

Intersectionality in Rupa Bajwa's *The Sari Shop*

Raveena Neeraj Kumar

II M.A. English

Chevalier T. Thomas Elizabeth College for Women

raveenank96@gmail.com

Mob no.: 9791028884

Abstract

The concept of intersectionality suggests that various forms of social factors like race, class, gender, sexuality and nationality, do not exist separately from each other, but are really mutually dependent and intersecting in nature. Though the theory of intersectionality emerged only in the 1970s, the idea of intersectionality grew out of black feminism. The interconnections between racism and sexism have been examined by the black feminists such as Maria W. Stewart, Ida. B. Wells and Anna Julia Cooper. Sojourner Truth, a black woman who had been a slave, delivered a speech in 1851, at the Women's Rights Conference in Ohio, in which she described how her identity was not just shaped by her gender; race and class were also the factors determining her identity. Kathryn Gines categorizes their works as proto-intersectional as their works suggest racism and sexism as systems of oppression that work together and mutually reinforce each other. This paper attempts to look deep into the lives of the characters of *The Sari Shop* by Rupa Bajwa for the truth of the concept of intersectionality regarding women's oppression as well as other factors such as caste, race, class etc.

Keywords: Rupa Bajwa, *The Sari Shop*, Women's Oppression, Intersectionality, Black Feminism, Racial Discrimination, Gender Discrimination, Multiple Consciousness

The works of black feminists like Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, bell hooks inspired the concept of intersectionality. Audre Lorde in her essay "Hierarchy of Oppressions" says that when an individual faces two different kinds of oppression, in that case both oppressions are to be considered as mutually interacting and both these matter. The Combahee River Collective's idea of "interlocking systems of oppression" and Deborah King's concept of multiple jeopardy and multiple consciousness can be considered as the basis of the theory of intersectionality. The Combahee River Collective, a group of black feminist activists from Boston, considered to be the first to theorize the interconnections between gender, race, class and sexuality. (Allen)

Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, a legal theorist first used the term “intersectionality” in 1989 in a paper titled “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrines, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” which was published in *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*. In this work, Crenshaw critiques single-axis framework which treats race and gender as exclusive categories. According to her, this framework distorts the multiple and intersecting forms of subordination experienced by a black woman due to race and gender. Crenshaw states:

Intersectionality ... was my attempt to make feminism, anti-racist activism, and anti-discrimination law do what I thought they should – highlight the multiple avenues through which racial and gender oppression were experienced so that the problems would be easier to discuss and understand. (Eric-Udorie n.p.)

Crenshaw coined the term to show how racial and gender discrimination overlap. Though the term was used by Crenshaw to describe the situation of coloured women, the theory has been widely adopted and expanded. Patricia Hill Collins broadened the concept of intersectionality in her book *Black Feminist Thought* including class, sexuality and nationality into this concept.

In the book *Intersectionality: Key Concepts*, intersectionality is described as

Intersectionality as an analytic tool examines how power relations are intertwined and mutually constructive. Race, class, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, ethnicity, nation, religion, and age are categories of analysis, terms that reference important social divisions. But they are also categories that gain meaning from power relations of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and class exploitation. (Collins and Bilge n.p.)

The theory of intersectionality considers how a person is oppressed for belonging to one group while being privileged for being a part of different group. For example, a white woman is oppressed in relation to sex, but is in a privileged state in relation to race. Similarly, a black man is in an oppressed position in relation to race but is in a privileged state in relation to sex. The experiences of a black woman are different to that of the experiences of a white woman or of a black man:

Intersectionality offers us a way to understand how multiple structures – capitalism, heterosexism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and on – work together to harm women: women who are poor, disabled, queer, Muslim, or a combination of those things. Intersectionality is a way for marginalized women to talk about how their lives are affected by multiple oppressive structures – ableism,

racism and sexism, for example – that thus hit them harder and cause them to exist in double or even triple jeopardy. (Eric-Udorie n.p.)

According to feminist scholars, intersectionality includes all subject positions. However, Jennifer Nash argued that theorists ignored the intimate connections between privilege and oppression. They have over-emphasized on oppression in intersectionality theories. For example, an individual might be both victimized by patriarchy and privileged by race. As a response to this concern Ann Garry puts forth a more inclusive view of intersectionality which lays emphasis on both oppression and privilege.

Rupa Bajwa, in her novel *The Sari Shop*, portrays the life of women who belong to different social classes. It also depicts their different roles and responsibilities based on their social class and position in the society. The experiences of the women characters in the novel are based on the mutually dependent and intersecting nature of the factors – class and gender. Rina Kapoor is the daughter of Ravinder Kapoor, the biggest industrialist in Amritsar. She did her Masters in English Literature and is an aspiring writer. Bajwa portrays Rina Kapoor as an upper class, educated and a “self-assured” woman. She is clear about what she wants from life and expresses herself clearly whenever it is needed: “I like to read, I like to explore new things, I like to take every day of life as a new experience ... I think life is an adventure. And when you explore life, you also explore yourself”. (81) She is very passionate about her writing. Though she is busy with the preparations of her marriage, she makes sure that her writing does not get affected:

... yesterday I wrote another poem. One of the poems in which I find that I can express the true meaning of life. And do you know when I wrote it? While a man who brought over crystal bangles for me to see was waiting outside. I felt the urge and I knew that bangles could wait, but I needed to get the creative process going. (81)

Rina Kapoor’s position as a woman is oppressed in relation to gender. The society expects her to fulfil certain roles and responsibilities as a woman. As an upper class woman, her father and the society expect her to marry a rich upper class man:

Ravinder Kapoor ... told the Guptas that his own daughter, Rina, was getting married in three weeks’ time. He wasn’t very pleased about it, because it was a Love Marriage, and his daughter had chosen to marry a Captain in the Indian Army. Ravinder Kapoor still couldn’t believe it, but he had not tried not to let his disappointment show. (163)

Soon after she gets married the society expects her to stay at home. When she visits the Sevak Sari Shop three days after her marriage, everyone in the shop is shocked to see her alone in the market soon after her marriage:

Ramchand was astounded. Brides never ventured out alone for months after their wedding! They had to be present at post-wedding ceremonies, there were invitations to lunches and dinners, special pujas had to be performed. He had heard of how things worked in families. But this was surprising. (133)

However, Rina Kapoor's position as an upper class woman gives her opportunities to follow her dreams. To understand the experiences of an individual, it is necessary to consider both the oppression and the privileges faced by the individual as these factors are mutually dependent on each other:

... the inclusion of both privilege and oppression in intersectionality implies that members of dominant groups must consider the factors of privilege in their own identity and positionality. Intersectionality applies to everyone, not only to members of subordinated or marginalized groups. (Garry 829)

Rina being an upper class woman has access to education which gives her confidence to express herself: "I just hope I can achieve something. Make sense of things. In our strange, multi-layered society that is a very, very difficult thing to do" (93). She makes her decision after assessing it thoroughly. While doing her bridal shopping, her confidence makes her decide on what she wants and why she wants it:

I was thinking I must be very careful while buying both clothes and jewellery. I don't want the usual conventional bridal trousseau. I want a collection that is me. A collection that is a mix of traditional and contemporary styles. You know, that way you don't get a fixed image and you can experiment with your looks. (67)

Rina's status and education gives her the opportunity to fight for her rights and her desires. Though her father is against her decision to marry an army officer, she is successful in convincing him. She is able to choose her life partner and also able to convince her family of her choices. She does not want to fix herself into the traditionally held social norms:

When my father heard that I was in love with you, an army officer, he wasn't pleased. He always used to tell his friends, "When my daughter gets married, the whole city will watch". But, well, I convinced him. I am not one of those girls who'll just marry a rich man and go to kitty parties. (82)

Though society expects her to stay at home soon after marriage, her position in the social class allows her to live on her own terms. She visits the Sevak Sari Shop, three days after her marriage to do her research for her novel. Within few months of her marriage she publishes her novel. Since she is rich, she makes her novel popular and seeks the attention of the people towards her book:

... since Rina was recently married, rich, glossy and permed, and wanted to draw the attention of the cream of Amritsar, she did. There was a spectacular launch of the book in New Delhi. There were press conferences and interviews in magazines. (186)

Rina's position due to her gender is that of an oppressed woman, but her position due to her class is that of an oppressor. She refers to the working class men as "stupid sari-wala" and "greedy jeweler" without even knowing them properly. Her opinion on whom she describes as "service class" people is also made clear in her conversation with Mrs. Sachdeva:

... though I must say that these days, with bribes and all, even they are doing quite well. Most of them have big houses at the outskirts of the city. Also ancestral property, I suppose. Some Sikh families, even the most ordinary-seeming of them, sometimes own quite a lot of land in villages. (93)

Rupa Bajwa portrays Shilpa as a meek and shy girl. She is the daughter-in-law of Mr. Gupta, a reputed businessman. Shilpa was not interested in studies and she somehow managed her way through one year of college. She felt that she was not witty or talented enough. She also felt that she was not stunningly beautiful, and her English was not good. However, she knew that her rich father would find her the best alliance: "The biggest thing in her favour was that her father was a well-known, rich businessman. She had known they would find a brilliant match for her" (162). Like Shilpa had hoped, her parents found her a match. Tarun Gupta is a rich, upper class, good looking man, and the elder son of the Gupta family. Shilpa did everything she needed to please her mother-in-law. Mrs. Gupta is aware of Shilpa's attitude before the wedding that, "She seemed meek and eager to please, her shy manner completely unlike the brash way some girls behaved these days. Anyway, she could be moulded" (16). Like she had contemplated, Mrs. Gupta trained her daughter-in-law to make her perfect at everything. She kept a close watch at everything her daughter-in-law did: "She instructed Shilpa in everything – clothes, make-up, behavior, recipes. She was kind and sweet to her, at the same time keeping a sharp eye and an iron control over how Shilpa looked, dressed and behaved" (164). Though Shilpa is aware of her mother-in-law's controlling nature, she felt that their relationship was much better than what she had seen in many households. Mrs. Gupta and Shilpa spent their days trying to show-off their

cleanest house, their nicest clothes and new recipes. Shilpa allowed herself to be trained and moulded by Mrs. Gupta:

Mrs. Gupta had a competitive streak in her. She liked to be the best. In her circle of friends and relatives, she liked to have the best complexion, the cleanest house, the nicest clothes. And she passed on this competitiveness to the previously inert Shilpa, galvanizing her into a new life of self-improvement. (165)

Though Shilpa always seemed meek and shy and allowed Mrs. Gupta to have her way, she was as materialistic as Mrs. Gupta. She lets Mrs. Gupta to have her way as she knew that “Mrs. Gupta would grow old, and then the factory, the house, all the property – it would all be hers” (164). When Shilpa realizes that she is pregnant, she “fervently hoped it would be a boy. That would forever consolidate her position in the family” (166). Shilpa represents the materialistic and patriarchal thinking of the upper class society when she hopes her unborn child to be a baby boy so she could attain power in her husband’s house

How did one behave when expecting a child? What would she be expected to do? ... In her parents’ family, they had the Godbharai ceremony. She wondered if they would have it here. If they did, then she’d get new clothes, a couple of jewellery sets ... it had to be a boy ... that would make things a lot easier for her ... she didn’t want a daughter ... (167)

Though Shilpa’s position as a woman in the society made her to play the role of a perfect and obedient daughter-in-law, her position as an upper class woman belonging from a rich family helps her live a comfortable life. Shilpa’s parents had made sure that she led a comfortable and happy life by giving their daughter and son-in-law expensive gifts on their marriage:

And all this – the room, the furniture, the air conditioner and the car, were in addition to all the cash, jewellery and clothes they had given to Shilpa, and all the gifts of clothes and jewellery they had given to her in-laws and to her husband. Yes, she had no reason not to be able to hold up her head in her new family. (164)

Rupa Bajwa portrays another female character, Mrs. Sachdeva, Head, Department of English at a local college. She is an educated and independent woman. Other than a few upper class women and middle class housewives, people respect her for her position and knowledge. When Mrs. Kapoor dislikes Rina keeping company with middle class women like Mrs. Sachdeva, she expresses her respect for Mrs. Sachdeva

Mother, there are other things in the world besides money. You know, this a big world, and out there, there are people, who are considered very high status because of their learning, because of the work they have done. And it is not like this respect, respect from a few small towners, a few crass businessmen. No ... it is respect from all over the world, from the academic, cultured world. It is recognition in its true sense. (91)

Mrs. Sachdeva as a teacher sees a lot of potential in Rina Kapoor. She motivates and guides Rina and feels that she could achieve great heights if she focuses on the right path. She advises Rina to focus on her career after marriage: “I will watch your future progress with great interest. I do hope, Rina, that you will not let the mundane things of life take over the real things” (94). When Rina Kapoor publishes her novel, Mrs. Sachdeva is extremely proud of her student. She clearly states how career and creating identity for a woman are the essential aspects:

True, money is very important. To maintain a standard of living. But there must be other things in life apart from money. Now look at Rina Kapoor. Doesn't lack anything in life. She has money, beauty, a solid family backing. But she has carved out a niche for herself by writing a book, by earning her own reputation. (207)

Belonging to the middle class section, Mrs. Sachdeva plays the role of both the oppressed and the oppressor. The upper class women like Mrs. Kapoor do not like to keep the company of a middle class woman and expresses her irritation to Rina for keeping her company: “Really, Rina, now these people have started to come to our home also. We are friends with the highest status families in Amritsar ... And just because of you, we have these ordinary, professor-type, service-class women coming here” (91). She becomes the oppressor when she talks with contempt about Ramchand, a shop assistant: “You can't really make these people understand, you know” (28).

As a middle class woman Mrs. Sachdeva becomes the victim of oppression when upper class women like Mrs. Gupta gossip about her: “Mrs. Sachdeva has no children and her husband is also just some professor somewhere. She is a nobody” (209). However, as a middle class educated woman she also gets opportunities to pursue her career, to express her views and to live her life on her own terms and it is necessary to consider both oppressions and privileges to understand the experiences of an individual

Oppression and privilege by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, nationality, and so on do not act independently of each other in our individual lives or in our social structures; instead, each kind of oppression or privilege is shaped by and works through the others. (Garry 827)

Mrs. Sandhu is a middle class woman. Her husband is a Chief Engineer in the Punjab State Electricity Board. Mrs. Sandhu's happiness is based on the achievements of her husband and her sons. She is materialistic and finds happiness in materialistic things like owning a house and furniture. Mrs. Sandhu finds extreme happiness in bragging about her sons' achievements in her conversations: "My elder son, Manu, Mandeep, his name is, but we call him Manu, he has cleared his entrance exams. He'll be able to get into the Amritsar Medical College ... All Waheguru's blessings" (206). Manu's treatment of Mrs. Sandhu points to the oppressed situation of women in the patriarchal society. When Mrs. Sandhu offers Manu a glass of milk, he pushes the glass away saying, "Didn't you strain it? You know I hate cream in milk. Take it away" (14). However, Mrs. Sandhu is very happy about her status in the society. Her only aim is to maintain her status in society and to take care of the future of her children

Mrs. Sandhu thought she was as good as anybody now. Never mind her weight, at least she was better than all those thin women with dark, rough skins and mousey hair. A beautiful house, status-family, a caring husband and good looks ... what more could a woman ask for? Now, if only the children would do well ... (13)

Rupa Bajwa portrays Kamla as a poor, working class, uneducated woman. Her father is a factory worker and her mother worked as a maid. When her mother passes away, she starts working as a maid to support her family. At the age of sixteen, her father gets her married to Chander, a factory worker. As a woman from the marginalized section, her approval or suggestion is not even asked in the subject of her marriage. Soon after the marriage, Chander loses his job. He starts drinking and hitting his wife: "Chander drank often and beat her up. This was pretty common, she knew. Men often beat up their wives. It was a matter of routine, nothing personal. It shouldn't have worried her. But it did. It turned her temper sour" (152).

Domestic violence and loneliness make her life miserable and hopeless. She has to stay at home alone and is not allowed to work: "She was expected to bear children soon, and Chander told her there was no point in starting on a job that she'd have to leave soon anyway" (151). When she realizes that she is pregnant, she gets some hope. However, Chander hadn't found a job yet and poverty and hunger result in Kamla's miscarriage. When she needs her husband's support, she has to face more oppression from Chander. He blames her for all the misfortunes in his life: "you are unlucky even for your own family ... You have a black heart, a black heart, a black heart" (157).

Chander's accusations, beatings and her pain push Kamla towards alcoholism. She starts drinking and snapping at men in the streets who try to take advantage of her drunken state. The society blames Kamla for drinking and fighting, Chander's colleague Gokul describes Kamla as

“not a good woman” (119). Soon Kamla realizes that Mr. Gupta and Mr. Kapoor were responsible for her sorrows. Chander worked in their factory and when the factory went on to lose, they shut the factory without paying the last three months’ salary to the workers which resulted in hunger and poverty in Chander’s house and was the reason for Kamla’s miscarriage. In rage and drunken unconsciousness, Kamla hits stones at Mr. Gupta’s house and screams abuse at them. Guptas get her arrested where she is brutally raped by the police constables. Kamla does not stop expressing her anger towards the Guptas and the Kapoors. When she hits a stone at Mr. Kapoor, he decides to stop her by getting her killed. He sends goons to Kamla’s house and the goons burn the house down with her in it: “Kamla’s fate was sealed at that very moment. Ravinder Kapoor couldn’t help it. It was a matter of his prestige in the city. He could not let a common woman go scot-free after that. Yes, it was a matter of his prestige, a matter of honour” (216).

The experiences of Kamla are the result of her marginalized position in the society. She faces oppression because of the intersection of factors such as gender and class. “Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice” (Collins 18).

The women characters in the novel *The Sari Shop* experience the gender oppression, no matter their position, class and education. The female characters’ experiences and the intensity of the oppression vary accordingly. Though Rina Kapoor is expected to get married to a rich upper class man, because of her position as an upper class woman in the society, she gets the opportunity to express herself and make her own decisions. She gets the opportunity to establish herself as a writer. Shilpa is trained and “moulded” by her mother-in-law but it is Shilpa’s own conscious decision to allow her mother-in-law to mould her. Her position as an upper class woman allows her to lead a comfortable life. Mrs. Sachdeva is criticized for being childless by the society. However, her position as a middle class woman gives her the opportunity to focus on her career and gain respect from the society for her achievements in her professional life.

Mrs. Sandhu’s life centers on her husband and sons. Her position in the society allows her to lead a comfortable life and she enjoys her social status and is content with her life. As Kamla belongs to the marginalized section of the society, her position as a marginalized woman subjects her to both class and gender oppression. She is subjected to domestic violence and sexual assault not just because of her gender, but for being a woman who belongs to the marginalized section of the society.

Thus, class and gender are mutually dependent in nature and to understand the experiences of an individual clearly, an individual’s intersecting position in the society must be taken in consideration. Through the concept of intersectionality, it is clear the character of Kamla

struggles the most in the novel due to her marginalized position in society which subjects her to double marginalization – class and gender oppression both at the same time, as these factors are mutually dependent and work together.

Works Cited

- Allen, Amy. "Feminist Perspectives on Power." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 7 July 2016. www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-power/#IntApp. Accessed 15 Jan 2019.
- Bajwa, Rupa. *The Sari Shop*. Penguin Books, 2004.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2000.
- Collins, Patricia Hill, and Sirma Bilge. *Intersectionality: Key Concepts*. John Wiley & Sons, 2016. www.books.google.co.in/books. Accessed 16 Jan 2019.
- Eric-Udorie, June. *Can We All Be Feminists?: Seventeen writers on intersectionality, identity and finding the right way forward for feminism*. Hachette UK, 2018. www.books.google.co.in/books. Accessed 16 Jan 2019.
- Garry, Ann. "Intersectionality, Metaphors, and the Multiplicity of Gender." *Hypatia: A Journal of Feministic Philosophy*, vol. 26, no. 4, Fall 2011, pp 826-850. Hypatia, Inc. www.wgs700fall14.hollowaysparks.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/hypa1194.pdf. Accessed 18 Jan 2019.
-
-