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Re-centring from the margin: An attempt to Re-construct the identity of strumpets, chancing upon patriarchal politics

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Abstract

This paper attempts to unravel wretchedness of prostitutes in male dominated and gendered society, which is culminated in their being used as commodities in our capitalistic society. The rich Indian ancient culture is recounted to bring out the dignified and distinguished social positions of women in general and of prostitutes in particular, and then it is pitted against the declining and deteriorating condition of them. A Sanskrit text, named Mṛcchakatika, is picked up, where prostitution has been extensively dealt with, and then, this text is approached from theoretical perspectives to bring out the discrepancies in attitude to this profession between common men of that time and that of today. Finally, this account is to be rounded off by providing a number of panaceas in support of the abolition of this profession so as to put an end to their poignant misery.

Keywords: Prostitution, Commoditization, Marxism, Feminism.

Introduction

Following Simone de Beauvoir's famous assertion in *The Second Sex* (1949)--- "One is not born but rather becomes a woman... It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature..."^[1], it can be argued clearly that one is not born but becomes prostitute. It is precisely the adulterated and gendered^[2] society, in general, that compels one to be a prostitute. Better to say, a number of cultural and political factors overdetermine^[3] the identity of a woman in the society. Toril Moi in her influential work "Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism" has made a comprehensive distinction among the three important phrases---- "feminism", femaleness" and "femininity". She explained "femininity" as a set of culturally defined characteristics'^[4]. Following Toril Moi it can be argued that our gendered society indoctrinates women in such a way that women who are associated with this profession, cannot think of coming back to the centre of the society and stoically bear with the oppression and exploitation perpetrated upon them by Patriarchy, and are apprehensive of the precarious future of their posterity if they relinquish this profession. Our society often preaches us that the identity of a person is to be determined by our putatively refined culture considering his/her profession. In other words, culture tends to laud a person if s/he is associated with dignified profession. Therefore, one can arrive at that profession of a person is to be prioritized over his/her humanity in our society. One of the reasons that lead a woman to indulge in prostitution is her straitened condition. Patriarchy forces women to "perform" the role of a prostitute thereby making them the victims of crass political marginalization. They are politically deprived from getting facilities in the society. Patriarchy detests and disparages them, for they cater coital pleasure to the clients; and they never concede that they are solely responsible for their miserable condition and they never tend to recognize their latent humanity. Judith Butler while responding to Nietzsche's observation: "there is nothing behind doing, acting, becoming; the doer is merely a fiction imposed upon doing, the doing itself is everything", retorts, "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results"^[5]. Following Bulter's opinion it can be argued that adulterated society judges a woman by her profession, i.e., by her "doing" instead of admitting the truth that they are forced in various ways to get involved in it.

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Thus, we the people of the society have no reason to detest them. Nowadays they are widely used as commodity by capitalism-stricken patriarchy. Marxist feminist critics, therefore, tend to take on Patriarchy for being hostile to them. Later their arguments are to be brought to the fore at length. What is Prostitution? Simply speaking, it is one sort of profession that hinges on the exchange of coital service at the cost of money to the clients. Webster Dictionary says: 'Prostitute is a woman who offers herself indiscriminately to sexual intercourse for hire' [6]. Prostitute is derived from the Latin *prostituta*. Some men believe that it consists of "pro" meaning 'upfront' and "situer" meaning 'to offer up for sale' [7]. It is unquestionably the oldest profession in the world. It can be traced long back in the ancient Indian culture. Though there are several myths behind the creation of women in the world [8], one will be taken aback to know that women had equal social dignity and respect to men in Vedic culture in particular. Though patriarchy was at that time prevalent, the then social thinkers comprehended that culture could not achieve its kudos if women were left in the lurch. For instance, in Rgveda, women have been portrayed as symbol of strength (śakti) and power [9]. At that time, women used to have the share of property known as 'stridhan' [10]. They had the freedom to choose their own spouses [11]. They used to hold on power [12] and enjoy venerable social positions [13], and above all, they had free access in education and in every field of work. Women used to chant mantras [14], take part in warfare, and used to indulge in the world of artistic activities [15]. They were self independent [16]. Even at that time, when patriarchy was ruling, they used to make pre-marital relations [17] and used to visit their lovers at tryst [18]. Therefore, we can safely arrive at that women in general had decent social positions. In Rgveda, there is a mention of prostitution [19]. In Mahābhārata and in Arthaśāstra, prostitutes are described as an established institution [20]. Prostitutes greeted Lord Kṛishna when he came on a mission of peace to the Kaurava Court [21]. Kālidāsa also referred to the institution of prostitutes [22]. In Jātaka, there are a number of instances of this profession, which suggest that they had space in the centre of the society and had high esteem. It is supposed that sacred devdāsī tradition triggered off the establishment and expansion of this profession in India [23]. Thus, it is quite clear that apart from women, prostitutes, in particular, too, carved out substantial niche in the society. It is during the end of Vedic Age and from onwards, the status of women in the society has been declining gradually. For instance, in Rgveda, it is stated that women were disparaged in this way that they are always made responsible for the breaches in amorous relations. In Brahmin texts, there are references of child trafficking [24]. In *Maitrāyani Samhitā*, it is mentioned that women, wine and sport are put on the same row [25]. In Oiteraya Brahmin, it is written that an ideal woman is she who patiently bears with torture and torment (3/24) [26]. It is supposed that the freedom of women were curbed inasmuch as they were flourishing rapidly. And in some fields, they outshined men, which that led them to disparage women to impair their psychological solidarity so that they could overpower them. During 18th century, the general condition of women deteriorated so much so that it led Mary Wollstonecraft to produce *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* [27] so as to stand against the oppressive politics of male politicians. Her legacy was carried forward by 2nd and 3rd waves of feminists. In our time, Marxist feminist critics are very critical of tattered and shattered, battered and buffeted condition of women in general and prostitutes in particular.

Whereas feminists 'revalue poignant experiences of women', 'challenge representations of women' as 'other' in patriarchal society; Marxists critics explore and re-examine the conflict between oppressed and oppressors, the role of culture in general [28]. Sūdraka's [29] *Mṛcchakatika* [30] has been picked up to show people's outlook towards prostitution. This drama can be taken into cognizance as a space where common people are allowed to perform their usual practices and prostitution has been highlighted. Prostitutes were looked down upon in the society because it was superstition stricken. In this regard, it needs to be said that there is a slight difference between ganikā and veśyā in that whereas ganikā means 'a high-caste public woman' who was enjoyed by only upper class people, veśyā means 'low-caste public woman' who was enjoyed by common man [31]. Sūdraka emphatically depicts Vasantasenā [32], the heroine of this drama, because of the distinctive traits of her character. Rightly Viṭa said that virtuous Vasantasenā 'should not be born in the family of prostitutes but in that of good men' [33]. Whereas contemporary virtuous men did not visit those areas where they dwelled [34], Sūdraka painstakingly sketches her character thereby drawing the attention of the readers. One may posit the adorable and appreciable traits of her character to justify Sūdraka's intention to bring her to the fore. Prof. Sukumari Bhattacharyya has argued that the name of the dramatist is itself suggestive of the fact that he belonged to the lower stratum of the then society and thus intended to bring out her [35]. In *Amarkośa*, it is stated that sūdra means somebody of lower birth [36]. This consolidates the claim that Sūdraka might have intended to draw heed of men to this profession. Though there are doubts regarding the original identity of Sūdraka, we, as critics, should concentrate on the work because 'Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet[dramatist] but upon the poetry[drama] [37]. The title itself is redolent of that Sūdraka gave prostitution due space in the text probably because he was concerned with the attitudes of men towards harlots. What strikes our wonder is that though during that time society was not as advanced and refined as it is today, Sūdraka could think of bringing her in the place of the Protagonist of the drama forgetting her social stature for the time being thereby implicitly showing his protest against patriarchal rulers and for that he is today lavishly lauded by literary critics. For instance, Dr. Suniti kumar Chattapadyya has extolled *Mṛcchakatika* as "one of these few master pieces among Sanskrit Dramas and deserved to be known to the cultural world in India and abroad..." [38]. During that time prostitutes were fond of money and wealth and their decorated and embellished residences [39], making love with well off youth [40], etc. vouch for their inordinate cravings. Greedless prostitutes were rare [41] and Vasantasenā was an exception. It is supposed that the rarity of her nature in addition with the dramatist's inclination to portray her made her the heroine of this play. Apart from it, it can be concluded that Vasantasenā had knack for art [42]. Vasantasenā's mother was a retired prostitute and unlike Vasantasenā she had excessive yearning for money. For instance, she orders Vasantasenā to go to the Śakara's residence so as to in search of wealth forgetting the emotion of her daughter [43]. There were two types of women----- 'ganikā' and 'kulastrī'. While 'ganika' was usually greedy, well off, etc., kulastrī was usually taciturn and bashful [44]. Vasantasenā again was an exception. She was humane, meek, emotional, kind-hearted.etc. She went to that extent of offering all her precious ornaments to Rohosen, the son of Cārudutta

[45] so as to console him when he was crying for a gold cart. She could do it because she became emotionally attached to Cārudutta and could feel for the little boy. Usually, courtesans do not make differentiation between clients but Sūdraka vicariously shows that she had no physical relationship to anyone before Cārudutta [46]. Unlike other harlots, she has always supported Cārudutta and resolved to sacrifice all her life for him just like a beloved pays utmost heed to her lover always [47]. It is supposed that Vasantasenā was averse to her family profession and tacitly protests against patriarchy by giving release to Madhanikā [48] from slavery. She thus turns out to be a potent rebel against patriarchy, who wishes to have a solid platform to exhibit her latent humanity. She never thought of it twice to go off her family tradition probably because her heart was ‘full of the milk of human kindness’ [49] and her intention was to set herself as an example before others to inspire her fellows to renounce that profession and to follow her trail. The title of this play may be explained in this way that Sūdraka had chosen this particular title not just only to emphasize the refusal of gold ornaments by Rohosen but also to foreground the motherly affection of Vasantasenā though Rohosen denied her to accept as his mother. This denial can be explicated in that Rohosen was too little a boy to comprehend her motherly affectation. Unlike other women characters in the play, she was prominent because of her unique traits. Prof. S.K.De thus has lauded the portraiture of Vasantasenā in the text [50]. It is also supposed that Sūdraka by drawing her character has attempted to alter the outlook of men towards this profession. Prof. Sukumari Bhattacharyya thus has arrived at that what is unique about this play is that instead of just depicting Vasantasenā, Sūdraka has explored her heart and foregrounded it keeping his emotions at bay [51]. Therefore, it is suffice to say the reasons why Sūdraka chose her as the heroine of this play. A Marxist feminist analysis of the play will come handy in interpreting the title of this paper. A Marxist feminist critic will tend to appreciate Sūdraka’s take on this issue because he has made Vasantasenā’s retreat to the main stream of life possible by revealing her humanity. Instead of projecting her as a mere commodity, Sūdraka artistically shows her marital union with Cārudutta thereby elevating her social stature. He has projected her free and independent among other women characters. She is also depicted as a potent threat to patriarchy. The marriage became instrumental for her in gaining Marxist feminist appreciation and recognition. In this regard one may be reminded of Swamiji’s opinion: ‘Unless the plight of women is alleviated, no altruistic work for the world can be carried out. No bird can fly with the help of a single wing’ [52]. Thus, the telling projection of Vasantasenā makes it clear that Sūdraka could realize the import of the fact that as none can deny the existence of the prostitutes, they are part and parcel of the society and should be given space to live up to the social status of men. Again, she is portrayed as a heroine, not as a ‘Slave’. Therefore, she could resist herself from being ‘otherized’ among others. Here lies her innate shrewdness. Apart from it, this marriage is redolent of that Vasantasenā is made free from being sexually exploited by well off clients. She herself released Madhanikā so as to bring to an end to sexual slavery. She herself did not succumb to the pressure of her family. She could overcome it probably because she was aware of her own ‘self’ and dignity. Sūdraka had low birth and therefore was supposed to have intended this drama to show his scathing protest against upper class people in general by addressing the issues related to the class.

People of today tend to rationalize this profession by arguing that it should be legalized inasmuch as prostitutes exchange coital pleasure at the cost of money. It means both are benefitted in this way. They prefer to call them sex radicals because they are self employed entrepreneurs in a sense. In support of this view, one may make a number of arguments to substantiate himself. For instance, legalization of this profession felicitates pimps to make profits out of sex trafficking and sex industry and patriarchal govt. will earn revenue from it. For instance, D.M. Hughes in her paper entitled as “Prostitution: Causes and Solutions” said: ‘Legalization does not reduce prostitution or trafficking; in fact both activities increase because men can legally buy carnal pleasure [53].’ In this regard, it seems to me pertinent to refer to Karl Marx who has explained prostitution in different ways. In ‘Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts’ (1844) he has interpreted it as “selling the body” [54]. Feminists support him because he was critical of the sexual exploitation of the female ‘body’. Marx has equated this profession to the capitalism in that while capitalists hinge on the consumers to make profit so also prostitutes depend on clients so as to make money. In ‘Capital and Theories of surplus-Value’, Marx has explained prostitution as “selling a service” [55]. Feminists subscribe to this view because he showed his concern for the exploitation of their ‘service’. Marxist feminists are very critical of prostitution because in this profession women are ‘otherized’ and exploited by patriarchy. So far crass marginalization of prostitutes in colonial period in India is concerned; their ‘subalternized’ condition was exacerbated by colonial rulers. They used to force them to reside around British Military Camps so that soldiers could easily exact and extract libidinal pleasure out of physical unions with them [56]. Yet, being invigorated by the inspiring speeches of national political leaders of that time, prostitutes came forward to redound to the nationalistic movements; for instance, in freedom fighting; so as to make India independent of colonial rules. Veena Oldenberg in her essays “Lifestyle as Resistance: the case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India” shows how courtesans despite socio cultural oppressions, “under the colonial rule wielded significant power and owned large amount of property and paradoxically to colonial designs commanded considerable ‘respect’ in social circles.” [57] In this regard, Vikram Sampath’s *My Name is Gauhar Jan* (2010) needs to be mentioned, for Sampath here shows the enormous popularity of Gauhar Jan, a prostitute [58] during that time. Gauhar Jan could escape colonial gaze and was able to acquire world wide popularity. He also showed an incident in which Gandhi himself sought financial assistance from Gauhar Jan for the freedom fight. Even, in pre-colonial India, kings used to keep prostitutes in their kingdoms and used to pay them due regard [59]. Courtesans, in order to wreak revenge against colonial rulers, used to bribe nurses in medical hospitals so that wounded white soldiers would die getting no medical attention [60]. Nehru himself admitted: “Most of us men folk in prison. Then a remarkable thing happened. Our women came to the front and took the charge of struggle. Women had always been there of course but now there was an avalanche of them, which took not only to the British government but their own men folk by surprise. [...] Here were these women, women of upper or middle classes, leading sheltered lives in their homes, peasant women, working class women, rich women, poor women ...” [61] Therefore, it is obvious that in spite of having ‘subalternized’ status in colonial period, prostitutes had tried their level best to redound to the national issues by

making telling contribution to the freedom movements in general.

Finally, at the close of this account, a number of panaceas are given so as to facilitate the society to deal with it. At first, Prostitutes need to be brought back to the centre of the society, i.e. to the main stream of life so that they can contribute to the development of the society. In order to make it happen, adequate financial assistance should be paid to them. They must be given unbiased education and made feel safe and secure. For instance, Vasantasenā could come to the terms with patriarchal rules, for she was educated. She can be set before them as their role model. They must be given a solid platform to translate their emotion into actions. The demand for prostitution must be nipped in the bud so that it cannot expand. Mindset of patriarchy has to be altered for the eradication of demand for it. The supply line in this profession has to be blocked. 'State' and culture must co-operate each other to bring absolute control over it. Strict laws can be formulated to check this issue [62]. Society has to inspire men to help them come in the centre of the society and it must chance upon patriarchal politics so far the recognition of the latent humanity of the prostitutes is concerned. In this regard, Marxist feminist critics would definitely insist society to abolish this profession and subsequently to compensate prostitutes adequately. I support of the abolition of this profession. One may tenably argue that if Indian ancient culture in general and Vasantasenā by posing herself as example in particular, could make it happen at that time then why will our Postmodern culture lag behind it? We thus need to hurry up without making further delay. Finally, I would like to wind up this account by reminding men of good sensibilities a citation from Gitā, which we all can recount any time to charge up our minds so that we can reach the end of the intention:

Karmanyavādhikāste mā phaleṣu kadācana I
Mā karmaphalahetubhūmā te saṅgo'stvahakarmani [63] II

References

1. See Beauvoir's The Second Sex. She has nicely carried forward Wollstonecraft's legacy. It is supposed that she brought to an end to the 'first wave' feminism. She has discussed at length female experiences and how women are discriminated in the society. This is one of the foundational texts in this domain.
2. Pilcher J, Whelehan I. have explained the term gendered as one sort of pattern of difference by gender. Both of them have said that gendering and gendered are concepts which signify outcomes that are socially constructed and give males advantages over females.
3. Overdeterminism, a word borrowed from Freud, which designates an effect which arises from a variety of causes, that is, from several causes acting together, rather than from a single factor.
4. Toril Moi has explicated 'feminism' as 'political position', 'femaleness' as 'a matter of biology' and 'femininity' as 'a set of culturally defined characteristics'.
5. See On Judith Butler and Performativity by Sara Salih.
6. See Webster Dictionary
7. See www.wikipedia.com.
8. See Contemporary Literary Theory and Rgveda- 1.4.7
9. See Rgveda- 10.102.02.
10. See Yāgabalka Saṁhitā (babahār chapter), 143.
11. swatyam sa mitram banuta jane chit. (Rgveda).

12. The involvement of women in military force and their courageous fight in the battle ground are redolent of the fact that they used to hold powerful ranks in this field and direct and lead soldiers shrewdly to take on enemies at the right moment thereby exhibiting their military prowess. See Rgveda-10.102.2.
13. Women were thought to have equal potentials to men so far contribution to the development of the society is concerned. For instance, they used to cater service to the society in general as professors, soldiers, artists, dancers, etc..(Vedar Parichoy). Therefore, it can be safely concluded that they had respectable social positions like men.
14. "Purākalpa kumārīnāṅ mounjibandhonaṅ iṣate I Adhāpaṅ cha vedānāṅ sāvitribhacāṅ tathā II" According to Yama, it is evident that during that time women used to chant mantras while teaching others. See Vedar Parichoy.
15. See Rgveda- 10.102.02, 5.8.06, 7.78.05 and Śatapad Brahmin- 3.2.4 and 12.7.2.1
16. Women, in Vedic time, had the freedom to opt for the professions with which they wished to involve themselves. They used to let their wishes drive themselves in taking up different kinds of jobs. For instance, they were not forced to be bound in wedlock by patriarchy. Brahmabadinis are the best instances of this claim. See Vedar Parichoy, 206.
17. Rgveda 1.117.18, 1.123.11.
18. Rgveda 1.167.3, 1.134.3.
19. Rgveda 1.167.4.
20. Mahābhārata V.30.38.
21. Mahābhārata V.86.15.
22. Pūvamegha, 38, Uttarmegha 11.
23. See Tradition of Devdasi: A Conceptual Framework in India and Abroad by P.C.Mishra.
24. See Ancient Indian Society by N. Bhattacharyya.
25. Maitrayani Saṁhitā. 3.6.9. See Ancient Indian Society by N. Bhattacharyya.
26. Oiteraya Brahmin. 3.24. See Ancient Indian Society by N. Bhattacharyya.
27. Here, M. Wollstonecraft first raised voice against the female exploitation and oppression. This is one of the foundational texts in Feminisms and turns out to be a critique of patriarchal politics.
28. See Beginning Theory.
29. See Prostitutes¹ in the Mricchakatika² of Śūdraka.
30. See Prostitutes¹ in the Mricchakatika² of Śūdraka.
31. See Prostitutes¹ in the Mricchakatika² of Śūdraka.
32. Vasantasenā is the heroine of the play. She was a harlot by birth and later was endowed kulastrī title for leaving her profession. Unlike others, she was a devoted woman.
33. 'Anyasyāmapī jātua mā veśyā bhūstvam hi sundari! Cāritryaguṇasampanne jāyethā vimale kule.' Mricchakatika.
34. Gaṅkā, hastī kāyastho, bhikṣuh, cāto, rājabhaṣca yatraite nivasanti tatra duṣṭā apī najāyante. Mricchakatika.
35. See introduction of Mricchakatika by A.C. Dey and S.K. Siddhanta.
36. See introduction of Mricchakatika by A.C. Dey and S.K. Siddhanta.
37. See Tradition and Individual Talent by T.S.Eliot in English Critical Texts: 16th Century to 20th Century.
38. See introduction of Mricchakatika by A.C. Dey and S.K. Siddhanta.

39. Yatsatyain nandanavanameva me gaṅkāgrham pratibhāsate.
40. ‘...vidyāviśeśālaṅkṛtaḥ kiṃ ko pi brāhmaṇayuvā kāmyate?’
41. ‘...aiubdhā gaṅkā ...iti duṣkaramete sambhāvyānah. Kāmasūtra’ 6.1.18
42. See vasantasenā’s palace’s description in Mrichchakatika.
43. See *Mrichchakatika* by A.C. Dey and S.K. Siddhanta.
44. See *Mrichchakatika* by A.C. Dey and S.K. Siddhanta.
45. See *Mrichchakatika* by A.C. Dey and S.K. Siddhanta.
46. See *Mrichchakatika* by A.C. Dey and S.K. Siddhanta.
47. See *Mrichchakatika* by A.C. Dey and S.K. Siddhanta, 58.
48. See *Mrichchakatika* by A.C. Dey and S.K. Siddhanta, 62.
49. See *Macbeth*.
50. See The Little Clay Cart by S.K.De in *Mṛcchakatika: A Myriad Prism*.
51. See Śūdraka’s Mrichchakatik: A Sanskrit Classic.
52. See Śāśwata Vivekananada.
53. See “Prostitution: Causes and Solutions” and “How Modern-Day Slave Trade: How United States Should Alter the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act in Order to Combat International Sex Trafficking More Effectively”
54. See Rethinking Commodification and Prostitution: An Effort at Peacemaking in the Battles over Prostitution.
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56. See Re-inscribing the Indian Courtesan: A Genealogical Approach
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58. See Re-inscribing the Indian Courtesan: A Genealogical Approach.
59. See Re-inscribing the Indian Courtesan: A Genealogical Approach.
60. See Re-inscribing the Indian Courtesan: A Genealogical Approach.
61. See Gender and Colonialism: Women’s Organization under the Raj.
62. See Legal Framework and Law Enforcement in Commercial sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse of Children in South Asia.
63. See *Śrīmadbhagbadgītā*.
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