

PARCHED: AN ARCHETYPAL AND CINEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF SISTERHOOD

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ABSTRACT

Thesis. The current paper deals with the idea of sisterhood which has been represented in a Bollywood movie named *Parched*. The movie manifests sisterhood as a way to find solace and to get rid of confinement from the oppressive and suffocating society that tries to confine women within the four walls of the house.

Concept. Sisterhood is an association, group, society, or community of women who are linked by common interests. This alliance became popular during the second wave of feminism. A single woman cannot combat the oppressors. Only necessary solidarity and collective efforts would result in the desired improvements.



Results and Conclusion. In our society, the term ‘brotherhood’ is used to designate camaraderie among men, but no term is used to denote companionship among women. In fact, it is assumed that women hate each other and this legacy of ‘women-hating’ is proved to be unfounded. Therefore, necessary solidarity is required to correct the patriarchal assumptions about women, and the idea of sisterhood is one effort in this direction.

Keywords: sisterhood, patriarchy, feminism, shared experience, solidarity

INTRODUCTION

Sisterhood is an association, group, society, or community of women, bound together by common interests. Sisterhood forces women to support each other in the fight against sexism. It aims to eliminate gender or sex-based prejudices and discrimination, particularly against women. Sexism can be defined as the belief that one gender is superior or more valuable than another. The concept of sexism was initially coined to raise awareness about the oppression of girls and women. Bell Hooks (1986) explains:

Women are the group that suffers the most from sexist oppression. Like other forms of group oppression, sexism is perpetuated by institutional and social structures. by persons who dominate, exploit, or oppress; and by the victims themselves who are socialised to behave in ways that force them to cooperate with the status quo. (Hooks, 1986, p. 43)

Apart from some men, some women also perpetuate sexism because they are socialized in such a way that they are unaware of their own oppression. A powerful, strong, and collective movement was needed to end this subjugation. So, sisterhood came into existence to end this sexism. Sisterhood encourages women to reach out to each other and get over their sexist attitudes first. It must be realized through a mutual recognition of social affinity rather than a fixed anatomy.

Sisterhood was a key feature of the second wave of feminism. The concept of Sisterhood was introduced by Robin Morgan, an American feminist, in her seminal feminist work *Sisterhood is Powerful*, published in 1970. It was a collection of essays and documents on the second wave of feminism. In the introductory part of this book, the writer described how the idea of sisterhood came into being. She told that while working together on this anthology, the female writers realised the need for coming together to fight against their oppressors. She wrote, “The Women who admitted that they were simply unable to cope with their miserable situation, we were all in, and needed each other and a whole movement to change that” (Morgan 1970, p. XV). Although this book was a feminist project and the female writers were working collectively to finish this book, their male fellows were dominating them. The male partners kept editing the articles of these female writers until these writings lost their original essence and became unrecognisable as female writing. Apart from this, women were forced to

change the title of the book by their male fellows who were working with them on this project. The original title was *The Hand that Cradles the Rock*. The fellowmen had objections to this title and instructed the women to change it. Robin Morgan states that at this moment, they realised the need for a strong sisterhood or friendship to survive against the domination of males. She opines, "Sisterhood must be very powerful for us to have even survived, let alone finished the damned book" (Morgan, 1970, p. XVII). According to these women writers, who were fighting against patriarchy through their writings, experiences or problems were not exclusive to a single woman rather they were common and shared by every woman; and this shared nature of experiences gave birth to a political movement. Thus, theory, ideas, or a collective movement came out of human feelings rather than text rhetoric. She again argues, "We have learned that those experiences are not our private hang-ups. They are shared by every woman, and are therefore political" (Morgan, 1970, p. XVII). Further, she talks about the equality prevalent in this movement. No one is privileged or treated specially. She elucidates:

This movement of women is a non-hierarchical where nobody is superior or inferior to others. Every member of the movement is treated equally. Nobody is given special privileges or any special authority over others. All tasks are done collectively and everyone has equal share of contribution. (Morgan, 1970, p. XVIII)

As they do things collectively, they have the potential of cutting across all the barriers of class, race, age, economics, and geography. There is another matter some feminist scholars have expressed their doubts about this solidarity. For example, Simone de Beauvoir (2011) in the introduction of her book, *The Second Sex* opined that "Bourgeois women supported bourgeois men instead of proletariat women and white women favoured white men instead of black women" (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 09). The same notion was propounded by some scholars in three international conferences related to women's issues held by the UN between 1975 and 1985. These scholars claimed that there was no homogeneity in the experiences and challenges of women from different regions. Margaret Walters also claimed that there could be disagreements among different groups of sisters. She recounted some experiences in the following manner:

In England, an early conference – improbably – was split apart because of a bitter feud between heterosexual feminists and Maoist feminists. At another weekend conference, held in a building shared by a large group of coal miners, some of the women, who apparently had no idea about working-class men or to curb their flirtatious aggression knew little about, started shouting that 'Sisters are being oppressed from the miners. (Walters, 2005, p. 114)

Oyeronke Oyewumi, an African feminist, in her book, *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*, also asserted that the

term 'feminism' only entailed a white bourgeois version in the name of representing all the women of the world.

Despite all these concerns, seekers of sisterhood claim that all women go through the same experiences as they have to play essentially the same roles, albeit with different sets and costumes. Men cannot easily get out of this system since they created it and maintained it. Since men cannot leave this system, women need to work together to change it. Women, who had been struggling on a one-to-one basis with their men, should begin to see some sort of solidarity with each other. Women should join hands and share their problems and difficulties with one another. The prevailing system is very rigid and the efforts of a single person cannot stand up to it. Only a strong collective movement can give some results. Therefore, a sense of sisterhood becomes necessary for women to fight against the system. A Bollywood movie named *Parched* manifests this idea of sisterhood, and finally, success is gained with the help of collective efforts.

Parched is an Indian Movie, written and directed by Leena Yadav and produced by Ajay Devgan. In India, it was released on 23 September 2016. Before releasing in India, the movie was presented at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2015. The Movie has won an award for Best Director at the Indian Film Festival of Melbourne.

This is the story of four women who live in a rural area. The roles of these leading characters are played by Tannishtha Chatterjee as Rani, Radhika Apte as Lajjo, Surveen Chawla as Bijli, and Lehar Khan as Janki. Rani is a widow; Lajjo is a lady who is accused of being barren; Bijli is a dancer and prostitute; and Janki is a child bride. Rani is struggling to run her house and take care of her teenage son, Gulab who remains busy with his disruptive activities. Lajjo is in an abusive marriage with an alcoholic husband who, himself being infertile, accuses his wife of being sterile. Bijli is an erotic dancer from an early age but why she is in this profession is an ambiguous question. Janki is a young girl who must leave her studies because of her marriage at an early age. Although the struggle of all the women is different, the goal is the same. All women want to attain the same needs.

The title of the movie is used as a metaphor. 'Parched' does mean extremely thirsty or excessively dry and hot. A parched thing needs water desperately. These four women are parched for love and affection and the fulfilment of their emotional needs and desires. They are in extreme need of affection and due recognition in society and in the family. They are marginalised in society and deprived of love, rights, opportunities, education, and freedom, just as a plant is deprived of water and finally becomes parched. Despite their struggle and the commitment, they show to their gender roles, their emotional desires are not fulfilled which are supposed to be satisfied by their husbands or male companions. This thirst for emotional fulfilment unites all the women and a sense of sisterhood is shared by them.

READING PARCHED AS AN ARCHETYPE OF SISTERHOOD

The four women in the movie named *Parched* promote the idea of sisterhood. Their struggles are different but they are together to fight against their oppressors because their goal is to attain liberation and satisfy their emotional needs. They are parched in different ways but in the end, they are thirsty for the same things.

Rani, the widow is struggling from an early age to run her household. She was also married at an early age and her husband named Shankar died in an accident just after one or two years of their marriage. Since the death of her husband, Rani is doing her best to run the house on her own. She alone feeds two more people in the house who do not earn anything. One of them is her mother-in-law who is bedridden and the other is her teenage son who, instead of helping his mother by earning something, creates more trouble for her. Although Rani plays her multiple roles of wife, mother, and daughter-in-law with great devotion, she never gets desired love and affection. Her husband used to remain busy with prostitutes and drink alcohol excessively. Once her husband lost his senses after drinking, and the erotic dancer, Bijli, came to drop him home. Rani offered her dinner and they talked for the whole night. After that whenever Bijli came near this village, she met Rani. Thus, a strong sense of sisterhood grew between them. The bond between Rani and Bijli also emerges from self-disclosure. Rani and Bijli reveal their feelings, aspirations, sorrows, troubles, and thoughts during their very first meeting. During this meeting, they find something common which helps them to be good friends.

Their experiences are common. Both girls are victims of patriarchy from an early age. Both are facing brutal sexual indulgences against their desires. Bijli must face it because of her profession and Rani faces it because she is married and her husband has full authority over her body. That is why he can approach her anytime he wants. But he never did it out of love and she is thirsty for a touch of love. Throughout the movie, almost every woman encounters brutal rape. Janki and Lajjo also face it as a punishment whenever they try to oppose their husbands. They are objectified as sexual products. This objectification becomes the basis of their strong bond. Objectification can be defined as treating a person, especially a woman, as an object. The focus is primarily on sexual objectification. Objectification of a woman or girl can ultimately lead to an increased sense of anxiety or self-awareness. For instance, when Bijli and Rani share their thoughts, feelings, and problems, they find a little bit of solace and gradually become good friends. Bijli meets Rani every year when she comes here with her company. Bijli tells Lajjo herself that she has no other friend except Rani who is like a sister to her. Their bond happens to be strong enough to cut across the differences of race, caste, profession, etc.

Bijli is an erotic dancer and prostitute who is not counted as a respectful domestic angel. The other women of the village are supposed not to be

friendly with her. Therefore, Rani and Lajjo's friendship with Bijli is not acceptable in society. But Rani and Lajjo maintain their bond with Bijli. They meet her at night. In fact, this friendship is a true example of sisterhood. When Gulab and Janki's marriage is fixed, Rani hesitates to invite Bijli to the wedding. She knows that Bijli would not be accepted as a friend by the male members of society. The same happens to her. When Bijli arrives on the day of the wedding, she is insulted by the same men who die to spend a night with her. On the other hand, Rani and Lajjo do not bother about it and maintain the same kind of bond with Bijli.

The bond between Rani and Bijli is not like the white version of sisterhood which avoids conflict and disagreement by emphasizing unconditional love as Bell Hooks (1986) talks about the same in the American context:

Their version of white womanhood was informed by the racist and classist assumption that the white "lady" (bourgeois woman) should be protected from all that might disturb or disturb her and avoid negative facts that may lead to conflict. Their version of sisterhood dictated that sisters love each other unconditionally. That they avoid conflicts and minimise disagreements. That they should not criticize each other, especially in public. For a time, these mandates created an illusion of unity to quell the competition, antagonism, chronic disagreement, and abusive criticism (trash) that was the norm in most feminist groups. (Hooks, 1986, p. 46)

They go through hostility rather than loving each other unconditionally or agreeing with each other without confrontation. The Splinter Groups as mentioned by Bell Hooks promote 'sisterhood' instead of 'white sisterhood'. These groups do not ignore confrontation or disagreement. The members of these groups support each other while confronting each other and thus, things become clearer and more accurate.

Today many splinter groups that share a common identity (e.g., Wasp working class; white academic faculty women; anarchist feminists, etc.) use this model of sisterhood, but the participants in these groups endeavour to support, affirm, and protect one another while demonstrating hostility. (Hooks, 1986, p. 46)

Rani confronts Bijli when she warns Rani to control her son, Gulab because day by day his behaviour is going worse. But Rani tries to turn back on Bijli and says that Bijli can never understand her problems because she has never lived a domestic life. She suggests Bijli to take care of her own profession because all the women from the village have complained about the dance company. They have given the reason that their husbands remain outside because of this dance party in the village. At this moment, Bijli becomes furious and she speaks in her defence. She reveals to Rani and Lajjo that once Gulab had come to her with money in his hands but she refused his offer and slapped him. Instead of believing Bijli, Rani slaps her and leaves the place. After that Bijli explains to Lajjo her relationship with

Rani. But a few moments later, all of them unite again and this time their relationship is stronger because some things have become clearer among them. After this incident, Rani becomes aware of Gulab's misbehaviour and stands up for Janki. When they return home, Gulab warns his mother not to go with Bijli. But Rani replies to him very boldly. She says if he can approach the same Bijli whom he says bad woman, why cannot she? She advises him to be kind to his wife instead of wasting time doing so-called masculine things. Thus, they prove that hostility is not such a bad thing at all. Confronting partners is not simply mean spoiling the agreement of the group rather it makes things clear and more accurate. Bell Hooks (1986) elaborates further:

Women need to have the experience of working through hostility to arrive at understanding and solidarity to free themselves from the sexist socialisation that tells them to avoid confrontation. Time and again, I have had the experience of making statements in conversations that angered the listeners and sometimes led to hostile verbal confrontation. The situation feels uncomfortable, negative, and unproductive because there are angry voices, tears, etc. and yet I may find later that the experience has led to greater clarity and growth on my part and on the listeners' part. (Hooks, 1986, p. 64)

Janki is the youngest girl among these sisters. Her friendship with the other three women blurs the generational gap. Janki is Gulab's child-bride and Rani is her mother-in-law. In fact, Janki's relationship with her mother-in-law and Lajjo goes through the process of finding common experiences and establishing sisterhood. On the other hand, the sisterhood between Rani, Lajjo, and Bijli is presented as already well-established. In the beginning, Rani acts as a typical Indian mother-in-law with Janki. Gradually, their relationship goes through a transformation and turns into a strong friendship. They bear their alienation and with the passage of time become familiar with each other and conquer their detachment. Bell Hooks defines, "To build a political, mass-based feminist movement, women must work hard to overcome the alienation from one another" (Hooks, 1986, p. 49).

Rani judges Janki by her looks. Her liking and dislike for Janki both are based on her appearance. Rani likes her before marriage because she is a good-looking girl with long hair. Rani dislikes her after marriage because Janki has cut her hair short. Rani speaks rudely to Janki and keeps insisting that she does not know how to work. She even blames Janki for Gulab's indulgence with other women. She assumes that Janki does not satisfy him which is why he goes to other women. When Gulab spoils the stuff made by the women of the village under Kishan's supervision, Kishan's wife warns Rani to control her son. Rani returns home and scolds Janki and tells her to make Gulab happy. She projects Gulab's mistake to Janki because she thinks Janki does not fit herself to the expectations of her husband. Rani instructs Janki with an authoritative tone. Thus, her sexist behaviour is reflected which gradually changes. Rani realises that Janki is also oppressed like her.

Janki also faces the same problems and violence. She remembers her own past when she hears Janki's screams. Once Gulab steals the money from Rani's locker and she blames Janki for this act. At night when Janki asks Gulab about the money, he beats and rapes her. At this moment, Rani hears Janki's screams and recalls her own violent married life. She comes to the realisation that Janki is also facing the same violence. Then, she gets up and slaps Gulab. She aggressively reminds him that it is not his brothel where he can do this shit. After this Gulab leaves the house and warns that he will never return. After that, Rani and Janki have a conversation and Janki reveals her hidden intention to prevent her marriage with Gulab because she loves another boy who comes to see her. Janki tells Rani that she cut her hair short just to prevent her marriage. Thus, their relationship shows the process through which a sense of sisterhood emerges. They overcome their alienation by sharing their feelings, thoughts, and problems as well. Even they also go through hostility but later, things become clearer as it happens with Bijli and Rani. In the end, Rani helps Janki to get the desired bridegroom and to pursue her studies. Finally, she gets the desired love that other women still lack.

Lajjo and Rani are parched for love which they never get from their husbands. But they find it from the outside. Rani gets empathy from a person who once happened to call her by mistake. After this first call, he calls her frequently and Rani finds empathy from him which she desired from her husband. On the other hand, Lajjo also feels a lovely touch when she indulges in sexual activity with Bijli's boyfriend. When Bijli advises Lajjo to test her husband's infertility and provides her with an alternative, Lajjo discusses the matter with Rani and seeks her approval. Rani warns her against the possible outcomes and finally approves her act. Rani and Bijli help Lajjo wholeheartedly. This type of action shows the spirit of sisterhood. Apart from this, Janki also understands Lajjo's pain because she also encounters marital rape. These marital rapes act as a base for a bond between them. Janki tries to comfort Lajjo when she comes to their house after being beaten up by her husband. They could feel the pain of each other even without uttering a single word. Meanwhile, Rani reaches home along with Gulab. Rani and Gulab start fighting and Lajjo comes to know that Janki is also a victim of a bad marriage. After this, a sense of friendship starts growing between them.

The relationship among these four women is non-hierarchical. Nobody is superior to another. This non-hierarchical nature of relationships is the most prominent feature of the women's movement because it leads to a stronger solidarity that strengthens the struggle against male domination. In her book *Sisterhood is Powerful*, Robin Morgan also states that the women's movement is non-hierarchical where nobody is superior or inferior to others. Every woman is an expert in one or another of certain fields but nobody exerts her power on others. In the case of Rani, Lajjo, Bijli, and Janki, nobody is superior or inferior. Everyone is on an equal footing.

Although Rani is Janki's mother-in-law and is supposed to put control over her daughter-in-law, she acts contrarily. When Rani comes to realisation, she never blames or orders or speaks to her with an authoritative tone. In the end, Rani sets Janki free from the clutches of a bad marriage. On the other hand, Lajjo is an expert in embroidery and is selected as the best employee by the Handicraft Committee. She is also offered a permanent job along with bonuses. Thus, she becomes financially secure. Her financial status becomes stronger than her other three friends. But she never let it affect her relationship with her friends. Generally, it is the legacy of the common masses that a financially strong person is given an authoritative position. But on the contrary, Lajjo shares her achievement with her friends. Bijli, an erotic dancer, is represented as Rani, Lajjo and Janki's adviser. She possesses more knowledge about the newly emerging techniques. She advises Rani and Lajjo but never imposes her decision upon them, rather they discuss the matter among themselves. They take decisions collectively. For instance, Bijli provides Lajjo with an alternative to test her husband's infertility. On the surface, Lajjo's desires matter to this task. But Lajjo discusses the matter with Rani as well. Thus, they do not control each other rather they do things collectively.

These four female friends seek complementarity in each other as defined by Elizabeth Abel in her article "(E) Merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women." Complementary relationships encourage the differences between female friends. Complementary relations refer to a relationship or situation in which two or more different things improve or emphasise each other's qualities. Two people may possess different qualities but work together well and meet each other's needs. Such relationships increase satisfaction and lower conflicts. All of them, Rani, Lajjo, Bijli, and Janki are quite different from each other. They possess different personalities. Rani, who is fully devoted to her family and household, is shy and always fears society. She is always worried about what people will say. When Lajjo discusses with her the idea to test the infertility of Lajjo's husband, she says that they live in a society and they must live in the same society. That is why, she warns Lajjo about the possible consequences. On the other hand, Lajjo and Bijli are contrary to Rani. They are open-minded and do not care for society. They never miss the opportunity to enjoy their lives. Apart from this, Lajjo is an expert in embroidery, and Bijli is a dancer who does not involve in domestic life. Janki is a child bride who is very fond of reading. Thus, the four of them have different qualities but still work together very efficiently. They also face conflicts among themselves but these conflicts are minor or do not last for a long time. They are bonded together to attain their goal.

The movie also presents a contrary situation where a girl fails to escape from a bad marriage and patriarchal exploitation. On the other hand, a group of women becomes successful to get their demands fulfilled. This short scene represents the need, importance, and strength of the sisterhood.

This patriarchal system is so rigid that a single person cannot target it. Only collective efforts and solidarity would result. A girl from the village named Champa runs from her in-law's house and comes back to her parent's house in order to escape her bad marriage. When a panchayat is held to discuss her matter, she speaks boldly in her own defence. But she is instructed to be silent and to go back to her husband. She is sent with her in-laws forcefully. On the other hand, a group of women from the same village, culture, and class puts forward its proposal to launch dish T.V. in the village. They remain successful to launch it. Thus, this incident represents the strength of collective efforts. The Girl, who tries to fight alone, is repressed but a group of women becomes successful. These women come together and discuss the issues. That is why they remain successful. Rani, Lajjo, Bijli, and Janki also work together and get the desired liberation. All these women share their problems, difficulties, views, experiences, etc., and find that this is not an individual problem. And this commonness leads to a sense of solidarity and sisterhood. Through their shared experiences they also realised that the oppression at the hands of men was not an individual problem but a common factor in most of the women's lives.

The kind of sisterhood represented in the movie denotes that there can be a feeling of solidarity in diversity. The differences based on caste, class, profession, geography, etc. cannot stand in front of the sisterhood. Being sisters does not mean that they are anti to males, rather they fight against the practices or norms which are opposite to their well-being. These women are united by common beliefs and interests and struggle together to get liberation and end their oppression. Bell Hooks (1986) states:

Women do not need to eradicate differences to form alliances. They do not have to fight equally to end oppression. They do not have to be anti-male to bond us together. Women have a great wealth of experience, culture, and ideas to share with one another. We can be sisters united by common interests and beliefs, united in appreciation of diversity, united in the struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity. (Hooks, 1986, p. 65)

The ending of the movie is very symbolic which represents the success of these sisters. The day of the *Dussehra* festival is chosen to put an end to the story. This Indian festival is a symbol of victory of good over evil. All these women leave their oppressors behind after a great struggle on this day. The background voice tells the mythical victory of good over evil and in the foreground, these women leave their oppressors behind and finally get rid of the clutches of exploitation. The next morning, Rani, Lajjo, and Bijli are shown standing on a road which further leads to another two roads and they have a discussion to choose one road. These roads represent the multiple opportunities that these sisters have created for themselves with their collective efforts. Thus, the strength of the sisterhood can be sensed there which results in the multiple choices which were denied earlier to these women.

CONCLUSION

The movie *Parched* presents the idea of sisterhood and ultimately the improvement which occurs due to collective actions. The kind of sisterhood that these four women (Rani, Lajjo, Bijli, and Janki) are having exemplifies sisterhood at the micro level of daily life. Their target is not to change the whole system but to get freedom for themselves. They do nothing heroic which can lead to a drastic change in the whole village, rather they put their efforts to end each other's oppression. Thus, their struggle is not political or at the macro level but it represents the strengths and potentialities of the sisterhood to make improvements at the micro level. It symbolizes the possibility of improvement which could be gained through the collective actions of the women.

The friendship among these four women challenges the stereotypical legacy of one woman-hating another woman. They prove that women also take a stand for their fellow women and combat collectively. According to stereotypical assumptions, Bijli is a rival to Rani. The relationship between Rani and Lajjo is the best example to challenge this stereotypical legacy.

Apart from this, the movie represents that women must give up their own sexist behaviour in order to combat the oppressive system. Rani could not be friendly until she did not stop projecting Gulab's mistakes onto Janki. When she comes to the realization, she unlearns her prejudices against Janki and develops a friendship with her, and avoids passing on the traditional customs and legacies to her. Thus, it highlights that women must stop themselves from normalizing the so-called feminine roles or traditions.

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