

Power Dynamics Amongst Women: A Socio-Cultural Analysis

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Received: 17/05/2024,

Accepted: 25/05/2024,

Published: 30/06/2024

ABSTRACT: *This research paper examines power dynamics among women in select literary works through the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. Drawing on key texts that depict interpersonal relationships and social hierarchies among women, this paper explores how cultural capital influences the distribution and negotiation of power within female communities. By analyzing characters' access to cultural resources and their strategies for social mobility, this study elucidates the complexities of power dynamics among women and their implications for gender relations and societal structures.*

KEYWORDS : power dynamics, social hierarchies, cultural capital, social mobility, societal structures

RÉSUMÉ : *Cet article de recherche examine la dynamique du pouvoir parmi les femmes dans certaines œuvres littéraires à travers le cadre théorique du concept de capital culturel de Pierre Bourdieu. S'appuyant sur des textes clés décrivant les relations interpersonnelles et les hiérarchies sociales entre les femmes, cet article explore la manière dont le capital culturel influence la répartition et la négociation du pouvoir au sein des communautés féminines. En analysant l'accès des personnages aux ressources culturelles et leurs stratégies de mobilité sociale, cette étude élucide les complexités des dynamiques de pouvoir parmi les femmes et leurs implications sur les relations de genre et les structures sociétales.*

MOTS-CLÉS : dynamiques de pouvoir, hiérarchies sociales, capital culturel, mobilité sociale, structures sociétales

Introduction

Man is a social animal. This age-old, rather clichéd phrase is as relevant as ever. Human beings have always tended to live in groups characterized by their customs and beliefs. A conglomeration of small family units became a village/tribe, which collectively forms a geographical area, a country, with its ethnicity and unique socio-cultural fabric.

The very lifeline of the human-ness is human interaction, which is the basis for professional and personal relationships. Mature and philanthropic interactions result in decisions and plans for a bright future of a country and people, whereas a failure of it jeopardizes the blueprint for success. A very natural outcome of any human interaction at any level is characterized by an authority, a power. In any group of people, someone has or is imparted a position of authority. It could be a unanimous decision, a democratic election, or someone thrusting his or her dominance with a desire to dominate.

The need for a guiding hand for a group, as the head of the family or state coupled with the desire to lead humans, gives rise to power dynamics; in which individuals vie for the position of a leader, or thrust their dominance over others. The result of which could be both negative as well as positive. History is inundated with examples wherein individuals have used their position of power to act remarkably to serve people while others have struggled, intrigued, plotted, and even killed to be in a position of power. William Shakespeare's Macbeth is an example of unbridled ambition for power.

Robert A. Dahl, mentions:

What is power? Most people have an intuitive notion of what it means. However, scientists have not yet formulated a statement of the concept of power that is rigorous enough to be of use in the

systematic study of this important social phenomenon. Power is here defined in terms of a relation between people and is expressed in simple symbolic notation". (Dahl, 201).

Dahl further states;

First, let us agree that power is a relation and that it is a relation among people...let us call the objects in the relationship of power, actors. Actors may be individuals, groups, roles, offices, governments, nation states or other human aggregates. (Dahl, 203).

As elucidated by the comments mentioned above by Dahl, as a part of society when people interact, mingle, and live a life together, it's a very natural human tendency to be the decision maker or be an influencer. This trait is visible in the relationships between women too. The reasons could be varied, but usually, the ones involved in it have social or cultural backing. And the reasons sometimes have cultural associations. The "actors" as Dahl says are placed in a position of dominance that has a cultural backing.

Power Dynamics in the literary works

As has been mentioned above, "power" is a relation among people that becomes evident in the way individuals, groups, and nations interact and deal with each other. This study is to analyze the varied modes of relationship between women in which there is power dynamics, due to which one is dominating or attempting to have an upper hand over the other. This leads to a conflict or an unhealthy situation giving rise to the binary placement of the oppressor and the oppressed.

A Terrible Matriarchy (2007) by Easterine Kire draws attention to the relationship of a grandmother and her granddaughter wherein the former is making decisions for the latter. As the title of the novel suggests, it is the grandmother who is the matriarch and believes that girls are meant to be submissive whereas the boys ought to be given education and all the freedom. The granddaughter is courageous enough to face her grandma's brutal emotional cruelty and can join a college. *Dollar Bahu* (2003) by Sudha Murthy, deals with the life of a typical Indian household and the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law tussle. The mother-in-law Gauramma is more inclined towards her daughter-in-law who lives in the US, just because she earns dollars whereas the other daughter-in-law Vinuta is

side-lined in spite of the fact that she is the one who does all the chores and manages the household affairs. It is Vinuta who suffers because of her mother-in-law's greediness and materialistic attitude.

The Rule Breakers (2018) by Preeti Shenoy also portrays the relationship between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in a middle-class family. Veda, who is set up in an arranged marriage at the age of twenty, has to live with an indifferent husband and a difficult mother-in-law. Though Veda is a topper in her class, she fails in the final exam as most of her time is spent in cooking and cleaning. Veda's mother-in-law accuses her of bringing bad luck to them when her father-in-law dies of sudden heart failure. Veda experiences many injustices at her new home after getting married and goes through a few break downs but she stands up for herself and fights back with courage and confidence.

The same issue of power dynamics among women, especially mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, in the family is represented in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* (1999). It is the story of two girls, Anju and Sudha, who are born on the same day and are each other's constant companions. Both are inseparable but different from each other. Anju and Sudha get married on the same day but Anju shifts to the USA and Sudha lives in India. Sudha's life is not easy as she has to face a demanding and controlling mother-in-law. After five years of marriage, Sudha is happy to know that she is pregnant but her mother-in-law insists on aborting the child as she comes to know that it is a girl child. To protect her unborn child, she leaves her husband's home and returns to her parental home in Calcutta.

Starry Nights (1991) by Shobha De displays the relationship between mother and daughter where a daughter is pushed into the film industry by her mother. Amma is a strange character, who in hunger for fame and greed for money, sells her own daughter Aasha Rani's chastity. Even Aasha Rani's sister Sudha Rani sets against her to take away her position in the film world. Though Aasha Rani knows that Akshay Kumar is already married to Malini, she entangles herself in extra-marital relations. Thus a woman ill-treats, exploits, and tries to control another woman

instead of showing respect and mutual understanding for their gender in the society.

Snapshots (1995) by Shobha De is a story of Swati who is confident, financially and socially powerful, and manipulative from school days. She is socially tactful, and competent and tries to overpower other girls in her class. Swati is full of jealousy and hatred towards Aparna as she is elected as the most photogenic and best-looking girl. She deceives Reema by disclosing her secret relationship with a boy as she is more intelligent than Swati as well as she gets lead role in the annual school play. She humiliates Rashmi as she is an unwed mother due to her physical superiority. She manipulates and exploits Noor and Dolly who are simple and impractical. She hates Surekha as she has helped Dolly when she gets rusticated from school due to Swati. Thus Swati is a rival of her friends whom she tries to control and takes revenge on them and betrays the most trustworthy relationship of friendship.

Another novel of Shobha De that deals with the same issue of power dynamics amongst women is *Sisters* (1992), which delves into the love-hate relationship between two half-sisters Mikki and Alisha. When Mikkie's parents die in a plane crash, she becomes the heir to the mighty Hiralal Industries. As she steps into the maze of the business world, she comes to know of her half-sister Alisha, the illegitimate daughter of her late father. There is hate between them but because Mikki needs Alisha as she is the only family member, they do attempt to reconcile but the hate between them is evident.

Sense and Sensibility (1795) by Jane Austen represents the relationship between two women, Elinor Dashwood and Lucy Steele, both of whom are pursuing Edward Ferrars for marriage. Lucy's success lies in her shrewdness and affection. When Lucy discovers that Edward gets attracted to Elinor; she gets jealous and deliberately informs Elinor about her secret engagement to Edward. Lucy cunningly impresses Lady Middleton and Mrs John Dashwood by showing her affection towards their children. Lucy remains with Edward due to his future prospects. Mrs Ferrars disinherits Edward after knowing about his secret engagement with Lucy. Edward is ready to live in Delaford and marries

Lucy but she elopes and gets married to Robert Ferrars who has inherited Ferrar's estate.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) presents power dynamics amongst wives and handmaids in Gilead where wives have positional power over handmaids. Serena as a wife exerts dominance over Offred to remind her position in Gilead society. Handmaids are sent to a RAD center where they are processed by 'Aunts' who brainwash them in name of God and train them to give birth to the commander of the Republic of Gilead. If these handmaids make any mistake, they have to lose a body part. The novel displays the power struggle between wives like Serena who are barren and handmaids like Offred who are fertile.

The issue of power dynamics amongst women takes center stage in the novel, *Difficult Daughters* (1998) by Manju Kapur. The novel is a story of a woman Virmati, who is educated and wants to come out of her stereotyped role of women. She is the modern liberated woman desirous of following her heart. She falls in love with her neighbor, a professor, and a married man. Yet Virmati marries him, this brings pain and humiliation to the professor's wife. This book deals with the way women hurt and harm other women because of extra marital affairs.

All the literary works resonate with power dynamics among women. Each of the books shows how a woman is against another woman for at least some part of her life. Not that these women are without emotions, but due to their socio-cultural positioning or a deliberate attempt, are conflicted with each other causing suffering and pain to the other women.

1. Theory pertaining to power dynamics:

1.1. The Concept of 'Cultural Capital' by Pierre Bourdieu

Pierre Bourdieu talks about this concept in the chapter "The Forms of Capital" in the book *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* published in 1986 and edited by Richardson. Bourdieu explains that in order to understand the position of people in a society and the way they act and are looked upon by others, we need to study 'capital' in all its forms and not "solely in the one form recognized by

economic theory”. So we understand that ‘capital’ is not just ‘money’ or ‘monetary richness’. Bourdieu further states that capital is observed to function in three different ways;

a. Economic Capital- which is associated with monetary value, the monies and property rights are associated with this.

b. Cultural Capital- It means the assets that one possesses that are culturally accepted and acknowledged.

c. The Social Capital- which means the social connections. The stronger the social network, the more is the social capital. (Bourdieu 243).

Bourdieu further classifies ‘Cultural Capital’ into three types:

1. ‘The embodied state’, which he suggests is ‘long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body’.

2. ‘Objectified State’- in the form of cultural goods (books, artifacts, instruments, machines etc).

3. ‘Institutionalized state’- Things that are legally sanctioned and academically authorized. (Bourdieu 245-248).

It is noteworthy that for Bourdieu power and capital mean the same, as he has quoted “capital or power which amounts to the same thing” (Bourdieu, 243).

In this context, it would be pertinent to mention the views of Zander Navarro who endorses that an important concept introduced by Bourdieu is that of ‘capital’, which he extends beyond the notion of material assets to capital that may be social, cultural, or symbolic. (qt in Navarro,16).

Elucidating Cultural Capital, Webb, Schirato, and Danaher state: “A form of value associated with culturally authorized tastes, consumption patterns, attributes, skills, and awards”. (qtd in Xiaowei Huang 45). So we understand that Cultural Capital is one of the ways in which power in societal relations functions. As Gaventa states, “Cultural Capital provides the means for a noneconomic form of domination and hierarchy”. (Power after Lukes, 6).

All the above comments by prominent sociologists explain that an authority that an individual or group has, that is sanctioned culturally results in some kind of practices wherein they are exercising their control over others and the latter are in an uncomfortable position where they have to put up with aggression or domination. This notion is used to study the situations and circumstances of women who we find in the selected study, to be pitted against each other.

In the book Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu David Swartz mentions “Bourdieu proposes a sociology of symbolic power that addresses the important topic of relations between the culture, social culture and action”. (6, Swartz). As mentioned above the power dynamics that are exhibited in the selected books, have a basis in this ‘symbolic power’ which places one female over the other because the one is in a dominant position which is culturally accepted.

2. The concept of ‘Fields’ was propounded by Pierre Bourdieu

In the book Bourdieu’s Theory of Social Fields: Concepts and Applications, edited by Mathieu Hilgers and Eric Mangez, we find Bourdieu’s views on ‘fields’ which says:

the notion of the field presupposes that one breaks away from the realist representation which leads one to reduce the effect of milieu to the effect of direct action that takes place in any interaction. It is the structure of the relations constitutive of the space of the field which determines the forms that can be assumed by the visible relations of interaction and the very content of the experience that agents may have them. (qtd in Hilgers and Mangez, 1).

The editors further state that “for Bourdieu, a field is a relatively autonomous domain of activity that responds to rules of functioning and institutions that are specific to it and which define the relations among the agents” (Hilgers and Mangez, p 5). Bourdieu has taken a cue from this and taken this concept to mention the ‘field of power’.

It is not linked to a specific activity; it is the space of relations of force between agents or between institutions having in common the possession of the capital necessary to occupy dominant positions in the different fields (qtd in Hilgers and Mangez, p 8).

The above comments are an explanation of the concept of 'fields' which we come to know are abstract spaces wherein individuals or groups exercise their authority. For example, in the novel *Difficult Daughters*, the field is the man over whom the two women are contesting. Each believes she has the right to be with them – and each tries to overpower the other by influencing him more, hence the power dynamics arise between the two.

Swartz further states:

The focus of his work, therefore, is how cultural socialization places individuals and groups within competitive status hierarchies, how relatively autonomous fields of conflict interlock individuals and groups in the struggle over valued resources. (Swartz, p6).

Conclusion:

The exploration of power dynamics among women reveals intricate relationships shaped by cultural capital and societal expectations. Through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, this study elucidates how access to cultural resources influences the distribution of power within female communities. Across various literary works, we observe conflicts and hierarchies emerging from disparities in cultural capital, leading to struggles for dominance and control.

The analysis of selected texts highlights the multifaceted nature of power dynamics among women, reflecting broader societal structures and gender norms. From the struggles between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law in Indian households to the complex rivalries among friends and sisters, these narratives portray the intersection of cultural capital with gendered power dynamics. Characters' access to cultural

resources, such as education, social status, and familial connections, significantly influences their positions within social hierarchies.

Furthermore, the examination of power dynamics among women underscores the role of agency and resistance in challenging dominant narratives and oppressive structures. Characters like Veda in "*The Rule Breakers*" and Sudha in "*Sister of My Heart*" demonstrate resilience in the face of oppressive power dynamics, asserting their autonomy and challenging traditional gender roles. Through their narratives, these works offer insights into the possibilities for social change and empowerment within patriarchal societies.

In conclusion, the study of power dynamics among women provides valuable insights into the complexities of gender relations and societal structures. By employing Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital as a theoretical framework, we gain a deeper understanding of how cultural resources shape power dynamics and influence social hierarchies. Moving forward, further research in this area can contribute to broader discussions on gender equality, social justice, and the transformative potential of cultural capital in challenging oppressive systems.

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