



Negotiating Identity and Womanhood: A Feminist Reading of *One and a Half Wife* by Meghna Pant

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Abstract— *In One and a Half Wife*, Meghna Pant writes a powerful story about what it means to be a woman while navigating concepts of identity, displacement, and self-realization through the lenses of patriarchy, migration, and cultural hybridity. In this paper I offer a feminist reading of the novel as I explore how Amara Malhotra, the protagonist, manoeuvres her identity and femininity in the face of clashing social demands and transnational realities. The story follows Amara as she navigates her way back and forth between India and the States, encapsulating the lives of many diasporic women who exist in the liminal space between tradition and modernity. Pant uses Amara's shifting awareness to question how Indian and immigrant women have been shaped by entrenched patriarchal standards, exposing both the price of compliance and the power of self-assertion. Employing feminist theoretical insights from Simone de Beauvoir and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, this paper questions the representation of Amara in her role as an incomplete “half-wife,” a metaphor for the disjointed identity of women in a patriarchal system. It carries on to assess how Pant, by the deconstruction of the romanticized details on matrimony, chastity and sacrifice, discloses the cultural and religious patriarchy-enabled subjugation. In the end, Amara's road to self-acceptance and self-reliance is a reclamation of power, redefining what it means to be a woman outside of the expectations of society. Locating *One and a Half Wife* in the feminist/postcolonial discourses, the paper asserts that not only Pant raises the voicing of diasporic Indian woman but also questions the universals on gender, belonging and freedom. It is then that the novel transforms into a tale of rebellion and restoration, in which the notion of identity and womanhood are seen as moving acts of negotiation rather than static markers by which one is defined.



Keywords— *Self-realization, womanhood, patriarchy, feminism, and diaspora*

INTRODUCTION

In this book, Meghna Pant presents a nuanced and sharply critical reflection on gender and identity-formation and what it means to be a woman in contemporary India, as these experiences are mediated through migration, marriage, and ideas of cultural disjunction. This book chronicles the life of Amara Malhotra, born in Shimla who as a child moves to the States with her parents, imbibes Western values and culture, and subsequently comes back to India with her husband after her marriage trajectory had met its natural course. Within this arc, Pant probes the definition of femininity when conservative and progressive identities are at odds: Amara is stuck between familial obligations—submission, virginity, glorifying parental and

societal pride—and her aspirations of agency, self-actualization, and a genuine identity (Pant).

While Pant's narrative presents a woman moving through separation and return, it also engages with the negotiation of female identity against a patriarchal backdrop of compression. That her role as close to “wife” is privileged but circumscribed: marriage becomes battleground of dream and imprisonment: a badge of community often insulated far beyond its local outskirts too frequently outweighing individual ambition. The ugly fallout of her divorce the stigma, the depression, the “loss of honour” exposes how femininity in this setting is shrivelled, controlled, and trapped in the bounds of relational duty and sacrifice (Dutt, D Cunha).

Pant also troubles the tradition versus modernity binary by revealing as both insufficient in meeting the expectations upon Amara. This return to India is not a return to a comfortable equilibrium but to re-negotiation; re-negotiation of what identity she wants to form, what traditions she accepts, what it is that she rejects, though and how she reclaims her agency in a society which expects women to assimilate the contradictions of society. Therefore, through a feminist reading the text *One and a Half Wife* is discovered to be involved with power, voice, and resistance, and thus the text comes to the conclusion that womanhood and identity in general is not static, but in flux (Kumar 72).

Feminist works attempt to create equal opportunities for women's position and recognition in society. Women's empowerment has had a significant impact on current society.

Although women's roles and appreciation have improved over time, misconceptions about feminine identity persist. Women are being recognized for their professional accomplishments, but their household obligations, such as cooking and childrearing, continue to be overlooked. To pursue a career, women often need to juggle domestic and professional responsibilities.

In any event, women are expected to put their needs first while men are seen as the family's main provider. households' obligations. Divorce is frowned upon in Indian civilizations, and those who are divorced must deal with the social and cultural stigmas associated with the idea of "being divorced." The psychological effects of divorce are profoundly depressing. When a person's marriage fails, it can be incredibly challenging for them to get over the negative thoughts and relationship destruction. Even though divorce is a decision made by each spouse with their own agreement, ending a marriage leaves people vulnerable and shattered on many levels—socially, culturally, individually, monetarily, and mentally (Naz 10).

About the Author

Meghna Pant is a contemporary Indian writer whose writings reflect feminism, gender issues, and identity inequality. She was born in Shimla, but spent the majority of her early years in Mumbai and Delhi. She graduated from St. Xavier College in Mumbai with a bachelor's degree in statistics and economics. She was awarded a scholarship to study finance for an MBA at Singapore's Nanyang Business School. She graduated from the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland with a master's degree in international management. She is a well-known journalist and speaker. Meghna decided to pursue a career in business journalism after earning her MBA.

She has shared his ideas in various discourse standings including famous TEDx show, Pune International Literary Festival, Kala Ghoda Literary festival, Jaipur Literature Festival and Young Maker's Conclave, #RiseWithTwitter, Lucknow Literature Carnival, Lito mania, Think Literature, Chandigarh Literati TISS Literature festival, LitFest, Women Writers fest etc. Pant talks liberally on social issues such as rape, domestic violence, body-shaming, miscarriage and surrogacy etc. Pant has worked as business news anchor with various renowned channels including NDTV, Bloomberg-UTV and Times Now. Till now in her career, she has got the chance to meet and interview President Obama, Mukesh Ambani, Sir Richard Branson, Hillary Clinton, Ratan Tata and Shah Rukh Khan, among others. Pant is the sister of famous comedian and artist Sorabh Pant. She currently lives with her husband in Mumbai and blessed with a daughter.

Before Meghna made the decision to confront her abuser, she had long been a victim of domestic abuse. It is partly the cause of her enthusiasm. to speak out against domestic abuse since she had personally experienced the horrific experience of falling victim to it.

Domestic abuse is a severe and cruel social menace, but most of the time women lack the bravery to talk about it because they are afraid of being judged and dishonoured by society. For these individuals, Meghna emerges as an inspiration and a source of hope for escaping their hopeless circumstances. Meghna used her TEDx lecture to raise awareness about domestic abuse by sharing her message, "Stop the Violence, Stop the Silence." aggression.

An Analysis of *One and a Half Wife*

The coming-of-age story of Amara Malhotra, an innocent and submissive Indian girl whose life is governed by her mother's beliefs and morals, is told in *One and a Half Wife* beliefs. The story begins when she is 14 years old. She is her parents' only child. Amara's only option since she was a young child was to appease her mother; "Biji's desire contoured Amara's identity." The needs she had to satisfy before herself—"God's desire," "Biji's (her mother's) desire," and "His desire"—shadowed her own identity. "His" was her future spouse, and he had been in her life since she was a young child, so she never felt alone. Little ones. Every discussion, her toys, her attire, and her manners all featured an imaginary "He." For her unidentified husband, she was expected to become the perfect "ideal woman and wife."

The spectre of another human being was so strong that Amara felt like she had an invisible twin, whose identity had been meshed into hers. She accepted that she was to have no 'I' in her life;

before meeting him, she would be known as 'We', the Malhotra family and after meeting Him she would be known as 'Us', the married couple. (Pant, 9).

Amara was taught that marriage was a lifelong institution for girls, as permanent as death and unchangeable as aging. It was fleeting. Thus, she was unable to comprehend what divorce meant when she learned of her neighbours' daughter Shikha Arora's "failed marriage." Shikha's parents permitted her daughter to remain with them following her divorce, but they were subjected to social marginalization and derisive looks from the community. Nobody asked them to weddings or celebrations, and everyone avoided them. They had a tiny storefront where people stopped to buy groceries, but nobody noticed them when they went for walks in the evening.

Amara's mother forbids her from purchasing anything from Aroras because she was certain that "Shikha's jinn" would have an impact on her daughter. However, Amara occasionally sent flowers outside Didi's home to cheer her up because she felt bad for her Shikha didi. Within two years of getting married, Shikha got divorced. Although she now lived with her parents, her position as a divorcee diminished her social standing. Here, Pant paints a pitiful image of the social repercussions divorced women must deal with. Shikha was a beautiful and smart woman. She was taught to become a doctor after receiving a scholarship to a medical school, but the term "divorcee" marred all of her brilliance. She felt ashamed and humiliated for no fault of her own.

Amara and her mother visit an astrologer to have Amara's destiny predicted as the story progresses. Her mother's expectations are shaped by the astrologer's sardonic statement that she is destined to become "*one and a half wife*," which not only foreshadows the story's main plot but also becomes her top concern and worries that characterize Amara's existence.

In spite of the main character, the plot centres on Amara's mother, "Bijji," whose presence plays a major role in the protagonist's life and who has been portrayed as a symbol of the social principle's deception and prevalent conservative views. Her words and deeds demonstrate the deeply rooted convictions and prevalent social mindset. She forces these values on Amara, forcing her to view the world through inherited customs as opposed to autonomous thought. Amara is forced to repress her own wishes and opinions as a result of her subjectivity being restricted under a strict community framework. The conflict between obedience and the dormant desire for

independence that characterizes Amara's struggle is highlighted by this forced conformity:

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).

In pursuit of her aspirations, Bijji relocates abroad with significant support from her brother Dua Mama. Her goal is to secure a better marriage for her daughter and gain greater respect within society. While everything may seem promising from afar, the reality only unfolds upon closer inspection. The scenario Bijji envisioned in America—filled with happiness and ample opportunities—ultimately exposes the harsh truths of assimilation challenges that immigrants face in a developed country. This leads to despair and confusion for Amara's family, who must navigate the trials of immigrant life, cultural differences, and even rejection from their own relatives.

Among them all, Amara bore the greatest burden, sacrificing her own desires solely to keep her mother content. She encountered challenges at every turn—be it at school, in her Dua Mama's home, or within society as a whole. The most agonizing aspect was her profound isolation, having no one to confide in about her pain. Amara transcends the role of a mere character; she embodies the silent struggles of countless girls who endure difficulties for the sake of their families' happiness and to fulfill societal expectations. Her life is constrained by what the narrative identifies as three ironies—"the curse of beauty," "the curse of money," and "the curse of opportunity"—each highlighting the contradictions of a patriarchal and materialistic society that restricts women's freedom to shape their own futures.

Life constitutes a continuum characterized by an extensive array of educational experiences; at each juncture, it imparts insights that fundamentally alter our worldview and augment the compendium of our lived experiences. In a parallel manner, within the narrative, when she endeavoured to acclimatize to the novel milieu—one that revealed itself to her in unforeseen manners—she came to the realization that the ambition of attaining elevated social standing often diminishes the importance of interpersonal relationships. Rather, it unveils a harsh reality in which relationships are frequently established and esteemed in accordance with an individual's societal standing. This phenomenon is exemplified by her Dua Mama's practice of categorizing guests based on their accomplishments in life, illustrating how societal

validation supersedes authentic human connections. As Amara articulates, “As if doctored by slot machine, the guests fell into sections_ ‘the beyond’ stood at the centre, surrounded by ‘the equals’, while ‘the early’ flitted nervously around both.” (Pant 76).

Another reality that emerged before her (potentially the most significant one) was the behaviour of society under the guise of ensuring a “desirable” life partner for their offspring. Through this lens, a novel and disconcerting conception of marriage was unveiled to her, one that reflected the unvarnished reality underlying social affiliations: “Amara had learnt that in Indian society, everything – prayer, education, family, beauty, chastity and career - represented a rung on the ladder of life, which had to be ascended to attain the highest rung: marriage.” (74).

In this context, marriage was not commemorated as a union founded on companionship or affection but rather upheld as the definitive indicator of social legitimacy and individual achievement.

Amara's life abruptly changed in the middle of an exclusive social circle when Damini, Prashant Roy's wealthy mother, selected her as a suitable spouse for her son, prioritizing traditional values over contemporary perspectives. This choice illustrates the paradox that older generations frequently eclipse modernization with their traditional views. Prashant consented to marry Amara out of a great deal of love and respect for his mother, not out of personal preference but rather to appease her. Like most marriages based on the will of others, Amara's marriage to her husband was unstable. She made every attempt to keep the marriage together, but it was all in vain, leaving her alone. “She entered the room feeling, as always, like an intruder. Maybe this was because she couldn't find the I in their room.” (Pant,103).

There was no meaningful companionship based on love, care, and communication in Amara and Prashant's marriage. She cooked his favourite foods, kept the house just how he wanted it, dressed him, and even thought in accordance with his preferences in an effort to close the emotional gap between them. Essentially, she shaped. Despite her efforts to transform herself into the “ideal wife” she thought he wanted, she was unable to win his affection. This highlights a hard reality about relationships: no matter how much work is put in later, the impression one makes of someone at first sight frequently doesn't change (Yadav 45).

It's particularly interesting that Amara didn't have to put up with controlling or repressive conduct from her in-laws; for example, Damini was kind and supportive to her. However, the disagreement did not cause the marriage to fail. Nevertheless, after six years of continuous conflict,

Amara and Prashant's marriage ended due to neglect, an emotional hole that developed between them—a gradual deterioration of connection rather than an explosive clash. Amara was eventually condemned by her family and the larger community once more.

Ironically, Amara's change began when she was forced to return to India due to her divorce.

Meghna Pant uses a particular quote to show how her protagonist's actions and perspective drastically change from hanging over the fear:

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. (Pant,143).

To the bold declaration Infront 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.” (Pant,290).

Meghna Pant's novel is in alignment with modernist sensibilities because of the way she depicts her characters' reactions to shifting conditions. She redefines traditional ideas about marriage, divorce, women's empowerment, and even the possibility of love after divorce through this change. Most importantly, via the persona of the narrator, Amara, portrays the picture of the “new woman”—a person who defies social norms, embraces her uniqueness, and demonstrates fortitude in the face of difficulty.

CONCLUSION

In *One and a Half Wife*, Meghna Pant strives to tear down the unjust customs that are imposed on divorced people's identities in Indian society. Divorce is by no means a good or ideal solution to any issue, but occasionally it becomes essential for all concerned. In many parts of India, “being divorced” is still frowned upon, and Indian society are frequently judgmental in these situations. Even though the book depicts the challenging outcomes faced by divorced individuals, it also offers a glimmer of optimism for Indian cultures in transition. The 16-year gap indicates a significant shift in people's tolerance and behaviour toward traditional ideas and cultures.

Amara's experience gives people—especially women—a fresh perspective on how to deal with their issues. The novel serves as a stimulus for overcoming

obstacles because of her journey from inwardness and the obscurity of the actual world to standing alone against all odds for her dignity and self-respect.

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