

The Yarns of Urban India: Women in Rupa Bajwa's *The Sari Shop*

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The Sari Shop is the debut novel of the Amritsar, Punjab based novelist Rupa Bajwa set in her own home town. She was born in the town of Amristar in 1976 and has started her writing career as a book reviewer and columnist in leading publishing houses like *The Telegraph*, *The Tribune* and the *India Today*. One of her articles in *The Telegraph*, *Dark Things Happen in Gurdwaras*, landed up in controversy for its portrayal of her own Sikh community. Her debut novel *The Sari Shop* has won her raving reviews and she has been heralded as India's new literary find. This novel has already been translated into French (Le vendeur de saris), Dutch (De Sariwinkel) and Serbian (Prodavnica sarija). The *Sari Shop* published in 2004 was long listed for the Orange Prize for fiction in the same year of its publication. The novel won the XXIV Grinzane Cavour award for best first novel in June 2005, the Commonwealth Award in 2005 and India's prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for English 2006. She is currently working on her second novel.

The Sari Shop showcases two different and opposed worlds existing uncomfortably side by side. It is about the static life of Ramchand and his fellow shop assistants who patiently roll and unroll the yards of sarees in one of the oldest sari shops in the city, the Sevak Sari shop. The novel is also about the world of the women customers who frequent the Sevak Sari shop. By juxtaposing these two unequal worlds—one where men dwell in extreme poverty and struggle for survival and the other where men comfortable lives in unparalleled luxury and splendor—the author lays bare the society of the twenty first century India which is characterized by consumer culture, individualism, snobbery and hypocrisy.

This paper is a study on the women in this novel and brings into picture the alarming disproportion that exist within the India society and the irony that makes up the very fabric of contemporary urban India. It also touches on the theme of New Feminism and tries to find how 'liberated' are the women in the 21st century India.

Feminism to New Feminism

Down the centuries, the feminist movement has evolved and diversified. As a socio-political movement which garnered much of its strength from the libertarian and enlightenment principles and practices of the French Revolution feminism drew its initial life force from the anti-slavery movement, especially in the United States. These anti-slavery movements inspired numerous white women and women of colour to politically organize against their own oppression. This phase is generally referred to as the first wave feminism. The first wave feminists fought against the tyranny of men and demanded the right to vote, and for massive reforms in the arenas of property rights, labour, education, divorce laws, child custody, prison conditions and sexual liberation, to name a few. Numerous first-wavers also addressed the mostly legal, inhumane practices of rape and the abuse of women and children, especially by husbands and fathers. Issues of sexuality and pleasure for women, as well as reproductive rights and birth control were highly contentious dimensions of the first wave. It is

within this context that many young women, in particular, began to question the institution of marriage, in which women and children were literally the property of men. John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* and Harriet Taylor's *the Enfranchisement of Women* are some major works on the first phase feminism. During the early twentieth century after the World War 1(1914-1918) most women in the western world were granted the rights to vote, with this the first wave of feminism slowly receded.

Although feminist, human rights and social justice struggles continued throughout the early 1920s to the mid 1960s, it is not until the 1960s that what is called the second wave of feminisms made its arrival felt. The issues addressed by this second phase of feminism were quite different from the first phase. Unlike the first wave, the politics of the family, reproduction, and sexual liberation of women became central concerns of second wave feminism. The reasons for this metamorphosis can be seen in the societal make up of the period. A large majority of second wave feminists were young women and girls who were part of the massive baby boom generation (1946-1964) born during the period of economic prosperity that followed the Second World War. Many were the first in their families to receive university educations and were highly influenced and /or involved in civil rights struggles and radical youth cultural movements. Others were disenchanted with social conventions following the war that had forced women back into traditional roles, especially those that idealized women as full-time wives and mothers. At the same time, there were limited opportunities for employment outside of the home, for those in the usual feminized low-waged arenas. Consequently, many women's dissatisfaction with their societal and economic positions, as well as with a host of sexually discriminatory attitudes and policies provoked what many refer to as a new feminist wave of awareness and protest. One of the most contested debates, concerning the feminist second wave, involves the false characterization of the second wave as a predominantly white, middle-class liberal movement.

The third wave feminism is not a movement defined by an age but one which is mediated by the terrains of race and multicultural alliances. It is a kind of an insurgent feminism which exploded in the 1980s and examines not only the intersections between race, class, culture, sexuality, but also celebrates the difference. It embraces diversity and change. Generally described as the feminism of a younger generation of women, third wave feminism acknowledges the legacy of second wave feminism but also identifies what they see as its limitations. It tries to disentangle the personal from the political and move beyond the constraints and 'spectre of political correctness' which a post-second wave generation of women no longer identifies with. The second wave feminism lost its way by shifting to an exclusive concern with sexual politics and culture in the mid-1970s. One of the key aspects of the second wave was its politicizing of the personal: 'the slogan "the personal is the political" sprang up in the seventies in debates about abortion, sexual harassment, rape and the division of domestic labour, often to good, and even revolutionary effect. As Natasha Walter's points out in her book *The New Feminism* by identifying the personal and the political in too absolute and unyielding way has led feminism to a dead end.(quoted in *Post feminism Cultural Texts* 67)

The New Feminism is a category of post feminism that became prominent in the 1990s and focuses on a younger generation of women who express their desire to fashion new styles of feminism. New feminism provides an optimistic and celebratory picture of a confident, assertive group of young women who are reporting high levels of achievement and success across private and public sectors .But it also stresses on the relevance of feminism in the modern day female existence.

As Walter's points out in her book *The New Feminism*, feminism is still here, right at the centre of these new lives' where it is needed to address a central paradox of this 'brave new world' .In effect, *The New Feminism* presents a contradictory picture of unprecedented female freedom and independence coupled with continuing blatant inequalities us the contradictory picture of unprecedented female freedom and independence coupled with continuing blatant inequalities....The average woman, 'with all her new dreams and beliefs', still faces a number of concrete, economic and social injustices,... and an increased chance of living in poverty. (67)

New feminism presents itself as 'more popularist, more inclusive, more willing to embrace power, more tolerant in crossing political boundaries, a feminism that belongs to men as well as women, conservatives as well as socialists.

The women in *The Sari Shop*

As varied as the sarees in *Sevak Sari shop* are the women in the novel. They are all in one way or the other products and victims of the consumerist world .One category of women portrayed in the novel are the educated, well respected women who lead a life of empowerment and independence and of individual choice and (sexual) pleasure. They are governed by consumer culture, fashion, hybridism, humour, and most of them show a renewed focus on their female body. One can aptly call them the post feminists. Many of them are house wives who have redefined and re signified domestic sphere as a domain of female autonomy and independence by severing its previous associations with drudgery and confinement. To them men are equal partners and never a rival or their victimisers. The all belong to the category of the urban elite. They are the liberated women whose tragic flaws are their hypocrisy and snobbery. They are the products of the consumerist world and the pivotal hinge on which consumerism survives and surges ahead. Apart from these attributes the women of this elite class are totally indifferent to the economically underprivileged. For them the poor are the lesser mortals meant to serve them and nothing more.

The other category of women is the ones who inhabit the lowest strata of the society and has not really made it and continue to live in conventional relationships where hope and violence are permanently entwined. These women though raises their voices against the patriarchy that controls their lives, it is not because of their desire to be equals but to cling on to their basic right to live and to be treated as humans . But their voices get muffled and scattered in a highly self centered world. And they remain as invisible presence in the fast paced lives of the urban elite.

Rina Kapoor , the postgraduate daughter of the leading business family tops the list of the liberated post feminist women of the novel .Apart from being

educated, she has convinced her traditional family to let her marry the man of her choice. She breaks the tradition by not marrying into a business family, but to a service class. In Rina's words she was "breaking the commercial streak that ran through her family and was trying to span the gap" (The Sari Shop 93). She later firmly establishes herself as a novelist by writing a novel about a shop assistant in a saree shop for which Ramchand, the trembling sari-wala who lied about being invited by her for her wedding reception, provides the real inspiration. She has her views on everything whether it is her garments, her grooming or her future plans. But the irony of the situation surfaces when the narrator adds on the following comments on Rina's feat.

If she had been a plain, unmarried girl from an ordinary family, it wouldn't really have much news in Amritsar, a city that had much money but only one real bookshop. But since Rina was recently married, rich, glossy and permed, and wanted to draw the attention of the cream of Amritsar, she did. (186)

The upper classes indifference towards the economically backward is evident where Rina who smugly ordered Ramchand to show the sarees which he carried to their house later shows an interest in Ramchand only because he was to give her novel's protagonist an identity.

Mrs Sachdev fits the bill of a typical post feminist woman, is the English Head of the department of a local college and a columnist of the *Sunday Tribune*. Mrs Sachdev according to Ramchand "must be terribly knowledgeable and well read" (26). She is employed, socially well recognized, highly confident and independent. She encourages and appreciates Rina for her brave step of breaking the tradition. The fact that she is a learned woman makes Ramchand reveal to her his colleague Chander's wife Kamala's hapless situation. But the moment Ramchand tells Mrs Sachdev 'the whole ugly, sordid story' of Kamala, the hypocrisy of Mrs Sachdev comes out (213). Mrs Sachdev's reaction takes Ramchand by surprise.

She glared at him. 'How dare you' she in a low, angry hiss, her voice trembling'. 'How dare you, a mere shop assistant, bring me here to this corner and tell me filthy stories about the kind of women you seem to know....The Guptas are respectable people. They happen to be friends of the Kapoors. Do you know what you are saying? And why are you telling me? What have I to do with this dirty business?...she said speaking through clenched teeth ...I don't want to listen to all that vulgar rubbish again, that too in Hindi. Why are you bothering me about all this? It is of no concern to me...There have been some horrible, filthy things going on, and now respectable people are to be dragged into it. (214)

This incident aptly demonstrates the hypocrisy of Mrs Sachdev and of the so called respectable women who live in a world totally insulated from the lives of the lesser mortals, the underprivileged.

Mrs Sandhu, Mrs Gupta, Mrs Bhandari are the other representatives of this highly individualistic group. In spite of they being known by their husbands surname they lead a liberated life. They are not desperate house wives who toil in their kitchen, shackled to the four walls of their houses. They are all house proud and are the successors of the Victorian living room mistresses. They spend their

days gossiping, match making and shopping. Mrs Sandhu is the wife of a chief engineer .She is someone who is intensely interested in her house. She 'had planned the construction as well as the furnishing very carefully.'(12).Mrs Gupta who stays two houses away, is a fitness freak. She in her late fifties looked much younger through 'her careful diet and regular exercise...On the dressing table below the room-reflection, stood a jar of L'Oreal anti-ageing cream, a bottle of lakme cleansing milk, packs of deep -red bindis and a bottle of perfume...These were the things that she used everyday' (14).Mrs Bhandari was a beauty contest winner and she is now in her forties. She claims to be a social activist and organizes charity programmes at the Rotary club. She has also established herself as a good cook. 'She could bake the most marvelous cakes that could beat the cakes in Delhi's best bakeries'. (26)

This is the brand of women whom Germaine Greer points out in *The Whole woman* as women who are presented as 'have it all'—a career, motherhood, beauty, and a great sex life— by the consumerist market which actually only resituates them as consumers of pills, paint, potions, cosmetic surgery, fashion, and convenience foods.

Their air of superiority is evident in their attitude toward the shop assistants. Rupa and her mother ordering Ramchand to display the sarees he has brought to their houses,Mrs Sachdeva's cold remark about the shop assistants lesser intellect to her friend Mrs Bhandari when the assistant failed to understand her choice of sarees- 'you can't really make these people understand' all exhibit their callous attitude towards the people of the lower strata of the society(26). In *Fire with Fire* Naomi Wolf calls them the power feminist generation who are 'unapologetically, 'free-thinking', 'pleasure-loving' and 'self-assertive' (149)

Though the wives of the shop assistants the author Rupa Bajwa paints the picture of the economically weaker counterparts. These women like the women of the elite class do have aspirations but their dreams are rarely fulfilled. Though they are all known by their names they do not lead a liberated life, but are always under the shadow of their husbands. Their family lives appear monotonous in their struggle for earning their next meal. They were unlike the sarees in Sevak Sari shop-colorless. The author never gives us the picture of these women from an omniscient narrator's point of view, but as reported by their husbands .To Gokul , his wife Lakshmi was someone who was never satisfied by their petty means of living. According to Gokul she was a demanding wife who never remained mute to her needs. 'She comes back from her occasional visits to her house 'with her head full of rubbish'.(34). Subash, a friend of Ramchand later reports on a lady customer who demanded the replacement of a damaged good she had bought the day before. These women are assertive as their rich counterparts but their lack of social status makes their voices mute.

The huge gulf between the world of the haves and the have nots become most evident through the way Kamala, the wife of Chander is being introduced. 'Her face was deeply lined, though she could not have been more than thirty, even less perhaps.'(104) .This representation reminds one of the middle aged women of the affluent classes who never looked their ages.

Kamala was never aware of her rights and had to start working as a house maid at a tender age of eight. She never expressed her mind and was badly beaten up by her husband and raped by the police men. She resorted to drinking as a way of protest, a protest against the mistreatment of her husband and against the insensitive world which turns a blind eye at the economically under privileged.

Kamala's misfortunes started with the closing down of Mr Guptas and the Kapoors factory in the which Chander worked .Since the factory incurred loses the owners did not pay Chander his last three months salary.It played havoc on their family budget and thus sowed the seeds of ruin of their family life .Chander found her an ill omen and responsible for his pathetic state. He started to get drunk and when Kamala followed sue he could not accept it and ignored her completely. The only way in which Kamal tried to make her voice heard was hauling stones at Mr Gupta's and Kapoor's house and shouting abuses at them. But no one listened to her and she had to pay penance to her trespass by getting raped by the police and eventually getting burned by the thugs sent by Ravinder Kapoor.

The chasm that separates the privileged and the less privileged in a multicultural, multilingual Indian urban society is deep. One can find here, at the same time, an emancipated woman and her emaciated counterpart. But the women in India cannot confidently embrace their own power unless they balance the disparity between the economic classes and free all women from the strands of victimization. What women want and need today is a secure gainful employment, the right to equal work, the right to make decisions about their bodies and sex lives without moral intimidation, and the right to be treated as full human beings even if we are not beautiful, skinny, fair and wealthy. The Sari Shop through its women characters presents before its readers the microcosm of India and opens our eyes to the real India of the twenty first century.

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