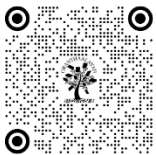


FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN SELECT PLAYS OF MANJULA PADMANABHAN AND MAHASWETA DEVI

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the feminist perspectives evident in select plays by Manjula Padmanabhan and Mahasweta Devi, two influential Indian writers known for challenging traditional gender norms and societal structures. Drawing from Simone de Beauvoir's concepts of The Other, immanence and transcendence, Situation and Freedom, and myths and reality, the paper examines how these playwrights confront and deconstruct prevailing myths and stereotypes surrounding women in Indian society.

Through an analysis of Padmanabhan's *Escape* and *The Island of Lost Girls*, as well as Devi's *Mother of 1084* and other works, the paper highlights the portrayal of women's struggles and agency within their respective contexts. Padmanabhan's dystopian narratives challenge societal norms and expectations, while Devi's realistic portrayals shed light on the intersectionality of gender, caste, and socio-economic factors in shaping women's experiences.

Keywords: Padmanabhan, Devi, Paper

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminist ideas have changed the world, and in the western world, they have brought about immense changes. From the university to the workplace, the feminist ideology of equal pay and equal work opportunities has all come to the forefront. Feminism is also a social and political movement that advocates for gender equality, challenges traditional gender roles, and even promotes women's rights. "Feminism is the radical notion that women are human beings" (hooks 27). This foundational quote establishes the core premise of feminist thought and its basic demand for human dignity.

This is a fundamental tenet of feminism, but it also addresses significant issues like sexism, oppression, and discrimination that women experience in various spheres of society. This is also an important aspect of feminism. It also encompasses a diverse range of perspectives and approaches, and that would include intersectionality. When one considers this, they encapsulate factors such as race, class, and sexuality, which will intersect with gender as well. Feminist theory is not only about understanding but also about action. It is not enough to describe the world; we must also change it" (Hooks 8). This highlights the core principle of feminism, which is to address and challenge discrimination, sexism, and oppression faced by women in society. It emphasises the importance of taking action to create change, rather than just understanding the issues. The quote emphasises the intersectionality of feminist theory,

recognising that factors such as race, class, and sexuality intersect with gender. Overall, feminism is not only about analysing the world but also about actively working towards a more equitable society for all individuals.

The feminist movement has been sweeping the nation for over a century, and this movement has empowered a lot of women, helped in dismantling patriarchal structures, and helped in creating a more equitable and inclusive society for all genders. It is important to remember that feminism is not a monolithic movement, and there are various branches and perspectives within it. By acknowledging these differences and working together towards common goals, we can create a more unified and effective movement for gender equality. Ultimately, the goal of feminism is to create a world where all individuals have equal rights, opportunities, and representation, regardless of their gender.

One of the most important contributors to feminist thought is Simone de Beauvoir, and she has criticised writers for struggling to make individual experiences universal. She has aimed to differentiate herself from earlier female writers in many ways. She analyses women's situations, and she traces back to World War I and how things have all changed. She has also highlighted the roots of women's issues in her article, *Feminity: The Trap*. This has many interesting ideas put forth in it. One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (Beauvoir 283). This seminal quote encapsulates Beauvoir's argument that gender is socially constructed rather than biologically determined.

Beauvoir has advocated for sexual freedom and equality, and she has challenged societal norms.

In fact, her ideas have influenced feminist movements in France. Beauvoir shifted towards socialist politics in the late 1960s. In fact, she was involved with the young French Maoists and altered her interpretation of her works as well. Beauvoir's influential work to date includes *The Second Sex*. There are a lot of contributions she has made as far as literary criticism is concerned. Beauvoir's contribution has had a lasting impact on feminist discourse and activism.

Her exploration of existentialist themes in her writing has also been widely studied and praised. Beauvoir's unique perspective as a woman in a male-dominated philosophical world has brought attention to the importance of gender equality in intellectual circles. Additionally, her personal relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre and their unconventional partnership have been a subject of fascination for many scholars and readers. Overall, Beauvoir's legacy as a feminist thinker and writer continues to inspire and challenge readers to rethink traditional societal norms and structures.

The whole of feminine history has been man-made. Just as in America there is no Negro problem, but rather a white problem; just as anti-Semitism is not a Jewish problem, it is our problem; so the woman problem has always been a man problem(Beauvoir 23).

Simone de Beauvoir emphasises the idea that, throughout history, men have created and perpetuated the "woman problem," which is the issue of women's rights and equality. By drawing parallels to other societal issues like racism and anti-Semitism, Beauvoir is emphasising the need for society as a whole to recognise and address the systemic inequalities that exist. This quote challenges readers to reexamine traditional gender roles and question the power dynamics that have shaped feminine history. Beauvoir's words serve as a call to action for individuals to confront and dismantle the patriarchal structures that have marginalised women for centuries. Some of the most important concepts in *The Second Sex* by Simone De Beauvoir are the concept of the Other, immanence and transcendence, situation and freedom, and myths and reality.

In the concept of the others, Beauvoir argues that women are considered alien when it comes to relationships with men. They occupy a position of self or subject. Women are seen as the opposite, the negative, and also as subordinate to men. The concept is solely based on her critique of patriarchy and gender inequality.

The other concepts are immanence and transcendence. In this concept, Beauvoir uses these terms to describe the modes of existence of human beings. Immanence here refers to the state of being confined to the present, the body, the material, and also the passive. This transcendence also refers to the state of being able to project oneself into the future, the mind, the abstract, and also the active. De Beauvoir claims that men have also historically reserved transcendence for themselves, while they have been relegating women to immanence. The other concept is that of situation and freedom. This only asserts that human beings are free and responsible for their choices and actions.

De Beauvoir analyses many myths and depictions of women in literature, religion, philosophy, and culture. She demonstrates how these beliefs frequently conflict with one another and misrepresent the actuality of women's experiences. She reveals how these misconceptions are used to support and strengthen the subjugation and isolation of women. De Beauvoir advocates for a discerning and pragmatic perspective in comprehending women as individuals rather than as representations or clichés. For example, de Beauvoir critiques the myth of the "eternal feminine," which portrays women as nurturing, passive beings whose sole purpose is to serve men. She argues that this myth restricts

women's freedom and denies them the opportunity to define themselves on their own terms. By challenging these myths and stereotypes, de Beauvoir advocates for a society where women can fully embrace their agency and autonomy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Argha Basu, Priyanka Tripathi in their paper explores womanhood in Manjula Padmanabhan's futuristic dystopian fiction, particularly in her works *Escape* (2015) and *The Island of Lost Girls* (2017). By analysing these texts, the review aims to uncover how Padmanabhan challenges traditional notions of womanhood and redefines the role of women in society. "In a world of clones and copies, authenticity becomes both precious and dangerous" (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 157). This reflects the dehumanizing effects of standardization on individual identity.

Through a postmodern lens, Padmanabhan's work allows for a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be a woman beyond reproduction and menial labour, ultimately portraying the plurality of truth in action within the model of womanhood.

Shivam Singh, and Gunjan Sushil gives a thought-provoking analysis of *The Island of Lost Girls*, a speculative fiction that explores the concept of marine animals being reduced to mere meat. The paper explores the hyperseparation of animals and humans in a dystopian world where anthropocentric thinking is dominant through the eyes of animal rights activists like Val Plumwood, Gary L. Francione, and David Eaton. It challenges readers to reconsider their understanding of animal identity and the ethical implications of how we perceive beings that are often overlooked in our society.

This research paper provides a thorough analysis of Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Lights Out* (2000), focusing on the themes of gender insensitivity and violence. The paper commends Padmanabhan for her realistic approach to addressing societal issues, particularly in relation to women. By presenting the perspectives and narratives of women in a believable manner, the playwright successfully sheds light on the challenges they face in society. Overall, this paper highlights the importance of Padmanabhan's work in promoting positive behavioural change among women and addressing social realities.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her paper about *Devi*, explores the societal systems and cultural norms in India that perpetuate violence against women, using literature as a tool for resistance. The tribal woman's body is the text on which the patriarchal society writes its dystopic narrative" (Spivak 118). This illuminates how female bodies become sites of social oppression.

Through her works, such as *Old Women*, *Devi* sheds light on the struggles faced by marginalised women like Dulali and Andi, highlighting the intersectionality of factors such as poverty and government neglect that contribute to their hardships. Her writing not only serves as a critique of Indian society but also contributes to the feminist literary movement in India.

Jhansi, a prominent Bengali writer, is passionate about history and her female protagonist. She is known for her strong stance against the mistreatment of lower castes, particularly women, and her advocacy for the rights of the 'Untouchables'. Through her impactful work, "*Draupadi*," she sheds light on the harsh realities faced by those fighting for freedom from societal constraints and political oppression. Jhansi's research reveals the hidden truths behind socioeconomic and political barriers, bringing attention to important issues of social justice.

In a recent research review, the life and works of Mahasweta Devi were explored, focusing on how her narratives in works such as *Draupadi*, *Rudali*, and *Mother of 1084* depicted the harsh reality of the oppressed. The review discusses how her writings forced readers to confront uncomfortable truths and examines her influence on contemporary movements. It also highlights Mahasweta Devi's lasting impact as a celebrated author, fearless reformer, and revolutionary activist, whose ideologies continue to inspire activists and reformers in their fight against social injustices today.

In her translated work "*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*," Mahasweta Devi delves into the intricate relationship between tribal communities and their environment, particularly their survival amidst exploitation by landlords and money lenders. She emphasises these tribes' ecological knowledge and their fortitude in the face of adversity through her writing. This review aims to explore the theme of exploitation from a postcolonial ecofeminist perspective, as portrayed in Devi's works.

The existing research on Manjula Padmanabhan's and Mahasweta's " primarily focuses on themes related to challenging traditional notions of womanhood, redefining women's roles in society, and critiquing anthropocentric

thinking. While these analyses offer valuable insights into Padmanabhan's narrative and Mahaswetha's ideas, strategies, and socio-political commentary, there remains a notable research gap in examining the intersectionality of gender and feminist perspectives. Specifically, further exploration is needed to understand how Padmanabhan's portrayal of women intersects with issues of Simone De Beauvoir theory. By addressing this gap, scholars can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of Padmanabhan's and Mahaswetha's literary oeuvre and its broader implications for feminist and environmental discourses.

Simone De Beauvoir has been an important person as far as feminist ideas are concerned. In her book, *The Second Sex*, she has four major concepts. The first concept is the other; in both Padmanabhan's play and Mahaswetha's play, the other concepts can be seen. In Padmanabhan's play *Escape*, the protagonist navigates a dystopian world where individuals are marginalised and oppressed by a controlling regime, highlighting the theme of "The Other" as those who are excluded or deemed inferior by societal norms. There are other things that need to be done by all men and women to challenge these oppressive structures and create a more inclusive society where everyone is valued and respected regardless of their differences. By recognising and addressing the concept of "the other," we can work towards a more equitable world for all individuals.

"Perfect ignorance opens the path to perfect obedience." (*Escape* 33) This quote highlights the manipulation of individuals by those in power through enforced ignorance, suppressing independent thought, and perpetuating blind obedience. It reflects the concept of "the other" as individuals who are marginalised and controlled by those in authority. By shedding light on this manipulation and empowering individuals to think critically, we can challenge oppressive systems and promote a more just society. This process of education and awareness can help dismantle the barriers that separate us from one another, ultimately fostering a sense of unity and understanding among all members of society.

"Uniqueness and individual talents belong to the past; today we can duplicate and standardise anyone and anything" (*Escape* 64). This quote reflects the dehumanisation and commodification of individuals, reducing them to mere objects that can be replicated and controlled. It emphasises the erasure of individuality and agency, reinforcing the concept of "the other" as individuals stripped of their humanity and autonomy. By recognising and celebrating the diversity of individuals, we can resist this dehumanising trend and instead promote inclusivity and empathy. Through education and advocacy, we can work towards a society where every person is valued for their unique contributions and perspectives.

In a similar way, in Mahaswetha's play, *Mother of 1084* delves into the perspective of a mother grappling with the loss of her son to a militant uprising, shedding light on the marginalised voices of individuals affected by political violence and social upheaval, thus embodying "The Other" as those on the fringes of mainstream society. "Unable to free herself from the clutches of the male-dominated society, Sujata fails to realise her own being" (15) This quote reflects how Sujata, as a woman, is marginalised and oppressed within the patriarchal societal structure, relegating her to the status of "the other." Through Sujata's character, Mahaswetha challenges the traditional gender roles and power dynamics that perpetuate the marginalisation of women in society, highlighting the need for social change and the empowerment of marginalised voices. The play serves as a powerful critique of the systemic injustices that perpetuate the oppression of individuals like Sujata, urging audiences to confront and address these issues.

"Apart from Sujata and Somu's mother, the third mother who is projected in the story is Mrs. Kapadia... She shows the other side of a mother who also doesn't understand the pain and grief of a mother who has lost her son" (17). This quote contrasts Sujata's experience of loss with Mrs. Kapadia's indifference, demonstrating how societal attitudes towards grief and loss further marginalise and invalidate the experiences of "the other." This juxtaposition highlights the complexity of motherhood and the varying ways in which individuals navigate and respond to loss. It underscores the importance of recognising and validating diverse experiences in order to foster empathy and understanding within society.

By delving into the personal stories of those impacted by conflict and unrest, we are able to see the common thread of pain, loss, and resilience that connects us all as human beings. It is through these narratives that we are reminded of our shared humanity, transcending the barriers of language, culture, and ideology. As we immerse ourselves in these tales of struggle and survival, we are compelled to reexamine our own beliefs and values, opening our hearts and minds to the experiences of others. In doing so, we not only expand our capacity for empathy and understanding but also contribute to the collective healing and reconciliation of our global community.

The next idea that is seen is immaturity and transcendence. Immanence refers to the inherent presence of divinity within all aspects of the world, while transcendence involves rising above limitations and reaching a higher state of being. By exploring these concepts, we are able to deepen our spiritual understanding and connection to something greater than ourselves. In both the works of Padmanabhan and Devi's play, the concepts of immediacy and transcendence can be seen. In Padmanabhan's work, "The Island of Lost Girls" explores the themes of immanence and transcendence through its depiction of characters striving to transcend their oppressive circumstances within a dystopian society. This is also a reflection on the immanent struggle for existence and survival in a harsh environment. "We are the past, the future, and the present. We have broken through," says General in the second book (Padmanabhan 2015, 102). This once again confirms how men are seen as transcendent beings and women are still considered immanent.

Devi's play also delves into the idea of immanence and transcendence as characters navigate through their own personal struggles and strive to find a deeper connection to the divine. Both works highlight the universal human experience of seeking something beyond ourselves in order to find meaning and purpose in life. "If you have loved and revered the mothers who bore you and gave you suck, if the honour of wife, sister, or daughter has been dear to you." (15)

These timeless themes of immanence and transcendence in literature reflect the enduring struggle for equality between genders as well as the eternal quest for spiritual fulfilment. Through the exploration of these concepts, we are reminded of our shared humanity and the universal desire to connect with something greater than ourselves. The words of Devi's play and the profound wisdom they impart serve as a reminder of the importance of honouring and respecting all individuals, regardless of gender or social status.

The next concept that is prevalent in Simone de Beauvoir is situational freedom. Even this concept is seen in both playwrights. In Padmanabhan's *Light Out*, there is some confrontation between the characters' existential dilemma and limited choices within their oppressive situation, prompting reflection on the interplay between situation and freedom in shaping individual agency and autonomy. In both works, characters grapple with the constraints of their circumstances and the choices they must make within them, shedding light on the complex relationship between situation and freedom. This exploration adds depth to the characters' struggles and challenges readers to consider how external factors can impact personal agency.

"It's some sort of religious ceremony, you see, with the local slum dwellers putting on a programme." - Mohan. The local slum residents' "religious ceremony" serves as a representation of the particular circumstance or context in which these people find themselves. Their socioeconomic status as slum dwellers likely plays a significant role in shaping their religious practices and community activities. The ceremony reflects their cultural and social background, as well as the religious traditions that may be prevalent in their community.

Despite the limitations imposed by their situation, such as poverty or social marginalisation, the slum dwellers are exercising their freedom by organising and participating in this ceremony. They are choosing to engage in a meaningful communal activity that holds significance for them, demonstrating their capacity to transcend their circumstances and find purpose and agency within their situation.

Devi's *Play, Old Women*, portrays characters constrained by their socio-economic situations and societal norms, yet they are striving for freedom and agency within their own respective contexts. Thus, it is exploring the tension between freedom and marginalised women's lives. Through the characters' interactions and decisions, Devi's play highlights the resilience and determination of individuals facing systemic barriers. By delving into the complexities of their struggles, the play prompts reflection on the universal struggle for autonomy and empowerment in the face of adversity.

The last part of Simone De Beauvoir is *Myths and Reality*, and in a closer examination, it becomes clear regarding this. Padmanabhan's "The Island of Lost Girls" deconstructs societal myths that surround gender roles and also seems to be compromising women's bodies. "When women reject the patriarchal gaze, they begin to see themselves through their own eyes" (Beauvoir 316). This exposes the harsh reality that lies beneath the veneer of societal norms and expectations.

In "The Island of Lost Girls," the myth aspect is portrayed through the character of Meiji, the last surviving girl, who undergoes a transformative journey that challenges traditional notions of womanhood. Meiji's experiences on the island reflect a mythic quality as she grapples with her identity and struggles with societal expectations. The narrative explores themes of femininity, agency, and self-discovery, presenting a nuanced perspective on the mythic aspects of womanhood within a dystopian setting. "I loved being able to see a dystopian world that I could recognise as specifically Indian and whose machinations didn't need a lot of exposition for me." Samira Nadkarni. Nadkarni expresses appreciation for being able to recognise a dystopian world specifically rooted in Indian culture without needing extensive explanation. This

suggests that the dystopian elements depicted in the work are familiar and recognisable to her as an Indian individual, reflecting aspects of her own cultural reality. By portraying a dystopian world with distinctly Indian characteristics, the narrative likely confronts and challenges societal norms and realities present in Indian culture.

In the context of Beauvoir's concept of "myth and reality," Nadkarni's statement can be interpreted as a recognition of the importance of representing diverse and culturally specific experiences in storytelling. By presenting a dystopian world that resonates with her cultural background, Nadkarni finds a reflection of her own reality, one that may challenge or subvert prevailing myths and stereotypes about Indian culture and identity. This representation allows for a more nuanced exploration of the complexities of Indian society and individual experiences, moving beyond simplified or stereotypical narratives.

The other ideas that are important are in Mahadevi's plays, and they deal with Devi's "Breast Stories," which certainly challenges cultural myths and stereotypes surrounding the female body, as well as those that are particularly the breasts. This not only presents the narrative that disrupts the traditional notions of beauty, motherhood, and womanhood, but it also certainly illuminates the gap between myths and the realities for women in Indian society.

The statement suggests that in tribal societies, the practice of exchanging goods or money between the groom and the bride's family differs from the dowry system commonly found in other cultural contexts. In the dowry system, the bride's family provides gifts or money to the groom's family as part of the marriage arrangement, whereas in some tribal societies, the groom or his family pays a bride price to the bride's family.

From the perspective of Beauvoir's concept of "myth and reality," this statement challenges the myth that there is a universal or natural form of marriage arrangement, such as the dowry system. The statement highlights the diversity of cultural practices surrounding marriage and challenges the notion that one specific system is inherently superior or more valid than others.

By acknowledging the existence of different marriage customs, the statement confronts the myth that there is a single, fixed reality regarding marriage practices. It emphasises the importance of understanding and respecting diverse cultural perspectives and practices, rather than imposing dominant cultural norms as universal truths.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research article delves into the feminist perspectives evident in select plays by Manjula Padmanabhan and Mahasweta Devi, two influential Indian writers whose works challenge traditional gender norms and societal structures. Drawing from Simone de Beauvoir's concepts of "The Other," immanence and transcendence, situation and freedom, and myths and reality, the article explores how these writers confront and deconstruct prevailing myths and stereotypes surrounding women in Indian society.

Through an examination of Padmanabhan's "Escape" and "The Island of Lost Girls," Devi's "Mother of 1084," and other works, the article highlights the ways in which these authors portray the struggles and agency of women within their respective contexts. Padmanabhan's dystopian narratives challenge societal norms and expectations, while Devi's realistic portrayals shed light on the intersectionality of gender, caste, and socio-economic factors in shaping women's experiences.

Furthermore, the article examines how Beauvoir's concepts resonate in the themes and characters depicted in these plays, from the marginalised status of women as "the other" to the tension between immanence and transcendence in their quest for freedom and agency. By deconstructing myths and exposing realities, these playwrights contribute to the broader feminist discourse and advocate for a more equitable and inclusive society for all genders.

In summary, this research article underscores the importance of literature as a tool for challenging societal norms and promoting gender equality. By analysing the works of Padmanabhan and Devi through the lens of feminist theory, the article offers valuable insights into the complexities of women's experiences in Indian society and highlights the ongoing struggle for gender justice and empowerment.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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