The Portrayal of Gender Inequality in *Well-Behaved Indian Women* Novel by Saumya Dave

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to see how gender inequality is portrayed in the Well-Behaved Indian Women novel by Saumya Dave. Using the qualitative method and existentialist feminism approach by Simone de Beauvoir, this study will analyze the narration from the novel to see how the characters from this novel, Nandini and Simran, had to experience gender inequality and how they overcome it. The result of this study is that Nandini and Simran had to experience gender inequality in the form of unequal opportunity in their education, career, and relationship. They finally overcame the inequality and refused their otherness by having their opportunities and choosing what they thought was the best for them.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Existentialist Feminism, Simone de Beauvoir

INTRODUCTION

In history, men's senses of ownership toward women makes women's existence have been reduced into just a property where they have no voice over their bodies and own being, and they are unable to achieve their potential and promising future ahead of them (Weitz, 2009, cited in Chakraborty and De, 2019, p.286; Walker, 2012, p.505). The hierarchical categories that separate men and women have existed in almost every aspect. In the social, political, and

economic systems, feminine attributes are seen as less valuable than masculine ones, leading to women's subordination (Nash, 2020, p.43). Therefore, inequality based on gender is inevitably still a major problem for modern society.

The inequality decreases women's opportunity to seek equal access throughout many fields such as education, career, and even domestic life. UNICEF in 2020 showed that women covered 56% of the global illiterate population, and 55% out of 59 million out-of-school children in 2018 were girls. Various challenges are the reason behind this unequal access, for example, poverty, poor quality of education, lack of infrastructures, but course, mainly because of gender inequality (UNICEF, 2020). Unfortunately, those women who can overcome the education barrier, other challenges such as their inability to join a professional workspace can still occur.

According to CATALYST (2021), only 38.8% of global workers were represented by women, and while there were 21.7% of women worked as full-time domestic workers, men only represented 1.5% of them. These gaps are caused by cultural restriction and structural barriers (CATALYST, 2021), which prevented women from joining the labor force and instead trapped in domestic life. However, even women who can join the professional workforce still need to work as double agents, both in the workforce and in the house and have the burden twice as much as men.

Many efforts have been conducted to abolish gender inequality as a global issue since this problem is a big obstacle for women worldwide. In relation to this study, gender inequality in Indian culture will be explained specifically to support this research issue.

Gender inequality is one of the core issues in India. It is the result of patriarchal values and social constructions which are embedded in the Indian society where men dominate many

things in life (Esteve-Volart, 2004; Mohan, 1973, cited in Batra and Reio, 2016, p.90), and its emergence is influenced by various factors such as culture, caste, and religion where the gender inequality practices are considered normal (Comyn, Kemmis, & Smith, 2014, cited in Batra and Reio, 2016, p.89; Pandey, 2019, p.91).

Young girls are prone to bad health conditions due to their conditions where they receive less care from their parents (Chand & Mehrotra, 2012, cited in Batra and Reio, 2016, p.91). Men can pursue their education, while women are prepared to be a good bride since arranged marriage is a normal phenomenon in their society (Chada & Sinha, 2013, cited in Batra and Reio, 2016, p.92).

After marriage, a woman's life will be attached to her "new life," where she must be obedient to her husband and her in-laws. It means that a woman's life has been dictated ever since she was born where she has to abide by her father when she was young, subject to her husband after marriage, and follow her son during her widowhood (Haq, 2013, p.173; Sharma, 2017, p.288). From birth to death, her life has been determined, and she does not have the privilege to be independent (Chada & Sinha, 2013; Razvi & Roth, 2004, cited in Batra and Reio, 2016, p.90; Sharma, 2017, p.288).

Women's awareness of the injustice they have to endure had triggered the emergence of feminism. Various feminism waves, approaches, movements have occurred throughout history for women to fight for their rights. One form of feminism branch where its language is derived from the existentialist is the existentialist feminism approach by Simone de Beauvoir.

Existentialist feminism was introduced in Beauvoir's 1949 book entitled The Second Sex. Using existential language, Beauvoir focused on the freedom of living beings, specifically

women (Fallaize, 2015, p.392). The book is filled with her famous quote: "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman." There, Beauvoir explained how man's identity is referred to as the self while the woman is the other, and in this differentiation, women are oppressed (Beauvoir, in Tong and Botts, 2018).

"In adopting the ontological and ethical language of existentialism, de Beauvoir observed that men named "man" the self and "woman" the other. If the other is a threat to the self, then woman is a threat to man. Therefore, if man wishes to remain free, he must subordinate woman to him" (Tong and Botts, 2018).

Beauvoir believes the notion about the self and the other is the result of patriarchy constructed by society. She furthermore states that women's subordination cannot be explained just by looking from the psychologist, Marxist, or biologist's point of view. Still, it should be seen from the social construction of their sexual role, which has been dictated to them ever since they were young (in Tong and Botts, 2018; Fallaize, 2015, p393).

METHODOLGY

This study will use qualitative method and descriptive-analytical study in order to analyze the issue and answer the research question of this research. Existentialist Feminism by Simone de Beauvoir is used to analyze the corpus of this research, *Well-behaved Indian Women* novel by Saumya Dave. By analyzing the narrations in the novel, the writer will try to see the occurrence of gender inequality issues in the novel and how it affects the self-identity of the novel's two characters, Nandini and Simran.

DISCUSSION

Well-Behaved Indian Women by Saumya Dave portrayed how the characters in the novel, Nandini and Simran, had to face gender inequality and how they tried to overcome it. Their

journey began when they faced inequality, how it differentiated them from the men in their family and society, and how they finally overcame the injustice.

A. Gender Inequality

Gender inequality refers to the injustice and unequal opportunities someone has to face merely because of their gender, and women often experience this. It can happen in the public and domestic spheres where aspects such as economic, relationship, education, and health in someone's life can be affected. In the eyes of existentialist feminists, this injustice happened because of the social construction which divides men and women into two categories of the self and the other where men are praised, and women are subordinate in daily life. This idea will be passed from generation to generation until many women will internalize and accept the idea of their otherness.

In the novel, the two main characters, Nandini and Simran, faced gender inequality because of the traditional values their Indian family held for so long. Even though they were born and raised in different times and places, the inequalities which they had to face were still related and similar. It can be found in unequal opportunities in their education, career, and relationship. Beauvoir believed that society is responsible for the difference between women's and men's characterizations (Beauvoir, 2010, p.330).

A study by Batra and Reio (2016) found that gender inequality faced by Indian women is the result of their culture, and the root lies inside the Indian houses (p.90-91). Nandini and Simran lived in modern America, but as Indian ancestries, the patriarchal value from their home was still firmly embedded in their family. When they compared their life with their partner, they often blamed their culture as the source of the inequality which they had to experience.

Nandini was born and raised in Baroda, India. As a dexterous girl, she was fully aware that her family treated boys and girls unequally, and women will always be reliant on men (Dave, 2020, p.71). She furthermore witnessed it from her parents' relationship where everything her mother did, had to be in her father's approval. Her mother could not decide everything freely and according to her will.

"Nandini would hear her ask Papa before doing anything. Inviting her sister over. Giving the bhaji walla five extra rupees when he delivered fresh okra, peppers, and onion every morning. Making poori instead of rotli for dinner" (Dave, 2020, p.71).

Nandini was considered lucky for a family that values boys because her mother let her pursue proper education until she get a degree as a doctor . It was hard enough for girls to get an education because, in Indian society, boys would get a good education while girls would be prepared to be a bride (Batra and Reio, 2016, p.91-92). Nandini also knew that her education would only slow down her preparation to be a bride, but eventually, her degree would mean nothing because her main aim was to be married.

"…under the patriarchal regime, she was the property of a father who married her off as he saw fit; then attached to her husband's household, she was no more than his thing and the thing of the family (genos) in which she was placed" (Beauvoir, 2010, p.118-119).

This was what gender inequality did to a woman, where all woman's life would be tied to be around men (p.28), and the moment "a girl bleeds, she no longer belongs to herself" (Dave, 2020, p.198).

After her marriage, Nandini lived with her husband's family in a small house filled with her in-laws. Most Indian families were accustomed to living with joint families from two or more generations (Chadda and Sinha, 2013). Nandini tried to find a job in the local hospital, but her mothers-in-law were against the idea. For her, a dutiful wife was the most sacred job a

woman could ever have. As a newcomer and an outsider in the family, Nandini had to do all the house chores, including taking care of her in-laws baby (Dave, 2020, p.204). However, the main reason for this was because it was a common thing for a wife to abise not only her husband but also her in-laws (Chada & Sinha, 2013, cited in Batra and Reio, 2016, p.92). Even with her degree, Nandini was merely a housewife whose life was under someone else's control.

As a patriarchal family ruled by patrilineal rules (Chadda and Sinha, 2013), her husband would not care about what Nandini had to go through. All he cared about was only about him and his family's well-being. Her parents-in-laws forced her to do procedural sex so that she could carry a baby, and when Nandini miscarriage her baby, instead of consoling her, her husband slapped her, and her in-laws blamed her for losing the baby.

A culture filled with patriarchal values would see what happened to Nandini as a common practice, but it was apparent that what Nandini had to experience was a form of abuse. They only see Nandini as part of her husband's property, and they even exploit her sexuality and blame her for the miscarriage.

After the series of abuses, Nandini ran away from her in-laws back to her house two times. However, her father would send her back because he did not want Nandni to embarrass the family by running away from her husband. Nandini reached her point when her brother-in-law sexually harassed her. He tried to explain it to her husband and his family, but they chose to be blind and continue to praise the man in the family. They would not want to believe their family did such a shameful thing. This time she ran away again but did not tell her family what happened. She begged for a divorce, and her family finally granted it.

Marriage was a big event for Indian culture, and divorce was a dishonorable act, where it was more likely to be decided by men (Shine, 2020, Gender Inequality section). When Nandini divorced her husband, she and her family were excluded from society. Her father even fell ill. The topic spread quickly, and people would not want to know its reason. They keep ashamed Nandini and her family for the choice. People blamed Nandini for what happened, and they never picked on her ex-husband. Worse was that they might know what happened but chose to ignore it because of the gender inequality undervaluing women. Even decades after what happened, when Nandini's mother met with her ex-mother-in-law, she still blamed Nandini for what happened and kept praising her son. Her society made her feel what Beauvoir called the feeling of otherness. Women were subordinate to men and blamed for something beyond their will and control.

Her parents tried to find another husband for Nandini, but none of the "men Nandini's age were interested in a woman who left her husband" (Dave, 2020, p.206). Her other families even suggested that she and her family change their names and move to another city. However, a year later, her family found another husband named Ranjit. Even though it seemed that Ranjit would accept her and her past, his family was no different than her first in-laws. The only thing they cared about was their son, and the thing about Nandini they cared about was whether she could do the house chores well.

Not long after her new marriage, her father passed away peacefully, knowing his family was no longer being excluded by society. Social construction was very destructive, and Nandini was the victim of the patriarchal society in her culture. She blamed herself for causing her family to lose their place in the community when in fact, she was the one who suffered and got harmed the most.

Nandini and Ranjit moved to America in hope to get a better life. For Nandini, she hoped by moving to America, she could left her past and could offer her children a better path than what he got back in Baroda.

"Nandini treated her past the way she treated the Atlantic Ocean. She visited often, even dipped her feet in at times, but always refused to be submerged… and by moving to America, by uprooting her life and letting go of everything that is familiar to her, she will make sure things will be different for her children. They can have the types of romantic relationships that are based on a true connection, not a need to survive…" (Dave, 2020, p.10&33).

Living in America, it might seem that Simran could get a different life than her mother. One noticeable thing was that she could choose her partner instead of suffering in an arranged marriage. However, despite being in a different environment and her mother's strong effort, Simran still had to experience similar gender inequality as her mother did in Baroda.

When Nandini first moved to America, she promised that Simran would never have to go the rocky path she had to go through. However, despite her effort, one of the main reasons Simran had to experience gender inequality was because of Nandini. According to Beauvoir, marriage and motherhood were the institutions which could cause and perpetuate gender inequality. Women were thought that their place was below men in the domestic and public sphere, and even though they might not want to accept it, the idea about it could still be internalized by them and caused their inferiority. When they become a mother, they might unconsciously teach their children the same idea, and thus they might become an ally in perpetuating gender inequality (Beauvoir, in Tong and Botts, 2018). It was what happened to Nandini and Simran.

Simran was taught the traditional values of becoming a decent woman, and Simran grew up with the same idea about how women should please others and suppress their own needs.

Nandini thought what she did was best for Simran, but she carried patriarchal values in the family. Simran was demanded to do things that her community would only accept. It could be seen when she prepared for her marriage. Her mother was obsessed with making sure Simran would look good in front of her future in-laws. She thought more about Simran's fiancée, Kunal, more than about her daughter. It was understandable that she did not want her children to be looked down on by others, but the way she advised Simran was often too rough and cruel. Simran thought her mother could not see her action was solely passing on patriarchal culture to her, and because of this, Simran and Nandini often quarreled.

Nandini's action was somehow graspable, considering what had happened in her past. She must suffer from people's cruelty and harsh words, so she did not wish it to happen to Simran. Her action was related to Beauvoir's thought, where a mother would see her children as things to atone for something they lack (Tong and Botts, 2018; Fallaize, 2015, p.393). Nandini was lack of opportunities to be seen as a well-behaved in-law, so she wanted Simran to be considered one.

In the end, Simran's mother was aware that what she did was not wholly a good choice for her. She acknowledged how she had been tied with her culture and unconsciously raised Simran to be the same as her.

"…as much as Nandini liked to think of herself as an evolved mother, improved from the generations before her, she knew there were certain mistakes she repeated…. maybe the inherent pressure and guilt of the culture had lodged itself deep inside her, to the point where she couldn"t even be rational about her own daughter"s decisions" (Dave, 2020, p.210&359).

B. The Self vs. The Other

According to Beauvoir (2010), "The duality between Self and Other can be found in the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies;.." (p.26). Men and women are divided into two completely different groups based on the superficial differences that are bound to dissipate (p.24&27). However, these differences separated men and women and were perpetuated by cultural norms and values. It was what Nandini and Simran had to face as women in the Indian community. The difference felt certainly noticeable when their lives were compared to their partners'.

It was apparent that one of the reasons Nandini wanted to move to America was to seek a better life and opportunity. She applied as a resident in Baltimore to pursue her career. However, even with the degree and experiences, she could only afford a job as a family medicine doctor not too far from her house. Nandini could be a doctor, but her primary responsibility was her family. Unfortunately, it was not only about her husband and children but also about her husband's family. So by having a job near her house, Nandini could be available for anyone whenever they needed her. Of course, this was against her will since she was not satisfied with her career, for she wanted to work in a teaching hospital. However, it was never about her wants, and it was always about what others wanted.

Even though Nandini liked to talk with Ranjit regarding getting a better job, her husband always had a way to reject the idea. She even had to face harsh opinions from Ranjit's family by choosing to be a working woman, but Ranjit often did not acknowledge his family's flaws. As a result, Nandini had to work a double job by being a full-time doctor and a housewife. Nandini and Ranjit were both doctors, but Nandini was the only one who cared about everything, including the family's health, while Ranjit could focus on pursuing his career.

While Nandini struggled with her job and domestic life, Ranjit's career went very smoothly. He was a surgery doctor who had his own practice, he had his own staff, and he was the president of Indian American Association.

"Over time, Nandini understood the difference between how people saw her husband''s career and how they saw her own. He was allowed to be consumed by his job. If he made it to Ronak''s baseball game, people lauded his devotion to his children. If she did the same, they accused her of not being focused enough on her career" (Dave, 2020, p.51).

As a woman, Nandini could not completely put her heart into her job because not only did she work in an environment that was against her wants, but she also had to focus more on her big family. As a working woman, she was forbidden to seem like she was not into her job because people might label her as not taking her job seriously.

Nandini was not only had to feel her otherness regarding her career but also regarding her past. It was obvious how differently people treated her and her husband regarding their past. Before marrying Nandini, Ranjit also had a bad past, but nobody ever talked about it. Ranjit was in a relationship with a Muslim girl, and the girl later got pregnant. However, their relationship was against his parents' blessings, and they had to break up. The girl then married another man, and Ranjit still sent them money, but the family died due to a car accident.

Nobody ever picked on Ranjit regarding her past despite having all these problems. No one ever excluded him or his family from the community. Decades after what happened to Nandini, people still blamed and embarrassed her while her husband could roam free as nothing had ever happened with him before. Ranjit's sister even used Nandini's past to threaten her, but she never reflected on her brother's past.

Moi's (1999, cited in Ytre-Arne, 2012) study showed that Beauvoir believed that women defined themselves according to how they made something of what the world had made them.

Years of being blamed and humiliated had made Nandini believe that her past was a disgrace, and she was an embarrassment for her family. What had happened was not her fault, but she accepted the idea built by her environment that she deserved the blame. Nandini let herself be defined as the other while Ranjit could roam freely and be the self.

Simran also experienced the self vs. the other problem. Simran always had an interest in journalism, but she only treated it as her hobby since she focused more on psychology. When she finally had the opportunity to publish her book, no one in her community or family genuinely congratulated her. For them, journalism was not a promising career. A woman should be grateful enough to pursue proper education and career, but the fields they should choose are still limited.

At her book launch party, people were more concerned and interested in her wedding plan than her achievement. It proved how a woman was looked at only by her relationship with a man (Beauvoir, 2010, p.26&503). People kept talking about how lucky Simran was to marry a doctor and only pointed out her fiancé's achievement even at her own party.

In Indian culture, the bride's side was responsible for almost every aspect of wedding preparation, for example, paying for the wedding, preparing the dowry, and maintaining the relationship between the two families (Dave, 2020, p.54&77). However, the groom's side held power on the wedding, and the bride was expected not to create even a minor conflict.

On her wedding preparation, the entire burden was placed on Simran. She needed to maintain the relationship between her and his fiancé, Kunal, between her and his family, between her family and his family, and she should manage the honor of Kunal's family even though they were not officially a husband and wife. All the while, she also had to prepare for all the necessary stuff for the wedding. It made her feel that Kunal was not giving his all at the

wedding because he was busy with his education. He never even bothered to call her parents. Simran could not complain about it because, in her culture, this was common and acceptable.

When their relationship faced difficulty, people showed sympathy only for Kunal and blamed Simran without asking why. People would ignore the cause the same way they did with her mother in the past. Kunal, who grew up within the patriarchal culture, would demand Simran to follow and obey him as a dutiful wife and gave up on her dreams. Everything was "…his life. His way. His time" (Dave, 2020, p.111).

"…she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (Beauvoir, 2010, p.26).

Even though Simran disagreed with her culture, she still needed to follow it so her wedding would go well. She was taught that a woman should never be stubborn because "A stubborn Indian boy was a leader. A stubborn Indian girl was a nuisance" (Dave, 2020, p.326). If she wanted to be accepted, she had to be docile. What her mother experienced, she had to face too. People would blame her as a woman if there were something wrong in her relationship, and if there was someone who would get acknowledgment and praise, it was the man. Therefore, no matter how Simran thought that she was an independent woman, in the end, she was the other, and Kunal was the self.

C. Overcoming Gender Inequality

Existentialist feminists believe in the freedom of every person. They believe every person should be able to decide what is best for them without being under someone else's control. Therefore, any acts limiting women's choices and opportunities are condemnable. Beauvoir (in Tong and Botts, 2018) offers four strategies for women to fight gender inequality: going to work, moving toward a socialist society, becoming more intelligent, and refusing their

otherness. In *Well-Behaved Indian Women*, Nandini and Simran portrayed three out of four strategies: Nandini chose the job she always wanted, Simran became intellectual, and they both refused to be labeled as the other.

As part of Indian ancestries, Nandini and Simran put others first and suppressed their feelings. They knew that their opportunities were limited, and they could not decide their desire freely. Therefore, when they had to choose between following their dreams or pleasing others, they usually chose the latter. Since women were subordinate to men in their culture, they often gave up their desire and followed their partners. No one in their family, not even their partner, offered them their freedom. Even though free will is the primary concern for existentialist feminists, Nandini and Simran did not seem to get it. Their opportunities to follow their dreams then came from someone outside their family.

For Nandini, the opportunity came from Greg, her former residency attending. He offered Nandini a good position in Baltimore as a head doctor because he needed someone to replace him since he was terminally ill. Nandini could become a head doctor while teaching the residents, which was her dream job by accepting the offer. However, Baltimore is way too far from her house in New Jersey, which made her hesitate to take the job since she would have to be away from her family. Nandini also felt reluctant because she feared that her husband would not let her and people would judge her choice. All the years of getting blamed made Nandini feel guilty if she could not be available for her family.

Greg did not want anyone else to take the position because he saw a big potential in her. He believed in Nandini. Therefore, even though what Nandini feared come out to be true, she did not want to let the opportunity be wasted. She realized she could not always pleased everyone.

Nandini always knew that her heart desired more. All this time, she was waiting for the right time to come. She waited for her children could do well on their own. She waited for so long. So, when Greg came and offered her what she always wanted, she did not let her hesitation and people's opinion limit her any further. She just hoped that everybody, especially her husband, would eventually understand. She finally could feel the freedom she had longed for. Greg offered her freedom and the ability to believe in herself. Nandini was no longer afraid of what people might say because she finally could find herself in the place she always wanted. She refused her otherness by being on her way and not letting anyone control her any longer.

For Simran, her opportunity came from new insights from her favorite writer named Neil Desai. Their first meeting was at Simran's book-launched party, and they had a very insightful conversation that they chose to stay in touch. Through Neil, Simran could see her life from another perspective and dared to go outside her safe zone.

Simran only treated journalism as her hobby for so long, but she was finally brave enough to pursue it as her main dream. She was always wanted to do something impactful for the world, and she thought she could do it by being a psychologist. She finally realized that what she wanted was to give impact through journalism. She wanted to help people through her writing. She realized it more and more by spending time with Neil. Her old dream to have a career in journalism started to reappear, and Neil encouraged her that it was something she should give up or feel ashamed of. Nothing should come between her and her dreams, and she should be free to choose what she always wanted.

Simran might always know what she wanted, but throughout her life, she was tied up with the idea of being accepted, so she often chose the safe path. When Neil came with the

encouragement that she never got before, Simran started to believe in her dreams and herself. Neil offered Simran the choices that she thought she could never achieve. He showed her "how safe she'd been with her life choices" (Dave, 2020, p.249).

When Simran chose to give up her degree as a psychologist, everybody was mad at her choice, including Kunal. Kunal even showed his true nature, a patriarchal man who only wanted a docile wife who would follow him around while busy with his dreams. Simran realized how selfish and unsupportive his fiancé was and how he would never take her or her dreams seriously.

Simran now knew her worth, and she did not want to be trapped in a marriage that would not liberate her. Simran chose to leave Kunal with complete certainty and seriously pursue her dream to help people through her writing. Simran refused to be labeled as the other by following her choice and leaving the things that tied her. She chose her future and became more intellectual. She would not let anyone stop her from achieving her goals. Simran became the "…vanguard of change for other women" (Tong and Botts, 2018). She could be more knowledgeable by helping others through her writing.

After being trapped between choosing something they wanted or being a dependent being and always in need of anyone's approval, Nandini and Simran could finally choose something for themselves and resist their otherness. They finally got to taste their freedom. Although not part of their family, Greg and Neil could offer Nandini and Simran the opportunity and encouragement they needed. Most importantly, they did not use their status as men to subordinate Nandini and Simran, and they showed that gender equality could be done by anyone regardless of their gender.

CONCLUSION

Well-behaved Indian Women portrayed how its characters had to suffer from gender inequality and how they finally could overcome it. Nandini and Simran were part of the Indian community, so they were raised by the patriarchal culture, which put men above women. They had to be the victim of gender inequality because of their culture. Despite Nandini's effort to not let Simran go through the same path, she unconsciously became part of something that perpetuated gender inequality. Nandini and Simra had to suppress their own needs to please others. They gave up on what they wanted to be accepted by their community and family. Fortunately, after years of being subordinate to men, they could finally get the opportunity to feel the freedom that they always wanted. The opportunity came from someone outside their family, Greg and Neil. They made Nandini and Simran believe in themselves and pursue their dreams.

The novel showed how women should be free to determine their life choices and have as many opportunities as possible. In the end, Nandini and Simran were no longer passive individuals whose lives were below men's. They were free individuals who got to determine whatever they thought was best for them.

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