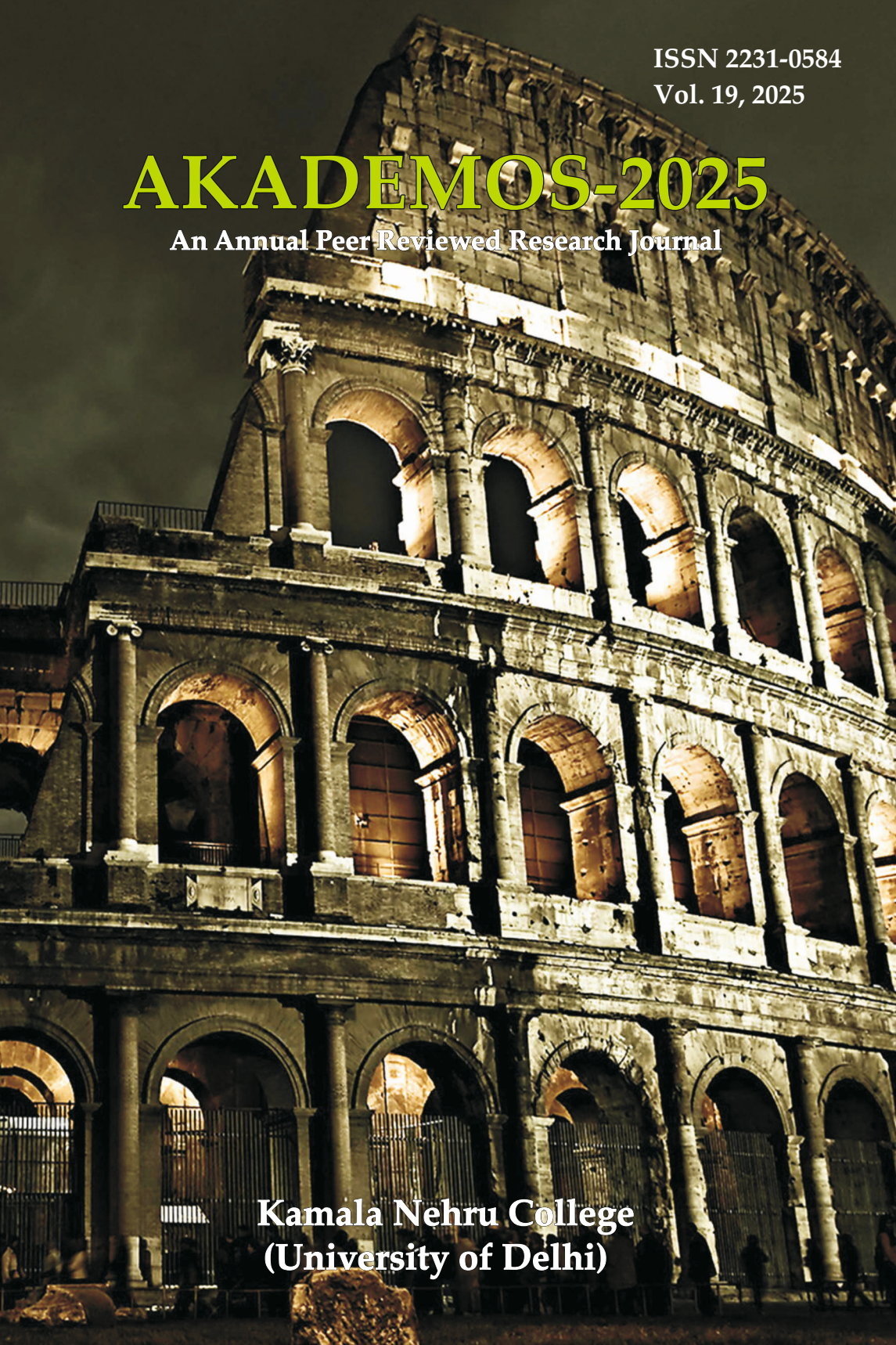
ISSN 2231-0584
Vol. 19, 2025

AKADEMOS-2025

An Annual Peer Reviewed Research Journal



Kamala Nehru College
(University of Delhi)

Akademos 2025

An Annual Peer Reviewed Research Journal

KAMLA NEHRU COLLEGE

(University of Delhi)

AKADEMOS

Editorial Policies and Processes

Introduction

Akademos (ISSN 2231-0584) is the multi-disciplinary, peer-reviewed academic journal of Kamala Nehru College that has been published annually since 2006. Over the years we have evolved to become a publication that strives to publish research of the best quality and we invite papers from the humanities, commerce and mathematics. Manuscripts are accepted from scholars, researchers, and teachers from all institutions across the world. Akademos is also published online at www.akademos.in, and the e-ISSN number for the online version of the journal has been applied for.

Guidelines for submission:

- All authors must read the guidelines carefully and adhere to the submission guidelines. Manuscripts should be prepared according to the style specifications of Akademos. Manuscripts that do not follow the guidelines will not be accepted.
- The editors release a call for papers every year with a submission deadline. Manuscripts received after the deadline will not be accepted, however they might be

considered for the next issue of the journal with the author's permission.

- Manuscripts must be original and in English.
- All manuscripts should be typed and composed as a word document (MS Word 1997 and upwards) (.doc and .docx are both acceptable).
- To maintain reasonable uniformity, we ensure that the word limit is between 4000-6000.
- Use Times New Roman font; font size for title is 14 points and for main body text 12 points and footnotes 10 points.
- The journal follows the conventions as per the latest edition of the Chicago Manual of Style.

Ethics Policy

In order to publish research of the highest quality we are committed to following international standards of ethical research and publication. All authors are required to read and adhere to these policies carefully.

- **Authorship –** The author is an individual who has contributed significantly to the development of a manuscript. Substantial contributions to the design, conception, research, analysis, collection and interpretation of data, drafting and revision of the work is the responsibility of the author. The author is also accountable for ensuring that any questions related to the truthfulness and reliability of the work are examined and resolved. A manuscript might have multiple authors and they are all credited equally for the work. All authors should approve the final version of the manuscript prior to submission. Once a manuscript is submitted, it is therefore

assumed that all authors have read and given their approval for the submission of the manuscript. Contact information of all authors should be stated on the manuscript. Surname/ Other names, affiliation, emails, and phone/fax numbers.

- **Acknowledgement –** Individuals who participated in the development of a manuscript but do not qualify as anauthor should be acknowledged. Organizations that provided support in terms of funding and/or other resources should also be acknowledged.
- **Confidentiality –** Submitted manuscripts are confidential material. Submitted manuscripts are not disclosed to anyone except individuals who partake in the processing and preparation of the manuscript for publication (if accepted). These individuals include editorial staff, corresponding authors, potential reviewers, actual reviewers, and editors. However, in suspected cases of misconduct, a manuscript may be revealed for the resolution of the misconduct.
- **Duplicate Publication –** All articles must be unpublished. In case of simultaneous submission, the author is required to inform the journal if the submitted article is accepted for publication elsewhere. It is the responsibility of the author to ensure that no duplication of publication happens as it is an unethical practice.
- **Plagiarism –** The journal has a strict policy against plagiarism. Authors may use appropriate software to check for duplication before submission. If plagiarism is detected, either by the editorial team or peer reviewers, at any stage during the process of publication, the author will be asked to rewrite and cite resources with due diligence. The editorial team reserves the right to reject manuscripts with extensive plagiarism (25% or more). If plagiarism is detected after

publication, the editors will retract the manuscript and no submissions will be accepted from the author(s) in the future. The author should also be cautious regarding duplication of their own material, or self-plagiarism.

- **Fabrication and falsification of data –** Fabrication, manipulation or falsification of data is a violation of the ethics of Akademos. If fabrication is detected during the process of publication, the manuscript will be rejected.
- **Citations manipulation –** Authors should only cite sources that are relevant to their manuscripts. Addition of references which are not relevant to the work is strongly discouraged. Irrelevant self-citation to increase one's citation is unethical along with unnecessary citation of articles for the sole purpose of "increasing" the articles' citation.

Peer-review and publication policy

The peer-review process is a very important part of the publication of ***Akademos.*** It ensures that the research is of the highest standards and that it adheres to the guidelines of the journal. Akademos follows international review standards and processes and it is imperative for authors and reviewers to participate with integrity. Reviewers are the unsung volunteers who put in a great amount of work to ensure the academic and scholarly integrity and record of the work and the journal acknowledges this contribution and regards the review process as sacrosanct.

- **Review process –** Each submission will undergo anonymous peer reviewing from academics from the respective discipline and area of work. In some cases, two or more reviews may be sought if the first review is found to be less acceptable. The comments and suggestions of the

reviewer(s) would be made available to the author as soon as they are received. The author will be required to make the necessary changes and resubmit the article. The article may be sent for review again after resubmission, especially in case the changes are found to be unsatisfactory. The entire process follows a double blind review system, i.e. neither the author nor the reviewer is aware of the others identity.

- The review reports are sent to the authors but the identity of the reviewers is not revealed. The author will not be given information that will help them to uncover the identity of the reviewer. Any attempt by the author to identify the reviewer and hamper the peer review process is unethical.
- The journal does not levy any submission or publication charges.
- The journal reserves the right to publish selected articles both in print as well as online on its website.
- Any subsequent publication of an article in Akademos must mention the journal as the first publisher.
- The editors and members of Team Akademos cannot submit their articles to Akademos during their tenure.
- The policies of the journal will be reviewed and updated regularly.
- All questions or clarifications may be directed to the editors on the journal's email address: knc.akademos@gmail.com.

Disclaimer: The authors assert their rights to be recognized as the author of their articles. Any errors or discrepancies are their own.

Editorial Board

Postal Address:

Kamala Nehru College, August Kranti Marg,
New Delhi, 110049, India
Email Address: knc.akademos@gmail.com

Honorary Members

Dr. Bindu K. C.
Email : binduke@aud.ac.in
Faculty Member, Gender Studies
Ambedkar University, Delhi

Dr. Smita Patil
Email : smita.sanu@gmail.com
Associate Professor
School of Gender and Development Studies,
Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi

Message from the Editor-in-Chief

It is my privilege and pleasure to present Volume 19 of Akademos, a multi-disciplinary, peer-reviewed Academic Journal of Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi. Akademos has been our flagship research journal since 2006. Over the years, the Journal has evolved to become a publication that strives to publish research of the best quality. The journal aims to foster an intellectual research culture by offering a platform to researchers to publish their original research work in the areas of Humanities, Social Sciences, Commerce and Mathematics. The journal aims to develop an interdisciplinary perspective of perceiving the issues and challenges faced by the contemporary world.

The focus on Indian knowledge tradition emphasising value based learning lies at the core of the academic discourse of the journal to develop a holistic approach. Manuscripts are accepted from scholars, researchers and teachers from institutions across the country and abroad.

The present volume has explored the domain of Gender issues and features eight research papers and one book review. The papers published here have undergone a rigorous double-blind peer-review process. Gender issues in the present volume have been examined by diverse disciplines and offer stimulating perspectives through well-researched academic study.

We hope readers will appreciate this edition of Akademos which will add to the knowledge in the domain of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Prof. (Dr.) Pavitra Bhardwaj
Principal & Editor-in-Chief
Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi.

Editor's Note

Gender roles are social constructs developed over time and are not based on natural human behaviour. Patriarchal notions of gender roles have been practiced for long and these stereotypes can be harmful because they motivate people to condemn and oppress those who do not fit the traditional gender roles. When people incorporate these cultural meanings into their own psyches, then gender becomes part of their identities. Attempts have been made in progressive societies to bring changes in these traditional notions of gender roles and behaviour and are now a key element in human development. In many of the modern societies today, both men and women are able to do many of the same tasks, thereby making gender-specific roles irrelevant. The fact that gender attributes are socially constructed means that they are also amenable to change in ways that can make a society more just and equitable.

The above perspectives on gender find resonance in the current edition of Akademos with its thematic focus on "Exploring Gender through Multiple Lenses". A range of viewpoints have found place in this edition of our academic journal, incorporating a multidisciplinary approach to gender issues.

Making mythological texts on gender relevant for contemporary times can be challenging, as explored in the first article of this edition. A similar take on the complexities of teaching the works of Victorian women writers to an Indian undergraduate class of the present generation and using a multifocal, mediatized approach

to overcome the same, is brought forth in the article on ‘Braiding Gender and Media’.

The obsessive desire to look beautiful which is consuming many women in today’s times has been discussed in the article on Myth of beauty. The author notes that the clash of neo-liberal market forces with patriarchal notions of ‘ideal beauty’ have created a new strain of desperate and ‘misguided’ young women consumers, who have fallen prey to this unhealthy trend to look desirable. The article goes on to suggest that interventions can help women make more informed choices and resist the pressure of patriarchal and market forces.

The skewed notions about women are also captured in Hemingway’s novel as explored in the next article of this volume. The writer elucidates that women are looked upon as impediments in the growth of the hyper-masculine heroes that Hemingway delights in portraying and they, of necessity, should be obliterated.

From literature to the cinematic genre, women’s issues are deeply entrenched. The next article on Vengeful women and the mysterious metropolis, has analyzed three Bombay films which chart a relationship between women’s bodies and the urban spaces, wherein the same cityscape that threatens the female figure also empowers her in multiple ways.

A similar dichotomy also holds true in women’s representations on social media, which is explored in an article on Women and the pandemic. The article elaborates that while the social media helped to highlight several women’s issues, including that of increased violence against women during COVID-19, these new media platforms also provided a channel for women to voice their opinions. Social media, note the authors, holds the promise of fostering alternative narratives if it can resist being dominated by self-serving actors.

Continuing with the digital space, a sociological study published in this edition explores the evolving nature of women's work in the digital age within the neoliberal framework. By focusing on the intersection of gender, technology, and entrepreneurship, the author notes how digital spaces shape women's labour experiences in contemporary society and the broader social and economic implications of these changes.

Women's remarkable presence in the workforce can be seen in the high proportion of own-account workers in the informal sector. This is discussed in depth in the concluding article which advocates gender-sensitive policies to create work that is inclusive and empowering for the countless women engaged in vulnerable work in the informal sector.

In continuum with the above, the Book review at the end of Neha Dixit's The Story of an Unknown Indian: The Many Lives of Syeda X, analyses the truth about women's informal, home-based work that sustains Delhi's small and medium-sized industries.

I express my sincere appreciation and thanks to our contributing authors whose well-researched articles have brought forth enriching perspectives on gender issues. On behalf of the Editorial team, I express my grateful thanks to Prof. Pavitra Bhardwaj for her support in the publication of this edition of Akademos.

Dr. Jyoti Raghavan

Contents

Retelling Mythology for Contemporary Relevance

Palak Mishra

Abstract:

Representations of women in various media have set gender roles in Indian societies for centuries. In the absence of modern mass media like radio and television, oral forms like epics and poetry and subsequently, their written records like books played a crucial role in establishing concrete gender roles in societies. There have been attempts to redefine these codes and practices through various means of dissent. One such means is the revolutionization of mythological texts to present alternate narratives. These books attempt to suit the modern fervour and present a more contemporary outlook on various social aspects. A specific genre of these retellings is Feminist Revisionist Mythologies. This study aims to look at some examples of Feminist Revisionist Mythological books, written by women, to analyse the evolving representation of women and LGBTQIA+ characters and the associated gender roles.

Key Words: *Mythology, Retellings, Feminist, Books*

Introduction

Books stand as timeless pillars of human civilization, shaping our world as both guardians of history and bridges to the future. They have been revered as the means to preserve our culture and history and a source to transmit it to the next generation. Among the plethora of book types, religious texts have one of the major footprints in the social and cultural construction of societies and gender roles. Religious texts, with chronicles of extraordinary heroic figures, recognized as Gods and several supernatural and mystical elements, are more often than not passed off as actual historical facts and ideals to live life by. Stories and legends have been used intricately to define the societies we live in by overriding certain practices and standards as adequate and others as inadequate. These texts often become the go-to laws for judging people based on the respective gender roles and codes established in these books.

Myth and Mythology –

Oxford Dictionary defines myth as a "traditional story usually involving supernatural or imaginary persons and embodying popular ideas on natural or social phenomena etc. "

Myth is a kind of symbolic storytelling, which has no claims to be based on historical facts. They are generally stories from the era of which no substantial record can be found. Mythologies, thus, are story collections indigenous to a community, which dictates their deities, values, and worldview.

Myths are often the subject matter for epics, long poems that tell a story about a well-identified protagonist. Epics were originally a part of oral communication, as the rhythm and rhyme of poems make them easier to remember and pass down.

Hindu Mythology –

Hindu mythology is rooted in diverse religious texts of Sanskrit literature, including the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, the Itihasas[1] —the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, and other stories from different ethnolinguistic groups like Tamil or Bengali. The Vedas, the oldest scriptures, contain hymns and rituals forming the basis of Hindu thought, while the Upanishads explore philosophical ideas like Brahman (ultimate reality) and Atman (self). The Puranas narrate myths, divine genealogies, and cosmic cycles, making religious teachings accessible. The Itihasas blend myth, morality, and historical tradition, shaping ideas of dharma and duty.

Hinduism and Hindu mythology co-evolved, shaping each other over time. While Vedic traditions focused on rituals, mythology made religious ideas accessible. It became central to ethics, spirituality, and cultural identity, with Bhakti movements deepening its role in devotion. Rather than one preceding the other, they remain interwoven forces, constantly redefining each other. Of these texts, the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata are the most popular among people.

Malashri Lal and Namita Gokhale in their book "In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology" explain the significance of mythology in Indian society-

"Mythology in India is not just an academic or historical subject, it is a vital and living topic of contemporary relevance. The complex social, political and religious attitudes of 'modern' India cannot be understood without an understanding of our myths and their impact on the collective faith of the people."

These texts have played a significant role in shaping societal values,

[1] Meaning "history"

often portraying ideals of masculinity and femininity. Characters like Rama, known as Maryada Purushottam (the epitome of virtue), and Arjuna, the great warrior, serve as models of ideal men. Meanwhile, Sita[2] is upheld as an example of the ideal woman, often admired for her obedience and endurance. In contrast, Draupadi[3] is portrayed as a woman whose assertiveness leads to consequences, reflecting the way gender roles have been reinforced through these narratives.

Many female characters in the epics are linked to the causes of conflicts, while the men who fight these wars are celebrated as heroes. These narratives, largely authored in historical patriarchal contexts, have contributed to defining and regulating gender roles, influencing perceptions of women's character, freedom, rights, and responsibilities over time.

Over time, these texts have not only shaped societal expectations but have also influenced later literature and storytelling traditions. This is substantiated by Dr Shakambhari Jayal in her book "The Status of Women in the Epics" as she comments, "…post-epic literature mostly borrows from, or improves and reconstructs on, the themes taken from the epics." She also emphasizes the connection between these stories and the culture of the land. "Ancient Indian History and tradition of the times have been so well-knit that it is very difficult to separate the two."

The Mythological View –

Understanding the traditional mythological interpretations of popular epics is essential for examining how their themes, values, and narratives evolve when viewed through a contemporary lens. By

[2] Ram's wife
[3] Arjun's wife; also the wife of his four brothers, collectively called the Pandavas

tracing their original contexts and intended meanings, we can better analyze how modern retellings reinterpret, challenge, or reinforce these long-standing beliefs.

The traditional view, as presented in the Valmiki Ramayana, sees Rama as the ideal king (Maryada Purushottam) who must balance *Rajadharma*[4] and *Svadharma*[5] . While Rama and Sita are both individuals, they are also bound by their responsibilities as king and queen. Their separation—Rama in Ayodhya and Sita in the forest—is not merely a personal decision but a necessary act to uphold the moral authority of the kingdom. This perspective interprets their sacrifices as selfless acts meant to set an example for society and ensure the stability of the kingdom, even at great personal cost.

Unlike the Ramayana, the Mahabharata presents dharma as fluid, requiring interpretation. Vyasa's Mahabharata largely portrays women as catalysts rather than active participants in shaping their destinies. Draupadi's humiliation leads to war, but the Pandavas largely make the decisions that follow. Kunti's secret about Karna defines key conflicts, yet she remains bound by duty rather than shaping events directly. Mahabharata presents men as bound by their oaths and responsibilities to state and lineage, whereas women are often defined by their roles in family honor and sacrifice. The Bhagavad Gita[6] suggests that individual suffering, whether of men or women, is secondary to the grand cosmic order of dharma.

Retellings and Revisions –

These texts were written thousands of years ago, in disparate contexts and environments. The pertinence of these texts after such

[4] Duty as a ruler
[5] Personal duty
[6] Sacred Hindu scripture part of the Mahabharata

extreme changes in society, culture and lifestyle is quite debatable. The values on which people have based their entire lives might be archaic in the light of new understanding of the world. The social and moral codes, the role of men and women, the distinction in caste and class, the lifestyle, and the spiritual practices, all need to undergo revisions from time to time to make room for new perceptions and conceptions of the world we live in. For this reason, there have been several retellings of these mythologies. These retellings sometimes help people comprehend the stories, sometimes make the stories more connecting and relevant, and many times include alternate perspectives to appropriate the current societal values.

Of the two most popular texts, the Ramayana originally written by Vakmiki[7]. , has around 300 versions, whereas The Mahabharata, originally written by Ved Vyasa, has over 1300 versions. Moreover, these stories have been adapted by people, especially rural women, to talk about their experiences and connect with these popular narratives. The stories of Sita have been incorporated vastly into folk songs to voice out the injustices done to women and their fight back. Thus, there have also been revisions to the original stories themselves to match the contemporary fervour, especially revisions regarding the role and characterization of women in these male-dominated texts. This has given way to a specific niche in the area of mythological retelling.

New Historicism –

A significant approach to studying these texts is New Historicism, a literary theory that challenges the traditional understanding of history and text as separate entities. Developed as a response to Old Historicism, which views literary and mythological texts as passive

[7] Written in 200 B.C.E.

reflections of their historical context, New Historicism argues that history itself is a construct—shaped by power, ideology, and cultural narratives, much like literature. This perspective is particularly relevant in the study of mythological retellings, where ancient stories are not just remnants of the past but active participants in shaping contemporary discourse. By examining how these retellings interact with both ancient texts and modern socio-political realities, New Historicism allows us to see mythology as a constantly evolving medium—one that is rewritten and redefined over time to reflect shifting cultural values.

Feminist Revisionist Mythology –

Feminist Revisionist Mythology can be said to be borne out of Feminism and Revisionism. Women have been highly discontented with the representation of female characters in the epics written by men and made to be followed by men. They question many of the perspectives and questions hurled at female characters. They also despise the way a women's struggle and suffering is idealized and a woman's strength is depicted as something to be warned against. There was an unavoidable need to let the world know of Indian women not only as meek and loyal but also fierce and intellectual. There was a desperate demand to portray these female characters in a way that contemporary women could mirror them.

Thus, writers took it upon themselves to give space to these women who have been largely neglected by men or used to drive certain specific lessons home. The coming era has seen the rise of stories in which women get prominence and significance. Feminist revisions of mythology do more than revisit well-known tales; they engage in a dialogue with history, challenging the way women's roles have been historically constructed and interpreted. Women's stories are told from their perspective, their opinions, reactions,

decisions, concerns, dreams, desires, and fantasies are accepted and appreciated. People are making use of such widespread stories to raise important issues, concerning society's past, present, and future. Sita's story is now seen as a symbol for injustice done to women and a neglected wife and single mother whereas Draupadi's is seen as a symbol for women being suppressed by regulations and the strength of a woman's conviction.

Along the same lines, it is also important to look at the representation of queer or transgender characters. [8] In the epics, these characters were even more neglected than women. Even today, they are neglected as not-so-important characters. As the feminist revisionist mythology takes centre stage, it is crucial to include these characters in the narratives, owing to the feminist principles of equal representation.

This study focuses on the popular feminist retellings of the great Indian mythology published between 2001-2020, keeping in mind the contemporary developments in society as well as the ever-evolving concept of feminism in the national environment. We look at four successful books, centered around a female protagonist and written by female authors. Female protagonists in the book ensure an alternate perspective to the ones already established, with the narrative shifting from war and victory to life and emotions. The books selected are all written by women so that the study uncovers the possibilities and progress women want to see in the characters that have long since been given the status of "ideal" and which still define their way of living.

The selected books are The Forest of Enchantments and Sita's sister for Ramayana; and The Palace of Illusions and The Kaunteyas for Mahabharata. These books are expected to provide a fair sample to study the popular reimagination of women protagonists by authors

[8] Any characters belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual)

of the same gender. They allow understanding of the women's perspective of the great war, as well as other characters in the epic, including the heroes and the queer characters.

The Forest Of Enchantments

BY Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

"The Forest of Enchantments" is an attempt to explore the 'Sitayana' or Sita's story. The prologue of the novel contains an interaction between Sita and sage Vyasa.[9], where she praises him for having written Ram's story but accuses him of neglecting her side of the story. Sita then takes it upon herself to write her own story.

The title of the novel can be justified because what Sita faces in her darkest hour is the major mystery behind her character. The forest of enchantments is where her life changes drastically and her past, present and future entwine to make sense.

Sita's Sister

BY Kavita Kane

As the author Kavita Kané claims, the novel "Sita's sister" tells the story of Urmila, the long-forgotten and largely neglected character in the epic Ramayana, along with an alternate view on many of the renowned events of the epic from her perspective.

Contrary to the general form of Ramayana storytelling, which focuses on the plight and suffering of Sita as the main female character, Sita's sister is a refreshing take on the stories of other female characters like Urmila, Mandavi[10], Kaikeyi, Sumitra[11], Shanta[12], etc. In the

[9] Author of the epic Ramayana
[10] Urmila's cousin sister
[11] King Dashrath's third wife; Mother of Lakshman and Shatrughan
[12] King Dashrath's eldest daughter

novel, Urmila is the protagonist, depicted to be the pillar of strength who binds together her sisters as well as her in-laws.

However, by naming the novel "Sita's sister" the author reiterates the secondary status of Urmila, as if she could be known only by her sister's name. Also, the novel ultimately establishes Urmila as a super-heroine and an upholder of immense strength and sacrifice, rather than substantiate her as a normal human being, with flaws and faults. The feminist obsession with transforming suppressed female characters into extremely glorified over-achievers is evident in the novel. Thus, rather than being Urmila's story, the novel is more like a chant of Urmila's strength and self-sacrifice.

The Kaunteyas

BY Madhavi S. Mahadevan

"Death is important to a man, but survival is more important to a woman."

The book is a critical commentary on the ways of men and women. Told from the perspective of Kunti, the mother whose early life is not much known to the majority, the novel does not shy away from asking questions about the supposed hierarchical and patriarchal structures of the society. Kunti, the heroine, is given the space to grow out of her image as the mother to be seen as a girl, a woman with flaws and desires.

However, in naming the book "The Kaunteyas" which translates to Kunti's sons, the writer has done injustice to the theme of the novel. Also, dividing the novel into parts based on the three overpowering men in her life, i.e., Part 1 – Kuntibhoja (Kunti's foster father), Part 2 – Pandu (Kunti's Husband) and Part 3 – Kunteyas (Kunti's sons), defeats its purpose. It gives in to the patriarchal means of quantifying a woman's life based on the men in it. While the first two parts

deal primarily with Kunti's feelings, the third part takes the main protagonist onto the sidelines and focuses only on diplomacy and politics before the war.

The Palace Of Illusions

BY Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

"The Palace of Illusions" is one of the most popular retellings of mythology. The protagonist Draupadi, the largely neglected, accused, and misunderstood character is given space to narrate the story of her birth and all that followed. The author successfully peels down Draupadi's life story, layer by layer and the characters are seen in a new light. The novel explores very diverse perspectives contrary to the popular narratives.

Naming the book upon a single material possession Draupadi had, i.e., The Palace of Illusions[13] , is a bit restrictive, negating Draupadi's agency. However, deeper into the story it is made clear that The Palace of Illusions is the only place Draupadi feels at home. All her life, she longed for love, acceptance and belonging which she could find in no human but a magical stone establishment.

Analysis:

It is important to understand if the modern feminist retellings of the epics texts proliferate or uproot the hierarchal and patriarchal power structures. Through these four novels – "The Forest of Enchantments" and "The Palace of Illusions" by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, "Sita's Sister" by Kavita Kane, and "The Kaunteyas" by Madhavi S. Mahadevan, we try to look at the multi-dimensionality

[13] Author of the epic Ramayana

bestowed upon these female characters who were barely given any space in the original texts.

One of the prominent themes in these retellings is the subjugation of women in the hands of fate or destiny. The woman makes a certain proclamation at the beginning of the story which she is unable to fulfil by the end. In "The Kaunteyas", Kunti vows to never abandon a child but she had to. Sita promises to never part from her husband in "The Forest of Enchantments" but she is forced to do so. In "The Palace of Illusions" Draupadi proclaims that she would never be the cause of so many deaths and she would teach her children to look for ways alternative to wars and seek peace, but she ultimately leads them to a fatal war. Draupadi also promises that she will never let her husband take another wife, but not only is she married to five men but her husbands also take several other wives.

The female characters in these novels are a step ahead of the popular patriarchal narratives. The women in these retellings are not mere spectators or victims, but the ones who drive the story. These women make mistakes, they struggle within the power structures and find their ways of defying the patriarchy. Although they succumb to the patriarchal standards at some point or the other, they present a strong feminist angle to their characters. None of these characters justify their partner's actions, they criticize their husbands or even others when the need be. The four protagonists in the selected books present a different picture of feminist imagination. Sita in "The Forest of Enchantments" is the ideal wife until she is forced to stand against her husband, but she does fiercely and without regret. Urmila in "Sita's sister" is a brand-new character that depicts a woman's intellect and dedication. Kunti in "The Kaunteyas" is a splendid example of a woman fighting against the ways of men and women, though being caught in the web many times but struggling nonetheless. Draupadi in "The Palace of Illusions" is the perfect

example of a strong woman who owns up to her actions and accepts her flaws as they are.

Another significant aspect of these characters is their acknowledgement of their emotional, physical and sexual desires. They are not merely seen as goddesses or idols but as humans with genuine feelings and needs. These books also succeed in representing women as individuals with hobbies and specific personality traits, rather than just fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers. They also provide splendid examples of women making alliances with other women and queens and princesses working for the upliftment of other women. Through Draupadi and Krishna, platonic friendships with devotion and loyalty are also given importance.

But these retellings have been lacking in creating a more humane character. Their protagonists are still proclaimed saviours, the ones who have the responsibility of changing the world. Many a time, they judge other women too harshly and themselves become the vehicle for patriarchy. All of these women try to act according to the established norms and standards as far as they can. These women are also shown to keep their feelings to themselves and suffer alone. The side character is always the one desperate for marriage, a gossip-monger and submissive, pushing them towards a forced competition between the perfect superheroine and the imperfect side character.

The narrative of the books does not linger on the politics and complexity of the wars as much as the older narratives do. The centre of attention remains on the feelings of those involved in the war, especially women. A good amount of attention is also paid to the results of the war, the sorrow and destruction it brings with itself in the lives of people left behind by the 'heroes' who died in the war. The wars are not justified in any of the novels but are depicted merely as a means to satisfy men's egos and prove their assertion over one another, all in the name of Dharma. In "Sita's Sister" by

Kavita Kane, the battle of Lanka is not as much as described in detail. The tension in the novel is focused on Urmila's concern for her sister, who has been abducted. She clings to any piece of news about Sita and prays for her return. The nuances of the war do not matter to her. The war is not remotely as important as what her sister had to go through before, during and after the war. In "The Kaunteyas" by Madhavi S. Mahadevan, the diplomacy and politics leading to the war are given considerable space in the narratives, often side-lining Kunti's role itself. However, the Kurukshetra War is not mentioned as a pivotal event of importance. The circumstances leading to it and the impact the war has on the people are much more significant. Kunti's helplessness in keeping her sons on the safe path, her anger towards her sons for not protecting Draupadi and her desire for getting her sons their rights are the forces that drive Kunti towards accepting the war. Her experience on the battlefield in the aftermath of war, where she encounters weeping widows and kids, including Gandhari, depicts the devastating power of men's games for control. Remembering the names of the dead, irrespective of their context, proves that none of the reasons for a war are justified. It's just death and destruction. "The Forest of Enchantments" also does not give much space to the war of Lanka. The story is all about Sita's tough existence in the forest and her struggles and does not focus on the intricacies or politics of war. She learns all about the war from varied sources but the major highlight remains on her experiences and not on the strategy and result of the war. The novel pays more attention to the aftermath of war, and the despair of Mandodari, Sarama, and other women in the city of Lanka. She also regrets the poor condition Lanka is left in because of the war. "The Palace of Illusions", however, gives a more detailed picture of the war. Draupadi, the protagonist, is the sole witness to the whole war and is thus responsible for sharing the details. Her depiction of the war is also significant as in many ways she was held responsible

for it. But she does not just describe the war as a detached event with cause and effects, she lingers on the complexities of human nature and the emotions, doubts, reservations, and intricacies in the behaviour of those involved in the war. She also exposes all the unfair tactics involved in war, from both the Kauravas and Pandavas side, appreciating neither. Thus, her narrative of the war makes it very clear that even though she made a few mistakes, the war was thriving on an unending supply of male ego and trickery.

There are other stark oppositions to the popular mythological narratives. Regarding the epic Ramayana, in "The Forest of Enchantments", Sita is supposed to be Ravan and Mandodari's daughter by birth. Sita is shown to have enraged Lakshman by knowingly accusing him of wanting Sita for himself so that he goes to save Ram. Kaikeyi is not the villain in "Sita's sister", but a mere mediator to deliver what's already been destined, staking her own life in the process. Urmila is not just any girl, but a highly respected scholar who is given a space in her father's court. Various incidents of the Mahabharata have also been depicted differently. Draupadi is shown to be in love with Karna in "The Palace of Illusions." Draupadi did insult Karna at the Swayamvar, but only to save her brother's life. Draupadi was supposedly not the one who laughed at Duryodhan in the Palace, it was one of her maids. The infamous unease in Kunti and Draupadi's relationship is replaced with friendship and respect in "The Kaunteyas", whereas it is magnified in "The Palace of Illusions." Kunti's command to her sons to share Draupadi is not shown as a mere fault but a well-thought-of move to keep her sons' lust for a woman from dividing them. Pandavas are not depicted as heroes but men with ambition, hunger for power, inability to uphold their wives' respect, and many other flaws. Thus, it is evident that these retellings represent genuine efforts of contemporary writers to modify the narratives to suit today's social environment. The various alterations in the narratives provide a deeper multi-dimensional

version of the narrative, without destroying the underlined essence of these stories.

We also look at the representation of Queer/ transgender characters who are not abundant in the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata. But, including the few characters, that existed in the mythologies, in the new contemporary light is a crucial step in the feminist claims of these retellings. Equal representation of homosexual/ queer/ transgender characters is essential to maintain the modern fervour of these works. In both the books based on the Ramayana, no queer/ transgender characters are originally present. However, in the books based on the Mahabharata, two prominent queer/ transgender roles are Sikhandi and Arjuna (who was cursed to become a eunuch for a year). In "The Kaunteyas" none of these characters are given any space whatsoever. The narrative does not include their description or role in the story. However, in "The Palace of Illusions", both of these characters are given some space. Sikhandi, Draupadi's elder sibling is described in detail, as Draupadi never knew she even had an eldest sister who had been sent away. When Draupadi saw Sikhandi, she mentions "Sikhandi, who was born a woman, was now a man." Sikhandi then narrates the story of her transformation from a woman to a man. "When I awoke, I was a man. And yet not completely so, for though my form was changed inside me I remembered how women thought and what they longed for." (46) However, with the inclusion of the character there is also the inclusion of the treatment they are subjected to. Draupadi's caretaker Dhai Ma and her father are not too happy about Draupadi being in Sikhandi's company. Her father even stopped Draupadi's lessons soon afterwards saying that she needed to learn more 'feminine' qualities. Arjun as the eunuch is described as "Without moustache or beard his face looked naked. His form was lithe and slender, draped in red silk. When he walked, his hips swayed; his smile was shy yet confident." (224) Draupadi also mentions the humiliation he would have to face as a

eunuch. “I would have to curb my emotions at the sight of his lost manhood, at the jibes to which, as a eunuch, he was bound to be subjected.” (225) Thus, these characters could earn a very cornered space in the whole narrative and almost negligible significance in the storyline. As these retellings are considered feminist, it would be expected of them to look at other facets of feminism rather than only women protagonists. Marginal representation of queer/ transgender characters reiterates certain patriarchal notions which are not acceptable in the contemporary world.

Mythologies were written in a specific social, cultural, and temporal context. Therefore, the portrayal of female protagonists cannot be seen with scepticism entirely in popular mythology. It is impossible to detach these characters from the reality of the society they were created in. Doing so could lead to the dissolution of the encoded meaning behind the whole text. However, it is also imprudent to accept these popular representations as they are. As the context of society changes, the mythologies need revisions so that they match the contemporary fervour of society. Consequently, the portrayal of female protagonists in popular narratives also needs revision so that the women in society know that the women they are supposed to look up to are not some outdated dummy dolls but an embodiment of women’s contemporary perspectives.

Conclusion:

In feminist revisionist mythology, female characters are often portrayed as powerful and complex, challenging the traditionally passive and one-dimensional representations of women in mythology. These characters are often depicted as strong and independent, with agency and the ability to shape their destinies. These retellings are an interesting source of mythological understanding for contemporary readers, with the necessary upliftment of female characters. These

retellings provide the readers with female protagonists, people would themselves want to look up to. It also provides ample scope for people to modify the stories further so that they incorporate their understandings and experiences into these stories and make them connectable to the larger audience. While feminist revisionist mythology seeks to challenge the traditionally passive and one-dimensional representations of women in mythology, it also has certain drawbacks in its portrayal of female characters. The emphasis on female empowerment and agency can sometimes lead to a reductionist and essentialist view of gender, perpetuating stereotypes and oversimplifying the complexity of human experience. One criticism is that feminist revisionist mythology can sometimes rely too heavily on the idea of women as inherently virtuous or morally superior to men. While it is important to challenge the stereotypes and limitations imposed on women in mythology and society, this approach can be reductive and unrealistic. It can also create a false dichotomy between men and women, ignoring the complexities and variations of individual experience. It can sometimes create a new set of stereotypes and essentialist representations of women. For example, the portrayal of female characters as strong and independent warriors can reinforce the idea that physical strength and combat skills are necessary for women to be considered powerful, which can be limiting and exclusionary. Feminist revisionist mythology can be overly focused on individual empowerment and agency, at the expense of collective action and solidarity. This can lead to a narrow and individualistic view of feminism, ignoring the importance of social and political structures in shaping gender relations. It can fail to address broader issues of structural inequality and oppression. While feminist revisionist mythology seeks to empower female characters, it may not necessarily address the underlying social and political structures that limit women's opportunities and agency. Overall, while feminist revisionist mythology can be a powerful tool

for challenging gender norms and promoting feminist values, it must be approached with sensitivity and awareness of the complex social and cultural contexts in which myths were created. These retellings are surely a successful attempt at revising the identity of prominent female characters of the epics, but they still lack in many aspects. In the contrast between the submissive ideal of the older times to the feminist superheroine of the present time, the intricacies of a woman's characterization are lost. The need of the hour is creating female characters who are more humane and connectable, characters who have their flaws and faults and are still accepted instead of a perfect superheroine.

References:

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. 2008. *The Palace of Illusions.* New York: Doubleday

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. 2019. *The Forest of Enchantments.* Gurugram: HarperCollins Publishers

Gokhale, Namita. Lal, Malashri. 2009. *In search of Sita – Revisiting Mythology.* Delhi: Penguin Random House

Jayal, Dr, Shakambhari. 1966. *The status of women in the epics*. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass

Kané, Kavita. 2014. *Sita's Sister.* New Delhi: Rupa Publications

Mahadevan, Madhavi S. 2016. *The Kaunteyas.* Chennai: Tranquebar Press

Ms.Palak Mishra is pursuing her MA in Women & Gender Studies at IGNOU.

Braiding Gender and Media: Teaching Jane Eyre in the Undergraduate Indian classroom.

Smita Banerjee

Abstract:

The paper is invested in mapping the terrains of 'braided pedagogies', a creative borrowing of the term that Natalie Davies uses for writing of history to focus on the multiple nodes of engagement that a teacher of Anglophone literature might have to invoke in the classroom that can speak to/ for her subject position enabling creative engagement with the much-maligned domestic novel genres that are included in most English Literature syllabi on Victorian women writers. The article also productively engages with the concept of 'intermedial' (Littau 1995,2005) as an important pedagogical practice. The textual focus on Jane Eyre is used as an illustration to explain teaching methodologies that can be useful introductory pedagogical interventions into cultural, Feminist, medial and postcolonial theories. These theoretical insights become imperative if we are to push for awareness of positions deeply imbricated in our mediated postcolonial locations and create capacity for 'critical-ethical' thinking in learners.

Key Words: *Feminism, Jane Eyre, Postcolonial, intermedial, Pedagogy.*

Introduction

What a great love story; Poor Mr. Rochester, Of course it is 'normal' for him to want Jane at all costs, after all he was saddled with Bertha for so long'! A few responses that undergraduate students came up with after reading Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre (1847). Their uncritical assumptions of accepting a 'romantic story' and the enduring appeal of the governess figure familiar via popular cinematic character of Maria, from the Hollywood musical Sound of Music (1965) or for some students the many adaptations of Loiusa M. Alcott's (1832-1888) Little Women (1868), seems to cast a romantic mist over the class. How does one counter this already mediated 'interpretive community'(Fish cited in Choo,2013), that the 'classic and pure love story' where this poor man is only trying to reform himself can be also read as a rake trying to redeem himself with 'virginal Jane' while imprisoning the mad wife!

Teaching an UG group one cannot presume any familiarity with concepts of literary theory and cannot present heavy jargon infused concepts head on in the class. The habit of reading a text as a discreet object which only comprises of story, plot, character sketches or chapter summaries need to be countered steadily with a wide-ranging theoretical scaffolding that accommodates multiple ways of reading a literary text as a cultural studies text needs to be slowly initiated. And for a reading group separated from the context of Victorian women writers who were challenging the discourses of their own times is in itself a hard task. How can any critical pedagogy engage with women's fiction as a serious object of enquiry and be used to posit questions about women, writers, and genres of domestic fiction, derided for being non serious and narrow in focus? The politics of syllabi formation that includes 'canonical' Anglophone texts are important issues for us in the global south. How can these ideological concerns structure the pedagogy of our classroom?

Additionally, despite the 'fixity' of the syllabus Literature teachers are "not mere pawns" in the teaching-grading machinery (Choo, 2012). Their pedagogies can become significant tools for enabling the learners to develop as "critical-ethical thinkers who can be made aware of what, "Nikos Papastergiadis (2007) terms, a "transnational consciousness" which is an outward orientation that recognizes shared human values and manifests itself as a posture of concern towards others outside one's community" (ibid,33). This enterprise assumes importance at present, given the onslaught of criticism levelled at Liberal Arts disciplines which are not perceived to be commercially and economically viable.

Material Contexts: Multifocal Teaching.

The practice of grounding our teaching strategies for Victorian women writers can begin by placing the text within a feminist cultural materialist frame. This can alert the students to the layers of locating the text within its material condition of writing, social and cultural histories and suture concerns of race and gender which given our own historical imbrication within colonialism, we need to contend with. If one uses the example of Jane Eyre (1847), and Vanity Fair (1848) then the critical review by Lady Jane Rigby (1849) is a good example into the contentious issues of class and working-class discontent in the period and the text. Her assessment of the two novels is mediated through a review of the annual report of the Governesses Benevolent Institution[i] which was founded in 1841.Though she seems genuinely moved by the plight of the retired governesses with no means of support, Rigby seems more concerned with the growing number of governesses from a wider class than those distressed gentlewomen who had traditionally become governesses. As governessing became a career option for which farmers and trades people might educate their daughters,

Rigby seems perturbed as, "a number of under bred young women have crept into the profession who have brought down the value of salaries and interfered with the rights of those whose birth and misfortune leave them no refuge" (Rigby,174). Becky Sharpe in Vanity Fair is precisely this kind of "underbred woman" who poses a threat to the established social order and class hierarchy discussed in Rigby's review. However, it is Bronte's Jane who invites the bulk of ire. Rigby finds in the figure of Jane, "an unregenerate and undisciplined woman who stands or falls by her own efforts" (ibid). For Rigby the novel is primarily an anti-Christian text in its, "murmurings against the comforts of the rich and privations of the poor and is thus set itself against God's will in asserting the rights of man." (ibid). She writes further that, "we do not hesitate to say that the tone of mind which has overthrown authority and violated every code of human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism[ii] and rebellion at home is the same which also has written Jane Eyre." (ibid). We know that Chartism was a mass movement that demanded voting and political rights for working class people who did not own any land or property. The First Reform Bill of 1832 presented in the British Parliament failed to secure these rights (https://www.paliament.uk). This popular movement was held responsible for fermenting social rebellion as is evident from Rigby's words. One can cite Jane's words in Chapter twelve from the novel that echoes ideas of rebellion and critique,

"Nobody knows how many rebellions beside political rebellion ferment in the masses of life… Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do. They suffer from too rigid a restraint, to absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow minded in their more privileged fellow creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, two playing

on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, if they seek to do more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex." (Jane Eyre, 95).

Jane Eyre's impact is all the greater because it written in the first person. The audacity of this female voice in articulating its discontent and aligning itself with larger narratives of rebellion is what clearly shocks Rigby. In fact, the form of the autobiographical fiction is part of its condition of success and its contentious relationship with its times, raising as it does important questions about fiction writing and ordering of women's experience into fiction. However, these concerns about authorial voice, narrative voice and constructions of self are outside the purview of this article. It would be enough to mention that the use of Jane's voice like the new public voice of the Chartists was an achievement in an age where women were usually concerned with private domestic spheres rather than public articulation of their desires. This is precisely the fear of the rise of the working-class discontent that Rigby is talking about. The entire edifice of 'order' and hierarchy of social status was challenged from the 1830s onwards and culminated in the debacle of the 1832 Reform Bill. The fact that most people did have not voting rights or political representation needs to be introduced and contextualized within the 'taken for granted' right to vote in the Indian context. This can provide a productive engagement with exclusionary politics based on property rights. For most students the understanding of specific inflections of historical and social contexts is hazy and non-essential. Pedagogy then needs to be informative in terms of contextualization of dry history that informs ideologies and their perpetuation. This movement of the working classes positioned within the discourse of class consciousness which informs the Marxist analysis can help students to navigate the ideas of social and historical materialism[iii].

The domestication of the discourse of class also involves one of

the principal figures in the fiction of this period, the governess. It is important to mention that this figure was the leading character in three novels published in 1847, William M Thackeray's Vanity Fair, Bronte's Jane Eyre, and Agnes Grey by Anne Bronte. M Jeanne Peterson (1970) and Pat Macpherson (2024) note that the governess figure embodied the multiple incongruences of the 1840s middle-class female's social location. She was a social embarrassment who underscored the 'normative' family's position as an economic brick of the society. She inhabited the interstices of the familial space: she was neither a relation, nor a guest, or a servant or a mistress and she was very often accused of transgressing her place in the social hierarchy.

Bronte's constructions of this socially marginal figure foreground the interpolations of gender and class configurations. We might refer to the offensive after dinner conversation of the Ingram's when they abuse the entire tribe of governesses in front of Jane. A governess job was largely an alleviation that enabled a woman a modicum of dealing with her economic dependency but did not provide any solution of her social marginalisations. Her salary ranged between 150 to 200 pounds a year, most likely between 25 to 45 pounds. Considering that it would require anything between 150 to 200 pounds to maintain a single person's gentility, Jane's insistence on holding onto an income of 30 pounds is indeed a mark of her independent spirit.

Bronte's Jane Eyre offered something new in the fiction of its time, subverting the romance plot made famous in Samuel Richardson's (1689-1721), Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded (1740). Her plain Jane is constructed without anything to recommend her marriageability-no beauty, no money, no family connections. Before Bronte's subversions, the plots repeatedly investigated male attention and assault on hapless women while the demands of middle-class formula that equated innocence and purity of the heroine to her

marriageability were left unchallenged. The heroine carried the burden of being beautiful, decorous, whose behaviour dictated her reward or punishment. If she retained her virtue in the face of the man's rakish behaviour, she could look forward to marriage, else she was to be thrown out of polite society as a transgressor. Through Jane, Bronte explores the various positions of the Victorian woman; the female child, the female adolescent, the genteel governess, the madwoman and finally the lady of the Manor. Bronte's power lies in her ability to weave a complex narrative permitted by this discourse of class, gender and power relations. Bronte's significance lies in her nuanced unravelling of the Victorian society and the woman of that times[iv]. Bronte begins her novel with a fallen woman; the term fallen resonating with ironies about the acceptable terms of innocence for Jane, what they should be and are.

The novelist's reconfiguration of the romance plot includes the figure of the bad girl Jane and then remake her into a new good woman and to consign the rest that could not be accommodated into the gothic. The narrator Jane and the author Bronte rewrite the Victorian woman into a whole; combining passion, intellect, feeling, reason, propriety, rebellion, virtue and transgressive desire. Eagleton's Marxist analysis (1975), locates the tensions and dichotomies in the text between conformity and rebellion as a fictional representation class conflict: the landed Gentry and the industrial bourgeoisie, the two dominant classes of the period.This work is extremely useful in analysing the nature of class conflict and its configurations in the text.

One can use the Jane- Rochester courtship in the Thornfield section to explain the gender, class and power equation in the novel. Jane has a dull experience at Thornfield until Mr. Rochester riding back home sees her on her walk and falls, both literally and figuratively. Bronte subverts the love affair by placing Bertha in the attic whose

intrusions undercut the budding romance. Elaine Showalter (1997) and Gilbert and Gubar's(1979) work on the madwoman and her relationship to Jane have attained canonical status within the discourse of feminist critique of Bronte. Susan Fraiman's (2011) explication of the Domestic Novel is very useful to locate the woman in the grid of class, women's employment situation, and the attempts at containing the woman into domesticity. Her useful invoking of Said's understanding of 'place', the healthy comforting British location vs the "morass" of abroad (176-177), is particularly prescient in introducing the postcolonial insight for the learner. Susan Myers (1997) becomes significant in locating the terms of analysis within the grid of gender and empire and the idea of a shared marginality into a shared experience of frustration, limitation and subordination. For teachers and students in the Indian classroom it is extremely important that the context of colonial ideology and historical context that defined the 19th century British political, social and cultural life be placed alongside other interventions. The embedded nature of these histories needs attention for learners to interpret ideologies of domination that inform canonical texts.

Media in the Classroom: the 'intermedial' zone.

The concept of 'intermedial' is useful to invoke here. As mentioned elsewhere "intermediality describes the contact zone of translation between media" (Littau cited in Banerjee, 2021). Littau has rightly remarked that as structuralism has demonstrated, it is not possible to exist outside language, similarly "we now no longer can exist outside media" (ibid). It can be a useful practice in the untrained undergraduate classroom where the ubiquity of smartphones and screens have proliferated during the pandemic and continues at present. The use of pdf texts read on the screen has all but replaced the physical text in many English classrooms. The availability of

internet connectivity on the student's devices in the classroom can provide rich resources which the teacher can mine for pedagogy, becoming the intermedial, the contact zone between the literary text and its avtaars on multiple media[v] : silent films, fiction films, stage, television etc. As teachers we must recognize this contact zone and use technology that can provide exciting possibilities of alerting students to the multiple adaptations of Jane Eyre.

The theatrical stage adaptation of Polly Teale[vi] is very interesting for initiating the students into discussing the convergences between Jane and Bertha that Bronte masks and Teale foregrounds[vii] . The use of stage setting in the Teale version where we see Jane on the stage, with Bertha perched above her in grilled balcony makes these tenuous associations of the Bronte text apparent for the students to visualize. The easy online accessibility of this stage adaptation's booklet and you tube links is significant for making the learners aware of the important feminist concerns of the two texts. The pedagogy to locate Bertha within the gothic genre is significant in not only critiquing love and marriage but also in locating the cultural anxieties of the period in terms of the binaries of the self and the other. The deployment of the gothic raises important questions regarding the relationship between the self-desire, transgression, sexuality and containment within the domain of patriarchy. The text creates subliminal connections between Jane and Bertha. These connections foreground them as gothic tensions; the fear of the 'other' and the uncanny. Bertha manifests the uncanny that Jane encounters in her attempt to navigate the mysteries of womanhood, romance and marriage at Thornfield. Bringing Bertha out of the attic makes the subliminal manifest and in reading a novel inside out we can see how invoking the uncanny becomes a useful conduit for feminism in the novel. Bertha's mystery is the source of her power, when she stripped of that, we encounter the powerlessness and the marginalization of this hybrid figure; born to a Jamaican creole mother and a colonial

planter father, her marriage is contracted for 30,000 pounds to Edward Rochester. Domestic life of the Rochesters is uncivilised. Doctors certify Bertha mad quite early after the marriage -her intemperate excesses, and unhinged habits had apparently developed the germs of insanity that she had inherited from her mother. What 15 years in the attic has done to her emotional health and mind is left to our imagination as are her feelings and thoughts that she herself might have about her situation. She utters no intelligible words, has no identifiable humanity left; she only makes animal noises and acts violently. Bertha is the uncanny 'other', the mystery that Jane must recognise and demystify in order to understand Rochester's offer of marriage, the nature of marriage itself and the subtext of the politics and psychology of sexual relations.

A useful pedagogic practice is to make the students see the film version of Jean Rhys 1966 novel Wide Sargasso Sea(Wide Sargasso Sea (1993) Free Full Movie Online, n.d.), to provide them an alternative reading of the Bertha story. Rhys narrates the Bertha Rochester story in Jamaica and maps the journey of the creole woman to the imperial centre of England. The unspeakable narrative of madness that Bronte refused to provide is articulated in this powerful and compelling rendering of the logic of Bertha's madness. This teaching strategy should be used carefully as one needs to position the ways in which a reimaging of the Bertha story provides a kind of 'prequel' to the Bronte text written/filmed years after the 'original text'. The logic of historical temporality and feminist re-writing of canonical novels is also a useful way of ensuring a conversation that can alert students to the existence of multiple versions of texts.

Jina Politi's(1997) analysis in Jane Eyre Class-ified can be invoked to provide a reading of the ending. Politi sees Jane's travels to different places, Thornfield Moorhouse and Ferndean as the route taken by 'Victorian love' itself- its romanticism domesticated and

controlled. Does Jane's sojourn at Ferndean provide a solution to Jane's and the bourgeoise family's dilemma? A privatised and feminised family comprising of an educated governess wife, who can function as a guide and prop for her maimed and rehumanised husband, sharing remarkable intimate and friendly companionship with him on an equal footing, presented as the solution to all of Jane's initial reservations and questions about the precarious place of a single woman in the Victorian society?

Jane's remark, "Reader, I married him", is usually read as a happy ending. Who is this new woman that Bronte constructs? According to Politi, the novel constructs "a new female stereotype, the highly principled, unattractive woman, the anti-woman to the French coquette, her role is to protect the English male from falling in to French ways and thus she becomes a pillar of the nation" (1997,90). This translation between the governess and the nation can be understood as ideas associated with Victorian womanhood. Bronte's agenda in creating a liberated female self remains unfulfilled as the ending celebrates the very ethos upon which bourgeoisie capitalism and the patriarchal ideology rests. "In the world of Jane Eyre improper concourse has no place. Revolution, sexuality, insanity, belong abroad… the novel's movement is not towards liberation, it is towards a tiding and consolidation of class positions." (ibid).

Conclusion:

The article has attempted to present multifocal teaching strategies that can be useful to teachers teaching Victorian women writers to an Indian undergraduate class. The necessity of contextualizing the socio-historical location of 19th Britain and using insights from the period, and then moving on to cultural materialist, feminist and postcolonial interventions are important steps in this enterprise. One must acknowledge that the diversity of opinions in an undergraduate

classroom which may not be well versed in literary theories needs to be reckoned with in a manner which can present the learners with multiple readings. These multifocal readings then can be useful for the students to engage with as interpretive strategies that are available for understanding a literary text beyond mere story and plot. Seminal Marxist analysis such as those of Lukåcs, Williams and Eagleton, or the canonical feminist interpretations of Showalter, Gilbert and Gubar, Fraiman, and the postcolonial analysis of Susan Meyers need to be positioned alongside the readings of Jane Rigby from the nineteenth century to the novel and its generic structure. The multifocal and braided teaching with the use of media adaptations; stage, film and literature can help the learners to become aware of the complexities of the text as well as enabling reading strategies to create a community of empathetic learners with crucial 'critical-ethical' capabilities who can become engaged citizens.

[i] The Governesses Benevolent Institution was set up as a regulatory body to enlist and support the women entering the profession. See the report mentioned below for a detailed explanation of its working and its representation in Jane Eyre. Also, the Report of the Board of Management (1843-1853) London that Rigby is reacting to is also available here. https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/reports-from-the-governesses-benevolent-institution

[ii] Chartism was a mass movement that demanded voting and political rights for working class people who did not own any land or property. The First Reform Bill of 1832 presented in the British Parliament failed to secure these rights. For a detailed discussion see https://www.paliament.uk

[iii] George Lukåcs (1885-1971) and Raymond William's (1921-1988) analysis of the discourse of class in the fiction of 1840s is of seminal importance in this context.

[iv] For a comparison with Maggie Tulliver and an analysis of the Victorian woman's location within the genre of domestic fiction see Smita Banerjee, 'Not a 'Silly Novel by a Lady Novelist': George Eliot and the Woman Question in The Mill on the Floss' in Salesian Journal, (2021).

[v] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adaptations_of_Jane_Eyre

[vi] https://www.sharedexperience.org.uk/media/education/jane-eyre_edpack.pdf

[vii] Polly Teale's adaptation uses costume and stage setting to visually stage the 'difference' between grey attired Jane and flaming red attired Bertha. Another version of this which can be used for a different visualization is Katherine Walsh's version of Teale's play. https://

www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVWyVgJZuQs. Or the musical Jane Eyre. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdJ0-0mFXcs.

References

Bronte, C. (1999). *Jane Eyre*, Worldview Publications.

Banerjee, S. (2021). 'Not a 'Silly Novel by a Lady Novelist': George Eliot and the Woman Question in The Mill on the Floss' Salesian Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 12 (2), 27-40.

Banerjee, S. (2021). Remapping English Studies and Translation Studies: Blended Learning and the Indian UG Classroom. *The Research Post: International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*., 4(1), 103–115.

Choo, S. S. L. (2012). *Conceptualizing Literature Pedagogy: World, Global, and Cosmopolitan Orientations to Teaching Literature in English* [Columbia University]. https://doi.org/10.7916/D8QZ2J5T

Eagleton, T. (1975), *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontes*, Macmillan.

Fraiman, S. (2011), 'The Domestic Novel', https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199560615.001.0001/acprof-9780199560615 DOI:10.1093/acprof: osobl/9780199560615.003.0011, uploaded on 20 December,2020.

Gilbert, S & S Gubar. (1979). *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination,* Yale University Press.

Governesses Benevolent Institution, Report of the Board of Management (1843-1853). https: www.bl.uk.

Lukåcs, G. (1962). *The Historical Novel*, Merlin.

Macpherson, Pat. (2024rprt). Reflecting on Jane Eyre. 10.4324/9781003539995.
Meyers, S. (1997). 'Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy of Jane Eyre' in *New Casebooks: Jane Eyre*, ed. Heather Glen. Macmillan Press, pp92-129.

Peterson M. J. (1970). 'The Victorian Governess: Status Incongruence in Family and Society. *Victorian Studies*,14 (1), 7–26. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3826404

Politi, J. (1997). 'Jane Eyre Class-ified', *New Casebooks: Jane Eyre*, ed. Heather Glen. Macmillan Press, 78–91.

Rhys, J. (1984rprt). *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Penguin.

Rigby, J. (1849). 'Review of Jane Eyre', Vanity Fair. https://www.bl.ukwith.

Showalter, E. (1997). 'Charlotte Bronte: Feminine Heroine', *New Casebooks: Jane Eyre*, ed. Heather Glen. Macmillan Press, 68-77.

Teale, P. (n.d.). *Jane Eyre: The Play, Adapted from the Novel.* Retrieved 4 February 2022, from https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/4262429-jane-eyre

Wide Sargasso Sea (1993) *Free Full Movie Online*. (n.d.). Retrieved 27 July 2022, from https://www.freegreatmovies.com/Free-Movie/Wide-Sargasso-Sea/2324

Williams, R. (1970). *The Novel from Dickens to Lawrence,* OUP.

Dr. Smita Banerjee is Professor in the Department of English, Delhi College of Arts and Commerces, University of Delhi.

Patriarchy, Neo - liberal market forces and the myth of 'body beautiful' : Critical Feminist Perspectives

Nupur Ray, Ankita Pandey, Diya Srivastava, Durdhana Haq

Abstract:

Beauty standards for women are not a unique creation of the present-day world, they have been shaped by patriarchal forces, to serve patriarchy since centuries. However, with the amplification of social media platforms, these norms have reached an unrealistic stage, especially for young women. Social media influencers, advertisements, and pop culture continue to 'construct' and reinforce the myth of 'ideal beauty'-an hourglass body, fair skin, full lips, sharp nose, etc. Patriarchy builds upon a woman's worth on her beauty and youth, impacting not just the self-esteem but also her prospects in marriage and career goals. In contemporary times, the neo-liberal market forces in alliance with patriarchal forces have augmented the insecurities amongst younger age group of women, to sell a 'perfect look'. Aesthetic surgery, bleach, anti-ageing creams, etc are becoming popular options for women, especially young women, as a means to project themselves to the 'beauty' standards, feel accepted and even as validation to their 'vulnerable' self-esteems. This lucrative coalition between the neo-liberal market forces and patriarchal norms have created a new strain of desperate and 'misguided' consumers as young women, on the verge of being 'consumed' by this unhealthy trend.

The objective of the following paper will be to look at how the forces of market collide with patriarchal norms to cultivate a consumer base largely based on stringent gender norms that compels women to even go to extreme measures in order to look 'desirable.' We will

be focusing on women of the age group 18-30 years located in urban spaces to study the impact these intersections create on women's outlook towards themselves and the society. The paper will also explore the viability of discussions and dialogues in educational institutions that can act as positive interventions to help women make more informed choices and resist the pressure of these forces, in contemporary times.

Key Words: *Beauty standards, choice, neo liberal market, young women, patriarchy, agency*

Introduction

In a rapidly evolving world of technology and innovations, all spheres of life are being transformed including the 'idea of beauty'. Although 'unrealistic' beauty standards for women are not a unique creation of the 21st century, they are being significantly shaped and moulded by the dominant forces of patriarchy and neoliberal market economies of today. Neoliberalism is a political idea which favours a liberal and capitalist economy sustained by a welfare state. And under the broad heading of neoliberalism economy prevalent in contemporary times , the paper will focus on the impact of social media marketing in the construction of unrealistic

beauty standards, leading to a surge in 'corrective' cosmetic surgeries amongst younger generation of women.

According to the 2021 global survey by the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, there was a 19.3 per cent spike in aesthetic surgery. The top procedures being liposuction, breast augmentation, rhinoplasty, eyelid surgery and abdominoplasty. Even though there might be different factors responsible for this rise, one of the driving forces behind the increase is the 'normalisation' of

corrective cosmetic interventions under the impact of neoliberal market forces. Through social media marketing and advertisements targeting women, especially young adults and teenagers, the forces have generated demand for these procedures through reinforcement of 'sexist' beauty standards. Social media platforms especially Instagram are a breeding hub of harbouring these insecurities. Social Media influencers(explain) who have a large social capital have the ability to influence the choices of their followers, especially those on the younger side. Kim Kardashian, a popular American influencer, has created a whole generation of women aspiring to look like her by getting surgeries done on their faces and bodies. 'An exotic look, bloated lips, thin waist line and wide posterior' have become the standard of a 'perfect look' for women. Hence, the only way women feel they would be seen as 'beautiful' and desirable, is to adhere to these standards.

The myth of an ideal beautiful woman has been created through patriarchal norms as women are 'objectified' with the purpose to gratify men in several ways. In South Asian societies for instance, the emphasis on fair skin is immense. women having a dark skin tone are forced to use skin lightening treatments and products due to societal pressure. In fact, the skin lightening industry in India is worth US $430 million dollars. Men and women both are impacted by this pressure however it impacts women more. The infamous cream 'fair and lovely' marketed itself as a way for women to achieve success and confidence by making them fair. Although it has changed its name and marketing due to backlash in recent years the craze and demand for fair skin has not died down yet in these societies. Fair skinned women are considered more desirable than dark skinned ones hence marriage prospects are greatly inclined towards the former ones.

Moreover, gender-based segregation of work is also based on

physical attributes of women. For example, receptionists favour fair skinned women because they seem more 'presentable'. Similarly in the USA, the thick thin body - thin waist with a thick and big posterior is seen as desirable in women. Music videos cast women with big posteriors for the male artists to ogle at throughout the duration of the videos. However, 'the thick thin' body shape is not common among women naturally therefore they opt for other alternatives to achieve the look. 'Brazilian butt lifts' popularly known as BBLs have witnessed a surge in recent years especially owing to the desirability attached to these body types. These examples show how the unrealistic standards of beauty are created in the first place by establishing the factor of desirability and attractiveness among women. Adhering to these standards means acceptance in the society and better opportunities whereas not adhering to these standards have adverse effects by creating binaries of beautiful vs ugly and womanly vs unwomanly. Hence, creating insecurities and lower self-esteem in women who are not considered conventionally 'beautiful'.

The market feeds into these insecurities by promoting and selling products and services that modify or beautify the unattractive part of the body or face. By claiming to empower women through such transformation, they show a mirage of success and happiness, the foundation of which is built on hiding the repercussions and negative consequences of these procedures. Comparison with other bodies, especially influencers has become a common trend. Despite the fact that most of the influencers undergo aesthetic surgery of one kind or the other, they rarely admit it, leading their young followers to believe that it is all natural. Since these standards are unrealistic, aesthetic surgery becomes the only way to attain it.

Therefore, the choices of young women get subconsciously constructed because of the societal pressure to look attractive

according to the prevalent societal norms. Furthermore, the indoctrination of these norms from childhood hamper women to see their own bodies without the societal lens. Thus, their choices revolve around being desirable for the patriarchy and accepted into the society. Market presents these choices as empowering but traps women in the vicious cycle of insecurities and consumerism, by reinforcing unrealistic beauty norms and projecting new forms of interventionist products/surgeries as a solution to 'fix' their looks.

Research Objectives

In the light of above observations, this paper has three-fold objectives. Firstly, to explore the various ways and tools employed by the neo liberal market forces to create unrealistic beauty standards especially through social media platforms and influencer marketing. Secondly, to understand how the market 'manufactures' choices of these young women consumers by collaborating with patriarchal norms to distort the lens through which they see their bodies and perceive their beauty. Thirdly, to provide a way out to women by enabling them to make 'informed and empowered choices' about their bodies through encouraging discourses and discussions in educational institutions like colleges around issues like how market and patriarchy deploy various techniques and methods to influence the choices of women by making them feel ugly if they don't follow a certain beauty standard. By understanding these tactics and the reality behind the trending beauty norms they will be able to make better choices for themselves, assert their individuality and not be engulfed by the changing trends of neo- liberal market forces.

Literature Review

There is a substantial amount of research and literature on market

and gender which signifies the impact of neo-liberal market on perceptions of body and beauty of a woman and the choices they make as consumers, respectively. In this section we make an attempt to bring forth existing literature on 'unrealistic' beauty standards, role of social media, cosmetic and plastic surgery industries are reviewed which have been highly helpful to our research paper.

According to Oldale Barbara's analysis of the relationship between 'patriarchy' and 'neoliberalism,' 'neoliberalism is a contemporary advancement of capitalism and destructive manifestations of patriarchy since it has vigorously dominated capitalism and used the free- market system to promote special interests...'(Barbara 2021). She connects the concept of 'shadow patriarchy' defined as a transformation of 'protection and caring guidance' into 'dictatorial control or abuse of authority, with 'neoliberalism' which she further defines as 'an extreme form of male aggression (Myss 2001). Thus, on the basis of aforementioned connection drawn by the Oldale Barbara, we can understand how on one hand patriarchy plays pivotal role in controlling the choices of women and on the very other hand, neoliberalism helps to further strengthen the patriarchal norms of market forces which paves the way for unrealistic beauty standards.

On the question of beauty standards opted by women, Chaudhari, D. in her article, The advertising world hates women who are comfortable in their skin have illustrated well how the advertising industry capitalises on and feeds off of women's fears (Chaudhari, D.2017). It not only takes advantage of these vulnerabilities but also makes them worse by imposing unattainable standards of beauty. These advertising' creators encourage women to fear something as normal as ageing. On the other side, fairness creams have developed into a factor and a crucial instrument for a woman's self-esteem. As an example, consider the Fair and Lovely commercial with actress

Yami Gautam, which figuratively shows a 'Fair-o-meter'. Hariharan, N. goes on to say how every single time when women walk into a beauty store, they hear the well-trained staff make comments regarding their faces and bodily appearance. Such as- 'Blackheads', 'Whiteheads', 'Pigmentation' or 'Ageing' and so on. As per him, the technique of these enterprises is to invent a problem that didn't exist before they brought it up, then give a miraculous answer and act as though they are mending life itself (Hariharan, N.2017).

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital can be taken into consideration while analysing the relationship between patriarchy and beauty to understand how beauty is weaponized to oppress women in india. According to Bourdieu, women are capital-bearing subjects that add their values to the primary groups like her husband (Bourdieu 2018). In the Indian context, women are the 'unrecognised cultural currency' of men. Standards like fairness are directly equated with hierarchy and power in the society since it was traditionally linked with upper castes. Foucault, M. in 'The History of Sexuality' talks about two disciplinary tools that produce a 'patriarchy defined feminine body'- practices like diets and control of body gesture, etc (Foucault 1976). Cinema, globally as well as in the Indian context plays a significant role in reinforcing these ideals that favours fair-skinned and thin body images, having a huge impact in determining beauty perceptions for women audience (Pandian, L. V. 2020; Ray 2023).

It is widely acknowledged that social media has brought people together on a worldwide scale. But it has also been used to define beauty standards for both sexes, notably for women. In turn, this has impacted on women's self-esteem in terms of body image, body modification, body dissatisfaction, etc as observed by Henriques, M., and Patnaik, D. (2021). Women are constantly looking for comments, followers, and likes to maintain a perfect and consistent picture of

themselves on social media. In this regard, another area where social media has a significant impact and a negative implication on young women is in the realm of filters and beauty apps. Tolentino, J. in her article The age of Instagram face, has attempted to investigate the rise of a standard face. She goes on to say how social media platforms like Instagram have face filters that make one's face look flawless (Tolentino, J 2019).

Plastic surgery procedures are also popular on these platforms which further creates and sustains new unrealistic standards of beauty especially for young women. Celebrities like Kim Kardashian have a huge influence on women who undergo cosmetic surgery. South Korea has also emerged as a fresh rival in the beauty and cosmetics sector in recent years. There are high rates of surgery performed on the eyes, nose, and jawlines. Even after surgery, women are mockingly referred to as 'Gangnam beauty' to indicate that they had undergone cosmetic surgery to enhance their appearance (Choi 2019). There are few factors that motivate women to undergo cosmetic surgery. In a study conducted by Markey and Markey, it was found that 4 factors influenced women to take up decisions based on these factors namely 1) body dissatisfaction 2) physical appearance 3) teasing by (usually male counter-parts, or even bullying) 4) media influence (Furnham, A. and Levitas, J.2012).

Morgan, K. P. (1991) in Women and the knife: Cosmetic surgery and the colonization of women's bodies have attempted to pinpoint the emergence of increasingly evasive types of cosmetic surgery that are predominantly directed at women, as well as the role of the beauty industry in turning women into idealised objects. Three paradoxes of decision-making are considered here; 1. 'Choice of conformity': beauty industry erases uniqueness in physical features because it is based on Eurocentric standards. women have to conform to patriarchal standards and compulsory heterosexuality. 2. 'Liberation

into colonisation': women's bodies seen as primitive entities that need to be exploited. Surgeries might liberate women from what they see as natural constraints but in reality, it makes them dependent on surgeons for these procedures. 3. 'Coerced voluntariness and technological imperative': increased pressure to undergo surgery in order to avoid being labelled as 'unliberated'. Technology forces women to undergo surgery by creating new standards of 'beauty' and 'ugly' (Morgan 1991).

The study by Bonell, S., Murphy, S. C., and Griffiths, S. (2021), shows how women seeking plastic surgery are perceived by others. Their qualitative evidence suggested that plastic surgery recipients are perceived negatively by others as they explored recipients' lived experiences of plastic surgery stigmatisation by conducting qualitative interviews with twenty women who had undergone cosmetic breast augmentation. They came to the conclusion that visually appealing women who undergo plastic surgery may experience unfavourable social and psychological impacts. Similarly, another survey was conducted by Molina, A. R., Baker,

R. H., and Nduka, C. (2011). 'What women want'—the UK's largest cosmetic surgery survey, wherein a majority of women agreed on the insecurities of their bodies, especially breast area. The survey found out that older women were not usually opting for aesthetic surgeries rather the younger generations who were brought up with consumerism and social media were in more favour of cosmetic surgery.

Research Methodology

This research methodology for this paper is a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. In the quantitative part, we have conducted surveys through a semi-structured questionnaire,

wherein data was collected through a Google form. As a part of qualitative research, focused group discussions with a sample set of women respondents was conducted in an online and offline mode.

In the quantitative research, we collected the data through a semi-structured questionnaire in a Google form and then analysed the data quantitatively. The data below, which was gathered among women between the age group of 18-30, from metropolitan areas, and women enrolled in educational institutions, demonstrates how market forces have led to a disparity in consumer behaviour based on income class. The motive of the paper is to find out how women have perceived cosmetic surgeries, how well are women informed about cosmetic surgeries, and what role does the neo-liberal market play. The survey included a set of 10 questions, in which 50 candidates participated. The questions asked were close-ended as per the convenience of the participants. The Questions were chosen as per the consultancy of another research conducted in the UK and USA. In the following research the scales 'YES' represented that they 'agreed', 'NO' represented that they 'disagreed' and 'MAYBE' represented that they(participants) 'sometimes agreed or disagreed'. (Questions attached in the *Annexure)

In the qualitative research, we conducted focused group discussions, for in-depth deliberations around neo-liberal market forces, introduction of new forms of corrective surgeries, impact of social media platforms and how responses received on these platforms affect the thinking process of our respondents. The discussion also explored the viability of academic discourses in educational institutions in breaking some myths and perceptions around beauty and excessive consumerism. These group discussions were helpful to provide deeper insights into the thinking of our respondents and their reflections around these issues.

As we mentioned above, we have chosen a mixed approach to

our research. The focused group discussions were conducted with participants between the age group of 18-30, young college going students set in an urban location. These were evaluated based on the participant's experience, we conducted this discussion with the consent of the participant hence, we will be keeping their identities confidential, as most of the participants we targeted were from our institution and these were taken face-to-face. We also had a group discussion with around four girls, from the Women's Development Cell (an organisation that works on empowering young women) these girls were from different age groups ranging from 19-21 in the online mode. The group discussions conducted were also interpreted with clues like body language and tone. We asked them the following questions (attached in the *Annexure).

Key Findings

The research conducted in the form of surveys was based on the hypothesis, that women tend to get influenced by the neo-liberal market forces beauty choices are 'manufactured' market forces have created a privileged caste and class divide, such as social media and Television commercials target age group 18-30. In the following data scales 'YES' represented that they 'agreed', 'NO' represented that they 'disagreed' and 'MAYBE' represented that they(participants) 'sometimes agreed or disagreed'.

Following is the data collected in the form of graphs, to show our findings:

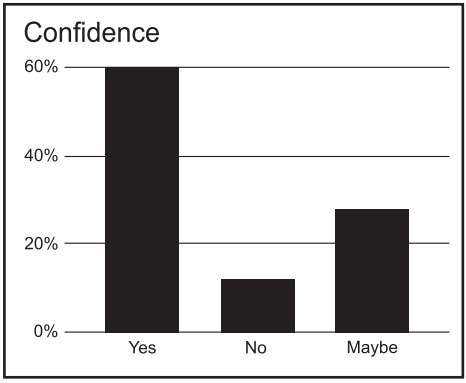


Fig1.1 Survey Conducted: Q1 Are you confident in the way you look?

In the confidence part around 60% chose yes, 12% chose No, rest 28% chose maybe, this meant that a majority of women were confident in the way they looked.

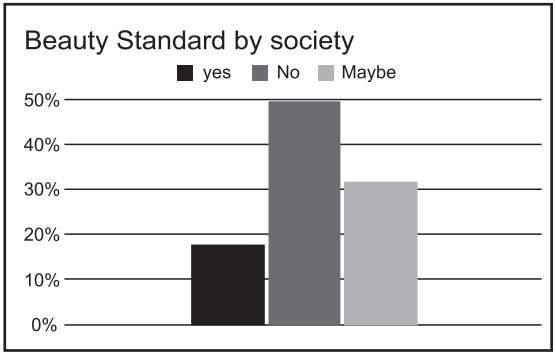


Fig 1.2 survey conducted: 'Q2 Do you feel the need to comply with the beauty standards set by society?'

Here we can see that around 50% of respondents disagreed, and only

18% agreed that they felt to comply with the society standards and rest around 32% responded 'maybe'.

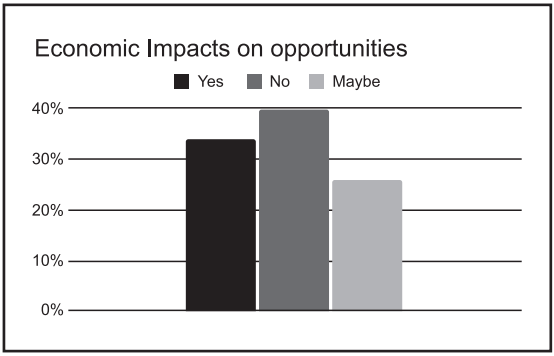


Fig. 1.3 survey conducted: here in this chart, it shows the Q3 Do you think your economic opportunities are impacted by the way you look? and about 34% of people agreed that they felt economic opportunities were impacted by how they looked, 40% disagreed and about 28% chose 'maybe'. Economic opportunities for women relied on the way women look, and there is only a very small gap between people agreeing and disagreeing.

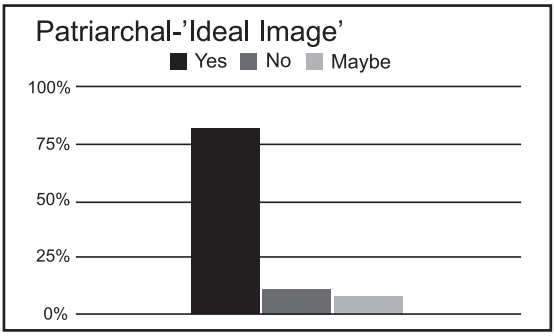


Fig. 1.4 Survey conducted: 'Q4 Do you think patriarchy plays a role in creating an 'ideal image of beauty'?' Patriarchal standards of Ideal Image of beauty, about 82% replied 'Yes' only 10% said 'No' rest 8% chose 'Maybe'. We can see that, a majority responded Yes,

this means that around 90% of the consumerist economy is based on the patriarchal norms in the beauty industries.

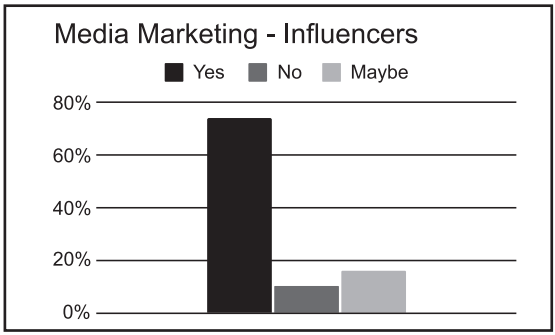


Fig. 1.5 Survey Conducted: 'Q5 Do you feel that beauty influencers like Kardashians influence young women to follow a specific 'look'?'

Around 74% chose Yes, 10% chose No, and rest 16% chose Maybe, a majority agreed that the media marketing influences women's decision in choosing any product. Many women face the burden to look a certain way specially during the 'teenage' the need to comply with looks becomes important, this is also possible due to peer pressure.

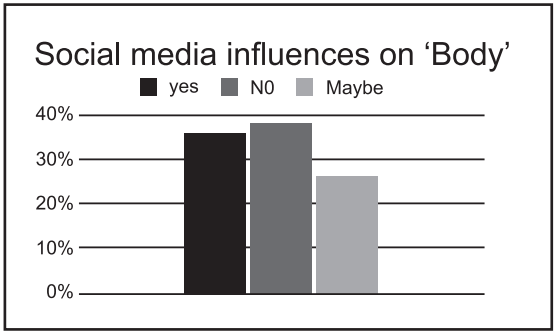


Fig.1.6 Survey conducted: Q6 Has social media made you feel under confident about your body or a body part? About 36% chose yes; 38% chose No; the rest 26% chose Maybe. It has been found that an early exposure to social media creates under-confidence

amongst young women. This becomes a problem, as in an article by Indian Express, it quotes those teenage girls below the age of 18, look forward to these stars on social media, and they not only admire but want to achieve a cosmetic surgery as it suits them, and do not evaluate the long-term effects on their bodies.

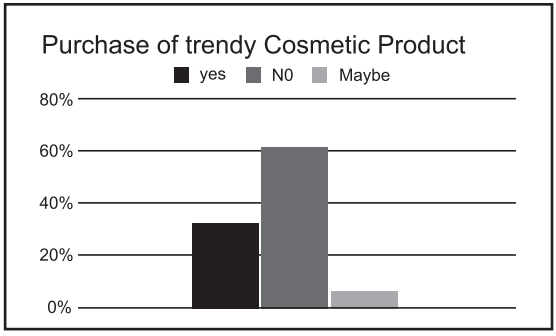


Fig. 1.7 Survey Conducted: 'Q7 Have you ever purchased a cosmetic product because it was 'trendy among influencers and social media?' A majority 62% chose 'No'; 32% chose 'Yes' and 6% chose 'maybe'. Many social media models and stars have their brands displayed on television and other mediums. The increasing rise in consumerism has led to mushrooming brands in fashion. Hence, there is a constant pressure to take up what is 'trendy'.

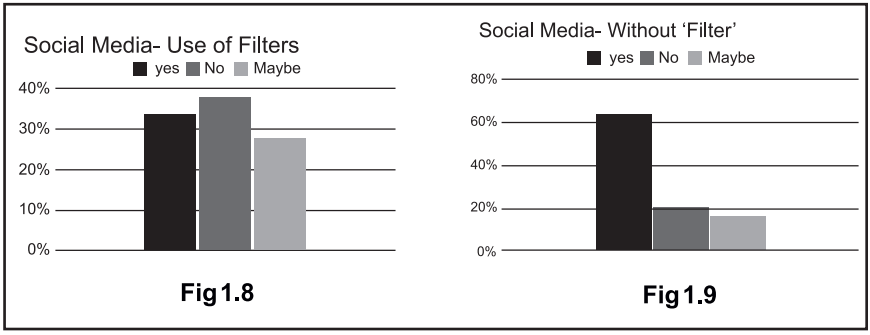


Fig 1.8 Fig 1.9

Fig. 1.8 Survey Conducted: 'Q8 Do you edit your pictures or use

filters before posting on social media?'

38% chose 'No', and about 34% chose 'Yes', the rest 28% chose 'Maybe' (sometimes).

Fig. 1.9 Survey Conducted: 'Q9 Have you ever considered posting pictures without makeup or filters on social media?' Here, in the fig1.9 we see about 64% agreed that they didn't use the filters, 20% chose 'No' the rest 16% chose 'Maybe'.

Here, in the two graphs we compared that a majority of the respondents agreed that they use No Filters to their picture, which is a positive outcome.

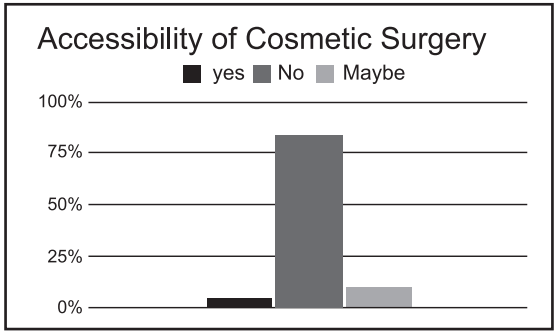


Fig 1.10 Survey Conducted: Q10 If cosmetic surgery is accessible to you, would you consider undergoing surgery or any other medical procedures to change your appearance? About 84% chose 'No', the rest 4% chose 'yes' and about 10% chose 'Maybe'.

Here in the following figure 1.10, we can observe that a majority of respondents chose 'No'. As we can see that we have come to an understanding that, our hypothesis, women tend to get influenced by neo-liberal market forces such as television and social media and consume cosmetic surgery, has been proven wrong, as we can see that though a majority women tend to get influenced by the neo-liberal market forces, as we can see that only 2% agreed to do

cosmetic surgery and a majority of 86% have responded that they won't choose a cosmetic surgery.

Critical Analysis

The paper started with an objective to understand the unrealistic beauty standards created by neo-liberal market forces, in contemporary times, that are constantly impacting the choices of young women. To this our survey showed that around 82 per cent agreed that patriarchy played a huge influence in the way they must look. And, the majority influence derived from social media, to this around 36 per cent agreed, but contrary to this around 38 per cent disagreed. For example- in the qualitative study while interviewing the group, Respondent one, mentions that 'social media negatively as well as positively influences' to this respondent two elaborates, that 'social media plays a crucial role in validating ourselves', respondent three, tells us about an experience in the school. The respondent three elaborates that in school which was a co-ed space, boys would often make fun of the facial hair saying that 'Facial hair only suits to boys' and often bully based on the looks. In many schools' young women while growing older have many changes, they feel unrelated as well as uncomfortable also, the curriculum does not emphasis on the awareness hence this creates a huge gap for young adults to understand. Most of the girls admitted that they are conscious of posting on social media. they admitted to using filters. From the study, we found there is a large acceptance of the fact that the market is creating unrealistic beauty standards. In our survey 20 per cent disagreed and around 64 percent admitted that they did not use any filters while posting on social media. It was also reflected in focused group discussions where they are unable to process the perfect bodies. For example, respondent four mentions another experience of her relatives discriminating based on her

'body shape'. Respondent four briefly mentions her experience, it felt to her that a 'perfect body' or 'desired body' is something that is mostly preferred. Respondent four, also mentions that she preferred coming to a girl's college because it was a 'safe space'. Also, mentioned that 'body positivity' is irrelevant but 'body neutrality' is the need of the hour. All the respondents agreed that neo-liberal market forces, such as the Kardashians television show or K-pop in today's world often pressurised young women to conform according to the current trends of beauty. But, respondent five said though agreeing to the point, 'that unrealistic beauty has taken its form in neo-liberal markets, it is also a reality that even if today we can try to conform with the trends, maybe tomorrow we will not conform'.

The second objective of this paper was to find out whether the neo liberal market facilitates the construction of 'manufactured choices' of young women and therefor leading them to access new beauty products in market or corrective cosmetic surgeries. Our research study shows a divided house where some women feel their choices to be determined by the market and patriarchal pressures whereas other women do not feel bound by it. For instance, in our quantitative study, when asked if they feel the need to comply with the beauty standards set by the society, 50 per cent respondents disagreed while 18 per cent agreed and 32 per cent responded maybe. Furthermore, 34 percent of respondents believe that their economic opportunities were impacted by how they look while, 40 per cent disagree and about 28 per cent responded 'maybe'. Asked whether beauty influencers like the Kardashians have an influence on young women to follow a specific 'look', around 74 per cent respondents agreed while 10 per cent disagreed, and the rest 16 per cent answered maybe. Moreover, on being asked if they had ever purchased a cosmetic product because it was 'trendy among influencers' a majority 62 per cent chose 'No' while 32 percent chose 'Yes' and 6 per cent chose 'maybe'. Our qualitative research

in the form of a focused group discussion also reflected this divide. On one hand, all respondents agreed that women are burdened by society to always look their best with respondent five sharing how her relatives discouraged her to dress a certain way because of her body shape. The respondents linked this pressure to an increase in cosmetic surgery among women. Respondent two argued that although women might want to undergo the knife out of their own choice, the cosmetic surgery industry and the hype around it does not talk about the repercussions it has on the body. She states that even if there is an element of choice but an 'informed one is needed'. Respondent six added that people have the pressure to follow western 'trends' such as slender bodies to achieve 'ideal bodies' and that 'personal choice is 'manufactured' subconsciously'. However, respondents showcased different perspectives on this issue. One group of respondents felt inhibited by the pressure to look 'body beautiful' with respondent one sharing how her 'resting arrogant face' makes her unfeminine and not beautiful in a conventional way. However, most of the respondents feel that even if they don't fit into the conventional beauty standards, they are beautiful in their own ways. Respondent three stated that even if she does not fit into the conventional beauty standards, it does not determine the way she sees herself. Hence, all respondents acknowledged that they felt the pressure to adhere to the beauty standards at a subconscious level yet they do not let it impact the way they see themselves and make choices regarding their bodies.

The third objective is that through encouraging discourses in educational institutions women can make more empowered choices, with awareness about the different aspects of the beauty industry. In the survey when asked about the confidence of women with how they looked, a majority chose option 'Yes', around 60 per cent women felt confident on how they looked.

Only 12 per cent chose 'No' and the rest 28 per cent chose maybe. This can be interpreted that women in the educational institutions are making informed choices, even if that means conforming to norms. This is evident as many Women Development Cell organisations present within the institutions help in inculcating nuanced topics that enable young women to also navigate these societal compulsions. When asked the question on if women are willing to pursue cosmetic surgery, around 84 per cent disagreed and only 2 per cent agreed. In the group discussion when asked if women are willing to have cosmetic corrections if affordable, respondent one agreed to do a lip suction, but also mentioned about the insecurities during the teenage. To this respondent two, and respondent three said a clear 'No'. Through research gathered from students of Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi, we found that a robust education provides, empowering and enabling space of dialogue and guidance for women to navigate through the impact of the market. However social media still has a major influence on the confidence of women. As mentioned earlier many girls agreed that they chose a women institution so that they get the space for discussions and the space to grow. This topic was very close to many of the participants as the discrimination women face is massive specially at a lower level of educational institution. Hence, this space is private to women as it is very important to make correct choices for them. We have also mentioned how 'agency of women is taken even if it is done or undone'. Respondent five mentioned that nowadays, there is a lot of change in social media, as many influencers have reversed the concept of beauty. The French government passed regulatory laws on models who are too skinny, as these can be very toxic beauty standards people might get influenced by. Government can promote a 'healthy look' and promote a healthier way of looking at oneself. Hence criteria should be set by the governments. Many actors in Bollywood have openly spoken of being discriminated against

because they were not skinny at all. A group of women expressed that, 'education helped them gain confidence, and their generation should understand that being kind is more important'.

Conclusions

Simone de Beauvoir had famously said 'One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman' (Beauvoir 2002). Patriarchy with its paraphernalia of social, political and economic norms, structures and institutions continue to shape and define women's choices, preferences and goals in their lives, that adhere to the boundaries of femininity as determined by the former. The fatal combination of neo-liberal market forces along with age old patriarchal ideas is producing a new form of consumerism amongst women especially young women based on unrealistic standards of beauty projected and reinforced as necessary to feel accepted and desirable. However, the paper has made an attempt to argue for the significance of academic discourses and deliberations in educational institutions that engage our young generation especially women to be able to develop an informed and empowered choice amidst the plethora of good and bad options that market provides today. It is pertinent that women resist being 'consumed' in this hyper consumerist world, to the false temptations created by the unholy alliance of market and patriarchal forces today.

References

Bonell, S., Murphy, S. C., and Griffiths, S. (2021). *Under the knife: Unfavourable perceptions of women who seek plastic surgery.* PLOS ONE, 16(9), e0257145.https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0257145

Bourdieu, P. (2018). Cultural reproduction and social reproduction. Knowledge, Education, and Cultural Change, 71-112. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351018142-3

Beauvoir, Simone, *Beauvoir, Simone de (2002). The Second Sex (Svensk upplaga).* p. 325.
Chaudhari, D. (2017, January 2). *The advertising world hates women who are comfortable*

in their skin. Feminism in India. https://feminisminindia.com/2017/01/02/advertising-hates-women-comfortable-skin/

Choi, S. (. (n.d.). *The ugly truth: A look into South Korea's plastic surgery industry.* FISH - Frankfurt International School Herald. https://fisherald.com/the-infamous-south-korean-plastic-surgery-industry/

Furnham, A., and Levitas, J. (2012). *Factors that motivate people to undergo cosmetic surgery.* Plastic Surgery, 20(04). https://doi.org/10.4172/plastic-surgery.1000777Global survey 2021: Full report and press releases. (n.d.). I S A P S https://www.isaps.org/discover/about-isaps/global-statistics/reports-and-press- releases/global-survey-2021-full-report-and-press- releases/#:~:text=The%20report%20shows%20a%20continuing,in%20the%20last%20four% 20 years

Hariharan, N. (2017, May 9). *Beauty standards – The ugliest trick of patriarchy.* Feminism in India.https://feminisminindia.com/2017/05/10/beauty-standards-ugliest-trick/

Henriques, M., and Patnaik, D. (2021). *Social media and its effects on beauty.* Beauty-Cosmetic Science, Cultural Issues and Creative Developments. https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.93322

Kambhampaty, A. P. (2020, June 17). *How skin whitening became a $23 billion industry.* The Juggernaut. https://www.jgnt.co/skin-whitening-industry

Neoliberalism (Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy). (n.d.). Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/neoliberalism/

Molina, A. R., Baker, R. H., and Nduka, C. (2011). *'What women want'—the UK's largest cosmetic surgery survey.* European Journal of Plastic Surgery, 35(8), 607- 612.https://doi.org/10.1007/s00238-011-0635-5

Morgan, K. P. (1991). *Women and the knife: Cosmetic surgery and the colonization of women's bodies.* Hypatia, 6(3), 25-53. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1991.tb00254.x

Mudge, S. L. (2008). *What is Neo-liberalism?* Socio-Economic Review, 6(4), 703-731. https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwn016

Pandian, L. V. (2020). *Patriarchy and beauty: The power over Indian women.* Journal of the Anthropological Survey of India, 69(1), 117-123. https://doi.org/10.1177/2277436x20928441

Ray, Nupur (2023) "Masculinist Constructions of Nationalism in India: Gender, Body Politics, and Hindi Cinema," *Journal of International Women's Studies:* Vol. 25: Iss. 3, Article 5. Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol25/iss3/5

Tolentino, J. (2019). *The age of Instagram face.* Social Media and the Self: An Open Reader. https://doi.org/10.32376/3f8575cb.760db98a *View of neoliberalism: The new patriarchy.* A literature review | Journal of integrated studies. (n.d.). Journal of Integrated Studies. https://jis.athabascau.ca/index.php/jis/article/view/279/713

Why the obsession for cosmetic surgery is now a mental disorder rather than a fad. (2022, December 11). The Indian Express.https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/health cosmetic-surgery-obsession-mental-disorder-not-just-fad-sunday-eye-8316866/

*Annexure

*List of questions asked for the survey-

Q1. Are you confident in the way you look?

Q2. Do you feel the need to comply with the beauty standards set by society?

Q3. Do you think your economic opportunities are impacted by the way you look? Q4. Do you think patriarchy plays a role in creating an 'ideal image of beauty'?'

Q5. Do you feel that beauty influencers like Kardashians influence young women to follow a specific 'look'?

Q6. Has social media made you feel under confident about your body or a body part?

Q7. Have you ever purchased a cosmetic product because it was 'trendy among influencers and social media?'

Q8. Do you edit your pictures or use filters before posting on social media?'

Q9. Have you ever considered posting pictures without makeup or filters on social media?' Q10. If cosmetic surgery is accessible to you, would you consider undergoing surgery or any other medical procedures to change your appearance?

***Questions for group discussion-**

Q1. Being a woman do you feel the burden to look a certain way (pressure from family, society or market)?

Q2. Do you think social media, specifically- Instagram has any role to play on how you perceive your beauty?

Q3. Why do you think there is an increase in cosmetic surgery in recent years?

Q4. Would you consider yourself beautiful according to the standards of beauty today?

Q5. Do you think the state needs to play a regulatory role in preventing unrealistic standards of beauty on social media?

Q6. Have you experienced any kind of comments/discrimination based on how you look or have you ever judged anyone based on the standards created?

Q7. Hypothetically, if cosmetic surgery is available at free of cost will you be willing to

undergo any surgical process in order to modify/ correct any part of your body.? If yes then kindly let us know the reason and if not then do the same.

Dr. Nupur Ray is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi.

Ms.Ankita Pandey, Ms.Diya Srivastava & Ms.Durdhana Haq are alumni of the Department of Political Science, Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi

Hemingway's Treatment of Women and Death in his Fiction

Vinita Gupta Chaturvedi

Abstract:

One of the major thematic preoccupations of the American writer Ernest Hemingway has been his overriding interest in the subject of death, and the position of women in this cycle of life and its termination. The theme of death as an end of life serves as a backbone to his works, recurring in his short stories and novels with a growing persistence. Hemingway treats of the inevitability of death and the related issues of what the reality of death means to the various protagonists, chiefly male; their contrasted attitudes to it, how best to approach or avoid it, in a range of works spanning his early fiction through the immensely popular novel, A Farewell to Arms (1929) to one of his maturest novels, For Whom The Bell Tolls (1940). Hemingway's fictional depiction of women has generally been regarded askance at, largely cavalier; dismissive of them at times, treating them as expendable at other times. Women are looked upon as impediments in the growth of the hyper-masculine heroes that Hemingway delights in portraying and they, of necessity, should be obliterated. This paper seeks to study how, one of the ways in which the man feels liberated in Hemingway's works is through the death of the woman, as in A Farewell to Arms or conversely chooses his own heroic death in For Whom the Bell Tolls, defying the loving implorations of the beloved to survive.

The Paper

Hemingway's preoccupation with death has biographical roots, when he had close encounter with death as he lay wounded on the Italian front on the night of July the 8th, 1918 in the great war that he had enlisted. As he lay shell-shocked with three dead soldiers under the debris, with innumerable shrapnel in his body, he was all but given up for dead. The impact of this experience coming forcefully upon his adolescence was to condition a large part of his writings, when, steeped in loneliness, he chose to travel the world alone and explore the shadows of death. It compelled him to view death as a stark reality and spoke of his injury as leading to the end, which he is reported to have confessed to Malcolm Cowley: "I died then…I felt my soul or something coming right out of my body, like you'd pull a silk handkerchief out of a pocket by one corner" (Hoffman 67). This sensuous description of death as an out of the body experience is entwined in his consciousness with the paradoxical feeling of freedom upon release from the hold of the woman in love, dead or living. It also instils in him an existential angst at the absurdity of and meaninglessness of life.

With this awareness of death as an inevitable reality, Hemingway began his search for an answer to the problem of how to live and die well, without giving in to despair. He first sought this answer in the Spanish fiestas and bullfights for here he took his symbolic life lesson wherein all struggles end either in death or in freedom. He rightly warns the old lady in non-fictional Death in the Afternoon (1932): "Madam, all stories if continued far enough end in death, and he is no true storyteller who would keep that from you" (76). In this work, which is a conglomerate of history, guidebook, and an exhaustive report on bullfighting as a sport, Hemingway finds the essence of the "feeling of life and death" (8) and in the bullring finds death located in the center of all activity. In his fiction he wishes to

express this deep contiguity between life and death. In the bullfight, though the chances of man's death were highly probable, that of the bull was a definite certainty. The proximity of death gives meaning to life: while the man's death conveys the ephemerality of life and a tragic sense of doom, that of the bull's acquaints the spectator with the knowledge of how close at hand death dwells. Thus, Hemingway saw death as an outcome of all physical struggle, the proximity of which gave a meaning to life. He famously declares in this work that of all the legitimate subjects that a man may write of, "one of the simplest things of all and the most fundamental is violent death" (6). Lincoln Kirstein in his essay, "The Canon of Death" says Hemingway concerned himself with death "since it is less complex than life" (Quoted by Coffery,62). A Farewell to Arms, on many levels a bildungsroman, teaches Frederick the value of life after Catherine's departure. The treatment of death from the early works of fiction like Death in the Afternoon, where it is faced with a sense of bravado and met in the most appropriate manner, at best to be avoided but not to be feared, it graduates to looking at it in a pragmatic manner and gradually leads to a metaphysical acceptance of it in the later novel, while all the time giving the male protagonist a shot at heroism, very often at the expense of the woman, which this paper would attempt to show.

Death in the afternoon is a wonderful work which contains the essence of Hemingway's conception of masculinity. An avid bullfighting enthusiast, he celebrated in the sport not just the essence of life, fear and courage but the unadulterated and undiluted heroism of the bullfighter in the ring who as a professional is tasked with the onerous duty of courting death and avoiding it in a stellar manner in order to instill awe and admiration in the spectators. The bullfighter or the matador is expected to do this by bringing death extremely close to the observer and then skillfully averting it, generating a feeling of his own immortality in the audience's mind. Reflecting

on the mortality of the matador, Hemingway recounts how he was inexplicably haunted by the memory of a wounded matador at night. Trying to recollect all the details of the fight, he suddenly remembers that "when he stood up, his face white and dirty and the silk of his breeches opened from waist to knee… it was the dirtiness of his slit underwear and the clean, unbearably clean whiteness of the thighbone that I had seen, and it was that which was important" (142). It is a cynically stripped visceral image of death, showing it in its ugliest form, but it is one which trains man in the school of survival, bestows upon him a certain degree of bravado, and from this emanates Hemingway's conception of the manly hero who inhabits a world of action, a universe which is bereft of women. Women are looked upon as an unnecessary appendage and more often as a hinderance. The bullfighter epitomizes courage, poise, skill and a stoic endurance of pain, the prized virtues of manhood. Hemingway finds the essence of masculinity in the Spanish word pundonor, "which means honor, probity, courage, self-respect and pride in one word" (88), a word which applies appropriately to a good bullfighter who must exhibit his courage with dignity as he exercised his skill under the commandment of doom.

The novel A Farewell to Arms is largely regarded as one dealing with love, war and death. But as Carlos Baker has significantly pointed out, only a third of it treats of war and the rest of the novel deals with Catherine-Frederick's love relationship, prematurely terminated by Catherine's pregnancy-related death. A large section of this two-thirds section is devoted to Catherine and Frederick's discussion of the end of life and her pathological but intuitive sense of an impending doom. Their foreboding dialogue is rendered in characteristic Hemingway staccato rhythm and their ruminations are punctuated with an imminent sense of loss. With the description of war as a cruel and impersonal force, a new leitmotif is suggested as early as Book I of the novel where we encounter Catherine's

unreasonable yet ominous fear of rain. This introduces the first note of death in their conversation. When pressed by Frederick, she admits that: "sometimes I see me dead in it" (113). The rains become a conscious symbol of disaster when Frederick tells us in the first chapter, "At the start of the winter came the permanent rain and with the rain came cholera" (9), suggesting its death-dealing capacity. Falling rain runs like a leitmotif through the novel, it rains heavily during the humiliating retreat from Caporetto when an inexplicable cruelty is unleashed by the enemy upon the Allied powers, resulting in chaos and their vanquish; it falls incessantly when Catherine, in throes of agonizing labour delivers a stillborn ; and it still keeps falling when on the last page of the novel bidding farewell to her dead arms Frederick walks out into the downpour : "After a while I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain" (287).Though a natural feminine symbol of rejuvenation and health, rain is continually used in the novel as a signal of disaster and because of its inextricable connection with Catherine, it becomes tangentially associated with life-sapping force and death.

In his fiction Hemingway endows the natural imagery of rain and snow, traditionally associated with fertility, regeneration and the fecund power of women with darkness and despair. In his short story, "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" (1936) the dying protagonist Harry's ruminations on slow and imminent death from gangrene are intertwined with thoughts of release from his wife Helen with whom he is out on a safari in Africa, camping in the rain shadow of the towering Mount Kilimanjaro. His last thoughts are on the uselessness of his careworn marriages where he consciously entered into dubious alliances with wealthy women of the society for self-advancement, chiefly with his present and third wife Helen. He married Helen for wealth and influence but realizes that her affluent lifestyle came as a wedge in the way of his becoming a productive writer, resulting in their endless bickering and quarrels. Unknown

to him, he contracts a life-threatening disease two weeks prior to this fatal African trip while they were out on the fashionable pursuit of waterbucks, and he wounded himself on a thorn which turns infectious. Harry's treatment of his wife borders on the pathological where he wishes he were away in a better place, possibly dead, rather than be in her company for the "rich were dull". Ever since he embarked on the safari Henry's thoughts are suffused with death. Looking at the salubrious snow-capped peaked visited by the hyena (a wily animal eternally associated with women) he has a feeling that death "came with a rush, not as a rush of water nor wind, but of a sudden evil-smelling emptiness and the odd thing was that the hyena slipped lightly along the edge of it" (62). To Harry's febrile sensibilities the hyena, the predatory vultures, the blinding snow and the woman he is yoked to in matrimony fold together in an ominous conjunction of a powerful image of death.

Towards the end of the story as he lies alone dying on a cot after a bitter altercation with his wife Harry feels death closing in on him while Helen has nonchalantly gone off for cocktails: "just then death had come and rested his head on the foot of the cot and he could smell its breath" (74). Hemingway demolishes the conventional image of the death's head signifying the temporariness of man's life and supplants it with his own very private image of death, which is expressed vividly in his dying last words to Helen; "Never believe any of that about a scythe and a skull;…it can be two bicycle policemen easily, or be a bird or it can have a wide snout like a hyena" (ibid). Although these are traditionally life-endowing images drawn from nature, symbolizing fertility they are here associated with death. The interminable snowfall here as the rains in A Farewell, runs like a motif, a harbinger of death. The death-dealing power of the snow recurs later in For Whom the Bell Tolls where an unseasonal snowfall causes the detection and annihilation of the Republican army at the hands of the fascists. This private conception

of death is embedded in Hemingway's sensibility that sees death in these otherwise traditionally considered symbols of healing and fecundity.

A Farewell to Arms shows a certain ambivalence towards the regenerative power of love. Although a love story that ends in tragedy, the larger question that looms over the novel is the necessity of Catherine dying at the end. Her presence in the novel becomes both a succor to the hero and ironically an impediment to his freedom. She is after all the reason why Frederick turns his back on the war. He finds solace and refuge in her arms from the violence in the outside world. But there is also a kind of restlessness in Frederick and a desire to get news of what is happening in the world outside. The arms he has ensconced himself into are not sufficient to obliterate the memory of the past active life. This is reflected in his ever so often stepping out to buy a newspaper to keep himself abreast of the news of his brethren. Thus, the farewell to the arms and ammunition and the farewell to the lifeless arms of Catherine are a conjoined image of death and disaster in the reader's consciousness. It is also pertinent to note that a lot of their conversations in the novel revolve around the topic of death where an optimistic Frederick must be divested of his romantic conception of death through the medium of Catherine. Her cynical and pragmatic attitude to death as an end of everything is important because Frederick is hesitant to believe in the finality of death in the beginning, but he comes round to accepting it in the end. In the early section of the novel, talking about her English lover who went to war reluctantly and was killed in France, she says, "I thought perhaps he couldn't stand it and then of course he was killed and that was the end of it" (33). She sees death as a point of no return and when Frederick is not convinced of such nullity of life and disagrees with her, she emphasizes: "Oh yes, that's the end of it" (103).

Frederick gradually grows to accept this extremely pessimistic view of life and the finality of death, with no suggestion of a hereafter, when he bids an agonized farewell to Catherine at the end. He accepts the terrible reality of Catherine's death as an end: "It was like saying goodbye to a statue" (287). There is a sense that the inanimate body of Catherine has no longer any promise to offer and the world he forsook for her is strangely a liberating world for him. Frederick and Catherine are both refugees from the chaotic world of war and find escape from the harsh reality in the little nook of seclusion they have found in neutral Switzerland. Frederick is deceived by the lies, sham and cruelty of the Allied retreat in Italy and following an instinct of self-preservation, signs a separate peace treaty with his soul by escaping with Catherine to an isolated, idyllic life. He is persuaded to give in to Catherine's disbelief in religion. He starts subscribing to her view that their love alone is the highest sacrament, and this is symbolically reflected in their rejection of the priest's proposal to go to Abruzzi, a place denoting rarefied atmosphere of purity and spirituality. Instead, they choose to go into a state of isolation. Because Frederick has severed all connections with the outside world, and has no hope or faith left, he is devastated by his close acquaintance with death. Because nothing besides his love holds sanctity for him anymore, he is not able to see anything beyond the immediate annihilation of his beloved's body. The reader realizes the inadequacy of Catherine and Frederick's worldview because Hemingway negates this narrow vision of the world where the lovers are seeking exclusivity. Frederick is attempting to discover universal meaning in the limited confines of personal relationship, and it is doomed to failure. It is doomed because it is liable to all mishaps and accidents of the world in which human beings, if they persist in standing isolated are like the famous imagery in the novel, like ants running back and forth on a log burning in the camp fire-some are killed by fire and others by steam, but the inevitable conclusion is

that, "they kill you in the end" (282).

Normally the Hemingway hero is only indirectly concerned with the exploration of philosophy of life for he has already started on the premise that it is an essentially meaningless and futile world. Hence what he is to be made aware of is the feeling that death a manifestation of this meaningless and absurd world, and an answer to the problem of how best to live in it. If we look at the novel as an education of Frederick, of making him aware of the social reality he wanted to escape by deserting the war, Catherine's death marks the final stage in his initiation into life as he gradually learns about love, life, war and death. Watching death at such close quarters, he is made aware of an important facet of life, the memory of which powerful experience, he would carry forth into his life. He is made aware that death is the end of life and the only value in death is man's knowledge of it. Since there are no aesthetic reasons for Catherine to die in the novel one can surmise that her end is meant to serve as a stylistic tool only to bring about this tragic realization in the protagonist. But aside from this there are other reasons why Catherine should relinquish her hold over Frederick. When we first see Catherine, despite the immediate attraction between her and Frederick, we are also aware of her desiring extreme physical possession of Frederick. She is determined to not let any other nurse attend to his body and ignores the hospital roster to be present with him even when she is not on duty. Hemingway has uncharitably attributed qualities like jealousy, unreasonable possessiveness and a certain trait of hysteria to her. She embodies an almost destructive force, when on her deathbed she extracts a promise from Frederick that he would remain loyal to her: "You won't do our things with another girl, or say the same things, will you?" (286). It is selfish moments like these, which critic Oscar Cargill notes, make her expendable in Hemingway's mind who kills her so that Frederick gains life-lessons: "Catherine's death can better be justified on

sadistic than aesthetic grounds" (Cargill,361).

In his most acclaimed and popular novel, For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940), Hemingway returns to the civil war-torn arena of Spain and once again raises the subject of the inevitability of death, the uber-masculine hero Jordan's heroic embracement of it in complete defiance and disregard of his lover Maria's worries and caution. For Jordan the validation for his heroic action in war is more meaningful than choosing to spend the rest of his sedate life in Maria's arms, even though he loves her very much. The title of the novel, borrowed from John Donne's Meditation Number 17, is a reminder of the idea of universal brotherhood, to which the protagonist Jordan is wholly committed. So does the epigraph to the novel, culled from Donne's sermon: "No man is an island, intire of itselfe…never send to know for whom the bell tolls; for it tolls for thee" serve as a stark reminder of the ultimate certitude of death, and how the importance of man lies in making the best use of his life before embracing death. It is one of the most political novels written by Hemingway and because Jordan feels himself an integral part of society: "I believe firmly in the Republic and I have faith. I believe in it with fervour as those who have religious faith believe in the mysteries" (86), he is ready to die being committed to the political cause at the expense of sacrificing his personal love life. He does not let his love for Maria interfere with his war strategy which he is certain will result in his self-annihilation. Like other women characters, the depiction of Maria as a docile, submissive, war-abused girl is problematic, her character does not develop beyond what many critics look upon as one providing only 'sexual convenience' to Jordan, a sexual stereotype.

The novel then relegates the love interest to the background and what is foregrounded is not only the theme of the inevitability of death but a man's heroism in sacrificing his personal interests, chiefly that

of love for a woman, for the benefit of mankind; in fact giving up the love of the woman makes the sacrifice all the more meaningful and worthy of Jordan's heroism. Towards the end of the novel, Jordan realizes that the odds are stacked against him in the fight against the fascist forces-he is hemmed in by the enemy, his resources are depleted, and his message has failed to reach the command base, so the only way to save the Republican band of army is to blow up the bridge. In the climactic moment he finds the detonators missing and resolves to accomplish the task knowing fully well that it will ensure his death. He accepts his end with stoic resignation. Earlier too he had shown a cavalier attitude to personal safety, had courted danger with exemplary heroism where death had : "seemed of complete unimportance, only a thing to be avoided because it would interfere with your duty" (159). Now, as he lies wounded and full of pain at the end of the novel, he feels completely at peace, bidding farewell to this world: "And you had a lot of luck,…you've had as good a life as anyone because of these last days. You don't complain when you have been so lucky (409). But not before he offers inadequate philosophical comfort to Maria, who is distraught at facing the world without him : "Thou wilt go now, rabbit. But I go with thee. As long as there is one of us, there is both of us…If thou goest then I go too. Do you not see how it is? Whichever one there is, is both" (405). He doesn't spare a thought that this is sheer palaver offering empty solace to an already war-ravaged Maria. In his dying moments he neither takes a painkiller to alleviate his agony, nor does he shoot himself because it would be associated with the cowardly act of his father who died by suicide. The accent of the novel then is on the unbridled heroism of the protagonist and his band of daring guerilla fighters, each one of who has sacrificed his love life at the altar of war.

Thus, the paper has attempted an analysis of Hemingway's problematic depiction of women in his short stories and novels. He

has offered a limited spectrum of women who are either too timid and submissive or are dominating and painted as a virago. Biographers have attributed this to the presence of innumerable women in the author's life and to his inability to fathom the female consciousness. Perhaps that is the reason why we do not have scenes of domestic felicity in his novels. He looks upon women as an intrusion into the all-male world of conviviality and machismo and their presence are often associated with the end of life, for as Leslie Fiedler has pointed out, Hemingway is happiest when he is depicting a world of 'men-without-women'.

References

Baker, C. (1963). *Writer As Artist.* Princeton University Press.

Cargill, O. (1941). *Intellectual America.* The Macmillan Company.

Fiedler, L.A. (1960). *Love and Death in the American Novel.* Criterion Books.

Hemingway, E. (1962 rpt.1966). *Death in the Afternoon.* Penguin Books Ltd.

Hemingway, E. (1953). "The Snows of Kilimanjaro". *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway.* Charles Scribner's & Sons.

Hemingway, E. (1929, rpt.1977). *A Farewell to Arms.* Surjeet Publications.

Hemingway, E. (1941, rpt. 1987). *For Whom the Bell Tolls.* Grafton Books.

Hoffman,F.J. (1951). The Modern Novel in America.1900-1950. Henry Regnery.

Dr.Vinita Gupta Chaturvedi is Professor in the Department of English, Delhi College of Arts and Commerces, University of Delhi.

Vengeful Women & The Mysterious Metropolis

Ritika Pant

Abstract:

The public-private dichotomy of urban space is a universal phenomenon where the 'public' belongs to men and 'private' to women. This paper explores the 'risks' and 'dangers' that a woman negotiates with as she navigates urban spaces. Through a narrative analysis of three films from Bombay Cinema – Kahaani (Sujoy Ghosh, 2012), Ek Hasina Thi (Sriram Raghavan, 2004) and That Girl in Yellow Boots (Anurag Kashyap, 2011), the paper argues that the uncanny cityscape metamorphoses a naive, meek woman protagonist into a vengeful, ferocious figure who gets even with her enemies. The paper charts a relationship between women's bodies and the urban spaces where the same cityscape that threatens the female figure also empowers her in multiple ways. Each of the three films navigates the dark underbelly of three different urban spaces with female protagonists who set aside their vulnerabilities and conspire against their perpetrators.

Key Words: *urban spaces, women, cityscapes, Bombay Cinema, vengeful*

Introduction

"Imagine an Indian city with street corners full of women: chatting, laughing, breast feeding, exchanging corporate notes or planning protest meetings. Imagine footpaths spilling over with old and young women watching the world go by as they sip tea; discuss love, cricket and latest blockbuster. Imagine women in saris, jeans, salwars and skirts sitting at nukkad reflecting on world politics and dissecting the rising sensex. If you can imagine this, you are imagining a radically different city."

– Why Loiter? (Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan and Shilpa Ranade)

Imagining an urban space with a free and unrestricted movement for its female inhabitants is a utopia. While a man on the streets can be a photographer, a journalist, a historian or a flaneur, a woman on the streets is a hysterical, loose woman who invites trouble for herself. Jules Michelet in his treatise La Femme (1858-1860) documents the spatial obstacles to a single woman's liberty and mobility in the city. 'How many irritations for the single woman! She can hardly ever go out in the evening; she would be taken for a prostitute…All eyes would be fixed on her, and she would hear uncomplimentary and bold conjecture (Michelet, cited in Gleber, 1997:71). The public-private dichotomy of urban space is a universal phenomenon where the 'public' belongs to men and 'private' to women. While men have the liberty to invade the 'private' spaces of the house, women are still bereft of the urban 'public' space. In the context of India, Partha Chatterjee (2010), distinguishes the day-to-day social spaces into 'ghar' and 'bahir', the home and the world. 'The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the

domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and woman is its representation' (122). In Hindu religion, a woman is often referred to as grihlakshmi; the Goddess of the house who not only looks after the house but also ensures that she stays within the confines of the four walls of the grih (home).

Although problematic in its representation of women's interaction with urbanity, Bombay cinema has registered the potential risks and dangers of women's mobility in public spaces. While the city space exposes a woman to risks and renders her vulnerable, it also transforms her gullibility into strength and courage. This paper explores the 'risks' and 'dangers' that a woman negotiates with as she navigates urban spaces. Through a narrative analysis of three films from Bombay Cinema – Kahaani (Sujoy Ghosh, 2012), Ek Hasina Thi (Sriram Raghavan, 2004) and That Girl in Yellow Boots (Anurag Kashyap, 2011), the paper argues that the uncanny cityscape metamorphoses a naive, meek woman protagonist into a vengeful, ferocious figure who gets even with her enemies. It highlights the conflicting relationship between women's bodies and the urban spaces where the same cityscape that threatens the female figure also empowers her in multiple ways. Each of the three films navigates the dark underbelly of three different urban spaces with female protagonists who set aside their vulnerabilities and conspire against their perpetrators.

Uncanny Cityscape and Vulnerable Women

While many scholars have discussed the public-private dichotomy of urban spaces, Elizabeth Wilson (1991) discusses the gendered spaces in the city and introduces us to the feminine and masculine spaces that are constantly at war with each other. 'The city is 'masculine' in its triumphal scale, its towers and vistas and arid industrial regions;

it is feminine in its enclosing embrace, in its indeterminacy and labyrinthine uncenteredness' (Wilson, 1991, pg.7). The curvilinear by-lanes, the narrow alleys, the enclosed spaces of the urban homes and the labyrinthine-like city streets – these feminine spaces that connect one part of the city to the other, I argue, are the spaces that often lend to the uncanny. Uncanny, as Sigmund Freud (2003) puts it, is 'an area in which a person (is) unsure of his way around: the better orientated he (is) in the world around him, the less likely he would be to find the objects and occurrences in it uncanny' (135). While these labyrinthine-like uncanny urban spaces produce disorientation for their inhabitants, they endow mobility and courage to the female figure. By navigating these urban spaces, a woman unsettles the dominant social order and finds liberty from patriarchal frameworks and moral restraints. The city becomes a site of individual freedom for the woman and offers her 'new social and spatial liberties, political visibility as well as the pleasures of anonymity' (Tonkiss, 2005, p. 95).

However, what is 'freedom' for a woman is 'disorder' for the others in the city. Men often get affected by this 'disorder' but for the women this 'disorder' fulfills their desire of unhindered mobility and anonymity. Wilson further adds that 'instead of setting nature against the city, they find nature in the city. For them, the 'invisible' city, the 'second' city, the underworld or secret labyrinth instead of becoming sinister or diseased, is an Alladin's cave of riches' (1991, p.8). Thus, while a woman might appear vulnerable in the urban environment, she makes herself at home in this sinister 'second city', the uncanny city. In this labyrinth of the underworld, a woman's susceptibility becomes her only weapon to escape from the perils of urbanity. The three films that the paper examines demonstrate how the city becomes a witness to the transformation of vulnerable and docile women to vengeful figures who navigate urban spaces and bring 'disorder' in the city to bring their chaotic lives back in

'order'. Kahaani depicting the labyrinthine cityscape of Kolkata has a manipulative Vidya (Vidya Balan) who is in search of her missing husband. Sarika (Urmila Matondkar) of Ek Hasina Thi transcends the boundaries of Mumbai and uncovers the network of the underworld in Delhi to seek revenge from her ex-lover. To find her missing father, Ruth (Kalki Koechlin) unravels the dark underbelly and corrupt network of Mumbai in That Girl in Yellow Boots.

The narrative of wronged women seeking justice through revenge directs us to the figure of the 'female vigilante' in the urban landscape. During the 1980s, Bombay Cinema witnessed an array of 'female vigilante' films like Insaaf Ka Tarazu (B.R. Chopra, 1980), Pratighaat (N.Chandra, 1987), Khoon Bhari Maang (Rakesh Roshan, 1988), Khoon Baha Ganga Mein (Pravin Bhatt, 1988) etc. the trend which Maithili Rao calls the 'lady avengers' (Rao, cited in Gopalan, 2008, p.97). According to N. Chandra, 'the common theme in these films is their portrayal of women as hardened, cynical, vengeful creatures' (Gopalan, 2008, p.97). He suggests that these films are a result of the 'voracious viewing habits of the Indian audience that wishes to see something different from the stock 'male' action film' (Gopalan, 2008, p.97). With ace yesteryear actresses like Hema Malini, Dimple Kapadia and Rekha carrying the women avenger genre on their shoulders, the success of such films was partially a result of their stardom and partially the high quotient of melodrama they offered. The current genre of lady avenger films, however, running on similar plots of avenging women seeking respite only after punishing their perpetrator are starkly different from their earlier counterparts. Unlike the earlier rape-revenge films, these films deal with the trauma of everyday life in an urban landscape. The urban backdrop that these protagonists use to seek their revenge differentiates contemporary female vigilante films from those made in the 1980s. Unlike, the melodramatic spaces of domesticity and familial ties in the earlier films, the contemporary women avengers

attain familiarity with the city and use the cityscape for reconciliation. The cityscape does not only help in exposing them to the 'risk' and 'danger' of urbanity but also helps them negotiate it.

In a city, a woman is present 'as temptress, as whore, as fallen woman, as lesbian, but also as virtuous womanhood in danger, as heroic womanhood who triumphs over temptation and tribulation' (Wilson, 1991, p.6). Drawing upon Wilson's argument, I further elaborate that the urban landscape provides a woman not only the freedom of mobility in its vast multitude but also unfair means to achieve her goals. The city transforms an otherwise righteous woman into a cheat, a thief, a prostitute, a manipulator and even a murderer. The dark underbelly of the city provides a woman with an uncanny feeling in which lies, not the phantasmagoria, but the carnivorous network of betrayal, vengeance, anonymity, despair and death. In the three films that the paper discusses, the cities of Kolkata, Delhi and Mumbai, metamorphose the docile and defenseless Vidya, Sarika and Ruth respectively into dangerous and vindictive rebels. Taking advantage of their superficial vulnerability, these endangered women become fierce in the urban landscape. What knits the three films together is the thriller genre, the plot of a single woman in an alien city and the search for someone, a goal to fulfil and revenge to be taken. In all these films, the protagonists carry a memory of the past that haunts their present. The unsettling events of the past demand a solution in the present and the urban space becomes the platform to fulfil the revenge. Therefore, the correlation between memory, urban space and solution through revenge becomes an integral part of all three narratives.

A Conspiring Mother-to-be in a Mysterious Kahaani

Kahaani narrates the story of a seemingly pregnant NRI woman, Vidya Bagchi (Vidya Balan), who comes to the city of Kolkata in

a quest of finding her husband, Arnab Bagchi who went missing while he was on an assignment at the National Data Centre (referred to as NDC, hereafter). Her first visit to the city that is gearing up for the Durga puja festival is not too joyful as the Kalighat Police Station becomes her first stoppage point in this journey. From her frequent visits to the Police Station to her dingy 'zero star' guest house, the new and old office of the NDC, the stinking morgue, the busy streets of Kumartuli and the crumbling lanes of North Calcutta are the only spaces that Vidya explores in what is known as the 'city of joy' in popular references. With a single photograph of her husband and some flashing memories of the past, all clues add to her disorientation when everyone tries to convince her that Arnab Bagchi does not exist. The situation becomes more complex when she finds out that her husband resembled a wanted criminal, Milan Damji. After finding Damji's files in the old building of NDC, Vidya's search for her husband Arnab comes to a halt and she starts searching for Damji. Every possible clue of his existence is erased and the people who can give some information about him are killed one by one.

Kahaani, as Ghosh puts it 'is a story about a woman who is pushed into an alien environment where she has to survive, protect her child, look for her husband and find the truth'[1] . Vidya as a single woman, in an unknown city, on the one hand, invites danger for herself, on the other, unravels the mystery plot with her conspired plans. Not only an alien city but also its strange inhabitants render the city dangerous for her. Vidya lives in a dingy, shady guest house that has a receptionist who is clueless about modern technologies of

[1] See 'Vidya Balan is a brave actress: Sujoy Ghosh'. https://www.news18.com/news/india/vidya-balan-is-a-brave-actress-sujoy-ghosh-446004.html.
In the interview given to Mid-day, Sujoy Ghosh reveals that Kahaani has two protagonists Vidya and Kolkata. While Kolkata's narrow alleys accentuated the thriller plot, Vidya Balan's familiarity with Bengali language helped control the crowd.

computers storing data of customers. A rude and arrogant Inspector Khan from the Intelligence Bureau makes her mission almost impossible by refusing to share any information about her husband or Damji and suggests she returns to London. The contract killer Bob Biswas who is on a killing spree makes Vidya her next target. His appearance is deceptive as he wears a smile on his face and greets the people before he kills them. The only solace for her in this alien city is Inspector Rana with whose support she explores the darkest spaces of the city to search for her missing husband.

What makes this otherwise vibrant city 'uncanny' in the film are the hidden identities that people live with. This is spelled out at the beginning of the film when Inspector Rana tells Vidya that 'Everyone in this city has two names – 'daak naam' which is the pet name and 'bhalo naam' which is the official name'. The lady with a baby in the metro who is a terrorist, a local and an official identity of every employee at the NDC, the Insurance agent Bob Biswas who is a contract killer, the sculptor who is a Police informer, the little boy at the guest house who works and goes to school and above all Vidya herself, live with dual identities. The underlying reality of the cultural landscape of Kolkata is thus reinforced in the film through multiple identities.

A pregnant woman is both a symbol of fertility and susceptibility. Vidya is fierce yet vulnerable, determined to find her missing husband yet far away from it. Khan, describing her vulnerability to his seniors in the Intelligence Bureau says that a pregnant woman who is left by her husband cannot be dangerous to anyone. But it is this vulnerability that she uses to her advantage to accomplish her goals. She conjures the plot of her pregnancy to portray a harmless, meek woman. But behind this docile pregnant woman lies a Software Engineer who illegally invades Government offices, hacks people's passwords, traces IP addresses of the computers and seeks private information from their systems and government documents. Vidya's

presence in the city leads to a 'disorder' amongst the city-dwellers. Putting it in Wilson's words, she becomes 'an eruption in the city, a system of disorder, and a problem: the Sphinx in the city' (1991, p.185). From the Police station in Kolkata to the Intelligence Bureau in Delhi, she challenges the Police, the law and the state.

All the while that Khan and Rana thought that they were exploiting Vidya to reach Damji, it was Vidya who exploited all these characters to fulfil her mission to kill Damji and seek revenge. The climax leads to Vidya going to meet Damji at Triangular Park and the cops following Vidya to eventually trace Damji. The city that is prepping up for the culmination of the Durga Puja festival becomes the backdrop of the event. The enormous statues of the Goddess Durga, the ululating Bengali women, the brightly lit city streets, and the rhythmic sound of dhaks all add up to a surreal enigma that the city exuberates. Amidst this is Vidya, clad in a white and red Bengali saree and a red bindi on her forehead almost replicating the image of the Goddess Durga who is out on a murderous rage. In this crowd of women who all look the same in the lal-paad sarees, Vidya follows a whispering voice calling out her name which eventually leads her to Damji. After a heated conversation between the two, he kicks the pregnant Vidya who falls back on the ground. It is at this moment that her false pregnancy is revealed to the audience and the whole mystery unfolds[2]. She shoots Damji and even before the cops can catch her, she merges into the crowd of identically dressed women. Therefore, all this while Vidya was staying with anonymity in the city where no one knew who the real Vidya was. Anonymity is a basic quality of urbanity. Anonymity, according to Judith Garber (2002) 'contributes to individual freedom, diversity and a rich public sphere' (p.26). It is this anonymity that allows Vidya to

[2] The climax unfolds to reveal Vidya as the widow of Arup Basu who died two years back in a poison-gas attack in a Metro conducted by Damji.

navigate the city of Kolkata without any restriction and yet ensure her safety. This anonymity lends to her a power 'to live in it, but hidden; to emerge on sufferance, veiled' (Wilson, 1991, p.16). The in-danger pregnant Vidya thus turns out to be a rather dangerous and manipulative revenge-seeker who exploits the city and its people as per her needs.

Therefore, this successful thriller as an out-and-out revenge plot not only portrays a never before seen city of Kolkata with dark undertones that overshadow the otherwise brimful city of joy but also takes us through the journey of an often underestimated figure of a helpless pregnant woman whose presence becomes threatening for other city-dwellers. The labyrinthine-like feminine city spaces empower Vidya and act as agents in fulfilling her revenge. Whereas Vidya's revenge emerges out of her love for her husband; in Ek Hasina Thi, Sarika's revenge is an aftermath of her abhorrence towards her ex-lover who betrayed her in love.

A Vindictive Girl-Next-Door in Ek Hasina Thi

Sriram Raghavan's Ek Hasina Thi is the story of the transformation of a naïve, small-town girl, Sarika (Urmila Matondkar) to an extremely dangerous and vindictive wronged woman who is out to settle her scores with her ex-lover Karan (Saif Ali Khan). The film can largely be divided into three parts – a naïve Sarika being completely smitten by the charming Karan, then falling in Karan's trap and being sentenced to seven years of imprisonment and finally escaping from the prison to seek revenge.

An outsider to the city of Mumbai, Sarika works in a travel agency and has limited interaction with the city. Focusing on the plight of a single woman in a metropolitan, Shilpa Phadke (2005) argues that her chastity is always in question in an urban environment. 'Women

who live within familial contexts with parents or husbands, it is assumed that 'somebody' is assuring their chastity. Single women living on their own, even in Mumbai are looked upon with no little suspicion, especially by housing societies and neighbours (p.47). Facing a similar crisis as a middle-class working woman living alone in the city, Sarika deals with everything from buying groceries, and electricity bills to shooing away the creepy rats and even creepier neighbours from her apartment. The everydayness of Sarika's routine is brought to an end with Karan's entry into her life and then her apartment by his deliberate efforts to impress her. However, suspicion soon overshadows romance as events take a new turn.

The film begins with a shot where the camera captures Sarika sitting in a dark prison cell with a rat loitering around in the foreground. The second scene leads us to an understanding that Sarika's present condition in the prison is a result of past events[3]. This middle-class girl, whose world once revolved around her home, now finds herself in the confines of a prison and is suspected to have links with the underworld. After being imprisoned, Sarika follows every bit of Karan's instructions. From not disclosing his identity to the cops to confessing a crime that she did not commit; she adheres to all the instructions given to her by Karan's lawyer. During the course of imprisonment, however, she realizes that she became a victim of Karan's manipulation. The prison acts as a catalyst in the transformation of this gullible girl into a malicious woman. Forced to live with crude women criminals, Sarika soon becomes one of them. Her character transitions not only through a psychological change but also a physical change where she throws aside her good-girl image, chops off her curly, long hair and becomes a rebel. The girl who would shriek at the sight of a rat, now, kills a rat if it looks bothersome. With the help of a prison in-mate, Pramila, who is a

[3] The motif of 'rats' to establish the uncanny has also been used in the first shot of Kahaani.

lady Don, she escapes from the prison by setting the prison on fire.

Once out of the jail, Sarika first visits the heartland of crime in Mumbai, city areas she was never exposed to earlier. To get a pistol from Pramila's friend, she goes through the narrow alleys and claustrophobic residences of the city. She skillfully murders Karan's lawyer, Mathur by entering in his apartment during night. The handheld camera takes us through the dark spaces of the unlit apartment of the lawyer with finally revealing Sarika attacking the lawyer with an iron rod and brutally killing him since he does not disclose the whereabouts of Karan. Not leaving behind any trace of the crime, she manipulates the police into thinking it to be a suicide. Her limited movement from home to work now transcends the boundaries of the city and she finds herself in Delhi.

From the chaotic lanes of old Delhi she heads to the Hotel where Karan stays and books a room right opposite to Karan's room. Sometimes through her hotel window and at other times through the key-hole of her door, she keeps a constant vigilance on Karan. From his business meetings with his clients to his private meetings with his girlfriend, Sarika closely follows him. Sitting next to his coffee table in a restaurant, travelling in adjacent lifts, roaming around in the same shopping complex and living in a room right opposite to his, without being noticed gives her the power of an omnipotent observer. Her surveillance over Karan is rightly depicted by the erratic movements of the camera across the spaces she navigates depicting her point of view. The once-upon-a-time sly Karan now starts to appear defenseless as he is completely unaware of Sarika's presence and the danger that awaits him. It is through Sarika's surveillance on Karan that the cartography of Delhi is sketched out for us. Ranjani Mazumdar (2007) observes the vitality of the urban backdrop in this revenge plot:

The film's uniqueness lies in the way the revenge plot is grafted onto

a vivid urban landscape of iconic city spaces, department stores, and crowds in Delhi's Jama Masjid area, alleys, claustrophobic jail spaces, hotel lobbies, and Sarika's home. The desire to mount the narrative as a journey that moves from Bombay to Delhi gives the film an unusual look, as Sarika's escape from prison is followed by walks, rickshaw rides, car travel, and leisure activities like shopping. Throughout this journey, Sarika is intelligently and methodically planning her revenge (p.208).

While Sarika is following Karan in the labyrinths of the city, she is also being followed by the Police. She is under surveillance as her movement across the city is being watched and her phone tapped. The network of underworld gangsters that is mostly associated with Mumbai gives a new spatial density to Delhi. Bilal, Sanjeev and Karan are a few names that run this network in Delhi. Sarika who is an alien in the city takes full control of the city. She navigates and uses the spaces as per her requirements without any fear. Karan is soon caught in a tormenting cat-and-mouse trap when he realizes that he is blamed for a murder that Sarika committed. Sarika's efficiency as a serial-killer becomes unquestionable when she commits one murder after the other without leaving any trace behind. Her presence in the city becomes a cause of 'disorder' for the cops, Karan and the underworld.

While Karan is looking for a hide-out Sarika takes him to her one-room rented apartment in old Delhi. This apartment has old and decrepit walls and is almost like an old store house with empty cartons and bottles. The transformation in Sarika's character can also be compared to the two apartments she changes over the course of time. From a one-room comfortable apartment in an urban housing society in Mumbai to an old one-room apartment in a busy area of Old Delhi, Sarika traverses her journey from an innocent middle-class girl to a vengeful criminal.

All these sequences build to an interesting climax where Karan runs away in a car only to find that he is on gunpoint and maybe shot by Sarika any moment who is sitting on the backseat of his car. Following her instructions, he drives the car to a deserted place, far away from the city. Sarika then chains him and leaves him inside a cave full of rats with the only source of light being a torch which also dies out eventually. The motif of rats, as I discussed earlier, has been used cleverly; initially, to depict Sarika's 'fear', then her 'anger' in the prison and finally her 'revenge'. The squeaking sound of the rats loitering around Karan merges with his shriek but alas, there is no one to witness his helplessness. Thus, completing her act of revenge, Sarika finally surrenders herself to the Police. The urban space witnesses Sarika's journey from an under-confident, simpering girl-next-door to a gruesome, cold-blooded criminal. The city, therefore, exposes Sarika to her violent side which she was unaware of until then.

It can thus be argued that the urban landscape, on the one hand, makes Sarika vulnerable at the hands of the male protagonist and snatches away her innocence but at the same time also confers to her a sense of strength and empowerment which prepares her to fight the injustice done to her. The city becomes a witness to her spatial and psychological journey in this narrative of revenge. While Sarika's journey of revenge ends with a sense of satisfaction, Ruth's revenge has a shocking and disturbing end when the mystery of her missing father unfolds after a long wait in That Girl in Yellow Boots.

Everyday Revenge in That Girl in Yellow Boots

That Girl In Yellow Boots unfolds the story of a twenty year old Ruth (Kalki Koelchin) who works in a sleazy massage parlour in Mumbai's Prabha Devi area to make ends meet. Adding to her discomfort in the city is her half-Indian, half-British origin, her

limited knowledge of Hindi, her drug-addict boyfriend, Prashant (Prashant Prakash) and the status of being an illegal immigrant. She navigates the urban landscape of the city in search of her missing father who left her when she was still a child.

The film opens with Ruth, sitting with a group of foreigners in the Passport office to get a stamp on her visa. Being called out as an 'England girl' by one of the Passport Officers, Ruth runs from one table to another, is rudely spoken to, looked at with astonishment when she speaks in distorted Hindi and often passed sexually-offensive remarks. In this alien urban environment, Ruth discovers her way out to deal with corrupt officers by bribing them. The hard-earned money she gets by giving hand jobs to old, lustful men is shoved into the pockets of corrupt Passport officers and policemen.

The everyday of Ruth's life is established by her daily commute in the local trains, giving Swedish massages to old Indian men often ending up in giving hand jobs to earn extra thousand rupees. Her one room seedy apartment, although a suffocating space with decayed walls and stained doors, surprisingly has a set of furniture that does not seem to belong there. Adding to this dilemma of space and its associated objects is a plasma TV, fancy lamps and air-conditioner. It hints at her 'illegal immigrant' status where although she can afford an apartment in a housing society, is forced to stay in an area where she is not under surveillance. The grim and gloomy ambience of the apartment further enhances Ruth's agony. Both, her apartment and the massage parlour, can be conceived as the 'in-between spaces' that allow her mobility in the city (Phadke, 2005). Shilpa Phadke (2005) suggests that the in-between spaces in Mumbai allow women to slip into them without restricting their mobility and ensuring safety. 'By these 'in-between' spaces one might refer to those formations of city-life, static and kinetic, socio-architectural (certain kind of streets) and demographic (certain kinds of crowds), that allow a

woman opportunities, occasions and possibilities to negotiate public spaces more effectively' (p.56). These 'in-between' spaces provide her anonymity and the power of unrestricted movement in the city where she lives as an illegal immigrant and works without a work-permit.

Phadke (2005) argues that while on the one hand women are the consumers, they also simultaneously get consumed. 'In their dress, deportment and gestures, women demonstrate an internalization of the male gaze. By implication, women are expected to simultaneously demonstrate their sexual desirability while ensuring their sexual safety' (Phadke, 2005, p. 48). Considering her 'foreign' status, Ruth is looked at as an easy prey in the city, often fooled by the auto drivers and harassed by the local goons with unpleasing sexual remarks. On being asked personal questions by a Passport officer about where she lives and what she does for a living, Ruth replies saying, 'Being a young, white girl in Bombay, I get paranoid when I am asked so many questions'. Born in a French family, Kalki Koelchin, who has also co-written the film with Kashyap, in an interview, adds her real life-experience of being a 'foreigner' in India:

Growing up as a white-skinned woman in India, I always stood as the odd one out — there was a certain alienation that comes with that, and you end up alienating yourself because everyone looks at you as a foreigner, you are easy, the 'Baywatch' loose-morale white girl. I have always had men look at me differently, not like they would look at Indian girls. I guess that is something I could relate to in Ruth's character [4].

Not only the corrupt government officer but also Prashant and the local goons live off her money in the city. Her house, although a

[4] See 'Dark, explosive, unsettling: Anurag Kashyap's 'That Girl in Yellow Boots' An interview with Kalki Koelchin. http://www.firstpost.com/bollywood/dark-explosive-unsettling-anurag-kashyap%E2%80%99s-that-girl-in-yellow-boots-75737.html

private space, is invaded by a small-time gangster Chitiappa Gowda (Gulshan Devaiah) who Prashant owed some money to. In order, to take his money back, Chitiappa, forcibly enters Ruth's house, takes away all her savings, humiliates her, slaps her and even ensures that she pays back the remaining amount. Ruth, due to her alienation in the city and illegally living in a country gives in to his torture. Also, men take her vulnerability for granted to fulfill their monetary needs.

Ruth negotiates danger and bitter truth at every step she takes in the dark underbelly of the city. Unlike Kahaani's Vidya or Ek Hasina Thi's Sarika's revenge that emerges from an unfortunate event, Ruth's revenge emerges from the everyday harassment she faces in the city of Mumbai – from the government officers, small time gangsters and to some extent her boyfriend. Her way of dealing with the trouble-makers is unlike Sarika or Vidya. But that is also because her troubles are different from theirs. To get rid of the local goon Chitiappa who extorts her for money, she cooks up a false story of her father dying in a cylinder blast when she gets to know that his father died in a similar manner. Listening to her story, Chitiappa breaks down into tears and runs away from there. To get rid of Prahsant's drug-addiction, she ties his hands to a window-sill and enjoys his helplessness as he gets frustrated and angry. To avoid any issues of her illegal stay she uses the power of money to settle the trouble.

Ruth's mental chaos is also reflected in the spaces she inhabits. The claustrophobic spaces of her house and the massage parlour indirectly mirror the situation she is trapped in. The unlawful extended stay in another country, the desire to find her missing father, the disrespectful job of giving happy endings to her customers, and being looked down upon as a foreigner with loose moral character constitute to construct a closed, claustrophobic world with almost no ray of hope for her. In her moments of an emotional breakdown, she

chooses to lock herself inside the bathroom and smoke a cigarette than to show her vulnerability to the uncaring city and its people.

Ruth establishes her own network of informants from the passport office, the ashram and the Post office in the city to find her father and ultimately succeeds in her search. But all her effort goes in vain; when she discovers that her father was one of her customers who would satisfy his sexual desires by getting services from his daughter. The film, through its course, also reveals a grimy and tragic tale of incest and sexual abuse, thus, exposing us to the bitter realities. With a bold climax that uncovers a disturbing issue, we are also exposed to the violent side of Ruth. After the revelation, when her father again comes to her as a customer, she pours hot water on his back and then takes a pistol out of a drawer and is almost willing to shoot him. She, however, controls her violent urge and leaves the parlour without saying a word to wander in the city that absorbs her in its vast multitude, as it does, many other strangers.

Conclusion

In all three films, the protagonists are the vigilantes who take the law into their hands – Vidya by conspiring against the law to find her missing husband, Sarika by unravelling the underworld operations on one hand and killing Karan to seek her personal revenge on the other, outdoes the functions of the state and the judiciary and Ruth by bribing her way out surpasses the surveillance of immigration. The helpless and pregnant Vidya, the shy and meek Sarika and the apprehensive Ruth, all conceal within them a monstrous identity that comes to foray into the urban landscape. The city, therefore, becomes a witness and a catalyst to the acts of these avenging women and introduces them to their 'other' side which is violent, vindictive, manipulative and unforgiving.

Bibliography

Chatterjee, P. (2010). The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question (1989). In P. Chatterjee, *Empire and Nation: Selected Essays.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny." (Imago, Bd) 1919.

Gleber, A. (1997). Female Flanerie and the Symphony of the City. In *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture* (pp. 67-88). Berkley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.

Garber, Judith A. "'Not Named or Identified': Politics and the Search for Anonymity in the City." In *Gendering the City: Women, Boundaries and Visions of Urban Life*, by Kristine B. Miranna and Alma H. Young (eds), 19-40. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000.

Gopalan, Lalitha. "Avenging Women in Indian Cinema." In Making *Meaning in Indian Cinema*, by Ravi S. Vasudevan, 216-217. New Delhi: Oxford, 2000.

Mazumdar, Ranjani. *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

Nigam, Aditya. "Dislocating Delhi : A City in the 1990s." *Sarai Reader,* 2001: 41-42.

Phadke, Shilpa. "You can be Lonely in a Crowd: The Production of Safety in Mumbai." *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* (Sage Publications), 2005.

Shilpa Ranade, Sameera Khan, Shilpa Phadke. *Why Loiter.* Penguin Books, 2011.

Tonkiss, Fran. *Space, the City and Social Theory.* Cambridge: Polity, 2005.

Wilson, Elizabeth. *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder and Women.*

Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

Dr. Ritika Pant is Associate Professor in the Jindal School of Journalism and Communication, O.P. Jindal Global University.

Women & pandemic: Social media performance of gender identity

Dr. Surhita Basu, Sana Amir & Archa Banerjee

Abstract:

During the Covid-19 pandemic the transformation of life and living to the digital space has also shifted the constructive norms and practices of gender identities. The semiotic proliferation of gender identities through memes, images, hashtags, videos and emojis developed a distinct gender identity in the background of a global health crisis. The present study attempts to capture the narrative nuances through quantitative and qualitative content analysis of the Facebook and Twitter posts under the hash-tags women and pandemic during the second wave of the pandemic. The study analyses social media posts to understand which issues surrounding gender are being prioritized, how gender narratives are developed and the prevailing discourse surrounding gender during the pandemic. The study found that, despite acknowledging intersectional identities at times, narratives mostly reinforced stereotypes and hierarchies. The focus on promotional content by organizations, rather than women themselves, aligns with the cult of femininity, where feminist language is used superficially for commodifying for institutional branding. However, in a few cases where women became authors, the tonal quality, thematic representation and message formation were more empathetic, collaborative and thoughtful.

Key Words: *women, pandemic, social media, gender identity, neo-liberal feminism, violence*

Introduction

As gender is constructed through performative acts (Butler, 1988), what the Covid-19 pandemic did was to shift that performative space largely to online platforms. The growing dependency on social media during the pandemic shaped and influenced the performative acts where the virtualization of gender and identity occurred through communicative practices. While performance is an integral part of identity construction (Schechner, 1988), the performative space once becomes virtual, the nature of performance and performative limitations are contested. Virtual platforms offer a spatial dimension where physical, geographical and many social markers can be challenged and reconstituted forming new identities through interactive multimedia posts.

These discursive practices shape how gender is being formed, contested and represented leading to gradual social absorption or withdrawal. Analysing social media posts would thus help to understand which issues surrounding gender are being prioritized, how gender narratives are developed and the prevailing discourse surrounding gender during the pandemic. The present study looks into such social media posts during the second wave of Covid-19 pandemic and tries to understand the gender discourse and gender identity as constructed through online performances of gendered acts.

Literature Review

There have been few studies on the issue of gender, pandemic and social media.

Violence

In a survey among 16,000 women respondents from 13 countries, what was found is now known to be the shadow pandemic (UNO, 2021). According to the report of UN Women, while 56% women felt less safe at home since the pandemic, it was 1 in every 2 women who either faced or knew someone who faced violence since pandemic. However, as pandemic aggravated the act of violence, so it did proliferate the mobilisation, particularly based on social media platforms. A recent study from Egypt showed that "Egyptian feminist mobilisation during the pandemic brought to the public sphere the untold stories of the forms of violence that occurred, through online and social media platforms" (Hassan & Rizzo, 2023).

Based on a report published in McKinsey Quarterly (McKinsey, 2022) around two million women considered leaving their job and career during the pandemic. Women's daily working hours have greatly increased, both at work and at home, far more than from men.

Intersectional Identities & Universalism

Women with intersectional identities, with overlapping identity compounds of race, caste, religion and many others along with gender, faced even more complex challenges. For example, intersectional feminist identity has been explored in an article (Surepally, 2021) on Dalit Feminism at the time of pandemic where the author calls for mediation of Covid in terms of caste and gender. In France, women with intersectional identities, already active in movements like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, realized during the pandemic how social media could sustain and expand these movements beyond geographic and social boundaries. An article on the intersectional feminism in France during pandemic

explained –…the online debates they initiated during the March–May 2020 lockdown (when it became illegal to march, protest, or simply gather in public) reached new and larger audiences beyond their own feminist and artistic spheres. Social media posts and actions by Aïssa Maïga, Rokhaya Diallo, Noémie de Lattre, and comedy duo Camille et Justine elicited strong reactions from opposing parties, notably the "masculinistes" and the "féministes identitaires. (Mouflard, 2022)

Similarly, J. Ahlawat (Rana & Govender, 2022) after analysing social media posts over three months showed "how social media played a crucial role in forming a virtual global community of sisterhood for women and further how it can be more inclusive for the digitally deprived communities of women to empower and support themselves."

Neo-liberal Feminism: Dominance & Resistance

In an exploration into Butler's concept of gender performativity through social media during pandemic, the author shows how in the neo-liberal structure the performativity turned into productivity and how women were constantly under pressure to be productive even during the pandemic and even on social media (Patnaik, 2022). However, in contrast to that, the author explained,

"I examine queer influencers whose profiles demonstrated the cost of social non-conformism. I reveal how three feminist activists Priyanka Paul, Durga Gawde, and Roshni Kumar subverted gender productivity during lockdown…" (Patnaik, 2022)

This fourth wave of feminist movement was visible even before the pandemic and in countries like China where autonomous feminist movements based on Weibo largely remain uncovered by prominent

media or academic discourse (Xue & Rose, 2022).

Gender narrative on social media during pandemic not only incorporated feminist movements, solidarity against violence, gender disparity and various other women rights issues, but it also included expressions of creativity, business establishment and promotional activities. Benedictis et al (2023) analysed 70 Instagram posts to understand the reproductive politics under pandemic crisis and concluded that "while 'freelance feminism' might be becoming hegemonic as dominant mode of organising feminist activism and resistance, inspired by Malik et al. (2020), we also showcase how creative campaigns are potential places where collective action, structural critique and resistance may emerge."

In quite a different note, Tomovska Elena (2022) explored the fashion statement in social media with protective facemask during pandemic, while M. T. Pham (2020) discussed quarantine feminism and business during the pandemic with the making of the protective facemasks. Using social media as an avenue for business by women entrepreneurs has also been explored in a recent study which concluded that,

"…social media enabled them to start or continue their own business and expand their market reach through family and close friends. Moreover, it became an avenue for expressing their autonomy and learning to use the features of social media in an innovative way to support their business" (Lavilles et al., 2023).

Thus, evidently there have been increased academic interests in usage of social media during pandemic, particularly by women and for issues related to gender.

However, a general exploration on how the discourse surrounding gender and particularly women proliferated over social media during pandemic and on how communicative practices or performances

constructed the gender narrative at large is still lacking in the existing literature, particularly originating from India. The present study thus attempts to explore various social media posts on women and pandemic for identifying the range, diversity and dominant patterns in that gender narrative.

Method

The purpose of this study is to explore the social media constructions of gender narratives during the second wave of Covid-19 pandemic. The study tries to find out how social media constructed the narrative identity of women during pandemic (RQ). To explore this, the researchers conducted quantitative and thematic content analysis of social media posts on women and pandemic to identify the range, diversity and dominant patterns in the constructed gender narratives and performative practices in social media platforms.

The researchers analysed the top public posts found in the result section searching with #women and #pandemic on two social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter. The public posts included in the study are of three months of second wave of Covid-19, from May to July 2021. The origin of the posts was kept as anywhere while searching at the social media platforms. Total 140 posts were included in the sample for in-depth analysis, 70 posts each from Facebook and Twitter. Top public posts generated by Facebook and Twitter were coded using four categories for quantitative content analysis - number of likes, comments and shares, sources of posts, content type and content theme based on the message. The thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2008) was done to identify the patterns in gender narratives that represented women and the discourse that constructed the gender

performativity during pandemic.

Findings

Users' Engagement

Table 1

Central tendency of the numbers of likes, comments and shares of all posts in social media

Social Media	Likes			Comments			Shares/Reposts		
	Sum	Mean	Range	Sum	Mean	Range	Sum	Mean	Range
Facebook	6256	89	1-2900	350	5	0-137	2186	31	0-1500
	Sum	Mean	Range	Sum	Mean	Range	Sum	Mean	Range
Twitter	753	11	0 - 38	30	0.42	0 - 4	375	5	0 - 32

Based on the findings presented in Table 1, the number of likes is more than the number of comments and shares since likes are the lowest level of engagement, with shares being the higher level of engagement followed by comments (Kim, C. & Yang, S., 2017). As the number of shares is more than the number of comments, the audience on the social media platforms actively engaged with the posts and "...showed a more serious commitment…" (Kim, C. & Yang, S., 2017). This also shows that the social media posts drove the audiences much to share the information with others, rather than triggering a conversation. Reach was of higher importance for the posts, than interactions. Considering social media activities as performances, it can then be said the posts on women and pandemic during the second wave aimed more to inform and make people aware, rather than to engage in discussion. This somehow generates

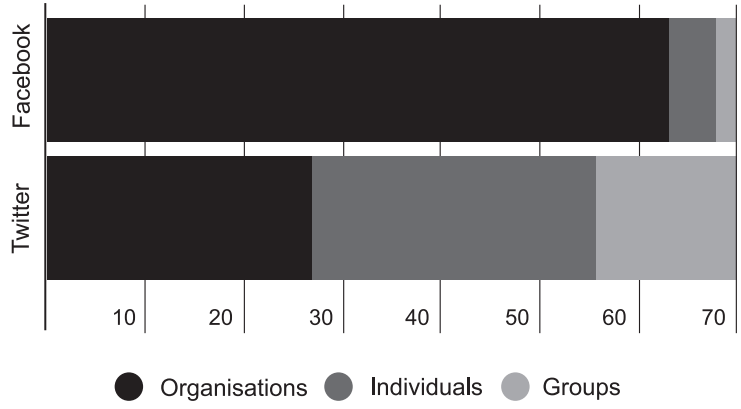
a top-down vertical approach of communication. Users were restricted into the role of performing as distribution nodes, rather than interactive nodes challenging or arguing the set discourse.

Sources

The three major categories as organisations, individuals and groups have been identified as major source of the sample posts. Here corporate organisations, government organisations, non-governmental organisations and media organisations were classified under the category organisation, while social media groups, communities and forums were classified under the category groups.

Figure 1

Share of sources of the social media posts



The source of posts that generates and produces content also decides what and how social media narratives are being formulated. The narrative on women and pandemic as seen in Figure 1, was mostly created by the organisations. Since the organisations have their own objective, agenda or propaganda, they would have an organisational motive to achieve through their social media posts. This will develop a purposive gender discourse prioritizing and adjusting

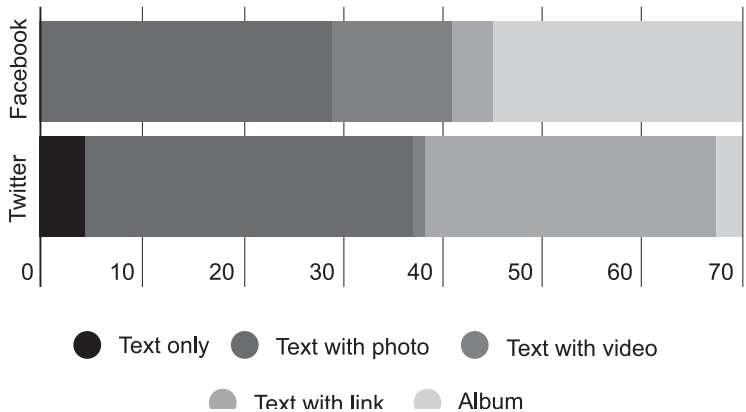
to the organisational requirements, further enhancing the politics of gender discourse. This organisational purpose and the narrative techniques have further been explored in the following sections.

Multimedia

In analysing the multimedia formats and content type used in sample posts, following categories were identified - text only, text with link, text with photo, text with video and text with album.

Figure 2

Share of multimedia used in the social media posts



Less text and more visuals were used in the posts. Although links used in posts generate visual preview when shared on both the platforms, separate visual elements like photo, video or album were used to grab attention and drive engagement in flow of numerous social media messages. The visual on social media "is eye-catching and has a direct effect on human emotions" (Manic, M., 2015). Thus, gender discourse becomes more performative through visual representations. Since most posts on both the platforms were by organisations which have brand guidelines and design templates

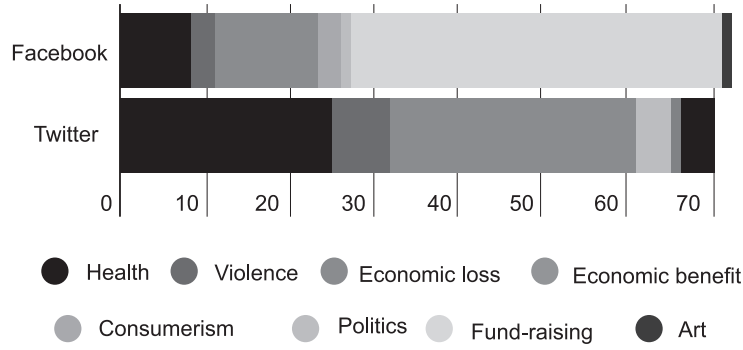
ready-to-go, it was easy to create visual content in multiple formats by these sources. When organisations shared posts on any issue on social media platforms, they also pushed promotional texts like call-to-action to follow and engage with their page.

Themes

The broad categories of content themes identified were health, violence, economic loss, economic benefits, consumerism, politics, fund-raising and art. There were other sub-categories that emerged under each. For example, the posts on health included text about reproductive health, maternal health, and mental health among other sub-categories. Similarly, economic loss included low labour participation, impact on job opportunities, impact on working mothers and many such.

Figure 3

Share of the themes of the social media posts



While fund-raising and negative economic impact on women was given importance, several other issues like violence against women or political female leadership were largely ignored. This lack of conversation on violence against women during pandemic upheld the issue of shadow pandemic. This further reiterates that

"the gender equality dimension was all but absent, with more than 99% of the coverage missing this dimension entirely in all analyzed countries…The majority of images in the news have reinforced gender stereotypes rather than challenged them" (Kassova, 2020). Though it was found that "COVID-outcomes are systematically better in countries led by women and, to some extent, this may be explained by the proactive and coordinated policy responses adopted by them" (Garikipati, S. & Kambhampati, U., 2020), but almost negligible number of posts emerged that spoke about female leadership in politics or businesses in the context of women and pandemic.

Social media discourse has often overlooked the key issues affecting women, with narratives driven more by corporate promotion than personal narratives. The representation of women through public posts is largely corporatized and negative, casting them as victims or passive recipients rather than active agents. The following section takes a deeper analytical look into the major themes and the semantic construction of the narrative through the use of texts, tags, hashtags and visuals.

Narratives and Identities

Major themes that were identified are fund-raising, economy, women's health and violence against women.

Fund-raising

These are posts requesting people to donate money using crowd-funding site links, posts from issue ambassadors which included celebrities, posts on migrant women workers receiving ration kits, distribution of sanitary napkins to rural women, and on transgender folk artists with hashtags such as #trans, #queer, #genderequality and #gendersensitivity to push the homo-capitalist agendas (Rao, 2015).

On Twitter, the one post on fund-raising was on refugee volunteers in Rohingya camps during the pandemic. Most of the posts on fund-raising were shared by non-governmental organisations.

Texts. The text in almost all the posts on fund-raising focused on promotional activities and mentioned the work the organisation is doing, the number of people it has reached to, and how thankful women are receiving the help from the organisation. Words like thanked, keep showing your impeccable faith and trust, support us, donate, distributed were common in such posts. The textual construction of the posts aimed to develop a positive image of the organisations as promotional activity, rather than mentioning the social or economic condition of women receiving alms, mostly migrant workers. Most of the posts did not identify the women by name and very few posts included their voice.

Hashtags. Following is a word-cloud analysis of the major hashtags used for the theme fundraising.

Figure 4

Word-cloud analysis of the hash-tags used on the theme fund-raising

Here it is apparent that a lot of the posts on fund-raising issue were for food, meal and ration. Non-governmental organizations used social media to inform as well as to promote. A lot of the posts were

to motivate and encourage the users to donate. Apart from food, sanitary napkins also were another important issue for fund-raising, though of a lot less in density than food. It thus can be said that though women specific issues were included, but with very little emphasis than other more generalized dominant issues. The posts also used #womenpower to construct a specific gender narrative which evidently proves purple-washing (Melen-Lamalle, 2023) in social media as the posts do not remain only about pandemic and food.

Visuals. Out of 45 posts on fund-raising, 10 posts included text with video and 35 posts included text with photo and album.

Single or multiple photos, included as albums, were all taken on locations, in most of the cases, in slum areas or in open field, in portrait format. The portrait format not only gave indication of shooting through mobile cameras and thus a more realistic on spot look, but it also aimed more to mobile users as audience. In most of the cases, the foreground had images of the volunteers giving the ration kits to women and the background had banners of the organisations along with the location details. Women receiving the ration kits were seen mostly in traditional Indian attires like saris and salwar-suits and in only in one instance in jeans and shirt, where the distribution was taking place in a Covid health camp. This developed the narrative of women on receiving ends of a particular class and culture, while the other end of the society was not represented as receiving section, developing a particular class performativity in the gendered identity.

Figure 5

Fund-raising campaign photo shared by Womenite on Facebook dated 07.06.2021

Posts with videos along with texts most often were videos of migrant women workers who received ration kits, talking about the problems they are facing and why they filled out the survey form by the organisation to receive ration kits. Duration of such videos ranged from 15 seconds to 1 minute. In these videos, the content focused on how grateful women are for the help from the organisations and what item/s they received from the organisations. Videos by activists and celebrities supporting the organisations in fund-raising were about the organisation's activities with a call for action to donate. In many cases such posts were shared with a link to donate.

Figure 6

Fund-raising video shared by Jove Conscious Foundation on Facebook dated 29.05.2021

Thus, most of the images and videos posted were for documentation and promotional purposes. The visual images of fund-raising activities focused more on the organizational activities and promotional frame than on women because purple-washing was actively used for gaining capital. The social media narrative on issues faced by women during pandemic which needed raising funds neither had much of the voices from women nor were about women. Personal stories, experiences, challenges, and issues faced by women during pandemic were missing in social media narratives constructed by various organisations.

The performative act of gender representation was thus minimized against the performative act of organizational promotion. Many visuals of women on social media depicted those from specific classes, creating a layered, intersectional narrative (Crenshaw, 2013). Gender identity is rarely just about gender—it intertwines with class, caste, religion, and other factors, shaping a complex, multidimensional identity. Rather than women themselves, the

narrative agents were organisations and celebrities who spoke for or about women. However, in one video where a woman's voice was heard it was about the helps received from the organisation. Such narratives succumb to the established stereotype of women from low-income groups as voiceless and treat them mostly nameless crowd. Thus, the social media's public performance with hashtags women and pandemic was mostly performed by organisations with promotional agendas, rather than by women themselves claiming the ownership of discourse about themselves.

Economy

The second major theme that emerged was the economic impact of pandemic on the female labour force, reiterating the fact that "…the Covid-19 crisis caused unprecedented job losses, hitting women the hardest" (ILO, 2021). The issues included the impact of pandemic on female labour force participation, decline in women employment, gender discrimination at workplace, less support from the employer and unpaid work at home. Many posts also focused on working mothers, increased responsibilities of the household, and how it is more difficult for women than men to go back to work among others. Some posts also detailed low venture-capital funding for women entrepreneurs, low women labour migration and impact on women mobility aggravated by the pandemic.

Texts. Most of the posts followed a problem solution approach where impact on women due to pandemic was explained mostly through data. Many such posts also had a promotional tone where their own reportage or research papers were pushed in the post. The narrative of several posts on the negative economic impact on women highlighted how the pandemic has aggravated the already existing problem. Words used in many posts like forced, less visible, dropped, double marginalisation, crisis point, struggled, regressed,

threatened and depended were common in these posts emphasizing the intensity of the impact of pandemic particularly on women.

Several posts gave space to the voices of women sharing their experiences of the pandemic. Several of these posts also included positive stories of women who are fighting the odds and driving change. Since a lot of posts about the economy and women in the pandemic were by individuals on Twitter, many of these posts included active voices and used words like we and ours and were by women. Sentences like "Can we do ANYTHING to get them to get back and get them motivated..?" (Yadav, 2021), "can you relate to this?" (Nithya, 2021), "where should she go?" (Raiot, 2021), engage women, change-makers were used in these posts which made the narrative more personal, more pro-active in nature and more involving to take actions and think to solve, rather than just to donate as contribution to solve the problem. This shows that the social media narrative on gender as more rounded and reflective of the problems when it is women who are the authors. The tone becomes more empathetic and collaborative. Thus gender identity performance on social media shifts notably when women themselves, rather than outside voices, are the authors. Drawing from The Second Sex (Beauvoir, 2015), where "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," and Judith Butler's (1988) theory of performativity, gender identity here is actively constructed and expressed, taking on different layers when women control the narrative directly.

Hashtags. Following is the word-cloud analysis of the hashtags used for posts on economic issues along with #women and #pandemic.

Figure 7

Word-cloud analysis of the hash-tags used on the theme economy

Here it is apparent from the hashtags used that a lot of narrative was surrounding the fair-trade issue where local trades or local businesses were also emphasized along with gender issues, highlighting the layered and complex nature of the issue where localisation came to be associated with gender rights as well. Apart from fair trade, emphasis has also been given on various types of jobs like the handmade industry, artistry, translation jobs as well as the technology industry. However, the professional identity constructed through these is mainly of a particular job prototype, simultaneously acknowledging home-based labour as well as limiting women's professions. The word mother surfaced which highlighted the increased responsibility and labour at home, many a times went unrecognized during pandemic.

Visuals. Out of 41 posts on economic aspects, 22 posts were uploaded with visuals of which 21 posts with photo/s and only one post with video. Out of the 22 posts that had visuals, seven posts were call for papers and webinar discussion links on the theme of negative impact of the pandemic on working women. Such posts in most of the cases carried designed digital posters of the event and in many cases the screenshots of the webinar sessions.

Visual posts about the female labour force often lacked actual representation of women. Images related to employment rarely featured women as the focus. This aligns with the concept of symbolic annihilation (Tuchman, 1979), where the absence or marginalization of women in media reinforced their invisibility and diminishes their perceived value in the workforce. Visuals of women were mostly given less space in these photos and mostly kept in the background. In one image women were shown working in a factory but not a single woman was centrally-framed. The equipment of the factory was given more visual space than women working in the factory.

Such visual representation of women shows that the issue of labour, employability and economic crisis is being constructed largely as a general problem, as a problem of the crowd, rather than giving it any individual face. The facelessness of economic instability of women made the narrative less personal, less focused and less in the human-interest nature of news reporting. Thus, when most of the dominant narratives constructed of the pandemic had high personal and emotional appeal, the visual narrative surrounding economic challenges were pedantic and numerical, with scholarly discussions and statistical correlations.

However, one post on women entrepreneurship was found which used an image of women in a workplace. This image had one woman in the centre of the frame, standing and passing documents to other colleagues, both male and female, sitting around a table listening to her attentively. In a photo posted by Women Entrepreneur India, only one out of seven people was a person of colour, with everyone dressed in glossy, Western-style outfits. This visual representation reflects both white feminism and girl boss feminism (Amoruso, 2014), promoting a narrow, stereotypical image of women entrepreneurs. Instead of inclusively empowering all women, it upholds a dominant, hierarchical discourse that centres privilege and overlooks the diverse realities of women in entrepreneurship, as

Ortega (2006) writes white feminists are knowingly ignorant about women of colour.

Figure 8

A social media post by Women Entrepreneur India on Facebook dated 01.06.2021

There were only two posts with photos of women of colour, one post with women in hijab in which she was given 30% of the visual space. This represented the intersectionality of gender narrative, yet much less in intensity and density.

The only post with video was a short video clip with data visualisation on why women find it difficult to switch off from work during pandemic. The duration of the short clip was 11 seconds, with the organisation's branding, logo and title of the data visualisation. The video did not share experiences of women and only shared statistics and numbers. The video did not utilize the opportunity that motion pictures can do to create impactful narrative on any issue.

Health

The third most publicly posted theme on social media was health.

There were 33 posts on health, of which 25 posts were on Twitter and 8 posts were on Facebook. Most of these were posted by organisations and then by individuals. The social media posts under health covered various topics such as vaccination, mental health, reproductive health, health equity, public health, health workers and long-covid. Maternal health included tips and information for pregnant women, challenges for the governments and maternal mortality rate in India. Posts on mental health included topics like burn-out in employees, how increased pressure of work at office and home impacted mental health of women and creative works on mental health by artists. One post on Twitter also focused on the issue of long-covid and why women were more prone to it. There were also several posts on academic discussion and articles on maternal health, health equity, future of women's health, women's preventive health services, increasing alcoholism during pandemic and contribution of women in science. There were several posts praising female doctors, female nurses and women frontline leaders during the pandemic. There was one post sharing experiences of women living with disability during the pandemic.

Texts. In many of the posts, words like children, adolescents, girls and men were included in the text along with women's health. This suggests that the gender narrative around women's health fell into the stereotypical trope of framing childcare as solely a woman's responsibility. This aligns with the cult of femininity theory, which reinforces traditional roles for women, idealizing them as primary caregivers and nurturing figures, thus limiting a more diverse portrayal of women's health and roles.

Words like equality, inequality, health equality were also common in many posts which highlight the gender bias even in the healthcare system and management emphasizing for a more fair and impartial healthcare system and healthcare narratives.

Words and phrases like #women-who-break-down-barriers-are-those-who-ignore-limits, "women and girls in science are on the front lines of response" (International Rescue Committee, 2021), "celebrating women fighting the pandemic" (Narayan, 2021), "healthier #women, healthier nation!" (IHWC, 2021) were part of the gender narrative, which celebrated women health workers and highlighted the importance of women's health.

Hashtags. Following is word-cloud analysis of the hashtags used in social media posts on this issue.

Figure 9

Word-cloud analysis of the hash-tags used on the theme health

Here it is evident that work burnout was one of the major concerns of social media posts. For women mostly, the work pressure increased manifold as they had to adjust to the changing working demands of professional fields, as well as increased demands at home as well. Along with that use of hashtags for wellness in the workplace, solutions, resilience, respect, unity, safety, mindfulness, precautions showed how simultaneously a positive narration was constructed surrounding the issue of women's health.

Visuals. On Facebook, all the 8 posts on health were posted with photo/s. On Twitter, out of 25 posts, 12 posts were shared with

photo/s and only one post with video. Most of the visuals included posters for academic events or publications. Majority of photos were two-dimensional design graphics. All the graphics showed women in it except one where an outline of a gender-neutral person was used. All the graphics were of different dimensions and used a variety of soft colour tones. In all the graphics women were shown looking away engrossed in some activity.

Figure 10

A post by Be Well Hospital on Facebook dated 03.07.2021

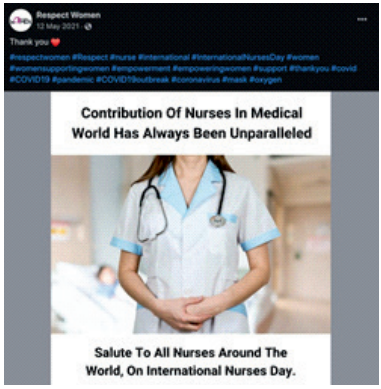
Some posts with women in the images were shown in professional clothes and in professional set-up. Women of various colours and religions were represented in these photos. In one instance where a photo was used with text, a photo of a female nurse was shown at the centre of the photo but her face was not shown in the frame and overlaid with text. This showed how an individual woman health worker representing all women health workers celebrated their contribution during the pandemic, going above the individual identity.

Figure 11

A post by International Research Committee – UK on Facebook dated 16.07.2021

Figure 12

A post by Respect Women on Facebook dated 12.05.2021



The visual narrative developed through these photos on women and health again lacks representation of women from different classes and regions. A lot of the visual narrative was dry fabrication based on statistics and event discussions. A lot of the visual narrative

then again was on academic and other discussions held online. Beyond scholarly discussions, the visual narrative largely excluded the voices of rural women and those from urban slums. Photos of women from lower economic classes appeared only in promotional posts under fundraising hashtags, but when discussions shifted to deeper issues like women's rights or economic challenges, class and regional representation vanished. This bias reflects white feminism and girl boss feminism, prioritizing privileged perspectives while marginalizing others. The lack of diverse voices contributes to symbolic annihilation, reinforcing a stereotypical, hierarchical, and biased narrative. The cult of femininity further sustains these stereotypes by idealizing certain roles and images, sidelining women outside these narrow frames.

Violence against women

The fourth theme that emerged from the social media post analysis was violence against women. These posts covered various sub-themes like domestic abuse, child marriage, women's rights, abuse against adolescents, children and girls, human trafficking, neglect of older women, intimate partner violence and patriarchy. While some posts focused on data on increasing domestic abuse during pandemic, helpline numbers one can reach if one wants to report domestic abuse, and several posts shared research papers on similar themes.

Texts. Words like war on women, disaster, setback to women's liberation, shadow epidemic were used in these posts which highlighted the gravity of the situation and the threat faced not only by women, but also by the growth of women's empowerment.

One post used the phrase "…because of a pandemic that resides in their homes" (RGnul Legal Aid Clinic, 2021) referring to Covid-19

lockdown and domestic violence by intimate partners or family. Words like multiple challenges, no age limit, and harassment, sexual exploitation and inequality were also found on posts on violence which showcased the range and diversity of violence faced by women. One social media post on Twitter also used policy makers and practitioners in its text referring to the steps decision-makers can take to address the problem.

Hashtags. Following is a word-cloud analysis of the hash-tags used in this theme.

Figure 13

Word-cloud analysis of the hash-tags used on the theme violence against women

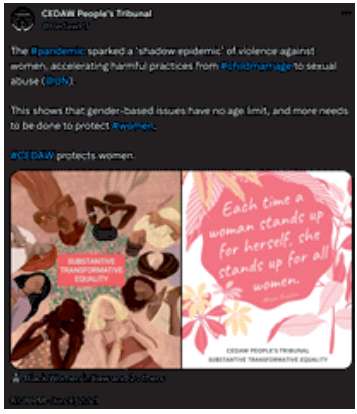
The hashtags largely showed discussions conducted by radio stations on this issue which raised public awareness, but simultaneously the social media hashtags with the names of the radio stations and radio jockeys proved more to be promotional activities on the issue. Violence against women also includes hashtags like domestic abuse and child marriage. The issues of being dropped out of school and getting married off among girls have thus taken a form of discussion in the social media narrative along with the very pertinent issue of domestic violence. However, the strong narrative on social media

that the issue could have generated was largely missing.

Visuals. The posts shared with photo/s did not have photos of women but used two-dimensional designed graphics. The graphics showed women of colour, reflected through different skin colour and hair colour, together with text on quotes and title at the centre.

Figure 14

A post by CEDAN People's Tribunal on Facebook dated 09.06.2021



Visuals of academic posts were accompanied by either screen-grab of the online seminar room or designed poster of the academic event. In one instance the graphics in the background with data on domestic violence and helpline numbers on the front.

The only post with video included an online session with a female police officer from the women safety department. It included the organisation's logo, name and designation of speakers and highlighted helpline numbers and initiatives being taken by the police department like patrol services and tele-counselling service provided by the police for the domestic violence survivors.

Thus, again it is evident the visual narratives for violence against women centred on facts, academic discussion posters and very

nominal inter-sectional aspects. Though the visual narrative acknowledged the intersectional nature of violence against women to some extent, it again lacked personal stories from women themselves. Visuals related to fundraising or the economy often depicted women as victims or passive recipients of help, reinforcing stereotypes of women and marginalized communities. This reflects the silencing of marginalized women's voices, where the narratives of those most affected are suppressed or overlooked, further perpetuating their intense marginalization (Spivak, 2023). Combined with the influences of white feminism and girl boss feminism (Amoruso, 2014), this dynamic reinforced a limited, top-down representation that excluded the lived experiences of women from diverse backgrounds. Violence against women thus could not have much personal visual narrative, as the visual representation depended a lot on posters and graphical design. The gender performance on public social media posts on the issue of violence against women was largely designed as mere factual visual representation.

Conclusion

The study was an exploration as to how social media constructed the narrative identity of women during pandemic (RQ). An analysis of social media posts during the pandemic's second wave reveals that, despite acknowledging intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 2013), narratives often reinforced stereotypes and hierarchies. Reflecting symbolic annihilation (Tuchman, 1979), women's voices, especially from marginalized groups, were largely absent. The focus on promotional content by organizations, rather than women themselves, aligns with the cult of femininity (Ferguson, 1983), idealizing traditional roles and limiting agency. Additionally, the lack of critique toward policymakers suggests purple-washing (Melen-Lamalle, 2023), where feminist language is used superficially for

branding without "real change". These patterns show how social media often perpetuates exclusionary and performative gender narratives. Butler's (1988) theory of performativity highlights how social media acts as a space for "constructing" and "performing" identities through curated actions and narratives. Women often use the online platforms to challenge traditional gender norms, yet performative activism, purple-washing (Melen-Lamalle, 2023), and the exclusion of marginalized voices complicate its potential for fostering genuine inclusivity. In a few cases where women became authors, the tonal quality, thematic representation and message formation were more empathetic, collaborative and thoughtful. Ultimately, online performativity plays a dual role - providing a safe space to self-express while being susceptible to the hierarchical power dynamics.

The public posts on social media could not use the strength of the medium with proper usage of the multimedia elements. Visual and moving images being very impactful media were largely wasted in developing any strong narrative on gender. The global gender discourse on social media was dominated by organizational and academic voices, silencing women directly affected by these issues. This reflects white feminism's focus on privilege, girl-boss feminism's corporate-driven empowerment (Amoruso, 2014), and the way homo-capitalism (Rao, 2015) commodifies feminist rhetoric for institutional branding. Such performative gestures, aligned with pseudo-feminism, reduce complex gender issues to superficial narratives, sidelining authentic voices. Also, the stereotypical representation of women still hangs strong even with the fourth wave of feminism washing off the virtual shores.

Social media helped to bring attention to many overlooked issues, including those amplified by the shadow pandemic of increased violence against women during COVID-19, providing a platform

for women to voice their opinions. However, representation remains limited compared to promotional content. Butler's performativity highlights its potential for women to craft authentic identities (Butler, 1988), while Crenshaw's intersectionality underscores the need for inclusivity across race, class, and gender, (Crenshaw, 2013). Yet, silencing of women (Spivak, 2023), symbolic annihilation (Tuchman, 1979), and the cult of femininity (Ferguson, 1983) reveal how marginalized voices are often overshadowed or reduced to stereotypes. Despite these challenges, social media holds the promise of fostering alternative narratives if it can resist being dominated by self-serving actors.

References

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2008). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology,* 3(2), 77–101.

Butler, J. (1988). Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory. *Theatre Journal,* 40(4), 519–531. https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893

Cho, S., Crenshaw, K. W., & McCall, L. (2013). Toward a field of intersectionality studies: Theory, applications, and praxis. *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society,* 38(4), 785-810.

De Beauvoir, S. (2014). The second sex. In *Classic and Contemporary Readings in Sociology* (pp. 118-123). Routledge.

De Benedictis, S., & Mendes, K. (2023). #ButNotMaternity: Analysing Instagram posts of reproductive politics under pandemic crisis. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13675494231173660. https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494231173661

Ferguson, M. (1983). Forever feminine: Women's magazines and the cult of femininity. (No Title).

Garikipati, S. & Kambhampati, U. (2020). Leading the Fight Against the Pandemic: Does Gender 'Really' Matter? SSRN. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3617953

Hassan, M., & Rizzo, H. (2023). The sexual and gender-based violence epidemic meets the COVID-19 pandemic: Survivors' and advocates' narratives in Egypt. International *Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice,* 47(2), 147–165. https://doi.org/10.1080/01924036.2022.2159465

IHWC (@IHWCouncil). (2021, May 27). Twitter. https://twitter.com/IHWCouncil/

status/1397895983434895360?s=20

IHWC (@IHWCouncil). (2021, May 28). Twitter. https://twitter.com/IHWCouncil/status/1398249374568783885?s=20

International Labour Organization (2021). A*n uneven and gender-unequal COVID-19*

International Rescue Committee – UK (@RESCUE_UK). (2021, July 16). Twitter. https://twitter.com/RESCUE_UK/status/1415985563304333313?s=20

Jagernath, J., & Nupen, D. M. (2022). Pseudo-feminism vs feminism–Is pseudo-feminism shattering the work of feminists?„„. *In Proceedings of The Global Conference on Women's Studies* (Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 60-73).

Kassova, L. (2020). *The Missing Perspectives of Women in COVID-19 News.* Bills & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Kim, C. & Yang, S. (2017). Like, comment, and share on Facebook: How each behavior differs from the other | Request PDF. Public Relations Review. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.02.006

Lavilles, R., Tinam-Isan, M. A., & Sala, E. L. (2023). Social media as an enabler of women's entrepreneurial empowerment during the pandemic. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies,* 29(1), 136–153. https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2023.2186633

Manic, M. (2015). Marketing Engagement Through Visual Content. *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Brasov Series V Economic Sciences,* 57(2). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290084483_Marketing_Engagement_Through_Visual_Content

McKinsey. (2022). *The pandemic's gender effect | McKinsey.* https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/five-fifty-the-pandemics-gender-effect

Melen-Lamalle, P. (2023). Purplewashing and its Analogues as a Strategy of Marketing Manipulation: How Brands Use Feminism for Promotional Purposes.

Mouflard, C. (2022). Stages, Streets, and Social Media: Intersectional Feminism and Online Activism in France during the Pandemic. *French Politics, Culture & Society,* 40(2), 29–51. https://doi.org/10.3167/fpcs.2022.400203

Narayan, K. M. V. (@kmvnarayan14). (2021, May 26). Twitter. https://twitter.com/kmvnarayan14/status/1397588183588777985?s=20

Nithya (@thefilterkapi). (2021, July 30). Twitter. https://twitter.com/thefilterkapi/status/1421113466677383182?s=20

Ortega, M. (2006). Being lovingly, knowingly ignorant: White feminism and women of color. *Hypatia,* 21(3), 56-74.

Patnaik, A. (2022). Productivity to Precarity on Instagram: Digital Feminism in India during the Covid-19 Pandemic. *Journal of International Women's Studies, 24(2).* https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol24/iss2/5

Pham, M.-H. T. (2020). "How to Make a Mask": Quarantine Feminism and Global Supply Chains. *Feminist Studies,* 46(2), 316–326. https://doi.org/10.1353/fem.2020.0028

Raiot (@raiotzine). (2021, June 30). Twitter. https://twitter.com/raiotzine/status/1410028663874244609?s=20

Rana, U., & Govender, J. (2022). *Exploring the Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Social, Cultural, Economic, and Psychological Insights and Perspectives.* CRC Press.

Rao, R. (2015). Global homocapitalism. *Radical Philosophy,* 194, 38-49.*recovery: Update on gender and employment trends 2021.* ILO. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_824865.pdf

RGNUL Legal Aid Clinic (@RgnulLAC). (2021, July 14). Twitter. https://twitter.com/RgnulLAC/status/1415158194322624512?s=20

Robinson, L. (2023). Is the 'Girl Boss' Really Just an Anti-Feminist Commodification?. *Critical Reflections: A Student Journal on Contemporary Sociological Issues.*

Schechner, R. (1988). *Performance Theory.* Routledge.

Spivak, G. C. (2023). Can the subaltern speak?. In *Imperialism* (pp. 171-219). Routledge.

Surepally, S. (2021). *ALTERNATIVE STANDPOINT Pandemic in the Time of Dalit Feminism.* 56, 10–13.

Tomovska, E. (2022). The emergence of fashion elements in protective facemasks during the early stages of Covid-19 pandemic: Evidence from social media: Part II: investigation of facemask trends among Pinterest users. *Tekstilna Industrija,* 70(1), 23–28. https://doi.org/10.5937/tekstind2201023T

Tuchman, G. (1979). Women's depiction by the mass media. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* 4(3), 528-542.

UNO. (2021). *The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19.* UN Women – Headquarters. https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19

Xue, A., & Rose, K. (2022). *Weibo Feminism: Expression, Activism, and Social Media in China.* Bloomsbury Publishing.

Yadav, G. (@gilienv). (2021, June 20). Twitter. https://twitter.com/gilienv/status/1406524811044483073?s=20

Dr. Surhita Basu is Assistant Professor, Centre for Journalism & Mass Communication, Visva-Bharati.

Ms. Sana Amir is a Multimedia Journalist & Independent Researcher

Ms. Archa Banerjee is an Artist, Activist & Academic.

Navigating Self-Employment Among Women in Neoliberal Contexts: Perspectives on Digital Entrepreneurship

Pravati Dalua

Abstract:

Digital entrepreneurship has emerged as a significant form of self-employment for women globally, particularly under neoliberal conditions, offering flexibility, ease of business initiation, and minimal investment. However, this trend prompts critical sociological inquiries that challenge the idealised neoliberal narrative of entrepreneurship as a space of unbounded choice within a free-market economy. This study critically examines the rise of entrepreneurial selfhood among women operating on digital platforms, interrogating how they perceive and navigate their journeys of self-employment, particularly about autonomy, agency, and self-realisation. Through empirical case studies of women entrepreneurs in a small neighbourhood of Delhi, this research explores the evolving nature of women's work in the digital age within the neoliberal framework. The study also investigates how digital platforms either disrupt or reinforce traditional gender norms, offering women new avenues for economic independence, social recognition, and personal empowerment. By focusing on the intersection of gender, technology, and entrepreneurship, the research aims to understand how digital spaces shape women's labour experiences in contemporary society and the broader social and economic implications of these changes. The findings reveal that the neoliberal emphasis on promoting entrepreneurial selfhood has complex, often contradictory outcomes, which diverge from its intended goal of wealth creation. The entrepreneurial practices of

women are shown to be deeply contextual, shaped and mediated by their social environments rather than simply being the product of individual choice or market dynamics.

Keywords: *Entrepreneurship, Neoliberalism, Gender, Women Digital Entrepreneurship, self-employment*

Introduction:

Digital technologies have brought about transformative changes in the global economy (Graham, 2019). However, much of the existing research on digital economies primarily focuses on large corporations in high-income countries, with limited understanding of their impact on smaller micro-businesses in the Global South, particularly in developing economies such as India. In these regions, there has been increasing emphasis on expanding small business ecosystems to generate employment and reduce poverty. The transformative role of digital technologies in business operations is often viewed with optimism, especially regarding their empowering effects on individuals in low-income countries in the context of small business operations. Empirical findings in this regard have showcased how small business economies use digital technologies to create new products and services while increasing their consumer reach, access real time information and improve their business performances by changing their market strategies (Khin & Ho, 2019; Kergroach, 2021). Particularly in the context of women's business, role of these digital technologies are perceived with optimism thinking that it may give them greater flexibility while enabling them to initiate businesses with minimal investment, balancing familial responsibilities while adhering to social norms, and achieving personal fulfilment and self-recognition (Sharma, 2022; Ughetto et. al., 2020).

Despite these perceived opportunities, the digital platforms upon which women's entrepreneurship is idealised, there can be a range of sociological questions revolving around how it brings transformations in entrepreneurial work and women's labour in particular. Considering the recent growth of digital platforms in India and the role that women plays there in, this study examines the rise of entrepreneurial selfhood among Indian women who are operating on digital platforms, exploring how they perceive and navigate their journeys toward self-employment as neoliberal selves—particularly in terms of autonomy, agency, and self-realization. The study seeks to understand the motivations driving women to engage in online entrepreneurial activities, how they establish their ventures, and how gender dynamics and neoliberal demands shape their labour experiences.

Through empirical case studies of digital women entrepreneurs in micro and small businesses, this research aims to examine how the neoliberal entrepreneurial self is shaped by everyday entrepreneurial practices. The paper is organized as follows: the first section discusses the neoliberal context of digital entrepreneurship among women, drawing on existing literature. The second section outlines the methods used in the study, followed by an analysis of the empirical case studies. These case studies are systematically analysed in light of the study's findings. This section also reflects on how digital platforms either challenge or reinforce traditional gender norms, offering women new opportunities for economic independence, social recognition, and personal empowerment. Ultimately, the study will shed light on the intersection of social structure, technology, and entrepreneurship, exploring how digital spaces reshape women's labour experiences and the broader implications for their social and economic participation.

The Context: Neoliberalism and Digital Entrepreneurship:

In the twenty-first century, entrepreneurship has become a buzzword and is seen as an important means of wealth creation across the globe (Ughulu, 2022). At the same time, there has been a parallel academic discussion on the expansion of digital entrepreneurship, which is closely linked to the rise of neoliberal forces that reduce everything to the logic of consumption and the market. A key focus in this discourse is the celebration and idealization of entrepreneurial cultures and figures as rational economic actors in their pursuit of wealth creation (da Costa & Silva Saraiva, 2012). As a result of these societal and economic shifts, people are encouraged to embark on their entrepreneurial journeys, embodying traits such as innovativeness, creativity, and risk-taking behaviour, giving rise to an entrepreneurial culture (Mallett & Wapshott, 2015). Within these neoliberal discourses, issues of women's development are often framed in a way that equates their participation as individual economic actors in growth with their personal betterment. At the core of this narrative is the individual self, who is responsible and enterprising, relentlessly striving to be included in the development process. Issues of poverty and unemployment, within the neoliberal framework, are understood through individualization, which avoids focusing on structural inequalities and impediments. In other words, neoliberalism has refashioned selfhood in a way that compels women to shoulder the responsibility for their own success, inclusion, and development (Gonick, 2006). This neoliberal re-fashioned self has some universal characteristics, as aptly noted:

This self-fashioning as a neoliberal subject then assumes a universal acquisition of characteristics such as high levels of flexibility, self-motivation, confidence, tolerance of precarity, and embrace of change. (Graham 2019:109)

This framing is also evident in the sphere of digital entrepreneurship

among women that has been a growing field of self-employment in recent years. Platforms like Facebook and Instagram contribute to the growth of the neoliberal entrepreneurial self and enterprise culture by transforming these spaces into sites for the production and consumption of both tangible and intangible commodities. For example, Roberts (2014) argues that individual personality traits, such as likes, dislikes, and passions, play a key role in constructing brands on social media sites, traits that often align with neoliberalism and competence-based management ideologies (Roberts, 2014). Women's participation in digital entrepreneurship is influenced not only by the affordability and availability of digital platforms but also by the structural and gendered social conditions that shape both women's productive and reproductive roles within households. Explaining the varied ramifications of digital entrepreneurship, Carmody aptly writes:

Digital enterprises, digital entrepreneurs, and digital workers from every corner of the world might all be able to connect using the same network, but this does not necessarily mean that they can all use it to alter their positionalities or level playing fields in the same ways, leading to an "integration" into global economies that does little to change positions of economic dependency (Carmody, 2013 as cited in Graham 2019:8).

Hence, the digital entrepreneurial landscape can be a complex and multifaceted one, within which women navigate their online business ventures. It necessitates a critical sociological examination, particularly in relation to the diverse socio-cultural contexts that shape their entrepreneurial trajectories. In examining the motivations of a sample of 55 women entrepreneurs for entering digital entrepreneurship, Tran (2014) argues that women primarily enter virtual businesses not for financial gain, but for more abstract or emotional reasons, such as personal fulfilment and identity.

However, some studies claim that the online space is not a naturally created environment but rather a socially constructed space shaped by the existing social structure. Scuotto et al. (2019) argue in this context that despite the growing participation of women in entrepreneurial ventures online, they are still treated differently, as "the online space is integrated with the offline space, and so gender inequality persists" (Scuotto et. al., 2019:121).

Similar to Scuotto's understanding, other scholarly studies highlight the multiple complexities of this issue, showing how women's entry into virtual business platforms is not without challenges as they negotiate everyday gendered boundaries. Despite the increasing number of women entering virtual business models, the glass ceiling remains a significant barrier. Studies in this context demonstrate how, despite these opportunities, female entrepreneurs operating on social media platforms also encounter substantial challenges, including work-life balance issues, as they juggle multiple roles as caregivers, homemakers, and business owners. For instance, Malik (2017), in her study on digital entrepreneurship among women, which is based on 30 in-depth case studies, shows how women in the U.S. face multiple levels of tension in their pursuit of creative expression. The demands from both private and public spaces constantly push and pull them as they balance familial responsibilities with work roles. Her study also highlights how gendered processes continuously shape the outcomes of digital entrepreneurship, often trapping women in a condition of the "multitasking whirlpool." As she aptly elaborates:

In their pursuit of flexibility and balance, they experience multiple levels of tension and stress, a result of the multitasking whirlpool, as previously cited, a term and concept I use to describe the results and consequences of social expectations and gender role ideologies that have led to the women-doing-it-all pattern (or being pulled in every

direction): managing professional, social and family responsibilities/ obligations, namely gendered expectations, duties and individual needs, and as a result, experiencing confusing-contradictory-conflicting feelings and emotions. (Kamberidou, 2020:10)

While women's business ventures are often emphasized in the context of developing economies, the issue remains underexplored when it comes to women who resort to these strategies more as a means of survival than as a method for profit generation. This observation is echoed in a discussion by Cesaroni (2017) in the context of countries such as Kenya, Indonesia, Nigeria, Egypt, and South Africa. They argue that women in these countries primarily join online businesses due to the new opportunities, networking, and flexibility they offer. However, the lack of basic digital skills, combined with socio-cultural obstacles, creates significant challenges in their lives. Mazonde's (2016) study on women entrepreneurs highlights the significant role social structure plays in shaping the experiences of female entrepreneurs. The study argues that social structures can either constrain or enable women's entrepreneurial journeys. For instance, these structures may empower women by providing financial resources, strengthening their agency, and helping them break free from patriarchal constraints by creating a supportive environment through family support. A similar finding was confirmed by another study by Chengadu and Scheepers (2017), which indicates that a supportive family and community environment is crucial for women's advancement.

While research on digital entrepreneurship is growing, there remains a gap in empirical analysis, particularly in the context of women who operate within different socio-cultural settings. Key sociological questions that emerge for researchers of digital entrepreneurship are: To what extent have social media platforms facilitated substantive change for women entrepreneurs, or have they merely reproduced

existing power structures? In other words, while the rise of social media has undoubtedly democratized access to entrepreneurial opportunities, one must question whether it has led to a meaningful transformation of gender dynamics within the entrepreneurial field. Following Martinez et al. (2018), this study assumes that while digital spaces provide opportunities for strengthening the agency of entrepreneurs through innovative expressions, they cannot remove socially constructed barriers to accessing resources or fundamentally alter the social positions that fuel such barriers.

This empirical study seeks to delve into these complexities through a set of case studies focusing on women digital entrepreneurs in Delhi, providing a nuanced exploration of their experiences and the broader social forces at play. More particularly, the present study aims to understand the following questions through selected case studies conducted in Delhi. These questions are broadly inspired by a similar study conducted by Mousa et al. (2024) on digital entrepreneurship.

Question 1: What motivates women to engage in digital entrepreneurship activities?

Question 2: How do these women establish their entrepreneurial digital activities, and how does it impact their lives?

Research Methodology:

To obtain information about women engaged in digital entrepreneurship, the author used qualitative research methods. My initial exposure to this phenomenon occurred when I joined a Resident Welfare Association in South Delhi. Within this community, I observed that many women operated small businesses by selling household items such as food, clothing, and jewellery, often as side ventures on social media platforms. Some of these businesses

also promoted their products via WhatsApp groups associated with the RWA. Upon joining, I gradually gained access to contents and messages within the group, which frequently advertised a diverse array of household items. These offerings included items like home-cooked food, spices, cooking oil, fruits, clothing, jewellery, and services like different hobby classes and more. To my surprise, these small and micro-businesses were predominantly operated by women residents, often as side ventures and mostly run on social media handles. They typically shared images of their products, accompanied by descriptions highlighting their unique features and competitive pricing. Accordingly, data was collected through a series of interviews conducted between July and October 2023. The author approached nearly 20 women entrepreneurs engaged in different activities such as selling clothes, providing fashion services, selling jewellery, cooking food items, and offering hobby classes and tuitions. The approached entrepreneurs were mostly recruited through the author's acquittance, while a few more were selected from the RWA WhatsApp groups. Most of these respondent have their Business pages on Facebook/Instagram, and a few of them operate through WhatsApp as well. None of these 20 enterprises have registered companies, rather, all of them operate as informal digital businesses. The five key informants in the study were selected through purposive sampling with snowball technique. This technique of combining snowballing with purposive sampling is useful for studies that aim to understand the micro, meso and macro of any phenomenon(Mousa et al. 2024). The interviews were conducted face to face using Hindi as the language of communication between the respondents and the author. Further, these Hindi scripts were translated to English later. For ethical purposes, all the respondents were briefed at the outset about the purpose of the interviews, and they, too, were advised not to answer any questions that they felt uncomfortable with. To cater to the broader objective of this study,

bigger questions were broken down into smaller ones to know the issues regarding the experience of selling products online and the advantages and drawbacks of being there in digital entrepreneurship. The most relevant pieces of data were presented in the form of the following case studies.

Case study 1: Ladies garment business

Gunjan is a middle-aged woman who operates her informal business of ladies' garments over social media. She started her business of sales of ladies' garments exclusively during Covid-19. A few tailors work for her and stitch according to her designs, after quality check, they all are put on digital platforms for sale. She finds running her digital business a perfect balance between work and family and her life. She is a graduate who takes pride in her business family background. She believes that owning a ladies' garment business through social media gives her the flexibility to work from home or even from a shop, which she describes as a blessing for her. It helps her set her work hours and control her work at her own pace. She said, *"It is an ideal arrangement for someone like me, a mother of two daughters who are now grown up and more independent. They even help me with the business, especially with managing our social media accounts, which has been such a joy to see"*. To the query of the question as to why she chose this business, she said, *'I can be there for my daughters, attend family gatherings, go to parties and still run a business. What more can one wish for? It's incredibly rewarding to be able to earn while still maintaining flexibility and control over my time'*.

Regarding the jobs that she undertakes on a day-to-day basis, she said, *'The tasks that I handle are light, yet fulfilling. I sell women's clothes online, and it's as simple as uploading photos, setting prices, and writing product descriptions on my Facebook page.*

Occasionally, I also post videos over WhatsApp status, which is quick. She adds further, *'I have a full-time hired worker too who suits videos along with me describing the product and its price, I too run a YouTube channel in my name,'* said Gunjan while asking me to subscribe to the same channel. Even though she can manage her home and work most of the time, there are instances when she has to let go of some big orders. She recalled the times when she had to compromise on her work, especially during her children's exams or any health emergencies at home.

Case Study 2: Cloud Kitchen

What began as my small, local venture during Covid has since flourished into a full-time business today. This is all because of social media platforms and, of course, the support of my family, says Vijaylaxmi, a woman entrepreneur who started a cloud kitchen during the COVID-19 pandemic to cater to the growing demand for home-cooked food in her neighbourhood. Vijaylaxmi's cloud kitchen was born out of necessity during the pandemic when lockdowns made it difficult for people to access prepared food from outside. *"I realised that there were many people in my area who needed home-cooked meals, and I could provide that for them,"* she says. The cooking, however, was not new to her—she had always cooked for her family. What was different was the scale of the operation and the right time to enter this venture. *"Earlier, I was cooking just for my family. Now, my family has grown—both in terms of the number of people I cook for and the emotional satisfaction I get from receiving thanks for my meals,"* she reflects with a sense of pride. She adds further,

It's not easy to live in a metropolitan city with just one salary of a class two employee, and I have always felt the need to add a second income to the family, but nothing was coming to mind. So many

expenses one needs to raise a child in cities like Delhi, all kids take hobby classes, all go to decent schools, and one has to also manage certain lifestyles like the neighbours, it is not possible with only one fixed salary. Covid time gave me and my family to think over our financial situation, and we started with this idea, and it clicked. This locality where I live contributes in a big way as many employees in certain blocks keep getting transferred very frequently, and many times, they also do not travel with their families, so they prefer to order from me rather than other online platforms. Mostly, my clients are only from the same colony, and I have never thought of extending it beyond that.

The main strategy Vijaylaxmi uses to run her business is simple—she operates through WhatsApp groups along with a few other ladies who also do the same business of providing home-cooked meals. Every day, she posts a menu of available meals for the day, and her clients place their orders through the app. The digital platform has allowed her to quickly manage her orders and logistics as she keeps the menu simple, what are usually cooked in households. *"Digital platforms are quicker and more efficient,"* she notes.

I don't have to worry about how much to cook or if people will order. I post the menu, and within hours, I have a full list of orders. Also, since most of my customers are part of our group, I can easily communicate when I travel or am not able to cook. But yes, this is not a business in the true sense of the term, but yes, I can generate my second income through this while sitting at home.

Her family is an integral part of her operation. While Vijaylaxmi does the cooking, her husband and son help with marketing and delivery. They actively support her in various aspects of the business, including grocery shopping, handling social media, and delivering food to customers. She added, *'I completely rely on my son and husband for what's app handling, and my son has recently*

generated a QR code that I tend to send to my clients for payment, earlier it was difficult for me in the absence of cash at home'.

Case study 3: Handwriting and Art class

Shashi is a 45-year-old woman who runs online classes and promotes her service over Facebook/ Instagram. She was staying earlier in a government accommodation in south Delhi where she was offering her handwriting improvement classes at home, only catering to the neighbouring houses of the colony. Her classes got so popular that she started her own Facebook page to reach out to new clients. Her Facebook or Instagram pages often show the success stories of small children whose handwriting improved after joining her classes. Since the respondent was contacted through the personal contacts of the author, the author knew that she had relocated to a neighbouring city, but she still ran her online classes for handwriting improvement in addition to art and craft classes. She thought of expanding this service as it was the easiest way to start something online for generating income and to get engaged. During Covid time, out of boredom, she got herself enrolled in an art and craft class organised by a reputed stationary-producing company. The small neighbourhood where she lived provided enough opportunity to start this venture, she emphasised while elaborating on how she started her journey of being a self-employed woman. She adds

'There are many households in my locality where both spouses are working, and they drop their kids in daycare and other hobby classes only to keep them engaged. I started to get a sense of this need in our social media and RWA groups, where women would constantly discuss the available hobby classes or activity classes, and they would always prefer not to travel a distance as it adds another task to them or to do it online. That was the inspiration of my starting point soon, I started enjoying it as I could earn something while

staying at home. ”.

Alongside this, she also offers workshops on drawing and art and crafts classes during summer holidays or winter holidays, both online and offline, but she reaches out to her clients through personal networks that mostly depend on word-of-mouth spread. ‘My women friends are my biggest assets, almost all the mothers would be part of some WhatsApp groups or other. They help me find my clients by circulating my WhatsApp messages. Their recommendations ensure a sense of trust in my clients who think of trying out my classes for their kids for the first time, elaborated Shashi.

Case Study 4: Smriti’s Journey as a Young Entrepreneur

Smriti, an undergraduate student, is charting her entrepreneurial path by curating and selling handmade funky pieces targeted at young girls like hers. Her creations include mobile phone accessories, photo frames, diaries, bracelets, hair bands, earrings, necklaces, and other trendy items. Operating primarily through online platforms like Instagram and Facebook, Smriti uploads images of her products, attracting an audience of young women. She also occasionally sets up stalls at school and college events to showcase her work. She feels that early entrepreneurship not only allows her to learn and grow but it also offers a sense of financial independence, which she values deeply. *“It’s nice to be able to earn something for my expenses without having to ask anyone,”* she says with a proud smile.

Although she’s still learning the ropes of entrepreneurship, Smriti believes that starting young is key to long-term success. *“It’s better to start early because the future is uncertain. Getting a job after graduation in my field seems unpredictable, so I’d rather be independent,”* Smriti says. Her online business gives her the liberty to explore her entrepreneurial ambitions on her terms, without the

pressure of face-to-face sales interactions. *"I'm a shy person and find it difficult to convince people to buy my handmade items in person," she admits "The online platform allows me to operate in a neutral space, where I can focus on the creative side and let my products speak for themselves also, I feel investing too much money into education after a certain point is not worth doing, from my older mentors experience I have to learn that. What matters is how much experience you have in life, not just the degree you hold," she shares.*

For Smriti, her small business serves as a practical learning experience, preparing her for a future where she can manage her own life and make decisions independently. Smriti's products cater primarily to women, and she finds it fulfilling to connect with like-minded individuals through her business. Smriti's products are completely handmade, and these are highly time-consuming and labour-intensive. She often takes time out from her studies to handcraft a few products. She admitted that she often finds her lack of experience and limited financial resources hindered her ability to focus too much on her business. This may be considered a structural impasse in her entrepreneurial journey.

Case Study 5: Resin Art Entrepreneurs

Malini and Priyanka, both businesswomen, have turned their passion for creating handmade resin art into a thriving enterprise by offering a range of household decorative items such as furniture, cutlery, keychains, and other personalised products. Their journey into entrepreneurship is rooted in personal transformation, friendship, and the shared desire to create something meaningful and fulfilling in life while earning money at the same time. While Malini is a spinster and Priyanka is a mother of two and wife to a white-collar professional, their partnership has allowed them to blend

their different life experiences into a business venture that operates mostly on an online platform.

Priyanka's entrepreneurial journey began at a pivotal moment in her life. With her children studying abroad, she found herself with more free time. *"Money was never my primary motivation," she says, "but I realised that you can't have enough of it to live life fully. The more you have, the more you can enjoy life."* She added with a big laugh during the time of the interview. Priyanka, however, didn't initially know what direction to take. It wasn't until she started talking with Malini, her close friend, that the seed for a new venture was planted. Malini, too, was going through a difficult time. After losing her mother and becoming jobless due to the pandemic, she felt a deep void in her life. *"I needed something that would give me purpose again,"* Malini recalls. *"That's when Priyanka and I started talking about business ideas."* Together, they decided to pursue training in resin art, a creative and versatile medium used to create unique decorative products. This decision marked the beginning of a partnership that was less about financial gain and more about providing meaning and joy in their lives. *"This business is more about friendship than money,"* Malini states. *"We spend so much time together, travelling for conferences, attending workshops, and discussing new product ideas. It gives our friendship a sense of purpose."* Priyanka agrees, saying, *"I can't imagine doing this without Malini. She's not just my business partner; she's my support system. Together, we are creating something that brings us joy, and that joy is reflected in the products we make."* Both women rented a small workspace and hired a few employees to assist with the production of their items initially. *"We wanted a business that was manageable, something that allowed us to be creative without taking on too much risk,"* says Priyanka.

Both women are actively involved in every aspect of the business, from design to marketing. They use social media platforms like

Instagram and Facebook to showcase their products, uploading pictures of their resin art creations, such as tables, coasters, jewellery and keychains. They also keep their WhatsApp statuses updated with new product designs, either made by them or curated from online inspiration. *"It took us more than five years to establish our business; it's a lot slow process for sure. We do not have a website since it's a little costly for us to afford that at this moment of our business, so we manage our business completely through social media,"* Malini explains. The duo ensures that they maintain a personal connection with their clients, answering inquiries and accepting orders via direct messages or WhatsApp. Once a client selects a design, the women create and deliver the finished product.*"The beauty of our business is that we don't have to invest heavily in inventory," Priyanka says. "People love customised pieces, and that's what keeps us going. Our clients are not unknown people, but we create pieces for mostly our friends or friends of friends.*

Discussion:

The case studies presented above contribute to the broader sociological discourse on digital entrepreneurship among women within neoliberal frameworks. Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on individual agency and choice, frames entrepreneurship as a personal endeavour, thus offering women the opportunity to transcend traditional societal constraints imposed by patriarchal structures. In this context, women can exercise autonomy, breaking free from the normative choices dictated by family, community, or male authority. However, this focus on individualism often obscures the structural inequalities and socio-economic injustices that shape opportunities and outcomes, ultimately placing the burden of success or failure on the individual woman or her family. This duality is evident in the case studies, where respondents simultaneously construct themselves as

autonomous decision-makers yet also articulate a compulsion to engage in entrepreneurial activities driven by the material pressures of family obligations, financial instability, and the need to secure a future within an unequal socio-economic landscape.

The five case studies presented here involve six women engaged in small-scale, informal income-generating activities. These ventures were predominantly low-profit and heavily reliant on women's cultural resources, such as tailoring, handicrafts, and service-based work. For most of the women, their entrepreneurial activities were viewed primarily as a means of generating supplementary income to meet the financial needs of their families. These cases resonate with the prevailing narrative that digital spaces offer an accessible route into entrepreneurship. Nearly all the respondents affirmed that digital platforms provided them with opportunities to achieve financial independence while remaining within the confines of their homes.

While the digital space undeniably offers new opportunities, an overemphasis on these prospects risks obscuring the broader structural and cultural factors that shape women's entrepreneurial experiences. Commercial enterprises need discipline and a lot of effort and time to achieve success, which is undermined when women in childcare responsibilities oft for l entrepreneurship and digital entrepreneurship is no exception. Her sentimental statement, *"I can be there for my daughters, attend family gatherings, go to parties, and still run a business. What more can one wish for!"* not only projects her in a privileged position but also reflects a perennial tension of the irreconcilability of balancing both responsibilities, especially when she had to let go of a few assignments because of it.

Vijay Laxmi's narrative illustrates the satisfaction she derives from creating a secondary income stream for her family, while Smriti's

experience reflects the neoliberal ideal of the self-reliant entrepreneur. Having embraced the market logic inherent in neoliberalism, Smriti adopted digital entrepreneurship at a young age. However, her business, which involves time-consuming and labour-intensive handmade products, reveals the tension between entrepreneurial ambition and structural limitations. Smriti acknowledges that her lack of experience and limited financial resources hinder her ability to fully focus on her business, presenting a clear example of a structural impasse in her entrepreneurial journey.

Gunjan's story exemplifies a common narrative of women engaging in digital entrepreneurship as a means to balance work and family responsibilities. Gunjan's case, despite her relatively privileged position—being able to manage an online business with hired help—demonstrates how her entrepreneurial involvement remains constrained by the traditional gendered division of household labour. As Gunjan herself articulates, *"Women always have to carry the responsibility of household management. As a woman, my priority is always my family."* This aligns with Jayawarna et al.'s (2014) findings, which highlight how gendered divisions of household labour can limit the ability to leverage class-structured privileges in entrepreneurship.

In contrast, Vijaylaxmi's story challenges the notion that women operate as a homogeneous category within the same social matrix. While her business was born out of a desperate need to supplement the family income, it also underscores how family can serve as an enabling factor in women's entrepreneurial activities. This points to the complex interplay between necessity and support systems in shaping women's engagement with entrepreneurship.

Moreover, the case studies reveal dimensions of entrepreneurial motivation that are often overlooked or underemphasised in discussions of entrepreneurship. Priyanka's relatively privileged

position—marked by her ability to rent a premise for her workshop and hire staff—reflects how access to financial and social capital can facilitate entrepreneurial success. Similarly, her access to a robust friendship network played a crucial role in the establishment and operation of her business. Malini's statement, *"This business is more about friendship than money,"* illustrates how social contexts and relationships significantly shape entrepreneurial motivations, often prioritising social capital over financial gain. Gunjan's story also reflects this aspect, owing to her relatively advantageous position of coming from a business family. Shashi's experience further emphasises the importance of social networks, with her friendships directly contributing to the success of her business. Similarly, her relative position in belonging to a specific affluent neighbourhood can also be identified as a factor contributing to her entrepreneurial success, which may contradict the neoliberal notion of entrepreneurship as a choice-making act.

The question of autonomy and financial independence, often central to discussions of entrepreneurship, also emerges as a key motivation in the case of Smriti. Smriti's case, like that of other young entrepreneurs under neoliberalism, represents the broader entrepreneurial dilemma in a neoliberal society. It vividly depicts the struggles of a young adult navigating the uncertainties and crises brought on by neoliberal policies, using entrepreneurship as a means of engaging creatively with an unstable socio-economic condition.

Conclusion:

This study explored digital entrepreneurship within the context of neoliberal conditions, using a contrastive case study method examining women in online businesses. The findings reveal both internal and external factors that shape how women establish and operate their digital enterprises. The study's conclusion supports Dy

et al.'s (2018) argument that digital entrepreneurial outcomes are not solely determined by individual agency or merit but are significantly influenced or constrained by broader structural and cultural factors. Digital platforms have certainly created new opportunities for women discussed in the sample case studies, however study finding also reveal that overestimating these opportunities could obscure the structural barriers embedded within the neoliberal world order, which promotes entrepreneurial culture as a solution to women's development challenges. Greater emphasis on social equity—especially gender and class equality—could better support digital entrepreneurship, particularly for women who continue to face obstacles owing to their gendered position even if they operate in online spaces. A key question raised by this study is also to reflect on whether online spaces are truly gender-neutral. The findings suggest that there is an interpenetration between physical and online spaces, where offline complexities are often reproduced in online environments, as evidenced through the case studies. While this shift brings a sense of agency to women, it is not without its negative consequences. Women's experiences in digital entrepreneurship are shaped not only by their agency but also by the constraints imposed by both offline and online structures that compel them to adjust to the norm of work life balance. Hence , recognizing the importance of cultural and social resources embedded within the structures of family and society could enhance women's digital entrepreneurial journeys rather than moulding their selves as neoliberal entities who over work to prove their efficiency in market situations.

References

Chengadu, S. & Scheepers, C. (2017). Women leadership in emerging markets: featuring 50 women leaders. Routledge, (ISBN1138188964, 9781138188969) https://books.google.gr/books?id=AplNvgAACAAJ&dq=Women+Leadership+in+Emerging+Markets:+Featuring+46+Women+Leaders&hl=el&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi7-OTencrVAhWnDsAKHQBvADgQ6AEIJTAA

da Costa, A.D.S.M. & Silva Saraiva, L.A., 2012. Hegemonic discourses on entrepreneurship as an ideological mechanism for the reproduction of capital. *Organisation*, 19(5), pp. 587–614.

Cesaroni, F. M., Demartini, P., & Paoloni, P. (2017). Women in business and social media: Implications for female entrepreneurship in emerging countries. *African Journal of Business Management,* 11(14), 316-326.

Gonick, Marnina. 2006. Between "Girl Power" and "Reviving Ophelia": Constituting the Neoliberal Girl Subject. *NWSA Journal* 18 (2): 1 – 23.

Graham, M. (Ed.). (2019). *Digital economies at global margins. MIT Press.*

Jayawarna, D., Rouse, J. & Macpherson, A., 2014. Life course pathways to business start-up. *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development, 26* (3–4), pp.282–312.

Kamberidou, I. (2020). "Distinguished" women entrepreneurs in the digital economy and the multitasking whirlpool. *Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship,* 9(1), 3.

Kergroach, S. (2021). *SMEs going digital: policy challenges and recommendations.* (No. 15). OECD Publishing

Khin, S., & Ho, T. C. (2019). Digital technology, digital capability and organizational performance: A mediating role of digital innovation. *International Journal of Innovation Science,* 11(2), 177-195.

Tran, K. (2014). The impact of digital media on female entrepreneurship. Trinity Washington University. Submitted to Dr. Donatus A. Uzomah on behalf of the faculty of the School of Professional Studies in partial fulfilment of the degree requirements for the Masters of Arts in Communication. [PDF] The Impact of Digital Media on Female Entrepreneurship

Malik, P. (2017). Gendering digital entrepreneurship: from research to practice using a tensional lens. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing: Purdue University http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/dissertations/AAI10266070/

Mallett, O. & Wapshott, R., 2015. Making sense of self-employment in late career:

Understanding the identity work of olderpreneurs. *Work, Employment & Society,* 29(2), pp.250–266.

Martinez Dy, A., Martin, L., & Marlow, S. (2018). Emancipation through digital entrepreneurship? A critical realist analysis. *Organization*, 25(5), 585-608

Mazonde, N.B (2016). Culture and the self-identity of women entrepreneurs in a developing country. A Doctoral thesis submitted to the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management, University of the Witwatersrand, in fulfilment of the

requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Johannesburg, March 31st 2016. http://146.141.12.21/bitstream/handle/10539/21573/Thesis%20Final%20NBMazonde%20final%20print.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Mousa, M., Shahzad, F., & Misbah Shabana, M. (2024). Digital entrepreneurship among Egyptian women: autonomy, experience and community. J*ournal of Small Business and Enterprise Development.*

Roberts, J. M. (2014). Social media and the neoliberal subject. In *New Media and Public Activism* (pp. 93-112). Policy Press.

Scuotto, V., Serravalle, F., Murray, A., & Viassone, M. (2019). The shift towards a digital business model. Women Entrepreneurs and Strategic Decision Making in the Global Economy. IGI Global.https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-7479-8.ch007

Sharma, L. (2022), "Assessing the entrepreneurship as emancipation' perspective among women in STEM", *Management Decision*, Vol. 60 No. 6, pp. 1585-1605, doi: 10.1108/md-06-2020-0696.

Ughetto, E., Rossi, M., Audretsch, D. and Lehmann, E.E. (2020), "Female entrepreneurship in the digital era", *Small Business Economics*, Vol. 55 No. 2, pp. 305-312, doi: 10.1007/s11187-019-

00298-8.

Ughulu, J. (2022). Entrepreneurship as a major driver of wealth creation. *International Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization, 10(3), 78-82.*

Dr. Pravati Dalua is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology, Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi.

Empowering Women in Informal Work: A Gender and Livelihood Perspective

Dr. Sona Mandal

Abstract:

Globalization has been associated with a rise in informalization, which has spread to the formal sector as well, resulting in the dissolution of the formal-informal dichotomy. The informal sector is essential to the expansion of the capitalist mode of production, as it's a site for capital accumulation, and therefore, it is in the interest of global capital that its significance increases over time instead of diminishing. Women form a large proportion of the informal sector employment, mainly as petty producers and unpaid family workers, where the conditions of work are exploitative. The paper attempts to contextualize these features of the global phenomenon and draw parallels with the available evidence from the Indian experience. The trend towards 'informalization of the formal' and the presence of a high proportion of own-account workers in the informal sector are indicative of the deteriorating conditions of the labour market. While it is important to address the concerns regarding the promotion of self-employment as a policy choice for income generation, it is beyond the scope of the present analysis. Instead, the paper explores the important policy interventions at the aggregate level, which are critical to generating employment and livelihood opportunities. In this context, it is imperative that gender-sensitive policies are implemented to create work that is inclusive and empowering for the countless women engaged in vulnerable work in the informal sector.

Keywords: *Vulnerable Work; Informal Sector; Gender-sensitive Policy*

Introduction:

Globalization has caused a significant transformation of the labour market by changing the nature and conditions of work. According to Yates (2023), own-account work, including unpaid family members working with a self-employed person, comprises 45 percent of global employment, which translates to a total of 1.46 billion people working in precarious conditions. Many of these workers are women who often face discrimination and State apathy more disproportionately than men. For instance, in the event of any crisis, women are more likely to lose jobs and less likely to get State support in comparison to men, despite being an integral part of the global capitalist production. An extensive body of evidence shows that women faced more hardships than men during the covid pandemic. Therefore, it is important to understand how globalization has contributed to the devaluation of work and a rise in informalization, especially for women in the 'Global South'.

Provision of decent employment opportunities is essential for economic development. An expansion in the production of goods and services is of little value if it cannot be accessed by a majority of workers due to their low purchasing power on account of their vulnerable working conditions. The response of State to protect such workers and provide income-generating opportunities becomes critical. The paper attempts to draw attention to the key elements of a gender-sensitive policy framework that ensures the emancipation of the workers from their vulnerable status.

Global Capital and Vulnerable Work

The Indian economy has a dualist structure where the formal sector exists alongside the informal sector. The former is also called the organized sector and consists of large and medium capitalist enterprises, both foreign and domestic; and also, the public sector owned by the State. In contrast, the informal sector, also called the unorganized sector includes peasants, artisans, small producers and retailers, and domestic workers among other petty producers (Basole and Basu, 2011).[1] According to Hart (1973 cited in Breman, 2010), the difference between the organized and the unorganized sectors can be compared to wage labour versus self-employment. In fact, Breman (1999) describes that the informal sector includes numerous micro-entrepreneurs who operate under abysmally poor and risky conditions. The characteristics of these ventures include- a simplified production process; less reliance on capital and technology as opposed to formal sector; prevalence of low wages or piece rates; absence legal protection in work contracts and absence of social safety nets and bargaining power due to lack of collectivisation (Breman, 2010).

It was believed that as the capitalist mode of production grew, the informal sector would decrease in size.[2] However, in reality, the transformation towards capitalism has not resulted in any considerable expansion of employment in the formal sector. On the contrary, casualization has increased as keeping the labour flexible is in the interest of the capitalist who can shift the risk

[1] Breman (2010) observes that the diverse modalities of employment do not conform to the image of a dualist but of a fragmented labour market (p.219).

[2] The view is based on the Lewis model, which assumes that the economy comprises of two sectors the traditional and the modern. The former has surplus labour which can be absorbed by the latter as capital is reinvested in the formal sector. Thus, the important prediction of the model is that with modernization there would be an expansion of jobs in the modern sector and a contraction of jobs in the traditional sector (Raj and Sen, 2016; Roy Chowdhury and Vani, 2018).

and the cost of production to the dispossessed workers. It is also a way to circumvent labour regulations and keep workers flexible and submissive (Breman, 1996). A similar explanation is offered by the neo-Marxian approach that associates informal sector with end-stage capitalism particularly in developing countries where it continues to thrive despite the adoption of neoliberalism (Hart, 1973 cited in Raj and Sen, 2016).[3]

In the literature, there are two competing views regarding the informal sector. According to Raj and Sen (2016), one view treats the informal sector as exploitative, where workers endure abysmal work conditions. Here, the key concern is to bring rules and regulations to the informal sector that are available to formal sector workers, such as minimum wage laws, social security regulations and rules of collective bargaining. The emphasis is to bring formalization to the poor in the informal sector. The other view treats the informal sector as a site for accumulation. Here, the informal sector is seen to possess a source of dynamism and creativity, where small informal enterprises eventually make the transition to large corporations, which are the defining features of late stage of capitalism. Any attempt to bring the existing rules that govern the formal sector to the informal sector will prove to be counterproductive as it would stifle the creative potential of the latter. Thus, here the State should try to make the transition process less cumbersome for the informal enterprises by easing the rules that govern the formal sector. The objective is to 'informalize the formal'. Both views call for ways to

[3] The classical Marxian approach views capital and labour as separate entities where the capitalist organization of production is wage-based employment, which rests on the alienation of labour from capital. However, in the neo-Marxian tradition, self-employment is the dominant form of labour, which is a non-capitalist production system. It is often seen to be a part of the larger pre-capitalist sector, which includes feudalism and semi-feudalism. It emerges that the process of subcontracting, which is an essential feature of contemporary global capital, has established the unequal exchange between capitalist production systems and the non-capitalist production space. Thus, informality is a relation between capitalist firms and the pre-capitalist entities (see Raj and Sen, 2016).

bring the poor of the informal sector to the formal sector but differ in their approach, as the first view calls for formalizing the informal sector and the second view calls for informalizing the formal sector. The latter view has inherent contradictions as it supports the transition of the informal firms to the formal sector, but ironically, the proposed strategy is through the process of informalization.

India is witness to this trend of informalization of formal work in manufacturing and services as a growing proportion of salaried and regular workers are without any written contract. This spread of informality to formal work implies growing uncertainty and vulnerability and poses a serious challenge to the quality and nature of employment in India (India Employment Report, 2024).

In developing countries, the informal sector is complex and highly segmented as classified by employment status consisting of employers; unprotected employees working either in the formal or informal enterprise or within the households; own account workers; casual labourers and industrial out workers or subcontracted workers who produce from their homes or a small workshop (Chen et al. 2006). According to the status of employment, own-account workers and unpaid family labour are classified as vulnerable workers. They lack all the benefits that the formal sector has access to, such as, decent working conditions; insurance against risks and effective representation through collectivization.[4]

In modern capitalist societies, self-employment in petty production is expected to exist on the fringes of the economy because as the economy makes a transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy, the proportion of people working on their own account is

[4] https://esa.un.org/unmigration/documents/retreat/UN%20WOMEN_Indicator_vulnerable_employment.pdf
https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/features/WCMS_120470/lang--en/index.htm

expected to reduce with a corresponding increase in the proportion of people employed in wage employment in the modern sector. However, the experience of the developing countries runs contrary to this, as far from diminishing in importance, own-account work continues to thrive in the informal sector that provides sustenance to people but at the same time increases their vulnerability. These workers exist at the lowest rung of the employment hierarchy and may not even be able to meet their basic needs despite having an income.

Informal Employment in India

Since the inception of economic reforms in 1991, Indian economy has been on a high growth trajectory. However, the growth failed to be inclusive as around 90 percent of the labour force works in the informal sector, which continues to intensify with a rising proportion of the regular formal workers being pushed into informal employment. The persistence of self-employment constituting half of the total employment is one of the highest in the world. In 2022 around 62 percent of women workers were in self-employment as shown in Table 1. In rural areas the presence of a large percentage of women in unpaid family work (42.6 percent) was the reason behind the high share women in rural self-employment (67.7 percent) (India Employment Report, 2024). The involvement of women in unpaid family work should be discouraged from both an individual and a social perspective because it is considered to be an inferior form of work that neither grants any financial freedom to women nor allows them to engage productively with the community (Deshpande, 2020, cited in India Employment Report, 2024).

Table 1) Detailed status of employment (UPSS), 2000 and 2022 (%)

		2000			2022	
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Self-employed	51.0	55.2	52.3	53.1	62.0	55.8
Own-account worker	37.0	16.6	30.7	40.5	24.8	35.8
Employer	1.2	0.5	1.0	3.4	0.7	2.6
Unpaid family worker	12.7	38.1	20.5	9.3	36.5	17.4
Regular employee	18.0	7.8	14.9	23.6	16.6	21.5
Casual worker	31.0	37.0	32.9	23.2	21.4	22.7
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: *NSSO data on Employment and Unemployment Survey(various rounds) estimated in India Employment Report, 2024. India-Employment-web-22-April.pdf Institute for Human Development*

Poverty and Vulnerability

According to RoyChowdhury and Vani (2018), own-account work in the informal sector is highly fragmented that provides livelihood to the people but is not enough to mitigate their poverty. Using data from NSS EUS, 68th Round, they show that when the poor and the ultra-poor are taken together, more than 50 percent of the self-employed are classified as poor in the urban economy. The situation is equally challenging in the rural sector. Using NSSO, EUS, 66th Round unit-level data, Raj and Sen (2016) show that the poverty

rate for the self-employed whose enterprises are located in their dwellings is around 25 percent and these are most likely to be family firms.

The incidence of poverty is also very high among casual labourers who also comprise the informal sector. As cited in RoyChowdhury and Vani (2018), about 33 per cent of the casual workers in the rural area and 44 percent in the urban area are deemed as ultra-poor and are therefore categorized as vulnerable, and when the poor and the ultra-poor are added, a staggering 69 percent of the rural casual and 75 percent the urban casual workers are poor.

It is evident from the data provided by 'Informal Sector and Conditions of Employment' cited in Hill (2018) that the quality of employment has deteriorated in India and that vulnerability has increased more for workers in rural areas in comparison to those in urban areas, as reflected by the fact that in 2011-12, 68.8 percent of workers across the country were without a formal contract while 72 percent of workers lacked access to any kind of social security.

Women in the Informal Sector

The neoliberal strategies adopted in the last few decades emphasize that an increase in economic growth would create more employment opportunities and subsequently increase the labour force participation of women. However, a disquieting feature of the labour market in India has been the low rate of women's participation in the labour force, which was 25 percent of the total female working-age population in 2022—one of the lowest in the world (India Employment Report, 2024). Verik (2018) observes that the explanation of the low figure is rather complicated, which can be attributed to an underlying array of socio-economic factors. The author elaborates that there are some broad explanatory factors, which include increased participation of

females in education and improvement in the economic status of households that allow women to withdraw from the labour force; faulty measurement practices that lead to the omission of work done by women; and finally, a lack of avenues for women to gain employment opportunities in the non-farm sector. The last point explaining the declining participation rate of women is crucial as it brings the focus back on the demand-side constraints [5] i.e. if a lack of demand prevents the creation of adequate jobs, increasing employability alone won't be sufficient to increase the participation rate. Data from the National Sample, as stated in Verik (2018), reveals that a significant proportion of women who were engaged in domestic duties and therefore treated as being outside the labour force were willing to return to paid work if it was made available.

While the status of women has changed since the adoption of neoliberal reforms, it has not necessarily improved. According to Ramamurthy (1997), a large number of women now participate in economic activity but primarily in the informal sector, where the terms of employment are uncertain and precarious. Their condition is made worse due to a lack of education, training, and access to credit and technology.

Women's work in the informal sector differs widely across the industrial segments which includes, women taking up work as street vendors, petty producers, casual labourers, industrial outworkers, among others where they are confined to doing work that can be classified as highly feminized (Hill, 2018). For instance, many women, especially in the lower-income groups, are engaged in doing craft-related work at home in their spare time as it offers them the flexibility of working from home and the opportunity to utilize their skills in craftwork. Women also work in these petty

[5] See Verick, 2018, for an in-depth discussion on the decline of the female participation rate in India.

ventures as it provides their family with the necessary insurance against unemployment, illness, inflation, and wage cuts (Desai and Krishna Raj, 1990, cited in Kambara, 2015). Apart from working to support their families, they also undertake domestic work, which is treated as the primary responsibility of women in a patriarchal society, thereby enduring the double burden of work. (Ramamurthy, 1997). Therefore, the undervaluation of work in the informal sector increases women's vulnerability which calls for interventionist policies to address the problems and improve their condition.

Gender-Sensitive Policies for Employment and Income Generation

The focus of employment policy for the informal sector should be on the creation of income-generating opportunities, which can be achieved in two ways. The first strategy is through the promotion of formal employment both in the public and private sector to help absorb the informal sector workers. For this to be effective, the government should not only create conditions for these enterprises to generate employment but also improve their accessibility, which can be done through improved education and training.[6] Moreover, the demand side cannot be overlooked, as inadequate demand can trigger an economic recession and create unemployment.

The second strategy is through the creation of avenues for self-employment for informal sector workers. According to RoyChowdhury and Vani (2018), in policy documents two kinds of interventions have been provided: firstly, to extend social protection to all the workers of the informal sector and secondly, to extend credit and training facilities to those engaged in self-employment. Poor women have benefitted from several flagship programmes of

[6] Ibid.

the government, however, when such policies fail to take off, the role of civil society becomes critical. A case in point is the success of SEWA, a women's union that promotes microcredit to self-help groups. Thus, the key components of a successful policy of self-employment must include the extension of social protection, effective credit disbursement, skill enhancement and active involvement of governmental and non-governmental organizations.

However, RoyChowdhury and Vani (2018) further emphasize that self-employment in petty production is critically viewed as a parallel economy that provides subsistence to millions of people who could not be absorbed in the mainstream sector. According to this perspective, despite having access to facilities, these workers would still continue to exist on the fringes of the capitalist economy due to their precarious working conditions, therefore, the exclusion of such employment is necessary to make the economy more resilient, inclusive, and growth-oriented. (Sanyal, 2007).[7]

Although there are different policy approaches, some being debatable, the employment policy for the informal sector at an aggregate level should be gender-sensitive and enables women to move from a low-paying, inferior work status to one that makes them economically empowered. The following measures broadly outline the key components of a policy framework to achieve the stated objective:

Provision of Public Investment and Support Services: The State should focus on promoting modern industries, which widens the opportunities for women and allows them to learn new skills and livelihoods such as in dairy, food processing, and craft-based work.[8] Women entrepreneurship should be encouraged with timely

[7] See Kalyan Sanyal, Rethinking Capitalist Development, Governmentality and Post-Colonial Capitalism. Routledge, 2007.
[8] Vina Mazumdar, Kumud Sharma and Sarathi Acharya, cited in Parthasarathy and Rao, 1981.

interventions such as credit disbursement, access to training, and availability of inputs are essential. Support services in the form of availability of creches for childcare, availability of processed food, cooking gas and drinking water, and provision of public transport are essential to liberate women from unpaid work and make them participate effectively in the labour market (Parthasarathy and Rao, 1981).

Choice of Techniques of Production: Technology is a double-edged sword. It simplifies the process of production, but at the same time, causes unemployment. The displacement of workers by machine-made goods, which use a small amount of labour per unit of capital, has widespread ramifications. It affects not only the workers who are displaced, but also those who are employed in other sectors. When the artisans are displaced by factory production and seek alternative employment in the farm sector, it exerts a downward pressure on the real wages of the peasants and agricultural labourers, which affects them adversely.[9]

Technology has been a boon for women, as improved household equipment like washing machines, cooking gadgets, etc., or even the availability of processed food has enabled women to have more freedom from the grind of domestic work. It may lead to the

[9] Marxian economists view technological unemployment as the main reason for poverty rather than the absence of skills. However, according to classical economists, technological progress creates opportunities for generating more employment in the long run. Ricardo explained that technology displaced workers only temporarily, but over time, as the rate of growth increases, employment growth would increase more than before. The underlying assumption is that the introduction of machinery increased labour productivity. With unchanged real wages, it amounted to a rise in the share of profits, which when reinvested, generates more growth of output and employment. However, Marxian economists argue that it overlooks the problem of deficiency of aggregate demand, which can prevent the realization of profits and destabilize the working of the model. Besides, Ricardo implied a one-time introduction of machinery; however, in the real world, technological progress is continuous, which hinders the re-absorption of labour. Even when there is no problem of 'realization', technological progress may still fail to increase employment when profits are repatriated by MNCs (See Patnaik, 2018).

displacement of domestic workers, but if such workers can be placed in the formal care economy with State support it would be doubly advantageous.

India witnessed de-industrialization during the colonial period, which was caused by the import of machine-made goods. It forced leaders to call for the rejection of foreign goods so that the exchange among the petty producers could be re-established and domestic employment could be increased. Painaik (2018) observes that the Gandhian view of restraint on technology is untenable in the exiting capitalistic setup, whereas under socialism, according to some Marxist scholars, no such restrictions need be imposed since technological progress while increasing labour productivity can continue to retain workers by lowering the number of hours of work. However, Patnaik (2018) further argues that unrestrained technological progress has its costs in the form of transitionary job losses in declining industries, which must be assessed against the benefits of reduced working hours and therefore even in a socialist economy, there should be a restraint on the rate at which technology is introduced, at least till full employment is reached, and such a decision should rest upon the workers. Walking this tightrope can be challenging for the policymaker and requires a precise understanding of the pros and cons of technological advancement (Parthasarathy and Rao, 1981). Instead of focusing on policies geared towards imposing restraints on technology, an appropriate policy response would be the adoption of labour-intensive techniques of production that employment opportunities for women on a large scale.

Collectivization and Community Participation: Employment policy should encourage the participation of workers at the local level since the informal sector workers cannot organize themselves into workers' unions; their bargaining power is severely limited. Neethi (2016) observes that such a situation can be resolved if

workers devise some informal mechanisms at the community level. She cites the example of a food processing firm where workers took advantage of their neighbourly relationships to negotiate favourable terms for themselves with the firms on day-to-day tasks, such as the collection of raw materials or payment of piece-rates. Individually, the workers were helpless, but collectively they could use such spaces for sharing stories and experiences that gave them strength to bargain with their employers. Patnaik (2018) argues that as the material interests of different groups are interlinked in an economy, the success of one group can favourably affect other groups. Therefore, according to him, the creation of a community is not only needed to meet the altruistic goals of the society but is also necessary to ensure the economic well-being of its members.

The employment policy should also help workers to gain control over the means of production. This will eradicate the exploitative practices of middlemen or subcontractors and help to empower the workers who can then stake a claim in the management of production and the distribution of the profits in an egalitarian way for the benefit of all workers. Women should form organizations at the grassroots level, as this would strengthens their bargaining power, and both government and non-governmental organizations should provide active support to improve the status of women so that they can overcome the challenges imposed by the patriarchal society (Parthasarathy and Rao, 1981).

Provision of Social Security: The government must generate productive jobs for vulnerable workers. However, even if the formal sector expands at a rapid rate, it cannot absorb workers from the informal sector. Until more productive jobs are created, the vulnerable workers in the informal sector must be granted social security as they face varied risks, including health risk,

financial risk, and labour market risks, besides the problems of rural distress.[10] The adoption of structural adjustment policy has led to massive cuts in social security spending, which in effect has severely compromised the welfare of workers (Sen and Growth 1987, cited in Ramamurthy, 1997). There is an urgent need for generating social safety nets that give protection to the vulnerable workers.

Expansion of Wage Employment: Expansion of non-farm wage work is crucial to reducing vulnerable work in the rural sector. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is a leading program of the Government of India that provides 100 days of guaranteed wage work to rural households to strengthen the livelihood opportunities for the rural poor. Mattos and Dasgupta (2017, p. 29) find that about half of MGNREGA workers in 2011-12 were either out of the labour force or were working as unpaid labour in 2004-05. Furthermore, they conclude that employment guarantee has considerably improved women's status and decision-making power in the household, thereby increasing their agency.

If all the above measures are well integrated into policy formulation and implemented effectively, it will pave the way for providing sustainable livelihoods to a large number of women workers and grant them economic empowerment and social mobility.

Conclusion

The expansion of global capital has dissolved the formal-informal binary that had long characterized the Indian economy (Jose, 2022). Furthermore, there has been an increase in the proportion of workers engaged in self-employment in the informal sector. Both

[10] Excerpt of an interview of Mahendra Dev and Pronab Sen by Sharad Raghavan in "Jobs or Doles: Which is the Way Forward?" Published in The Indian Worker, May 01-15, 2019.

these aspects have deteriorated the quality of jobs and increased vulnerability, more so for women who already have an inferior status in the labour market. Gender-sensitive policies are critical to creating decent livelihood opportunities and restoring the dignity of workers. It is the collective responsibility of the State and the civil society to formulate policy measures to reverse the process of informalization of work and reduce vulnerability in the labour market to foster economic development and promote the welfare of the workers in the informal sector.

Acknowledgement

This article is based on a chapter (with modifications) of a Minor Project (F. no. 02-205/17-18) supported by a grant from Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi entitled "Efficacy of State Intervention in the Economic Empowerment of Vulnerable Labor: A Study of Artisan Cluster Scheme."

Bibliography

Basole, A, 2016, Spare Change for Spare Time? Homeworking Women in Banaras, in Saraswati Raju and Santosh Jatrana eds. Women Workers in Urban India, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.

Basole A and Basu D, 2011 Relations of Production and Modes of Surplus Extraction in India: Part Two- Informal Industry Economic and Political Weekly, 46: 15, pp. 63-79.

Breman, Jan 1996, Footloose Labour: Working in India's Informal Economy, Cambridge University Press.

Breman, J, 1999, "The study of industrial labour in post-colonial India--The informal sector: A concluding review", Contributions to Indian Sociology

Breman, Jan 2010, Outcast Labour in Asia — Circulation and Informalization of the Workforce at the Bottom of the Economy, Oxford University Press, India.

Chen, M. 2006. "Rethinking the Informal Economy: Linkages with the Formal Economy and the Formal Regulatory Environment." in B. Guha-Khasnobi, R. Kanbur, and E.

Orstrom, eds. Unlocking Human Potential: Concepts and Policies for Linking the Informal and Formal Sectors. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ghosh, Jayati, 2009, Never Done and Poorly Paid: Women's Work in Globalisisng India, Women Unlimited.

Hill, Elizabeth, 2018, Re-thinking Employment in the Indian Economy: Inclusive Growth and well-being in Amitendu Palit and Elizabeth Hill edited Employment Policy in Emerging Economies: The Indian Case, Routledge.

Kambara, Channamma, 2015 FDI in Retail: Plight of Women Vegetable Vendors, Indian Journal of Labour Economics Volume 58, issue 4, October –December 2015.

Maiti, D., and K. Sen. 2010 "The Informal Sector in India: A Means of Exploitation or Accumulation?", Journal of South Asian Development.

Mattos, Fernanda Bárcia de and Sukti Dasgupta. 2017. MGNREGA, paid work and women's empowerment, Employment Policy Department EMPLOYMENT Working Paper No. 230, International Labour Office, Geneva

Mies, Maria, 1982, The Lace Makers of Narsapur: Indian Housewives Produce for the World Market, Zed Press.

Mies, Maria, 1986, Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour, Zed Books Ltd.

Mitra, Ashok. Lalit P Pathak and Shekhar Mukherji, The Status of Women: Shifts in Occupational Participation 1961-71, An ICSSR and JNU Study, Abhinav Publications.

Neethi P, 2016, Globalization lived Locally: A Labour Geography Perspective, Oxford.

Parthasarathy, G. And G. Dasaradharama Rao. 1981. Women in the Labour Force in India in Women in the Indian labour Force, papers and Proceedings of a Workshop, Asian Employment Programme, Asian Regional Team for Employment Promotion (ARTEP)/ ILO, Bangkok, Thailand.

Patnaik, Prabhat, 2018, Gandhi, Technology and Employment, Social Scientist, Vol. 46, No. 11-12.

Patnaik, Prabhat, 2007, The State Under Neo-Liberalism, Social Scientist, Volume. 35, No. 1/2, (Jan-Feb), pp. 4-15.

Raj, Rajesh S. N. and Kunal Sen., 2016. Out of the Shadows? The Informal Sector in Post-reform India, Oxford University Press.

Raju, Saraswati and Debangana Bose, 2016, Women Workers in Urban India and the Cities in Saraswati Raju and Santosh Jatrana Edited Women Workers in Urban India, Cambridge

University Press.

Ramamurthy, Priti. 1997. Women, Work, Patriarchy, and Development in India in Women and Work: A Reader edited by Paula J. Dubeck and Kathryn Borman, Rutgers University Press.

Roy Chowdhury, Supriya and B.P Vani, 2018, Self-employment: Dimensions, diversity and policy settings in Amitendu Palit and Elizabeth Hill edited Employment Policy in Emerging Economies: The Indian Case, 2018, Routledge.

Sanyal, Kalyan, 2007 Rethinking Capitalist Development, Governmentality and Post-Colonial Capitalism. Routledge.

Jose, Secki P, 2022, India's Labour Reforms: The Informalisation of Work and Growth of Semi-formal Employment, Economic and Political Weekly, November 12, 2022.

Verick, Sher Singh, 2018, Employment Policy to promote the participation of women in the Indian labour force in Amitendu Palit and Elizabeth Hill edited Employment Policy in Emerging Economies: The Indian Case, Routledge.

Yates, Michael D., 2023, Work Work Work Labor, Alienation, and Class Struggle, Cornerstone Publications, Kharagpur

Reports:

India Employment Report 2024: Youth employment, education and skills, Geneva: International Labour Office, year. © ILO and Institute for Human Development, New Delhi

The Challenge of Employment in India: An Informal Economy Perspective, Report of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector, Government of India. Academic Foundation, 2009.

Dr. Sona Mandal is Associate Professor in the Department of Economics, Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi.

Book Review

The Story of an Unknown Indian: The Many Lives of Syeda X. Juggernaut, 2024, ISBN-10. 9353453542.

Mehak Dua

India's economic reforms have led to swift urban growth, with thousands relocating each day from rural areas and traditional ways of life to urban centres. Most average Indians work in the informal economy, earning incredibly low wages and lacking social protection. As a result, they are compelled to endure urban poverty and deplorable living conditions on the fringes of major cities like New Delhi. Increasing communal tensions and the politics of division have exacerbated challenges for India's diverse communities. Although these transformations have been examined through multiple perspectives, Neha Dixit's The Story of an Unknown Indian: The Many Lives of Syeda X provides a direct, journalistic and investigative account of the social, economic, and political changes the country has witnessed in the past three decades vis-à-vis its effects on the poor migrant labourers. The narrative centres on Syeda, a weaver hailing from Banaras, who is compelled to leave her relatively secure life and relocate to Delhi with her husband and children in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992. It chronicles the challenges and hardships endured by a Muslim woman (and many others in similar situations) as she navigates through various odd jobs in an effort to survive. In the author's note given in the book, Dixit writes – 'I am not a historian, economist or political scientist. I have used no disciplinary boundaries. As a reporter, the only training I have is to dig out information, corroborate it, analyse it, find the story and tell it. That is what I have done here'. This

unfamiliar, authentic, and raw depiction of the working conditions faced by women labourers in the informal sector constitutes the most intriguing aspect of the book. The Many Lives of Syeda X is a poignant and multifaceted exploration of the human condition in the context of migration, displacement, and the search for stability.

Syeda's life is marred by incessant drudgery. While being a Muslim woman is the most obvious marker of her identity, she is also a mother, a home-maker, a daily wage labourer, a multi-skilled worker and most importantly, a survivor. Hence the question who Syeda is leads to answers that are manifold. At different points in her life, she has taken up various odd jobs such as that of a domestic worker, a toilet attendant in a mall, a worker in an almond shelling factory, stitching footballs to be exported to international leagues, trimming jeans and making tea strainers at others. While her labour helps run the house, it is her strength, resilience and perseverance that keeps the family together. In the book, we are also familiarised with her husband, Akmal, and her three children—Shazeb, Salman, and Reshma— each living a life unique to their own struggles. Akmal, once a skilled weaver, gives into the lure of alcoholism and uselessness when life becomes a little too difficult to handle leaving all the economic and emotional responsibilities on Syeda's shoulders. She loses her eldest son tragically in an unexpected incident after a mosque dome falls on him. Salman, her other son, marries a Hindu woman and flees, cutting all connections with his family, out of fear of retaliation from Hindu extremists who view interfaith unions as unpardonable. Reshma, the youngest of the three, exhibits a rebellious streak in her attempt to chart a better life for herself, which Syeda covertly resents as she never had the opportunity to become what her daughter is trying to be. These woes add fuel to the fire when basic needs like food, clean water, healthcare, and shelter are hard to secure, adding more stress and

pressure to an already difficult life.

The Informal Work Sector and Employment Mobility in India

Employment in the informal sector often lacks job security, consistent pay, and adequate working conditions. For women, these difficulties are intensified by societal gender norms and responsibilities. Numerous informal positions do not offer benefits such as health insurance, maternity leave, or retirement savings, putting women at risk, particularly during emergencies like sickness or pregnancy. Moreover, the informal sector is heavily feminized, with women often employed in low-paying and vulnerable jobs, such as domestic work, care work, and garment manufacturing. These jobs are not only poorly remunerated but also lack recognition, leading to further marginalization. Women workers in this sector also face significant gender-based violence, harassment, and unequal pay for equal work. Dixit's book articulates these complexities coherently. The narrative of contemporary India marking significant developments in the national front runs parallel with Syeda's everyday challenges and familial issues. Events like the announcement of India's first Mars probe in 2008 and Narendra Modi's rise to national power in 2014 punctuate her story. Some events have a direct impact on Syeda and her community, such as the "demonetisation" initiative in 2016, which aimed to confront political adversaries and wealthy criminals but ultimately devastated many of the unbanked impoverished citizens. As Dixit's comprehensive and intricate investigation shows, the variable conditions of women's employment, or generally, the employment of the poor and the destitute, are not driven by personal choice or inclination. Such a privilege is one they cannot attain. Rather, it is the broader external influences that dictate their circumstances, wherein financial strains compel them to move to urban areas that offer the hope of improved living

conditions. However, factories that are set up unlawfully and close unexpectedly, necessitate their relocation. The author points out that added to these woes is the violence they face, both physical and mental on account of their minority identity.

By the end of the book, Syeda has worked in 50 different roles, participated in one of the largest worker strikes in the nation, experienced two communal riots, established a family, and faced the loss of her dear ones. This narrative extends beyond Syeda's personal story; the inclusion of "X" in the title highlights that the book serves as a reflection of the hardships faced by countless women due to exploitative and low-paid home-based work sectors in urban areas, forcing them to be frequently displaced and relocated.

Of companionship and shared narratives

One of the many remarkable aspects of this book is also its ability to portray a variety of female characters beyond Syeda. Closely woven with Syeda's story is that of Raziya's, who serves as Syeda's guiding light in Sabhapur; Radiowali, who having dedicated her life to her family decides to live for herself, her home offering few minutes of solace and comfort to other women impaired by the mundane brutality of their everyday life. Then there is Babli, who has separated from her family to be with a man of a different faith, and Reshma, Syeda's daughter, a rebel in her own right. Despite being primary breadwinners, these women are often accused of bringing dishonour to the family or even belittled for having a mind of their own. In the family structure, men, regardless of how much they contribute to the household, remain esteemed while women persist in working hard without anticipating appreciation in return. This only exacerbates a cycle of resentment, passed down from one generation to another. Complicating the matters further is the financial instability caused by highly exploitative piecework, whether done at home or in

factories. The book exposes stark realities of workers enduring severe physical injuries, having their personal boundaries violated, and being routinely dismissed or reemployed for being tardy, ill, or caring for family members.

Their lives are valued less than the cost of the products they assemble, yet they continue to foster cordial relationships with the contractors they work for in the hope of remaining eligible for future employment. Amidst these shared struggles, Syeda and the other women create a sense of solidarity, where they lean on each other, provide support, and develop deep empathy and trust, fostering a relationship based on vulnerability and resilience.

Conclusion

Dixit does a remarkable job of an investigative journalist observing her subjects from afar while also humanising them. She lets them live a life of their own without reducing them to mere victims of their circumstances. By doing this, the book transcends the common tendency to fragment women's experiences into separate instances of victimization, and instead, it makes a commendable attempt to weave their lives together and narrate their stories in full. The book is a result of over nine years of field work and a series of interviews with various individuals. It is organized chronologically and delves into three major themes: the truth about women's informal, home-based work that sustains Delhi's small and medium-sized industries; the misconception of shared roles and responsibilities within domestic settings; and the importance of community in offering comfort from both. It effectively portrays how gender-based oppression does not occur in a vacuum but intersects with other social inequalities. It should be read for its unembellished, simplistic and honest portrayal

of the life led by the many Syedas' that exist in our society. It holds a mirror to those of us that live in the comforts of our privilege and more so, the cruelty of apathy towards those who shape our life. Dixit's work exemplifies everything that great journalism aspires to be - intricate, nuanced, doing justice to those portrayed, and capable of encapsulating the spirit of the time through storytelling.

Ms. Mehak Dua is pursuing her PhD in Mass Communication at MCRC, Jamia Millia Islamia.

Statement of Ownership and other Particulars

Akademos 2025

Form XVI

Place of its Publication	:	Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi
Periodicity of its Publication	:	Annual
Printer's Name	:	Colour Edge
Whether Citizen of India	:	Yes
Address	:	9/98a,1A-4, Street No.-9, Anand Parvat Industrial Area Delhi -05
Publisher's Name	:	Prof. (Dr.) Pavitra Bhardwaj
Editorial Board	:	Prof. (Dr.) Pavitra Bhardwaj Dr. Jyoti Raghavan Dr. Komal Yaduvanshi Dr. Ragini Kapoor
Whether Citizen of India		Yes
Address		Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi
Name and Address of the owner `		Principal Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi New Delhi- 110049

I, Prof. (Dr.) Pavitra Bhardwaj, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

June, 2025 Prof. (Dr.) Pavitra Bhardwaj

Kamala Nehru College
University of Delhi
New Delhi
Phone: 26494881