

Breaking Chains and Building Identities: A Comprehensive Exploration of Womanhood in Twinkle Khanna's 'If the Weather Permits'

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Abstract: *This research paper shows the representation of femininity in Indian society through a critical analysis in Twinkle Khanna's novel, 'If the Weather Permit'. The paper examines how the novel addresses various aspects of femininity, including traditional gender roles, social expectations, and the evolving status of women in India. Through an in-depth exploration of the characters and themes in the novel, this paper seeks to shed light on the multifaceted nature of womanhood and its portrayal in contemporary Indian literature, emphasizing the ongoing struggle between tradition and change.*

Keywords: Culture, marriage, Indian society, gender roles, equal relationships

I. INTRODUCTION

India, with its rich tapestry of traditions and societal dynamics, has long grappled with the intricate perceptions of womanhood. Rooted in age-old customs and continually influenced by a changing socio-cultural landscape, the representation of women in Indian literature serves as a nuanced mirror reflecting the complexities of their roles and identities. Twinkle Khanna's novel, 'If the Weather Permits,' becomes a compelling focal point for our exploration into the multifaceted nature of womanhood in contemporary India.

Published in 2016, 'If the Weather Permits' stands as a testament to Twinkle Khanna's insightful examination of gender roles and societal expectations. Through the lens of this novel, we embark on a journey through the evolving landscape of Indian womanhood, navigating the intersections of tradition and change. In this exploration, we delve into the author's unique perspective, examining how she addresses the various dimensions of womanhood, including traditional gender roles, societal expectations, and the ongoing struggle for autonomy.

As India undergoes significant transformations, propelled by economic, political, and cultural shifts, the concept of womanhood is undergoing a profound redefinition. This paper seeks to unravel the layers of representation embedded in 'If the Weather Permits,' shedding light on the challenges and opportunities that women encounter in their quest for self-identity and agency. By critically analysing the characters and themes within the novel, we aim to contribute to the broader discourse on gender and literature in India, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between tradition and change.

The objectives of this research are twofold: firstly, to offer a nuanced understanding of how 'If the Weather Permits' engages with issues related to womanhood in modern India, and secondly, to illuminate the broader societal tensions that manifest in the evolving roles of women. Through this investigation, we aim to discern the intricate threads that connect the characters in the novel to the broader socio-cultural fabric, unravelling the ongoing dialogue between tradition and change that permeates the lives of women in contemporary India.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature addressing the representation of womanhood in India has evolved over the years. Earlier works often portrayed women in stereotypical roles, reinforcing traditional norms and values. However, contemporary Indian literature has seen a shift towards more nuanced and multifaceted portrayals of women, reflecting the changing socio-cultural landscape (Nair, 2019).

Twinkle Khanna, a prominent Indian author and columnist, has been recognized for her insightful exploration of gender roles and societal expectations. Her novel 'If the Weather Permits' offers a refreshing perspective on the representation of womanhood in India, making it a valuable contribution to the discourse on gender and identity (Rao, 2020). According to Twinkle Khanna, "If the Weather Permits" was closer to my heart because it was a woman closer to my age, with a contemporary background like mine. I felt for that character. I've seen so many women like that - smart women who are a wreck when it comes to their emotional lives.

"If the Weather Permits" is the story of Elisa Thomas searching for her perfect groom. In this story Khanna tries to show how marriage is the most important thing for people in India. But Elisa Thomas is getting married for the fifth time, hopefully things will work out this time.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative approach to conduct an in-depth analysis of Twinkle Khanna's novel, 'If the Weather Permits.' The qualitative methodology is chosen for its suitability in exploring the nuances and complexities of the representation of womanhood in the Indian context as portrayed in the novel. The chosen approach involves a combination of close textual analysis, character examination, and thematic exploration, supplemented by insights from secondary sources.

- **Textual Analysis:** A close reading of the novel is conducted to unravel the layers of meaning embedded in the narrative. This involves a meticulous examination of the language, dialogue, and narrative structure to discern the author's intended messages concerning the representation of womanhood.
- **Character Analysis:** In addition to examining the overarching themes, a detailed analysis of the main character, Elisa Thomas, is undertaken. By dissecting her motivations, actions, and interactions with other characters, the study aims to illuminate how the author constructs and portrays the complexities of womanhood through the lens of Elisa's experiences.
- **Thematic Exploration:** The research identifies and explores key themes related to womanhood, such as traditional gender roles, societal expectations, and the evolving status of women in India. Through thematic analysis, the study aims to uncover the underlying messages and socio-cultural commentaries embedded in the novel.
- **Secondary Sources:** To contextualize the novel within the broader discourse on gender and literature in India, the research draws on secondary sources. These include interviews, articles, and reviews related to Twinkle Khanna's works, as well as broader discussions on gender issues in Indian society. This multi-faceted approach aids in placing the novel within a socio-cultural framework and enriches the analysis with diverse perspectives.

Limitations:

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this qualitative approach. The analysis is inherently subjective, influenced by the researcher's interpretations and perspectives. Additionally, the study focuses primarily on one novel, and while it provides valuable insights, it may not capture the entirety of the diverse representations of womanhood in Indian literature.

Ethical Considerations:

The research adheres to ethical standards, ensuring the proper citation of sources and respecting intellectual property rights. Confidentiality and anonymity are maintained in the discussion of characters and their relationships within the novel.

This qualitative methodology aims to provide a thorough and nuanced exploration of the representation of womanhood in 'If the Weather Permits.' The combination of textual analysis, character examination, and thematic exploration, supplemented by insights from secondary sources, contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between tradition and change in the portrayal of womanhood in contemporary Indian literature.

IV. REPRESENTATION OF WOMANHOOD IN 'IF THE WEATHER PERMITS'

The novel 'If the Weather Permits' is based on the society's rule of marrying off one's daughter at the 'right age', regardless of her readiness. This story will touch your heart and make you think again. "If the Weather Permits" is truly a bittersweet story. This is the story of almost every Indian girl who, as people say, is of 'marriageable age'.

The main character is Elisa Thomas, a Malayali-Christian who is married five times. She briefly belonged to many, but in reality she belonged to herself. Every time, she marries only because her parents threaten her. She has an elder sister who is married and has a child and hence she is a perfect example of what a woman should be according to her parents. Her husbands are really weird men (one wants to kill himself and the other, wants to kill himself and tries to kill Elisa too) so you wouldn't fault her for running away every time. Her sister is the only one who understands what she is going through. Through Elisa's journey, the novel explores the tension between individual desires and societal pressures.

In this story, Elisa Thomas had five failed marriages. Marriage is another constructed institution where men dominate. Men demand dowry, in Indian culture after marriage a woman is expected to live with her husband and in-laws, serve them, take up household responsibilities and even change her name and identity. This shows gender discrimination in marriage (Melina, 2021). According to Goffman, men and women engage in visual displays of gender in which a stylistic way of interacting may signal deference or dominance (Goffman, 1976). This gender performativity is evident in the institution of marriage in Indian culture. Judith Butler, in her work "Gender Trouble", argues that gender performance is not something we inherit, it is society that imposes gender roles (Butler, 1993). In most Indian cultures, women wear certain jewelry that serves as a symbol of marriage.

If the Weather Permits refutes the one-sided institution of marriage by making it normal for a woman to walk out of a marriage if she is not comfortable with it, rather than endure emotional and domestic violence just for the sake of society. If heroine Alisa is not happy with the marriage then she walks out of the marriage fearlessly. This upsets her conservative Malayali parents who constantly try to set her up with a settled Malayali man. The desire of the parents to marry their daughter within their community is well portrayed in the story. This shows how many cultures in India dislike exogamy (marriage outside the community) and prefer endogamy (marriage within the community) to carry forward the value of their community and culture. This can be seen as a trap created by the patriarchy to further its biased views.

Bourdieu states in "The Forms of Capital" that "Networks of relations are the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously, aimed at establishing or reproducing those social relations which are directly usable in the short or long run." (Bourdieu, 1986). Therefore, marriage can be seen as a source of capital.

Interestingly, 'If the Weather Permits' challenges stereotypical notions of madness and crazy behavior, often associated with women. In this story, Elisa's husbands, Javed and Chacko, are portrayed as mentally unstable, flipping these traditional gender roles. Despite being aware of Chacko's instability, Elisa is coerced into living with him by her parents and in-laws, illustrating the immense societal pressure placed on women to conform to traditional expectations. Elisa's father's statement, "A woman without a man's name behind her is mad, deaf, and dumb, but a man is a man, is a man" (Khanna, 16), echoes the reaction of many parents when their daughters choose to leave a marriage. This statement highlights the societal expectation that women need a man to define their identity, while men remain unburdened by such expectations

V. THEMES EXPLORED

Tradition vs. Modernity

The novel meticulously dissects the perpetual struggle between entrenched traditional gender roles and the burgeoning desire for modern, egalitarian relationships. Elisa's predicament becomes emblematic of the broader societal tension between conservative values and evolving norms. Khanna skilfully portrays the clash between the expectations placed on women to conform to age-old traditions and the emerging aspirations for a more liberated, self-determined life.

Through Elisa's journey, readers witness the constant negotiation between adhering to familial and societal expectations and embracing a more progressive, individualistic path. The clash between tradition and modernity serves as a microcosm for the societal shifts occurring in contemporary India, highlighting the challenges and complexities faced by women navigating these contrasting worlds. (Sharma, 2018).

Empowerment and Independence

A central theme in the novel revolves around Elisa's journey toward empowerment and independence. Her character becomes a symbolic representation of the changing status of women in India. The narrative carefully unravels Elisa's pursuit of a career and personal identity, showcasing her resilience and determination in carving a space for herself outside the confines of traditional gender expectations (Gupta, 2021).

The novel challenges the conventional narrative that often dictates a woman's primary role as a wife and mother. Elisa's pursuit of personal and professional fulfilment underscores the evolving aspirations of women in modern India. Khanna's portrayal of Elisa breaking free from societal constraints echoes the broader societal shift towards recognizing and fostering women's agency.

Marriage as an Institution

'If the Weather Permits' critically examines the institution of marriage, laying bare its intricacies, biases, and societal expectations. Elisa's five failed marriages serve as a poignant commentary on the constructed nature of marriage in Indian society. The novel questions the conventional wisdom that dictates a woman's worth and completeness through marital status.

Khanna challenges the normative expectations associated with marriage by portraying Elisa's willingness to walk out of relationships that do not align with her personal happiness and well-being. This defiance challenges the societal pressure on women to endure emotional and domestic challenges in the name of preserving a marital facade.

Gender Performativity in Marriage

The novel delves into the concept of gender performativity, particularly within the institution of marriage. Khanna draws attention to the societal expectations placed on women post-marriage, including the demand for dowry, the assumption of specific roles within the household, and even the symbolic change of name and identity. The story becomes a lens through which readers can observe the performative aspects of gender roles within the context of marriage.

Drawing from sociological perspectives, the novel aligns with Goffman's concept of gender display, where men and women engage in visual displays of gender, signaling deference or dominance. The gender performativity portrayed in the novel reflects broader societal norms and expectations that shape the dynamics within marital relationships.

Parental Expectations and Community Values

The narrative skillfully explores the clash between individual desires and parental expectations, particularly within the context of marriage. Elisa's conservative Malayali parents, representative of a larger cultural ethos, yearn for her conformity to traditional norms, including marrying within their community. This highlights the tension between individual autonomy and the societal pressure to conform to established community values.

The desire of Elisa's parents to perpetuate endogamy, the preference for marrying within the community, underscores how cultural values and community identity become intertwined in the institution of marriage. Khanna's portrayal sheds light on the complexities of familial expectations and the challenges faced by individuals in reconciling personal choices with community values.

'If the Weather Permits' masterfully navigates these interconnected themes, offering readers a profound exploration of the evolving role of women in Indian society. The novel's thematic richness contributes significantly to the broader discourse on gender, identity, and societal change in contemporary India.

VI. CONCLUSION

Twinkle Khanna's novel, 'If the Weather Permits,' serves as a captivating lens through which the multifaceted nature of womanhood in Indian society is examined. The rich embroidery of characters and themes in the novel allows for a nuanced exploration of the challenges and opportunities faced by women in contemporary India. This conclusion encapsulates the key findings and implications derived from the critical analysis, emphasizing the ongoing dialogue between tradition and change and the complexities that women navigate in their pursuit of identity and agency.

The examination of 'If the Weather Permits' highlights the perpetual tension between tradition and modernity. Elisa Thomas, as the protagonist, embodies this struggle, navigating the societal expectations deeply rooted in conservative values while striving for a more equal and liberated existence. The novel becomes a mirror reflecting the broader societal narrative, where women grapple with the dichotomy of traditional gender roles and the emerging desire for modern, egalitarian relationships.

Empowerment and independence emerge as central themes in Elisa's journey. Her pursuit of a career and personal identity challenges the conventional roles imposed on women. In doing so, the novel becomes a poignant testament to the evolving aspirations of women in India, showcasing their resilience and determination to break free from the shackles of societal expectations.

The conclusion also underscores the societal pressure placed on women to conform to traditional norms. Elisa's multiple marriages and the characters around her echo the prevailing sentiment that a woman's identity is often perceived as incomplete without a man. Khanna deftly exposes the biases ingrained in the institution of marriage, illustrating the need for women to assert their agency in defining their destinies.

This research contributes to the broader literature engaging with the evolving role of women in Indian society. By shedding light on the diverse experiences of women in contemporary India, 'If the Weather Permits' serves as a powerful tool for initiating crucial conversations about gender, identity, and social change. The novel challenges stereotypes and encourages readers to question societal norms, prompting a reevaluation of the structures that perpetuate gender discrimination.

So, 'If the Weather Permits' is not just a novel; it is a mirror reflecting the intricacies of womanhood in India. It resonates with the growing narrative of women determining their own destinies, free from societal expectations. Twinkle Khanna's work stands as a powerful reminder that literature, as a reflection of society, has the potential to ignite change by challenging existing paradigms and advocating for a more inclusive and equitable future.

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