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Class and Conflict: A Study of Indian Contemporary Society in Rupa Bajwa's

The Sari Shop

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Social scientist, Karl Marx was one of the first to focus mainly on social class and according to him one's social class dictated one's social life. The upper class people enjoyed all the facilities of life, while those in the lower class lived lives of hardship and poverty. According to conflict theory, social stratification benefits the rich and powerful at the expense of the poor. Thus, it creates a system of winners and losers that is maintained by those who are on the top. The people who are losers do not get a fair chance to compete, and thus are stuck on the bottom, as shown in the novel through the protagonist Ramchand.



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The impact of the rich to the lower class of people is depicted through the character of Kamla. Kamala goes to the extent of cursing and throwing stones at the house of Kapoors and Guptas who were responsible for her betrayed life, for which she was taken by police, raped and killed ultimately.

“Red hand imprints stood out clearly on her face. Her hair dishevelled; her green selwaar kameez was in disarray; her black chunni lay on the floor. Tears ran down her face. A corner of her mouth was bleeding a little.....” (Bajwa 105)

“The Sari Shop” revolves around the protagonist Ramchand, who has long lost his parents when he was just six, later on his family property was taken by his uncle who was responsible to raise him but happens to turn other way round. Deprived of all necessities of life he landed up becoming a salesman in one of the sari shops in Amritsar.

In the opening of the novel, the whole scenario of the Amritsar town is depicted: the busy people around, some fighting and some hurriedly buying the things and others don't bother even to know why and how about the fight. In the mid of this Ramchand finds himself getting late to his work place, with hustle and bustle he gets to the shop, with a creepy feeling lodged inside, but had to face scolding from his boss, Malik Mahajhan which was inevitable. Mahajhan was once a salesman in this particular shop, but was able to gain the trust from Bhimsen Seth, the actual owner



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of the Sari shop where he is considered a malik, now. The shop had a hierarchical system; Bhimsen Seth (Owner), Malik Mahajhan (Manager), Shyam and Rajesh (Senior salesman) Gokhol , Chandar , Ramchand and then came Hari. Bhimsen Seth visited the shop rarely since he had confident on Mahajhan. Mahajhan treated the entire attendant lowly, he kept eye on every attendant keenly, for which the workers were really in to work.

Balwinder Kaur's paper "Psycho-Analysis of Ramchand in *The Sari Shop*" explores the class distinction and their unfulfilled desire. Where the commoners are not only exploited by the rich but also victimized by the same class. The author highlights that law exist for the rich while the poor accepts injustices. It talks about Ramchand who buy books (English) trying to raise his standard but later finds to be in the same place. Chandar has been used by industrialists and still is used by middle class. Kamala becomes the ultimate victim of Chandar's failure, which is caused by the rich industrialist in which she was raped and murdered. Bajwa shows through her novel that laws are meant for the rich depriving the rights of the poor.

Smita Devi's Analysis of Rupa Baiwa's *The Sari Shop*, gives insight on the life of Ramchand the protagonist and how he landed up becoming working in Sari Shop and how he was deprived by his uncle to pursue his father's dream. Next it talks about Kamala, who was raped and bitterly tortured by her husband. The paper also uncovers the snobbery and hypocrisy of the upper English



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speaking class of people and their attitude to the people of lower status. The submissiveness of women is also touched in the paper through the character of Kamala.

Jaspal Singh, Aravind Khanna and Parveen Kaur Khanna's paper *The idea of false sisterhood: The post-feminist echoes* reveals how the two worlds of glaring inequalities do exist in Indian society where the women of upper-class society take the lower class women as a dust on their feet. However, the paper investigates the fact that even in elite strata of society, power of discussions are only controlled by males and elite women are only domestic maids. The major focus of the paper throws light on the world of the elite women. The majority of which take pleasure only in shopping and gossiping and evade serious issues and fail to redistribute the comforts and pains of their less privileged sisters. The paper blames elite class of women for not being considerate enough about underprivileged women who own very few resources.

Parmindar Sohal's paper "*Tantalizing Glimpses and Darker Psychic Portrayal*" discusses about the class difference. It also portrays the clear picture of woman and their plight through the character, Kamala. Her innocence has no room in the law, law which is meant to protect all, but protects only the rich.

Sebastian Subhi's work "*The Yarns of Urban India: Women in Rupa Bajwa's The Sari Shop*" covers the whole classes of women present in the novel; rich, middle class to the poor, giving us the clear picture of contemporary, Indian women. Though India seemed to be patrician dominated society, upper class women are free from certain norms of olden past, but the author also paints



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the picture distinctly through the character Kamala how lower class does stick onto the tradition. The paper also highlights women and their quest in finding their place in the society they live. Like Sandhu (wife of an Engineer) wants to be equal in terms of wealth with Gupthas, the Industrialist.

Sahgal Tara's "*Review of Rupa Bajwa's novel on complex reality of urban India 'The Sari Shop'*" talks about the protagonist who has come through constant injustices. His uncle has over taken his properties that belonged to his parents. He was being used by the rich Rina Kapoor and his struggles to learn English through little saved wage he gets from his work.

The class stratification and its impacts are clearly visible, where the poor is being exploited by the rich to the extent they can. Chandar was one of the victims of industrial revolution, He was working in the factory owned by Gupta and Kapoor family. As the factory incurred loss, it had to undergo shutdown depriving two months wage for all the workers in order to revive the loss. This incident brought himalyan blunder to the family of Chandar who was entirely dependent on the wages he earned. As the condition in the house became worst, he started blaming his wife for all the misfortune and takes resort in drinking alcohol. His wife Kamala could not resist the blame and the black and blue beating by her husband lead her to take refuge in drinking alcohol, as a protest to her husband and the industrialist. When she was unable to control the emotional trauma and turmoil, she went to the extent of cursing and throwing stones at the house of Kapoors and Guptas, for which she was taken by police, raped and ultimately killed.



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The women in the novel from various classes take trouble in finding a place for their identity. Bajwa presents the picture of contemporary India and women through the eyes of the protagonist. Mrs Gupta, Mrs Kapoor and her daughters Rina and Tina Kapoor, the rich industrialists representing upper class, Mrs Sandhu to the educated, westernised, hypocritical, Mrs Sachdeva (head of English Department in local college), Mrs Bhandari (wife of D.I.G of Police) representing middles class, Kamala, Sudha and Lakshmi representing the lower strata of the whole Amritsar town. Each woman has a domineering figure. They try to prove their stand through various means. Ramchand is called as stupid Sariwala by Rina and later she lets him to attend her marriage party. It is known that Ramchand was let in the party so that she could get fictional character for her novel. Even her mother Mrs Kapoor looks down on Mrs Sachdeva, while she drops in to congratulate Rina for her mirage.

Mrs Scachdeva scolds and looks down on Ramchand when he explains the cause of Kamala's misfortune. This shows the hypocrisy hidden in the educated class people. Mrs. Sandhu makes sure that her status is equal to Guptas as it is shown while buying sari and Lakshmi despite of knowing the truth that they are poor she wants to have luxury life which her husband Gokhul (Assistant is the Sari shop) cannot afford.

The impact of western culture has inflected mostly the upper class women, despite the fact that even the poor have a dream of speaking English as depicted through the character of the



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protagonist. In the novel understanding and speaking English is a prerequisite to the upper class people.

The novel has four facets; class conflict, identity crises amongst the women, exploitation of the poor, and wave of feminism. The whole novel is seen through the eyes of Ramchand who, since his teens has been working in the popular Sewak Sari Shop, where he is accompanied by other five attendants, all thriving for survival. In this shop the people from all class shop sari. Ramchand in service to the shop accumulates enough insights about the haves and have not.

Thus, the novel “The sari shop” has several incidence that have widened the gap between the rich and poor through the protagonist’s empty and monotonous life in Sewak Sari Shop. Bajwa reflects the issue of exploitation of the poor. She also talks about women’s identity crises. The wives of rich industrialists with their empty lives, the educated class with their snobbish intellectualism, is skilfully satirized by Rupa Bajwa.

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