Re-Knowing Prostitution and The Feminist Problem

Does Prostitution pose a problem to Women in the household?/Why Feminist does not consider Prostitution as a profession like any other?/Should anything need to be done about Female Prostitution or does it make women independent?

Feminists and Prostitutes always have contradictory responses. One rejects, the other supports. This paper tried to show a different view of Prostitution in comparison to the Feminist’s opposition.

Feminism is the strong political, philosophical and an ideological movement concerned about the rights of women in the male-designed patriarchal society. A Feminist supports the oppressed women of a household to achieve freedom and enjoy equal rights as men which are usually denied to them. While Prostitution defined by World Health Organization (WHO) as a process of a sexual transaction between buyer (man) and the seller (women). Feminist define Prostitution that degrades society and morally corrupt women. And simply, Prostitution in which women sell themselves for the money and living in the red light lower quatrain area far away from society.

Irish Marion Young in “Is Male Gender Identity the Cause of Male Domination?” explains her theory on the male-dominated society in existing heterosexual societies. This gender differentiation explains the nature of women's mothering that defines her theory of male-domination. Women's mothering situates women into the domestic sphere where they nurture the children. The division made between men and women is not biological but a societal construct. Society made two spheres: Public sphere and Private sphere. The Public sphere is associated with the masculine attributes i.e., rational, impersonal and objective, the world outside the household is the world of men. While the Private sphere is associated with feminine attributes i.e., emotional, personal and subjective, the world within the household, where even men rule is the world of women. Those women who try to enter the Public sphere, the attributes of the Private sphere must be transcended as women embody it. Women prioritize her relationship between the self and the body by being embodied. In Public sphere, women's bodies become central to their self as their rationality is considered through their bodies only. Men are disembodied because their body is not related to their self; they can easily distance themselves from their bodies in public. It is the women's ‘sexed body’ central to their sense of self. Women in Prostitution are disembodied as they choose their sex as work and self-protection for them. Disembodiment allows men to enter the Public sphere and access to rationality which is possible only through regulation of bodies and this regulation is central to the provision of Prostitution.

Wendy Chapkis's “Live Sex Acts: Women Performing Erotic Labour” aims to broaden and challenge the division between good girls (the girls that obey patriarchal rules) and bad girls (the girls who oppose patriarchal rules) in the ongoing Feminist discussion about Prostitution. Chapkis in her illustrations includes the perspectives of various Feminists such as Catherine Mackinnon, Karen Davis and Andrea Dworkin. According to them, Prostitute cannot be considered as 'sex worker' because she is always perceived as 'sex object'. Women's body, as well as her identity, is constituted through sex. Mackinnon insists*, “.... men say all women are whores*”. (O'Neill 23) Prostitution was not the result of women entering into the sexual service but it is born out of male sexual desire. It has been promoted because of male sexual fantasy. Men in the society believe that they had the propensity to have sexual urge and that desire to be fulfilled. This is the ideology with which men are trained within the patriarchal society.

Prostitution and Feminism (specifically Radical Feminism) have always been contrary to each other. Laurie Shrage in making the case for Radical Feminist claims that,

“*female Prostitution oppresses women, not because they some women who participate in it 'suffer in the eyes of society' but because its organized practice testifies to and perpetuates socially hegemonic belief which oppresses all women in many domains of their lives*.”(Bromberg 3)

Radical Feminist had a belief that Prostitution is promoting patriarchal oppression due to which women are being more suppressed and degraded. But the reality is something else, Prostitutes are also a victim of male society entitled to fulfill their sexual needs. The social structure of society provides unequal power and privilege to women sex and women working in sex industry had to work under this paradigm. The Prostitution of Sexuality*,* a book by Radical Feminist Kathleen Barry visualizes Prostitution to be connected with the darker and humorless world of sex, violence, oppression and abuse. By objecting women, she dehumanizes and degrades their personality in a way men objectify and reduce women in their status. According to them, Prostitution allows men to perceive women continuously as 'sexual objects' and constrain women to satisfy their own sexual fantasy through Prostitution.

In the recent surveys, Prostitution has been accepted as a profession needed to fulfill socio-economic needs of consumer culture that privilege male sexuality. Radical Feminists are supportive of prostitutes as they are oppressed but view their work as totally degrading for society. Women, from the beginning of the history, are under the threat and dominance of men. Feminists try to overcome this oppression but believe Prostitution instead of reducing, perpetuate this climate of oppression. Prostitution according to them is said to destroy the familial bonds and marital relationship of husband and wife. Still, Prostitution has every time tried to influence the dignity of women, wanting women to earn for their living.

While constructing theories against and for Prostitution, one must take into account the reasons because of which women enter Prostitution. ‘Poverty’, the lack of money force women to enter into Prostitution to help her family financially. The lack of education and unemployment leave no other option better than Prostitution that will fulfill all economic needs. Women entering Prostitution under poverty gives it an emotional appeal due to the pain and suffering they bear within this profession. Some women enter voluntarily in this profession, they are not ashamed of what they are doing and know what are they and their position.

Prostitution is charged for causing violence and abuse in society but much of the violence and abuse is done by pimps and police. Prostitutes are exploited not because of women but those who organize sex industry (mostly men). Radical Feminists tried to remove Prostitution as a whole from every corner in society. It is found that Pornography is a ladder that steps towards Prostitution where sex is not chosen for sex but for the money that is provided for consent. Radical Feminists connect Pornography and Prostitution in two ways. First, in pornography, by pressurizing women to engage in pornographic depictions and second, by satisfying male fantasy where men abuse women and women are enjoying that abuse. Sex workers are bold, strong, independent and business-minded women unlike the household women who are shy, scared and dependent, whose identity is defined by the male of the house (father/husband). Sex workers earn by selling their sex, they are capable of having economic transactions from men but the women in the household are never allowed to move out or to have an earning of their own.

Feminism has really prominent and un-resolving issues against Prostitution, which they are like germs spreading like a virus helping in the patriarchal oppression that affects all women. Western Feminists have never included Race in the theory and discussion of male oppression and in Prostitution. The Feminist division includes only the issue of sex versus class inequality refusing to include race as a part of an understanding of those inequalities and Prostitution. It has been found that women of color are more likely to enter Prostitution at an earlier stage and are found imprisoned as prostitutes. The Black Feminists criticized both radical and social Feminists who refuse to incorporate the concerns and issues of African-American women. According to African- American women, Prostitution is born out of the intersectionality of structural racism, classism and sexism rooted in the society that gave rise to the clearer understanding of Prostitution.

The ‘cult of whore’ is another name for the cultural equivalent of sex worker's rights. No one ever dares to call themselves a whore. ‘Whore’ is one who desires but 'whore' in Prostitution is described in other sense as a ‘dysphemism’. ‘Whore’ is nothing more than a cultural fantasy produced by the male of society, a male desire transformed into feminine characteristics. The women are labeled as 'whore' while the man who demanded this Prostitution, no label is attached to him. The entire sex trade works on the male-created fantasy: only the women can become whores and of a particular type that is available to men through all the years.

There are two types of Feminist perspectives against Prostitution. First, the Anti-Sex Feminism, i.e., a group against Prostitution, in favor to stop the working of the sex industry. Second, the Pro-Sex Feminism, i.e., a group which allows the sex industry to make space within the society to help empower gender stereotypes and change masculinities in many ways. The ‘Pro-’ group supports the Prostitution as an occupation that allows them to be freely independent of other gendered occupation. Sex industry provides prostitutes economic and financial aid as well as liberate them from social inequality. Feminists from the perspective of ‘Pro-Sex Feminism’ published works claiming that Prostitution is doing nothing other than “*performing erotic labour*”. (O'Neill 16) Additionally, it can be a liberator terrain for women. By restricting women's free choice to work where she wants to deny her status and her equal rights as a human being.

My Body is not my Self’. The 'sex' is the commodity that is sold in Prostitution. The men are called ‘buyer’ and the prostitute, ‘seller’. Prostitute Eva Rosta once writes, “*You might see your brain, you might sell your back, you might sell your fingers for typewriting. Whatever it is that you do, you are selling one part of your body. I choose to sell my body the way I want to and I choose to sell my vagina.*”(Ekman,86) These women choose to sell her body, not her Self. The whole idea of sex worker is based on Cartesian Dualism, on the Cartesian concept of Split Self. Descartes' concept of Cartesian Dualism shows the incorporeal mind and corporeal body are two separate entities that interact with each other. While the body can be divided into parts of legs, hand but mind and soul are indivisible, they are inseparable. Two roles of Prostitution are presented here: The Self and the Vagina. Self is an active agent who makes the sale but vagina is no agent, it is a commodity to be sold and brought. In short, a female prostitute is made up of both a commodity and a being like any other.

Prostitutes regard themselves far away from the respected women; they are called as sexually active and morally corrupt women. She incarnates in herself the patriarchal attitude towards sex but sex in a different way as it is the sex per se in which she offers sex, sex as momentary act set against sex as a core to sustained relationship. (Campbell 5) They possess a threat to the social order and in cinema too, prostitutes are always targeted for murder. The prostitute separates the erotic from affectionate feeling that explains their role in men's imaginative realm. Freud in his writing acknowledges this phenomenon that man's experience sexual appetite only when they are in contact with lower-class sexual women. Freud considers this as neurotic with two factors: sexual frustrations prohibited by society or family in adolescence and incestuous fixation formed in childhood. The latter he calls as Oedipus Complex where the boy has to repress his desire for mother in order not to break the incest taboo. With this, Freud concludes that men physic impotence is challenged that when they desire cannot love and love but with no desire such that men are sexually excited to those women who are seen morally degraded i.e., Prostitutes.

When discussing Prostitution, it has been noted that only female Prostitution is brought up in the debate while there is also a Male Prostitution. Men are generally not included in the debate though they enjoy the credit of being men of society. Men as Prostitute have access to everything that is denied to women. The reason is simply because of their male status and body who are never marginalized and oppressed as women. The violence created in Prostitution is not in the practice of Prostitution but in the practice of buying sex that forwards the patriarchal male traditional power of society.

The Pro-Sex Feminists provides the solution of Decriminalization to help Prostitutes. Prostitutes are always under the direct pressure of imprisonment and court-imposed debts. Police illegally shutting their work and not arresting the men or the brothel keeper shows gender discrimination. The Prostitutes are doubly brutalized and burdened under the pressure of criminal records and the loss of reputation in society. The ‘Pro-’ group maintains that if Prostitution is decriminalized, then illegal arrest would decrease and there would be total security for prostitutes by police to rely upon for protection, not oppression. Whereas, the ‘Anti-’ group opposes Decriminalization as a vehicle that would promote sex trafficking, child Prostitution, leading to the expansion of sex industry. Further, decriminalization will produce more prostitutes and instead of protection, there would be an increase in social and health problems. They preferred Criminalization that regulates the laws against Prostitution.

In 1985, government changed the 1911 morality act on brothel-keeping into, “*Brothel Keeping was no longer to be prohibited, except for the cases of violence, force or overpowering*”.(O'Neill 17) This revision of the law expedites Prostitution as a form of work. The judicial system of the country should duly check brothel keepers and the men who visit them instead of blaming prostitutes who stand to change the socio-legal status of women in society as well in the Feminist understanding of Prostitution. Canada made Prostitution legal in the country in order to give police protection and rights to the sex workers living there. The Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act replaced the former laws against Prostitution with the laws that help prostitutes power to protect them as well as help them to get themselves out of the sex industry. Even in India, prostitutes were outcast and kept outside the frame of women's movement as they do not come under the label of pavitrata (chaste women). The sex workers manifesto that emerged in India set out to re-orient the right of sex workers, there were not only female prostitutes but also male prostitutes unites together and fight for equality. Womanhood is always ONE, there is nothing too good and nothing too bad.

It is, however, surveyed that prostitutes go through several clinical and familial experiences that could have negative results. The prostitutes have a suicidal tendency more than any other women. It is due to the environment surrounding that affected their mental health, personality disorders due to violence and abuse and being affected with the sexually transmitted diseases like HIV. They face chronic trauma that worsens their mental health. These happen due to the feelings of guilt and shame regarding society and the way their children would be affected, fear of getting arrest and embarrassed. The fear and feelings stop prostitutes in seeking help for medical care.

CONCLUSION

During Durga puja, in India, there is a custom followed from many years of collecting soil (punya mati) from the forbidden territories, the nishiddho palli of Calcutta, from the land of prostitutes. It is meant to be a sacred soil to make the Durga sculpture. The soil is begged and taken as a gift from prostitutes' hands. It is called Punya mati because the people who visit prostitutes leave their purity outside hence making the soil virtuous. In the 1800s, French physician Alexandre Parent -Duchâtelet, proposed a model called ‘Drainage model’ for regulation of Prostitution that was based on the intention that Prostitution is needed in society for channeling the unhealthy urges of man. If Prostitution is made legal everywhere, it will help the society from being choked and providing an example to all women to be independent of the male to achieve freedom to work in the public sphere. The attitude of society needed to be changed towards Prostitution and the blame must be shifted from women to men who are responsible for the sexual behavior then only Prostitution/prostitutes can be cured. The prostitutes must be viewed as a being and worker like any other, the rules of society need to be regulated.

“*Men sense the contradiction in us. They observe our desire to be prey. . . . In our fantasy life we submit even as in our real life we resist. In their fantasy life they resist even as in their real life they submit*.”(Campbell 21)

- Sheila Rowbotham, *Women's Consciousness, Man's World*

Works Cited

1. Young, Irish Marion."Is Male Gender Identity the Cause of Male Domination?". *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*. By Diana T. Meyers. 21-37. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.
2. Ekman, Kajsa Ekis. *Being and Being Bought: Prostitution, Surrogacy and the Split Self*. Trans. Suzanne Martin Cheadle. North Melbourne, Victoria: Spinifex, 2013. Print.
3. Sahni, Rohini, V. Kalyan Shankar, and Hemant Apte, eds. *Prostitution and Beyond: An Analysis of Sex Work in India*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, 2008. Print.
4. Self, Helen J. *Prostitution, Women, and Misuse of the Law: The Fallen Daughters of Eve*. London: Frank Cass, 2003. Print.
5. Carpenter, Belinda J. "Introduction". *Re-thinking Prostitution: Feminism, Sex, and the Self*. New York: P. Lang, 2000. Print.
6. Bartley, Paula. *Prostitution: Prevention and Reform in England, 1860-1914*. London: Routledge, 2000. Print.
7. Kissil, Karni, and Maureen Davey. "The Prostitution Debate in Feminism: Current Trends, Policy and Clinical Issues Facing an Invisible Population." *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 22.1 (2010): 1-21. Web. 25 Oct. 2016.
8. "FREE Prostitution & Feminism Proble Essay." *FREE Prostitution & Feminism Proble Essay*. Web. 13 Nov. 2016.
9. O'Neill, Maggie. *Prostitution and Feminism: Towards a Politics of Feeling*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2001. Print.
10. Shrage, Laurie. *Moral Dilemmas of Feminism: Prostitution, Adultery, and Abortion*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
11. Matt Coutts. "What Is and Is Not Legal under Canada's New Prostitution Laws." *Yahoo! News*. Yahoo!, 9 Dec. 2014. Web. 9 Nov. 2016.
12. "What Is the Reason behind the Practice of Taking Some Clay ...". Web. 13 Nov. 2016.
13. Sarah Bromberg. "Feminist Issues in Prostitution." *Feminist Issues in Prostitution*. Web. 13 Nov. 2016.
14. Campbell, Russell. *Marked Women: Prostitutes and Prostitution in the Cinema*. Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin, 2006. Print.