

Resistance or Negotiation? Agency within Unequal Marital Experience of Urban Middle Class Women

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Introduction

Power relation within gender has become a very important, sensitive and dynamic phenomenon by the strong arguments and debates of feminist scholars and activists. From their long continuing arguments, development discourses focusing on women by 'women empowerment' and 'mainstreaming women' and such other issues have turned the women issue popular and central to public discourses within capitalist state ideology. With this public concern the growing scholarly interests; the focus in feminist interest has been changed from collective revolutions to individual resistance and women agency to locate small-scale transformation in power relation with the help of the post-modernist power analysis. In this regard, the concepts like 'everyday resistance', 'bargaining with patriarchy' and 'women agency' become the central issue of interests and debates. These concepts have strong theoretical arguments as well as important critiques. One of the major critiques against focusing on resistance is that, by overemphasising and romanticising the resistance, unequal domination of patriarchy may become imperceptible.

In this context, I want to re-examine the resistance expressed by the changing discourses of marriage and explore the dynamic gender relation within the patriarchal marital relation. And to do such, the question that becomes vital, is that resistance really can make any threat or challenge to the patriarchy or it is nothing but a strategy to

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negotiate with the patriarchy which to some extent strengthening it? In this paper, I will search for the answer of these questions from my previous research experienceⁱ (in 2002) of two generations of middle classⁱⁱ married couple of Dhaka cityⁱⁱⁱ.

The married women of two generation expressed their individual thoughts and strategies to deal with the difficulties they face everyday. Their strategies represent their conscious agency within patriarchal marital relation in their personal sphere. In this article, I would like to examine these agencies in personal and individual sphere in relation with the patriarchal hegemony that dominates and determines the women's role in the marital relation. To do that my objectives will be, firstly, to contextualize the interrelation between capitalist structure, patriarchy and the gender hegemony with the analysis of power. And secondly, to re-examine the resistance and its effectiveness as a method of ruination the marital hegemony.

Capitalism, Patriarchy and Hegemony

I would like to understand women oppression structurally by the interrelations between capitalist state and patriarchy. Socialist feminists have illustrated the interrelations of patriarchy and capitalism elaborately (Juliet 1971; Hartmann 1976; Jaggar 1983) which is useful to analyse the middle class gender hegemony in Bangladesh, where the research and my arguments have been focused on. Conceptualise state, as an actor of capitalism and patriarchy, Sylvia Walby's exploration of patriarchal mode of production can be useful as an analytical tool. She urges "...when patriarchy is in articulation with capitalism, the state should be seen as both patriarchal and capitalist" (Walby 1994: 25). The capitalist state maintains patriarchy to stabilise the social order and she argues that it operates women's exclusion and subordination within the productive process and limits the access to form political representation and legitimates women's subordination.

In the context of Bangladesh, development discourse plays an intermediate role to relate global capitalism and patriarchal state in women issue. Deconstructionist critiques of development have identified development as a form of establishing capitalist neo-

imperialism (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1990). On the other hand, critiques of development have become the learning of development organisations. Consequently, feminist critiques are also incorporated by development discourses that put emphasis on women issue. Bangladesh's state approach to gender as a client of western aid has been opportunist and contradictory, where predominantly male oriented economic planning primarily identifies women as mothers and only associated with biological reproduction (White, 1992). On the contrary, state personalises gender issue in public discourse that camouflages their political implication (White 1992:14; Guhathakurta; 1985: 84). This kind of approach does not change their unequal power relation of gender ideology rather it is nurtured by the patriarchal state.

At this time, the question is, what is the strategy and technique of nurturing gender ideology in the context of patron-client relation between aid community and Bangladeshi state? The answer lay on the concept of *hegemony* from Gramsci's notion where he goes beyond the direct domination of 'economism' to the ideological consent that determines and legitimates the inequality between dominant and subordinate classes. From his conception, hegemony is dynamic, "a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibrium" and "the fact of hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised" (Gramsci [1972]1996: 161). Hence, the formation of hegemony does not completely exclude subordinate's interest but transforms it as a tool of domination towards them. Therefore, the process of developing hegemony can explain the state's role on women issue in Bangladesh within constrain of donor prescription and patriarchal ideology.

However, James C. Scott problematises *hegemony* and argues, "the concept of hegemony ignores the extent to which most subordinate classes are able, on the basis of their daily material experience, to penetrate and demystify the prevailing ideology" (Scott; 1985: 417). He wanted to locate subordinate classes' resistance in their daily life that might not to be organised or even collective. The tool of this kind of resistance can be "foot dragging, dissimulation, false

compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance” and such are which he named as the *weapon of the weak*. He argues, “when such acts are rare and isolated, they are of little interest; but when they become a consistent pattern (even though uncoordinated, let alone organised) we are dealing with resistance” (Scott; 1985: 296).

I would like to argue that when these kinds of acts shape a consistent pattern, are they remaining as personal or individual acts? Rather it must have represented collective material consciousness, which is also explored somewhat by Scott when he situates *resistance* and *false consciousness* in an opposite direction. It may not be as an organised confrontational movement, but it has its collective political interest that cannot be seen as one’s individual act. For example, the discursive practice of the villagers of Sedaka^{iv} by mocking at a rich farmer that explored by Scott as a form of resistance, represent shared political interest. I would like to argue, the everyday resistance that Scott has explored, is political resistance derived from shared collective interest. However, though collective, it can be questioned about the strength of this resistance to demolish the structural inequality.

Derived from Foucauldian notion, the post-modernist arguments consider *power* not from a single source of direction rather dynamic, decentralised, and practiced in everyday life. Foucault situates resistance in the opposition of power (Foucault 1980: 95) that expresses a sense of equilibrium between them. Many feminist scholars are now influenced by Foucauldian paradigm have focused on women’s agency and resistance rather than structural power, domination and discrimination of gender. However, Foucauldian notion of Power though unique and exemplary for post-modern analysis, become “very difficult to locate domination, including domination in gender relation” (Harstsock 1987:167). Thus Harstsock problematises rightly– “..Systematically unequal relations of power ultimately vanish from Foucault’s account of power”(Harstsock 1987:165). On the other hand, the post-modernist and post-structuralist argument differs and criticises with the notion of ‘structural inequality’ as an error of essentialism by addressing differences and dynamic power relations of gender, race and class.

Therefore, derived from other positivist critiques, arguments of post-feminism are focused on examining changed position of women and the male reaction to women's increased power. That arise question to the relevance for feminist activism, which can be highly problematic in understanding women's subordination in Bangladesh where gender is need to be analysed within different class and identity as a category that represents women's structural subordination as an expression of patriarchy. For me, denial of gender as a discriminatory category and notion of multi-centred power can create obstacle to understand women subordination. Although, from the post-modernist analysis we can use the concept of *agency* or *resistance* as an analytical tool to examine the impact of it under the patriarchal hegemony that is shaped by the state.

Marital Discourses of Two Generation

At this point, I will bring some empirical examples of urban middle class married women in Dhaka city of two generations to explore the agency they practise within the marital hegemony. From their conversation, their marital thoughts can be clearly identified.

1. In most cases, informants of the first generation^v wives have expressed the acceptance of the domination of husband within marriage as 'natural' from their long time marital relation. None of them questioned this inequality. There can be two reasons behind it; they really think this inequality as normal, or they don't want to make a new conflict in their long marital life by expressing this.

However, it can be understandable if carefully examined, beside this acceptance of the domination or taking it as normal, there are some activities of these wives, which don't match with their statements. For example, an informant who accepted her husband's superiority without any question and also expressed that 'his' money is 'her' money which contradicts when she secretly saves money and takes loan by mortgaging her ornaments and invests that money in business without letting know her husband and borrows money from neighbours. These activities express the desire to spend money on her own without giving any excuse to her husband. Though these activities run in secret, her husband is not completely unknown to

this fact. It was revealed by observation that although he knows, he acts like he doesn't know. That is the strategy, which expresses his authority.

On the contrary, from these couples, some 'educated', employed wives are conscious about their rights from their earnings, they do not want to admit their marital relation as unequal, which is contradictory when they accept the superior position of their husband as rationale and try to keep that position by their behaviour.

From those examples, my argument is, in this generation the women express their consent more or less on superiority of husband and both of them avoid such situation that can challenge the authority of husband. However, within this, the wife continuously tries to make better situation for herself.

2. The informants of *second* generation, especially wives want to express and think their marital relation as equal. But it became clear from observation that they do not do such thing that can be threatening to her husband's ego or chivalry.

For one informant wife, expressed her notion of marital ideology: "women can't love a man who is inferior to that woman, women can only accept her husband who is somehow better qualified than her." She expressed her instance, her husband is not educationally more qualified than her, but he is the chief of a recital organisation and divisional editor of a renowned weekly magazine. She said that her husband is superior to her by his creativeness. In her words, "it is vital for marriage to give honour to each other and it happens only when the wife respects her husband for some of his quality, and of course husband also respects the wife for same reason" and according to her, "To respect the husband, his superiority is important, though it is not an important issue to respect the wife, rather husband likes his wife's inferiority. She added she can manage the complications strategically in her life and her husband is also dependent on her in this respect. But simultaneously she is very conscious of not to express her arrogance that can make her husband inferior. She nourishes his husband's 'chivalry' both in home and public sphere very carefully.

Another informant, playing role of a 'liberal' husband whose opinion is, "In marriage, status of husband and wife should be equal." He claims that he practises that equality and always gives the opportunity to his wife to take the decision on her own. However, through the observation, the privileged position of that man was revealed when he naturalises household works as her wife's duty, that she has to do after returning home from office. On the other hand, even if her wife complains, he does not share the household works as a common task of them.

Another woman gave an example from her life; there was a clash between her husband and her sister's husband, that's why her husband told her not to keep any relation with her sister. For her, that decision was absurd and impossible to maintain, but if she doesn't follow, that will create serious conflict. In that situation, she secretly goes to her sister's house, and her sister also comes to her house. She thinks that may be her husband knows about it, but there was an acceptance of husband's superiority in this secrecy, that's why he doesn't say anything about that. She is optimistic that her husband will understand about the ridiculousness of the command soon, when she can convince her husband.

Those are the examples about the domination of husband. Because of this domination, husband can make an absurd command to his wife, and wife has to accept this by doing this secretly. Here is a contradiction between acceptance of domination and contravention of that when the wife breaks his silly command. There was a power negotiation behind that domination by which the wife made her way to go, but of course not in a direct resistance but very gently.

In sphere of the research it is observed that discrimination of patriarchal ideology that creates complicity in the women's life is shared by the peer groups in this generation. By this sharing, they try to find ways of negotiation that can expand their sphere of autonomy within the unequal marital relation.

Shift in two generational thoughts: From Hegemony to Resistance?

From the above examples of two generational couples of a specific class, the patriarchal hegemony is well exposed. The married couples of first generation apparently do not problematise exiting subordination of women in marital relation and there have their consent of that. In their discursive arena, they are very much surrounded by the marital hegemony but behind that, they have some agencies to overcome the difficulties that are created by the hegemony. But for the second-generation, 'gender equality' in marital relation can be identified in their desire and discourses. This gender equality is expressed as an element of conflict to a male respondent, on the contrary, most of the women in the second generation agree to this unjust ideology of marriage and in their thought a quest for 'gender equality' is explored which create a contradiction and constrain to their marital life. Most of the married women those have been interviewed in this generation are dealing with that constrain and make a way to live a better life by bargaining within that relation. At this moment, the questions become vital, first, what is the reason behind the change of thoughts in between the two generations about the legitimacy of gender discrimination in marriage? And second, can we consider this agency as collective resistance to the patriarchy?

For searching the answer of the first question, I would like to contextualize these generations historically. In the case of first generation, some of them had faced serious barrier for higher education and the reason they used to overcome that was the need of being good educated mother or wife. In their socialisation process, gender equality in marriage was not so strongly present in the public discourse. It is very important issue because feminist movements have had a strong impact on discursive area by the popular writings of intellectuals in the last few decades in Bangladesh that was incorporated somehow by the patriarchal hegemony as well as the concepts of feminism are commoditised by the corporate media. For example, the activists do not only celebrate 'International Women's Day', rather the corporate companies remarkably celebrate it.

Therefore, the concepts of feminism (such as 'women liberation') are widely used in the popular discourse, become a part of the capitalist commoditization (e.g. Ponds Women's Day). My argument is that, the discursive change in between the two generations should be historically contextualized where discourses of feminism and patriarchal hegemony contesting dynamically and creating space of women's voice in the gender relation and ideology.

Subsequently, answering the second question, the agency that expressed in both generations that I want to differentiate between these two situations. In case of first generation, the aim of the agency was to overcome some of the difficulties that are created by the marital inequality, but I did not find any collective conscious agency to supersede that inequality nor that any shared dissatisfaction for that. They express the subordination of women as natural. And because of the absence of shared interest to exceed the discrimination of marital inequality, I will consider that agency as individual and discrete. But for the second generation, conscious agency to exceed the discriminatory relation that most of the time is shared by the peer group that is shaped by the public feminist discourse that incorporated within the hegemony. I would like to consider it as politically motivated resistance that express collective interest.

From Resistance to Negotiation and assimilation in Patriarchy

At this time the question of effectiveness of that resistance to change the patriarchal power relation becomes central. For searching the answer of the question, I want to bring the arguments of Lila Abu-Lughod where she has explored the recent academic interest on resistance as 'romance of resistance'. She wants to focus on *power* rather than *resistance* by reversing the comment of Foucault, that is, 'Where there is power there is resistance' to 'where there is resistance, there is power.' Thus Lila argues that giving too much importance of resistance can obscure structural dominant power relation. Through her research on Bedouin women's resistance, she proposes to "learn various local and everyday resistances in the existence of a range of specific strategies and structure of power"

(Abu-Lughod 1990:55). Lughod's argument makes an insight to look slight differently to the everyday resistance of women and identifies the risk to overemphasise upon resistance, because these resistances cannot be so strong that can challenge and change the patriarchal power relation. Her argument was not about to reject the idea of resistance; rather she proposes to examine resistance as a tool of diagnosis the power.

From my research experience, I want to argue that the resistance of married women should be discussed in relation with the hegemony of patriarchy, where dominant discourses are also somewhat influenced by the history of feminist activism and writings. The consciousness of the second-generation women can be located in the discursive change caused by feminist writings and activism. The dominant hegemony of patriarchy, serving interest of capitalism, constantly incorporates terms and tools from feminist critiques and that make the patriarchal structure more consensual, legitimate. I would like to call the process as a modification of patriarchy. It is not any small-scale change, rather mutual negotiation between women resistance and patriarchal hegemony that make the patriarchy more receptive, flexible and therefore more strong.

Conclusion

From this discussion, my argument is, capitalist state keeps patriarchy that is practised by the patriarchal hegemony, which women endure constantly in their experience, sometimes they raise question to that, sometimes they do not. I want to take Scott's argument to my analysis that women do not always give consent on patriarchal hegemony, but that does not mean that it is any individual and automatic process. It is a consequence of long feminist activism that women share within the peer group by their experience, which is appeared by the discursive practice. And that discourse can be also absorbed in changing patriarchal hegemony and capitalist interest. Popular arguments on resistance support that it can bring small-scale success to defeat patriarchy, but my argument is that, resistance makes a way of negotiation between resisting women and patriarchal hegemony. Therefore, at the end of the day it made the patriarchy

more flexible and the agency of the oppressed women assimilated in that accommodating patriarchy.

Notes

- i. In that research my objectives was to examine the daily agency and resistance of women of two different generations. Form that data I would like to put forward my analysis on re-examine the affectivity of that resistance to create challenge to their discriminatory marital relation in that paper.
- ii. The differentiation of class only economically in context of Bangladesh, is very difficult and requires complex study, especially in the case of middle class. Here middle class refers to that class who shares the middle class ideology, more or less the middle class lifestyle and identify themselves as 'middle class'.
- iii. In that research that was held in 1992 I interviewed twelve couples of two generation and my research methods was mainly in-depth interviews, observation and group discussion.
- iv. Sedaka is the Malaysian village where Scott conducted his research.
- v. The study was based on two generations, where the age group of *first generation* was between 45 to 60 years and *second generation* age group was 25 to 40 years.

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