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## Feminist Urge For Dignity – An Analytical Study Of Meghna Pant's Novel *One And A Half Wife*

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### ABSTRACT

The nurturing of a child in a woman's womb occurs in a space untouched by bias or hierarchy. Yet, once gender is ascertained, discrimination and subordination begin to unfold, giving rise to socially constructed notions of masculinity and femininity. Violence against women and the systematic denial of their freedom under patriarchal dominance transcend barriers of class, caste, and religion, demonstrating that gender inequality is a deeply ingrained social reality. Central to women's liberation is the assertion of individuality and the insistence on acknowledgment. Within this context, Meghna Pant, an acclaimed voice in contemporary Indian feminist literature, through her novel *One and a Half Wife*, portrays the manifold hardships experienced by her protagonist within the domains of family and society. The protagonist's awakening of an inner consciousness and her defiance of imposed restrictions not only reveal the intricacies of women's lived realities but also provide a powerful model of inspiration for those bound within suffocating marital frameworks. This study, therefore, aims to acquaint the pangs and difficulties through which the protagonist resists repression rooted in patriarchal traditions and rigid belief systems, with specific emphasis on the narrative techniques employed by the author, Meghna Pant.

**Keywords:** Patriarchal, Suppression, Feminism, Self-recognition, Subjugation

### INTRODUCTION

Language serves as the primary medium through which human thought is expressed and shared, and in literature, it becomes the very essence of a writer's creative spirit. It transforms lived experiences and emotions into narratives that not only resonate with readers but also challenge and redefine social realities. It also lends voice to the voiceless and to the silent sufferer entangled within the societal construct.

Amidst the constellation of great writers, women writers have emerged as significant figures in reshaping the image of women within the societal framework. From global icons such as Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, and Elaine Showalter to Indian voices like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and Kamala Das, women have cultivated their creative skills to give voice to the long history of suppression endured by their gender. In this context, one of the contemporary feminist writers, Meghna Pant, has emerged as a powerful voice, exploring her literary virtue by highlighting women's subjugation while presenting a fresh concept of the "New Woman."

Meghna Pant's debut novel *One and a Half Wife* explores striking and vibrant themes such as love and loss, feminism and women's empowerment, the social stigma associated with divorce, identity and self-discovery, and the complexities of family dynamics and relationships. These concerns are examined against a conservative backdrop, offering a contradictory yet compelling perspective. This paper aims to examine women's quest for freedom through Amara's journey towards self-redemption, enriched by Meghna Pant's narrative skill, which lends the issue a realistic essence.

## RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVE

The rationale of this study lies in the feminist literature's urge for freedom, dignity, respect, and equality in marriage, with particular focus on Indian traditions and customs that are deeply influenced by patriarchy and restrict a woman's ability to live freely. It also highlights the significance and challenges of divorce, singlehood, and protest as means through which women raise their voices against societal norms, eventually paving her way toward self-redemption.

The objective of this study is to demonstrate contemporary issues of feminism and women in marriage through the journey of the protagonist, Amara Malhotra, in Meghna Pant's *One and a Half Wife*. It aims to illustrate the struggles Amara faces under the patriarchal mentality imposed by her mother, as well as the consequences of being entangled in a loveless marriage, which ultimately lead her from a submissive to a self-assertive personality. Furthermore, the study seeks to highlight the challenges of immigrant life, where cultural displacement and social rejection further intensify her struggles. Also, by examining Pant's narrative techniques, the study underscores how literature provides an authentic and effective platform for addressing gender conflicts, exposing rigid mentalities, and advocating for women's freedom, dignity, and empowerment.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminism has been a prominent issue since the first wave, involving numerous voices that have actively written about and explored its various consequences, successfully bringing about significant change. Yet, some aspects of feminism continue to demand further attention. In this context, marriage, though widely explored by many scholars and writers, still reflects entrenched societal practices and norms. Writers such as Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Leo Tolstoy, Shashi Deshpande, Jaishree Misra, Bapsi Sidhwa, and Arundhati Roy, along with research scholars like Alok Rai, Pratibha Parmar, Ritu Menon, and Kamla Bhasin, have examined the theme of marriage extensively. Despite this exploration, traditional notions persist. However, changing times have given rise to the concept of the "New Woman," where years of struggle have granted women a voice, enabling them to resist submission and assert their autonomy.

In this light, Meghna Pant's *One and a Half Wife* presents the journey of a woman through Amara Malhotra's struggle moving from a submissive to an assertive stance. And through Pant's creative narrative techniques, she is able to present the struggles of women in a realistic and compelling manner, leaving a lasting impression on the reader's mind.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, analytical approach to examine Meghna Pant's novel *One and a Half Wife*, focusing on women's struggle, marriage, and the journey from submission to self-assertion. The research involves a detailed analysis of the text to explore the interplay between patriarchal norms, societal expectations, and women's autonomy. In this paper, Meghna Pant's narrative skill is explored not only through her novel *One and a Half Wife* but also with reference to her other works and interviews, in order to achieve a comprehensive and insightful understanding of her literary approach.

## DISCUSSION

Meghna Pant is a bold speaker and perceives the world through her objective lens. She has established herself as one of the most prolific feminist writers, distinguished by her incisive narrative style and thematic depth. Her works reflect a keen engagement with issues such as love, sacrifice, ambition, gender concerns, immigrant dilemmas, and broader societal conflicts, offering nuanced insights into the complexities of modern existence. Her area of interest inspired from her past experience and curiosity to explore. Although, having spacious involvement in different field with great career option, she paved her way toward writing as she believes “Writing is not a choice rather calling.” Initiating from financially assisting her writing to full time writer, she produces eight great works including novels, short stories and non-fiction books cultivating variety of themes like feminism, human relationship, immigrant issues, identity search, domestic violence, women empowerment and social scrutiny.

Meghna Pant once stated in an interview with the *Hindustan Times* held on 2012, “I write the book that needs to be told by me and I write to break the stereotypes, not adhere to them.” Hence, her work presents a realistic portrayal of modern Indian cities, capturing their vibrant yet often oppressive environment. The spatial settings in *One and a Half Wife* acquire symbolic significance, reflecting the protagonist’s struggles and the cultural pressures that shape her existence. The narrative moves from the small-town atmosphere of Shimla to the metropolitan spaces of America, and eventually back to India, symbolizing the tensions between modernity and tradition, freedom and social conformity, as well as self-discovery and obscurity. In this way, the cities function not merely as physical locations but as metaphors for Amara’s emotional and psychological trajectory.

The novel unfolds with Amara and her mother’s visit to an astrologer to predict Amara’s future. The astrologer’s ironic declaration that she is destined to become “one and a half wife” not only foreshadows the central trajectory of the narrative but also becomes a primary concern for her mother, shaping the expectations and anxieties that frame Amara’s life.

Besides the main character the plot revolves around Amara’s mother ‘Bijji’, whose presences holds a significant place in the protagonist life and who has been depicted as embody of the prevailing conservative values and the duplicity of the social principle. Her actions and speech reflect the deeply ingrained beliefs and prevailing mindset of society. She imposes these ideals upon Amara, compelling her to perceive the world through inherited traditions rather than through independent thought. As a result, Amara’s subjectivity becomes constrained within a rigid communal framework, forcing her to suppress personal desires and opinions. This imposed conformity underscores the tension between obedience and the latent urge for freedom that defines Amara’s struggle:

“The only three desires Amara knew scrambled in front of her eye. They crept up like vines from underneath the floorboards, jumped up from the third leg of the wicker chair and skipped atop the steel trunks. They danced in frenzy, whirring and whirring around her ‘It Is God’s Desire.’ ‘It Is Bijji’s Desire.’ ‘It Is His Desire.’ (Pant, 20)

To achieve her aspiration, and with the great help of her brother Dua Mama, Bijji moves abroad hoping to find a better marriage match for her daughter and to appear more respected in society. Things look very beautiful from a distance, but their reality is revealed only when you get closer, similarly the scenario Bijji imagined in a country like America that will shower plenty of happiness and best opportunity, indeed reveal the truth behind the common issues of assimilation faced by the outsiders in such a developed country which created a despair and confusion between Amara’s family. And they have to undergo the challenges of immigrant life, cultural differences, and even rejection from their own relatives.

Among all of them, it was Amara who had to suffer the most, without any desire of her own, only to keep her mother happy. She faced difficulties everywhere—whether at school, at her Dua Mama’s house, or in society at large. The most painful part was that she had no one with whom she could share her sorrow. Amara is not just a character of a story rather she represents the reflection of countless girls who silently endure hardships for the happiness of their families and to meet the expectations of so-called society. Her life becomes circumscribed by what the narrative terms as three ironies—“the curse of beauty,” “the curse of money,” and “the curse of opportunity”—each of which underscores the paradoxes of a patriarchal and materialistic order that denies women the freedom to define their own destinies.

Life is a journey filled with arrays of learning; at every turn, it teaches us lessons that reshape our perspective of the world and enrich the book of our experiences. Similarly, in the novel when she attempted to adjust to the new environment—one that unfolded before her in unexpected ways—she realized that in the pursuit of becoming a person of high social status, personal relationships often lose their significance. Instead, it unfolds a bitter truth that relationships tend to be formed and valued according to one’s status in society. This can be witnessed through her Dua Mama’s manner of listing guests based on their life achievements, reflecting how social recognition outweighs genuine human connection. As Amara states, “As if doctored by slot machine, the guests fell into sections\_ ‘the beyonds’ stood at the center, surrounded by ‘the equals’, while ‘the earlys’ flitted nervously around both.” (76)

Another reality that unfolded before her (may be the most important one) was the conduct of society under the façade of securing a “good” life partner for their children. Through this, a new and unsettling concept of marriage was revealed to her, one that mirrored the stark truth behind social connections, “Amara had learnt that in Indian society, everything – prayer, education, family, beauty, chastity and career- was a rung of the ladder of life, which had to be climbed to reach the top rung: marriage.” (74). In this sense, marriage was not celebrated as a union of companionship or love but rather upheld as the decisive marker of social validation and personal success.

In the midst of an elite social circle, Amara’s life took a sudden turn when Daminiji, the wealthy mother of Prashant Roy, chose her as a suitable bride for her son, valuing traditional ideals over modern outlooks. This decision reflects the irony of how older generations often overshadow modernization with their conventional beliefs. Out of deep respect and affection for his mother, Prashant agreed to marry Amara, not for his own choice but to please her. Marriages built on the will of others are usually fragile, and so was Amara’s relationship with her husband. Although she tried her best to make the marriage work, all her efforts went in vain, leaving her isolated. “She entered the room feeling, as always, like an intruder. Maybe this was because she couldn’t find the I in their room.” (103)

Amara’s marriage with Prashant lacked true companionship grounded in love, care, and communication. She went to great lengths to bridge the emotional chasm between them: cooking his favorite meals, keeping the house exactly as he wanted, dressing and even thinking according to his preferences. In essence, she molded herself into the “ideal wife” she believed he desired—yet despite these sacrifices, she still failed to find a place in his heart. This underscores a harsh truth about relationships: the image one creates in another’s mind at first sight often remains unchanged, no matter how much effort is invested afterward.

What’s particularly striking is that Amara didn’t endure oppressive or domineering behavior from her in-laws—Daminiji, for instance, was warm and encouraging toward her. Still, the marriage died not from conflict. Still, neglect, an emotional void created between Amara and Prashant—a slow erosion of connection rather than explosive confrontation, and after six years of constant tension, the marriage finally came to an end, thereby relegating Amara once again to social condemnation from both her family and the wider community. Amara’s divorce compelled her to return to India, which, ironically, became the turning point in her transformation. Yet, this journey was far from smooth; it was marked by uncertainty, rejection, and even resentment from her parents. For a while, she was left broken and shattered. However, what initially appeared as defeat eventually paved the way for renewal. With Lalit’s presence, she found the love, care, and companionship that had long been denied to her. Along with this, she turned herself from a timid and



introverted woman into a bold, self-reliant individual, capable of confronting the world with her own strength. By rebuilding her life and reclaiming her sense of agency, she resisted the rigid and deterministic roles imposed upon her by patriarchal society. Significantly, the novel concludes with the reappearance of the astrologer predicting the future of Kiara, Amara's adopted daughter, symbolizing not only continuity but also the enduring possibility of hope, resilience, and change.

Meghna Pant illustrates a huge transformation in the behavior and outlook of her protagonist from hovering over the fear, as it quotes:

What would happen to her once she was divorced? How would her parents react? What would people say? What box would she tick in forms asking about her marital status? Who would want to marry her again? She was almost thirty; when would she have children? Amara couldn't even envision spending her life alone, leave alone actually do it.(143)

To the bold declaration in front of Lalit on Kiara's adoption, "I hope she'll respect me more if she knows that I fought for her and didn't act like a coward. And if things get worse then I'll move to a city where women like me are not singled out."(290)

Meghna Pant's clear portrayal of her characters in response to changing circumstances, align her narrative with modernist sensibilities. Through this shift, she redefines conventional notions of marriage, divorce, women's empowerment, and even the possibility of love after divorce. Most significantly, through the character of Amara, the narrator presents the image of the "new woman"—a figure who challenges societal expectations, asserts her individuality, and embodies resilience in the face of adversity.

## FINDINGS

Through the analysis of Meghna Pant's novel, the protagonist Amara illustrates that the thread of a woman's existence ultimately lies in her own hands, which is often obscured by patriarchal expectations and maternal responsibilities that can only be reclaimed through self-awareness and self-realization. Even Amara's migration to the United States reflects the common pursuit of most individuals in the quest for better livelihood and stability abroad; in a totally new environment, this often results in losing their sense of identity and becoming victims of an identity crisis, especially women who are the direct victims of such circumstances. Despite these, strong voices like Amara's demonstrate that, through determination and self-belief, women can successfully navigate such challenges.

## CONCLUSION

The journey of Amara provides a new insight for people, especially women, to confront their problems. Her rise from inwardness and the obscurity of the real world to standing alone against all odds for her dignity and self-respect renders the novel a catalyst for overcoming challenges. The outcome of such exploration is reflected in Elaine Showalter's expression: "'Feminist scholars and critics have given women's fiction a critical room of its own in the house of literary history. Now we are free to come and go as we please, not in sorrow but in laughter".(Showalter' 320) This demonstrates the transformed scenario of a conservative society, shaped as a result of women raising their voices against oppression and the freedom that writer got to explore boldly through their narration.

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