

Umbartha: Women's Exploitation, An Intersectional Feminist Approach

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Abstract

Feminism has emerged as the voice against male dominated exploitation and intersectional feminism is a platform that emerged as a voice for women from discriminated and diverse sociopolitical background. Intersectional feminism is thought provoking step to protest rights of women and equality in the society. Women cannot be separated from numerous injustices because women experience them intersectionally, some women affect due to race, some because of caste, some due to LGBTQ, others due to poverty and illiteracy etc. Released in 1982, Marathi cinema Umbartha, presents story of Sulabha who is determined to struggle for women in the Reformatory. Problems, exploitation, traumas, sufferings of women in the story are interlinked and related to each other in such a way that this story also becomes tale of present women.

Key Words: Feminism...intersectional. Feminism, exploitation of women, movie Umbartha

Objectives:

To focus on the theme of women's exploitation in the film Umbartha

To explain the concept of Intersectional Feminism.

To analyse the film Umbartha from intersectional feminist point of view

The film, Umbartha is a story of a woman, Sulabha (though the meaning of her name is easy, nothing is easy in her life) who has realised her existence after education, completing a degree in social work, now she doesn't feel like an ordinary woman with family. She wants to step out of the family and work for the destitute women to improve their lives. The film also portrays lives of women who have been wronged and suffered a lot due to male dominance and patriarchal system. All these women suffer together and tries to settle with each other sharing their tales of sorrow and the protagonist Sulabha

becomes the part of their home at the end seeking her identity with them. At the end Sulabha also becomes a destitute woman like other women, but difference between Sulabha and others is that of enlightenment and realisation of self. Sulabha, though, decides to leave her husband and family, that shows her refusal to adjust with patriarchal norms.

The story focuses rich and reputed Mahajan family. After the passing of her husband, Mrs. Mahajan, in the role of *Mother-in-law* develops her career, works as a successful incharge of four institutions, and is reputed social worker cum business woman, lives a comfortable life with her two sons - Dr. Mohan and his wife, Maya; and Adv. Subhash and his wife, Sulabha, and their daughter, Rani.

Directed by the most able director Jabbar Patel and Rao, powerful star cast in the leading role Smita Patil and Girish Karnad, melodious voice of Lata

Mangeshkar and music by Hridaynath Mangeshkar, meaningful and theme-based lyrics of Suresh Bhat, based on Marathi novel *Beghar* by Shanta Nisal the movie *Umbartha* (released in 1982) is still a milestone

Depiction Women's Exploitation-

Sulabha Mahajan protagonist, (played by Smita Patil) is a woman who decides to step out of her home, crossing the threshold (in marathi *Umbartha*) to fulfil her passion of social work and to do something constructive for the deserted, abused, traumatized and assaulted women in her society. Against the wish of her Mother-in-Law and by convincing her Husband and leaving behind her daughter Rani to the care of her Sister-in-law, Maya, Sulabha accepts the job of a superintendent of a Women's The Reformatory in a remote town of Sangamwadi.

The second part of the plot begins with Sulabha's endeavour and her journey in the realm of superintendentship. The remaining part of the film presents a story of a woman, who left behind a well settle life and family, and now faces unknown challenges and resistance to fulfil her ambitions and to develop the lives of deserted women in the reformatory. She tries to establish discipline and works as per the rules and regulations. The managing committee does not support her, even local MLA Mr. Bane, other landlords like Madan Shet who uses the inmates of the reformatory to fulfil their sexual needs, the cloth merchant who is commercial and some women who want to leave the Reformatory so that they can enjoy life as per their wish, all go against her. Despite these obstacles, she starts new ways of settlement through the means of sewing classes, marring the girl as per her consent, and achieves success in the rehabilitation of

these women. Two women, Gulab and Bakul, run away and forcefully brought back to the The Reformatory. They burn themselves. Two women, Sugandha and Jaswandi, are lesbian and news about it is published which defame the Home. All these happenings lead to the inquiry of Sulabha by a special committee. Though she is found innocent and honest, Sulabha resigns the job and returns home. Except her sister-in-law no one welcomes her heartily. Her daughter Rani denies to accept her. To her surprise her husband is engaged physically with another woman and justify his betrayal calling it as a need to fulfil his desire. Disappointed yet not defeated Sulabha decides to leave her family and follow her ambition. At the end we find, Sulabha confident and self-reliable woman.

Concept and Features of Intersectional Feminism-

The term *intersectionality* was first introduced in the paper "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex." in 1989 by theorist and American law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, who provided a framework that must be applied to all situations women face, recognizing that all the aspects of identity enrich women's lived experiences and compound and complicate the various oppressions and marginalizations women face.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, explained Intersectional feminism as, "a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other, she further adds all inequality is not created equally". An intersectional approach shows the way that people's social identities can overlap, creating compounding experiences of discrimination. (3). Crenshaw said,

“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 of its parts”. (1)

In an interview, (2) Crenshaw defines intersectionality as, “The idea that we experience discrimination based on a number of identities.” She developed her concept against double exploitation of the Black women, as a black against colour discrimination and as a woman, against gender discrimination. In her research, Crenshaw found that enduring issues like political the racial wealth gap could not be explained unless the systems themselves were biased. Race wasn’t only the factor, however.

Laci Green and Franchesca Ramsey (7) explain the steps to understand intersectionality in an video-

1. Examine our own privilege.
2. Listen to each other.
3. Practice feminism through a broader, more inclusive lens.

As Laci explains further, “On the feminist issues where we hold privilege, it's crucial to listen to women who don't. To listen to their experiences, to see the world through a more complex lens and to raise the voices of those who have less power.” Intersectionality is just about standing up and looking out for each other.

In an article, titled “Intersectional Feminism: What It Is and Why We Need It For, Taylor Hawk,(8) comments on the necessity of

Intersectional Feminism as the movement that is truly inclusive, and allows women of all races, economic standings, religions, identities and orientations for their voices to be heard. (2)

Features of Intersectional Feminist View-

➤ Feminism may focus on the aristocratic section of women and their problems such as white women, women from high class and caste, educated women and so on. But Intersectional feminism takes into account different ways each woman experiences discrimination. All women experience discrimination and gender inequality differently and uniquely, but the ultimate end of all is equality and zero tolerance.

Oppression can be understood in the depths of the inequalities with their relationship with each other.

- It's crucial to check your own privilege in society in order to be a better feminist. I, for example, am a white, straight, able-bodied, middle-class woman. This means that I personally don't have to face challenges that other women do. So, it's important that I recognize my privilege and listen to women who experience the world differently than I do.
- The intersectional approach is more inclusive that allows to fight for gender equality despite the differences among the

women and increase our understanding of each other and together we can strive for justice and better future.

- The history behind the violence and discrimination creates inequality that disadvantage some from the outset. These inequalities intersect with each other, for example, poverty, caste systems, racism and sexism, denying women their rights and equal opportunities. The impact of gender-based violence is on the marginalised women- such as rural area, young girl with poverty, girl with disability,
- Intersectional feminism connects all fights for justice and liberation. It shows us that fighting for equality means not only turning the tables on gender injustices, but rooting out all forms of oppression.
- Rather than fragmenting women's issues, taking on board the experiences and challenges faced by different groups has a unifying effect; we are better able to understand the issues at hand and, therefore, find solutions that work for all.
- Looking through an intersectional feminist lens, we see how different communities are battling various, interconnected issues, all at once. Standing in solidarity with one another, questioning power structures, and speaking out against the root causes of inequalities are critical actions for building a future that leaves no one behind.

- Taking an intersectional feminist approach to the crises of today helps us seize the opportunity to build back better, stronger, resilient, and equal societies.
- Women cannot be separated from numerous injustices because women experience them intersectionally, some women get affected due to race, some because of caste, some due to LGBTQ, others due to poverty and illiteracy etc.
- Feminism has emerged as the voice against male dominated exploitation and intersectional feminism is a platform that emerged as a voice for women from discriminated and diverse sociopolitical background. Intersectional feminism is thought provoking step to protest rights of women and equality in the society.

Umbhartha : An Intersectional Feminist View

The film focuses socio-political forces that try to be philanthropic and sympathetic towards women but in reality, are selfish, work for profit and exploit women sexually. After completing a degree in social work, Sulabha feels alienated in her own family and decides to create her own identity. Here she is different from her mother-in law who adjusted with circumstances, family and career, on the other hand her sister -in -law, Maya who is housewife and is considered with sympathetic attitude for being childless. Her husband Subhash, who supported her to take up this course and job, shows his inherent patriarchy when he taunts Sulabha for not being understanding the family and the situation. He decides to support her

against the will of his mother as he admits that Sulabha has realised the world outside.

Sulabha's dream job to work for women turns to a nightmare when she observes everything in the reformatory unfolds a tragic state of women. The film exposes many illegal and immoral aspects of reformatory such as the former Superintendent has provided girls to the local MLA and thus laid them to prostitution, indiscipline among the women, dominance of certain women over others, women unwilling to live, commercial attitude and so on. The character of Sulabha takes a critical feminist stance against the reign of capitalist and patriarchal culture and provides skill and vocational development courses to settle women financially.

The management committee members are apathetic to the women in Reformatory, they come for the meeting and abuse these women when listen to their cases. To give food and shelter to these women is enough and never feel to bring them out of their pathetic condition. One of the committee members publishes issues like lesbianism at the reformatory for his newspaper from commercial point of view. Sulabha in her monologue at the end makes it clear that such organisations should be supportive and run honestly, instead it has become the centre of corruption and women's sexual exploitation. Women suffered in the world outside but here in reformatory also hell like situation is created for them.

The character of Sulabha is opposite to her sister-in-law, Maya who is a perfect wife, supportive sister-in-law and a caring motherly figure for her Rani. However, she receives a taunt as childless one, it shows that for a woman to be mother is her highest blessing. But the same blessing of

motherhood is the cause of death of Mangala, a school going girl who is pregnant as a result of rape by her teacher, Utapala Joshi, an unmarried mother faces challenges to get her child, Champa tries to abort her baby as it is the result of her illegal relationship which she accepted as a financial need, Farida kills her six months baby girl to save herself from not going to her husband's home and prefers imprisonment. The issue of motherhood has various dimensions, that it makes a woman goddess in the form of Mother and the same thing turns the greatest blot for her if a man is not there to support her motherhood.

Sulabha's mother-in-law, Mrs. Mahajan is an authoritative and dominant figure who works as a woman from a *sanskari* family, aware of her limitations and responsibilities. She opposes Sulabha's stepping out and warns her son that without his wife, he would live life as a monk. At the end her prediction proves wrong as her son Subhash physically gets involved with another woman. A man has freedom to have extramarital affairs, which can be supported as his need but a woman must not behave like this. He 'allows' his wife to take up the job but makes her aware of this favour.

Women in the reformatory have different and separate tales of sufferings and exploitation. The common thread is sexual exploitation. Ultimately, they are women who have no place to go, as Kamala bai says, "*I have no home*". This statement also highlights the plight of the Reformatories which are just homes in the name of it. Some women question why should they live in reformatory? It is hellhole? Women are from different places and background, yet their problems and sufferings are similar. All women, despite their class and education, are deserted by

husband or family, exploited sexually, and frustrated.

Another interesting episode in Umbartha is that of Lesbianism. Sughandha and Jaswandi are lesbians. It is not something that was common in society around 1980s, women do not even have the vocabulary to describe what they saw. They are subjected to verbal and physical violence. The committee members laugh Subhadra when she denies the name of her husband instead she goes for lover's name, but when gets information about lover's marriage with another woman, she kills her baby and prefers to go to jail.

When Sulabha talks about increasing opportunities for self-employment and training for these inmates, the management committee ignores her. They do not care about what happens to the women, these women are not asked about their consent at all when arrangements are being made for their settlement. Sulabha, on the other hand, sympathises with them and believes freedom and training will improve and transform their lives. They deserve second chance to make life decent and happy. Before resigning the job, she comments that the reformatory is not more important than women and their settlement.

Sulabha's husband, Subhash is apathetic to all the work she does. At the outset of the movie, we saw him pleading for a doctor who rapes. That woman was poor and her husband was paralysed, so it was easy to prove her characterless. The "*character defamation*" is a common factor that comes with women. Women are deceitfully impregnated by men and abandoned easily. Women belonging to certain sections are targeted and exploited. The title, *Umbartha* meaning *Threshold*, which suggests, it is a story of a woman

stepping out of her home, exploring the world and her interests while she faces challenges and resistance. In the end, when she returns home, her family has moved on. Sulabha ends up becoming one of those women she helped but what differentiates her is her stoicism. Sulabha sitting on a train with a satisfied smile emits an aura of freedom and a sense that whatever path she will choose, she will do what she wants.

Conclusion:

Umbartha presents women's exploitation with its multidimensional aspects ranging from class, caste, literacy and so on. Patriarchy always puts limits for the development of women. Feminists try to comment on the same and Umbartha which means threshold or doorstep in English presents the plight of women. "[It is] a time for all of us to reset. Think outside of our comfort zone and look beyond to the neighbour that is in need." Jyotsna Siddharth, (3) actor, writer and activist from India, spoke at a side event during the 76th session of the UN General Assembly, co-organized by UN Women and the National Alliance of Women's Organisation in India. The protagonist, Sulabha is from well settle family. She never faces any of the problems faced by the women in the reformatory, but she understands the condition of women in reformatory and decides to work for them. This is intersectional perspective. A woman with authority tries to establish her own identity by awakening other women, enabling them to settle on their own, sets Umbartha apart from other films of the time.

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