

## Utilitarian & Marxist Feminism through Drama and Cinema

Feminist theorists try to approach their philosophical perspectives from various systems. They approach it from the perspectives of liberalism, Marxism, radicalism, existentialism, postmodernism, etc. Whatever may be the system they use, their aim seems to be to divulge the oppressions undergone by the women. They use a method or adopt a philosophical thinking so that they can spell out their cries in a philosophical manner. Using the philosophical systems do not mean that the philosopher who forwarded the system was aiming at the liberation of women.

I would like to present in this essay the utilitarian and Marxian perspective on Feminism. For the utilitarian perspective I base myself on Harriet Taylor Mill and the Marxian perspective are from the writings of Karl Marx. I also attempt to connect the philosophy of Harriet Taylor with the Iranian movie, *The Day I Became Woman* and the philosophy of Karl Marx with the illustrious play of Bertolt Brecht, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Since Karl Marx has not written directly on woman, I brief his teachings as I deal with him and the implied feminist thinking that lie under the philosophy of Marx.

### Harriet Taylor Mill

Harriet Taylor Mill is one of the representatives of 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal feminism. Her ideas differ from Wollstonecraft Mary at least in two perspectives. Though she celebrated with Wollstonecraft the theme of rationality, Harriet Taylor was trying to give a utilitarian vision of rationality, i.e., the ordinary way to maximize aggregate utility is to permit individuals to pursue whatever they desire, provided of course that they do not hinder or obstruct each other in the process. Secondly, Taylor insisted that if we are to achieve sexual equality, or gender justice, then society must not only give women the same education as men; society must also provide women with the same civil liberties and economic opportunities that men enjoy. Taylor followed many traditional assumptions about women's maternal nature and role. According to her, sexual inequality

is the result not of nature's decrees but of societies, customs and traditions. She names at least three of the apparent situations to explicate this fact.

1. *Education* in primary and high schools, universities, medical, legal and theological institutions.
2. *Partnership* in the labors and gains, risks, and remunerations of productive industry.
3. *A coequal share* in the formation and administration of laws – municipal, state, and national-through legislative assemblies, courts, and executive officers<sup>1</sup>.

Taylor was an advocate of partnership. According to her, in order to be the partners rather than the servants of their husbands, wives must earn an income outside of the home. She believed that “Even if every woman, as matters now stand, had a claim on some man for support, how infinitely preferable is it that part of the income should be of the woman’s earning, even if the aggregate sum were but little increased by it, rather than that she should be compelled to stand aside in order that men may be the sole earners, and the sole dispensers of what is earned.”<sup>2</sup> Taylor also advocated the creativity aspect of feminine. According to her, if given a free reign, woman may trade in the “career” of marriage and motherhood for something else. Taylor thinks that instead of the “career” of marriage and motherhood, woman may be easily prompted to choose a career in the arts, business or politics<sup>3</sup>. Taylor was a feminist who saw the greatness of work among women. For her, it was psychologically vital that every woman work, regardless of financial necessity<sup>4</sup>. According to Taylor, the institution of marriage can be made equal only if a woman by virtue of her employment first has a real chance to remain husbandless and, second, once married, has the confidence and sense of entitlement that come from contributing materially to the support of her family.

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<sup>1</sup> Tong, *The Varieties of Feminist Thinking*, 18.

<sup>2</sup> Tong, *The Varieties of Feminist Thinking*, 18.

<sup>3</sup> Tong, *The Varieties of Feminist Thinking*, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Tong, *The Varieties of Feminist Thinking*, 19.

### *The Day I Became a Woman* and Harriet Taylor

I would like to attempt to combine the notions of Harriet Taylor with the Iranian movie *The Day I Became a Woman* by Merzieh Meshkini. Taylor's attempt to bring in the concepts of partnership, creativity and greatness of work are significant in relation to the movie.

In the second act of the movie, the husband considers the wife as a servant who should abide by his directions. He is not interested in respecting her creativity aspect towards sports. If he had respected the notions of partnership and creativity aspects as suggested by Taylor, there would have emerged a relationship between them, a relationship of equality. Taylor's teaching on the importance of work, especially in the case of married women is relevant in relation with the movie. The heroine of the second act of the movie is compelled by the society and family to return to the husband, and one of the reason for that compulsion could be, that she is not financially secure and where will she depend for her needs. If the heroine were a source of income, I believe, she would not have to be on the road to escape and she could have led a free and creative life.

### Marxian Concept of Human Person

Marxists emphasize that what makes us human is that we produce our means of subsistence. We are what we are because of what we do. Unlike other creatures, humans create themselves in the process of consciously transforming and manipulating nature. This view is against the liberal theorists who view human person who is rational and competitive and has the tendency to put self over the other. "Human beings creating themselves" is not to be read as "man and woman, individually, make themselves what they are."<sup>5</sup> It is to be read as "men and women, through production, collectively create a society, that in turn, shapes them.

For Marxists, material forces of production and the reproduction of social life are the prime movers in history. Marx believed that a society's mode of production is its

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<sup>5</sup> Tong, *The Varieties of Feminist Thinking*, 39.

forces of production, its relation of productions that generates a superstructure that in turn bolsters that mode.

Marxists feminist believe in social existence determines consciousness. They believe that to understand why women are oppressed in ways that men are not; we need to analyze the links between women's work status and women's self image.

### Marxist Theory of Economics and Feminism

Capitalism is a system of power relations and exchange relations, according to Marx. It is a system of exchange relations because once labor power as a commodity has a price and all transactions in the market are fundamentally transactions. As a system of power relations every transactional relation is fundamentally exploitative. While power relations are exploitative, the exchange relations make the humans valueless. Capitalism is an exploitative system because employers pay workers only their labor power, without also paying them for the actual expenditure of human energy and intelligence that is taken out of them and transferred into the commodities they produce. Since workers must choose between being exploited and having no work at all, they consent to be exploited in order to survive in the society. More over, the capitalist ideologues convince the workers that there is nothing wrong in exchange relations that exist in the system.

This view of Marx is against the liberal notion that spreads the 'good news' that the freely signed contracts between the worker and the employer are mutually beneficial.<sup>6</sup>

Marxist feminists make use of the power relations and exchange relations in the Marxist economics to bring out the fact that most often women too coerced to sell herself in the market (for sexual or reproductive services) and it is not a free choice she makes rather that is only the value she has to sell in the market place.

### Marxist Theory of Society and Feminism

Class and alienation are the two concepts that play a great role in the Marxian analysis of society. According to Marx, every political economy has the seeds of its own

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<sup>6</sup> Tong, *The Varieties of Feminist Thinking*, 40-42

destruction. Within the capitalistic system there are two classes: class of the wealthy and the class of the poor. Once the classes become conscious of themselves as classes, class struggle begins and it becomes extremely difficult to prevent them from achieving its fundamental goals.

Marxists feminists are eager to bring together the women realizing the power of class and class consciousness. However, women in a strict sense do not constitute a single class. On the other hand, most women's domestic experience has similarities to motivate unifying struggles. For example, the campaign on *The Wages of Housework* has produced the result of recognizing domestic work as real work and women have gained a consciousness of themselves as class of workers.

Marxists feminists also make use of the notion on alienation. One is alienated if s/he either experiences his/her life as meaningless or him/ herself as worthless, or else is capable of sustaining a sense of meaning and self-worth only with the help of illusions about ourselves or our condition. According to Marx, workers are alienated from the product of their labor because they do not have a say in the commodities they produce and the fruits of their labor is taken away from them. Workers are alienated from themselves when work is experienced as something unpleasant to be gotten through as quickly as possible, it is deadening. The work that supposed to humanize the worker here in turn becomes a dehumanizing element which leads the worker into a psychological crisis. The workers are alienated from other human beings since the capitalistic structure promotes the workers to see each other as competitors for jobs and promotions. The worker who supposed to have his identification with other workers loses the identity as an aftermath of it. Finally, the workers are alienated from the nature too. Because the kind of work they do and the conditions under which they do it make them see nature as an obstacle to their survival.

Marxists feminists make use of the concept of alienation for their support. A man who experiences alienation in his work place at least not alienated in his own home or other social circles where as women who spends her time only within the house when feels alienated has no place to go around. She has no relief in such situations. This

prompts the Marxists feminist to help the women to have an integrated existence than a fragmented one<sup>7</sup>.

### Marxian Political Theory and Feminism

Marx believed that the workers who are aware of the class consciousness will struggle first to constitute themselves as a class, then to effect the transition from capitalism to socialism, and finally to achieve communism: full community and complete freedom. They will attack the political and economic structure of capitalism and if successful that will lead to the replacement of capitalism with socialism and once people learn to cooperate under socialism it will take them to communism. The persons who are living under communism are free not only to do but also to be what they are because they have the power to structure that shapes them.

Marxists feminists do not hesitate to be inspired from the political theory of Marx. Marxian call to eliminate the pernicious dichotomies that have made slaves of some and masters of others are made use by them to explain their struggles with others<sup>8</sup>. They also love the Marxian promise of make people free and they want to implement the liberating idea of women and men constructing together the social structures and social roles that will permit both genders to realize their full human potential.

### Reading *The Causasian Chalk Circle* in Line with Marxist Feminism

Bertolt Brecht is the author of the play and he hails from Augsburg. The heroine of the drama Grusha Vachnadze speaks to us a lot to support our reflection in line with the Marxian feminism.

### Grusha as Commodity

Grusha is in a position that compels her not to be free even within her work hours. She needs to satisfy the family of the Governor even out of her way. In the scene two of the play we see that though Grusha is dressed to go after the work, the extra need for the

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<sup>7</sup> Tong, *The Varieties of Feminist Thinking*, 42-45.

<sup>8</sup> Tong, *The Varieties of Feminist Thinking*, 45-47.

family of the governor compels her stay back<sup>9</sup>. The extra need was a goose for the banquet. She is sold as a commodity in her marital ceremony with dying Yussup, where the mother-in-law gets the profit.

#### Alienation in the Drama

Marx in his thinking state the fact that once people feel alienated in the work, the entire work one does become dehumanizing. We have a good example for that in the play. In scene two the conversations between the two doctors simply embarrasses us. They are fighting over who is in charge of the royal child and they are not interested in it. In a way they curse the work and the work place and thus become dehumanized in their approach.

However, Grusha is against the trends of the doctors. She considers her work as sacred and is responsible. She is even taking a risk to be a responsible worker. In order to save the child she does not hesitate to cross the bridge even risking her life. Her adventure to protect the child is a humanizing element in the work. She can't destroy her work because she says "I've brought him up! Am I to tear him to pieces? I can't do it". Indeed Grusha is a woman who is humanized by her work.

#### Oppression in the Drama

Marx was a champion for the liberation of the oppressed. Brecht too brings up the oppressive structures and people that continue to oppress the women.

Woman in the society is oppressed by the societal thinking and prejudices. Though the heroine Grusha is taking care of the child is with a good intention to protect the child, she had to face a lot of oppressive thoughts and actions. She had to move from place to place due to the presence of oppressive figures. They appear in the form of Iron shirts, the younger and elder lady of scene two and even in the negative thinking of her own brother and sister-in-law one can see the presence of oppression. Since the people in the village are talking about the child with an unmarried mother, Grusha is even forced to

have marital relationship with an elderly person to please the society. And the marriage is presented as a business deal where the mother-in-law gets the profit. The dying Yussup speak up that women are subjected to oppression saying: “woman is the one who hoe, in the field and parts her legs.”

#### Presence of Exchange Value in the Drama

The inn keeper and the milk seller in the drama are the characteristic figures who make use of the opportunity to exploit, exploit a woman who is in a helpless condition. Both of them charge excessive fares for the place to rest and for the milk. Grusha is forced to undergo the exploitation because there is no other way to protect the life of the child. Brecht presents the capitalist exploitation as presented by Marx with an emphasis on the exploitation towards woman.

#### Bourgeois Women oppresses Proletarian Woman

Natalla, the younger and elder ladies are the representatives of Bourgeois women who oppress the proletarian women. Natalla, the Governor’s wife beats her adjutant who is also a woman and calls her bad names (bitch). She is attracted to her luxurious items like slippers and silver dress than her child. She harasses people who work for her using her power. She calls Grusha as vulgar person during the trial and demands that Grusha to be punished. Natalla, A perfect Example for an uncaring Bourgeois Woman!

The younger and elder ladies in the drama cannot even be in the presence of a working class woman, Grusha. Their heartless and suspicious behavior increases the pain of Grusha.