



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

BREAKING THE ICE: GENDER INEQUALITY AND SUBVERSION IN DEVIKA RANGACHARI'S *QUEEN OF ICE*

Sanika Sanil

Post Graduate in English Language and Literature, currently pursuing B Ed

Department of English

Mercy College Palakkad, India

Abstract: Gender inequality is one of the most persistent challenges facing society around the world. Gender discrimination was prevalent in ancient Indian royal families where women were often considered inferior to men and had limited rights and opportunities. The study explores the various forms of gender inequality depicted in the novel *Queen of Ice* by the well-known Indian author and historian Devika Rangachari. This includes restriction of women's education and mobility, forced marriage and the Sati system, and the marginalization of women in political and economic spheres. The paper argues that the novel offers a nuanced and complex portrayal of gender inequality that highlights how individual agency and resistance can challenge and subvert oppressive social structures. The paper concludes by arguing that *Queen of Ice* offers an inspiring and powerful vision of women empowerment and resistance that can help to inform and inspire contemporary efforts to challenge and transform gender inequality.

Key Words: Gender inequality, Queen Didda, discrimination, historical fiction, etc.

Gender inequality is not a novel idea that took its present shape or form a year or two ago. While there is no single definitive cause, some scholars argue that gender inequality emerged as a result of the agricultural revolution, which led to the development of patriarchal societies and established traditional gender roles. Keeping India in focus, gender inequality has deep roots in the country's history and culture. The caste system, and religious and cultural practices, have reinforced patriarchal norms and beliefs, which have led to gender disparities and discrimination. While several measures have been taken in recent years to address this problem, gender inequality remains a pervasive social evil that affects women around the world.

Women of lower castes or backward sections of society are not the only victims of gender discrimination. Even women from royal households are discriminated against on all fronts, no matter how powerful and rich they are; and queen Didda is a notable example of this. Right from the day she was born, Princess Didda was discriminated against by her father King Simharaja of Lohara. She was a doubly marginalized woman because she faced discrimination on two fronts: gender and disability. Didda was born with a clubfoot, which made her an outcast in her society. She was expected to do the jobs of any other woman by her father, who tried his level best to hold her back. Despite this, she rose to power and became a capable ruler who expanded the kingdom's territories, built infrastructure, and promoted cultural and religious diversity.

Queen Didda's life has been enticingly portrayed by Devika Rangachari in her novel *Queen of Ice* (2014). The novel brings to the forefront the inequalities and sufferings undergone by a Kashmiri Queen and how she subverted the traditionally assigned gender roles and emerged victorious in her life. The novel which has won

several awards including the New Young Adult Book Award, vividly depicts the turbulent and untold history of Tenth century Kashmir profoundly.

Right at the outset of the novel, it is revealed that King Simharaja was disappointed with the birth of Princess Didda for he always desired a "full-term son" (Rangachari 22). She was never dotted upon by him and was always looked down upon, giving her only a secondary status. Even after being born into a royal family, education was denied to Queen Didda. King Simharaja used to say "Learning is wasted on a girl" (6). The whole administration of the palace and finances were safe with the powerful male officers and women were often assigned the roles of housekeeping, kitchen management, and gardening. Though Didda had great innate potential, nothing of that was given due attention just because she was a crippled female child. At one point, she retorts "I am your daughter, not some worthless servant" (23). But she gets an immediate response from her father: "But that's exactly what you are to me-worthless" (23). If this was the treatment that a royal member received in the country, one cannot even dare to think of the predicament of the ordinary masses.

Living with the same mental state for a few decades, King Simharaja is seen finally happy with the birth of his son Prince Udayaraja. But this does not lessen his rage towards Didda. When she attempts to hold the baby, he fumes with anger and shouts at the midwife, "Giving my precious son to a cripple to hold? If she had dropped him, I would have had your head. (33)"

When Didda asks him why can't she be his heir, Simharaja replies, "A woman doesn't rule, Didda. Only a man can occupy a throne. You know that. (25)" This discriminatory remark made by the king, who is the supreme ruler of the land, shows that the whole nation was unfair towards women, relegating them to the margins of society. The only way in which women could find meaning in their otherwise subjugated and desolate life was through the institution of marriage. This is in line with what Simone de Beauvoir once said, "we build factories, offices, and facilities for women, but we continue to believe that marriage is the most dignified career for a woman, liberating her from the need to participate in society in any other way (DeBeauvoir 67)". This is how the Didda's cousin Vighararaja speaks about her marriage: "You are being sold Didda. Your father has sold you for a paltry bit of land (Rangachari 29)". The lifelong subjugation and marginalization can undoubtedly cause long-term psychological issues in women. But even at that point, women have no power but to endure these verbal and physical tortures in silence and darkness.

Sex determination and female infanticide are common practices in the backward parts of the country even after the implementation of stringent laws and rules. This practice is said to have existed during the Vedic age itself in many royal households. In the novel, Princess Didda remarks, "If I have a sister my father will... Her voice trails off but we both knew what she wants to say (32)". By exquisitely combining fact and fiction, the author tries to bring out the fact that women, wherever they are born and bred, are subjected to various atrocities, both during their lives or sometimes, even before they are born. Such age-old traditions and customs are followed generation after generation to this date, when people, despite being educated cling to these irrational practices.

When Queen Didda is married off to Kashmir king Kshemagupta as his second wife, one would expect her future to be bleak and misery-ridden. On the contrary, that is where her fortunate destiny begins. Upon entering the land of Kashmir with her all-time favourite companions, Narvahana and Valga, she would have never thought that Kashmir was the land that held lots of hopes and fortune for her.

Amid several power-seeking and evil-minded wolves, Queen Didda strengthened her hold and influence slowly and steadily. With the support of Narvahana, she could anticipate the moves of suspicious Phalguna; and in a couple of years, Queen Didda was a truly new woman in all its sense. She even dared to defy the system of Sathi, which was a compulsory practice for all Hindu women, irrespective of their background and status. At this point, the author describes how Phalguna thinks of Queen Didda, "in his mind, I am a usurper of sorts, an unnatural woman who did not die alongside her husband but chose to play a part in the real world, the world of men (98)". Here Phalguna stands as a representative of all other men of the nation who despises and looks down upon the progress of women. In that sense, several Phalgunas can be spotted among today's men, especially those with a patriarchal mindset. When Queen Didda becomes a regent after the death of Kshemagupta, she rules the Kingdom in a highly efficient manner. It is on that day that she realized her dream which she always longed for, "It is the power that I want- the power to be acknowledged and respected for who I am, the power to crush those who taunt and humiliate me, the power to command those who dismiss me as a cripple (40)". Lazar's feminism aims to investigate how gender, ideology, and authority interact intricately in societal discourses. He defines power as, "one's capacity to influence the actions of others (Lazar

145)". She speaks of two parts of her mind: one which craves love and support and shuns evil; and the other part of the mind which makes her want to harm all her rebels and maul the world for mauling her with its indifference for she is not a man (Rangachari 40)". The author tries to say that not all women can be meek and submissive for all time. There comes a point in their lives when they resist and protest against the prevailing discriminatory social order and shakes the hierarchy to restore balance. Later when she achieves power, she says, "I am now king and queen in one. Kashmir belongs to me and mine (149)". Even after losing all her loved ones, including her parents, husband, son, and all the grandsons, she does not let hold off her grip on kingship and tries to rule with even more vitality and strength.

There are several instances where Rangachari contrasts the rule of a male and a female ruler. The rule by a female monarch can happen only once in a blue moon and here the difference is in the fact that monarchy did not fall upon Queen Didda, rather she, with her shrewdness and wisdom, herself took the responsibility to rule the entire Kashmir region. She describes her as, " a woman who does not hide her gender in male garb but flaunts her beauty and femininity like a weapon (150)". Yet she does not fear away from impeccably ruling her subjects. Facebook COO and renowned author Sheryl Sandberg opines, "Women should lean into their jobs and take responsibility for the work they accomplish, be ambitious and unafraid to compete, to question the status quo, and to fight for a better world with a unique viewpoint (Sandberg 36)".

From a naïve girl who was taunted and criticized for all her deeds by everyone, Didda rose to become a queen who surmounted one obstacle after another. This is the sole reason why she commands respect from her subjects and they hail her rule. even during that period, she faced criticism and opposition from the male members of the royal court who felt threatened by her leadership. Her disability also left her vulnerable to increased marginalization and stigma. Despite these daring challenges, Didda was able to leave a lasting legacy, and her achievements are remembered and celebrated even to this date. Towards the climax of the novel, the author writes, "... for generations to come will remember her as the queen who established her rule on this land so effectively that none dared to oppose her at the end (Rangachari 159)". Didda's story is also a reminder of the importance of understanding and addressing systemic inequalities and the resulting marginalization. In this sense, Queen Didda's life is a testament to the resilience and strength of marginalized women throughout history.

Works Cited

- DeBeauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Parshley, Jonathan Cape, 1991.
- Lazar. "Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis: Articulating a Feminist Discourse Praxis." *Critical Discourse Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, Sept. 2007, p. 145, doi:10.1080/17405900701464816.
- Rangachari, Devika. *Queen of Ice*. Penguin Random House India, 2018.
- Sandberg, Sheryl. *Lean in: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011.