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Feminism

# Women's Oppression and Liberation

- Features - Women -

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## **Description:**

Does Karl Marx have any relevance for today's struggles for women's liberation? Do his theories of society and revolutionary transformation present us with tools that in any way continue to be useful?

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### **Does Karl Marx have any relevance for today's struggles for women's liberation? Do his theories of society and revolutionary transformation present us with tools that in any way continue to be useful?**

These and related questions come up repeatedly as I will argue for two very different reasons. I will exclude here the arguments, if they can be called that, of the extreme right, which are opposed to human liberation in any form, from class exploitation, from racial, gender and sexual oppression and discrimination. Rather, my focus is on forces and ideas within what we can call the center and the left.

With the worldwide collapse of older, organized, often large Marxist (or socialist) working class parties, a left-liberal segment became more influential even within the old left. We think of the left's orientation to the Democratic Party in the USA (where no mass workers' party has existed for some 80 years now) or the example of India where the left, in order to halt the fascist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) [extreme Hindu nationalist ed.], sees no option but to rely on the rightwing liberal Indian National Congress.

One consequence has been the acceptance of intellectual currents that reject Marxism's contributions to the principles of emancipation. Another consequence of the collapse of class politics is the rise of an ideology that conceives of the struggle for liberation as separate for each gender, race or other "identity"-based segments of the population. These separate oppressions at best forge moral alliances, rather than an objectively rooted unity.

A secondary but not unimportant reason lies in the creation of an opposite ideological claim that Marxism indeed promotes women's liberation, Dalit [lower caste ed.] and other oppressed people's emancipation, but must be hostile to feminism, Dalit (or Ambedkarite) politics, etc. as all being variants of "bourgeois/petty-bourgeois politics."

In India in particular, in the name of putting the working class first, this second current is widely present within both the old mainstream left and considerable parts of the far left. We can call this a sort of Marxist Antifeminism. It has both indigenous and international influences.

## **Marxist Antifeminism in India**

Kanak Mukherjee, one of the first woman members of the Communist Party of India (CPI) in Bengal and a leader of the Communist-led mass women's movement from the end of the 1930s. She later became a key figure in the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPIM) and its women's front, the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), needs to be cited in this connection.

Mukherjee, belonging to an older generation of activists, dismissed feminist ideas and movements for autonomy in many of her writings. Her focus was on fighting the Congress as well as the CPI (after the party split in 1964 and she went to join the CPIM), defending the Left Front government in West Bengal from 1977. However, a few remarks scattered through her political essays show Marxist Antifeminism at work. She saw feminism as a homogeneous category, and a movement that set women against men rather than class against class. In *Women's Emancipation Movement in India* (1989), she wrote:

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"Now the imperialists are also throwing a challenge to the healthy democratic women's movement. They are propagating the misleading Western 'feminist' ideology to misdirect and confuse women of the villages and cities.... As against Marxist ideology and its analysis of the women's emancipation movement as an integral part of the people's revolutionary movement and the class struggles of the proletariat, these agencies advocate "party-less" or 'above party' 'feminist' theories to confuse and disrupt the democratic women's movement. (103)

In the next paragraph, she sets forth the theoretical positions of the feminist movement as she sees it.

"These feminists, though of various views, pose the woman's question as opposed to men's and hold the patriarchal system of society responsible for the exploitation of women. Thus, they try to divert the class struggle into a struggle between men and women. This breeds hatred in the family, conjugal life and social life, and leads to the isolation of the women's movement from the mainstream of the people's movements.... Some of the leaders of these action groups pose as leftists and criticise the teachings of Marx-Engels-Lenin on women's questions." (Ibid).

Younger activists, who had to build their organizations while in regular dialogue with the left wing of the feminists, such as Brinda Karat, for many years General Secretary of the AIDWA and now a member of the CPI(M) Politbureau, took a somewhat more nuanced position, but explained the persistence of patriarchal families as a hangover from the ruling class, with no material roots within the toiling people. (Karat, *Survival and Emancipation*, 36-39)

One of the major influences from abroad has been "classist" (class reductionist) forces in the West, especially their material available in English. Here, I do not propose to look at all dimensions, but to mention the example of Tony Cliff's book *Class Struggle and Women's Liberation*. Cliff took the most conservative trends in feminism as representing the norm, then debunked all feminists as some kind of homogeneous force, and went back to Marx, Zetkin, Lenin and others as evidence that he stood with the Marxist tradition.

Cliff's argument against the feminists, taken up in the mid-to late 1980s by some activists in India having connection with the British Socialist Workers Party, included the stance that feminists are wrong in differentiating between men and women even when looking at women's oppression:

"This is not to deny, however, that men behave in certain ways which are oppressive to women.... But the blame should be placed squarely on class society, not on its individual agents. Women's oppression damages the interests of both working women and men." (Cliff, 229)

Elsewhere, Cliff lumps theoretical disputes around violence against women as minor, or issues that divide women from men.

"Many women in the women's liberation movement have consistently focussed on the areas where men and women are at odds rape, battered women, wages for housework while ignoring or playing down the areas of struggle where women are more likely to win the support of men such as opposition to the cuts in hospitals and schools, the right to abortion, and battles at work for equal pay or the right to join a trade union....(T)he women's liberation movement has come to concentrate on where women are weakest. (177-8) This implies that fighting too seriously for an end to rape and violence against women should take a very low priority in the agenda of a Marxist party or a Marxist-led women's movement an especially appalling position in the context of violence against women in India!" (My own response to Cliff's harnessing of Zetkin to his narrow position appears in my essay "German Socialism and Women's Liberation," 2003.)

## Marxist Antifeminism vs. the Real Tradition

To make sense of Kanak Mukherjee's attacks, it is worth looking at one of her earlier essays, published in a Bengali collection of her writings, *Nari Andoloner Nana Katha*, titled "Patitar Paap." Originally published in 1958 in the women's association journal *Ghare Baire*, it deals with prostitution.

The title sums up her attitude, for *Patita* means "the fallen woman," and *paap* is "sin." Apparently, back in the 1950s there was already some agitation among prostitutes for organizing, to demand better conditions. The essay looks at Engels, at Lenin's dialogue with Zetkin, and at real or supposed achievements in the USSR and China, and discusses existing laws to eradicate prostitution in India.

About the prostitutes themselves and their demands there is a brief statement: "What the fallen women themselves are saying or doing is not important. ... The first demand of the fallen woman is the demand for freedom from her fallen life. What they want is unimportant, the real issue is what we want for them and what we are doing about it."

Rather than a long polemic over this, I want to move to Marx, at a very young age, provides with a different approach. In *The Holy Family*, there is a considerable discussion of gender in the context of Marx's critique of Szeliga's analysis of the French socialist Eugene Sue's novel *The Mysteries of Paris*.

For Sue, the emphasis is on a questionable altruism shown by the German Prince Rudolph. In Marx's discussion, we find an examination of *Fleur de Marie*, a Paris prostitute, and *Louise Morel*, a sexually exploited servant of a bourgeois man. Marx's description of *Fleur de Marie* rejects the specious philanthropy of Sue, which later affects the attitude of Mukherjee.

"We meet Marie surrounded by criminals, as a prostitute in bondage to the proprietress of the criminals' tavern. In this debasement she preserves a human nobleness of soul, a human unaffectedness and a human beauty that impresses those around her, raise her to the level of a poetical flower of the criminal world and win for her the name of *Fleur de Marie*." (*The Holy Family*, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, 168)

It is not an abstract moralism by which Marx judges *Fleur de Marie*, but by how her actions affect herself and others. Pointing to the hardships of working class women and girls, Marx rejects the priest's description of *Fleur de Marie* as sinful. "The priest had made up his mind concerning Marie's penance; in his own mind he has already condemned her." (172)

As members of the proletariat have no way to survive but to sell their labour power, when there is not enough other work the women are forced to sell their bodies to survive. Marx sees her entering the nunnery as an illusory consolation which focuses on the mind at the expense of the body. Christian values forced her to focus on supposed crimes that she had committed, ignoring her reality.

Marx's sharp remark is: "Convent life does not suit Marie's individuality she dies. Christianity consoles her only in imagination, or rather her Christian consolation is precisely the annihilation of her real life and essence her death." (176)

It could be argued that Kanak Mukherjee did not ask that all prostitutes be made to enter convents, whether by persuasion a la Rudolph or by the force of law. However, this is precisely the point that her condemnation of the prostitutes as "fallen women" willy nilly pushes her in the same direction as Sue and Szeliga.

It is the moral degradation of the prostitute, not the society that has produced her, that Mukherjee's article ends up stressing. Marx's view of what she had done is put in other terms:

"The memory of the catastrophe of her life her selling herself to the proprietress of the criminals' tavern puts her in a melancholy mood. It is the first time since her childhood that she has recalled these events.... Finally, contrary to Christian repentance, she pronounces on the past the human sentence, at once Stoic and Epicurean, of a free and strong nature: 'Enfin ce qui est fait, est fait.' ["In the end, what is done is done." ed.] (MECW v. 4, 169)

Coming from Marx, the identification Epicurean needs to be understood as "materialist." And selling herself is caused by her need to survive. So she "considers her situation not as one she has freely created, not as the expression of her own personality, but as a fate she has not deserved." (169)

The voice of Fleur de Marie should be given due attention: instead of a sweeping assertion that what she wants does not matter, what matters is what "we" (the liberators from above) want to do to her. It is ironic that a fictional Prince Rudolph is to appear in a Marxist garb over a century after Marx wrote.

Marx's attitude to the issue is clear. He is not glorifying the initial condition of Fleur de Marie, when she certainly did not voluntarily choose to become a prostitute. But the alternative life she was given was far worse, as Marx saw it, for she was made to atone for something for which she was not responsible. To treat the prostitute as a fallen woman is to put the spotlight on her, and not on the social system that repressed her.

## Marx and Engels on the Family

It is also worth looking at both *The German Ideology* and *The Communist Manifesto*, for the way Marx and Engels look at the family. Rejecting the possibility of looking at the family as a unit through the ages, they stressed (this was of course a joint work) that one has to look at the historical context, particularly the social relations involved in production.

"One cannot speak of the family 'as such.' Historically, the bourgeois gives the family the character of the bourgeois family, in which boredom and money are the binding link, and which also includes the bourgeois dissolution of the family, which does not prevent the family itself from always continuing to exist. ... Where the family is actually abolished, as with the proletariat...the concept of the family does not exist at all, but here and there family affection based on extremely real relations is certainly to be found. In the eighteenth century the concept of the family was abolished by the philosophers, because the actual family was already in process of dissolution at the highest pinnacles of civilisation. The internal family bond, the separate components constituting the concept of the family were dissolved, for example obedience, piety, fidelity in marriage, etc; but the real body of the family, the property relation, the exclusive attitude in relation to other families, forced cohabitation ... (MECW v. 5, 180-81)

The argument is repeated, with more rhetorical sweep, in *The Communist Manifesto*: "On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain. In its completely developed form this family exists only among the bourgeoisie. But this state of things finds its complement in the practical absence of the family among the proletarians, and in public prostitution."

As with much of the *Manifesto*, there is a compression involved. What they seem to be arguing is that the family in bourgeois society needs to be viewed distinctly from pre-capitalist families. This family, in its ideal form, existed among the bourgeoisie, while the absence of ownership of the means of production meant that in practice such a

family tended to be absent in the working class.

In the later writings of Marx we can certainly see that he recognized the existence of families among workers in practice. But there is no idealization of the family. There is no need to argue that Marx had arrived at positions developed by feminists. There is certainly no elaboration of the concept of patriarchy. What I am getting at is that Marx is simply pointing out that there is no universal form of family across time.

The German Ideology also provides some evidence of a much more complex attitude to women's supposed inferiority. The discussion on the gender division of labour points out that the natural division that exists due to women's different biology turns into something social, with wife and child being described as the first slaves of the husband.

Since this original "natural" division is seen in societies that have underdeveloped productive forces, social and productive development would render the division no longer necessary. At the same time, since women are "enslaved" (whether this was based on Marx's class analysis and/or whether it was a linguistic turn of phrase), this suggests that technological improvement alone would not lead to women's improvement. Rather, a suggestion exists that they would have to fight for their emancipation.

In an essay of 1846, to which Michael Löwy draws attention in his *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx*, Marx looks at family-based and other "private" oppressions. Löwy argues that the essay "amounts to a passionate protest against patriarchy, the enslavement of women, including bourgeois women, and the oppressive nature of the bourgeois family." Löwy adds that there are few things like this in Marx's later writings.

Talking about the French Revolution and its aftermath, Marx wrote:

"The revolution has not overthrown all tyrannies; the evils of which the arbitrary authorities were accused persist in the family, where they cause crises analogous to those of revolutions." (MECW v.4: 604)

## Marx and Feminism

This is not to argue that Marx had prefigured every progressive step made by feminism. However, it suggests that Marx's ideas very often put him closer to many feminist arguments and in opposition to Marxist Antifeminism. The argument that a political and economic revolution might not automatically mean the overthrow of all other oppressions, including particularly gender oppression, is one that would be made by socialist-feminists and Marxist-feminists about the Russian and other revolutions.

Kanak Mukherjee's book *Women's Emancipation Movement in India* ends with a quotation from Lenin. It is in fact a good argument that Lenin makes, since he talks about the communist women's movement as a mass movement, not only of the proletariat, but of all the exploited and oppressed. (Mukherjee, 107-8)

What Mukherjee does not say, and what Karat would hesitantly admit in her book, is that the overthrow of capitalism did not mean gender equality. "With the general erosion of the commitment to socialist theory by ruling communist parties in many of these countries over a period of time, the conscious ideological and cultural struggle against patriarchal attitudes, which were the hallmark of the early years of the Bolshevik revolution, all but disappeared." (Karat, 44).

The problem, however, was not simply the absence of "ideological and cultural struggles," but the failure to understand the material roots of sexism. This is where in recent times Marxist-feminists have taken important strides forward, but basing themselves firmly on Marx.

## Identity, Intersectionality and Class Struggle

Anti-Marxist arguments sometime come from those who claim identity politics, regarding each kind of oppression in itself as a distinct entity. My argument is that each of these oppressions are real. But they cannot be solved (a) within capitalist society, or (b) each on its own as if there were no connections. Thus, Dalit caste and gender are both real classifications. As the #MeToo campaign in India has thrown up, sexual harassment of Dalit women is rarely acknowledged.

Ruth Manorama, speaking at a meeting in late October, stressed the need to speak about the sexual harassment of Dalit women, which has been ignored for hundreds of years. Cynthia Stephen, writing about NGOs in Tamil Nadu, points out that when she protested against an abuser (who had abused another person, not herself) she was thrown out. She notes:

"Information was shared by others, not by me, to the funders of the organisation where I worked about the various wrongdoings of the executive director and the board members. But as far as I know, they did nothing to intervene at the time or maybe they chose to believe his lies and nobody asked me for my side of the story. Was it because I was seen as a Dalit woman and therefore one whose opinion did not matter?" [1]

One way of dealing with these problems is to create a hierarchy, deciding that certain oppressions take priority. This is what Antifeminist Marxism does in a way, arguing about class first, others later. Reversing the signs, this is what is sometimes done by anti-Marxist critics.

Marxist-feminists have been in the forefront of a new analysis. From Lise Vogel and a small number of others to Tithi Bhattacharya in recent times, a line of argument has been developed, stressing that Marx's analytical tools and his own discussions in *Capital* and elsewhere can be extended.

Workers are sustained their paid and unpaid labor, which includes the care of workers, themselves as well as the care of the non-working members of the working-class family (the elderly, the children, the sick). Their survival ensures the replacement of their generation of workers by the next. This has been called social reproduction theory.

In the essay "How Not to Skip Class," Tithi Bhattacharya writes: "Instead of the complex understanding of class historically proposed by Marxist theory, which discloses a vision of insurgent working class power capable of transcending sectional categories, today's critics rely on a highly narrow vision of a 'working class' in which a worker is simply a person who has a specific kind of job."

Bhattacharya follows closely Marx's analysis of capitalism, and stresses, not that he had made all the connections, but that within his analysis there is scope for its expansion to a full-fledged social reproduction theory. Bhattacharya points out that workplace struggles are not the sole form in which class struggles are fought out.

"Workplace struggles thus have two irreplaceable advantages: one, they have clear goals and targets; two, workers are concentrated at those points in capital's own circuit of reproduction and have the collective power to shut down certain parts of the operation. . . . But let us rethink the theoretical import of extra-workplace struggles, such as those

for cleaner air, for better schools, against water privatization, against climate change, or for fairer housing policies. These reflect, I submit, those social needs of the working class that are essential for its social reproduction. They also are an effort by the class to demand its 'share of civilization.' In this, they are also class struggles." (Viewpointmag.com, October 31, 2015.)

Bhattacharya, as well as David McNally in "Intersections and Dialectics: Critical Reconstructions in Social Reproduction Theory," his essay in a volume *Social Reproduction Theory* (2017) edited by Bhattacharya, both argue that intersectionality theory leaves unexplained the potential for a unified theory of oppression and exploitation.

Nonetheless, whether we look at the context of intersectionality theory in the USA where Black Feminism arose as a response to exclusions, or to its current applications in India where both Dalit women and Queer activists have been talking about it as a response to their exclusions from the "mainstream," I would argue that we cannot treat intersectionality as a failed framework.

Patricia Hill Collins had argued that oppressions should be seen as a single, historically created system. There do indeed exist multiple layers of oppression, and unless the specially oppressed and their conditions are understood and they have their own voice, one can collapse into the Cliff-type position where those points where men are "willing" to help must be foregrounded, while uncomfortable issues like rape and assault should be pushed to the rear.

Intersectional politics of oppressed social groups is not necessarily revolutionary. But neither is it reactionary. What is called "identity politics" involves struggles of different social groups. Intersectional identity politics is a step to recognising that it is possible to be oppressed in one context and privileged/oppressor in another.

Dalit women in recent times have challenged the #MeToo campaign in India, not because they are misogynists but because they feel it is focussing excessively, or even solely, on upper caste, comfortably placed women, ignoring much more systematic sexual harassment and sexual violence perpetrated on Dalit women.

When recently one queer activist made a Facebook post expressing happiness that the #MeToo campaign was showing that heterosexual women could also be facing trouble, most other queer activists took strong exception.

Intersectionality is therefore an awareness that there is not one homogeneous, simplified exploiter beating in the same way upon all the downtrodden. And it is an attempt to raise the awareness that unless the struggle for social progress consciously incorporates all the oppressions, they can never be overcome in some automatic manner. The struggle for empowerment and representation of one oppressed group can even further the oppression of another oppressed group if it does not act self-critically with regard to its own tactics and rhetoric.

Intersectionality may not lead to revolutionary directions. But the concept of the proletariat as a "universal class" in Marx suggests how Marx also provides a possible link between class struggle and intersectionality. If the emancipation of the proletariat is not possible without the emancipation of all the oppressed, this needs to be understood, not as an automatic function of an ideal proletarian revolution, but as the process where multiple oppressions are seen, addressed, and given proper representation.

For example, it might mean the need for building mass working class organizations where women, Dalits, Dalit women, queers, are represented in the program, in the organization, and in the leadership in increasingly growing numbers.

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So we need to see that Marx's method provides us with the tools to integrate different oppressions and shows how capitalism binds them together. Intersectionality shows us that these distinct oppressions do have autonomous dimensions. Today we find that a (re)turn to Marx has a lot to do with the pressure of concrete struggles.

If we did not acknowledge this, we might again turn to a wooden Marxism that would reduce class to abstract, casteless, raceless, genderless humans who simply sell their labor power at the marketplace. Marxist theory and practice must move forward, not back.

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[1] <https://bit.ly/2Tg1Ugn>.