

MAN'S ENDLESS STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL AND IDENTITY AS PORTRAYED IN RUPA BAJWA'S NOVEL 'THE SARI SHOP'

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Received: 16 May 2018

Accepted: 25 May 2018

Published: 26 Jun 2018

ABSTRACT

The paper is an attempt to probe into the harsh realities of man's existence on earth and how the class differences affect a man's life and make his survival even more difficult. It is an attempt to explore the struggles of a commoner and his efforts and failures to live up to the standards set by the rich. The story of a commoner who wishes to identify himself with the rich and struggles to be like them but ends up disappointed and disgusted with the kind of treatment given to people like him for instance ,Kamla, a character in the novel. RupaBajwa through the protagonist Ramchand opens up a window to her world and presents a society which is highly divided between the rich and the rich and the rich and the poor. The story brings forth considerable insights into the contemporary Indian society and the constant struggles of a commoner for a better life, his desires, and aspirations and his failures and inabilities to fulfill his dreams. The streak of realism that runs throughout the story brings us face to face with therealities of life, where a poor man the protagonist of the story better called a subaltern, is bound to suffer and leads a mundane life of misery after all his efforts end up in nothingness. Ramchand a salesman at the Sevak Sari House and Kamla, wife of Chander are the representatives of subaltern under discussion.

KEYWORDS: *Commoner, Struggle, Aspirations, Failures, Reality*

INTRODUCTION

RupaBajwa through the protagonist Ramchand opens up a window to her world and presents a society which is highly divided between the rich and the rich and the rich and the poor. The story brings forth considerable insights into the contemporary Indian society and the constant struggles of a commoner for a better life, his desires, and aspirations and his failures and inabilities to fulfill his dreams. The streak of realism that runs throughout the story brings us face to face with the harsh realities of life, where a poor man the protagonist of the story better called a subaltern, is bound to suffer and lead a mundane life of misery after all his efforts end up in nothingness. Ramchand a salesman at the Sevak Sari House and Kamla, wife of Chander are the representatives of subaltern under discussion.

The corrupting influence of wealth has divided the society on the basis of the riches one possess'. The one, who has money, is rich and powerful and has respect in society, is the paradigm of identity in the Indian setup. The Indian society is divided into three sections the rich, the middle and the lower class. The lower class is the most affected as they are sans wealth, sans money, sans any social standing. This kind of division is certainly leading the society on the path of deterioration and reminds us of Eliot's "The Wasteland".

The abrasive effects of poverty play havoc upon the lives of poor and make them suffer helplessly under the shadow of the malevolent. RupaBajwa conforms to this reality in her presentation.

Far away from the old city, the rich live in their spacious houses with lawns in the front and kitchen gardens behind. They are presented with the colorful mixture of variedness. The rich, the bureaucrats, the educated are totally engrossed in their ways of life as per their status and profession demands. They have their cocoons of living and leading their lives. Locale, posh or otherwise, does not symbolize the conduct of the people since the division is purely made on the basis of fortune one has. This goes equally true with both men and women. Mrs. Gupta, Mrs. Sandhu, Mrs. Sachdeva and Mrs. Bhandari turn out to be their true representatives.

Ramchand the protagonist passes his journey of life coming in contact with all these people and becomes the representative of the ordinary, poor and downtrodden lot of Indian society and desires to rise high in life, struggles for identity and is shattered, when circumstances jolts him upside down from the dreamy reality to ground realities on which his very existence depends. The author has made Ramchand unfold for us and for himself too the reality of both the worlds: the world of Kapoors where riches matter and the world of Kamla where misery and squalor rules. In the context of such a world, Ramchand's encounters with different people and their attitude towards life make him attain the ultimate truth and the realization that survival has an edge over identity and to survive one has to earn money. Working as a salesman in the Sevak Sari House he is contented with the job of rolling and unrolling of saris. Having lost his parents in his childhood, he has no relatives to visit. His world consists of a little, dingy safe room. There are two windows in his room, one opens towards the street symbolic of the troubles and turmoil a commoner has to undergo outside his shelter and the other window opens in the courtyard of the landlord symbolizes the hopes and aspirations and dreams, a commoner would like to fulfil in the form of an ideal house, wife and children, a complete happy family.

Besides the two pieces of furniture, Ramchand has acquired few more things which include a chair, a low stool, a mug, two plastic soaps; all the articles of a perfect bachelor. He aspires to make some changes to his room. He wants to paint the walls and replace the 40-watt bulb by 50-watts, but the things remain as they had been. He abbreviates the total moment of his life particularly at the prime of his youth, a 'pothole' life.

"This was his world he thought in disgust. No wonder his life was such a pothole. Shop, room, shop, room, shop, room."

And one fine day an opportunity comes his way to evoke him to new possibilities. After working for eleven years in a sari shop, there is the advent of a new world in Ramchand's life. The world he has never seen before. Ramchand is sent to the elite Kapoor to a posh colony, the abode of rich, to show expensive saris to the Kapoor women. For the first time, he sees with utter amazement high iron gates, grand-looking sofas, big rooms and glass-topped tables. He observes the Kapoor women non-haggling and non-bargaining over the price of the saris as most of the women do. In RavinderKapoors' living room the women completely ignore Ramchand and choose whatever they want. There is no doubt, no confusion in their mind. Overawed by the riches and the treatment given to him by the Kapoors, his confusion and nervousness get so much multiplied that he is totally unsure whether to ask for the bill or not. His mental notes regarding the amount of money the Kapoors owe for the purchase they have made does not come to his rescue.

This new phase of life fills his mind and soul with enthusiasm and he decides to learn. He begins to feel that he can realize the dreams his father had seen for him once. Ramchand awakes himself with an urgent sense of possibility. Ramchand feels as if he has explored a new promising world.

“Once you got out of that rut, it was easy to see that there were endless possibilities in the world.”

The inner urge to set himself on the stage of amelioration by reading Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography and getting acquainted with the use of English language ignite his dormant spirit. He arms himself with old books but with a new copy, a new pen, and an ink pot. He wishes to get success in the steps he had taken for self-improvement, unaware of the truth of life he was yet to face. Ramchand is unable to make a balance between the world he lives in and the world he has come across but he believes that reading and writing can promise a better life. And during this struggle of reading and learning, he comes to know about Kamla. Kamla is the wife of Chander, another salesman on the Sevak Sari House. Kamla is another representative of the subaltern who has been victimized by the society, her husband and husband's former employer. When Ramchand probes into the truth of Kamla's life he is astounded to see the cruel realities of poor man's existence on earth.

The story of rape by two policemen sends shock waves and unnerves him thoroughly. Despite his assurance of help to the lady, he becomes helpless. The Stale blood-stained red color on her white flower purple sari leads him to imagine the unimaginable. He understands the kind of rape she must have undergone. He recalls the essay of policeman he had read. He realizes that reading and writing has nothing to do with the real life. He puts all his books in a pile and keeps them on the upper shelf so that he cannot see them. Experiences of the real life and those described in the books do not match therefore he decides to keep the books aside.

“Every coin has two sides.” Ramchand comes face to face with the other side of the coin also. After seeing Kamla, he is so terrified that his pains touched the last edge of his tolerance. Kamla's words start crawling into his ears like worms and embed themselves in his brain. He does not know how to handle the situation. Should he run away from the terrible blackness of his eyes, from the filthy smells she emits and the rust-red stains on her sari, he fails to decide. He is so much emasculated with the state of his total impotence in the present situation that Ramchand can do nothing but cry and blubber loudly. He runs away from the place and seeks refuge in his dark, dingy, safe room. But then he thought of Mrs. Sachdeva, an educated woman, (HOD) English in a college, a social activist can help Kamla, can fight for her and teach the oppressors a lesson. And when he attempts to narrate Kamla's story to Mrs. Sachdeva, she vehemently repels against Ramchand's narration of inhuman treatment of Kamla in the hands of Guptas and the police. She believes that such horrible and filthy things happen every day and the rich and (respectable) should not be dragged into it. She also threatens Ramchand that she would report against him and that will cost him his job.

The incident makes him so confused and nervous that he is wrenched upside down. Under the fit of neurosis, he becomes aggressive and insulting to the shop manager. But his fit is transitory and non-caustic. This behavior lends him to a state of utter helplessness. He becomes jobless and moneyless. He remains cocooned in his room for twelve days in a state of, ‘no rage, no worries, no happiness, no ambition, no doubt, and no grief.’ It is a state of complete blankness. He breaks contact with the outside world and loses the count of days and dates. The sense of shiver on the thirteenth day brings him back to senses. He is suddenly awakened and overpowered by the haunt of rent he is supposed to pay. Under the compulsive fear for the need of money he gets up suddenly, reaches Sevak Sari House, seeks forgiveness from

Mahajan, the shop manager in a lowly and apologetic tone and gets back to his job of showing saris. His realization that surviving requires money, leads him to make a compromise.

Life is full of struggles and one faces ups and downs of various kinds. Fanciful dreams on the one side and harsh realities of life on the other always clash and bring no result. The hard fact of life has been and is that one needs money to survive in life. For that compromises are a must. A commoner has to make compromises sometimes of uncommon kinds.

Ramchand presents the real picture of a man on earth. The larger section of society is no different from the character of Ramchand. The fate of poor in the novel strikingly matches with their counterparts in the actual world.

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