

The Unhappy Union of Gender and Marxism: A Study with Reference to Leo Tolstoy's *Resurrection*

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Abstract

This article draws upon Marxist Feminist theories and their application to Leo Tolstoy's novel, *Resurrection*. It is based on mainly Friedrich Engels' and Alexandra Kollontai's seminal essays where patriarchy and traditional family structures are held responsible for the subjugation of women. Kollontai further criticizes the lack of an alternative structure and calls for social reforms that would lead to freedom for working class women who are otherwise exploited by the upper class. Moreover, intellectuals like Gayle Rubin and Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak have pointed out the loopholes in Marxist Feminist structures. This is a line of thought that this article would like to explore.

Keywords: Marxist Feminism, patriarchy, capitalism, subjugation.

Marxist Feminism is a branch of Feminist theory and politics that takes its theoretical moorings from Marx. It criticizes capitalism as a set of structures and practices that promote the exploitation of labour. For Marxist Feminists, empowerment and equality for women cannot be achieved within the framework of capitalism. Marxist Feminism thus distinguishes itself

from other modes of Feminist thought by refusing to accord the category of "women" any separate and special status without regard to class.

Lynda Nead makes a distinction between a "fallen woman" and a "prostitute" in so far as the terms are dependent on class. A fallen woman belongs to upper or middle class, and her sexual indiscretion, leading to her fall, has no link to her financial requirement, while the latter—a prostitute—belongs to a lower class, often seen as a victim of circumstances and therefore an object of compassion. However, this researcher has employed "fallen woman" as a broad umbrella term.

In his foundational essay, titled "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State", Friedrich Engels blames the system of monogamous marriage for the subjugation of women. He asserts that within the capitalist family, the husband is the bourgeois and the wife is the proletariat, and calls for the abolition of the monogamous family as the economic unit of society. However, Russian Feminist Alexandra Kollontai's "The Social Basis of the Woman Question" asserts that free love would burden the woman with caring alone and unaided for her children. Moreover, as an alternative to monogamous marriage, people practice many forms of depravity in the name of free love: "All those masters of the house who rape their servants and throw them out pregnant on to the street, are they not adhering to the formula of "free love"? In a patriarchal society, only a woman is blamed for sexual transgressions and termed a "fallen woman".

We see this form of free love and class-based power in Leo Tolstoy's *Resurrection* (1891). The son of an aristocratic landowner, Dmitri Nekhlyudov, seduces their young maid Katyusha who belongs to the working peasant class. He adds insult to the injury by offering her money and then cruelly abandoning her while he enjoyed a life of debauchery. When it becomes apparent that she is pregnant with Nekhlyudov's child, Katyusha is turned out of the

service and ultimately turns to prostitution for her livelihood. Ten years later, she is accused of murdering a client and Nekhlyudov, who is a member of the jury during the trial, is full of remorse. Tolstoy takes a strict moral stand and gives both Nekhlyudov and Katyusha the opportunity to redeem themselves, but in real life, not all fallen women are as fortunate as Katyusha, nor do most rapists regret their wrongdoing. As an aside, it may do well to remember that Alexandra Kollontai, who was the commissary for social welfare in 1917, introduced many reforms for women in the Soviet Union, but her policies were reversed by the Soviets themselves after Lenin's death.

A critique of Marxist Feminism can be found in an essay by Gayle Rubin titled “The Traffic in Women”. Rubin argues that women are oppressed in societies which can by no stretch of the imagination be described as capitalist, taking examples from Amazon Valley, New Guinea Highlands and even pre-capitalist European societies. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak in her work “Feminism and Critical Theory” recognizes the historical antagonism of Marxism and Feminism. According to her, Marxism dismisses and at best patronizes the importance of women's struggle, and the conflict between the suffrage movement and the union movement must be taken into account. This unhappy union of Marxism and Feminism eventually paved the way for Feminism to tread the paths of the Subaltern, Posthumanism, and Intersectionality.

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About the Author

Jagari Mukherjee is a poet, editor and reviewer based in Kolkata. She has authored three collections of poetry. Most recently, she has coedited *The Kolkata Cadence: Contemporary Kolkata Poets*, published by Hawakal Publishers. Her latest full-length volume of poetry, *The Elegant Nobody*, was published by Hawakal Publishers in January 2020. She is a gold medalist in English Literature, a Best of the Net 2018 nominee, DAAD scholar from Technical University, Dresden, Germany, a Bear River alumna. Her poems and other creative pieces have been published in different venues both in India and abroad. She is the winner of

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