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How Does the Labour of Women Unveil the Coloniality of Power? An Anthropological Context of the RMG (Readymade Garments) Workers of Bangladesh

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Abstract- The readymade garments workers in Bangladesh are the most important persons in the economy of Bangladesh. Without their contribution, we have not got the status of a middle-income country. There is a distinct similarity between the garment's workers and slavery in terms of the long work hours, wage gap, and curbing human rights. This research is focused on the relation between power and labor in the garment factory. So, this paper is based on the theory of 'Coloniality of Power' by Anibal Quijano (2000). It is investigating how the labourers have become modern 'slaves', how they are being treated, and how their flesh and blood are used to bear the practice of colonialism. This paper concludes with some recommendations for stopping this practice.

I. Introduction

Readymade garments workers are the main force for the economic growth in Bangladesh. The garments workers of Bangladesh are behind the billion dollars fashion industry worldwide. Unfortunately, they are the most neglected among the workers. Hundreds of workers have already died in different factory accidents in recent years, yet safety measures and safe work environments are not arranged for them. As three-fourth of the workers are women, they are the worst victims in case of accidents, pay-cuts, and low wage rates. There is a distinct similarity between slavery and the modern-day garments work and that is - both are initiated by Europeans in the global South. Exploitation on the cheap labour force can be explained through the coloniality of power. It is necessary to understand the anthropological context of the labour-owner relationship and the colonial behavior towards these workers. This research is going to explain the anthropology of the coloniality of power which is unveiled by the cheap labour force comprising mainly of women.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first one is going to elucidate the terms related to the essay, e.g. coloniality of power, modernity, etc., and some background information about the garment industry in Bangladesh. The second part is going to explain the literature review and theoretical framework of this essay and the third part is dedicated to the analysis of how women's labour is unveiling the coloniality of power. In regard to theories, this work is explained through the 'coloniality of power' by Anibal Quijano (2000). Besides, there is a partial explanation through the post-Fordist theory. This paper tries to understand the relation between women, labour, power, and their relation to coloniality.

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II. Objective

This research focuses on women garments factory workers in Bangladesh. When they start their work, they are very young, and they dedicate their whole life to making dresses for European companies. Unfortunately, when they retire due to their broken health or any accident, they are considered to be a burden for the factory. Even when they die by accidents like collapse of buildings, fire, etc. they become merely a number for the media. The factory owner, the state, and the global supply chains never take any liability for their families. History tells that the same thing happened with the slave system which was adopted by European colonizers in different parts of the world. They chose slaves based on their physical strength and when they became old, the colonizers tried to get rid of them, much like the garments workers. The colonizers tortured and killed them to get the wealth of their land. The modern system of garments follows a similar system like the slave trade and colonization. This paper is going through the neo 'slavery' system through garments factories and the relation of power and coloniality with the industry.

III. Definition of Terms

a) *Coloniality of Power*

Historical social identities have imported the idea of race and modernity in Latin America as Quijano (2000) explained. For their interest, the colonizers tried to distinguish people in terms of colour. The colour of one's body has become an identity. Based on race, colour, and identity the social power is distributed among people. It became a tool of exploitation. Besides, capitalism has only changed the form of control and exploitation between the dominant group and the exploited group.

In the light of 'Coloniality of power' Argentine Philosopher Maria Lugones (2016) has coined a new term 'Coloniality of gender'. She explained 'the coloniality of gender' through the division of power based on gender. This theory showed the practices and legacies the former colonies gained from their European

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colonizers and which they are still maintaining. And this legacy continues through multiple forms of social discrimination in every part of the colonies.

b) Traditional and modern societies

Modern means the time after the industrial revolution. Before that, the society did not depend much upon technology and science. There were mostly agrarian and village-based societies which are considered traditional. They were characterized by customs, collectivity, religion, behavioural norms etc. On the other hand, modern society is characterized by the decline of religion, consumption of commodities, the rise of scientific knowledge, etc. Modernity does not have a proper explanation. The examples and explanations are given by the scholars are mostly given through context and perspective. Appadurai (1996, p. 4-9) mentioned that modernity is quite a set of attitudes, technologies, and social forms that were enforced or associated through the Western Countries in the 20th century.

c) Garment industry of Bangladesh

The first garments factory of Bangladesh was established in 1976 after the independence from Pakistan in 1971. The expansion of the garment industry was fuelled in the 1980s which opened the door of foreign investment in Bangladesh. The export industry in Bangladesh is mostly based on ready-made garments. There are around 5000 garments factories currently operating Bangladesh. Three million people are working in this sector, where 85% of the workers are women. The buyers are mostly European and UK based companies ('Garment Industry', 2015)[1].

Bangladesh got international attention mostly based on the accidents in garment factories. Specially Tazrin Fire incident and the collapse of Rana Plaza had changed the industry and the life of the workers massively. On the 24th November 2012, a fire broke in a garments factory near the capital Dhaka, where around 120 people were dead and 200 were injured. These factories produced dresses for US Marines, Walmart (USA), C&A (Netherlands), etc. On 24th April 2013, a few months after the Tazrin Fire Incident, another factory near Dhaka collapsed due to structural failure. 1134 people died and more than 2500 people were left injured in this incident (ILO, no date)[2].

These two incidents made the government and the international workers' organisations think and create laws for the garments workers' safety and security. Besides, it led to international discussions of the corporate social responsibility of the global supply chains.

IV. Literature Review

Many works related to the coloniality of power can be found but none of them are focused on garments workers. There is a huge connection between the transition of capitalism, race, and the coloniality of power, as mentioned by Graeber (2006, p. 62), during the transition period of capitalism when reproductive and productive tasks are different. Capitalism has not only changed the system of works; it has also changed the mode of production. Besides, capitalism has made its way through Fordism and then post-Fordism. This capitalism and the way of post-Fordism are going to be explained through some literature on how women labour is revealing the way of the coloniality of power.

Ong (2010) explained about the spirit and resistance of Malaya women in different factories. She (p. 211-213) mentioned how Malaya women are taking the authority of renovating their life in this 'modern' time. How they have been coming out from their age-old tradition and working for them and their family. Capitalist development in Malaysia has brought some new changes in the life of Malaya women. They are facing changes in their cultural and social life.

The change in the agrarian society and the new industrial society has an enormous impact on the life of Malayan families, unlike the Bangladeshi garments workers' families. With the growing interest in feminism and the rise of the NGOs, it was obvious to bring women in the workforce. After World War II, European Women started working outside for money. During this period, there was a huge need for cheap labours, so, the unskilled and cheap labours of women helped the rise of the industrial revolution. Similarly, in Malayan society, women have to confront the industrial discipline and to serve as the new and smart slaves for the time they work in the factory. They alternate between the traditionalism (belief in spirit), and modernism.

Jha and Chakrabarty (2014) showed a 6-tier production process in an Indian garments factory that is supplying their products to GAP, where they mentioned the company has the authority to change their roles in this tier-based production system. or example, someone wants to work on sewing section as he/she is good at it but the officials think he/she might be good at washing, so they immediately send them to that section. By this time, the worker finds the work uninteresting, his/her passion for work becomes worse and she/he might get fired. That means the Fordist system is making the workers nothing more than slaves. So, the management has the supreme power to force someone doing any work against his/her will. Sometimes they force the workers to work overtime and sometimes they punish them by not giving their wages.

[1] http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Garment_Industry

[2] https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/geip/WCMS_614394/lang--en/index.htm

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Ong (2010, p. XV) argued about the resistance tactics of the traditional society and the spirit of the modern one. As here women's bodies are part of capitalism, she tried to show how the coloniality of power has changed its way through modernity. There is a link between the global value chain (GVC) analysis and the coloniality of power. Gradin (2016, p. 356-363) mentioned, GVC analysis focuses on the division of labour because for the global supply chains the rich countries perform the tasks which need higher technology and a large sum of investment, whereas poor countries perform lower paid and lower-skilled tasks. International Labour Organization (ILO) is not fulfilling their duties and the workers are fighting for social up-gradation of the labours with own resistance.

V. Theoretical Framework

This paper is based on Anibal Quijano's (2000) 'Coloniality of power'. Quijano explained the power and exploitation in the colonies, as he explained "with the emergence of America all the form of labour, production, and exploitation had changed, and they started to roam around the axis of capital." He later mentioned this structure of capitalism is based on power relations and hierarchy and racial supremacy. This can be found in the garments manufacture industry in how the supply chain of these industries is dominated and maintained by European and North American fashion companies.

The post-Fordist theory was designed by Henry Ford. Ford (cited in Jha and Chakraborty, 2014) described how the mass industrial production cycle became small production units and how the labour system is adapting to this process. But each and every production unit needs highly skilled workers. Wark (2006, p. 5) argued based on the post-Fordist theory in terms of garment industries. He mentions, the fashion garment industries need highly skilled workers. There is a monopoly system in this business which is based on cheap labour. They have secure manufacturing chain, high demand, secure revenue, and capital base. Post-Fordist economy transforms the production and social reproduction of the workers. This theory tells us how the workers are negotiating through this.

Santiago (2003, p. 53) connected the relation among race, labour, power, and their relationship with the post-Fordist structure. He explained that to make a profit, European countries are using the cheap labour of women by making them migrants and social nomads. For their interest, they are asking women to join the workforce in the name of gender equity and balancing their households. Both of these duties make women more vulnerable in the global south. They are becoming 'modern' slaves in the name of economic independence.

VI. Women Labour and Garments Factories

With the enormous growth of the population, the state needs lands to make accommodations for the entire population. In this case, the agrarian lands become smaller and the people in the village start to come to the city. This large population is being used for the sake of capitalism. Half of them are women, whom the state was not prepared to keep home for their household chores. Women are being treated as machines of cooking and bearing children. Since the 1980s, ready-made garments were the first industry allow a lot of women the opportunity to work. For religion and other social boundaries, women are bound to work at home. Kabeer (1995) pointed out the economic motivations of female garments workers. She showed two types of workers are working in the garment's factories, one is working for meeting the basic needs and the other for improving their lifestyle.

Bangladeshi women have long been restrained from working due to the conventional Islamic society of this country. In Bangladesh, Islam is the state religion and 92% of the population is Muslim[3]. Most significantly, for purdah (an Islamic lifestyle/fashion for women), women are not encouraged to go to work in the factories and offices with their male counterparts. However, with the economic pressure of living and the change in the Bangladeshi economic system women are brought forward with education and employment. The government of Bangladesh has made women's education free from the entry-level to the university. The employment opportunity gives them a chance to take decisions in their life, but still, they are under male domination, gender-based violence, etc.

Professor Heath and Mobarak (2014) found a systemic effect of the works in the garment's factories and the postponement of marriage and childbirth age. The researchers showed the impact of the RMG industry in contributing to women empowerment. This trend enforces Bangladeshi households to invest in their girls to get benefit from them. It could be viewed as a positive step towards women empowerment and equity. Still, women workers' rights are ignored. They face pay gap, sexual violence, labour rights violations, the burden of domestic works, etc. Maternity rights are sometimes ignored as well. As women are not skilled when they first start their work and they do not have much experience they could not be good at could not bargain their wages and job rules That is why the garments' owners can easily exploit them through wages, job security, and other systems.

This paper is analysed through three main findings based on Quijano's 'Coloniality of Power' and

[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Bangladesh

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Santiago's theory on 'Women, labour, and post-Fordism'. These findings are:

VII. Women and Resistance in Factories

Women from rural households are the main labour force of the garment industries. Karim (2014) explained, "A majority of the women who work in this sector are young, poor and from rural areas. Many are migrants who lost their homes and arable lands due to the constant river erosion in Bangladesh." These unskilled workers start their job in garments factories as helpers. Sometimes they are paid very little. Moreover, female workers are often paid less in factories than their male counterparts.

It takes time to be a machine operator in the factories, by this time in the post-Fordist structure of the factories, a person cannot be an expert in maintaining or working with all the machines. That is why he/she has to prove his/her expertise. So, they get a minimum amount that is not enough for supporting their family. To reduce the pay gap and get a better condition, women workers started to show resistance in Bangladesh. Some labour unions who are working on equal rights for men and women in different factories, always try to protest for an increase in the minimum wage or mitigate the pay gap (Elven, 2019)[4].

The citizens of Europe could help these women to get their decent payment by keeping pressure on the brand outlets, as they have done that in time of the Rana Plaza and Tazrin garments incidents. The retailers were pressurized by their nation and they started to work on workplace safety. Besides the resistance in the retailers' countries, women in the garments have start resisting on the exploitation they have to face every day. Dannecker (2000, p. 7-14) mentioned Josna who said she and her co-workers protested for a colleague who had not received money after being dismissed. Josna felt confident through her spirit of rebellion. These women mentioned they could not do many resistive activities through their union because most of the time their union's policy and agenda do not reflect their issues.

After the Rana Plaza incident in 2013, the movements against the owner of the building and their International Buyers united the workers, organized them, and incidentally, most of them were led by Bangladeshi women. Nagraj (2018) pointed out these women were fearful about losing their job, but they seemed more confident than ever. Muhammad (2013) explained the resistance of women workers about their pay raise and working atmosphere after the Rana Plaza incident. He mentioned, "In spite of living in a frustrating atmosphere, women workers' recent revolts have shown a sign that these workers have the potential to break this vicious chain of exploitation, and create a network of resistance, locally as well as globally".

VIII. Women and Domestic Spaces

It is hard for the workers to pay their food and rent besides sending some money to their parents or relatives in the village. Most of the garments workers are the main earning member in their family but they have to handle their domestic works as well. Kibria (1998) pointed out, either the departure of the male earning member or their unemployment has propelled women to start working in the garments factories. Several women also mentioned that they took the job because of the pressure of other family members. They have to cook for their family, take care of the children and the elders in the family, and even have to face domestic violence. But the garments workers get mental support from their co-workers which helps them to survive in these critical social atmospheres. Dannecker (2000, p. 7) mentioned a garment's worker Hazera, who had been beaten by her husband and then rescued and given shelter by her co-workers.

Female workers who came from the village to the city for their work face a lot of problems for housing, as the city's housing is quite expensive and most of their income goes to this portion. Absar (2002) included some researchers who have done extensive research on the housing of garment workers. Their studies show that accommodation in the city at present is not adequate for 1.5 million workers. The accommodation is not good for living, but they have to stay there because of poverty. They do not have private toilets or bathrooms to use, so they have to use shared toilets and bathrooms with other people in their accommodation. Moreover, drinking water is not very easy to collect in the city area, women have to collect the water. As they have to work a lot both in the factories and at home, they do not have much time to think about their health and wellbeing.

Transportation is another problem for these women. Bangladesh is not a safe country for women to commute in public transport. The rate of rape is quite high these days. However, to avail cheap transportation, these women are using public buses to go and return from their work, knowing it could be deadly for them.

IX. Labour and Coloniality of Power

The cheap labour of the female garment workers is the capital for the billion-dollar fashion industry, of which very little is being paid for the wellbeing of these workers. Centeno & Cohen (2010, p. 17) claimed that the global capitalist system is being governed by the North American and European set of rules which is the foundation of global capitalism. Sayer (1991) argued that capitalist agencies or the agencies led by the businessmen normally sets the regulations of society. One perfect example of this is the

[4] https://fashionunited.uk/news/fashion/police-clashes-with-garment-factory-workers-in-bangladesh/2019010940894

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recent lockdown situation in Bangladesh and the treatment of the garment's workers. In formulating the lockdown in case of Covid-19, the government declared general vacation for all of the workers. But one and half months later, the garment workers were forced to join their work. The government of Bangladesh did not intervene in this decision of the garment owners though it was not safe for the workers[5] (Ellis-Petersen & Ahmed, 2020). In Bangladesh, investors and the businessmen decide the rule of norms, investment goals, and profit targets, where they get the full support of the government. They just try to invest all their money in making the business grow. They are only concerned about their profits and never think about the wellbeing, mental health, or the minimum rights of the workers. Neve and Prentice (2017) pointed out the global retailers who have their factories in the low-wage countries always keep pressure on quality and speed, for that reason the local suppliers do not have the scope to think about the well-being of the labourers. As they got low wages, they cannot avail a nutritious diet and soon they lose their physical strength which leads them to unemployment even to death.

Muhammad (2013) pointed out most of the garments factories in Bangladesh are run by the local businessmen and the bourgeoisie, who demonstrate power and authority. They have a close connection to the government and hold political power. So, they can make any type of garments without maintaining any environmental standard or building code. The government keeps a good relationship with these businessmen, sometimes they donate a lot of money in the government fund, sometimes they invest their money in elections. Even they compete in election and become members of the cabinet or advisor to the Prime Minister. In the current cabinet there are 22 businessmen among the 47 cabinet members (Shovon, 2019)[6]. This is how the government has become a vital part of the capitalist and the colonial system. In this relationship of politics, power, and capitalism, the labour rights are always sacrificed without any second thought.

It can be realized that, the empowerment of rural, poor women is not just the way to gain gender equity, actually it is the way to enhance capitalism. Kabeer's (2011, p. 232) study clearly shows that the garment industries in Bangladesh "emerged in response to opportunities thrown up by economic liberalization and established its ability to compete globally through the employment of a flexible, non-unionized and largely female labor force". The female labours are exploited in the name of empowerment.

Before Rana Plaza Incident, there are very few women who are in the labour unions. They were not aware of their wages, duty hours, and rights. The trade union never takes any steps to make them conscious about their rights. The reason is thoroughly explained by Muhammad (2011), "during the early 80s, the World Bank's privatization project created a favorable environment for the government of Bangladesh to turn the trade unions into the tools of the ruling party making them alienated from the general workers in the context of corrupt practices of the union leaders and mistrust among workers against the leaders in the industrial sector" (cited in Sultana, 2015). This change has brought up a lot of differences in terms of labour rights movements. That is why there is no one to talk about the rights of the workers.

Rana plaza accident triggered all the problems the labourers were facing. The exploitation for the work hours, low wage, labour relations, safety standard, and the politics beyond capitalism. After all those accidents, and the national and international campaign, the major buyers agreed to pay the compensation, besides they are forced to check their local retailer's health and safety standard for their workers. But all of those were not agreed, some companies from the US stopped their relations with the Bangladeshi retailers and a lot of workers lost their job. The US companies moved to other low wage countries to exploit the workers in the name of capitalism.

Though their foreign counterparts are trying to compensate, the BGMEA (Bangladesh Garments Manufacturing Export Association) is still exploiting the rights of the workers. But the resistance of the workers from time to time could not let them continue the exploitation year after year. The death of the workers does not mean anything to the BGMEA, there is no trace of any dead worker in their website, no information at all. No database for the accidents, how the accidents happened, or what is the situation of the factories of factory owners now. They have become some numbers in their website, even the number is not close to the actual figure.

After the Rana Plaza accident, there is a lot of resistance in terms of wages and safety issues. These days, the workers have a certain level of education, so they understand their situation better than before. Women are speaking up against their European retailers, their local vendors, and global customers for their rights to live, equal pay, maternity leaves, etc.

As Quijano (2000) pointed out "in reality the slave owners, landlords, industrialists, merchants, bankers and professional have been a dominant coalition from the beginning". For Bangladesh, this coalition is maintained through politics, media, society, and business. That is why, it is quite impossible to resist

[5] https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/may/11/bangladesh-garment-factories-reopen-despite-coronavirus-threat-to-workers

[6] https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/government-affairs/2019/01/08/businessmen-dominate-new-cabinet

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and change the 'coloniality of power' in no time. But the resistance from the women workers after so many accidents, it shows a ray of light that the spell of the 'coloniality of power' might be broken through them.

X. Conclusion

The readymade garment workers are the 'slave' of the new capitalistic system where safety, dignity, and value of life are considered less important. Their physical strength is the only capital the capitalist society can use to gain more and more profits. Women are the worst victim in this case. While women lose the physical strength, the consumerist capitalist system does not want to take any responsibility for these workers. In a normal view, it seems like these garments factories are giving them the freedom for living their own life and financial independence. Their independence is materialized through the hard labour they are putting without thinking much about what they would do later. Their situation is quite similar to the colonized people who were under the rule of their kings, then the colonizers came and liberated them for their interest. Their liberalism is the new way to exploit them. Things will change soon with the education and economic prosperity of the labours who, now know how to speak up and talk against the 'coloniality of power'.

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