POWER AND DISPLACEMENT: EN ROUTE TO FEMALE EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract- Empowerment and liberation are frequently associated with women portrayed in literature. In a significant body of literature in English, the acquisition of female liberation is depicted as a result of displacement. 'Displacement' is defined in this paper as 'leaving one's own socio-cultural context in search of liberation'. This article explores the meaning of empowerment, in the context of its "root-concept": gaining power and the varied definitions - depending on the context of the individual trajectories of protagonists. This article attempts to contest the dominant notion of attaining liberation through displacement as portrayed in the selected literature. The novel 'Jasmine' by Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian diasporic writer, will be scrutinized as a background study. The short story, 'A Bird of Paradise' written by a Sri Lankan diasporic writer, Chithra Fernando, will be juxtaposed against 'Jasmine' to prove that displacement does not always bring about empowerment as shown through Rupa's quest for liberation through displacement. This article also highlights the interdependencies, tensions, societal norms and expectations, as well as obligations as depicted within the world of the story. The short story, 'The Breast Giver' written by a Bengali Indian writer, Maheshweta Devi, is analyzed alongside this text to show that although 'Jashoda' does not leave her own socio-cultural context, she gains mobility from the periphery of the socio-cultural circle to the centre. However, her liberation is rather superficial as her attempt to gain agency further ensnares her; this provides the medium for my secondary argument regarding varied definitions of 'female liberation.' I argue that 'female liberation' is not always brought about as a result of displacement and that 'empowerment' can have different meanings to different individuals dependent on their personality, educational background, cultural influences, family structures and the larger socio-cultural contexts. In conclusion, this paper will critically challenge the belief that female liberation is achieved through severing one's bonds and leaving behind one's obligations while contributing towards reframing the perception of empowerment in order to move beyond 'catchphrases'.

Keywords- empowerment, liberation, literature, displacement

I. INTRODUCTION

The image of females depicted in 'literature' has undergone monumental changes during the last few decades. Female writers have gradually diverged from the portrayal of "enduring, self sacrificing female characters" towards women in conflict and in search of identity. Writers often explore "female subjectivity," highlighting the theme of growing up from childhood to womanhood -the Bildungsroman- in order to establish the female identity in patriarchal society. In her poems to Kamla Das, Toru Dutt, the first female Indian poet, depicted "archetypes of Indian womanhood, such as 'Sita' and 'Savitri', exhibiting the suffering of women, their self-sacrificing roles and reinforcing conventional myths in a patriotic manner" (UK essays, 2013). Similar to Dutt, Das' poems too were based on women's subjugation by men in society. In contrast to this very common trope, current literature has emerged with a modern approach to giving a new identity to the women of modern times through the creations of writers such as Arundathi Roy (God of Small Things), Sunethra Gupta(Glass Blower's Breath), Bharathi Mukherjee (Desirable Daughters, Jasmine), Shobha De

(Sultry Days), Anita Desai, Manju Kapur, and Kusum Sawhney.

However, the concept of women acquiring emancipation and agency through 'displacement' in their search for identity (as depicted in Mukherjee's novels such as 'Jasmine') is problematized through this essay which focuses on the short story, 'The Bird of Paradise' by Chitra Fernando which contests this dominant depiction of gaining empowerment through displacement. Within the context of this essay, the term 'displacement' refers to 'leaving one's own socio-cultural context in search of liberation'.

In 'Jasmine', the diasporic writer, Bharathi Mukherjee, portrays a young widow, bound by the shackles of her country's grip, who sheds her previously assumed roles by moving across borders in an attempt to empower herself, often disassociating herself with any position that might hold her back, while assuming new names and identities in a bid for social survival. A reader is left with the idea of Jasmine's success at achieving agency as a result of her 'displacement'. Thus, the short story, 'A Bird of Paradise' by another diasporic writer Chitra Fernando, is juxtaposed with 'Jasmine' aptly to contest the notion of emancipation through displacement as the protagonist Rupa's movement across borders in search of empowerment, in this narrative, ends in disillusionment in contrast to Mukherjee's novel, illuminating that following the American dream does not always result in liberation.

The second short story by the Bengali Indian writer, Mahesweta Devi, 'The Breast Giver' from her collection of short stories called 'Breast Stories' translated into English by Gayatri Spivak, narrates "a tale of a Bengali wet-nurse, Jashoda, living in a 1960's India who is compelled to take up 'professional motherhood' when her Brahman husband is disabled" (WNN Editors Team, 2010). The gender role reversal that takes place in the protagonist's household as Jashoda becomes the sole 'bread winner' of her family in her attempt to seek relief from her family's desperate economic destitution, and her husband takes on the responsibilities of their household which are usually designated to females, contributes towards the argument that the term 'female liberation' carries varied definitions dependent on the personality, educational background, cultural influences, family structures, and the larger socio-cultural contexts of different individuals.

This three dimensional analysis will illuminate that female empowerment is extremely subjective and reframe

the perception of female empowerment in order to move beyond buzzwords to make this phenomenon a reality.

This essay will scrutinize the term 'empowerment' in order to reach an agreeable definition to suit "women of all stratas, as at present, female liberation is an issue embraced by women of the higher strata, particularly upper class / middle class and power elites" (Caplan, 1985) and as a result can be "criticized for its marked Western ethnocentrism" (Sharma, 2000). Thus, it displays inabilities to relate to the cultural ethos and gender relations of the East. This paper highlights the deficiencies of some of the existing definitions of 'empowerment' which fail to capture the reality of women of all walks of life, and will use the protagonists of the two selected short stories 'Rupa' and 'Jashoda' to emphasize the concept of varied dimensions of empowerment as well as to contest the idea of displacement as a key en route to female liberation.

II. BACKGROUND

Female empowerment has gained great momentum at present, contributing to the need to identify the true meaning of this term which is used to address universal female issues although predominantly sporting a western ideology alienating non- western women's experiences.

Paulo Freire (1996), in his book 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' discussed `empowerment' in a very formal manner for the first time in the 1970s. Thereon, many scholars have discussed it in terms of "human potential especially for female empowerment". Caroline Moser (1993) has discussed it as "redistribution of power". Confusion occurs when discussing the concept of empowerment because the root concept 'power' itself is challenged, primarily used in political and economical contexts, while delegating a minor role for the personal context. However, "to try to come closer to an understanding of empowerment, we need to look at the actual meaning of the term that has been variously used by writers and researchers in a variety of contexts" (Rowland, 1997).

According to Rowland (ibid), it is paramount to understand that power can take on different forms in the process of empowerment. Rowland (ibid) explains:

a. **Power over:** Controlling power, this may be responded to with compliance, resistance (which weakens processes of victimization) or manipulation.

b. **Power to:** Generative or productive power (sometimes incorporating or manifesting as forms of resistance or manipulation) which creates new possibilities and actions without domination.

c. **Power with:** 'a sense of the whole being greater than the sum of the individuals, especially when a group tackles problems together'.

d. **Power from within:** 'the spiritual strength and uniqueness that resides in each one of us and makes a true human. Its basis is self-acceptance and self-respect, which extend, in turn, to respect for and acceptance of others as equals."

Using the conventional definition, of 'power over', "empowerment means bringing people who are outside the decision making process into it. This puts a strong emphasis on participation in political structures and formal decision making and, in the economic sphere, on the ability to obtain an income that enables participation in economic decision-making. Individuals are empowered when they are able to maximize the opportunities available to them without constraints." Within the generative, 'power to' and 'power with' "interpretations of power, empowerment is concerned with the processes by which people become aware of their own interests, how those relate to the interest of others in order for both to participate from a position of a greater strength in decision-making and actually to influence such decisions,"(Rowland, ibid).

From a feminist perspective, interpreting 'power over' entails "understanding the dynamics of oppression and internalized oppressing. Empowerment is thus more than participation in decision-making; it must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions". As feminist and other social theorists have shown, societies ascribe a particular set of abilities to social categories of people. "Thus, empowerment must involve undoing negative social construction, so that people come to see themselves

as having the capacity and the right to act and influence decisions" (Rowland, ibid).

According to Rowland (ibid), "empowerment is seen to operate within three dimensions as captured by Figure 1 (Rowland, ibid):

a. **Personal** : development of a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity, and undoing the defects of internalized oppression.

b. **Rational** : developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of a relationship and decisions made within it.

c. **Collective** : This includes involvement in political structures, but might also cover collective action based on co-operation rather than competition."
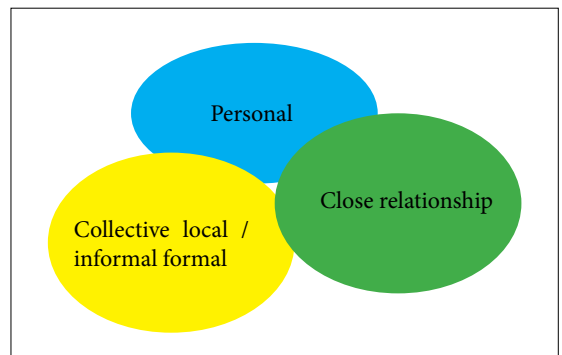

Figure 1. The Three Dimensions of empowerment
Source: Rowland, J. (1997)

According to Naila Kabeer's (1989) interpretation, empowerment is "a transformation of power relations between women and men, 'so that women have greater power over their own lives and men have less power over women's lives." Kabeer (1994) has provided another dynamic account of this notion "as a concept with theoretical and practical potential that merits being more than an empty slogan." She has deemed it necessary to deconstruct the notion of power in order to understand the process of empowerment. She has explained that "the multi-dimensional nature of power suggests that empowerment strategies for women must build on 'the power within' as a necessary adjunct to improving their ability to control resources, to determine agendas and

make decisions. 'Power from within' needs 'experiential recognition and analysis' of issues to do with women's own subordination and how it is maintained. Such power cannot be given; it has to be self-generated" (Kabeer, ibid). She emphasizes that elements such as self-respect and the sense of agency are of great importance. Furthermore, she has highlighted "that careful analysis and insightful reflections are necessary preconditions for the creation of a new form of consciousness." "This idea is based on the concept of `critical consciousness' propagated by Paulo Freire where the process of empowerment is tied to an educational process" (Naz, 2006). In addition, Kabeer (1994) believes that "self esteem and feeling of being an active agent are the fundamental principles of empowerment and she expends her thought by saying that empowerment should be considered an aspect of perceiving oneself as an active agent capable of making decisions" (Naz, ibid).

Thus, it is not simply an act of decision-making but encompasses much more. Kabeer does not ignore the value of collective action but considers it useful in achieving social as well as political empowerment. In her opinion, the empowerment process should have its effect in policy changes at the state and market institution level that ultimately mould and limit women's lives (Naz, ibid).

John Friedman's (1992: 32-34) theory of `alternative development' "is derived from the concept of empowerment that arises from indigenous, political and social cultures of society." According to Friedman, "there are three kinds of power; social, political and psychological. Social power consists of processing knowledge, information and skills. Political power is a mechanism that influences policy changes both at the micro and macro levels. It is the result of the power of voice and collective action. Finally, psychological power is expressed as an individual sense of potency demonstrated in self confidence, behaviour, self-reliance and increased self esteem." Friedman explains empowerment "as social power, which can be translated into political power. Social networking enhances individuals' position and power, which consequently expedites and strengthens the process of psychological, social and political empowerment."

According to Kate Young (1993), "empowerment enables women to take control of their own lives, set their own agenda, organize to help each other and make demands on the state for support and on the society itself for change." For Young, "empowerment is a complete change of the

processes and structures responsible for women's inferior status in the society. It is based on a `transformatory potential' related to the `need to transform women's position in such a way that the advancement will be sustained." Finally, she summarizes "the concept of empowerment from individual to wider political perspectives and she subscribes sufficient importance to collective action, as it is a sure means to individual empowerment."

In its true sense, this term is discussed from a feminist perspective, and Marilee Karl (1995) says, "The word 'Empowerment' captures this sense of gaining control, of participation in decision-making".

More recently, this notion has entered the vocabulary of development agencies, including international organizations and the United Nations, and Vanessa Griffen (1987) explains, "also through a gendered lens, that empowerment means;

- having control, or gaining further control;

- having a say and being listened to;

- being able to define and create from a woman's perspective;

- being able to influence social choices and decisions affecting the whole society (not just areas of society accepted as women's place) and

- being recognized and respected as equal citizens and human beings with a contribution to make."

Moreover, Beteille (1999) discusses it "as power distribution without having clear power." According to Beteille, "the main point behind empowerment is that it seeks to change society through a rearrangement of power." This clearly reflects Kabeer's opinion. But, Dandikar (1986) has described empowerment "as a multifaceted process, which involves four parallel aspects. These are:

- The woman's economic/resource base;

- The public/political arena allowed to her by society;

- Her family structure, and the strength and limitations it imposes on her; and

- Perhaps most important, the psychological / ideological "sense" about woman in her society,

which in turn shapes her own perception of herself and the options she allows herself to consider."

Looking at Batliwala's (1993) observation, "she says the word 'power' is contained within the term empowerment, implying that empowerment is about changing the balance of power in a given society, power being defined as control over resources and ideology. The resources may be categorized into physical, human, intellectual, financial, and self, including self-esteem, confidence, and creativity. Ideology refers to beliefs, values, attitudes, and ways of thinking and perceiving situations." She points out that "empowerment is a process that involves a redistribution of power, particularly within the household."

Therefore, it is evident that "power, power redistribution and power relationship" are the key factors emphasized by modern scholars in their scrutiny of the concept of empowerment. However, it is important to identify the shortcomings of this debate.

"Viewed from a liberal perspective, women's empowerment approach suffers from three fallacies: exclusionary bias, adversarial orientation and subversive logic" (Sharma, ibid: 21). He explains that "it suffers from an exclusionary bias as it excludes man from the feminist discourse, organization and movement. It is noticed that it isolates women from men." This is quite evident from the fact that this particular area of specialization is monopolized by women themselves leading to their isolation. "As a result, the academic discourse on the gender question seems to have gained an activist impulse. Within the academic discourse, again the question of 'women' is being viewed in isolation from the gender relations context resulting in a disconnecting consequence, alienating men from the gender discourse," (Sharma, ibid: 25). Above all," it also evinces an adversarial orientation. Simply, it tends to project man as an adversary of woman" (Sharma, ibid: 25).

In its present discourse, women's empowerment perspective could also be viewed as a threat to domestic peace as it may create marital tension. As a result, some women prefer to keep away from this field of specialization. From a structural view point, "women's empowerment approach is intrinsically psychologistic, structural and elitist" (Sharma, ibid: 26). It is psychologistic "as it places over optimism on the efficacy of conscientization as a key to women's empowerment. Even as the importance of `awareness generation' among women for their empowerment cannot be overemphasized, conscientization of women alone, to the exclusion of man is as important, perhaps even more than change in the attitude of woman, for setting gender relations on an even keel. Above all, while attitudinal change among both women and men is a necessary condition for gender equality, it is, however, not a sufficient condition, (Sharma, ibid)." From a Marxist angle, "women's empowerment framework suffers from a sort of nonstructuralist condition. That is so because it ignores the importance of existential conditions, including the fact of economic dependency of woman on man. The economic dependency of woman is built into the structure of property relations which are dominated by man. Certainly, developmental approach has failed to make a dent in the structure of gender-based property relations" (Sharma, ibid). From a structural viewpoint, another problem with women's empowerment is that "it treats women as a homogeneous category, an undifferentiated mass. This, however, is not realistic. The fact of the matter is that there is internal differentiation among women and it is as telling as between man and woman" (Sharma: ibid). These women differ significantly not only in their backgrounds but also in their needs and interests. The question then is; "whose empowerment are we talking about? Empowerment of which class or section of women? In view of the above delineated limitations of women's empowerment approach, it is evident that it needs gender empowerment. It also fails to identify male empowerment because most males of Third World Countries have no 'power' and they are also exploited by the existing power-structure in the society" (Sharma, ibid). So, it is evident that 'empowerment' also needs to be re-defined as a gender-neutral concept.

When scrutinizing, 'gender empowerment,' "it should not be mistaken for empowerment of man vis-a-vis woman or vice versa. It signifies transformation of gender relations from hierarchical to egalitarian plan rather than just tinkering with women's power position. It aims at reworking gender relations in a complimentary framework rather than a conflictual framework," (Sharma, ibid). Gender empowerment "is a broad category which includes empowerment of women without creating a misgiving of emasculation of men. It stands for fostering a balance in gender relations as against the one-sided women empowerment approach," (Sharma, ibid). Furthermore, empowerment is not just a question of rearrangement of power both economic and political; it is also a matter of change of values," (Sharma, ibid). Thus

it is quite clear that as much as women do, men too need gender sensitization. "In fact men need it even more, for they still are in a position of domination on account of the perpetuation of patriarchy," (Sharma, ibid).

Therefore, it is quite evident that there is a need for a better framework in order to encompass all female individuals with their diverse trajectories hailing from different cultures and social strata. It is this need that propelled this research of analyzing popular depictions of female empowerment in literature as this acts as a representative of society.

III. DISCUSSION

To set the background for this study, it is important to look at Bharathi Mukherjee's title character Jasmine who leaves behind her cultural heritage and homeland in search of liberation and multiculturalism in the United States of America. Mukherjee, "an Indian born Canadian/ American novelist, has made a deep impression on the literary canvass," (Shukla et al, 2014). It is evident that her novel 'Jasmine' resonates "with some of the issues of her own cultural location in West Bengal in India, her displacement (alienation) from her land of origin to Canada where she was "simultaneously invisible" as a writer and "overexposed" as a racial minority and her final re-location (assimilation) to USA, which she vehemently states to be a land of fluid identities, as a naturalized citizen" (Shukla et al. Ibid).

Jasmine, the protagonist, was born in 1965 in a rural Indian village called Hasnapur. She narrates her story as a twenty-four-year-old widow who is pregnant, living in Iowa with her crippled lover, Bud Ripplemeyer. While the reader journeys a time span of two months with Jasmine in Iowa, recent happenings in her life as well as the biographical events that span the time between her Punjabi birth and her American adult life are revealed. "Her odyssey encompasses five distinct settings, two murders, at least one rape, a maiming, a suicide, and three love affairs. Throughout the course of the novel, the title character's identity, along with her name, changes again and again: from Jyoti to Jasmine, Jasmine to Jazzy, Jazzy to Jase and Jase to Jane. In chronological order, Jasmine moves from Hasnapur, Punjab, to Fowlers Key, Florida (near Tampa), to Flushing, New York, to Manhattan, to Baden, Iowa, and finally is off to California as the novel ends" (Ganesan et al, 2017).

The reader is told at the outset itself that Jasmine was born an unlucky child according to Hindu wisdom, foreshadowing many of the pitfalls she is to face. The youngest daughter of a large, impoverished family, her multi-linguistic talent in Punjabi, Urdu and English and her intelligence were wasted because of her destiny to be married off at an early age according to Indian custom. Even this traditional destiny was maimed according to astrological readings, ending in widowhood and exile. However, Jasmine, in her fight for survival, interprets the scar she receives following the astrologer's prediction as her "third eye" which can be read as a kind of "third space" (Kaula, 2009: 23- 32) in Bhabha's terms where Jasmine negotiates a space for herself which refuses to be incorporated into the various hegemonic socio-cultural fields she moves in.

As the story unfolds, a series of seemingly tragic events propel her to abandon her homeland and move towards the promise of the American dream and it is ironical to note that it is her ill-fate that facilitates her female – migrant trajectory. Her forward movement to the USA is also facilitated by Jasmine's creative re-interpretation and re-deployment of fate. Thus, rather than submitting to fate in India, she re-scripts her 'fate' in her favour through 'displacement.' A reader of this novel is left with the strong feeling and realization that Jasmine's liberation comes about as a result of severing bonds with her homeland and culture along with her re-invention of self to suit the dominant hegemony of Western ideals.

It is this portrayal of empowerment that subscribes to Western liberal feminism and fails to recognize the diversity of feminist positions and female subjectivities in the world, much like liberal humanism which imagined a single human subject inspired by European ideology that is problematized through this essay using Chitra Fernando's short story 'The Bird of Paradise.'

Chitra Fernando was born in Kalutara, Sri Lanka and migrated to Australia and spent half her life there pursuing her craft as a 'free individual', "liberated to a great extent from emotional involvement with Sri Lankan events, and from 'labels' relating to caste and class that she believed to be inescapable in her homeland" (Gooneratne, 2002). As cited by Gooneratne (ibid), "Fernando looking back on her life a few years before her death observed: Sri Lanka gave me my soul, but Australia gave me my freedom" and added: Without that freedom my soul would have shrivelled." Quite similar to Mukherjee, Fernando's

creativity too was focused on her homeland and dealt with issues, experiences and influences of her life in Sri Lanka. However, interestingly, in contrast to Mukherjee who promotes the idea of female emancipation through displacement in her novel 'Jasmine', Fernando in 'The Bird of Paradise' brings in a different dimension through Rupa's journey to Australia in search of freedom and relief from familial pressure, expectations, Sri Lankan traditions and customs, which ends in regret and disillusionment.

'Rupa Gomez' is introduced to the reader as a teacher of English in Australia who returns to Sri Lanka after two years as a result of familial pressure which "took on the collective force behind a battering ram." Initially, although she seems to be happy about her return to her motherland, as days pass by, old memories of suffocating practices, restricting traditions of family and her traditional household in general, as well as old resentments pertaining to formalities, gossip, lack of personal space and differential treatment of class and caste, which were the reasons behind her flight to another country in the first place, creep back into her mind.

The reader is able to feel the mounting agitation in Rupa as she increasingly feels stifled in her familiar surroundings due to the presence of her family members and their unchanging lifestyle full of traditional expectations and the intrusion of her privacy.

After her return home, when she realizes that her parents intend to find a suitable partner for her, at the outset she is open minded about it as she thinks, "…*did she really mind? The independence, the isolation of the city life, she'd had enough of that.*" Her initial sense of happiness after her arrival is beautifully captured by Fernando when she takes the reader into Rupa's mind, "*Wedding photographs… would hers hang there too? She felt a pleasant sense of anticipation as she thought of her future here at home.*" However, as Rupa's parents gradually approach her albeit in a gentle manner "…*We'd like to see you settled before too long…You have – may be you have - have you met anyone there – in Sydney*?", she becomes desperate at the prospect of life in her motherland, living a life mapped out by her family, based on the background painted by the writer as revealed through Aunty Mary, "*Enough of this kind of talk. You have a duty to god and the Family. In my time, we either married or entered a convent.*" Thus, she flees back to Sydney on the pretext of finishing her teaching contract with the promise of returning home to marry the chosen groom, but remains

in Australia and gets married to a man of her choosing. This clearly highlights Rupa's pursuit of Western ideals, of scripting her own fate in contrast to traditional practices in Sri Lanka which resonates to an extent with Jasmine who leaves India initially to fulfill her husband Prakash's dream, but embraces Western ideals in her bid for a better life, free of inhibitions.

It is interesting to note the subtlety through which Fernando positions Sri Lanka as a place of inhibitions and Australia as the opposite through the prejudicial viewpoint of Aunty Mary who views Rupa's simple gesture of hospitality of offering biscuits to Dominic who was identified as a suitable partner for her without her knowledge, as an uninhibited display of her interest, "*Don't pretend you don't know. I saw you offering him biscuits and cheese – getting a closer look. I was surprised, I must say. But then, that's what Australia has done to you.*" Within such a context, the reader is shown that the protagonist views Australia as a land of progress, independence and modern civilization in contrast to Sri Lankan life and practices which made her want to go overseas "*some years away from the family, …to find a separate being.*"

Following her displacement, subscribing to the popular trope, although any reader would expect to see Rupa as an independent and happy individual, Fernando surprises the reader with her novel perspective on how Rupa's life has run along similar tracks as it would have in Sri Lanka although scripted by her choice in contrast to her need which propelled her displacement, which clearly highlights Dandikar's (1986) claim "that the psychological and ideological sense about woman in a female's society, in turn shapes her own perceptions of herself and the options she allows herself to consider."

This is very evident through Rupa's trajectory as although she flees her birthplace to escape a life mapped out by her family "*shaped by custom and tradition*", after returning to Sydney she falls in line with a life of domesticity replicating practices of her homeland. In her moment of epiphany at the end of the story, she ponders, "…*why had she married at all? That's not what she'd returned to Sydney for. She'd been looking for something: a new being unconstrained by custom and tradition, a splendid freedom. Yet, she'd settled so easily for comfortable ordinariness, not really different from her mother or Aunty Mary, from Srini.*" Thus, Fernando brings her narration to a close through Rupa's visualization of "*the shining*

bird…It's you – you I've always wanted," symbolizing her yearning for empowerment. This yearning is much like that of Jasmine's, although Rupa is clearly more privileged than Jasmine due to her social situation, educational background, economical resource base as well as her family structure. However, Rupa's quest for liberation which is brought out when Fernando uses the definite article 'the' in her description of the shining bird, is clearly depicted as ending in regret and disillusionment despite her displacement which promised her independence and an unconstrained life subscribing to Western ideals.

Therefore, this novel perspective brought forth through Fernando's short story highlights that in contrast to Mukherjee's depiction, displacement does not necessarily bring about empowerment and that it is dependent on each individual's larger socio-cultural context as well as the inherent ideology which propels an individual in his / her course of life. This also shows that although Rupa is capable of making her own choices about her life, is economically more secure than Jasmine was, flees from her family and birthplace to free herself from the continuity of life shaped by traditions and customs, she does not become emancipated like Jasmine, as the interdependencies in her life and her definition of empowerment in terms of her life are quite different from that of Jasmine's. Thus, in this scenario the existing framework for female empowerment that treats women as a homogenous category, an undifferentiated mass is very problematic and iniquitous.

On the other hand is 'Jashoda,' the protagonist of Maheshweta Devi's short story 'The Breast Giver.' In this tale of a Bengali wet-nurse, Devi shows the female protagonist, Jashoda, living in a 1960's India as she is compelled to take up 'professional motherhood' when her Brahman husband loses both his legs. With her only ability held in her 'always full' breasts and her desperate economic destitution - she is swiftly utilized and praised for her expert weaning of wealthy offspring, which she does for 25 years, before losing her usefulness and consequently dying from breast cancer.

Although the patriarchal practices, the exploitation of women are of paramount importance to the plot of the story, the following analysis highlights that even within such a male dominated context Jashoda does achieve agency from the periphery to the centre and becomes emancipated in some areas of her life. This supports the argument that empowerment carries varied definitions and is highly subjective.

From a feminist view point, Jashoda is a typical woman - a victim as she takes on the responsibility of providing for her family through literally commercializing her ability to nurture and tragically dying at the end of the story due to breast cancer. However, Devi does not depict her as a passive victim in the story as she gains importance within the plot in diverse ways, portraying that for a woman in her situation, especially given the setting, she does become liberated at least temporarily.

Against the backdrop of women who are depicted as 'child-producing machines' regardless of their economical status, Jashoda, even though uneducated, uses her only skill as a commodity to her own advantage which propels her towards changing the hierarchy within her household through a gender role reversal. As she goes out to earn a living to provide for her family, her husband takes on the responsibility of the household chores and caring for their children, generally a socially constructed identity reserved for a woman. This is the primary change Jashoda brings about which gains prominence due to the prevalent social order in 1960s India. This can be viewed as an instance where Jashoda becomes liberated even within her own household through the reversal of stereotypical, traditional societal norms. According to Tyson (2006), every area where patriarchy is in control, "woman is *other*: she is objectified and marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values, defined by what she (allegedly) lacks and that men (allegedly) have." Although Jashoda is continuously objectified by men as well as women in the story and cast in the role of a subaltern due to her status as a woman, as well as her poverty, it is ironical to note that she uses something that men (allegedly) lack and women possess - her breasts and her maternal plentitude - to her own advantage in her journey towards economical emancipation.

As Jashoda "becomes more and more revered for her body's other worldly tolerance due to her ability to nurse over fifty babies" (Nair, 2015) for over twenty five years and heralded as wet nurse and "the mother of the world", the binary 'man - woman' seems to become subverted to a hierarchy closer to 'woman - man' which evidently portrays a woman who is viewed as "a *strong personality*", even by her own husband.

Therefore, Jashoda becomes an 'active agent' in alignment with Batliwala's notion (ibid), that in terms of empowerment, there is an apparent redistribution of power within the household of Jashoda. However, similar

to 'Rupa' in 'The Bird of Paradise', due to the psychological and ideological sense about a woman's role in her society Jashoda's perception of herself and her role in her family unit are shaped (Dandikar, ibid). Furthermore, these social constructs, as well as her economic resource base, make her accept the oppression meted out to her by the male society as well as the women who employ her to breastfeed their offspring in order to safeguard their health, viewing her as a mere commodity as reality that goes unchallenged.

Thus, looking at Jasmine, Rupa and then Jashoda, it is evident that Jashoda, unlike the other two protagonists, although she does not seek displacement for selfhood as depicted through Mukherjee's and Fernando's works, within her own socio-cultural context she is able to bring about changes in the social and symbolic order through gender role reversal as well as subverting the man-woman binary in a male dominated society. It is this perception that enlightens the concept of empowerment as a notion that is problematic when looked at through female homogenous lens and signals the need to look at empowerment from a novel angle in order to move beyond catch phrases and make this concept a 'possible reality' in every society.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is apparent that the two protagonists Rupa and Jashoda, when analyzed against the backdrop of Jasmine, clearly challenge the popular trope found in most literature that is of gaining emancipation through displacement. Rupa Gomez, an educated, Christian woman of a privileged background seeks selfhood through displacement to escape her traditional home set up which imposes stifling traditional practices as well as ecxpectations on her life. However, Fernando through the depiction of her trajectory ending in regret and disillusionment highlights that sometimes regardless of an individual's education and financially secure life, which is in clear contrast to Jashoda as well as Jasmine, that a female's journey towards liberation can become stunted as a result of the psychological and ideological constructs of the society she lives in. Jashoda on the other hand, although she is portrayed as a typical Indian wife who harbours an irrational sense of duty, love and servitude towards her husband, and hailing from an impoverished and uneducated background, gains agency to some extent within her own socio-cultural context

without having to resort to displacement unlike Rupa or Jasmine. Despite the interdependencies and the tensions prevalent in the 1960s patriarchal Indian society, Jashoda succeeds in reversing traditional social constructs of a woman's role and contributes towards subverting the man-woman binary. This clearly highlights that the term 'empowerment' carries varied definitions for individuals dependent on their diverse socio-cultural contexts which map their course in life and challenges the common trope that in order to become liberated one has to sever one's bonds and leave behind one's obligations. Finally, it should be emphasized that Rupa and Jashoda contribute towards reframing the perception of empowerment in order to move beyond buzzwords and contesting the common depiction of gaining agency through displacement as portrayed in the selected literature.

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