

**Indian Feminisms Concepts and Issues**  
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**Lecture-27**  
**Gender, Labour and Agency-Part 2**

Hello everyone. In the previous lecture, we talked about gendered labour in the context of sex work. We learned that even though there have been attempts to show the agential impact of sex work in terms of women's economic and bodily agency. The matter becomes complicated when the caste factor comes in. Choice, seem to be an agential aspect by feminism is heavily circumscribed in case of Dalit women who are forced into casteist sexist forms of labour such as, bar dancing.

Moreover, the expression of sexuality also gets curtailed in the context of caste. In this lecture, we are going to delve into the various methods through, which agency can be or seen as to be achieved. In earlier lectures, we have discussed how Rassundari Devi in her autobiography *Aamar Jiban* compares her married life to a prison. He would also be interested to note, that women writers also presented a world, where they imagined life would be different.

Sultana's dream written in 1905 by Begum Rokeya presents a very interesting dream world, where gender roles are completely reversed. It is also known as the first science fiction written by a woman in India. The story begins with the narrator sitting in an easy chair in a lazy afternoon thinking about women's position in Indian society. Soon, she falls asleep and visits a dream world called Ladyland.

In Ladyland women, now run the government and men now live behind waves. They have completely discarded the patriarchal language and have introduced new terminologies and new meanings to all terminologies, as is evident in the replacement of the word *Zenana* with “*Mardana*”, where men stay behind the doors. In the dominant terminology *Mardana* refers to male sexual prowess, which is now completely undermined with the new meaning that shows men as inefficient and irrelevant.

To the extent that women do not trust them even with needlework. In the same way the term *Mannish*, which would come closer to what we refer to as manliness in a patriarchal society

means shy and timid in the Ladyland. Women in the Ladyland are not only resourceful they are efficient in establishing a symbiotic relationship with nature as contrast to men, who think it is useless to give so much attention to horticulture, while they have so many other things to do.

Women on the other hand distribute their time equally for every work and hence can complete them in time. Sister Sara, a character in the story finishes her work at the laboratory in 2 hours, whereas men spend 6 hours to do the same work. Yet, after everything hierarchy is maintained in this land. We are told how the Queen's word is the ultimate word in the land. And how the two lady principles compete with each other in professional level.

The very fact that women study in separate colleges and men must remain into the Mardana, while women are out in the world show that man and woman cannot stay together in this land. One's existence is determined by the absence whether, consented or forced of the other. The binary thus remains in this land. Ironically, this society is not much different from the ones ruled by men, because here gentlemen are kept in the Mardanas to mine babies, to cook and to do all sorts of domestic work.

But there is no mention that they get paid or are acknowledged for their housework. Instead, it is presumed that cooking is so easier thing that is it is a simply a pleasure to cook. Now, Sultana's dream is celebrated often as a feminist utopia, but the question remains is it really so. As we have discussed feminism is not about women dominating men it is about equality. Sultana's dream promises a matriarchal society by completely replacing patriarchy.

So, we cannot really call it a feminist utopia. The story is significant though, because it provides a possibility of a different world in 1905, a time when nothing was possible for women. This story is an example of agency as a resistance to victimhood. It is shown as a completely oppositional factor. The theorization and conceptualization of women's agency is often measured in contrast to victimization, as we have already discussed.

For example, in elaborating on women of color, how they experience abuse. Patricia Connell mentions that, feminist attempts to explore women's experiences of abuse tend to follow two methods, one that emphasizes women's victimization and one that emphasizes women's

agency. The problem with such polarization is that it presents victimhood and agency as two binary opposites.

As a result, agency as a visible opposition to victimhood becomes the norm. Such assumption automatically cancels out alternative scopes of asserting agency, which may not be so obviously based on resistance alone. According to Martha Nussbaum, the society that incorporates the perspective of tragic compassion into its basic design thus, begins with a general insight.

People are dignified agents, but they are also frequently victims. Agency and victimhood are not incompatible. Indeed, only the capacity for agency makes victimhood tragic. In American society today, by contrast we often hear that we have a stark and binary choice. Between regarding people as agents and regarding them as victims. We encountered this contrast when social welfare programs are debated.

It is said that to give people various forms of social support is to treat them as victims of life's skills rather than, to respect them as agents, capable of working to better their own lot. Now, when Nussbaum talks about compassion, she does not mean sympathy, in the sense of a patronizing attitude, but rather she focuses on empathy to capacitate a deeper understanding of the position of the subject.

This also helps to change the position from object, who is always victimized to subject. One, who has the capacity to struggle and survive. Lois McNay looks at self-interpretation to understand different dimensions of subject formation and agency. In feminism, the idea of agency has come to be coterminous with autonomy and independence from patriarchal oppression. It indicates a restructuring of gender relations.

McNay claims that while this work on agency has been very stimulating and justifiably influential. It offers only a partial account of agency, because it remains within an essentially negative understanding of subject formation. McNay therefore like Nussbaum has problem in viewing victimhood as the origin point and binary opposite to agency. While, she acknowledges the immense contribution such negative victimized representations have in highlighting or bringing into focus, the condition of the marginalized people it nevertheless comes with grave consequences.

First, it generalizes a person or a group through the single lens of victimhood, who then is presented as incapable and who has the need of an external intervention. Second, it provides a single definition of victimhood and agency and does not explore the complex relation between oppressors and oppressed. Third, the subjectivity that is created false preys to determinism. And finally, it also defines agency in terms of resistance to particular kinds of oppression or acknowledges agency.

Such approach fails to address the issues or people analytically. McNay opts for a generative framework to understand agency. Framework defined as one that focuses on the active process of self-interpretation that is inherent to the process of subject formation. Now, this framework focuses on creative ways through, which agency is sought. Let me give you an example through Mahasweta Devi's short story Rudali.

Mostly read as a feminist text by theorists such as Anjum Katyal exploring economic empowerment of women. Mahasweta Devi's short story Rudali shows an understanding of how caste gender class operates simultaneously. Rudali narrates the struggles of Sanichari a lower caste woman, whose perpetual poverty along with the deaths of her family members has literally caused her tears to dry up.

The story tells how at the time of the death of her mother-in-law, she was so busy making funeral arrangements, that there was no time to cry. Then when her husband died the government officers did not give her any time to shed tears, because they burned the corpses too quickly fearing the outbreak of epidemic. And at the time when of her son's death, she was so stunned at the turn of the events that she could not cry.

Added to this is her mounting debt to the landlord. The story however goes beyond a mere dirt to sanichari's sad life and depicts her emergence as a victor, wherein she converts her grief into a profession by becoming a Rudali or a professional moaner. This is where the negotiatory aspect of agency comes into focus. Sanitary assumes mastery over the profession of Rudali's as she imparts her knowledge to the younger women or younger Rudali's to be.

Her agency lies in transforming her personal grief into profitable work. This becomes clear in the way the Rudali classify their work, just for wailing, one kind of rate. Wailing and rolling

to the ground, 5 rupees one sikka. Wailing, rolling on the ground and beating one's head, five rupees two sikka. Wailing and beating one's breast, accompanying the corpse to the cremation ground, rolling around on the ground there for that the charge is 6 rupees.

Here, Sanichari and her group do not actively resist the system. Rather, they manipulate their position within the system to make it favorable for themselves. It is in this transformative act of turning victimhood into a source of profit that their agency can be traced. Negotiation as a criterion to depict such agential representation is explicated, through the character of Sanichari in Rudali.

This story therefore complicates the concept of agency, through oppositional choice by invoking agency, through negotiation. Unlike, mainstream feminist interpretation of women's exercise of choice in oppositional terms as resistance to patriarchy with respect to labour and sex as seen through the Mumbai dance bar ban issue in the previous lecture. In Rudali, Mahashata Devi clearly shows that Sanichari has no choice, but to opt for this job.

Deprived of all economic and emotional support, she becomes a moaner. But it is here that negotiation becomes important. Sanichari exercises agency not through active resistance, but by negotiating her way to survival. This representation can be contrasted to that of the lower cost wife in for example Gautam Ali's short story Bazaar. Now, unlike that story Sanichari does not remain a victim of patriarchy.

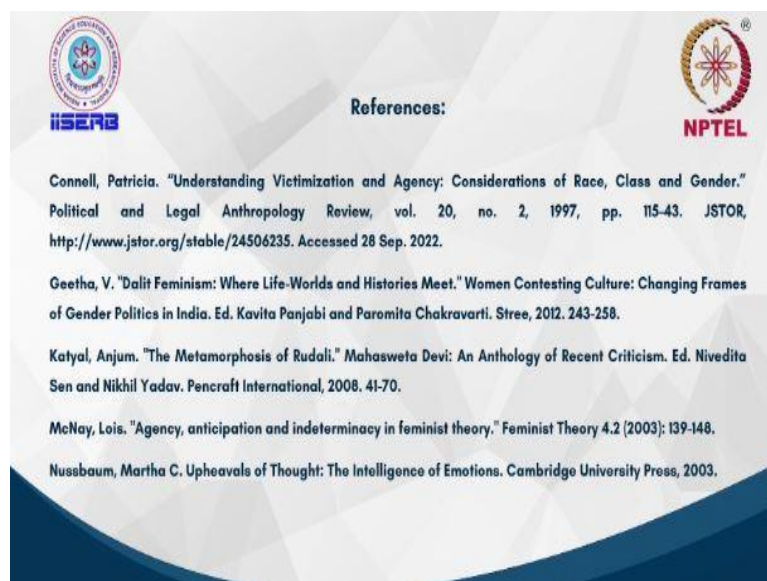
She also encourages younger Dalit girls to leave professions such as prostitution and become Rudalis. The job of a professional mourner becomes an avenue to challenge the patriarchal practice of devadasi system. In the context of studies conducted on the Dalit women in Tamilnadu, V Geetha in her article Dalit feminism, where life worlds and histories meet observe that exclusive focus on victimhood renders, rejection and complete defiance as the only ways to achieve agency.

As she points out, a feminist understanding of agency would not merely reproduce instances of victimization and angry retaliations. But, would examine how female political subjectivity is constituted and played out. Now, by bringing out different ways of coping with victimhood, negotiation actually demolishes the dichotomy between victimhood and also agency.

Such representation recognizes the intersectionality of gender along with other structures of oppression in creating specific situations for different groups of women. And how people like Sanichari find their ways around to survive through negotiation. Now, let us summarize today's lecture. In this lecture, we talked about the various formats of agency, agencies seen as opposition to victimhood is often asserted, through direct resistance.

However, this is not the only way in which one can achieve agency. We also learned that methods such as negotiation may also prove to be agential. This is a very significant epistemological contribution in terms of how feminist agency is conceptualized. Thank you.

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