



Simone de Beauvoir's concept of socially constructed patriarchal norms in the novel *I Am Vidya*

Annie Sofia A

II MA English

PSG college of Arts & Science

Dr. Brinda P.

Associate Professor

Department of English

PSG College of Arts & Science

Abstract

This article explores the patriarchal framework and gender inequality in Indian families and in society in the novel *I Am Vidya* by Living Smile Vidya. It reflects the culture and norms that give power to the men, depriving power and liberty from women. This article compares Simone de Beauvoir's concept of social construction of women stereotypes that creates patriarchal oppression, with the characters and instances in the novel. The main objective of this article is to bring out the influence of the patriarchal framework in family and society, which serves as the basis of marginalization and oppression. Men take their socially constructed supremacy for granted and continue to show their superiority through dominance and violence.

Key words

Domination, oppression, violence, male-centric norms, patriarchal framework

Introduction

Indian cultural norms and social construction of hierarchy often uphold male-centric norms, resulting in the subjugation of women. Starting from families to social institutions, the patriarchal framework plays an important role. The male dominance and their power over women and other members in the family are normalized. This male supremacy in Indian families and society is evident in the violence perpetrated against women, which mainly includes domestic violence. These kinds of violent acts are legitimized by the Indian families that are deeply rooted in their culture that regards women as inferior beings to men.

Living Smile Vidya was born in 1982 as the sixth child, her parents named her Saravanan when she was identified as a boy by birth by the hospital and the society. She did her MA degree in linguistics but spent most of the time in the department of dramatics. Her dream was to become an actress. She is a Dalit and transgender activist. She is also an author and an Indian actress. *I Am Vidya*, an autobiographical novel, was penned in Tamil by Living Smile Vidya and was translated into English by V. Ramnarayan. This article is analyzed on the basis of the English translation.

In *I Am Vidya*, Vidya describes her childhood as a boy in a patriarchal society where the man holds power and privileges. Vidya's experiences with familial constraints and gender restrictions expose the impact of patriarchy on women's lives, which limit their freedom, self-perception, and personal growth. Vidya's decisions are limited by the social standards that favor male dominance and male authority. *I Am Vidya* is about Vidya's life journey from childhood. She narrates the struggles and hardships she faced from childhood and how she identified her true identity as a woman in the male-centered society by undergoing many verbal and physical abuses. Born and identified as a boy, Vidya had many privileges in her house. Her father held the upper hand. He dominated his wife and children. Though Vidya was younger than her two sisters, she was given more liberty than her sisters and her mother because of her past identity as a boy. Since a boy child was considered valuable, Vidya, who was named Saravanan when born, was the precious child of the family. The sisters, Radha and Manju, had to take care of Saravana and do chores for him. Vidya's father wanted his son to be a District Collector, it was his dream. But he did not have this kind of dream or desire for his daughters. Vidya's father married off Radha and Manju but let his son choose his higher studies. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir says, "she is always under the guardianship of the males. The only question is whether the woman after marriage will remain subject to the authority of her father or of her older brother

- an authority that will extend also to her children - or whether she will become subject to that of her husband.”(97). These daughters were under the control or authority of their father and that authority was transferred to their husbands when they got married. Vidya's father used to boast that his son got the first rank in his class. His pride was his son, but he did not care about his daughter's academics. He used to say that his son's only job in the house was to study.

Vidya's mother used to leave for work at five in the morning. So Radha was given the responsibility to wake her brother and make him study. Radha and Manju cleaned the house and vessels and cooked early in the morning for the family because they were ‘girls’. They also had to make sure that their brother had breakfast and went to school, while all he had to do was study. It was like an unwritten law in their house that was laid down by their father, who holds the power and control over the family. Beauvoir claims that gender is not biological, rather it is socially constructed. The daughters were assigned to do all the domestic work because of their socio-constructed gender. Vidya’s father did not give any liberty to his daughters. In the novel, He warns, “If any of you dares to give him work that interferes with his studies, I'll kill you,” (Vidya 12,13).

After Vidya's parents left for work, Vidya's sister, Radha took care of everything in the house. Though Radha was young, she had to take care of everything because she was a girl. She did all the household chores and also started to cook when she was barely ten years old. Vidya calls Radha as “Goddess”. Though Radha should have been cherished and treasured like a goddess, the patriarchal society exploits the labor of women in the household and treats them as inferior beings. While in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir says, “In brief, she is pressed to become, like her elders, a servant and an idol”(286). The role of women is restricted to serve and nurture. Radha and Manju never complained about the partiality and inequality that happened in the house. The women in Vidya’s family, in general, think in the patriarchal way. They believed the cultural construct of women stereotypes to be true and natural. This belief became the bane of the female population. Women are socially trained from a young age to serve and please men as Beauvoir says in *The Second Sex*, “the treasures of feminine wisdom are poured into her ears, feminine virtues are urged upon her, she is taught cooking, sewing, housekeeping, along with care of her person, charm, and modesty;”(286). Their brother was the only beneficiary of all the advantages and affection, just because he was a boy. In the novel, Vidya says, “I think they came to believe in time that looking after me was the very purpose of

their existence.”(13). Even the sisters believed that they were born to serve their brother because of the patriarchal norms that are followed and believed to be the true Indian culture for generations. Even their daily allowance was not equally distributed. The son got the highest allowance though he was younger than Radha and Manju. Gender inequality was very predominant in Vidya's house. It was normalized and accepted by all the family members because they had no other choice but to follow the socially constructed male-centric norms. All the children were afraid of their father. Even their mother had no liberty to stand up for her children though she loved them and took care of them. Vidya's father used to beat his son if he slowed down in doing his homework. Radha, Manju and even their mother used to get belted if they tried to stop him from hitting his son. He would scream, “Weren't you expected to ensure he did his homework?”(Vidya 15). Though they did nothing wrong, they were punished. Beauvoir discussed this power of man in *The Second Sex*, she says, “In spite of the fecund powers that pervade her, man remains woman's master as he is the master of the fertile earth; she is fated to be subjected, owned, exploited like the Nature whose magical fertility she embodies.”(98). Vidya's father was the representation of the cruelty of patriarchy. He exerted his power and ownership through violence. Men take the other members in the family for granted.

Vidya calls her mother a “brave woman”. Her mother was hardworking and kind. She had no choice but to submit to the oppressive ways of her husband. Because it was believed that only if the wife submitted to the husband, she was considered to be a typical good wife. Beauvoir says, “She seemed in work and in motherhood more a servant than an associate: the objects, the values, the beings she created were not her own wealth but belonged to the family, therefore to the man who was its head.”(124). Vidya's mother was a typical Indian wife who had to face every hardship and oppression that happened in the family without any complaints. Even the Laws of Manusmriti represent a woman as an inferior being who should be a slave to the husband. Though people approached Vidya's mother with great respect, she was a victim of domestic violence. Vidya says, “For all that he terrorized her, kicked her and beat her, she was the strong one in the family. She had great willpower. She might have looked like a fool to accept all the taunts and beatings, but she thought domestic problems should not be taken to the street.”(21) in the novel. Vidya's mother died when she was eleven years old. After her death, within a year, Vidya's father married Lata, who was younger than Radha. As Beauvoir says, “No man would consent to be a woman, but every man wants women

to exist.”(161), Vidya's father could not lead the family without a wife or a mother figure who would take care of the children and the house. Lata was a good person. Even after their mother's death, Vidya's father's oppressive behavior did not fade; instead, the intensity was increased. He thrashed everyone in the family, exhibiting his male supremacy. Their struggles, pains and tears did not bother him in any way. Radha's husband was also a man of patriarchal society, but Radha always stood for her brother. The traditional concept of marriage is built on the basis of the differences in biological sex which maintains fixed gender roles. This traditional framework often leads to a transactional relationship, where men are expected to sustain their power and authority and women are expected to perform duties for men and fulfill the stereotypical expectations of the society. In *The Second Sex*, “Society has always been male; political power has always been in the hands of men. 'Public or simply social authority always belongs to men,' declares Lévi-Strauss at the end of his study of primitive societies.”(96) says Beauvoir. Women never created any stereotypes, it was the men who created these stereotypes for women and blamed it on society.

Vidya's stepmother, Lata was a lovely woman, but Appa's violence extended to her as well. Just like Vidya's mother, Lata too was always in a constant fear of her husband. Lata was married off at a young age. However, Lata gained the courage to voice her opinion and argue with Vidya's father after some years. Vidya would always encourage Lata to stand up for herself and be bold. This patriarchal setup is not only seen in Vidya's house but also in other houses. Aruna is also a transwoman who was a victim of patriarchal family setup. Vidya says, “She too was the recipient of corporal punishment at her father's hands.”(66). These male-centric norms influenced gender discrimination. The male gender was considered to be superior to the other genders. Simon de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* argues that women were considered to be the “other” because they were not men. She says, “her ‘being-the-other’; she is taught that to please she must try to please, she must make herself object; she should therefore renounce her autonomy. She is treated like a live doll and is refused liberty.”(285). Women were mere dolls in the hands of men. The structure of the society is constructed by having man and man-made rules as the centre.

Instances of women being powerless around their husbands can be seen and it is evident in the novel. Vidya says, “women do not even have the right to give alms in this wretched male-dominated society.”(94) So, while begging, Vidya and her friends would not approach women who are with their husbands, as they are voiceless and powerless around the husband. Men show their arrogance and power through violence. When she was begging in a

train, a man slapped her. When she shouted at him, four men, including him, started to attack ruthlessly. They tortured and hit her brutally in the train compartment. Her nose was bleeding and her body was injured. But no one in the compartment tried to rescue or stand up for Vidya. People hesitated to stand against men. It was not safe for the transgenders to beg alone because of these kinds of arrogant men who behaved like wild beasts. These kinds of violent incidents were predominant in the male-dominated world where the men think that it is their privilege to indulge in violence. Vidya was afraid of men trying to molest her when she was out alone. Even the police never take their complaints seriously when they complain about the assaults they faced.

While women are oppressed by the patriarchal society, transgenders are also oppressed by it. The patriarchal setup of the society could not accept the transgenders. The men show their supremacy through the practices of inequality and marginalization. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir says, "If one of the two is in some way privileged, has some advantage, this one prevails over the other and undertakes to keep it in subjection"(87). To gain the highest position in the gender hierarchy, men tend to oppress the other genders. Vidya says, "It is not improbable that a male-dominated society cannot tolerate a man wanting to become a woman. Women who have accepted male domination tend to agree with that view."(137). Femininity is considered an insult to men. Women who believe the man-made norms tend to think in the same way as men. Beauvoir says, "In truth women have never set up female values in opposition to male values; it is man who, desirous of maintaining masculine prerogatives, has invented that divergence. Men have presumed to create a feminine domain - the kingdom of life, of immanence - only in order to lock up women therein."(90) in her work, *The Second Sex*.

Though *The Second Sex* and *I Am Vidya* were written in two different centuries, the social construction of women stereotypes in the patriarchal world remained the same. The man-made norms and male supremacy is predominant in the society despite cultural, period and geographical differences.

Works Cited

1. Vidya, Living Smile. *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*. Rupa Publications India, 2013.
2. Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley, Jonathan Cape, 1953.
3. Choudhary, Monisha. "Simone De Beauvoir and 'The Second Sex': What Is a Woman?" *TheCollector*, 12 Nov. 2023, www.thecollector.com/simone-de-beauvoir-the-second-sex-summary-key-idea.
4. Lee, Kendrick. "Simone De Beauvoir." *Woman Is a Rational Animal*, 24 May 2021, womanisrational.uchicago.edu/2021/02/12/simone-de-beauvoir.
5. Nayar, Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*. Pearson Education India, 2010.
6. Yin, Haodan. "'Constructed Women.'" *International Journal of Education and Humanities*, vol. 13, no. 3, Apr. 2024, pp. 154–58. <https://doi.org/10.54097/55yxkz87>.

