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BEYOND A BATTLE OF 'PROPS' AND 'COSTUMES' – NGOIZATION IN INDIA

Introduction

In *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*, Arundhati Roy, a Booker Prize novelist and acclaimed essayist,¹ contends that in the Indian Women's Movement (IWM),² the battles for autonomy of 'collective' versus 'individual' power "have been played out on women's bodies, extruding Botox at one end and burkas at the other" (2015, p. 36). She refers to the French government's attempt at liberating women, of coercing women out of the burka rather than offering them the choice to do so. She contends that this act of humiliation and cultural imperialism, be it in France, or India, or any other country in the world, is not about the burka, but the act of coercion, an issue of feminist identity that is beyond a Battle of 'Props' and 'Costumes'. The Indian Women's Movement (IWM) that has existed since the 1970s and 1980s, despite its national profile has been categorized by Roy as 'NGOized' as it does "seminal work on queer rights, domestic violence, AIDS, and the rights of sex workers" (Roy, 2015, p. 36). Pursuant to the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) of 2010 where some feminist NGOs have been barred for mismanaging foreign funds, Roy contends that the IWM needs to consider other feminist leadership models that are conducive to the present economic scenario. Roy's essays³ are typical of postcolonial feminist discourse as she challenges the status quo of power politics, uses her pen to advocate the globalization of feminist dissent and "deploy[s] writing from the heart of the crowd" (Roy, 2011, p. 1).

NGOization Paradigm in India – Buffer between the Sarkar⁴ and the Public

Despite the early existence of associations like the SEWA⁵ and charitable trusts like the Annapurna Mahila Mandal,⁶ it was only after the late 1980s that women NGOs gained momentum and recognition and have contributed to establishing gender as a developmental category. Feminist scholars have aptly remarked that "suddenly women are everywhere" (Tharu & Niranjana 1996, p. 232). During this period, late 1980s and the early 1990s, known

¹ Roy has received awards for her essay writing, like the Lannan Award for Cultural Freedom in 2002, Noam Chomsky Award in 2003, the Sydney Peace Prize in 2004, the 2005 Sahitya Kademi Award, which she declined, and the Norman Mailer Prize in 2011 for Distinguished Writing.

² Existent since the 1920s as a feminist, anti-colonial, nationalist movement, it became an autonomous new Indian Women's Movement only in the 1970s.

³ Her political and feminist essays have been compiled into the following collections: *The End of Imagination* (1998), *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2001), *Power Politics* (2002), *War Talk* (2003), *An Ordinary Person's Guide to the Empire* (2005), *The Shape of the Beast* (2008), *Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy* (2009), *Broken Republic* (2011) and *Capitalism – A Ghost Story* (2014).

⁴ Sarkar in Hindi refers to someone who is in a position of authority.

⁵ The Self-Employed Women's Association has its roots from the Textile Labour Association (TLA), India's oldest and largest union of textile workers. It was founded by India's first female union leader, Anasuya Sarabhai in 1920. Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, who led a successful strike of textile workers in 1917, she created the Women's Wing of the TLA in 1954 as she believed that women should be able to hold their own against tyranny from employers or the state. In 1971, Ela Bhatt, the head of the Women's Wing decided to create the SEWA to fight for the rights of women head-loaders who were paid erratic and meagre wages for transporting clothes between the wholesale and retail markets.

⁶ Founded in 1975 by Padmashree Prematai Puroo, this trust exists today as the Annapurna Pariwar. Its main aim is to empower women and their families in 1000 slum pockets by offering them financial aid for education.

as the 'Mandal/Mandir/Fund-Bank years',⁷ feminists made a call for a Uniform Civil Code for all religious communities in India. In 1985, after the Shah Bano Indian Supreme Court case⁸ that yielded to the demands of the Muslim clergy, many voices in the IWM demanded equal rights for women, irrespective of caste and religion, in marriage, inheritance, divorce, adoption and succession. Rather than a single code that is not fair to all communities, their call was for rooting out gender bias and establishing 'uniform rights' that expand civil alternatives like the Special Marriages Act, the Domestic Violence Act and the Juvenile Justice Act which would apply fairly to all women, irrespective of laws of different religious communities in India.

In India, the 1990s was a period of privatization and globalization. The 'opening up' of the Indian economy to foreign investment took place in an era of caste and religious-based cleavages as seen in the Mandal-Chundururu incidents.⁹ Women were perceived as feminist subjects – "assertive, non-submissive, protesting against injustice done to them as women (Chundururu) or as citizens (the anti-Mandal agitation)" (Tharu & Niranjana, 1996, p. 237). NGOs boomed at a time when women had to voice their concerns on aspects of identity, sexuality and citizenship as the political environment was one based on parliamentary quotas, sexual rights and guaranteed citizenship entitlements. Furthermore, the UN Fourth World Conference in 1995, held in Beijing played an important role in the empowerment of women in India. As "an effusive celebration of global sisterhood" (Alvarez, 1998, p. 293), it focussed on influencing the International Platform for Action and in helping to articulate the global women's lobby. NGOs in India, in keeping with the post-Beijing global trend transformed into professionalized, thematically-specialized, fund-driven, expert-based and policy-oriented structures. During this period developmental women's NGOs moved away from providing welfare to income-generation services to empower women by launching microfinance projects through "credit baiting" (Spivak 2000, p. 322), therefore affording themselves new forms of sovereignty that were previously reserved for states.

Despite government-initiated women's development programmes and the creation of the National Commission for Women in 1990, visibility of women in the current NGOization paradigm is sadly dependent on external funding, their accountability to their funders, thereby compromising on their already hard-won credibility at the grassroots. In the Indian context, the NGO boom in the 1990s, coincided with the withdrawal of state funding on the one hand in feminist issues like women's education, reproductive rights, health, AIDS, civil rights, environment; and the stepping in of feminist NGOs working on women, gender and sexuality on the other hand. NGOs in India receive aid from development agencies that are funded by the World Bank, the UN and multinational corporations. Roy has criticized and

⁷ 'Mandal' refers to the anti-reservation agitation that was sparked by the Socially Backward Commission's study on the condition and representation of socially or educationally backward castes in 1979; 'Mandir' or temple alludes to the controversial movement to rebuild a Ram temple in Ayodhya on the site of a Muslim mosque; 'Fund-Bank' relates to the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) and loans with conditionality clauses provided by the IMF and the World Bank.

⁸ Though the Supreme Court upheld the right to alimony in the case, the judgment set off a political battle as well as a controversy about the extent to which courts can interfere in Muslim personal law.

⁹ On 6 August 1991, 13 lower caste Dalits were hacked to death by upper-caste men in Chundururu village. A young Dalit had dared to enter a cinema space reserved for upper caste Reddys. On 22 April 2014, the Andhra Pradesh High Court acquitted all the accused on the grounds of lack of evidence. They blamed the Dalits for not being responsible enough in alerting the police immediately, and obliquely cast a doubt on their integrity and seemed to support the claim that the Dalits had harassed upper caste women.

questioned the welfare-statist role played by these agencies and she deems that “they are certainly part of the same loose, political formation that oversees the neoliberal project and demands the slash government spending in the first place” (Roy, 2004, p. 43). She contends that by filling in the vacuum created by a retreating state, NGOs tend to change the public psyche holding the status of a ‘*sarkar*’ or an entity of authority, as their beneficiaries become dependent victims.

NGOs form a sort of buffer between the *sarkar* and *public*. Between Empire and its subjects. They have become the arbitrators, the interpreters, the facilitators of the discourse. They play out the role of the ‘reasonable man’ in an unfair, unreasonable war. (Roy, 2004, p. 43)

Roy further deliberates on the question of accountability and rightly points out that the donor dependence on agencies makes NGOs accountable to their funders and not to the communities they serve. With external funds dictating the agenda, women who might have otherwise been feminist activists in resistance movements, now have 9-to-5 jobs to do creative good and earn a living at the same time. Roy warns that given the tainted status in the NGOization paradigm, the time has come to debate on the right strategies of resistance. She emphasises the fact that “the choice of strategy is not entirely in the hands of the *public*. It is also in the hands of *sarkar*” (Roy, 2004, p. 55). Instead of preparing funding briefs tailored to fit in with “what counts as women’s issues and what doesn’t” (Roy, 2015, p. 36) in the New Economic Policies of the Modi government,¹⁰ Roy insists on the need to find new feminist leadership models that can voice dissent through ‘collective’ and ‘individual’ resistance.

Beyond NGOization – Collective/Individual Resistance through ‘Collectives’ or ‘Platforms’

In her essay, “Confronting Empire”, Roy identifies ‘Empire’ in the Indian postcolonial context as “this loyal confederation, this obscene accumulation of power, this greatly increased distance between those who make the decisions and those who have to suffer them” (Roy, 2005, p. 81). She muses on how to eliminate that distance and how to resist ‘Empire’. Roy like Saida Hodzic points out that in the Indian context, the term NGOization does not merely refer to an increase in the number of NGOs working on women and gender but encompasses a larger ideological and moral context that “understands this phenomenon as harmful for feminism” (Hodzic, 2014, p. 222). It is interesting to refer to Hodzic’s view that “the NGOization paradigm has been institutionalized as a master narrative and now serves a normative theory that structures the feminist field of knowledge about NGOs” (Hodzic, 2014, p. 222). Though Hodzic’s analysis stems from her research on the Ghanaian articulations of NGOs, her contention that women’s NGOs need to historicize and contextualize their works holds good in the Indian NGOization paradigm. Women activists in India clamoured for their rights to equality and social justice with the Quit India Movement in 1942; In 1946 during the Bengal Tebhaga¹¹ movement, women took part in the fighting troops of the *Nari Bahini* or women’s squad to voice their grievances like men; During the eco-feminist revolution or the

¹⁰ After assuming office on 20 May 2014, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has implemented nine key economic policies ranging from *Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana* (a festivity of financial records to stop black money), corporate insolvency, *Aadhaar* (an identity mapping tool) to demonetisation. The 2 million NGOs whose operations lack transparency and accountability must now abide by the India Regulatory Brief and new regulations for foreign-funded briefs.

¹¹ An agrarian movement when sharecroppers demanded that two-thirds of the crop should remain with them as opposed to the British system of halving the harvest as rent, including other taxes levied on them.

Chipko¹² movement in 1970 in Uttar Pradesh, rural women in keeping with the Gandhian philosophy of passive resistance hugged and protected trees to prevent them from being chopped down; Abroad in 1976, Indian women clad in saris¹³ protested against the abysmal work in the Grunwick factory in London to demand better work conditions and claim their right to unionize; In the wake of the 2012 Delhi gang rape, thousands of women marched to the Sansad Bhawan, the Parliament building to demand their right to public spaces and question prevailing patriarchal and misogynistic views. In *Capitalism – A Ghost Story*, Roy writes on how most feminists and women's organizations in India are wary about joining forces with organizations like the 90,000-member Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sangatan that fights for the rights of indigenous women minorities.¹⁴ Instead of gathering together in a conscious 'collective' way, Roy points out that Indian feminists seem keen on maintaining their normative divides – 'feminisms' versus 'independent' or 'social movement-based ones' on the one hand, and the schism that existed among 'urban-rural' feminist movements on the other.¹⁵ Roy's call is for creating independent 'platforms' or 'collectives' that tackle political and feminist issues jointly.

Interestingly this 'hiving off' of the 'liberal feminist movement' from 'grassroots movements' has also resulted in a new generation of 'career feminists' in India who strive for "development delivery" (Gupta, 2014, p. 140). They ignore marginalized forms of leadership and aim at a dissemination of the technical aspects of their gender expertise. 'Collective' feminist power has been exhibited in various forms: Majlis, a campaign group founded in 1979, has created a Forum Against Oppression of Women; Lawyer's Collective created in 1981, provides legal funding for underprivileged women; Prajwala, an anti-trafficking organization started in 1996, works to combat sex crime; Gulabi Gang started in 2002, is a rural vigilante group of women clad in pink saris wielding bamboo sticks in pursuit of justice,¹⁶ intervenes in child marriages, dowry harassment cases and provides training in self-defence to women; Maitree, an independent humanitarian platform initiated in 2005, works with vulnerable women facing gender-based violence; Sheroes.in, an online platform launched in 2013, provides work opportunities for women. These independent groups without any external funding, function as 'collectives' or 'platforms' and are just as engaged as NGOs in "equally problematic structures of capital, power and inequality" (Hodzic, 2014, p. 245).

On an individual scale, women activists have been engaged in a critique of legal reforms or a venture of "broad antistatism" (Rajan, 2003, p. 31): Meenakshi Arora framed the Vishakha Guidelines to pave the way for the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act of 2013; Mary Roy¹⁷ won a lawsuit in the Supreme Court of India in 1986 to strike down the unfair Travancore Christian Succession Act; (TCSA); Leila Seth fought to amend the Hindu Succession Act of 2005 to ensure that daughters have equal rights to joint family property; Following the Delhi gang rape cases in 2012 and 2016, feminist activists like Kavita Krishnan,

¹² A Hindi word meaning 'to embrace' or 'to hug'.

¹³ Perceived by their British employers as 'Costumes' and a first nod to the title of this article.

¹⁴ As it is a frontal organisation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist) People's War, this Women's Association has been banned.

¹⁵ Women activists in rural areas belonged to radical, anti-capitalist movements, but were not very vociferous as patriarchy ruled their lives. In urban areas, women clamoured for gender equality as part of the revolutionary process.

¹⁶ A second reference to the title of this article where women are resplendent in 'Props' and 'Costumes'.

¹⁷ Roy's mother fought to ensure equal rights for Syrian Christian women and their male siblings in their ancestral property.

Karuna Nundy and Vrinda Grover led the anti-rape protests, gave a call of 'Freedom without Fear' for women and triggered the legislation of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 2013.

Conclusion – Globalizing Dissent

In her essay “The Ladies Have Feelings, so ...” Roy describes her role as a writer-activist in a country with 1.3 billion people, to be a dubious honour and an onerous responsibility as she carries the burden of weaving a "web of morality, rigour and responsibility" (2001, p. 189-190). Due to her political essay writing, Roy has often been acclaimed as a ‘writer-activist’, but this title, in Roy's opinion, is a double-barrelled appellation that diminishes the credibility of writers and feminist activists. She challenges the 'Expert's Anthem',¹⁸ which seeks to professionalize everyday issues, and urges the reader to recognize her writing as an attempt to "de-professionalize the public debate on matters that vitally affect the lives of ordinary people" (Roy, 2001, p. 210). She insists on the need to step out of the tropes of autonomy and purity associated with the NGOization paradigm by advocating gender-related, feminist ‘collectives’ or ‘platforms’. Through her writing, a form of non-violent dissent to change the world, Roy rightly advocates that "the only thing worth globalizing is dissent. It's India's best export" (Roy, 2001, p. 215).

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¹⁸ Roy refers to the corporate foundation endowed NGOs (ORF, RAND Corporation, Ford Foundation, The World Bank, Brookings Institution) that work hand in glove with intelligence agents, strategic consultants to lobby governments and influence public opinion.