



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Manjhi ‘The Mountain Man’- A Confluence Of- Isms

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KEY WORDS – Communalism, Secularism, Feminism, Casteism, Poverty, Illiteracy, Feudalism, Subaltern

Abstract: *It is quite ironical to say that society at present has become a blend of a number of -isms such as communalism, secularism, feminism, casteism etc, dissecting society into binaries, ultimately in marginalised and privileged. “Manjhi – The mountain man”, a film by Ketan Meta released in 2015, seems to be a story of a passionate lover Dashrath Manjhi who out of sheer rage, as his wife passes away while trying to cross a mountain, carves a way out through the heart of the mountain. But it is a pathetic picture of Gehlaur, a village in Bihar, plunged in the darkness of abject poverty, illiteracy and above all exploitation.*

This paper is an attempt to unravel the different undercurrents flowing underneath a passionate story of love and sacrifice. It will focus on the issues of gender, casteism, feudalism, and poverty, intersecting each other and above all politicians and bureaucrats feeding on them.

Nawazuddin Siddique starring as the mountain man, the film is quite inspiring no doubt, but it can be seen symbolic of a Dalit’s revenge against the upper caste landlords who are no less treacherous than that mountain that was a great obstacle in the growth and development of that village. Ultimately, by his indomitable will power and courage, he carves his way out through the mountain assuring that a subaltern can also speak. Having a victory over the mountain, the film prophecies the freedom of the downtrodden from the ages long slavery under the yoke of casteism, feudalism, illiteracy and backwardness.

The dictionary meaning of intersection is “criss -crossing” but it is taken as an approach to peep into the inequality, injustices and discrimination prevalent in a society. Coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, an American Law professor in 1989, intersectionalism is attached with feminism that is a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality operate together and exacerbate each other. “All inequality is not created equal,” she says and intersectional approach tries to assess the amount of inequality and the levels of discrimination. An intersectional approach shows how people’s social identities can over-lap compounding experiences of discrimination. “We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant status, What’s often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum its parts,” Crenshaw said .

Valdecir Nascimento is another women activist in Brazil who talked of the overlapping of discrimination and exploitation that a person can experience on different levels. She is a stalwart of Black Feminism and talks of intersection of colour and gender.

“We don’t want. others to speak for Black Feminists – neither the White feminists nor back men .It’s necessary for young black women to take on this fight. We are the solution in Brazil not the problem.”

Sonia Maribel Sontay Herrera experienced compounding forms of discrimination based on her identity. "Those who are most impacted by gender-based violence and by gender inequalities, are also the most impoverished and marginalised –black and brown women, indigenous women, women in rural areas, young girls living with disabilities, trans youth and gender non-conforming youth," explains Majandra Rodriguez Acha, a youth leader and climate justice advocate from Lima, Peru.

Thus, intersectionalism is concerned with feminism that is not new to us. As a movement it goes long back to Mary Wolstonecraft. A lot of discrimination has been perceived on the basis of gender since the very beginning of life. Women were always taken as second gender.

Woman, the very word has been derived from the Greek word "womb" that implies Hysteria which refers to a psychological disorder. Now this gender was characterized by one such peculiar, overemotional, illogical and irrational behaviour. It also pronounces shortness in temper and conduct in the females. On the other hand, the word Man comes from German word "Mann and Greek Word "Manus" which has synonym as One Strength and Universal. They are the personification of qualities of strength, superiority, power and logic. So, from the very beginning of civilization, language and culture, men have been glorified as the cost of suppression of the most beautiful creation of God. Right from our cradle, we have been introduced an established patriarchal society and a patriarchal woman. Patriarchal woman infused gender bias. The word "he" has been a universally accepted reference for both the genders. When mankind was ever talked about, both the genders were addressed by a single pronoun 'he' which itself proves the very existence and supremacy of a patriarchal society. This also proves the deeply rooted cultural, social, political and psychological attitude that ignores woman's existence and her point of view. This age old practice has a very damaging effect to the identity of female in the literature of all spheres of life.

Before the actual feminist revolution started, it was the male chauvinistic trend being followed in the literary process like: male authors writing about male point of view, male authors writing about females as they wanted to portray them. There was hardly any historical text that talked about existence of female authors and their narratives. Even the incident of past related to female and their glory was interpreted through the eyes and voice of male speakers. For instance, if we refer to most popular fairy tales heard from generation to generations like Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White: we have always encountered with the female figures as weak, submissive, irrational and ever-nurturing. And when it comes to the male figures: they are shown as saviours, heroic, decisive and mighty. There was a time when plays were staged and the female roles were played by men in disguise. Later, when females started writing, they used a male pen name because of the fear that they might not be taken seriously. While the films were shot, the character of the heroine was as designed to cater the ideals of male viewers. Hence, there is an evident marginalization of women writers, actors, protagonists, speakers and narrators from literature and art. Absence of women as a subject of testing in medicines and science: It is one of the most chilling example of sidelining female gender from mankind. From the very beginning, all the medicines discovered and produced were always tested on male as their subject and was later prescribed to both. After going through any laboratory test, it was well notified that it is suitable for men (including man and woman) completely discarding the fact that a male and a female body has certain significant difference in mechanism.

Women in religion and tradition-When it comes to any religion, there had been a complete absence of female priests and parish. In work and wage till today we find the difference in wage distribution. While a male is paid 300/day a female is paid 250/day. So, these were the adjoining facts and practices that led to the rise of female voice against an under weaving compact to diminish the identity of second gender. The above readings by certain early feminists laid a stepping stone toward feminist criticism. Then blew an air of anti-patriarchal move in later half of 18th century in England and it further contributed to build a strong feminist ideas and inspired all the spheres of life especially literature. It was philosopher-writer Mantha Lear who first classified the feminist movement into waves or phases in year 1963 as First Wave (feminist phase), Second Wave (fe-male phase) and Third Wave (feminine phase).

First Wave- feminist activities within the period of 19 Century to early 20 Century focused mainly on legal and political rights of women, particularly Right to Vote. The seed of first wave of feminism was sown during the French revolution, 1789, when Rousseau's idea and philosophy of democratic society was illustrated. Mary Wollstonecraft expanded the same idea but by establishing gender equality. In year 1792, she wrote for Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with strictures on Political and Moral Subjects. She mainly advocated political, social, legal and moral rights for woman. In her book, she challenged the conventional belief and portrayal of women in literature and art. This is how she became a torch bearer for so many female authors of 19th Century and 20th Century in England viz: Jane Austen, Bronte Sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell, Virginia Woolf.

Second Wave -Second half of 20 Century ,1960-1980- This phase was based on the liberating ideas of women parallel with legal, political and economic rights. It campaigned for women's right on her body and integrity. It was highly influenced by Simon De Beauvoir's "The Second Sex (1949)" and Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique(1963)". Simon gave a very revolutionary concept that "gender is a social concept. One is not born a woman one becomes one". In this phase, writers and socialists advocated rights like reproductive rights, choice of marriage, selection of gender, equal wages and pre & post natal care. It was a bit radical and aggressive.

Third wave – 1990's onwards – it admitted the importance of individuality and diversity. It is also considered as a theory of post feminism and introduced a new concept of black feminism.

Black Feminism led us to the concept of Intersection. Black feminism is a philosophy that centres on the idea that Black women are inherently valuable that (Black women's) liberation is a necessity not as an adjustment to somebody else but because our need as human persons for autonomy.

The Combahee River Collective (1974 – 1980) a group of black feminists ,spoke on how black women were constantly fighting the battle of multiple oppressions from all angles. Within the Black Feminisms: The Combahee River Collective Statement of 1977, they spoke On how,".....difficult to separate race from class from sex, oppression because in our (black women's)lives they most often experienced simultaneously."(The Combahee River Collective Statement pg,504)

The Combahee River Collective articulated this interlocking system of oppressions based on sexism, hetero sexism, racism and classicism due to the lack of basic human rights provided in comparison to other groups, such as white women fighting for feminism,was different from Black Women. They were oppressed only on one level i. e sexism .So black feminists aimed for an inclusive and exclusive movement because 'The major source of difficulty in our political work is that we are not just trying to fight oppression on one front or even two, but instead to address a whole range of oppressions.'(pg 505)

Though Intersection is concerned with caste , it can be perceived in the context of other concepts too. It is quite ironical to say that society at present has become a blend of a number of -isms such as communalism, secularism, feminism, casteism etc, dissecting society into binaries, ultimately in marginalised and privileged.

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As there is no homogeneous society made up of homogeneous people, intersectionality becomes an inherent attribute of a society that admits that power privilege and oppression exist simultaneously. Different identities based on gender, race, class, creed, colour, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality, ability intersect each other and affect life. And overlapping of oppressions based on sexism, racism, poverty, homophobia and other forms of discrimination can be easily perceived in a society. But the resultant is the formation of two groups – the privileged and the marginalised in which the privileged are to be seemed playing power game i.e. to impose one's power on the other, be it man or woman, the rich or poor, the white or black or any other binary. Actually power politics is at the root of all kinds of conflicts. Gerald Salancik and Jeffery Pfeffer say 'Power is simply the ability to get things getting done the way one's wants them to be done'. So power game can be played by anyone and can lead to both better and worse. But English historian John Emeric Edward Dalberg claimed 'Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely'.

So power becomes an abuse because people tend to conform the powerful.

This power politics can easily be seen in the village Gehlor which is a criss cross of discriminations based on caste, class and gender. Though gender discrimination is not the main issue in the film but women are to be seen exploited by the powerful male dominated society. The women in the village are oppressed on two levels – first being the Dalits and second the woman. The film opens with a scene where a labourer with a hammer is challenging a mammoth mountain that seems standing undaunted like an arrogant treacherous monster. What can be easily perceived is the anger and resentment of a person against something that has eaten into his body and soul. In his rage, he sets the mountain a blaze. It is nothing but his own aggression against the pain and agony inflicted upon the poor and the outcast. Though democracy and egalitarianism have been gifted to India long ago inequality and injustice is grim reality crumbling the structure of the society.

Inspired by the real-life story of a 'mountain man' who toiled for twenty-two years trying to break a path through hard rocks with humble tools and indomitable spirit, the story is situated in Gehlaur a village that is segregated from the main city Wazir ganj due to the mountain and are bereft of all the basic amenities like school and hospitals. The village is groping in the darkness of ignorance, illiteracy and poverty. It is inhabited by only two types of people the rulers and the ruled, the marginals and the privileged, the landlords and the labourers, the upper caste and the outcaste. The people of Gehlaur are downtrodden and outcast compelled to live under the domination of the landlord. They can't lead a life as a human as they are lower caste poor people and can't think of leading a life of dignity and advancement. They can't have their own dreams, as they are poor and dalit. They are compelled to live at the periphery of the village and are abandoned of taking water from the common well. They can't put on shoes or they will be nailed. Their lives must be colourless because they are poor and untouchables. They are labourers who can never come out of the vicious trap of the Zamindar as the concept of bonded labourer still prevalent there. So they must undergo the atrocities inflicted on them by the zamindars. They have suffered all kinds of discrimination including untouchability and are not allowed to enjoy simple pleasures of life. All these abuses are so much rampant that even the politicians, journalists, bureaucrats are also indulged in it as if the marginalised there in the village are born slaves and should remain slaves forever. And if ever a voice of rebellion rise it must be crushed by hook or by crook. Pain and tyranny is seen against the dalit women who are abducted, raped and murdered by the landlords. But Dashrath Manjhi, since his childhood has a rebel in him and is not ready to accept feudalism. He ran away to town and returned after seven years hoping for changes, but in vain. Even when untouchability is declared illegal, the people of the village cannot make themselves free from the atrocities of the upper caste. Law and administration is kept in the hands of the Zamindar. Though they were untouchables and must be kept at bay, the women are not untouchables as they are made prey of eve teasing. The politicians, the bureaucrats and the journalists are the birds of the same feather. And the poor marginalised are exploited by these privileged people. Corruption is flourishing by leaps and bounds and the condition of the lower caste people is deteriorating day by day. There is no hope for any reformation instead of all kinds of steps and efforts taken by the government. Corruption has eaten into the

whole structure of society. Among all these sufferings and pains the poor oppressed used to carry on their lives looking forward to a good morrow. Dashrath too moves ahead but suddenly gets a set back as his wife meets an accident and passes away while climbing the mountain. He loses his patience and throws a challenge to the Mammoth peak of mountain that he will destroy it and pierce its heart. He sets the mountain on fire. *It is* nothing but his resentment against all the atrocities and injustices he had born throughout his life in the hands of feudalism, casteism and untouchability that shatters his dreams. But his rebellion heart leads him to the better of all and he starts making a way through the mountain so that he could connect his village with the mainstream. All the injustices, atrocities and exploitation turns a weak and marginalised into a mountain man while another sufferer into a Maoist. Another dalit who has left the village because of the oppression by the zamindars comes back with an anger in his heart He hangs the zamindar to take his revenge but is himself gunned down by the police. This is how power is used in different ways. Zamindar uses to suppress the weak , Manjhi to bow down a peak and the maoist to take revenge thinking that he can demolish suppression. The zamindar is killed but not the zamindari. That is not the end of feudalism and corruption. It erects its head in another way. 25 lakhs are sanctioned for making the path but is swallowed up by zamindar's son and a bureaucrat. The poor became poorer and the rich richer. All the attempts to bridge the gap between the rich and poor went null and void. Quite ironically the mountain man was sent to jail in the allegation of stealing the mountain. The culprits were escort free while the innocent was behind the bars. Amidst the vicious circle of corruption and exploitation, the journalist ,who in the beginning was in the grip of the zamindar came out of the quagmire and helps Manjhi come out. Manjhi musters up his courage once again and goes on foot to meet the prime minister to appeal for the injustice done against the villagers. But once again he fails as he was not allowed to meet the prime minister. On the contrary, a leader without fail exploits him saying that he came so far for their cause that was protest against the emergency in 1971 and his own cause was left unheard. Ultimately the labourer has to trust his own labour and the path is made breaking through the gigantic mountain with the hope that- all- isms prevalent in the society that are no less than mountain will come to an end. A Dalit moves the mountain. A path is made . It is named Dhasrath Manjhi path.

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