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RETHINKING GLOBALIZATION: EVOLVING A NEW CONSENSUS

After making a critique of globalization, the questions that one is faced with are: Is globalization a fait accompli, a triumphant inexorable march of capital or is it a socio-economic construct whose cultural preponderance can be questioned? If so, in denying the positives of globalization, are we in danger of reverting back to the pre-modern under-developed world? On the other hand, by extolling the virtues of globalization, are we endorsing a system of discrimination and exploitation? All these questions are staring us in the face.

Considering all perspectives of the issue, it cannot be denied that globalization has profoundly impacted the lives of many around the world, more so in the developing third world. Specifically, it has affected indigenous communities, poor women, tribals and minorities, and shaken up their centuries-old ways of existence. These groups of people have resisted the onslaught in their own ways with the limited means available to them. From the critical examination of the select autobiographical narratives of the four third-world women, it can thus far be deduced that global capitalism has led to massive social, political, cultural and ecological upheaval that has directly or indirectly impacted these women-protagonists.

Reading their self-narratives, many questions and issues have arisen: How has globalization affected these women? Is globalization as gender-neutral a process as it is made out to be? If not, how have these women been victimized and further marginalized by the machinations of global capitalism? Is their reverting to ritualization a means of coming to terms with the overwhelming changes taking place around them? Or is their subverting of oppressive forces by waging resistance movements and narrating their stories in memoirs and autobiographies, a waging of a bigger battle? By using “words” to express their personal experiences and innermost thoughts, do they seek to change the very ideology that works to marginalize them under the garb of global economic reform? These questions seem to have been answered to a great extent through a careful analysis of the four autobiographical narratives.

Globalization has impacted the lives of the four women-protagonists in different ways. Be it the political repression of Menchu’s community, the forcible confiscation of Janu’s tribal community’s forest land, the war-induced devastation of Riverbend’s Baghdad or the cultural and religious repression of Iranian women in
Ebadi’s conservative Iran, it cannot be denied that these third world women have been adversely affected and further marginalized by the manoeuvrings of global capitalism. But the significant fact is that they have voiced resistance against the different oppressions from their variously constituted contextual positions. Their memoirs and self-narratives have facilitated them in taking their life stories beyond the local to the global. The cross-border media attention that these *testimonios* garnered helped in putting national and international pressure on the oppressive local ruling elites in their respective countries, thus bringing some respite and justice for the beleaguered women and their communities. The use of technologies of globalization such as the internet and other mass media for expressing their resentments against neo-imperialistic and hegemonic forces has led to a reworking of the relationship between the subject and the object in significant ways. The women-protagonists have, thus, resisted the forces of globalization at various junctures from their specific local-bound positions.

Being the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, Rigoberta Menchu is steadfast in her commitment to fighting for social justice and democracy. She has founded the ‘Rigoberta Menchu Tum Foundation’ that provides support to Guatemalan people in terms of educational programmes, community development initiatives and defending human rights, especially of indigenous people. The Foundation serves many diverse cases ranging from helping people seeking justice for the victims of the genocide in Guatemala to coming to the defence of those who have suffered discrimination and racism. Menchu’s commitment to her country brought forth an active participation in the signing of the Peace Agreements in Guatemala between the United Revolutionary National Guatemala (URNG) and the Government of Guatemala. She has thus demonstrated leadership and stood at the forefront of social struggle.

C.K. Janu continues her struggle to get back the alienated land of the Adivasis and to protect the land that has already been assigned to them by the Kerala Government. She claims that, “It was the Muthanga agitation and its fallout that strengthened the political consciousness of the Adivasis . . . . My personal experiences have no relevance as they are part of a cause that highlighted the collective dispossession and deprivation of the hapless Adivasis” (Nazeer 5). Travelling extensively to different parts of the country and also abroad (In January 1999, she toured Europe as part of a delegation of the People’s Global Action Group and took
part in anti-globalization protests), Janu continues to spread awareness about the tribals’ cause and to garner support for it. Her peaceful protest movement has met with creditable success as nearly 10,000 Adivasi families have received land following the 2001 agreement. Over 4,000 hectares of land including the Aralam Farm land in Kannur district has been assigned to the landless Adivasis (Nazeer 5). The Tribal Mission Package announced by the Chief Minister A.K. Antony following the 2001 agitation was a major success for Janu.

Riverbend’s last reported blog entry reads “Bloggers without Borders” written on 22 October 2007 after which she stopped writing. This last entry was about her crossing over into Syria along with her family as refugees from Iraq. She records her first impressions of Syria as a refugee, “Syria is a beautiful country – at least I think it is. I say ‘I think’ because while I perceive it to be beautiful, I sometimes wonder if I mistake safety, security and normalcy for ‘beauty’”. It was a flight into safety after almost four years of suffering the ravages of war in Iraq. It is probable that because of security reasons and her status of a refugee in Syria, Riverbend stopped blogging. This parallels the fate of Iraq which is also marked by apprehension and uncertainty.

Shirin Ebadi continues her quest of bringing about reform in the rigid Islamic Law in Iran to make it more gender sensitive. Since receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003, she has lectured, taught and received awards in different countries. She has travelled extensively to various countries and spread her message of reforming the Islamic Law through ‘ijtihad’ or an intellectual and innovative interpretation of Koran. This, she believes, is the only way through which Islam can be made compatible with globalization. Yearning for independence and freedom to come to the Iranian people soon, Ebadi focuses on representing the weak — women, children, refugees and minorities against their oppressors. She has even taken on the cases of intellectuals, students and others who were targeted and condemned as counter-revolutionaries by the Islamic regime. Facing repeated threats to her life as well as her family’s, she doggedly marches on in her pursuit of justice and freedom.

The testimonios of the four women-protagonists have led to a successful bridging of the gap between theory and praxis. The literary and the social text meet to form socially and culturally relevant studies that hold immense use for the academy. Bringing activism back to theory is the creditable employment of these narratives. Marx proclaims in his *Theses on Feuerbach*: “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.” This change has to come
through radical action. Marx also asserts that “All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.” Marx calls for revolutionary action to change the existing power equations:

The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator must himself be educated. . . .The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.

(Theses on Feuerbach)

Positive and constructive change can be brought about by the collective effort of communities or groups of people who have been discriminated against. For the four women-protagonists in this study, their individual efforts did bring about change to some extent — an awareness of their different oppressions and mobilization against the same. In this, their autobiographical narratives proved to be very effective in terms of getting international attention that helped them further their causes. Marx’s emphasis on radical change that has to be brought about by revolutionary action is bound to be partially fulfilled as the proletariat is now in a much better situation, having formed trade unions and securing a certain level of living for itself. Rather, it is the lumpenproletariat that currently holds the potential for a really revolutionary class — Menchu and Janu being fitting prototypes of this class. It has to be kept in mind though that this change will not come overnight. Capitalism is now deeply entrenched in our lives and to think of completely doing away with it does not seem plausible at the moment. For the moment, it only makes sense that certain ways and means be found to make it socially, culturally and ecologically sustainable. Other non-capitalist ideologies can exist alongside, showing a mirror to capitalism so that it does not overreach itself till the time that a new idea or ideology emerges that will be capable of fitfully replacing the almost inevitable seeming doctrine of global capitalism.

In this context, Arundhati Roy has remarked that if national governments do not respect non-violent struggles, then violent protest movements will raise their ugly heads. Some have already. This is evident from the partial success of the long drawn-out non-violent Narmada Bachao Andolan in Gujarat (against the Sardar
Sarover Dam being built across the Narmada river) and the rise of the violent Naxalite movement in central India where villagers and locals in some parts of states like Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa have taken up arms to express their anger and resentment against governmental apathy towards their poverty and lack of equity. The natural resources that they depend on for their livelihood are mostly under the control of the local ruling elites who are complicit with national and international corporations. To avoid this kind of degeneration into violence, governments need to pay attention to the peaceful protest movements such as those led by women like Janu and Menchu. These subalterns speak ‘truth to power’ and fight for their cultural survival.

In economic terms, globalization has “unleashed market forces that by themselves are so strong that governments, especially in the developing world, often cannot control them” (Stiglitz Making Globalization Work 20). Trade liberalization has not led to equal growth everywhere. The main reason is that international trade agreements have often been unbalanced. The advanced industrial countries have been allowed to levy tariffs on goods produced by developing countries that are about four times higher than those on goods produced by other advanced industrial countries (15-16). Also, while developing countries have been forced to abandon subsidies to their nascent industries, advanced industrial countries have been allowed to continue their own enormous agricultural subsidies, thus pushing down agricultural prices and undermining living standards in developing countries (16). These gross discriminatory policies of the developed first world led the IMF itself to concede in 2003 that “for many developing countries, capital market liberalization had led not to more growth, just to more instability” (16).

The Washington Consensus which advocated rapid trade and capital market liberalization in the 1990s lost its currency by the early years of the millennium. Instead, there is a “post-Washington Consensus consensus” that criticizes the Washington Consensus for having ignored issues of “equity, employment and competition, to pacing and sequencing of reforms, or to how privatizations were conducted” (Stiglitz 17). The former also criticizes the latter for focussing too much on just increasing GDP and ignoring the sustainability of growth. Free-fall liberalization led to short-term high growth rates in many developing countries but ignored the long-term economic, social, political and environmental sustainability. For instance, countries like Argentina that got A+ rating from the IMF for following
the Washington Consensus precepts experienced high growth rates for a few short years only to later face calamity — Argentina’s debt crisis at the end of 2001 was the worst in history (17).

A lack of transparency in the workings of international public institutions like the IMF and World Bank has led to a “democratic deficit” and increased the “dangers of unilateralism” (Stiglitz 18). Problems of governance in these institutions are leading to a lack of legitimacy and undermining their efficacy. Transparency and more openness are required in the procedures of these institutions. Increased accountability, better judicial procedures, better enforcement of the rule of law and enhancing the ability of developing countries to participate meaningfully in decision making are some other reforms that are imperative to making their functioning more democratic (283-4). For this, changes in the voting structure at the IMF and World Bank are required to give more weight to the developing countries. Till now economic power of countries has been determining the outcomes of various decisions taken by these institutions.

A commitment by developed countries to a fairer trade regime that would actually promote development, a new approach to intellectual property, promoting of research and innovation, respecting the rights of the developing countries to have their traditional knowledge protected, a commitment by the developed countries to pay the developing countries fairly for their natural resources so as not to leave behind a legacy of environmental degradation, a renewal of the commitments already made by the developed countries to provide financial assistance to the poorer countries and reforms of the global financial architecture are some of the solutions posited by Joseph Stiglitz to improve the current situation (Making Globalization Work 285-6). There is also no direct relation of multi-national corporations single-mindedly maximizing their profits and resulting in social welfare. Instead, to achieve economic efficiency, corporations have to take into account the effects of their actions on their employees, the environment and the communities in which they operate (190).

Marx forewarned in his writings that under the capitalist mode of production there would always be the persistent threat of the commoditization of man. This would result in the dehumanization of man and his turning into a commodity himself. This prophecy has come true today as global capitalism has not just lead to
commoditization of man but a recommoditization that is as fast as the recycling of products that goes on in the factories. Marx’s words hold true today:

Production does not simply produce man as a commodity, the human commodity, man in the role of commodity; it produces him in keeping with this role as a mentally and physically dehumanized being. – Immorality, deformity, and dulling of the workers and the capitalists. – Its product is the self-conscious and self-acting commodity ... the human commodity. (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts 36)

He criticizes private property as the underlying cause of the misery that ails human society. Making an anti-thesis to private property, he writes, “This material, immediately perceptible private property is the material perceptible expression of estranged human life. Its movement – production and consumption – is the perceptible revelation of the movement of all production until now, i.e., the realization or the reality of man. Religion, family, state, law, morality, science, art, etc., are only particular modes of production, and fall under its general law. The positive transcendence of private property as the appropriation of human life, is therefore the positive transcendence of all estrangement – that is to say, the return of man from religion, family, state, etc., to his human, i.e., social, existence” (Manuscripts 44). This ‘re-humanization’ is the required and urgent change that has to take place today. It is a reclaiming of the human being’s natural state — also a return to Nature that will take it back to the unifying, creative and positive state of being one with Nature again. This will also be a reclaiming of the feminine principle that Vandana Shiva argues for so vehemently. A re-connection with Nature and returning of the respect and sanctity towards it is imperative for humankind to stop the destruction of Nature and the degradation of human society.

Marx had given out the ideology of Communism as the solution to the problem of private property. He wrote, “In order to abolish the idea of private property, the idea of communism is quite sufficient. It takes actual communist action to abolish actual private property. History will lead to it; and this movement, which in theory we already know to be a self-transcending movement, will constitute in actual fact a very rough and protracted process. But we must regard it as a real advance. . . .” (Manuscripts 53). As history proves, this ideology of Communism did not provide a
tangible, lasting and universally accepted solution. Rather, it faced active resentment and resistance from most of the developed western world.

The paradigm of ‘ownership of property’ that has become an inalienable part of the globalization discourse has only strengthened patriarchy and further weakened the position of women in society. The raw analysis put forth by Engels regarding passing of private property as inheritance via the male line resulting in the subordination of women can thus be further built upon by the re-examination of the relationship of ‘ownership of property’ and the status of women in the context of a globalized world. When patriarchy as the “oldest of oppressions” (Shiva, Staying Alive 3) came into contact with the nineteenth-century industrial capitalism, it led to a deterioration of women’s situation. But in a globalized world that is seen by many as the age of ‘extreme capitalism’, the situation of third world women, especially poor, indigenous, tribal and minority women has further deteriorated (as has been explicated in the previous chapters). And in this worsened condition, the ‘ownership of property’ is both a major cause and effect. Owning/possessing property means depriving a certain section of society of its basic source of livelihood and survival. Accumulation of property and thus capital by one is the simultaneous deprivation of another, resulting in the tilting of power hugely in the former’s hands. This unequal balance of power is deliberately maintained by the ruling class by accumulating more and more property, thereby exerting its dominance and hence hegemony. It only points to the fact that capitalism caters to the perverseness in human nature by creating an unequal society that favours the disposseors over the dispossessed. The situation of women, especially those belonging to the lower strata, becomes more precarious. Their dependence on men increases as survival on their own becomes more and more difficult as the subsistence economy of women is replaced by the profit-based economy of men where owning property is almost a pre-requisite for any kind of business venture and hence, wealth accumulation. It is only right to say that just as ‘capital’ displaced ‘labour’ as the ruling metaphor of the globalized world, so a value-based, ethically-strong ideology has to replace ‘capital’ in the post globalization world. If economists are to be listened to, then capitalism has to refurbish itself again. But the field lies open for other non-capitalist ideologies to fill the ever-increasing void and to lead the world onto a better future for the human race.
“The vigour of American capitalism and its innovativeness spring from its pitiless rejection of failed men and women,” writes Nihal Singh (“Wall Street Protests”). This condemnation of those who do not fit into the straitjacketed confines and standards of the rich and the successful is now being looked upon by the American people themselves with decreasing conviction. They are realizing that hardcore capitalism that glorifies only the success stories of some people and leaves the ‘not-so-lucky’ others with feelings of frustration, inadequacy and low self-esteem has stopped working the way it was supposed to. The recent Wall Street protests are an indication of this doubt that has crept into the minds of the American people as to the supremacy and finality of capitalism as the best available system. They are instead demanding a re-furbishing of capitalism to include better social security and welfare mechanisms for the less privileged ones. In this context, the social democratic system of the Scandinavian countries or the Nordic model is one of the most humane forms of capitalism existing today. This ‘welfare capitalism’ emphasizes on an elaborate social safety net in addition to public services such as free education and universal healthcare, maximum labour force participation, promoting gender equality, egalitarianism and low levels of corruption. This socio-economic model is then one of the more socially viable forms of capitalism that can be emulated by other countries also.

Bauman’s words serve as a stark reminder of the present human predicament in the globalized world and warn us that until and unless, strong, focused and positive actions are taken both at the highest level of decision-making and at the level of the aware citizenry, the future of humankind will be ridden with problems that might soon become irreparable:

The new individualism, fading of human bonds and wilting of solidarity are but one side of the coin whose other side bears the stamp of globalization. In its present, purely negative form, globalization is a parasitic and predatory process, feeding on the potency sucked out of the bodies of nation states and their subjects. Society is no longer protected by the state; it is now exposed to the rapacity of forces it does not control and no longer hopes or intends to recapture and subdue. (“The Demons” 15)
This scenario of human society marked by insecurity and fear has to give way to a world that is characterized by less violence, injustice and misery. The crisis of liberal capitalism or hyper capitalism evident in the high level of social disquiet sweeping the advanced economies of the west in the present times compels a justification of capitalism in terms of social gains. The protests taking place in the west that are as yet inchoate, along with the various resistance movements of the marginalized in the developing world, demand a new discourse to sustain humanity in the post globalization world. The evolving of a new consensus that is marked by inclusion, tolerance and justice is the challenge which faces humanity in the present times.