

Identity and Cultural Confines: A Feministic Study of Megna Pant's *One and a Half Wife*

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Abstract

The concept of marginality was first introduced by Robert Park (1928). Marginality is a widely used concept in the literature on inequality and development and refers to societal positions. Marginality is a complex condition that may arise from imbalanced or discriminatory environmental, ethnic, cultural, social, political, and economic factors for individuals and communities. Women's Marginalization aims at evaluating the marginalization of women. Indian women writers have voiced their distress over the last five decades against some atrocities and gender inequalities. Meghna Pant, a notable Indian writer, openly deals with sensitive aspects of human relationships, particularly marginalization. Her work is colored with her personal experience as well as crucial subjects like domestic violence, rape, miscarriage, surrogacy, public safety for women, etc. Her notable work, *One and A Half Wife* is a story of a single girl child prophesied by a parrot astrologer. It focuses on the contemporary aspirations of Indian parents for their children. The story turns on the unsatisfactory relationship which leads to melancholic feelings of guilt of not being able to sustain the bond. The title itself proves one for a successful marriage and half for an unsuccessful one. This study was conducted to address the problems faced by marginalized women in the domestic and public spheres.

Keywords: Patriarchy, inequality, exploitation, harassment, violation, identity, marginality, etc.

Introduction

The concept of marginality was first introduced by Robert Park (1928). The term marginalization refers to individuals or groups who live at the margin of society. Marginality is a widely used concept in the literature on inequality and development. It refers to societal positions. The term marginalized may be used synonymously with the terms oppressed, subaltern, powerless, exploited, vulnerable, discriminated, disadvantaged, subjugated, socially excluded, alienated, or downtrodden as used elsewhere in the available literature. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines

marginality as 'to relegate to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group.' Collins Dictionary defines it as 'to marginalize a group of people means to make them feel isolated and unimportant. The Encyclopaedia of Public Health defines marginalized groups as, 'To be marginalized is to be placed in the margins, and thus excluded from the privilege and power found at the center'. Marginalization occurs when a person or group of people are less able to do things or access basic things, services, and opportunities. Social, economic, political, etc., are the types of marginalization. Marginality is a complex condition that may arise from imbalanced or

discriminatory environmental, ethnic, cultural, social, political, and economic factors for individuals and communities.

Indian women writers have voiced their distress over the last five decades against several atrocities and gender inequalities. Women are oppressed and marginalized in almost every society and more specifically in patriarchal societies like India. Domestic violence, extramarital relationship, rape, gender discrimination, female foeticide, infanticide, terrorism, and several physicals, as well as health injuries, affects women's marginalization which is continued today. This study was conducted to address the problems faced by groups of women in the domestic and public sphere.

Meghna Pant, a notable Indian writer whose works have received prestigious awards and recognition worldwide one of the most imminent Indian writers of our time. Her works openly deal with sensitive aspects of human relationships particularly marginalization (caste and gender issues due to her exceptional skill). In other words, in the socio-political, economic, and educational spheres, women have experienced and continue to experience discrimination and underrepresentation based on gender. Meghna Pant focuses on issues regarding domestic violence, rape, miscarriage, surrogacy, and public safety for women. Her work is coloured with her personal experience regarding domestic violence. She can feel the pain of women who are single or childless and how family, friends, and acquaintances pressurized them.

One and Half A Wife (2012) is the story of Amara Malhotra, an obedient single child of her parent, who arrives in the US

and tries to live Biji, her mother's version of the American dream. The contemporary aspirations of Indian parents for their children are shown by her mother's only illusion that she will get an American education and a prince-like husband. In reality, she was not destined to achieve the American dream but because of her spirited Biji and doting Baba by whom she leads an unremarkable life. The novel starts with an incident of an astrologer to whom Biji is eager to know Amara's future. This incident worried her most as he stated 'one and a half wife' which makes Biji more sensitive and over the next three hours they walked from one astrologer to the next which shows,

“One fakir studied the moles on Amara's face and declared her unlucky, Another poked her ears with a steel pin, and after comparing the wax inside her left ear to the one in her right, warned Biji of the presence of an evil eye. A holy man in orange robes determined the strength of the breath exhaled from Amara's nostrils and charted her husbandless future in accordance.”¹

It shows the tendency of typical Indian parents regarding a better future for their children. Marriage of Amara is pivotal for the Malhotra family so she is groomed by her mother right from birth which can show, 'A gift of tiny plastic tea set with tiny cups and tiny saucers was her fifth birthday present so she could learn to be a good hostess for His boss. Little tin pots and little tin ladles were placed before her to stir and roast His desire. His anticipated choices and needs filtered into the fiber of her childhood such that growing up she never felt like an only child.'²

From childhood, she forces herself to compromise on her likes and dislikes and tries to adjust to her husband. Amara wanted to be a lawyer like her Baba but Biji had dismissed that idea and was convinced that the only thing Amara would learn from her law college was to argue with her mother-in-law. Amara marries Harvard-educated millionaire, Prashant Roy which was her Biji's wish. Riya, a daughter of Amara's Dua Mama, is chosen for Prashant but Daminiji, the mother of Prashant, desires a typical daughter-in-law, like Amara, so she denies Riya who is a 'rich, spoilt girl with too many boyfriendss.' This develops conflict between the two families. To avoid this, Amara is unwilling to marry Prashant but because of her parents she marries him as if it was their 'coming to Amreeka worth'.

“Talking about marriage in bad terms was considered sacrilege in the Indian community. Everyone around her was married and claimed to be happy so, despite public fights and snide rumors. She often wondered if there was anyone else who had daily failures in marriage like she did.”³

According to novelist, ‘marriage was – after all- a battle of wits and constraint, exercised in order to win the war for a peaceful life. Biji had taught her that the best way to participate in a conversation was to say nothing at all. The marriage resulted unsuccessful as Prashant was totally indifferent to Amara. Amara also tried to sustain bond and all her efforts to 'save' the marriage prove futile and leads to left him.

“ counter with Pranna that Amara realized, “Modern thought in India was gurgling along like a river with two polarized banks. By one bank was an aberrant section of people, who had diverted from conventional

norms, and by the other bank were the extremists who wanted to protect society by controlling the aberrant people. The two banks could never meet”⁵

In male-dominated communities in India, women have to endure several challenges after the divorce. A divorce is a sign of an unhappy as well as unsatisfactory relationship between the couple and it leads to melancholic feelings of guilt of not being able to sustain the bond. Women are a linking unit of family therefore all blame for broken homes falls on her share. The horror of social circumstances proves that Biji perceives her as a failure and dishonor for their family and tries to hide Amara's divorce. Finally, she finds her perfect mate in Lalit. The title itself proves one for a successful marriage and half for an unsuccessful one.

In this way, marginalization is a complex as well as a shifting sensation connected to social status. The most dominant problem of marginalized characters like Amara, who became a victim of the fulfillment of parental desire, struggles to save frustrated married life which leads to ineffective. Henceforth desires of her family create misery and cause great depression in her first marriage.

Conclusion: Meghna Pant, in *One and a Half Wife*, aims to break the unfair conventional dogmas imposed upon the identities of divorced people in Indian societies. Divorce – by no means – is a favorable or preferable solution to any problem but sometimes it becomes a necessity for the involved people. Indian societies are often judgmental in such cases and “being divorced” is still considered taboo in a large portion of our country.

Although the novel presents the difficult consequences inflicted upon divorced people, it also provides a ray of hope in the transitional mindset of Indian societies. The

difference of 16 years conveys the tremendous change in the behavior and tolerance of the people against conventional concepts and culture.

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