

The themes of  
sexism and classism  
in daughter of earth:  
freedom is higher  
than lo...



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The narrative of the novel *Daughter of Earth* by Agnes Smedley follows the coming of age story of Marie and her struggle against the almost overpowering social forces of both sexism and classism to find her own sense of self-respect and autonomy. She is both influenced and deeply scarred by these forces as she pulls herself up the social ladder of class mobility through the power of education, determination, and sacrifice. Marie is able to make the connections between the personal and the political and, in the end, she chooses freedom over love.

Marie's parents represent the issues of sexism and classism enacted on a personal scale. Their powerlessness and unhappiness become an excuse for abusing one another. During this time Marie not only becomes emotionally scarred, losing her ability to love and trust, but she also learns "the shame and secrecy of sex...that male animals cost more than female animals and seemed more valuable"(15). When her brother George is born her father is so happy to have a son, but he tells Marie to go away leaving her with the impression that "there seemed something wrong with [her]...something too deep to even cry about" (16). Once the family is in town it becomes apparent to Marie that education is the only way to pull herself up out of poverty as "high school and riches seemed to go together" (50). Within the school setting she learns that people from other classes have different standards and experiences. When she steps inside the white middle-class girl's home for a birthday party she is not only completely out of her element but she is shamed and shunned by the other children. The very poor Marie has brought "at great sacrifice... three precious bananas" as a gift but when she sees

what the other children have brought, and the opulence of the house, she is humiliated (54-5).

This class humiliation is coupled with Marie's aunt Helen coming to live with the family demonstrating to Marie the way in which sexism and classism interact. Helen is a working woman and as such has stepped into the traditional masculine role of bread-winner. This gives Helen a "position of authority and influence in the community" (28). Marie's father starts to resent Helen's money seeing it as taking away from his authority and power as head of the house. The same situation is happening also to their neighbor Gladys. Her husband forces her to quit her job after they are married saying he does not want her to "gad about the streets and stick your money under my nose ...[and] leave my house!" (72). When Marie overhears the husband threatening to take back the clothes off his wife's back and Gladys crying and saying how much she loves him, it is in this moment that Marie realizes that this is the "source of [her] hatred of marriage and [her] disgust for women who are wives [as this scenario demonstrates] the true position of the husband and wife in the marriage relationship" (73). It is the grotesque imbalance of power, coupled with women's double burden of economic inequity and the vulnerability of motherhood, which Marie rages against.

The second part of the novel expands outward taking the issues of sexism and classism outside the home and into the workplace. Smedley shows the deep connection between classism and sexism as well the way in which systematic oppression works. As a metaphor for the power imbalance that Marie has witnessed in the marriage relationship so too the workers at the mine for the Company are cast as the oppressed "female" while the

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Company is put into the role of the oppressing “ male” who holds all the power. The Company owns and runs the store which provides all of the food and clothing for the workers, it also owns the housing and the saloon where the workers have to pay for their accommodations and entertainment. Not only is there no other source of livelihood for the workers but they are not even paid in real money. They are paid in script which is issued by the Company and they have no choice but to spend it at the Company owned store and saloon. Just as a woman without money had few options other than marriage so too the workers have no other option but to work for the Company. Similar to the life of a wife, the people’s “ existence meant only working, sleeping, eating what or when you could, and breeding [... and] in the end we obeyed those who paid us wages and thereby gave us the right to live” (118-20).

Marie tries to step outside of the socially constructed role for women in two ways. First, she takes on a traditionally male job of selling subscriptions as a way to take power and become financially independent, but society continues to exert its forces on her, violently oppressing her and undermining her efforts, leaving her powerless and starving to death. Next, she tries to change the parameters of her marriage to Knut. Believing that they can have a relationship of equals she explains that she does not want “ children, or a home, no cooking, washing, scrubbing”, and that she wants to earn her own living (193). Marie makes the connection between a woman becoming a mother, losing her ability to make her own living, and losing her autonomy. Although Knut agrees to her conditions it is Marie who suffers the physical, financial, and emotional, distress of having to have two abortions.

As much as Marie tries to change her social role she is constantly cast as primarily a sex object to be owned by a man through the institution of marriage. Marie sees her aunt Helen as having more self-respect and agency because even though she is a prostitute “ her profession seemed as honorable as that of any married woman—she made her living in the same way as they made theirs, except that she made a better living and had more rights over her body and soul. No man dared mistreat her...she was pledged to obey no man” (142).

By the end of the story, Marie has dedicated her life to the movement for an independent India. She has sacrificed much but is still treated more in terms of being as an appendage to her second husband Anand rather than a person in her own right. The other men accuse her of having “ loose character” when they discover her sexual past. The double standard for sex and “ man’s primitive attitude toward woman as a purely physical being”, forces Marie to choose her autonomy and self-respect over her marriage. She is left questioning, “ why should they, men, be so care-free, so happy, while women must submit to other standards?”. In the end, she decides that she will not “ be enslaved, [for] freedom is higher than love” (360).

## **Works Cited**

Smedley, Agnes. *Daughter of Earth* Published in 1987 by The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, New York, NY. Print