

Gender Equality and Patriarchy: A Study of Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* with Special Reference to Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

The gender of an individual across caste, creed, religion and geography immensely shaped their socio-political and economic circumstances. The assumption of biological sex-based difference over ages solidified into social and cultural practices that ultimately gave birth to gender prejudices, barriers and discrimination. They systematically penetrated and into areas of education, health, economic opportunities and individual autonomy, resulting in Gender inequality. Gender studies, post-1990 subjugated such institutionalized ideasto great intellectual stress and challenged discrimination based on gender identity through counter narrative of equality. The movement under the aegis of United Nations goals for sustainable development are aligned to establish equality in gender and empower all girls and women. The aim is to amend the social, historical wrongs, as women form a large part of the economy, skilled labour, and the world. They strive equivocally towards equality, providing all opportunities and resources to individuals irrespective of gender. This paper seeks to emulate these concerns and embody the principles in the context of *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) a semi-autobiographical novel set against the backdrop of partition with women at its centre and receiving end. It entails the life narrative of Laila, its fifteen-year-old orphaned protagonist, navigating her individuality through the patriarchal terrain of aristocracy and conservative Muslim family over two decades. The oppressive practices of 'Purdah' and 'Zenana' stifle her 'movement' and freedom in 'choice of marriage', ultimately rendering her an outcast. Her attempt at 'education' is often criticized, and her wish to obtain financial independence through economic aspects becomes a subject of great quarrel. Unfortunately, the above-stated aspects continue to pervade and constrain gender justice even to this day, thus making the novel a potential mirror to critique society.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Sustainable development Goals, Patriarchy, Subjugation, Oppression

Introduction

The fixed sexes through civilization haveupheld socio-cultural, political, and economicdisparity between men and women based on their biological makeup that defined their roles. Women of weaker physicality were mostly rendered to food gathering and child rearing thus rendering them subservient to their male counterparts. For ages women have been at the receiving end of this discriminatory socio-cultural mindset called patriarchy that accords men a higher pedestal than women. It provides social, cultural, and economic mobility and benefits, denied mainly to women, such as the right to education, individual life, marriage choice and property. Jane Austen's critique of 18th-century aristocratic society regarding the position and depiction of women in her novels, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, *Persuasion* harks to the disproportionate power dynamic, political and social autonomy, and choices. The seminal work '*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*' by Mary Wollstonecraft's argues that both men and women are capable of reason, and thus both should be accorded similar status. She vehemently opposed the education dispensations that seemed to make women subservient and docile. Virginia Woolf wrote against the prejudice and patriarchal views that pollute her age and deny women an opportunity to study and write. In her work '*A Room of One's Own*,' she emphasizes how women must become financially independent to fulfil her dreams. It was because

of these writers' body of work that the feminist movement was born that raised a counter-narrative to existing patriarchy in socio-cultural, political, and economic landscape.

In 1990s, Jacques Derrida proposed the 'Deconstruction Theory' that Gender studies were formally established as an interdisciplinary academic discipline across all IVY League institutions of higher learning like Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard etc. It identified the complex interaction of gender with other markers such as race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and nationality. In social life, gender is one of the basic categories in life. According to Popenoe "As a social and psychological trait, gender is often associated with masculinity and femininity while the biological traits as male and female are determined by sex. Thus, gender is socially and culturally created whereas sex remains constant for the population as a biological trait (Popenoe)." Gender here specifically refers to the social construction and not an individual. It seeks to identify social, cultural, political, and economic discrimination existing based on gender to subvert them. "Any misjudgement or discrimination to an individual solely based on their gender identity is referred to as Gender that denies them basic amenities and opportunities available to others. This biased treatment based on gender is often classified as sexism. This discrimination occurs when prejudices are held by the people towards others which otherwise do not take place in case of the opposite sex" (Salvini, 2014).

Novel as mouthpiece of Modern Women

Novel genre was introduced as leisure for 18th century middle class British society. However, the form gained quick prominence among the proletariat and bourgeoisie with themes, characters and settings that appealed to non-aristocratic sense and concerns, especially women. The form with its elements allowed long complex narratives that did not find a place in poem or plays due to limited access, structure, and established principles. Williamson admits that "early novels from men served a propaganda to mould and shape the character of women in the patriarchal frame of ideology suiting their needs (Alan Williamson, 2001)." Judith Kegan Gardiner states that "women's experience immensely differ from their male counterpart especially in a male dominated society. Being a woman here would mean not acting like a man since gendered behaviours are expected hence restricted and polarised and reflects in the writing (Judith Kegan Gardiner, 1980)." Novels allowed both authors and readers across the globe to capture complex life narratives in figure of speeches, writing techniques like epistolary and picaresque in diverse setting of culture, religion, and geography. Especially autobiographical and semi-autobiographical novels laced with imagination and reason particularly allowed to portray the life narratives of women as marginalised community. Hence Attia Hossain's (1913-1998) semi-autobiographical work "Sunlight on a Broken Column" like that of Jane Austen's portrays mirrored characters both from her personal life as well as from the socio-cultural and political setting of her protagonist Laila, that reflects upon the life of the author and women around her. Born in aristocratic family of Oudh, she is destined to bear the burden of tradition, culture, and obligatory womanly duties within patriarchal domain. Whereas, the characters from working class like Nandi are mercilessly beaten, shamed as lustful whores, and married off to a man twice her age, all to protect the family honour. Her fate compels her to be torn in half, stretched between the dichotomy of European traditions in stack of western books and her Islamic identity through Quran. This troubled existence was forced upon her by patriarchal authority, for Attia it was her Cambridge educated father and Laila it was her dying grandfather. The power of self-consciousness and awareness of their individual self as a human being as well as collective position as women within their society is remarkably expressed. Massey (1994) suggest that "the spatial and social organisation is constructed through articulation of the 'public and private spaces and through the characterization of experience in the figure of male (Massey, 1994)." Urvashi Butalia backs this up and writes that "The complexities of Indian societies in terms of the caste-class-gender milieu necessitates the conceptualisation of spatial binaries through a different lens. Inequalities of gender and class indeed of location and caste are built into very concepts of public and private and therefore needs to be problematized (Urvashi Butalia, 2012)." The lack of their socio-economic mobility, political freedom and familial affections critiques their marginalized position and autonomy both within the family and the society. Lucknow University becomes a breeding ground for both Laila and Attia to reclaim their individual identity from being doubly marginalized within the oppressive regimes, first the British colonisers and second their patriarchal family. As an educated, empowered, and independent women of her times, Attia was deeply infatuated with her time's social, political, and cultural ideas, particularly by the 'Progressive Writers Movement that sought to fundamentally challenge the present dispensation

oppressing the downtrodden, caste dysphoria and position of women in society. Liberalism, equality, and women empowerment were the new ideas that had freshly arrived from the West through English education. These writers wanted to use them to reform the socio-cultural landscape of India. Attia herself said, "political thoughts of 'Progressive Writers Movement' had influenced her immensely by friends such as Sajjad Zaheer and Mulk Raj Anand." Her Western education juxtaposed with Indian identity were always in conflict with herself and her society, especially when she decided to marry her cousin, Ali Bahadur Habibullah. It led to her ostracization, and she moved away to find her place, away from the orthodoxy, fanaticism, rigid social and cultural barriers, and the religious divide that had severed the country into half overnight.

Literary Narratives in Women's Plight

Attia Hossain's seminal work spans over two decades against the backdrop of partition and speaks about women's plight. The novel floats "domestic fiction", as one of the core themes that serves as "The vehicular tool for stories of women and their life (Gopal 140)." Home emerges in literary piece as a "space where women's life becomes arena for tradition and modernity seeking power (Nayar 130)." Shamsie writes that "*Sunlight on a Broken Column* portrays feminine struggle for self-determination and assertion of her autonomy alongside that of her nation. She is broken by the division of her family as well as her country that leads to the disappearance of her reality" (135). Laila is introduced to a fifteen-year-old orphaned girl under the aegis of her paternal grandfather, Baba Jan (Syed Mohammed Hasan), the feudal monarch of the Taluqdars household in Hassanpur. He is the patriarch, head of the family on death bed who for years had reigned supreme over his two daughters, Majida and Abida, and two sons, Ahmed (younger one), Laila's father, no more alive while his eldest and Hamid, who had traded his native identity and religion for English customs and traditions.

The 'Aashiana' (Taluqdar household) waits for a new feudal patriarch to rise for the occasion and take the destiny of the esteemed Taluqdars of Hassanpur into his hand. Sarla Palkar notes "The struggle for compartmentalisation of Laila's personal history from the national or social one, turns *Sunlight on a Broken Column* into a three-dimensional novel (Sarla Palekar)." Where "national, personal and social issues keep colluding and colliding with one another (Attia Hossain, Pg-115)." The women of the house Abida, Majida and Hakimian Bua are all by-products of the patriarchal structure who believe that women must remain subservient to the man; they nudge both Laila and her cousin Zahra to receive religious education and learn cultural etiquettes that would bolster their prospect for gaining a suitable marriage. Due to a promise to his late father, Laila receives a Western education, while Uncle Mohsin criticizes this decision that she would end up as an English memsahab. Zahra, unlike Laila, is docile; she gives into the patriarchal domain and becomes subservient as they wish for her and Laila. The political atmosphere of the university, the liberal English ideas, and Sita Aggarwal had fundamentally changed her outlook towards her existence and that of the women in her family. She became conscious of how neither Zahra had any individual autonomy, and so did Aunt Abida, Majida and Nandi, the daughter of Washerman. Her liberal ideas clashed with her uncle Hamid, who had now assumed the responsibility as the head of the family. Though he might have become an English Gentleman, underneath all his liberal ideas, he was a patriarch through and through, not allowing complete autonomy to his wife and children as the one he envied in English people. The novel, divided into four parts, is a Bildungsroman that could be read at multiple levels and subjected to diverse prism ranging prominently from partition novels to women's studies, questioning patriarchy, analysing women's space in the socio-political sphere and an account of historical narrative fiction. Laila finds the horrible travesty of women forced into marriages or enslaved to religious and social dogma. Zahra, Nandi, and Aunt Abida become prime examples of this, who lose their sense of autonomy, freedom and even themselves forever.

In contrast to them, Laila makes the daring decision to marry her own accord to Ameer, a distant cousin of whom not even a single family member gave permission. They were vehemently against her marriage decision and the groom, for in their view, he was not in taste to the aristocracy's prevalent social standards and cultures. Her marriage to Ameer was short-lived, and it was upon his demise that Laila found herself ostracized from all; no one was there to console her or stand by her, and she had to be strong for her child. Her cousins (Asjad and Zahid) had made their political affiliations to either ideological thought like liberalism or religious fanaticism, for which

they paid dearly with their lives. The country was divided, and she was left with nothing, no home, no family, no husband, just space and distant memories that were nostalgic and supplied whatever little solace they could offer.

WomenApathyin Education

Women's education is one of the fundamental issues in the novel Attia Hossain addresses through her female characters, particularly that of Laila. The character of Zahra has been used as a foil to contrast this symbolic meaning and urgency that other male writers primarily ignored. Woolf states that "without money and a room of her own, a woman cannot likely write her piece and illustrates this with example of Judith Shakespeare (Virginia Woolf, 1929)." Zahra is Attia's Judith that never received the education, never had her autonomy, and was deprived of her individuality both by the society and her family. The novel opens with Hakim Bua rebuking her by saying, "my moon princess these books will devour you. The light of your lovely eyes will be dimmed, and no one will ask you for marriage then, why can't you be like Zahra? (Attia Hossain, Pg – 14)." Zahra is a religious, docile woman who has given into the patriarchal structure, and her fate is now controlled for her rather than by her. Thus, it is her story that like countless other women is written for them rather than by them and thus their voice is missing. Education enables the mind and uplifts the consciousness oneself to think, speak and decide, depriving it makes sure that they are forever at the mercy of others. In Baba Jan the household's characterized with "balanced life observed and ordained between safe and warm space of security and the confusing insecure life outside without modesty or restraints (Amin 119)." Her Mother, Aunt Majida, was married off under the wishes of her father, Syed Mohammed Hassan. However, her husband left her for his religious affiliations with a daughter at the mercy of her father. She bellows, "a widow, look at me and this child without father. What will become of us? Where to go? What to do? I am an ill-fated woman, oh how miserable (Attia Hossain, Pg -22)." The situation of her sister Abida is no better either; she is not married yet, and her father has passed away, leaving her at the mercy of his elder son Hamid. Both the women have received no proper education other than the traditional lessons in Urdu and Arabic, social and cultural roles that have left them with very little knowledge to sustain themselves. In their view, Zahra "has learned little English, knows how to sew, cook and do religious duties which is what expected of her (Attia Hossain, Pg- 24)." She, too, has received no formal education or equipped herself with skills that could contribute to her being financially independent and supporting her life. Fortunately, Laila receives a formal Western education not by her own choice but by a promise made to her dying father that had to be honoured. However, very few people were in her Favour of receiving proper education, especially Uncle Mohsin, who believed that "Western education poisons women's mind and renders them walking and talking like a Christian meme-sahib" (Attia Hossain, Pg- 23). Nandi, the daughter of the Washerman, is also deprived of any education because they could not afford to do so but were quick to get rid of her through marriage. Tareeq Usman and Naveed Yousuf write that "there is a concerted juxtaposition between the character of Abida and Laila. As the girl raises existential questions, she has a free spirit that challenges patriarchy, but her aunt does not. Laila struggles to gain her independence from the frustration and claustrophobia of patriarchy and adopts forward thinking to live per her ideals" (Tareeq Usman and Naveed Yousuf).

Unfortunately, to this day, women are kept away from education due to fears of becoming corrupt with western ideas that are seen to threaten the disintegration of social and cultural values. This superstition and stereotype have claimed the future of many young aspirational girls and their vision of becoming independent through education. Gender plays a key role here, where men are the carriers of the bloodline and women, in contrast, are seen as a burden or as someone else's property. Virginia Woolf states that "a number of famous women characters in literature have occupied prominent roles in the works of famous authors from like Shakespeare, however in real life they have been rendered as second-class citizens. They are not allowed to be educated themselves and vied as fit to only dawn traditional roles and household chores (Virginia Woolf as a feminist, 2004)." The social and cultural preference for the male sex deprives Women of equal opportunities at resources as well as individuality and choices. Women are considered inferior to men, fit only for grasping traditional and religious knowledge skills at doing chores necessary for maintaining the household. Unfortunately, this patriarchal perception and role of women perpetuates both at native and global scale that demands women to conform their identity and subservience to suit the demands of the men. Depriving education is one of the most potent tools that keeps women in the dark; no spark of knowledge could initiate the fire of thoughts, thereby drastically reducing the capability to question authority. Another fundamental issue is that due to the cultural practice of giving huge

dowries, particularly in the context of the Indian subcontinent, which also manifests itself in other forms across the globe, parents prefer to save the money for their marriage rather than invest it in her education and make them financially and holistically independent.

Women's 'Movement' and 'Space'

The physical "movement" and "space" of women in private and public spaces has been a subject of analysis and scrutiny under various disciplines from literature, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and likewise, all under Feminist and Gender studies. It is because the concept of movement and space is not defined by the boundary parameter but rather by the principle of inclusion-exclusion logic made normative by institutionalized gendered order. This order facilitates movement social-cultural and economic mobility by availing opportunities and resources to the males and deprives women of the same treatment. Khan opines that "specific cultural and social milieu is arranged in domestic space of the novel. Domestic changing boundaries, spatial structure of domesticity, psychology and culture define society, community, and the individual self (Khan 118)." Historically, from ancient Greeks to Romans and primitive civilizations, much did not accord equal status to women, thus denying them access to amenities because of prejudice against the weaker sex. For a large part of human civilization, women were confined to childbearing and caring, doing household chores. It had become a codified aspect of a society's social and cultural fabric that retained this discriminatory practice with each modification. Hence, we see that Laila and Zahra are not allowed to move about the city of their own accord. Their movement within the household was restricted to a confined arena called 'Zenana'. The word 'Zenana' comes from the Persian language and means 'a place for women.' It was reserved in Muslim tradition and Culture and eventually was incorporated across other Cultures after their invasion and occupation in the Indian subcontinent. Zenana is a socially constructed space by the patriarchal male for his female counterpart where cultured, immensely prized, and well-spoken women are arrested in a contest to gain his affection based on his designed parameters. It is a tool of dominance deployed to cage the individual female's autonomy, aspirations, and learning. Jumman the Washerman accused his daughter Nandi, on the pretext of this, for having an illicit affair with the driver because she did not observe 'purdah' and violated her space of 'Zenana', he further confessed that " my honour was besmirched, possessed by thousand devils I would have willingly killed her (Attia Hossain, Pg -26)." Thus, she is beaten by her father and Uncle Mohsin because she forgot her place. In his discourse on power, Michel Foucault elucidates the institutionalized practices and crafts that subject an individual to enslavement and 'Zenana' is no different. The entire household of 'Aashiana' was divided into separate private spaces for men and women, and it was emphatically made understood to Abida, Majida, Zahra and Laila that they were to hold their respective positions and their positions in the house. Palkar points out that "Laila is sceptical of this demand as well as the behaviour of Zahra, her compliance to acceptance of the groom. She accords this error in her disposition to 'purdah' that provides her limited outlook and damages her psyche and personality" (Palkar 113). Their movement and exposure to public space were restricted, which was reserved for the male gender only. The participation of women in the public arena was prohibited and looked down upon with contempt. They could not even move about for minor chores and had to be accompanied by a male security.

The author remarks that "Baba Jan's last moments were marked by Aunt Abida's movement from 'zenana' to guest room near her father's (Attia Hossain, Pg-14)" This gendered 'movement' as well as 'space' elucidates gender inequality in the Indian subcontinent as well across the globe. Anuradha Dingwaney Needham, in her works notes that "belonging' propounds that interests of preserving and creating homogenous traits and national experience are product of patriarchy enforces exclusion and inclusion principles that are deliberately preserved for certain agenda by interested people" (96).Despite the Industrial Revolution that saw an active participation of women in the public sphere via workforce across developed economies, in developing countries, prejudice, violence and lack of policies continue to cage women in their domestic roles. It is because of a lack of proper infrastructure, women-related hygienic space, lessons, and resources. Countless girls/women drop out of school and do not complete their education. In the face of all difficulties, women who manage to get educated are strongly discouraged by their parents, spouses, and society to mould them into patriarchal roles to get married, have kids and serve the husband unequivocally. Their movement deprives them of opportunities and aspirations; restricting their space again curbs their social, cultural, and psychological development as rational creatures. This limited perception and exposure of the worldview, and her understanding of self is regressive and harmful to her progeny.

The limitation to women is the limitation to the potential of humanity as the family forms the fundamental unit of a society in which women play a larger role in setting up the next generation. They will be only as good as the person they spend a considerable amount of time with, i.e., their mothers; hence, holistic growth of a woman would ensure better skills, understanding, opportunities and character for the child.

Oppressive tools 'Purdah' or the Veil

"Purdah at home, became a weapon for organized subjugation and isolation of feminine representation by enforcing their exclusion within domestic space and segregation altogether. Indian women's imprisonment could be interpreted as 'purdah' (Burton in Bahuguna Pg- 54)." Bakr Ina's study concluded that 'purdah' had deliberately been deployed as a structure of enslavement to dominate Woman in a patriarchal setting for their husbands" (Bakr). It subdues women as objects or property that must be covered and kept safe. Scholars like Begum (1998), Rahman (1994) and Zaman (1995) argue how "purdah practices responsible for lack of education as well as disempowerment amongst women. In their case study in Bangladesh, they observed that purdah limits their mobility and in patriarchal families is used to enslave women" (Rahman, Begum & Zaman).

Religion and Culture morph a mangled and distorted understanding of religious scriptures and compel women to adopt certain practices and customs that are appreciated, emulated, and rewarded. Thus, a veiled woman symbolizes virtuous and ideal women that all men would seek; right from her childhood, such notions are hammered into her brain. Rosario (1992), Gruenbaum (1991), Hoodfar (1991) and Papanek (1982) establish in a case study that "purdah is taken as a means of exclusion of females. By extension, women are separated from their male counterpart and a division in their task is created that further restricts their participation in domestic and public sphere" (Rosario, Gruenbaum, Hoodfar & Papanek). Engels viewed purdah as "a set of social practice deliberately invested for the exclusion of the women that were not liked by foreign observers he saw it as an imitation of the Victorian society as women there too were sidelined from the main narrative" (Engels). Blasphemy and immorality become the tools unleashed upon the feminine if she disagrees with pre-established traditions and her character is questioned, maligned, and denigrated publicly. It creates a stigma that deters her and others from forming any association that could break this cycle of oppressive patriarchy. Zahra, Laila Abida and Majida, all women of the Taluqdars, are required to observe 'purdah' in front of all male members of the family. Again, this veiling curtails a woman from her exposure to Social-political reality, her identity, body, and sexuality that is being suppressed under the 'male gaze'. Uncle Mohsin is a prime example of this hypocrisy wherein he criticizes women on their character, behaviour, and mannerisms, but "the tales about dancing girls and him in the city were well known. The senior most of his four offspring's obedient to a father was of our age, she saw him seldom, holding him responsible her mother's health, ailing and tattered condition. A beauty beauty of mendicant love, who only saw her husband to conceive a child and no more. The husband visited her rarely, did no work or provided any respite other than dressing well, composing poetry, and enjoying dances (Attia Hossain, Pg – 21)." But this does not stop him from commenting upon women clothes and their walk, particularly that of Laila he says, "dressed like native Christian, your young meme-sahib hasn't given up on her western persona (Attia Hossain, Pg -23)" and follows it by saying that "Zahra was brought up differently, after all! sensibly and correctly (Attia Hossain, Pg-23)." Insinuating that Western education was corrupt and sinful, whereas traditional religious teaching was the correct path for young girls. It is how the sole responsibility of safekeeping and upholding Culture, and tradition was placed upon the shoulders of women; they were reduced to trophies in the battle with the colonizer against the colonized. The English saw women as victims and themselves as virtuous white night who had to save them from oppression and enslave them to their English ways. The natives saw this as an attempt to interfere in their private space and corrupt their women for their lustful immoralities. Hence, both wanted to conquer, enslave, and rule over female bodies in their twisted ways, but neither truly wanted to empower them to realize their individuality and autonomy.

Subjugation through institution of Marriage

Radical feminists, as well as Gender theorists over the years, have subjected the institution of marriage under the Feminist and Gender thought to propose that it is another arsenal in the patriarchal domain heavily biased towards a particular gender, the male individual. They have argued that marriage itself is a patriarchal and heteronormative function that legitimizes heterosexuality, commodifies women and renders other genders as well as sexual

orientations abnormal. Attia Hossain points to the fact that patriarchy deploys religion and law interwoven with the holy ritual that marks the communion of two souls into a binding relationship that cajoles women into subservience. After marriage, women become the marital guardians for maintaining and upholding the family's honour and emotional intimacy, moulding their bodies into the sexual preferences of their male spouse. It should be done by limiting her autonomy to a position that would not harm, question or jeopardize her husband's status and honour in the public and private spheres. This intuition's social-political and economic power dynamics reside with the male who assumes an absolute dominant pedestal as patriarch, presiding over all affairs. In the marriage of Zahra, Sita, and Abida, they are compelled to part with their own identity, and this is characterized by taking over the name of their spouse, an act that many feminists and gender theorists have critiqued.

Moreover, there is no autonomy to make decisions for one's own marriage; a woman will not be allowed such luxury; instead, her brother or father would make that decision for her. As an individual, she has no choice but to submit to their wishes, much like in the case of Zahra. It is Uncle Mohsin, Aunt Abida, her mother Majida, and the elders of the household sanction her marriage proposal, and Uncle Mohsin rebukes vehemently when this authority is questioned; he remarks, "will she doubt their capability? Question the decision? Will the girl now to pass judgment upon elders? And choose husband of her own?". His analogy of comparing marriage to breeding a horse reveals the grotesque and unsettling reality for women; he adds, "it's fashionable to decry the pedigree of men, horses therefore my dear Abida, are chosen with moreprecaution or else one has to pay with fortunes and apologize for breeding of the lesser offspring's (Attia Hossain, Pg 23)". Marital rape, domestic violence and abandonment of responsibilities are the question that largely haunt women as they neither possess the education nor the skills to support themselves. They cannot own property because they are one; their voice has no agency in the household's decision-making or their very own child. Uncle Mohsin has neglected his wife by floundering with dancing girls in brothels; she has been reduced to a birthing machine.

In contrast, Majida has no sustenance for herself or her daughter Zahra and relies upon the mercy of her brother Hamid and other male elders of the house. Laila makes the self-choice of marriage to Ameer, and she is ostracized and cast out of the protection and grace of the Taluqdar family. Uncle Hamid, who had wanted to marry his son, refuses to accept her, or provide her any support. She makes a house for herself and her spouse with her education and skills, but this act of severing ties damages her emotionally and psychologically. Attia puts this question to the readers and families: how many sacrifices does a woman have to make, and does she possess the right to live with dignity and receive love and kindness that are crucial to this day?

Countering Patriarchy and Gender Inequality

The very first act of subverting patriarchy and gender inequality is by questioning its authority and any practices that are carried out by the pre-established structures and policies. It requires the individual to be sufficient in reason and knowledge, both of which are a by-product of good education. Thus, it becomes imperative that women be allowed to receive formal and higher education to be empowered and hone their social-political and economic understanding of their surroundings and make correct independent decisions. Education enlightens the mind about gender equality and raises awareness among young girls as well as women that they have a fundamental right to be educated and provide access to amenities that, for ages, have been reserved only for their male counterparts. Access to education ensures that women would become more conscious of the stereotypes that oppress them in their immediate vicinity. It would allow them to question practices like the demand for a male progeny and the prejudice created around women due to dowry. The sex-based discrimination would also be challenged at the core of the patriarchal institution. The socio-cultural dominance of the male body over the female would be questioned and rejected to bolster self-worth and individuality. The tool of education initiates their upward social mobility in society and annihilates caste as well as gender bias of women being incapable of thinking or working. Educating a woman ensures that she will harness and deploy her skills to gain employment and important positions in the power structure of the community, state, and country. She could become the leader to undertake, guide and initiate revolutionizing changes in the social fabric that would allow other women to aspire for the same. Robbins argues, "feminist ideologies were responsible for the mediated self-expression through the present lenses at current given moment (Ruth Robbins, 35)." Ruth Robbins states that "social construction of women and even personal identity are shaped in relation to interactions with family members and society, thus, in literature women sought alternative

roles and identity (Ruth Robins, 2000).” Attia seeks to frame alternative roles and identity for women through the genre of literary fiction and novel to shape the new Indian women with feminist thought and consciousness of herself as an equal individual in the society.

Stigma and Initiatives

The project of educating the girl child must be adopted at national and individual levels, and parents must be made aware of the importance of education and how it holds the immense potential to provide a better life for their daughters. The government has framed policies that cater to educating girl children like the Beti Bachao and Beti Padhao (BBBP, 22 Jan. 2015), which ensures that female infanticide, a global menace, gets eradicated. It ensures the girl child's safety and welfare in infancy and cracks down on gender-based abortions. It spreads awareness in collaboration with non-government organisations (NGOs) that conduct workshops, seminars, and awareness campaigns that girls and women are equal to men and capable of achieving equal success if the right opportunities are provided. The prevalent stereotypes, misinformation and superstition must be attacked that perpetuate discrimination by orthodox notions and teach biased practices and narratives, especially against the women in rural areas marred by illiteracy. Other schemes and policies like 'CBSE Udaan', 'Balika Samriddhi Yojana', 'Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana', 'Ladli Scheme' and 'National incentive scheme for the girls of secondary education' all provide social, cultural, political, and economic assistance in sanctioning a secure path to educate the girl child and ensure her of a better future. It considerably reduces the financial burden on the family, and it also mitigates any negative perception against having a girl child. Instead of seeing her as a curse, they feel fortunate to have a girl child, ensuring a good sex ratio in the country.

The negative perception of education as a government brainwashing scheme has been largely removed. However, it still finds existence in some places. They do not want to give up their authority on women, but their apprehensions and disillusionment are addressed occasionally. Education imparts knowledge on sexual well-being and good hygiene among the girl child and ensures her a long life. The discussion on Menstruation to this day remains an enormous taboo, especially among the communities in rural areas, and proper guidance is rarely given about it. Many women die because of this; thus, personal hygiene and sexual knowledge facilitate well-being and chart out a plan for a well-planned family. Under the government policies of family planning, Janani Suraksha Yojna, and Ayushman Bharat programme, women are given the benefit of better health facilities regarding diseases and childbirth. It facilitates access to resources and amenities for girls and women neglected by the leading society. It re-integrates their active participation by ensuring their well-being and a well-defined path for realising their aspirations.

Marriage Imprisonment and Reforms

The institution of marriage has again been subjected to scrutiny from the perspective of concerns raised by social activists, feminists and gender theorists that raise the prevailing disparity. Issues like domestic violence, marital rape, and physical abuse due to dowry have all been brought under the jurisdiction of law and sanctioned as criminal offenses with strict punishment upon being found guilty. The status of women no longer remains as property but as conscious human beings who must have the claim to a dignified life, the access to education, freedom of speech and expression as constitutional and fundamental rights recorded and written. She is a citizen of the nation and holds social, political, and economic rights to opportunities and active participation, along with the right to vote, contest elections, and assume government positions. Their participation in the military, medicine, engineering, and diverse fields of discipline have been safeguarded by the judicial and parliamentary instructions. Society and religious institutions, upon subjugation to feminist thought and questioning of gender bias, have made appropriate changes in attitudes and practices. Women now have complete freedom to visit temples as well as their movement in the 'public' space. Though the stigma of working Women persists, it is regularly addressed through popular media and literature to subvert this mindset and has largely succeeded. Even with the private space mitigating the concept of 'Zenana' that prevailed, she has the complete right to move about the space and, if she chooses, could also own it. Women are entitled to half of their spouses' materialistic possessions by law.

Moreover, if he chooses to abandon her under any circumstances, proper alimony and child support must be provided. Polygamy largely has been abolished, and marriage no longer remains an ever-binding institution. The

law now allows the Woman to seek divorce if she does not wish to continue the relationship that was only exercised by the males and was denied to them. Earlier, household chores were the arena of the female body; however, feminist and gender theorists over the years smashed this bias and stereotype, making it a cooperative exercise wherein males must contribute equally. The male significant must share the responsibility of childbearing and caring similarly in case the Woman is a full-time working employee. Many women now choose to either marry by their choice or not marry at all, and this has become socially acceptable; no mistreatment of Women could be done on this as it is punishable by law. The law sanctions inter-caste marriage and inter-religious marriages in an extraordinary marriage act that seeks to diversify and create a harmonious social fabric that would benefit the country.

Orthodox customs and traditions

The practice of 'purdah' or veil is a highly oppressive exercise that views women as objects and property that need to be shielded from the world. The excessive covering of her body and her movement in public and private space again harks back to patriarchal notions of how a woman should or should not conduct herself. The tradition of dowry, child marriage, genital mutilation, and female infanticide are all orthodox misconceptions that have polluted the social and cultural atmosphere for ages. The stereotyped roles and lack of autonomy all contributed immensely to creating gender inequality and mistreatment of women. Lukasik states that these stereotypes may result from cultural norms and manifest through textbooks and stories that perpetuate this stereotyped understanding and image among the young, impressionable kids" (Lukasik, 2021). Gromkowsaka and Melosik argue that "in modern societies lack of education is an important factor perpetuating gender inequality. If equal access to proper education is not provided for everyone, then it is impossible to achieve skill, profession, and sustenance" (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2011). It is tackled in various literatures and academic disciplines, from social, political, psychological, etc., to correct the historical, social, and cultural wrongs. Disciplines like Gender and Feminist Studies, under the aegis of various theories and theorists, are shattering the contours of patriarchal structures by subjugating them to rigorous intellect and reason. Women's bodies and identities are being reclaimed to empower them in public and private discourse. These academic disciplines have been made compulsory in secondary and higher education. Various courses and curricula have been organized on these topics to mitigate the above-mentioned social evils. Under these disciplines, the historical participation or lack of it is analysed and put forth to redeem them through policies framed by the parliament, such as women's right to have abortions as well as their reservation in the parliament for active participation. The conservative ideas of 'Zenana', women being witches and objects of pleasure and commodity, are fundamentally disintegrated. The sole purpose of women providing emotional and sexual pleasure has been subverted, and they now make more significant contributions and participation in the world. The physical abuse and psychological torture that was socially acceptable now has been criminalized. The plight of widow women was worse; they were not only ostracised like Aunt Majida but were even barred from marrying again. It was again challenged as it deprived women of an opportunity for a better life. Women were required to shed their name to acquire that of their spouse, and this practice has been dramatically disrupted by empowered modern women who do not wish to carry this patriarchal baggage. Sexuality is another arena that has been largely uncontested for ages, and women are now reclaiming their rightful position. They question the treatment of promiscuous men in contrast to women who are labelled as slut and wanton like Nandi. Their body has been barred from exploring their sexuality or feeling the same carnal emotions and pleasure that their male counterpart indulged heavily for years. Dating has become a socially accepted phenomenon, and many women explore their sexuality and body to reclaim their identity as living creatures and not private property.

Modern woman, problems, and solutions

The modern Woman is an educated and empowered individual capable of sustaining herself and taking care of others. She is responsible, rational, and freer to decide the course of her life per her own choices rather than by the whims and fancies of others. She has balanced herself to her cultural roots and traditions by aligning her

education and aspirations with modern times. She has shed away the conservative notions and orthodox customs colonizing her body for so long. She has etched a niche in every respective field of participation through her hard work and excellence in the face of all discriminatory practices and prejudices. Today crimes against women remain a large issue, again limiting their potential and active participation in society; the number of rape cases and cases of domestic violence have skyrocketed. Abduction, killing and forced conversion are the issues that the government has failed to address appropriately. Corporate misogyny, work harassment and pregnancy-related leaves are still the more significant concerns that have gained traction in social discourse, but minimal action has been taken to address them. Due to this, many women discontinue their work because they are divided between work and private life, which has burdened them with responsibilities beyond their capabilities. Stress, anxiety, and depression have become rampant causes of nervous breakdowns, suicides and health-related problems that go unaddressed. The current work environment is designed to force women to choose their career or their family; thus, it needs to be changed and made more friendly, allowing more and more integration of women. There is a considerable gender pay gap; women receive less money for the same amount of work a man does. Zajackowska states that quality, quantity, and skills along with the gender gap is responsible for lack of women participation. They are often provided with low-quality education and skills. It is because of socio-cultural stereotyping of boys and girls from their early childhood" (Zajackowska, 2008). It is discriminatory and discouraging for the women as it provides them with less capital and ultimately affects their decision-making capabilities regarding their family situation and work. Shorthanded infrastructure for feminine hygiene and comfort; they are often expected to work in the same structures, tools and space that have been crafted for men, and this makes their situation less comfortable as well as their productivity. There is mass hysteria about a specific body type that women are expected to maintain that is not expected of their male counterparts. This body dysmorphia again puts women at a significant disadvantage and makes them feel insecure about their bodies. Clothes become another point of contention as women who dress bombastically are castigated as prostitutes and immoral; this thinking wants to conform women again to a particular stereotypical role of ideal women per patriarchal notions. Gender awareness and non-gender policies are still not a reality in the country, and as a result, a large section of the community that finds itself a part of it is deprived of active participation in the workforce as well as life. These concerns continue to prevail and only add to gender bias and gender inequality that must be addressed by putting proper schemes, policies, and awareness programs in collaboration with NGOs. In 2023, the country aspires to become a developed economy, and this is a collective effort that cannot be achieved without the active participation of women in mitigating gender inequality.

Discussion

The paper addresses the fundamental definition and contours of gender and gender bias contributing to inequality in opportunities within the socio-political and economic arena. This gender bias originates in human civilization, from the Greek and Roman to others, where sex-based discrimination was adopted mainly as a socio-cultural practice. It led to the subordination of women over the years. It deprived them of the same amenities and opportunities that were availed to their male counterparts, like education, freedom of choice, individuality, and the right to work and own property. In aristocratic as well as amidst the commoner, the plight of women largely remained the same. Attia Hossain's character of Zahra, belonging to the aristocratic Taluqdar family and that of Nandi, the daughter of the Washerman, was the same. Both women were subjugated under the patriarchal structure and forced into an identity crafted for them rather than by themselves. Both received little to no education other than lessons in Culture, tradition and religious duties that were to be carried by them to obtain a good husband. Their life's purpose was not to think rationally or explore themselves and their surroundings but to be sold off as a valued property to the highest bidder in hopes of good fortune. Both were viewed as a burden; their movement across the Taluqdar mansion called 'Aashiana' was primarily restricted to an officially designated space called 'Zenana'. It was reserved for women only, away from the eyes of the public, because the male patriarch burdened them as safe keepers of patriarchal Culture and tradition. All the morality, character and modesty were reserved for women, along with limitations. At the same time, men did whatever they wanted to do marry according to their choice, indulge in adultery, work earn by themselves and live independently. The condition of married women was far worse.

Aunt Majida was married to Baba Jan, but her husband left her, and she was left at the mercy of her father, who died and left his duties to his eldest son, Hamid. Aunt Abida was married later by Hamid, but she was abused in her marriage and later succumbed to an unfortunate death. There was very little solidarity among the women themselves; Hakimian Bua was a relic of a patriarch who immensely discouraged Laila and Zahra from studying books; for her, like another male patriarch of the house, they were instruments of corruption and must be always shunned. Only religious education was required; reading the Quran would ensure that the girl would be sought after by other similar women for their sons. Laila, who makes a self-choice in marriage and receives a Western education and skills, is antagonized, and ostracised by the patriarchal authorities like Uncle Mohsin, Uncle Hamid and other women like Sita Aggarwal and even Zahra. Her marriage to her cousin Ameer is looked down upon because of his status, and she is cast out of the house for her choice. Her marriage to Ameer lasted short; she was left with her child, no husband, no family, only nostalgic memories.

Conclusion

The structures of 'purdah', 'Zenana', 'Marriage' and 'Education' resound with our contemporary times and find their relevance in the lack of individuality, autonomy, freedom, and participation in public and private space. Gender bias, oppressive structures, and domestic violence are all addressed and contrasted with solutions proposed by feminist and gender theorists and social activists who propound gender equality and the availability of opportunities and representation without discrimination. Government policies of 'Beti Bachao and Beti Padhao' ensure the eradication of social evils like female infanticide, and health schemes like 'Janani Suraksha Yojna' ensure better physical well-being. Pregnancy schemes 'like Shishu Suraksha Yojna' and education schemes like Balika Samridhhi Yojna ensure capital investment and infrastructure to help financially weaker sections of society by providing girls and women equal access to education. Moreover, proper laws are formed that keep a check on domestic violence, rape, property ownership and distribution, along with the facilitation of alimony and child support. In 2023, women no longer remain an object or private property. However, they will be the nation's citizens with the right to vote and are endowed with constitutional rights from freedom and education to speech and expression. They actively participate in all workforce sectors and move shoulder-to-shoulder with their male counterparts. However, grave concerns still perpetuate gender inequality, like the unequal pay gap, lack of friendly work culture, hygiene infrastructure and pregnancy-related policies that deter women from complete participation amidst cutthroat competition. Anxiety, stress, and depression are the by-products of the globalised and technological revolution that also need to be addressed as women receive a double whammy from being a mother as well as an employee. They are fundamentally stretched between their responsibilities at home and in the office. Solutions for all such problems addressed in this paper could be tried to reach a solution and bolster the active participation of more and more women. It benefits both the development of human civilisation and the country's economy. Each human being is entitled to live freely, speak, and express his/her ideas. They must have opportunities to fulfil their aspirations and dreams and live according to the choices they make without any ostracization or negative stigma. The fundamental goal of gender equality is a United Nations sustainable development programme initiative, and all countries are mandated to achieve it as a responsibility to their citizens and the world. This paper aims to contribute to the same effort by highlighting the markers of gender inequality and providing possible solutions to mitigate it and help all achieve gender equality.

This paper would also contribute and add to the body of literature already produced on the subject, thereby prompting other fellow researchers to take a keen interest as well as initiative to find the root causes of discriminatory practices, superstitions, socio-cultural orthodoxy, and religious conservative ideas that seek to oppress or disempower an individual based on their gender.

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