

# Locating Socialist and Marxist Tropes of Feminisms: A Critical Study of Double Oppression, Gender Inequality, and Sexual Enslavement in *The Doll Factory*

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**Abstract-** This paper explores the horrifying realities of 1850s London society: Double oppression, gender inequality, misogynistic view of patriarchal society along with the sexual enslavement experienced by the repressed Iris in *The Doll Factory*. The intersectional feminism, a specific strand of Socialist/Marxist feminisms, recognizes women's experiences shaped by interrelation of class, race, gender and sexual orientation. Socialist/Marxist feminism analyzes the subordination of women towards men through the legitimization of double oppression – of class and gender on women. Socialist feminism scrutinizes the oppressive social order due to patriarchal system of capitalist society that exploits working-class women by establishing unequal relationships among the genders. Elizabeth Macneal's *The Doll Factory* considers gender inequality and sex slavery as a product of capitalist society, experienced by the working-class protagonist, Iris - struggling to escape the misogynistic male society of 1850s London Exhibition in which she fashions the dolls for men, in a sexually pleasurable way. The sexual enslavement – a modern-day slavery portrays objectification of women and obsession of men in order to own women through manipulation and sexual violence. Therefore, the paper aims to achieve women's liberation by applying the specific tropes of Socialist/Marxist feminism in order to abolish patriarchal oppression and gender inequalities experienced by women along with intersectionality that defines social identities – class, gender and sexuality as interconnected in complex ways that shape individual's experiences of oppression.

**KEYWORDS:** Double oppression, Gender inequality, Liberation, Sexual enslavement, Socialist/Marxist Feminisms.

## I. INTRODUCTION

A renowned British novelist, Elizabeth Macneal, explores the role of patriarchal violence in crippling the voices of women. Macneal's *The Doll Factory* as one of the notable inclusions in feminist literature has garnered critical acclaim "*The Doll Factory* is already a success, and according to its publishers, is 'the most coveted debut of 2019, an intoxicating story of art, obsession and possession' (Massie 2019)." Macneal recreates the world of an oppressed woman, Iris, aspiring to become a painter in the misogynistic society. The defining positions of women regarding their social and economic rights within a society investigates the

oppressive 1850's patriarchal London. *The Doll Factory* identifies the Victorian class system of 1850's London by exploring the limited options available to women in pursuing their dreams. Despite the restrictions of the stereotypical society, Macneal manifests how women possess the ability to make their own decisions. *The Doll Factory* acknowledges the pervasive issue of patriarchal society of targeting women through various forms of discrimination. Regardless of the oppression, women still struggle to be considered as an independent being rather than an object to be possessed. Macneal uncovers the role of Louis Frost in patriarchal oppression in her novel, *The Doll Factory*. He becomes infatuated with Iris for her physique. The obsession of Louis Frost to violate Iris for the physical satisfaction alludes to the sexual slavery experienced by Iris. This destructive obsession in *The Doll Factory* unfolds the mentality of patriarchal society for the women to conform the man-made rules.

- II. Double oppression, the experience of being subject to two forms of oppression –gender-based discrimination and class-based discrimination, refers to the intersectional oppression of class, race, gender and sexual violence. The intersectionality as a specific strand of Socialist/Marxist feminism creates systematic barriers to subjugate working-class women to both gender-based discrimination and sexual violence. The concept of double oppression from the standpoint of intersectional oppression, gives prominence to the strategies for dismantling systems of oppression. The Socialist feminism integrates the legitimization of double oppression on women with Patriarchal-Capitalist system. The theoretical framework of Socialist/Marxist feminism explores the inextricable intertwining of economic and social inequalities in *The Doll Factory*. The protagonist, Iris, experienced harsh conditions caused by her gender, race and class while working under the supervision of a strict mad woman in a doll shop. Iris struggles to escape oppression by pursuing her passion despite her family's disapproval. Double oppression, however, promotes social change and equity for marginalized women.
- III. Socialist/Marxist feminism – a type of feminist theory, emphasizes the intersectionality of gender and class oppression. This theory highlights the modes of oppression: patriarchy and capitalism that exploit women of the working

class particularly. Capitalist system perpetuates social and gender inequality by reinforcing traditional gender roles and limiting access to opportunities for marginalized working class women. Socialist/Marxist feminism aims to dismantle the Patriarchal-Capitalist modes of oppression for the establishment of equality within a society. The elimination of oppressive capitalist and patriarchal systems leads to the socially and politically revolutionized society. Therefore, Socialist/Marxist feminism helps to enfranchise exploited women to rebel against these modes that are used to shape women's choices as dependent on men. Socialist/Marxist feminism argues that the achievement of women's liberation: true gender equality can only be attained through the recognition and implementation of the equal rights as a fundamental requirement.

- IV. Socialist/Marxist feminism – a multifaceted approach, addresses the interconnection of Sexual enslavement, double oppression and gender inequality simultaneously. The double oppression of working class women, compounded by gender-based marginalization, creates significant barriers to their ability to resist sexual enslavement. Sexual enslavement – gender-based practice of using force to exploit individuals, disproportionately affects women. Socialist/Marxist feminism provides a framework to address the psychological harm – mental violence caused by patriarchal oppression along with the process of healing from sexual trauma. This theoretical framework considers patriarchy and capitalism to be the root cause of sexual enslavement. According to this perspective, patriarchy creates a culture of male dominance that encourages the commodification of women's bodies. This culture, reinforced by capitalist structures, sexualizes women's bodies that results in exploitation of women. The contribution of patriarchy, capitalism and gender oppression to the commodification of women's bodies devalues gender equality. Socialist/Marxist feminism advocates for the new cultural narratives to promote social justice and equal respect for both genders.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Through the exploration of possession, haunting secrets, and obsessive nature of 1850's Victorian London, Sammie's review, "*The Doll Factory* by Elizabeth Macneal|| Cinderella with a gothic twist" presents *The Doll Factory* as a gothic novel that elucidate the realities of 1850's misogynistic society. According to Sammie, *The Doll Factory* transports the reader back to Victorian times – a city known for its gloominess, and crime, in a vivid description of art, death, life with a crazy mixture of gothic atmosphere. The lurking danger investigated by Sammie through the role of Silas Reed reveals men's obsession with women and dark art, "I do not think this is supposed to be a Cinderella retelling, but it felt like a Cinderella story to me, with a bit of darker twist" (The Bookwrym's Den). Sammie commends Elizabeth Macneal for her portrayal of supernatural abilities, oppression, child abuse, animal cruelty, and dark secrets of art: "The Gothic vibe is strong with this one, and Macneal does a great job of portraying Victorian life without shying away from

the gritty, disgusting realities". The struggles of Iris with the psychological demons reveals the darker aspects of the human psyche – fear, repression, obsession and guilt, ultimately leading to the complexities of the human nature.

Ron Charles in his review, "*The Doll Factory* is a guilty pleasure wrapped around a provocative history lesson" claims that the social and cultural barriers of capitalist society ostracized women to rebel against the societal norms and their expected gender roles. Charles manifested that *The Doll Factory* is a recreation of 1850s London laced with a smart feminist critique of Western aesthetics. Charles picturizes the sufferings of an ambitious young woman, Iris, "Her secret nude painting late at night offers her any momentary thrill" (The Washington Post) to study the strong implications of patriarchal society on gender distinctions. Charles reveals the mentality of 1850's patriarchal society of women's submission to live oppression free life, "a fascinating portrait of a talented young woman trying to negotiate the impossible standards of her era: To acquire the skills she needs, Iris must endure society's approbation, and to enjoy the romances she craves, she must keep her talent subordinate to her lover's." In the various aspects of life, women serve as a submissive being to men for their economic, social and personal needs.

Anna Carey in her review, "The Doll Factory review: Page-turning thriller explores art in 19<sup>th</sup> century" uncovers the limited opportunities available to women in an oppressive patriarchal world. Carey admires the struggles of working class women under the unavoidable oppressive conditions, "The Book manages to be both a page-turning thriller and a thoughtful, moving exploration of what it meant to be a woman and an artist in the 19<sup>th</sup> century" (The Irish Times). Despite the marginalization and oppression of women in the Victorian London, the protagonist, Iris, pursues her dream by recognizing her worth as a woman and an artist. Carey acknowledges the "Perfectly paced and rich atmosphere" of *The Doll Factory*. The psychological sufferings Iris experienced in every stage of her life strengthens her to stand against the male-dominated society. In "Book Review: The Doll Factory", Parvathi Ramkumar affirms that, "The Doll Factory recreates a London that is dark and ugly, and riddled with filth and disease" (Deccan Herald). The 1850's Victorian London – a dark period in history legitimize gender inequality, oppression, and obsession. *The Doll Factory* reveals the fact that the ugly norms of Victorian London suppress women to conformity. The subjugation of Iris towards the dangerous working conditions under the male oppression exposes the dark realities of Victorian London. Ramkumar explores the insights of Silas' obsession with Iris: He imagines how she speaks, how she looks, how she will be besotted with him if only he can capture her. The author of *The Doll Factory*, Elizabeth Macneal affirms the 1850's London city as, "a maze of dark, narrow alleys, and cramped, filthy tenements" that reveals the rapid industrialization, led to unsanitary conditions in the city. With the vivid glimpse into the dark period of history, Ramkumar portrays the ugliness of the Victorian London. Lyndsay Faye reviews *The Doll Factory* as, "Taxidermy, Velvet and Candlelight: A Lush Victorian Horror Story" that shapes women experiences of poverty within a patriarchal-capitalist society. He labels *The Doll Factory*, "an unapologetically lust debut ..." (The New York Times) as the illustration of the sexual

experiences of Iris, toil endlessly at painting the faces of dolls in a doll Emporium. Iris becomes an object for Louis Frost while struggling to learn painting. Faye views Louis Frost as, "An obsessive man who begs Iris to become his new muse." The renowned author Elizabeth Macneal, engrossed in the Pre-Raphaelite movement, connects the obsession of men to the poverty of Iris. Poverty affects Iris's physical and mental health that leads to the temptation to engage in immoral activities. Poverty as an inescapable reality within a patriarchal society results in Iris's rejection to her lover, Silas Reed. The more Silas realizes the betrayal of Iris, the more repulsive he became.

### Locating Socialist and Marxist Tropes of Feminisms: A Critical Study of Double Oppression, Gender Inequality, and Sexual Enslavement in *The Doll Factory*

Socialist/Marxist feminism believes that women's oppression stems from the mutual reinforcement of capitalism and patriarchy. The gendered-based and class-based distinctions rooted from the praxis of double oppression by patriarchal capitalism undervalued women's talent within a society. *The Doll Factory* picturizes Victorian – era London: position of women to demonstrate the ways of exploitation. The protagonist, Iris, suffers at work for being a working class woman. While working under the pressure of oppressive owner of the doll shop, Iris recalls Mrs. Salter as, "But you must remember you are dealing with a devil, not a woman, in Mrs. Salter, and fairness never has been a concern of hers" (Macneal 15). The limited women's opportunities for personal and professional growth oppresses women through the level of submission. The desire of painting – artistic talent within Iris forces her to stand against the oppression she experienced at the doll shop: "The names she would call her ('whore', 'strumpet'), the real possibility that Iris would lose her employment, and with it twenty pounds a year." The theory of Socialist/Marxist feminism works as a powerful critique of the oppressive patriarchal-capitalist systems. The urge to rebel the established gender roles within a society in order to enjoy liberty tortures women to its fullest. Women subjects to unsafe working conditions reveals the misogynistic nature of 1850's London society that legitimizes oppression on women. Patriarchal capitalism perpetuates gender inequality by reinforcing traditional gender norms. The gendered-based and class-based division under capitalist systems of the Victorian London tends to be the indicative of women's oppression. Elizabeth Macneal, the well-known author of *The Doll Factory* points out the terrific freedom Iris experienced because of her long journey of life under restrictions. Macneal depicts the reality out of liberation given to Iris by oppressive men, "She feels she has seen nothing except the tired tread of the streets ..... Her life was a cell before, but now the freedom terrifies her" (Macneal 163). Capitalist society of 1850's London practices power dynamics that leads to social class issues. Louis Frost, a wealth member of the PRB (Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood), exerts control over the emotional and mental states of Iris. By promising her access to artistic life, Louis exploits working class Iris. The feminist urge to experience liberty considered as the efforts to dominate men in the 1850's ugly London. This feminist urge within Iris forces her to escape the cycle of exploitation and poverty, "She thinks, Escape, Escape, and Escape" (Macneal 333).

Socialist/Marxist feminism – an anti-capitalist theory emphasizes on the women's liberation from being treated as an object. Women's objectification: bodies of women used as objects of inspiration for artistic and aesthetic males, refers to the character of Silas Reed in *The Doll Factory*. Silas's behavior as the representation of the male gaze results in the subjugation experienced by Iris. The obsession of Silas with Iris's beauty – to make her his muse, manifests devaluation of women's bodies within capitalist system of a society. Iris struggles to escape the oppression of maniac Silas, "But I'm me. I'm not a piece of canvas – I'm a real woman" (Macneal 255). Socialist/Marxist feminism recognizes the intersectional oppression – class, gender, race and sexuality to be the reason of women's commodification. The sexual harassment experienced by Iris from her lover, Louis unveils different forms of intersected oppression: "You talk about honesty in art and truthfulness, but you're a fraud, a hypocrite ..." (Macneal 210). Louis causes emotional harm to Iris, "I've done my best to hide my feelings. I could easily have seduced you" (Macneal 210). Iris challenges the pervasive oppression by resisting the conformity to the values set by male-dominated society. The setting of *The Doll Factory* contributes to the objectification of women within the Great Exhibition of 1851 which introduces the capitalist system of the society. The depiction of the women of the novel based on the class-based division in Victorian society shows the ongoing exploited ways under capitalism.

Along with the objectification of women, gender inequality, and double oppression, Socialist/Marxist feminism examines the limitations of social mobility for women in a capitalist society. In *The Doll Factory*, sexual harassment – physical and emotional harm faced by Iris results in her career disruption, and limited opportunities for advancement. The stalking behavior of a taxidermist, Silas causes discomfort for Iris. The threatening and intimidating obsession of Silas towards Iris, "You must be my Queen .... I just want you to be my friend" (Macneal 248), creates a sense of fear within Iris: "Please – let me go. I won't tell anyone about you – I won't say anything – but I beg you, please, let me go" (Macneal 304). Silas's persistent advances towards Iris disregarding her lack of consent constitutes as sexual harassment that has significant consequences on his mental health along with the violation of her boundaries. Despite the clear disinterest of Iris, Silas continual pursuing contributes to the hatred of Iris: "You're a deluded – a deluded devil of a man! I hate you. I hate you with every ounce of my being, every last breath in my body. You're pathetic. It's little wonder you have no companions, that you're all alone" (Macneal 335). The *Doll Factory* illustrates the multifaceted nature of sexual harassment – damaging effects of dangerous obsession experienced by the protagonist, Iris.

### CONCLUSION

*The Doll Factory* underpins Socialist/Marxist strand of intersectionality – oppression of class, race, sexuality and gender of women through the exposure of exploitation of women: the pervasive violence within patriarchal capitalist systems of society. The aim of Socialist/Marxist feminism is to overthrow patriarchy and capitalism: a deadly nexus meant to cripple women's identity, muffle their voices, and relegate them to positions of inferiority. Socialist/Marxist feminism prioritizes social justice and gender equality with a view to ending the

vicious cycle of oppression, suppression, and suffocation against women.

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