EMANCIPATION SERVED HOT:

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF GRASSROOTS FEMINIST ACTIVISM IN INDIAN AND KENYAN TEA PLANTATIONS

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Introduction

Despite the gradual erosion of its colonial empire following World War II, Britain still sought to maintain its control over foreign land and labour in its South Asian and African colonies (Rappaport 343). Thus, India and Kenya, two of the largest global tea exporters, became a centre for Indian and Kenyan nationalist movements as they attempted to reclaim the agricultural sector that the British East India Company and the Imperial British East Africa Company helped pioneer (Rappaport 336). Still, post-colonial theory has scarcely compared the historical similarities in India's and Kenya's post-colonial agricultural economies. More specifically, post-colonial theory has yet to employ a feminist lens recognizing the substantial role women's labour played in shaping the post-colonial Indian and Kenyan agricultural economy.

Correspondingly, this research constructs a comparative analysis of the influence that British colonial rule had on the sexual division of labour in Indian and Kenyan tea plantations. More specifically, this paper argues that an analysis of the rural feminist activism that arose as a result of this marginalization is most conducive to addressing India and Kenya's gender rights development. To build this argument, a comparative analysis on the influence of colonialism on the sexual division of labour in each country's tea production will be undertaken. This will lead to an exploration of how marginalization lies at the basis of feminist organizations. Next, a comparison of the Indian and Kenyan legal frameworks addressing gender rights will connect to my analysis of rural women's political organization. This will reveal that it is rural women's mobilisation, rather than policy recommendations, that have actually impacted the development of India and Kenya's gender rights.

Literature review

Marxist feminists' examination of women's unrecognized labour is a major theoretical field that situates the first half of research. Nancy Hartsock's view of feminist standpoint theory significantly guides my analysis of the causal relationship between labour and socio-political mobilization. Hartstock posits that the structures that have defined women's activity should be at the basis of a feminist historical materialism (Hartsock 292). Furthermore, in the context of my research, Hartsock's terminology referring to a "sexual division of labour" rather than a "gendered division of labour" will be employed (293)[1]. This term more accurately encompass-

1 A separation of biological forms of labour compared to socially imposed ones is situational, and is less applicable in feminist analyses of topics including emotional labour, prostitution, and sexual harassment: topics which include both cisgender and transgender women.

es the additional work of childbearing that many rural women must perform without the accommodations (ie, paid maternity leave, daycares, nannies, etc) that many women in urban settings have access to.

Nonetheless, Marxist feminist theory struggles to address how feminist ideologies are adapted to the postcolonial era (Hartsock 294). The entrance of former colonial economies as autonomous actors in international politics has encouraged many states to address women's newfound roles in a globalized world. Yet despite India and Kenya participating in symbolic feminist conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (Chhichhia 2), sexual inequality within the agricultural sector remains persistent in both countries. Therefore, this paper expands Hardstock's "feminist standpoint" to explore how the all-encompassing idea of "women's labour" actually depends on contextual circumstances, that being the agricultural labour in the post-colonial era, in this context. This research aims to shed light on these blind spots to outline how rural women's labour has been foundational in the development of the post-colonial Indian and Kenyan socio-economic and legal frameworks. To achieve this aim, a comparative analysis of the existing research done by Supurna Banerjee on women's roles in the Daahlia plantation in India, Rayah Feldman's study on women's socio-economic position in Kenyan agricultural production, and Bandini Chhichhia's comparison of India and Kenya's gender rights laws will be examined.

Women's introduction into the agricultural sector under colonial rule

In both the Indian and Kenyan cases, perceptions of "gendered work" heavily mirrored the British metropole's stark sexual inequalities in the workforce: women historically performed unpaid domestic labour, whereas men took on more "physically demanding" forms of paid labour. As many Marxist feminist theorists, such as Nancy Hartsock, have observed, this household labour in practice manifested twofold: women were responsible for reproducing human beings and thus labour power, while also bearing the responsibility of producing goods (Hartsock 295). British colonies extrapolated these multifaceted forms of labour, where the surplus of labour and goods was essential for the colonial empire's maintenance. Consequently, while sexual divisions of labour existed in pre-colonial India and Kenya, British colonial rule institutionalized this social structure in the agri-

cultural sectors. In colonial India, the British encouraged family recruitment in tea plantations, and women became an additional cheap labour force, subject to abuse and intimidation (Banerjee 7). In Kenya, however, while women in pre-colonial societies carried out the same tasks in the agricultural sector, the commercialization of the colonial tea enterprise has placed men alone as the key income earner in the household economy, pushing women into the roles of reproductive labour. While women still do participate in cash cropping, this form of labour is often not sufficient to support themselves independently (Feldman 71). In both countries, colonial rule solidified the family structure as a key component needed for women's survival. Hence, fixed family structures were ultimately entangled with women's economic activity, reducing their own financial independence.

The first example of the sexual division of labour in a former British colony can be seen in Indian tea plantations. Ethnographic research conducted by Supurna Banerjee in Daahlia, a tea plantation in Dooars, India, between 2010 and 2012, found that women on the tea farms occupied more hands-on tactile positions, such as plucking and pruning, where they directly interacted with tea crops in the garden. This sexual separation extended to other facets of daily life, as most women also tended to their families by cooking, cleaning, and undertaking house chores (Banerjee 92). Even though the domestic and agricultural work women performed required much precision, concentration, and patience, the women who performed this labour fell victim to two forms of marginalization explored in Hartsock's analysis. Firstly, women's labour was considered less demanding compared to the jobs reserved for men, such as wielding machinery, which was regarded as "specialized" (Banerjee 122). Moreover, many women in the Indian agricultural sector faced unequal access to land rights and struggled to obtain credit from financial institutions and agricultural co-operatives (Chhichhia 5). Although these women were waged labourers, they faced a double exploitation, where both their unpaid domestic labour and insufficient compensation for work in agricultural plantations went undervalued.

In Kenya, the lingering influence of the British-imposed sexual division of labour occurs through the increased dependence women have on male incomes, despite their active role in agricultural enterprises, such as tea farming. Although women have historically been involved in agricultural labour,

the colonial commercialization of the rural economy—Kenya's tea economy in particular—intensified the gendered inequality seen in rural plantations (Feldman 71). Following colonialism, the Kenyan government aimed to sustain its agricultural growth from the colonial era, and this was achieved by encouraging smallholder tea production; projects which eventually led to the state accounting for 11% of the world's exports by 1983 (Rappaport 344). However, while women play an increasingly significant role in both subsistence farming and farming cash crops such as tea, only 5% of Kenyan women in rural areas own land in their name (Feldman 71). Tea farming is also Additionally, most rural women do not receive material compensation for their work in commercial farming, and men are often the sole recipients of income from cash crop farming (Feldman 67).

How Women Challenge the Sexual Division of Labour in Indian and Kenyan Tea Production

When extending an analysis of the feminist standpoint to the post-colonial era, it becomes evident how the collective experience of sexual subjugation in tea plantations actually encouraged a new form of socio-political mobilization. As much of women's work in Daahlia was performed in open spaces such as the gardens, women were under close supervision from employers, and could only find moments of privacy during their breaks. During this time off, women would go to bushes where they could share food and discuss their lives (Banerjee 121). Most importantly, these spaces allowed women to share critical socio-economic information relating to job applications, before poverty line cards, and methods of resistance against unfair treatment (Banerjee 122). As women's pay was based on the weight of the leaves they plucked, Banerjee cites an example of women in the plantations refusing to weigh their leaves after a new manager arbitrarily deducted the weight from women's totals. This act of collective civil disobedience was central to the push for greater rights in Daahlia. As the state was viewed as a distant entity, women had to directly confront and challenge the managerial class in the plantations (Banerjee 160).

Similarly, in Kenya, many women's groups supported by the Kenyan Women's Bureau in 1976 arose from the recognition of women's common subaltern position in the agricultural sector Feldman outlines how these groups' objectives were, "(a) to achieve social welfare functions and (b) to implement [women's] commercial [farming] projects" (68). This distinct Bureau aimed at

addressing women's grievances and was crucial to the advancement of gender rights in the country. As Kenyan women faced difficult entry into governance, solidarity groups were the most prominent forums in which women could work towards achieving desired changes; with most rural women belonging to some sort of mutual aid society or communal agricultural group (Nzomo 238). Hence, in both India and Kenya, the neglect and denigration of women's labour stood at the basis of collective organizations aimed to reform their socio-economic conditions.

The self-improving goals of the Indian and Kenyan feminist mobilization in tea plantations could be linked to critiques of labour unionism, which stipulate that trade unions simply maintain the working-class' marginalised position within capitalist systems rather than undertaking revolutionary change. In the Indian and Kenyan cases, the benefit of women's organization was restricted to the spatial and material circumstances of the women who worked on certain plantations, rather than the position of female labourers within the wider Indian and Kenyan agricultural sectors. This was evident in India as the women in tea plantations primarily protested against their supervisors, and in Kenya, where Feldman argues that women's groups only target individual grievances rather than undergo structural change (Feldman 76).

Yet, while cognizant of the importance of structural change for women's subaltern roles in the agricultural sector, this critique still relies on two assumptions that do not align with the contexts of the Indian and Kenyan tea plantations. Firstly, this form of rural mobilization does not correspond to urban trade unionism, which attempts to negotiate workers' conditions with the capitalist class: the owners of the means of production. Contrarily, rural mobilization in India served to educate women on the methods to alter their disenfranchised positions in society, and in Kenya, it aimed to upturn societal structures that institutionalized women's subordination. Both of these divergent methods still converged in their goals, which were to provide women with the tools to redefine their positions in agriculture and strive for financial autonomy. Secondly, and most importantly, utilizing Marxist critiques of labour unionism—critiques which are often formulated in the contexts of a male, European urban proletariat—produces an epistemic violence, conceptualised by Gayatri Spivak, where "identifying with forms of resistance plausible in advanced capitalist countries [becomes] a piece with that elitist bent of bourgeois historiography." (Spivak 83). The assumption

that political projects in Global South countries should follow the same trajectory as their former colonial powers erases these countries' unique histories and fails to construct a meaningful political project informed by colonialism.

Comparative Case Studies: The development of legal gender rights in India and Kenya

To get a clearer picture of the need for grassroots organizations by rural women in India and Kenya, Bandini Chhichhia's legal case study comparing state initiatives for gender rights will be analyzed. To determine the status of gender rights in post-colonial societies, Chhichhia used primary sources and literature review comparing India and Kenya based on their shared British colonial history, common law and legal system, and current demographics, where 62 percent of Kenyan women lived in rural areas as of 2000 and 71 percent of Indian women as of 2012 (Chhichhia 1). Based on these similarities, Chhichhia compared and contrasted each state's gender rights framework in relation to India and Kenya's 2005-2006 reports to CEDAW (Chhichhia 2). In India, four key legal institutions address gender, namely: the Department of Women and Child Development (DWCD), the National Commission for Women (NCW), the Parliamentary Committee on the Empowerment of Women (PCEW), and the Inter-Ministerial Committee (Chhichhia 3). Contrarily, in Kenya, the National Gender and Development Policy acts as a catch-all instrument that addresses economic, social, legal, and other gender-related problems (Chhichhia 3). As argued in Chhichhia's analysis, the decentralization and division of tasks in India's various gender institutions are more conducive to addressing specific gender rights. This result was compared to Kenya's overly burdened NGDP, which, through mainstreaming gender into other socio-economic and political causes, fails to address the complexities that exist within gender related causes (Chhichhia 5). This argument has been conceptualized by various scholars within gender and women's studies, such as Joan W. Scott's "Gender as Useful Category for Historical Analysis," where she claims that gender not being understood as its own distinct category but rather as a subset of other fields in critical theory, leads to universal and descriptive accounts of what gender is (Scott 1064). This use of gender fails to provide analytical accounts of the impacts of gender categorizations, and, in regard to the case study of Kenya, does not account for how "gender" has been instrumentalized in the post-colonial context to

deprive women of a means of income (Feldman 67).

However, despite the relevant analysis on how states can further comply with international norms to promote greater gender equity, Chhichhia's focus on the legal structures to determine the success of gender rights still relies on an external assessment of feminist issues, rather than centring the very women aimed to benefit from gender rights. Chhichhia mentions how CEDAW reports for the development of gender rights in both states, "have repeatedly cited anachronistic socio-cultural norms as the main hurdle to improving the status of women and securing compliance" (Chhichhia 5). Yet, the notion of jumping "the hurdle" of socio-cultural norms once again is another instance of epistemological violence where one-dimensional analyses of gender development and equality is determined by global hegemons. Here, "progress" is not context dependent, but rather a generalized amalgamation of international norms (Chhichhia 2). This issue is particularly relevant to the cases of rural women in India and Kenya, who, as previously mentioned, viewed the state and subsequently, its legal provisions, as a distant entity. Thus, Scott's perspective of gender as an aggregate of ideas that shape a society's views and not as a universal metaphysical concept (Scott 1067) becomes increasingly relevant to the case studies examined. Therefore, rather than ignore cultural contexts, legal norms outlining the "progress" of gender rights in rural areas are best addressed when determined by actual rural women, as seen with the women's organizations in Indian and Kenyan tea farms, which focused on the independence and agency of female tea farmers. Overall, while Chhichhia's argument commends India's various areas of gender sensitive institutions compared to Kenya's catch-all gender organisations, in both cases, rural women fail to be at the forefront of real structural change; an issue which has impeded these legal organisations' ability to actually introduce substantial material changes in the condition of women.

Conclusion

Gender rights in rural tea plantations in India and Kenya deconstruct the systematic categorization of women as subaltern in socio-economic change. In both countries, women's complete agency in political mobilization, the proliferation of financial information, and the development of agricultural initiatives by and for rural women have been at the forefront of improving rural women's conditions and access to income for their labour.

Through examinations of the relationship between labour, activism, and the dissonance these interlocking features have had with legal structure, this research emphasises why a bottom-up approach to socio-economic development is necessary in creating an equitable, post-colonial society. This focus on grassroots activism is additionally important when constructing a post-colonial feminist analysis on political economy. This research forms a distinct context-dependent analysis on labour and activism while being critical theories based on European stages of development, ones that are not easily transferable to other regions. This analysis is also cognizant and critical of legal theories which rely on international norms and customs rather than local contexts to address domestic conflicts.

Despite underscoring the importance of theoretical lenses prioritizing women's labour, agency, and epistemologies, the case studies in this research mostly utilized secondary sources and data. Correspondingly, ethnographic research conducted through interviews, observation, focus groups, and field studies in Indian and Kenyan plantations could reveal a more comprehensive analysis of the politics in contemporary tea plantations.

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