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# Alexandra Kollontai and Marxist Feminism

*To record the contradictions within the life and writings of Alexandra Kollontai is to reclaim a largely unidentified part of Marxist feminist history that attempted to extend Engel's and Bebel's analysis of women's oppression but eventually went further to expose the inadequacy of prevalent Marxist feminist history and practice in analysing the woman's question. This essay is not an effort to reclaim that history uncritically, but to give recognition to Kollontai's efforts and understand her perspective.*

JINEE LOKANEETA

## I Politics of Memory

The 150th year of the Communist Manifesto saw many initiatives all over the world to critically re-examine the basic tenets of Marxism. There are also efforts on to review the socialist experiments in Soviet Union and other countries. Simultaneous is a need felt to recover the voices of those who professed Marxist ideology but were marginalised in history, theory and practice, for their critical questioning and dissenting interventions. It is important also because these life experiences lay bare not only the nature of official histories and history-makers but the possibilities which existed or did not exist for experimentation within a particular ideology/history/practice.

Acclaimed either as the first woman ambassador of the Soviet state in the 1920s-1930s or denounced as the proponent of 'free love' in post-revolutionary Russia, Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952) has been usually subjected to a monolithic characterisation. The list of prominent women of the socialist revolutionary tradition has included names of Clara Zetkin, Nadhezda Krupskaya and Rosa Luxembourg. Alexandra Kollontai, who was described reportedly as a 'brilliant orator and powerful propagandist' by Lenin during the revolution, was the only woman in the central committee in August 1917 and became the commissar of social welfare in the first soviet government, is conspicuous by her absence in these accounts. Kollontai later went on to head the central women's department ('Zhenotdel') of Soviet Russia as a foremost leader of the Russian Social Democratic women's movement. For such a person to be remem-

bered for the post of an ambassador, which actually indicated her political downfall, requires a little explanation.

It reaffirms the selective memory of official histories, which retain only those aspects of history that fit within the dominant version recorded. Two illustrations to indicate how Kollontai was ignored by the Socialist revolutionary tradition and more specifically by Soviet history should be sufficient as cases in point. Lenin's writings on women titled *On the Emancipation of Women* (1965) seem to be oblivious to the very existence of Alexandra Kollontai let alone responding to the questions raised by her. The life and writings of Kollontai are restricted to a thin volume of *Selected Speeches and Articles of Kollontai* published by Progress Publishers, Moscow (1984). The publishers are indeed 'selective' as they attempt to present a completely abridged and uncontroversial picture of Kollontai that overlooks all issues of dissension from the official party history. Her contributions as a close comrade-in-arms of Lenin and a successful commissar are lauded. But what are carefully concealed are the moments of opposition and resistance against the 'dominant' party positions and the struggles that she waged inside the party. It is according to the latter that the political graph of Kollontai's life rose and fell and finally led to her removal from the mainstream of Soviet politics, to be remembered merely as an ambassador of Soviet Russia or for a distorted version of her writings. The present essay attempts to retrieve the lesser-known facets of Kollontai's life. This would not only expose the politics of official history writings but would also raise certain questions about Marxist feminism in earlier times and today. "It is clearly not

the absence of information about women, but the sense that such information was not relevant to the concerns of history that led to the invisibility of women in the formal accounts of the past" [Scott 1988].

Kollontai's case indicates that it is not irrelevance of information but rather the critical nature of her speeches and articles that led to her invisibility and irrelevance for official history. If one looks at the attempts made to democratise written history, one finds that, since the 1970s, the women's movement and women's studies have attempted to record women's history in contrast to the andro-centric history that existed earlier. The exclusion of women's lives and their perspectives from a patriarchal recording of 'male' history was sought to be rectified. New methods and techniques were developed to write a feminist history. Much of the early attempts were in terms of a 'compensatory history' that is placing the 'great women' alongside the 'great men' and study their contribution to the social concerns of patriarchal history. Although this attempt to 'retrieve' women from history was a major contribution, the limitations of this method were also recognised. Compensatory history was considered inadequate due to its inability to transcend the history of the privileged. In other words, it could only locate 'exceptional' women who had been able to contribute towards the major events in 'male' history, which excluded the majority of women, their perspectives and experiences along with other subaltern sections of society. The documentary evidence about these exceptional women was also a consequence of their 'privileged' position.

Hence women's history focused on alternative forms of evidence especially

oral histories, customs, photographs, relics, iconography in order to rewrite history from a feminist as well as a subaltern viewpoint. It was "the attempt to democratise access to history, its production and its content" [Davin 1988]. The periodisation of earlier history writing was also questioned since it had failed to account for the transformations in women's lives say, for instance, in terms of reproductive rights or other issues concerning their everyday lives.

While recognising the limitations of 'compensatory history', I would still like to place the present attempt within this trend with some qualifications especially because through such a history one can lay bare the history of marginalisation even in recent times. The question of periodisation on the basis of changes in women's lives is important but these changes have to be also related to periods of large-scale transformations in society so that it is not a partial representation of societal history. Further, it was not history itself that excluded the majority of women but the patriarchal forces and structures of society that excluded women's participation in several large-scale social processes, for instance, say the renaissance which Joan Kelly<sup>1</sup> drew attention to, in her path breaking article 'Did Women Have a Renaissance?' It would be pertinent, however, to clarify that one is not trivialising the need to record the contribution of the invisible majority of women in history. Rather it is to draw attention alongside to the struggle waged by many exceptional women in the specifically 'male' domains of a patriarchal society. These women's lives have often been obliterated from social memories. Official versions sought to either destroy or conceal the 'documentary evidence' of their contribution.

To reclaim a part of past history becomes all the more difficult when one has to piece together fragments of theory from selected speeches, articles and fiction, the selections and interpretations being different in western and Soviet literature. Being a theorist, agitator, party member and government official at different moments, or simultaneously, Kollontai responded to different situations and audiences. Within the party structure, with the masses (men and women), with the rank and file members (men and women), Kollontai entered into debates according to the levels of consciousness perceived, and the extent of 'democratic discussion' permitted which could partially explain the inconsistency

in her writings. Further, her practical considerations as a people's commissar could seem at variance with her vision and the ideological questions raised by her within the party. This also leads to a difficulty in systematically analysing Kollontai's writings. Yet it is within these levels that one senses the contradictions in her and the alternative tradition that she tried to represent.

Soviet history is replete with symbols of dissent; the question is what was it that made Kollontai 'important' enough to be obliterated almost entirely from revolutionary Soviet history? Kollontai had opposed the official party positions most forthrightly on various occasions whether it was on participation in the first world war,<sup>2</sup> Brest Litovsk Treaty,<sup>3</sup> and Workers Opposition.<sup>4</sup> It even led to her being ousted from prominent government posts in the latter two cases. But it was on her ideas on the 'woman's question' that she faced maximum criticism.

Although Kollontai stated that the struggle for women's rights had to be waged both inside the party and outside it, it was the latter that had been theorised and directed against the bourgeois women's movement. Kollontai explained at great length the class nature of the bourgeois women's movement and its limitation in taking up issues of working class women. But she failed to extend even a semblance of theorisation to the 'male attitudes' within the party and government. The criticism and hostility that she faced for her attempts to build an autonomous women's group within the party and for her views on the communist morality has never been referred to, let alone analysed, except in very general terms. The struggles that she and other women had to wage within the party to gain due recognition of the woman's question has to be read from her mild criticism of male attitudes in her writing as well as from other accounts of that period. The contradictions in her roles as party/government official and a Marxist feminist theorist is perhaps most evident in her inability to criticise the party/governments understanding of the woman's question. Yet to record the contradictions within the life and writings of Alexandra Kollontai is to reclaim a largely unidentified part of Marxist feminist history that attempted to extend Engel's and Bebel's analysis of women's oppression but eventually went further to expose the inadequacy of prevalent Marxist feminist theory and practice in analysing the woman's question.

This essay is not an effort to uncritically reclaim that history but to recognise the attempts made by Kollontai to raise the 'woman's question' in a Marxist framework and understand her perspective. The obvious limitations of her work arise not only from the fact that she was writing in the early part of the century when the revolutionaries were engaged in a variety of campaigns but also in the context of the 'struggle within a struggle'<sup>5</sup> that she was a part of. The Bolshevik Party as a whole had to fight first against the czarist system, and then continuing foreign intervention and the women within the party fought a dual struggle. They not only fought alongside their male comrades but also had to fight against the patriarchal values and practices prevailing in society, party and the state, even though in varying magnitudes.

## II *Zhenotdel: An Invisible Quest for Autonomy*

*Zhenotdel*, the women's department was created to provide an autonomous space for women within the Russian Socialist Democratic movement. 'Rabonitsa' or 'woman worker' existed as a separate women's paper while the other party papers had special pages related to women. It is little known that these spaces for raising the women's question came not due to a mechanical implementation of the Russian Socialist Democratic Party's (RSDP) commitment towards equality for women but were a result of a continuous and arduous struggle by revolutionary women like Alexandra Kollontai.

Russian history had experienced a tradition of women's movement long before the torchbearers of the Bolshevik revolution even realised the necessity of mass mobilisation of women for the socialist cause. Right from the onset of the early revolutionary movement, women had participated in the peasant revolts that led to the abolition of serfdom in 1861 and Bakunin's campaign of 'going to the people'. The prominent leaders among women came mainly from the aristocratic background like Vera Figner and the Leshern sisters on which Turgenyev [Kollontai 1984:41] wrote his famous poem 'On the Threshold' describing women who had left their homes to fight against social injustice. In the latter part of the 19th century there were a series of factory strikes and unrest which not only involved many proletarian women but were also often

initiated by them. Strikes in the 1870s and 80s in factories of Moscow and Petersburg were historic struggles where women played a very significant role. Very few however were attracted to the Socialist Party.

Two factors in that period forced the Social Democratic Party to take up the task of mobilising women. Firstly, the 1905-06 struggle had revealed the revolutionary potential of women as a section. Women bore the brunt of the czar's soldiers for demanding their rights, which reflected their growing consciousness. Secondly, the party could observe the increasing influence of the so-called bourgeois women's organisations which were mobilising women on various fronts. Kollontai, like most Marxists distinguished the socialists from the so-called bourgeois women's organisations. While the bourgeois women's organisations were said to restrict their demands for civil and political rights within a capitalist framework, the socialists believed in a joint struggle of women and oppressed masses for socio-economic equality in a socialist society.

Although Kollontai in her writings suggested that the bourgeois women's organisations were to die a natural death due to their own internal contradictions, they actually posed a major challenge to the socialists. The first attempt to organise women was by clubs like the Russian Women's Mutual Aid society, meant to provide conditions for recreation to bourgeois women. But gradually other organisations articulating the demands of women as a whole emerged. Accounts<sup>6</sup> [Cliff] of that period write of the emergence and growth of some militant feminist organisations which tried to raise themselves 'above their class interests' and include the rights of working women, like the Union for Women's Equality, Women's Equal Rights Union, Women's Progressive Party. Some of them not only demanded suffrage right but also a set of radical, social and labour reforms. For a brief period, feminist and socialists worked together and attracted women to the United Women's Platform until the socialists felt the need to dissociate entirely from the bourgeois organisations. Kollontai's apprehensions about the growth of bourgeois women's organisations are apparent in her extensive writing on the difference between the working class perspective and the 'feminist' perspective. On the whole the bourgeois women's organisations were restricted to fighting for limited rights without demanding

restructuring of society. However, they were able to attract working women to their fronts, which was a disturbing fact for the socialists.

Hence, it became a political compulsion for the RSDP to attract women towards a class view of politics that integrated the women's question with proletarian revolution. The weakness of the party in this sphere is exposed by the First All Russian Women's conference in 1905 where only two women spoke of the working class women's emancipation as being related to overthrow of capitalism and this motion too was decisively defeated. At this juncture Alexandra Kollontai was one of the few who even while criticising the notion of sisterhood of all women that the bourgeois women's organisations propagated, sensed the need to create autonomous channels to approach women. Comprehending the triple burden that women had to bear as a worker, housewife and mother she recognised the need to establish separate channels of communication to bring women into a struggle for a socialist society. The everyday oppression of peasant and working class women were seen as specific and required to be articulated along with the other demands of the struggling masses.

The struggle for a separate organisation for women started from 1906 onwards and got actualised only after the revolution. In 1906 Kollontai tried to set up a women workers bureau but failed in the face of the opposition within the party. Any effort towards this purpose were thwarted by party members as 'divisive' of the working class and smacking of the very bourgeois 'feminism' that Kollontai and others had spoken against so ardently. In her writings Kollontai mentions instances of party men deliberately creating obstacles in their initial efforts to organise women. Buildings for holding meetings were often found locked and notices attached, declaring those spaces as unavailable for women's meetings. Kollontai herself mentions the hostility they faced. "They gave no encouragement and even went as far as trying to hinder the group" [Kollontai 1984:55].

Yet in the very next paragraph, Kollontai seems to defend the hostile attitudes of the party comrades almost as if any criticism would be interpreted wrongly. "Such an attitude was based on an easily understandable fear that the working class might leave their class movement and get entangled in the snare of feminism" [Kollontai 1984:55]. It is interesting to observe the

various meanings of feminism that were perceived within the Marxist parties. On the one hand, Kollontai recognised the need to articulate the women's question but preferred to dissociate herself from the term 'feminism'. Feminism was equated with bourgeois feminism, which believed in a united struggle for women's rights across all classes; thereby denying the possibility of a struggle of the entire working class (both men and women) against the propertied classes which Marxists propagated. On the other hand, within the party it was almost as if any attempt to organise women separately was seen as a divisive attempt by 'feminists' to hinder class struggle. It seems ironical that Kollontai who demolished the views of bourgeois feminists was accorded such criticism from the very party comrades she sought to represent and defend; and that she herself was unable to transcend these criticisms and redefine feminism within Marxism.

It was in 1907 that party women were first able to establish a club, the Society for Working Women's Mutual Aid clarifying beforehand that "generally speaking the society did not bear the stamp of a specifically women's club" indicating the suspiciousness towards the issue of any specific women's mobilisation. In these unfavourable circumstances, even this club was a hard earned victory and this forum was utilised to mobilise and agitate amongst working women.

The next phase of massive mobilisation came in the wake of the February revolution in 1917. The number of working women had rapidly increased. The war and the subsequent shortage of bread brought thousands of men and women on the streets on February 23 (March 8). And it was again the militancy of the working class women in braving the wrath of the Czar's soldiers that led to the RSDP to direct its attention towards mobilising women. Despite the history of joint struggles by working class men and women, the hostility towards any specifically women-related activity continued. Alexandra Kollontai had been forced to leave the country to avoid arrest by the Czar for her 'anti establishment' activities from 1908 onwards till 1917 and it is no mere coincidence that the issue of women's organisation was taken up again in a big way only after her return. Vera Slutskaia, a party member, who had been asked to draw a plan for the party suggested the formation of a bureau to coordinate agitational work among

women and to restart the newspaper *Rabonitsa*. Hence bureaus were set up but were poor substitutes for separate women's organisations that Kollontai and others were demanding. Further, most of these bureaus existed only on paper.

The extent of fear on the idea of separate women's organisation was such that in the Seventh Party Conference when a special commission raised this issue, they were asked to withdraw almost entirely without discussion. The minutes reveal the bureaucratic and patriarchal high-handedness with which the issue was tackled. When the issue of women's organisation was raised the minutes recorded the following conversation: "The chairman suggests that the question be withdrawn since none of the women attending have voting rights ...Sergei suggests that it is necessary to create a *technical organ for the direction of agitation* among women...The chairman suggests that the question be withdrawn. The question is withdrawn" (emphasis added).

It was only in September 1919 that women's departments coordinated by the Central Women's Department, Zhenotdel were finally formed. This was a consequence of the All Russian Women's Conference on 1918 where over a thousand women passed a resolution for "a special commission for *propaganda and agitation* among women" [Holt 1977:120] (emphasis added). Extremely interesting and revealing is the cautious wording of the functions to be performed by the women's departments. Vera Slutskaia in her proposal for a bureau had been particular in differentiating between the function of organising and agitating clarifying the bureaus' role as the latter. Organising seemed to smack inherently of 'divisiveness' and in the 1918 conference of women, a further clause was added to ensure the boundary of jurisdiction. It was stated that the commission was to be the apparatus "for carrying out the decrees of the Central Committee" [Holt 1977:12]. Hence an attempt to create an autonomous space was subverted even before the establishment of the commission. There were also instances of women issues being undermined in party conferences which made the need of the commission more significant. In the eighth party conference, the resolution of women's work was sought to be passed without any discussion since there were no disagreements or objections. Despite protests from Kollontai the issues were relegated to some future session which never took place.

Given the level of patriarchal bias against the women's organisations, it was only outside the party congress that the women's department was finally created. It was the central committee, which ratified the decision to establish the Zhenotdel, and accorded some freedom of activity compared to the earlier bureaus. In this respect the establishment of the International Socialist Women's Conference and International Women's Secretariat also had its influence on Soviet Party and government.

Kollontai's persistence for the creation of Zhenotdel reflects the recognition of the patriarchal biases prevalent in the Bolshevik Party, which required an autonomous space for women. The women's departments could not only increase the scale of earlier agitational activities but could take up organisational activities as well. Meetings and conferences were held for non-party women. The most important of these was the delegate meetings where 'working and peasant women and housewives elected their representatives who for a period of several months met to discuss local problems, attend political lectures and were attracted to sections of the Soviets, participating in its administrative work.' Efforts to make women politically and economically independent were also made and in some areas women's departments set up canteens and creches to unburden the working women. The Zhenotdel developed into a space where the everyday forms of oppression faced by women could be brought to the socialist agenda and became subjects for discussion. The difficulty in bringing women into the political process as long as they continued to be burdened with housework and childcare was felt by party women.

The situation grew worse under the New Economic Policies<sup>7</sup> (1921) when the party withdrew funds from most of the socialisation activities. Problems such as unemployment and prostitution confronted many working class and peasant women. Zhenotdel became a forum for criticism of the New Economic Policies at that time. Even earlier Sofia Smidovich, a prominent leader of Zhenotdel had given a choice to the party to either give trained workers or close Zhenotdel. With no party help forthcoming even at that critical juncture, Zhenotdel found their hands tied.

Zhenotdel represented a symbol of struggle for autonomy, which however failed to develop into a women's movement for their rights in a socialist society.

That there existed a difference in the conception of an autonomous space between the party and Kollontai is obvious by the struggle that she and others constantly waged for a separate women's organisation as also by the questions that she raised on the various psycho sexual aspects of the women's question. Her exploration into the realm of the 'personal' took her beyond the traditional Marxist analysis.

She recognised the need to theorise the specificity of the women's question within a Marxist framework. Kollontai represented a tradition whose demand for autonomy emerged out of a realisation that it would provide a space for women oppressed for centuries to articulate, analyse and struggle against patriarchal oppression in relation to other forms of oppression in society. This perspective also underlies Kollontai's endeavour to theorise the sexual and ideological aspects of women's oppression (along with the economic) in greater depth.

She recognised the need to analyse and develop theories of family, love, sexuality and morality, which had been a source of women's subordination for centuries. The relation between the different forms of 'personal' institutions and ideology under different stages of history was studied and the need to challenge those was regarded as a simultaneous but separate part of socialist struggle. Practice required not only an analysis of the prevalent forms and ideology of oppression but an alternative vision of the future, which Kollontai envisioned and put forward in her writings.

### III Personal Is Political: Kollontai's Views

The family had been located as the site of economic and sexual oppression of women by Engels and Bebel. By providing an analysis of the social bases of women's oppression, Engels questioned the 'normality' of a biological basis. Emergence of the monogamous family was to ensure inheritance for the 'legitimate heirs' for men in a capitalist society. Some feminists have critiqued the anthropological evidence given by Engels on the emergence of family and other institutions. Engels is also criticised for assuming a natural sexual division of labour, which weakens the force of his arguments. Yet his treatise continues to remain a point of reference

for all streams of feminists analysing woman's oppression.

Relating woman's oppression with other forms of social oppression and identifying the determining factors of exploitation has been a significant contribution of Marxists. But the analysis of the sexual, psychological and ideological dimensions of the oppression as translated into the lives of women is largely absent. Theorising the everyday realities of women's lives has been the contribution primarily of the radical feminist tradition. That the theory of patriarchy cannot be determined from a predominantly economic analysis of society but had to provide a theoretical framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of women's oppression, has been pointed out.

Issues relating to sexuality, marriage, family have often been considered as secondary issues to be addressed only after the transformation of economic structures in early Marxist theory. In case of Soviet Russia, even after the revolution, such issues were largely ignored in face of the primary task of reconstruction of state and economy. The few mentions made by Engels, Marx and Bebel on family, love and monogamy within capitalist society and their future forms were treated as 'gospels of truth'.<sup>8</sup> The fact that the so-called private domains are often the primary sites of women's oppression remained unaddressed by such a perspective.

Kollontai attempted to fill the void to a certain extent. Her writings, especially considering the period in which they were written, were a path-breaking contribution to Marxist feminist theory. Underlying her writings on psychosexual aspects of women's lives are the various roles that she assumed in Soviet history and society – dialectically interacting with each other. As a member of the government, people's commissar, director – *Zhenotdel*, party member and a Marxist feminist she faced several conflicting situations which she attempted to address both theoretically and practically.

As a Marxist, she believed that worker's oppression was related to women's oppression. There was a need to jointly struggle for the socialist revolution. Kollontai, however, understood the need to address the complexities underlying this general formulation. There was an attempt to analyse gender as a separate but related category of oppression. Two themes define her theory of understanding and resolving the woman's question. Firstly, she applies

the Marxist concept of labour. Kollontai starts with the Marxist notion that the essence of a human being is her/his capacity to creatively interact with nature. Hence any role which deprives woman of her basic right to labour is oppressive. Anything hindering her right to labour had to be opposed. This general critique is then used to analyse the specific oppression faced by the mother, housewife, prostitute, etc, that society has imposed on women and to evolve methods of emancipation in a socialist society.

Secondly, it is the collective, which gains primacy in socialist society. The brutish, short, egoistic and possessive individual who is the basis of capitalist society is sought to be replaced by the socialised collective/the Soviet state in this case. Equality, solidarity, love and comradeship are to be the determining features in a socialist society. This would be the basis of the social relationships and institutions in future societies. Her writings on questions of communist morality and sexual relations have to be understood in this perspective. The right to labour of an individual was integrally related to the life of the collective or the state. In the case of Russia, it was the Russian state, society and economy which was of paramount importance. All labour had to contribute towards the rapid development of Soviet economy.

### Maternity and Housework

As a commissar of social welfare, Kollontai attempted to put her theory on motherhood into practice. There was an understanding that childbearing and rearing were not just private concerns. The state had to perform an important role in the entire process. The Soviet state was to emancipate the woman from the 'burdens of motherhood'. Decrees were passed and an elaborate system of institutions were sought to be developed to 'take over the difficulties of childbirth' by state and society. For the first time in history creches, milk kitchens, maternity provisions at workplace, consultation centres for pregnant women, etc, were established by the Soviet state. The state was to ensure the health of the mother and bear the child-rearing functions. The mother was 'expected' to take care of herself and give birth to a 'healthy baby' within favourable conditions provided by the state. The maternity provisions were available for both single and married women

demolishing the hypocritical attitude towards single mothers in pre-revolutionary society. Childbearing was separated from child-rearing as Kollontai the commissar of social welfare, claimed that "maternity does not involve the mother always being with the child or devoting herself entirely to its physical and moral education" [Kollontai 1984:145]. The responsibility to educate the children as the member of the collective also lay with the state not the parents.

It is however essential to analyse the perspective underlying these efforts. The point of reference for Kollontai, the commissar, is the welfare of the socialist state and economy and ensuring adequate labour power for the Soviet state. Motherhood is not a private matter, rather it is a 'social obligation'. Therefore the unburdening of the mother has to be located within this. The state may take over the functions in order to ensure healthy members of the state but the reproductive rights of women of childbearing or contraception do not seem to figure in this understanding or if present have to be fitted within social requirements. Even as far as abortion is concerned, Kollontai while agreeing in principle to legalise abortion felt that it was counterproductive for the labour-short Soviet Union. In other words, Kollontai keeps the state interests as paramount without adequately developing a theory of rights for women.

Furthermore, while seeking to emancipate women from the burdens of motherhood, she herself glorifies the relationship between the mother and the child and asserts the necessity of breastfeeding.

The woman's (second) obligation is to breastfeed her baby, only when she has done this the woman has the right to say that she has fulfilled her obligations. The other tasks involved in caring for the younger generations can be carried out by the collective. Of course the maternal instinct is strong and there is no need to stifle it. But why should this instinct be narrowly limited to the love and care of one's own child? Why not allow this instinct, *which for the labour republic has valuable potential*, the opportunity to develop vigorously and to reach its highest stage, where the woman not only cares for her own children but has a tender affection for all children (emphasis added) [Kollontai 1984:144].

This paragraph sums up the dilemma of a Marxist feminist visionary officiating in a transition period. The socialist society

would create conditions where all women would avail themselves of the maternity benefits, consciously consider themselves a part of the collective and raise themselves above the individual affection for one's own child to extend it to other children. But given the fact that Kollontai was addressing the Soviet woman in a phase of transition where the Soviet state was unable to provide all maternal provisions and women were suspicious of the new ideas, she seems to address the issue only as a practical administrator. That in the process she glorifies the obligation of motherhood and breastfeeding does not seem to occur to her.

Further her notion of maternity has no concept of choice regarding motherhood itself, or says about contraception for women. It is 'necessary' to perform the social obligation of reproduction in order to increase the workforce for the nation, since the health of the collective is the most important. While child-rearing is separated from childbearing, on occasions when the state was unable to fulfil its obligations, the women were burdened with not only factory labour but also with the household work. A notion of sharing housework with men in the transition period is found wanting. Her vision of state being responsible for the childbearing functions then becomes oppressive for the very women that it seeks to liberate.

With regard to housework too, Kollontai's theory of labour is applied. Although she renders household labour as unproductive, she refers to it in the context of capitalist society. In a peasant economy, the 'well-being' of the family depended, on the women's capacity to produce not only the immediate needs of the family (cooking, washing) but also things that could be sold on the market like cloth, thread, butter. And every man whether peasant or worker tried to find a wife who had 'hands of gold', for he knew that a family could not get along without this 'domestic labour' [Kollontai 1977:155].

In fact Kollontai feels that this labour was not only beneficial for the family but also for the prosperity of the nation. Under capitalism however the production of commodities shifted to the public sphere and hence family according to Kollontai was reduced to a consuming unit where housework becomes restricted to cleaning, cooking, washing and care of linen and clothing of the family. These four tasks she feels are not only exhausting, strenuous and time-consuming but are of no value

to the state and national economy. Here again the emphasis is on the creation of values for the Soviet economy through productive labour.

Feminists (for a discussion on domestic labour see Delphy 1984, Barrett 1980 and Oakley 1974) have rightly criticised Marxists [Marx 1969:152] for defining productive labour only as that labour which has exchange value (not use value), creates surplus value and has a direct relation to capital, since this understanding devalues and delegitimises the significance of domestic labour performed by women. Kollontai too follows the same framework. (fn Marx, on Productive Labour As Marx puts it, from the viewpoint of capital "Productive Labour...is wage labour which exchanged against the variable part of capital (the part of the capital that is spent on wages) reproduces not only this part of the capital (or the value of its own labour power), but in addition produces surplus value for the capitalist...Only that wage labour is productive which produces capital." Delphy rightly points out that while Marxists recognise the exploitation in the industrial mode of production, they fail to look at the family system.

The family or the domestic mode of production is based on the unpaid labour of the wife and creates antagonistic relations of production between the husband and wife. This is the basis of the patriarchal exploitation where the men are the exploiters. Hence, it was not the nature of produce that determines whether the labour was productive or unproductive, rather it was the relations of production, which determined the status of the labour. Women provided the unpaid labour within the framework of universal and personal relationship of marriage and this constituted a relationship of domestic slavery. The fact that the same labour when performed in the market is considered productive and has exchange value reflects the concealed value of the domestic labour. Marxists never considered domestic labour as contributing to production, as it was believed that under capitalism the family ceased to be productive. Hence domestic labour was said to be contributing to reproduction (of labour power – daily, generation and human) which was seen as separate from production.

But despite these limitations, what must be appreciated is the fact that Kollontai was one of the foremost theorists to address the question of domestic labour. (fn The domestic labour debate took place

only in the 1960s.) Although she failed to go beyond the Marxist understanding of productive labour, given the time she was writing, her attempt to analyse the issue itself was an extremely important contribution. Kollontai's differentiation between the everyday drudgery of the four endless tasks from the earlier 'creative' tasks is also significant. This is more a critique of the nature of tasks rather than devaluing the work of women. About the nature of tasks she rightly argues, "even if a working woman were to give a thousand years, she would still have to begin everyday from the beginning. There would always be a new layer of dust to be removed from the mantelpiece, her husband would always come in hungry and her children bring in mud in their shoes" [Kollontai 1977:255].

With regard to both child-rearing and housekeeping, Kollontai observes that the process of socialisation was not new. In the capitalist society these were already being transferred to the public sphere. Creches, schools kindergartens had always been available to the rich. So were the restaurants and the laundries. It is only that under socialism the working class seeks to unburden the women from these oppressive forms of work by opening public dining rooms, communal kitchens and cloth mending centres. The vision underlying that was "the four categories of housework are deemed to extinction with the victory of communism" [Kollontai 1977:255].

### **Sexual Relations and Communist Morality**

The family had performed economic functions under capitalism. With the state attempting to take over the functions of housekeeping and childcare, what remained according to Kollontai were the relations between the sexes. Sexual relations had a close link with social struggles in society. Kollontai criticised both the bourgeois notions, which advocated non-interference in the so-called private realm as also those socialists who believed that such questions could be dealt with, after the complete reorganisation of society. For Kollontai dealing with the psychosexual realm was simultaneous with the process of social reconstruction.

"Why has the fact been ignored that throughout history one of the constant features of social struggle has been the attempt to change the relationships between the sexes, and the type of moral codes that determine these relationships,

and that the way personal relations are organised in a certain social group has had a vital influence on the outcome of the struggle between hostile social classes?" [Kollontai 1977:240].

Tracing the history of marriage, Kollontai explains how the women's oppressive situation was based on an ideology of love used to justify changing forms of marriage/family. Throughout history there were material considerations that determined marriage. In ancient times, respect for the kinship ties and collective material interests dominated in determining marriage. Under feudalism, family business interests were the basis of marriage but for the first time a theory of platonic love for a 'lady' also emerged as an incentive for the 'knight' to commit acts of bravery. However, it was under capitalism that monogamous love was upheld as the basis of marriage. Bourgeois love, of course, demanded women's undivided love and loyalty to ensure inheritance within the family while men could exploit women in the parallel institution of prostitution.

For Kollontai the ideology of love in capitalist society was both a patriarchal ideology and individualistic in nature. In the capitalist society she identified two characteristic features of the psychology of modern man. (a) the idea of possessing the married partner and (b) the belief that the sexes are unequal, that they are of unequal worth in everyday, in every sphere, including the sexual sphere.

According to Kollontai the crude individualism which was the basis of capitalist society created a sense of loneliness which made one yearn for the "finding for themselves through another person, a means to a larger share of spiritual and physical pleasure" [Kollontai 1977:240]. The urge to overcome this loneliness was so strong that it resulted in a desire to own the very soul of the other such that it even became oppressive. It was also this feeling of 'possessiveness' that pervaded the capitalist society and provided an illusion of searching for the 'ideal partner'. This 'individual psyche' was worsened by the inequality assumed in the relationship.

Kollontai's notion of patriarchy is conscious of not only the actual sexual and economic oppression but also the ideological creation of women. The woman is not only considered the property of the husband but is defined stereotypically as having no personality of her own. "We are used to evaluating a woman not as a

personality with individual gritudes and failings irrespective of her physical and emotional experience, but only as an appendage of a man. This man, the husband or the lover, throws the light of his personality over the woman, and it is this reflection and not the woman herself that we consider the true definition of her emotional and moral make up. In the eyes of society the personality of a man can be more easily separated from his actions in the sexual sphere. The personality of a woman is judged almost exclusively in terms of her sexual life" [Kollontai 1977:245].

Kollontai realises that mere economic independence will not itself lead to the emancipation of women. In fact there is a recognition of the autonomy that patriarchal ideas and practices have vis-a-vis the economic structures of society. This is hinted when she writes, "Only a change in the economic role of women, and her independent involvement in production, can and will bring about the weakening of these mistaken and hypocritical ideas" [Kollontai 1977:245].

In other words, although economic independence is a primary need it would only lead to a weakening of patriarchal ideas and not their elimination. Special efforts have to be made to struggle against patriarchy.

### **Morality for New Society**

Kollontai hence sees the sexual relations as suffering from three factors – extreme egoism, possessing the married partner and inequality among the sexes. These according to her have to undergo a radical transformation to change the individual psyche along side the structural changes in society. Her theory of communist morality is an attempt to envision a morality for a new society. Post-revolutionary Russia saw an emergence of various forms of sexual relationships and while most communist leaders defined it as sexual anarchy; Kollontai's response was to create a debate on the question of morality for the workers collective. Since it was a phase of transition, it was essential to outline the basis of a new morality in face of the critique of the capitalist society in the psychosexual realm. For Kollontai, in other words, it would be a society where there would be equality in relationships, where freedom in personal relationships became a fact and the principle of comradeship overtook inequality.

The concept of comradeship and solidarity would be the key elements in a socialist society. In capitalist society, wingless Eros (sexual attraction) existed outside marriage in the form of momentary sexual encounters. In a workers collective there would be no limits on the Eros. Winged Eros (sexual attraction with sensitivity and mutual respect) would be able to flourish. It was unimportant whether the relationship was temporary or permanent, what mattered was that 'it was based on equality, mutual recognition of rights of the other and comradely sensitivity, of ability to listen and understand the inner workings of the loved person' [Kollontai 1977:245]. While these were the basis of sexual relations, they were subordinate to the concept of solidarity within the collective. To ensure that the unit of two loved persons does not become exclusive, Kollontai emphasised the need to uphold the interests of the collective by creating inner bonds between the members.

Kollontai is often wrongly 'credited' or rather denounced for the glass of water theory that is considering sex to be as natural as drinking a glass of water. It is on this basis that she was accused of propagating free sex and perpetuating sexual anarchy. A close look at her writings reveals that this is a clear distortion of her views. Firstly, her concept of new morality is a response to the sexual crisis in Soviet society. Soviet society experienced various forms of relationships during the early 1920s.

Kollontai (1977) expressed the need to make it an issue of debate so as to create a morality based on egalitarian values. "In the New World the accepted norms of sexual relations will probably be based on free, healthy and natural attraction (without distortion and excesses) and on transformed Eros." Hence for Kollontai, it is for the sake of the collective, 'that the ideology of the working class had to create a morality that would emerge along with the socialist struggle though the actual forms it would take, was left undefined. Forms would only emerge in the course of struggle.

It was Kollontai's ideas on sexual relations that became a major source of criticism within the Soviet party. Although there were some writings on the subject by others, they were not as radically different from the analysis of Marx, Engels and Bebel. Kollontai had tried to raise the issue of the personal realm simulta-

neously with other 'political' issues like class struggle and social reconstruction. No attempt was made by the other party leaders to systematically analyse the relation between the personal realm and women's oppression, which was the most significant contribution of Kollontai. Ironically, it was from the Central Women's Department that she often faced criticism. Vinogradskaya a young woman who worked in the department was extremely critical of Kollontai. Alix Holt (1977:240) writes "Vinogradskaya herself is convinced the Marxism and sex are mutually exclusive, and that in a time of social turmoil, 'multifaceted love' is not on the agenda, the idea that sexual love can be 'for its own sake' and is not connected with the birth of children should be vigorously denounced". It is perhaps in Kollontai's unorthodox writings on the realm of the personal that one can locate the cause of her political downfall and the amnesia towards her writings on the part of the official record keepers of Soviet history.

### Conclusion

Kollontai was a prominent leader of the Russian Social Democratic Women's Movement. She was even the director of *Zhenotdel* (Central Women's Department) for a brief period. Her writings were an analysis of the various aspects of women's oppression and constituted a preliminary attempt to integrate Marxism with Psychosexual analysis and the critique of patriarchy. Despite these insights, her limitations in terms of the issues raised by contemporary women's movement are numerous. Kollontai failed to develop her ideas on autonomy and specificity of the women's question even within the Marxist framework that she followed. She overemphasised on the larger interests of the state/economy over the rights of individuals, groups and communities. Definitions of productive labour were uncritically accepted, and women were almost considered as agents of reproduction for the welfare of the economy and society. The concept of women's choices and rights did not come up adequately. In a sense her analysis and understanding of women's experience were fitted within the requirements of the Soviet economy belaying the significance of her own perceptive analysis on various aspects of women's oppression.

But what is more significant is that she was a symbol of struggle within the Soviet

state which was unique in itself in giving many equal rights to women for the first time in world history. At the present historical juncture, as Marxist theory and practice attempts to critically evaluate its history, it has to rediscover the views of women revolutionaries like Alexandra Kollontai. While the Soviet state took several progressive steps to liberate women, its inability to identify the multifaceted dimensions of patriarchy that govern women's lives has to be recognised. Kollontai's attempt in such circumstances was a radical development in the Marxist tradition towards the understanding of some unexplored spheres of women's lives.

Issues of the autonomy of women's question and women's organisations within a Marxist analysis and movement: and a Marxist feminist approach to women's oppression continues to be subjects of debate and discussion. The relationship between Marxism and Feminism has been a tenuous one. Socialist feminist have attempted to integrate feminism and Marxism and some have even given up the efforts in the process. The fact remains however that given the continuous marginalisation and oppression of large sections of society, there is a requirement for larger alliances among the oppressed. This would need the resolution of questions of autonomy and primacy in analyses and practice, which Kollontai raised and which continue to be raised within Marxist theory and practice. [E]

### Notes

[I thank Sarah Joseph, my supervisor, Uma Chakravarty and Sanjay for their critical comments.]

- 1 Joan Kelly drew attention to, in her path-breaking article 'Did Women Have A Renaissance?'
- 2 Kollontai was a part of the Zimmerwald left – a section within the second International, which was opposed to the war.
- 3 Kollontai opposed Lenin's views on the peace treaty at the end of the war. After the first world war she resigned or was removed from the Commissar of Women's Welfare.
- 4 Party members including Kollontai and Trotsky demanded the restructuring of the entire system of administration. They challenged bureaucratisation and asked for more participation of proletarians in the decision-making.
- 5 This term has been used by Nalini Nayak in Ilna Sen's *Space within the Struggle: Women's Participation in People's Movements*, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1990, p 140.
- 6 Tony Cliff gives detailed account of the bourgeois women's movement of that period.
- 7 In 1921, New Economic Policies were introduced in response to economic crisis that Soviet Russia was facing. Private managers

and entrepreneurs were given powers in industrial activity to achieve faster economic growth. The workers' opposition came as a response to that.

Lenin as the leader of the party had recognised the need to mobilise women and was supportive of women's department for attracting them to the party but failed to recognise the need to develop an autonomous space which could be helpful in developing a Marxist perspective on the women's question.

- 8 I have been told that at the evenings arranged for reading and discussion with working women, sex and marriage problems come first...It is said that a pamphlet on the sex question written by a communist authoress from Vienna enjoys the greatest popularity. What rot that booklet is! The workers read what is right in it long ago in Bebel...It seems to me that this superabundance of sex theories, which for the most part are mere hypotheses and often quite arbitrary ones, stems from a personal need... There is no room for it in the party among the conscious, fighting proletariat. Extract from conversations with Clara Zetkin, Lenin, op cit, p 10.

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