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NPTEL ONLINE
CERTIFICATION COURSE

Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 57 - REFUGEE WOMAN AND PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

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Agency in Begum Jaan

- The refusal to give away their home is a major exercise of agency on the part of the women in the movie.
- Instead of getting intimidated by the official orders and the threat to their lives, the women choose to fight back. This episode takes us back to movies like '*Mirch Masala*' where we see a similar physical fight being put up by the women against the men who try to oppress them.
- Begum Jaan in an encounter with the king says, "Come what may, I will not die like a beggar but like a queen in my palace." Begum Jaan displays her power by not succumbing to the pressure around her and acting in accordance to her choice.

Continued...

- Even though these women exercise their agency by putting up a fight, they can be viewed as victims as well for being in the situation they are in.
- Facing a situation of losing their sole means of survival for the sake of an imaginary line drawn by a man in the position of power, stands as a metaphor for the idea of dividing the country by a handful of people where the brunt is bore by the commoners.
- Being put in a situation like this portrays the victimhood of these women. It shows how there was a possibility of both having agency and being victims in the period.

Continued...

- Roger Matthews- “Carol Pateman (1988) and Sheila Jeffreys (1997) argue that engaging in prostitution involves a form of intimacy which is qualitatively different to simply providing one’s labour and is bound up with one’s sense of self and identity... the degree of choice that women and girls exercise when engaging in prostitution is often severely limited. Indeed, most women enter into prostitution when they run out of choices, or are pressured, manipulated or coerced in some way” (Shdaimah and Wiechelt, 2013) (Matthews 2015, 85).

Prostitution

- “The different forms of victimization experienced by women involved in prostitution have been well documented. In many respects their victimization is a function of their marginalized and stigmatized status. The range and depth of victimization that they suffer is exceptional, but the forms of victimization that are most commonly recognized are violence, child abuse, trafficking and sexual and mental health problems” (Matthews 2015, 86).
- Prostitution is also a very common profession that women separated from their families during partition were put into. The movie gives us an insight into the lives of sex workers during the period of partition, it shows us how they are victimized and also display their agency at times.

Prostitution

- “The violence directed towards those involved in prostitution comes from a number of directions, including pimps, partners and punters...Violence is used...to reinforce male privilege, either to punish women who do not accept their subordinate status in our society, or as an attempt to reassert a sense of masculinity” (Monto, 2004, quoted in Matthew 2015, 18).
- The women in the movie face violence on a daily basis. There are multiple episodes of men attempting to abuse these women. Rubina in one of the scenes rushes out of the room in panic and the others beat up the man, implying his attempt to rape her.

Prostitution

- “Many of the women who have experienced violence during their involvement in prostitution have also experienced violence and abuse as children (Farley, 2003).
- For many women there is a graduation of harm that continues throughout their lives.
- Child sexual abuse tends to be linked to prostitution, in two ways: either the experience of abuse psychologically predisposes the person to devalue their body and be prone to selling sex, or alternatively they run away in order to escape abuse and consequently make themselves vulnerable and likely to engage in the sale of sex in order to survive” (Flowers, 2001; Herman, 2003) (Matthew 2018, 87).

Begum Jaan

- During the partition carnage many young girls became a victim of rape and were thus either given away to brothels by their families or ended up there.
- Shabbo stands as an evidence of such a child abuse. She is portrayed as a young girl raped in the past riots, and when sent to the camp her father refuses to accept her back and leaves her in Begum Jaan's house.
- Shabbo's trauma is very deep, she reminds us of Manto's Sakina from his story *Khol Do*.

Begum Jaan

- The rapes faced by these women leave them traumatized for life. Shabbo's abuse by the king also shows us the very dark side of the profession, where the women become completely powerless over their own bodies many a times and the abuse of children is common in the field.
- In the scene where the king is entering the brothel, he touches the cheeks of the kid Ladli, which the other women see as gesture of love towards the child. But later in the movie, he expresses his desire of having the first right over the women who come in the brothel. It exposes his duplicitous character.

Begum Jaan

- In all probability, as soon as Ladli would have grown a little older the King would have expressed his desire to have sex with her regardless of her age.
- Shabnam throughout the movie remains in a deep state of shock. In the scene of her introduction, Begum Jaan slaps her hard to bring her out of the trauma.
- Later on in the movie Begum Jaan reluctantly becomes a contributor in intensifying her trauma by allowing the king to rape her, thus bringing up the question if she played an instrumental role in Shabnam's victimization.

Begum Jaan

- At various points in the movie Begum Jaan refers to their work of prostitution as her business. Her setting up of the brothel as a business endeavor and its maintenance can be looked at as her agency.
- But her forcing of the other women for this profession can also be questioned as a reinforcement of masculinist aggression.

Begum Jaan

- We see a continuous reminder of the fact that Begum Jaan has rescued the other women in the brothel from difficult circumstances. Towards the end of the movie Gulabo opposes this argument by referring that Begum Jaan had a purpose behind rescuing all the women, she wanted them for her business.
- This stands as true to a large extent despite her attempts to take genuine care of the women around her.
- Begum Jaan – a matriarch or a female patriarch?

Begum Jaan

- In the scene when India gains its independence, Begum violently reacts when the girls go close to the crackers lest an accident occur and ruin their face.
- She says they will be of no use to her and will be thrown out of the house. Here she acts as a part of the patriarchal system.
- She comes out as a woman who displays her agency by successfully running her business but also as someone who dominates and oppresses other women for the sake of her business.

Begum Jaan

- Indrajit Hazra talks about the need of this behaviour that Begum Jaan put up in order to run her business:

“to trash the film for its portrayal of a brothel madam keeping her employees on a tight ‘patriarchal’ leash betrays ignorance about brothel madams as well women employers who put business before sisterhood... Begum Jaan tries everything to stop the exodus from her kotha — including allowing, with much painful reluctance, her princely benefactor (Naseeruddin Shah) to have sex with a minor rape victim...”

Gulabo

- Gulabo turns out to be a powerful character in the movie. She displays her agency over her body when one of her customers tries to touch her breast and she aggressively stops him. She sets her boundary with the customers in the act of sex and doesn't tolerate its breach.
- Even though cheated by the teacher, she dares to dream a life beyond the brothel which she found oppressive. Time and again, she tries to rise against the accepted oppression in the brothel and Begum Jaan's strictness. Towards the end of the movie as she chooses a life with the teacher and runs away with him, she acts in defiance of Begum Jaan.



Class-Caste

- The movie reiterates the irrelevance of class and caste at different junctures and also hints against the division of people on the basis of religion. In one of the scenes the child Ladli asks the old woman, “Amma! Is it the same thing to kill a Hindu and a Muslim?”, to which the old woman reacts with a thoughtful silence.
- The movie refers to the hypocrisy of men who do not touch these women in the daytime on the basis of their caste, but have sex with them.



Independence

- On achieving independence Begum Jaan says, “Independence is only for men. Women don’t even have the freedom to hurl abuses. How can we hurl abuses at our mothers and sisters.” Further she says, “For a prostitute all days are the same, once the lights are off, men are just men; Hindu, Muslim, Brahmin, untouchables. They are all the same when the lights are off.”
- This displays her awareness of her gender and her position in the society as a woman. This awareness could have been a reason why she wasn’t ready to give up her house, because the experiences of her life told her the aftermath of leaving it.

Begum Jaan

- Begum Jaan's awareness of her womanhood also becomes evident when in a scene the officers give Begum Jaan one month to vacate the house emphasizing the time period, to which she replies that she is well aware of this time period since women menstruate every month.
- We are reminded of Beauvoir's belief that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" when Rubina says that her breast, her vagina are just a piece of flesh like any part of her body, breaking down the belief that a body is what makes a woman, by seeing it just as a piece of flesh.

Thank You

