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**Appropriation to the Capitalist Metanarratives of
Women Empowerment: A Study on
The Work *Lean In: Women, Work, and The Will to
Lead* By Sheryl Sandberg**

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ABSTRACT

In the age of neo-liberalism, the contours between the countries become invisible and this helps capitalism expand its cultural hegemony. The capitalistic discourse is capable enough to manipulate people to its interests, in turn, taking the agency away from subaltern classes. This discourse has attained a status where it can be decisive of even what one should do with one's life. It breaches into defining empowerment and providing dictums on what the purpose of life is. This paper aims to look into the book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* by Sheryl Sandberg as a capitalist metanarrative of women empowerment. The author, appropriating to the capitalist narrative, limits achievement into economic and material gains and makes women empowerment a monolithic concept. This paper aims to see how capitalist hegemony makes ultimatums on woman empowerment disregarding its different possible narratives. Along with this, this paper analyses how the book is written for an elite audience evading the discussions of intersectionality.

Keywords: Appropriation, Capitalism, Discourse, Hegemony

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Hegemony retains its domination by controlling the mindset of its subjects. It works through disseminating ideology which would re-establish the predominance of hegemonic institutions. The influential narratives of hegemony are instrumental in maintaining the status quo. Equality emerged as an episteme along with modernity and turned a critique on the absolute positions of hegemonic structures. Before this, women and other subaltern communities had been oppressed by those who were in power without any question.

Capitalism is an economic system based on the private ownership of the means of production and their operations for profit (Rosser, 7). Karl Marx criticises capitalism, arguing that it gives power to a minority capitalist class and exists through the exploitation of the majority working class and their labour. The grave critique against capitalism is its cultural hegemony; manipulating the beliefs, perceptions, values, etc. of a society, so that it can pursue its commercial interests and continue its domination. Following the neoliberalist policies of the governments around the world, capitalism expanded its cultural hegemony to more parts of the world. The range of identity and social conflicts around the capitalist mode of production is yet to be explored.

Lean In: Women, work and the will to lead, published in 2013, written by Sheryl Sandberg and Nell Scowell, attempts to trace the reasons behind the smaller number of women leaders in the corporate institutions and figure out solutions for that. The book got good reviews and was acclaimed for its inspiring tone. The author was holding high positions in Facebook and google when she wrote the book and her fame contributed to the reach of the book. The book acclaimed for motivating women to forge into the leadership roles of corporate firms challenging the male dominance. In that way it is considered a manifesto of women empowerment. But, is it really?

The author starts the first chapter of the book saying that she was born into a progressive family and it helped her to reach 'heights' in her life. She insists that her parents created an atmosphere in which gender was not a problem for her to decide what to do and what not to. Following this, she discusses the issue of why only a small number of women are present at the top of the corporate firms and implies that it is either because women are not ready to push themselves forward to hold positions of leadership or men are more ambitious to be in leadership positions. The title of the chapter itself "What would you do if you weren't afraid?"; hints that it is the fear and hesitation that keep women away of the leadership roles. How true that can be? She speaks from a privileged position as she mentioned in the first paragraph of the book, and expects what she has achieved is possible for everyone. She fails to recognise the various cultural and social barriers a woman has to cross to come to the front-line of the society. The discussions of equality and empowerment have to be rooted in the realities of the disadvantaged people, only then, possible solutions could be found for the crises. The author's analysis seems an exhortation rejecting realities.

The author views women as if they are a homogenous group who want to be in leadership positions but are unable to reach there. The author firmly believes that majority of women would choose professional achievement over any other achievement. They are expected to be in the rush for the

leadership positions in corporate institutions. The author fails to acknowledge the discrete natures of women and their concepts of empowerment and limits empowerment to what capitalism manifests. The author fails to give recognition to the distinct identities of women. Author's approach and analysis is based on a belief that it is homogenous. It reflects what Verhaghe (2014) argues, that with their strong focus on success and happiness, both capitalism and neo-liberal culture destabilise experience of identity. The author is indifferent to the ethnic, racial and economic varieties of people and their different perception of identity and life, rather appropriates to the "capitalist universal" and evades the discussions of women empowerment uprooted in ground realities.

In the chapter "Don't leave before you leave", the author advocates the women to try to go as forward as they can in their professional space until they leave on account of social and family pressure. It might look like a good advice as working with a half-mind or without a deliberate attempt to improve can significantly affect the progress of a person. But, by advocating this, the author finds problem with the present attitude of women for the gender inequalities as women are not thriving enough to go forward until they leave their professional space. But is what the author demanding that easy? Is it possible for one to give their best effort to something when they can't find any assured benefits from that? It is understandable that lack of assurance about the future pull women backwards in their professional space. Then, what the author is doing is mere exhortation to women without thinking how difficult and improbable it is to make possible. It is hard to find sincere effort from the author to consider the actual situation before giving these incitements. By moving from the reality, the author alienates the concept of women empowerment as she demands super human efforts from women to get gender equality. That is, women have to work harder than men to get equal status. Is this really equality?

And, who really benefits from this hard work of employees? Of course, it is the firm, the capital. Marcuse (1964) mentions that capitalism integrates people in a model of consumerism, where they work and spend more than the requirement. Earn and consume more becomes the measure of success. This creates conflicts in the environment and social life, but also contaminates the mental life by installing false needs that people want to satisfy. The author insinuates to do the same, work hard to reach higher position in the corporate job ladder. So, in a way it turns a narrative for the profit of the capital than the empowerment of women. Her narrative demands more and more from women and in no way helps women empowerment.

The author does not express any criticism over the corporate institutional set-up in which women are being exploited. Women are not preferred to hold high positions by the companies as they might leave after a time. Gender wage gap still exists with only 79% to women comparing to men in USA and women are not given enough considerations regarding the biological factors like pregnancy and menstruation. The sexual harassments in the corporate institutions are left unnoticed by the author; in 2017, 12428 sex-based harassments complaints have been registered in the U.S. Equal employment opportunities commission. She doesn't look into these problems which apparently show the

patriarchal nature of capitalist institutions, makes this arena difficult for women. Corporate institutions must take these problems into consideration on a humanitarian ground to make it possible for more women to come into leadership positions. Todd McGowan writes, “in order to act as a capitalist subject, one must consciously pursue one’s own particular aim while actually doing the behest of capitalist universal” (474). Though the author tries to find ways for women empowerment, leaves out some of the fundamental problems that hinder women empowerment and, in a way, helps to cover up the exploitations of capitalism. If she was serious about women empowerment, she might not be in the right track.

The author, in the chapter “The Myth of Doing it All”, urges the women to give importance to their profession. Though, at times, she points out the possibility of women who may not like to struggle in a corporate arena but to have other life priorities, the appreciated line of the chapter, following the whole work, is to give importance to profession. The author rejects the possibility of “having it all”: as she considers it not possible for women to manage profession and family together, and the author does not hesitate to choose profession over other things. The author says that there is no problem with arranging surrogate for babysitting and bringing up the children. The problem is not with whether there is problem or not, but in author insisting to put profession first over of these. Here the author herself dictates what one should do with one’s life. She generalises the tendency of some women who like to climb the job hierarchy in corporate firms thus reduces the numerous possibilities of human life into just professional achievement. The author fails to think in terms of ample choices for women, possibly rearing children itself if one wants. The author’s subjective positions are highly inclined to the capitalist interests as she considers earning more money and acquiring more power as the purpose of life. Here, the author fails to identify with women empowerment by approaching it from a subjective position turning down other interests. The author supports the hegemonic capitalist narratives that one has to toil in their profession to earn money and to find meaning in life.

The author does not discuss the structural problems in the corporate institutions which contribute to the gender inequality rather she finds problems with the attitude of women in reaching the equal status. She says technology increased working hours. She merely forgets that it is not the technology but the exploitative capitalist regime that is the convict in the increase of working hours. Rather, she advocates to manage one’s life according to the contemporary scenario of “unlimited” working time. Nowhere in the book she discusses the right of a person to have strict working hours of eight. The over-time work has been considered as a natural extension of technological improvement rather than an exploitation by the hegemonic structure. The silence, on her part, regarding this, shows how the author’s subjectivity is inclined to capitalist interests. Through this narrative, she presents the institution as flawless or with negligible problems and thus normalises the exploitation. The author presents herself an icon and encourages women to bend themselves into the corporate structure as that is what she has done to reach the heights. She urges others to be an employee who works as hard as possible to do well. This ‘bend’ would help hegemony, as no one sees any problem with the capitalist

institutions. These structural problems evade the discussions of the work. Instead of challenging the hegemony, the author becomes a flag holder of the hegemonic discourse of creating a group of people who continuously aspire for what the hegemony demands.

When Sandberg says more and more women have to come into leadership roles and insists that it would only help to attain gender equality, she not only encourages gender absolutisms that only women can solve women's problems but also follows the capitalist discourse that those who are in power would determine what should be done. She evades the discussions of attaining gender equality through the nurturing of an episteme of equality. But, the author believes, to change the situation women should hold power positions and to implement what helps gender equality. The author falls for the capitalist discourse intentionally or un-intentionally. Marx argues in "Das Capital", that in a capitalist regime subjects cannot know what they are doing. He insists capitalism not only deceives its subjects by reducing them into a set of beliefs but also manipulates who they are on the basic level. The author, as she has explained, writes this book to help women empowerment, but in turn it becomes a capitalist metanarrative on women empowerment which helps to maintain the hegemony of capitalist discourse than a fight for gender equality.

When the author insists that selecting the right partner is very important in the success of a woman, she normalises the narrative that men hold the agency in a family and a woman's rights must be awarded to her by her husband in a relationship. It totally contradicts the "empowering" recognition of the book. Rather it merely normalises the oppression of patriarchy. By this suggestion, she implies that the empowerment of women is only possible through the hands of men. She does not want to question the hegemonic positions of the institution of family and its oppressive nature but urges women to compensate it with selecting a partner who will support the women to pursue a career. If every woman could select such persons, then there is no problem with the society, no oppression exists. But that is not the case, patriarchy exists, and selecting a good partner is not the possible way to tackle that. She holds a conservative approach on the institution of marriage and family even though she accepts that it is oppressive. She fails to put forward possible solutions or to suggest alternative structures which would help to attain gender equality but curse or lament on the regressive natures of family and marriage as institutions.

Ultimately, the book helps capitalist discourses to widen their sphere of influence. The author merely acts as a subject of hegemony as her subjectivity is highly influenced by the hegemonic ideology. The author throughout the book insists that she writes this book to make a change in the condition of women in the society. But she become a mere ambassador of capitalism and corporate institutions. Todd McGowan writes "when capitalism becomes the ruling socio- economic system, one obeys not by submitting to the domination of a universal command but by following one's own self-interests" (476).

The importance for the universal women at the cost of their particularities, author's silence towards the institutional injustice and oppression from the corporates and capitalism, and her hesitation to

challenge patriarchal and cultural institutions even when they instrumental in deceiving gender equality show how much Sheryl Sandberg's subjectivity has been influenced by capitalistic discourse. The author fails to think about achievement outside the box of capitalistic discourse. In her opinion achievement is limited to get better hierarchal positions in a corporate institution. This book may be a good manual for those women who want to pursue leadership at the cost of other things, but, certainly not universal, not concerning women empowerment.

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