



Women and Marriage in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*: A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT: *The object of the study was to analyze the theme of marriage and women in patriarchal setup of 20th century Indian and British societies. Vikram Seth's A Suitable Boy and Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice revolve around the matrimonial issues that dominate women's life. Qualitative research paradigm is adopted for this study and the textual analysis is used as research tool. Comparative and analytical study is made of the selected excerpts from both the novels. A comparative study of the novels ascertain that the patriarchal ideology favors and promotes such social setup that makes female dependent upon men. They are left with no other option except getting married for their economic and social security. The study concludes that the patriarchy deals the institution of marriage as an economic transaction in which material interest is always sought. In male dominated society there are fewer opportunities for women to learn and earn. Hence, it is proved that the male dominance has been promoted ever by making female dependent upon men financially and socially.*

Keywords: Patriarchal ideology, economic transaction, regency England, matrimonial issues, post-colonial India

Introduction

Marriage and family are viewed as permanent elements of social life. The nature of these institutions has changed gradually with time and circumstances. The eastern and the western societies have a complicated marriage and family setup of its own. In human history, the institution of marriage has been tightly bound to society which always aims at organization and order.

Researchers have compared two entirely different societies i.e. the Indian society of the twentieth century and the English society of late eighteenth century, which gives a new dimension to this research. The Indian

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society lags far behind the English society in all fields of life. The researcher has discussed that the woman was a victim of the social pressure in the late eighteenth century in Europe, the Indian woman of twentieth century faces the same exploitation in her patriarchal set up.

It has been proved that in spite of cultural, religious and social differences, the English women of Austen's era and the Indian women of Seth's era face the same plight and suppression in male dominated societies. The patriarchal power and authority is exercised by their male counterparts to restrain their liberty and free will, even in their personal affair of marriage

The study highlights the gender discrimination regarding the institution of marriage pointed out by Evan (1987) who argued that in *Pride and Prejudice* all women depend upon marriage to have economic security.

In *A Suitable Boy* the women are faced with the same situation. As Kalpana and Gangodharan (2006) comment on this issue that in India the status of woman is still low and a great emphasis is laid on marriage. 'The institution of marriage is oppressive economic arrangement which makes women to regard themselves subordinate to men' Tolan (2000). Both novels present entirely different social milieu but women are faced with the same plight.

Literature Review

In Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Seth's *A Suitable Boy* the society takes woman as a commodity for marriage on account of gender bias. Mrs. Bennet's priority in the novel is to get her daughters married. She is following the same pattern blindly what she is educated to do. The women could not do any job in that era, so getting married was their sole objective of life. Mrs. Bennet was anxious to get her daughters married because she wishes to assure financial security for them. As Mudrick (1974) comments on this top priority of Mrs. Bennet that she wishes to arrange wealthy suitors for her daughters in order to consolidate and assure her own security. To get them settled in affluent families is symbolic of financial security of the whole family.

Likewise, 'A Suitable Boy' also addresses the issue of marriage. Lata, the protagonist and her sister come across with the same situation which is faced by Bennet sisters in 'Pride and Prejudice'. Lata's mother Mrs. Mehra's chief concern is to find a suitable boy for her daughter. As Piciucco, (2001) comments while discussing Shyam Agarwall's views that the major theme of *A Suitable Boy* is Mrs. Mehra's search for a suitable match for her loving daughter. Lata seems to be totally unconcerned with this chief concern of her mother. She regards her mother a bit obsessional because she is crazy about Lata's marriage.

Therefore, Indian society of post-colonial era is very much oppressive for females. In both societies the patriarchal ideology is in full working that restricts female freedom. This oppressive ideology does not let them to decide about their future course on their own. In patriarchal societies, female power is closely related to courtship. Regarding the issue of marriage Duplessis (1985) comments that as a gendered subject in the nineteenth century, the heroine has barely any realistic options in work or vocation, so her heroism lies in self-mastery, defining herself as a free agent, freely choosing the romance that nonetheless, in one form or another, is her fate. Mrs. Bennet in and Mrs. Mehra can be categorized as business women who hunt husbands for their daughters to ensure their economic security. The economic dependence of female on their male counterparts makes them vulnerable and yielding. They become bound to follow set rules and regulations at the cost of their free will. Pateman (1988) comments on this issue that Marxist linking of patriarchy and capitalism, particularly its understanding of marriage as an ownership relation or possession ideologically underpinning the capitalist system' has been influential in feminist thought.

The women of late eighteenth century England and twentieth century of India seem bound to enter into the institution of marriage due to economic dependence. Kalpana and Gangodharan (2006) comment that women are made to be disciplined and trained to be good wives and mother since their childhood. An unmarried woman does not get respectable status in society. It is their lot to be domesticated after getting married. They have to serve in their husband's house. Gillie (2000) believes that in Austen's social set up marriage is counted as an ideal one which could enhance the financial status of woman. It is a matter of wealth. Evans (1987) throws light on this issue that Jane Austen.... Clearly states the point which many social historians have observed, that marriage, in the 18th and 19th centuries, was on economic need of women. It was never a matter of romantic or personal choice, the compulsion on women to get married was very considerable.

Research Methodology

The 'textual analysis' and 'comparative and analytical' methodologies are used in the present study of two novels named *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth and *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. It has been observed that in the English society of late eighteenth century and post-colonial Indian society of twentieth century, the institution of marriage is handled and regulated by patriarchy. Researchers have highlighted the common factors in both societies regarding the institution of marriage that restrain women's liberty and make them dependent on male counterparts.

In order to make study focused and systematic, the following questions were formulated:

- 1) Why does the society consider that for women getting married is vital to have economic security?
- 2) How does the women's lack of economic privilege motivate them to compulsive husband hunting?
- 3) Why are women made to be skilled in domestic affairs?

The extracts from the primary texts have been used as data and secondary sources like critics' views, books, journals, and critical views of feminists related to the issue have been employed to support the claim. The primary and secondary texts have been analyzed to answer the research questions through detailed reading analysis.

Data Analysis

Class Hierarchy, Money and Marriage in Pride and Prejudice

The institution of marriage seems to be an economic transaction in which material interest is always sought. The same scenario exists in *Pride and Prejudice*, where most women decide to get married to be financially secured. It is women's obsession to look attractive to be able to get married to a suitable man in order to get economic security. They are made to be skilled in domestic sphere as their adult life would be utilized in domesticity. So a systematic education is never meant for women but for men. 'Elizabeth Bennet does not possess decent fortune. She has to marry with an eye to money. Her family inheritance has been passed on a male. She must marry now. The condition of economic life favored men and exploited women' (Newton, 1981, p. 120).

The inequality of career-making opportunities between male and female force the women to be entrapped. As Showalter (1989) points out that in the late 18th century women were not used to opt any vocation because womanhood in itself considered to be a vocation. Furthermore, Cruse (1930) reminds us that women of Regency era could earn her living by adopting a teaching profession or governess. On the other hand, a number of occupations were available for men. Gillie (2000) comments that in the absence of career making opportunities, women could only look forward to happy matrimony in order to get satisfaction, esteem and security. Women were restricted and bound by this patriarchal set up. Such non-availability of career opportunities makes a woman an unequal partner of man. They are made to develop the tendency to become dependent on men. They are made to identify their own survival with the prosperous status of those who support and feed them. Gilman (1996) states that women can never enjoy

liberty until they get freedom from the responsibility and restraint of domesticity that keep them enslaved and keep them dependent on men. These limited opportunities for jobs make their situation worse. Such restrictions do not let them to develop their own separate identity.

The same situation can be observed in a relationship of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet. Mr. Bennet does not give importance to any opinion of his wife. She is a woman of weak understanding in his eyes. Most of the time, he judges her actions and suggestions critically. He never seeks any advice from her as he does not consider her equal to him. He never agrees with whatever Mrs. Bennet says and imposes his own will all the time. They seem to be incompatible for each other. As in Austen's era it was out of question for women to be financially sound and independent on their own. It was considered to be a big achievement on a woman's part to marry some wealthy man and to have children. A woman had to be completely subservient to her life partner. If woman did not get married then her life was thought to be useless. The sole criterion of a woman's life in Regency period is to find out wealthy life partner. Consequently, they remain subservient to their male counterparts. As Gilbert and Gubar (1979) state that a man of late eighteenth century holds the view that women are not born to rule or for battle and they are not intelligent enough to invent or create anything.

Pride and Prejudice clearly reflects the powerlessness of a woman due to male favoring society. The patriarchy keeps women powerless by denying the social and economic benefits to them. The patriarchy fears if women acquire the opportunity for systematic education and jobs. They would be empowered and would challenge the patriarchal authority as Chafetz (1999) states that Nineteenth century feminists believed that if they obtained the rights to get education, the right to own property, the right to vote, employment rights-in other words, equal rights under the law then they would attain equality with men.

Austen's women in *Pride and Prejudice* possess domestic power which actually makes them powerless. In support of this argument Armstrong (1987) also maintains that domestic power stands for women's powerless position. The conduct books describe that dealing the matter of economy and the economic interest, is the domain of male whereas women are meant to run houses and exercise domestic power.

Similarly, Charlotte Lucas and Elizabeth Bennet depend upon marriage to be secured financially. The Bennet sisters have no brother to care for them, in case of their father's death. Furthermore, they would not own the estate of their father as it can only pass to the male heir. On the other hand, Charlotte Lucas belongs to low income group and her father's property

is not enough to provide her financial security. Gooneratne (1970) further comments, that Charlotte only values Mr. Collins as the source to financial strength and status. Charlotte takes him as a prize in lottery rather than as a husband. It is tragic to see that the economic forces compel sensible and intelligent Charlotte to swallow hard pill by deciding to marry Collins. Therefore, it is easy to judge that Charlotte acts as a reminder of eighteenth century economic realities. Marriage between Mr. Collins and Charlotte is creepy and pitiful; but it is routine scenario of 18th century and it is every day (Amis 2009).

Therefore, marriage is not always about feelings and love. It is more like business dealings where major motive is to be established socially and financially. Gillie (2000) highlights that in *Pride and Prejudice*, poverty is a future threat and another cause is entail; the Bennet girls are worried that Mr. Collins, their cousin will inherit their father's estate. That's why Mr. Collins is so boastful when he proposes Elizabeth. As he knows that he is empowered enough to choose and is not in want of a wife. According to Jones (1987) a link is visible between marriage and money in the opening lines in *Pride and Prejudice*. For families marriage means to possess fortune and wealthy person. They seek eligible young man as a rightful property of their daughters. Though Elizabeth chooses her life partner on the basis of love but there is no doubt that she also responds to the power of money. While answering the question of her falling in love with Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth states that she is not sure when it began but she can date it when first time she visits beautiful gardens at Pemberley. Jones (1987) comments that there is difference between the response of Elizabeth to Pemberley and her response to Charlotte Lucas in accepting Collins's offer of marriage but both give importance to material benefits and status, while planning for future.

Mrs. Bennet is desperate to seek eligible spouses for her daughters. She is least bothered that she is being ridiculed for this search. She is not having male heir, so she has more pressure to secure her future. Mrs. Bennet's only aim is to strengthen and enhance her own security by getting her daughters settled in wealthy families and this 'condition is symbolic of material advantages' (Mudrick, 1974, p. 79). According to Newton (1981) entailment law grants financial privilege to Collins and restricts the Bennet sisters financially. Women become victim of economic restrictions.

All men are autonomous and aspire to a mastery which women cannot possess. Men have access to money and consequently they have authority and potential to control the lives of women. So it is women's lack of economic privilege that motivates them to compulsive husband hunting. To get married has a sound economic base which makes men feel empowered and makes women feel powerless. Marriage becomes a need for

women and desire for men. This segregation makes them subservient to their male counterparts.

Caste Hierarchy, Money and Marriage in A Suitable Boy

The social necessity of marriage is evident in *A Suitable Boy*. The novel starts with a wedding ceremony of Savita Mehra. It is arranged marriage and the bride has met Pran, her would-be husband, only for an hour and this meeting is held in her mother's presence. In Indian society, it is not considered a desirable act to marry for love as such marriages are not regarded successful. Mrs. Mehra feels that her burden has been lessened as she has married off her elder daughter. Now she is considering the marriage prospects of Lata, her younger daughter. Though, Lata detests the idea of arranged marriage, her mother reminds her that she has to marry the boy of her choice. She says, 'what is good enough for your sister is good enough for you' (Seth, 2014, p. 5)

There are certain sociological factors that make the parents desperate and anxious to search a suitable spouse for girls especially. As we see in the case of Mrs. Rupa Mehra, she belongs to middle class and she wishes to marry her daughters to a well-off class in order to raise their social standings. In this way she would not be troubled to raise dowry. As in Indian society, the bridegroom's family demands much dowry from bride's family. Responding this analysis Agarwalla (1995) describes that in today's India, this social problem has assumed a monstrous form, when, thousands of daughters were burnt for inadequate dowry. No contemporary Indian writing in English has addressed the miseries and agonies of mothers of many daughters, with scant resources and who are bogged down in the quagmire of caste, religion and tradition.

Therefore, it is Mrs. Mehra's utmost attempt to get her daughters marry to well-off families. She is also very much conscious of class and caste. In her eyes, Haresh Khana comes up to the qualification of the most suitable boy. One major reason of choosing him is that he is Khatri by caste. Secondly, he is well settled in job, so he would not ask for a dowry. His financial position is sound. His caste matches with the family of Mehra. She gets excited when Kalpna assures her that Haresh Khanna is different type of guy and he would never ask for a dowry.

Before this, Kalpna Gaur has arranged the meeting of Mrs. Mehra with seven prospects who do not come up to Mrs. Mehra's expectations. So while keeping in mind, all the issues of class, caste and religion, Mrs. Mehra finally casts her vote in favor of Haresh Khanna regardless of her daughter's liking or disliking.

Mrs. Mehra explains to Kalpna that it would be the best if she finds some Khatri boy, as she thinks that one's own community creates a sense of comfort. So far as Lata is concerned, she dislikes a traditional way of searching a spouse. She is even amazed at Savita and Pran's marriage. They have just met once and for one hour before marriage. Likewise, she protests at her mother's frenzy about her marriage. When her mother invites her to Cawnpur in order to introduce her to Haresh Khanna, she is much perturbed at her mother's choice. Lata says that she does not care about any community and she is not in a mood to see that man. She repents that she should not have come here from Calcutta. She recalls her lover, Kabir, passionately but nothing could be done as her mother repeats again and again that Haresh is Khatri from UP. She is overjoyed that Khatri caste matches Mehras. Therefore, due to societal pressure Lata yields before the authoritative decision of her mother regarding her marriage with Haresh Khanna. Mrs. Mehra represents a typical Indian society that is very much conscious of caste and class issues.

Lata is deeply in love with the handsome Kabir Durrani who is also studying at Brahmpur University in history department. He is a son of a professor. Their love affair does not reach the desired destination. Lata gets shocked to learn that Kabir Durrani is a Muslim. She is fully aware that her mother will never give her consent for her marriage with Kabir. He is not only from other caste but also a Muslim. When her mother comes to know about her affair with Kabir, she gets hysterical and says that she can never let Lata to marry a Muslim. As Seth writes:

She stood up again, 'Never, never, never, she said: absolutely not-dirty, violent, crude, lecherous-... 'He will marry you- and next year he'll say, "Talaq, talaq, talaq'... You obstinate, stupid, girl! You should drown yourself in a hand full of water for sheer shame.... She slapped her daughter hard, twice and instantly burst into tears... The more Mrs. Rupa thought, the more agitated she became. Even marrying a non-khatri Hindu was bad enough, but this was unspeakable. It was one thing to mix socially with Muslims, entirely another to dream of polluting one's blood and sacrificing one's daughter (Seth, 2014, p .207)

Therefore, Lata avoids marrying Kabir Durrani because it is regarded as a social taboo if a Hindu marries a Muslim. As Agarwalla (1995) comments that in the aftermath of the horrible Indian partition and the resultant communal frenzy in 1951-1952, it was unthinkable on the part of Vikram Seth, to show an inter-religious marriage between Kabir Durrani and Lata Mehra.

The selection of Haresh, as the most suitable prospect for Lata is done on the basis of compatibility of caste and his sound financial position. He is a practical-minded, executive in shoe-sales, who is able to earn more and more. Amit Chatterji wishes to marry Lata too. Here again Mrs. Rupa Mehra does not consider him a suitable prospect as she opines about Amit that he is a mere poet. He is not able enough to earn properly and another reason of her not liking him is that he is Bengali. In Indian society like Regency England of Austen's time, there is no concept of independent woman. A woman is always identified with her relation to man. It's not considered a desirable act that women should be empowered financially. It's a tool of patriarchal ideology to keep them enslaved. That is why the parents always prefer to marry their daughters to a man who earns more. Women depend upon them for financial security. Amit's proposal for Lata is not taken under consideration as he is not earning properly. Furthermore, if a woman wishes to earn in this male-dominated society she is discouraged as happens with Savita Mehra. Her father-in-law discourages her to execute her future plans when he says to his wife that if women /insist on working, they won't be able to spend time on their children and husband. Women are confined within domesticity as it is their first and foremost duty to cook and raise the kids. These are the tactics of patriarchal ideology that keep women suppressed and subjugated. De Beauvoir (2004) argues that the humanity is not female but male. A man never defines a woman in herself. He takes her as a relative to him. He does not give her an autonomous status. She further depicts Benda's comments on this issue that in a patriarchal set up a man can maintain his identity without a woman but there is no concept of autonomous female identity as she cannot think of herself without him.

The concept and fashion of arranged marriages is still flourishing due to strong hold of traditions in Indian society. Gopal (2000) pointed out that in India marriage issues are negotiated through matrimonial advertisements. It is a modern transformation of an old custom. This system of brokering the marriages got an important character in the Colonial Era. Eventually Lata gets ready to marry a man of her mother's choice and decides to give consent for companionate marriage.

As marriage is just like a financial business in Regency Era of Austen where parent's role is always of major importance, similarly, the same scenario is very much evident in Indian society, where parental veto is always taken into consideration. Austen's heroines may exercise their will to some extent, though there are certain limitations that restrict them as well. But Seth's heroines are living in more rigid society that curtails their liberty. The question of inter-religious marriage is out of question in Indian set up. The concept of economically independent woman is not desirable in post-colonial

society of India. This is the point where Vikram Seth has put a question mark on the outcome.

Findings

The in-depth analysis of both the novels, *Pride and Prejudice* and *A Suitable Boy* clearly indicates that in both societies the institution of marriage keeps women powerless by relegating women to the domestic sphere. The comparative analysis also reflects the male dominance in two different social setups. It is evident that women are marginalized by their patriarchal societies. Their economic dependence on men makes them vulnerable and yielding. *A Suitable Boy* is set in an Eastern background, whereas *Pride and Prejudice* is set in a Western one. In *A Suitable Boy*, the plot ostensibly focuses on Lata's marriage. The novel opens at the wedding of Lata's elder sister Savita and concludes with another wedding, that of Lata herself. Women do not enjoy social and financial status unless they get married. The chief concern of Lata's mother is to hunt suitable life partner for her daughters. Women are not encouraged if they wish to do jobs to earn on their own, as it is evident in the case of Savita. Her father in law is highly critical of her decision of doing some job. It is considered the first and foremost responsibility of women to run houses and raise the children. If they work outside the homes they would neglect their main duty.

In *Pride and Prejudice* the chief concern of Mrs. Bennet is to get her daughters married. This is the only way through which women can dream to have social and financial status which otherwise is denied to them. In Austen's society, money and property are indicative of how much power a man holds in patriarchal setup. Lack of financial independence combined with English laws effaces identity of a female by converting her into her husband's property. In both societies it is believed that the desirable life for women is centered on women's obedience and submission to husbands, family and domesticity. This comparative study validates the fact that female subjugation is not only the problem of any particular culture or society but it is a norm of all societies and cultures of the world.

Conclusion

The comparative study establishes that marriage as a patriarchal institution contributes to powerlessness of women and curtails their individuality and liberty as females depend upon men socially and financially. It has been proved that marriage is not a romantic affair for women. The marriages in both novels exist for necessity or convenience. Though, sometimes in matrimonial affairs romance may follow but it is not a requirement at all. In patriarchal set up of post-colonial India and the Regency England, matrimonial issues hold a great significance. It has been investigated that in both societies, a norm of arranged marriages dominates

women's lives. The patriarchy keeps women subjugated for its own vested interest.

The researchers have argued in critique that the male-dominated societies compel women to get married in order to have a social and economic status. Marriage is considered to be the most important event in a female's life. The patriarchal conventions restrict women within the private sphere of their four walls. They are made to be domesticated, to run houses and to raise and educate their kids.

The study has portrayed the ground realities of the respective societies. In the 18th century when the British settled the colonies in the subcontinent, at that time India was lagging far behind the Europe in all spheres of life. This colonial domination triggered deep changes in social structure of Indian society. With spread of education the Indian got enlightened. Women got awareness and demanded for their basic rights. This change has come gradually and still a lot more, regarding the Indian women's status, needs to be done. In this way, the researcher has identified that the social and political set up of India is hundred years back than that of England's. It becomes evident that certain social predicament faced by Indian women of mid twentieth century is very similar to that which was faced by the English women of late 18th society.

It has been proved in the comparative study of both the societies that a major factor that can be held responsible for women's predicament, is their economic dependence on their male counterparts. The economic institutions in each respective society and time period are purposefully formed to keep women subordinate to man constantly. It is desirable norm to make women domesticated. Due to this biased economic and social system, women are rendered financially and socially dependent on men. The study has answered the research questions, mentioned in the beginning.

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