

Claiming Space for Oneself: Feminist Reading of Smriti Ravindra's *The Woman Who Climbed Trees*

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Abstract

The Woman Who Climbed Trees (2023) by Smriti Ravindra is a soul-stirring novel that showcases the miserable plight of women in a society governed by males. Marriage, gender discrimination, power relations between male and female, and toils of women in the family lead to their confinement within the frameworks staked out for them by men. Women suffer, are subjugated and subordinated, and are yet indispensable for running the family, where they are pulled by the traditional roles thrust upon her. But women's access to education, employment, and socio-political awareness has helped them achieve personhood. They no longer want to be connected to and defined by the societal and cultural norms of the patriarchal structure. The objective of this paper, therefore, is to examine and explore the theme of how women in the novel make resistance, claim space for themselves, and search for their identity. Through the lives of three women across different generations, Kaveri, Meena, and Priti, the novelist beautifully captures the complexities of love, acceptance, estrangement, and self-discovery, highlighting the evolution of self-assertion. The novel serves as a poignant exploration of human experience, anchored by protagonists, whose journeys serve as a microcosm of broader societal dynamics. Applying feminism as a research framework, this study delves into the protagonist's journey of self-discovery and her challenges to patriarchal constraints. The analysis elucidates how the women in the novel navigate and resist a male-dominated social labyrinth.

Keywords: Homosexuality, female agency, patriarchal society, marital estrangement, self-discovery

Introduction

The Woman Who Climbed Trees unveils the complexities and custom-bound restrictions faced by women in the patriarchal society and their incessant struggle for identities. It is a poignant and insightful novel that explores the theme of self-hood and self-

realization through the lives of three women across different generations: Kaveri, Meena, and Priti. Kaveri, the matriarch, is portrayed as a strong and defiant woman who embraces her sexuality despite societal disapproval. Her story is one of resilience and courage as she navigates the challenges of living authentically in a conservative society. Meena, Kaveri's daughter, represents a generation caught between tradition and modernity, struggling to find her own identity amidst conflicting societal expectations. Priti, Meena's daughter and the youngest of the three, symbolizes a new generation that is more accepting and understanding of diverse sexualities.

Feminism: An Overview

Feminism is a transformative movement committed to achieving political, social, and economic parity across all genders, with a particular emphasis on confronting systemic inequities that disproportionately affect women. At its core, feminism champions gender equality, the empowerment of women, and the deconstruction of patriarchal frameworks that perpetuate discrimination. Wilfred L. Guerin et al argue that, "In its diversity, feminism is concerned with the marginalization of all women: that is, with their being relegated to a secondary position" (196). Central to feminist ideology is the assertion of individual autonomy, advocating for the inviolable rights of individuals over their bodies and personal lives. Additionally, feminism embraces the principle of intersectionality, acknowledging the complex interplay of race, class, sexuality, and other social categories with gender, which collectively shape unique experiences of oppression. Through persistent activism, solidarity, and advocacy, feminism aspires to create a society where every individual, irrespective of gender, can access equal rights and opportunities.

Feminism vehemently challenges and condemns patriarchy by unveiling and dismantling the systems and structures that uphold male dominance and gender inequality. Patriarchy, a social construct where men hold primary power and occupy dominant roles in political leadership, moral authority, and control over property, has historically marginalized women and other gender minorities. In this context, Sarah Grimke aptly observes that "Man has subjugated women to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort; but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill. He has done all he could do to debase and enslave her mind" (10). Feminism, therefore, aims at exposing "what might be called the mechanics of patriarchy, that is, the cultural 'mind set' in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality" (Barry, 122). Feminists critique these imbalances of power, arguing that patriarchy not only oppresses women but also restricts men by enforcing rigid gender norms.

Mary Wollstonecraft in her spearheading manifesto *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) annuls the age old notion that women are naturally weaker and inferior to men. She believed that lack of education and proper training kept women in a secondary position. Drawing upon the essence of Mary's philosophy, Richard J. Lane writes, "...rather than being naturally passive, inferior, or emotional, women are taught to adopt and express these qualities within a patriarchal society" (635). It is social, political, and pedagogic

conditions, not biological or natural condition, that tame women to be weak. Mary suggests that women must be treated equally and they too should overcome love and passion that degenerates them to secondary status. Reasons, according to her, should be the rational citizenship. Wollstonecraft writes, "In the choice of a husband women should not be led astray by the qualities of a lover" (224). This observation encapsulates the feminist critique of how patriarchy devalues women's experiences and identities, subordinating them to male-defined standards.

In its pursuit of establishing a space within a male-dominated world, feminism aspires to create a society where women's voices, choices, and contributions are equally recognized and valued. Through advocating for legal reforms, driving social change, and empowering women, feminism strives to carve out spaces where women can flourish independently of patriarchal constraints. Feminists dismantle the traditional notion of women as being weak, meek, docile, seductive and sentimental, and strongly assert that such representation of women in literature and art is embedded in social conditioning. Simone de Beauvoir's celebrated phrase "One is not born but rather becomes a woman" (297), was a waking call for women to realise their autonomy and potentiality. She further asserts that "man defines the human, not woman" (qtd. in Guerin et al, p.198). Tolan aptly draws conclusion from *The Second Sex*, and writes:

There is no such thing as feminine nature. There is no physical or psychological reason why women should be inferior to men, and yet, throughout history and across cultures, women had always been second-class citizens... Biological differences do not provide a causal explanation for women's oppression, however their reproductive function has placed women at disadvantage by tying them to the domestic sphere and associating them with the body and thus with animals and nature. Just as man considers himself superior to nature, so he considers himself superior to woman." (pp.320-321)

It means considering women as meek and weak is a fallacy. It is patriarchal culture, social conditioning, and gendered parenting that are responsible for marginalization of women in society and literature. Women's power, potentiality, and productivity are at bay due to unjust and oppressive social organization.

Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) and Virginia Woolf's *Room of One's Own* (1929) argue for the necessity of financial independence and intellectual freedom as essential for women to create their own space. Education, employment and political rights alone can emancipate women. Woolf developed the concept of woman-centric notion of reading and education, and argued that, "the patriarchal education systems and reading practices prevent women readers from reading *as* women. They are constantly trained to read from the men's point of view. Aesthetics, values, literary merits and tradition are adopted by *male* literary authors and critics within the patriarchal institution (such as the university or publishing)" (qtd. in Nayar, p 87).

In brief, feminism is a kind of movement that aims at social, political, and economic enhancement of women, deconstructing and dismantling the gender inequities,

subordination, subjugation, and subservience of women because "feminists perceive women as in the position of a social class exploited by patriarchy at levels (economic, political, ideological)" (Seldon, 135).

Textual Analysis

Homosexuality as a Tool of Resistance

In the novel, the theme of homosexuality unfolds with a profound sensitivity and complexity, intricately weaving through the fabric of societal norms and personal struggles. The novel vividly portrays the protagonist's journey of self-discovery and the multifaceted nature of navigating emerging same-sex desires within the confines of a patriarchal society. Through the character portrayal of Meena, and Priti, Ravindra skillfully portrays the complexities of homosexuality, highlighting the interplay between personal identity, societal expectations, and generational change.

One pivotal moment occurs in the novel, where Meena witnesses a physical display of love between her sisters Kirti and Shanti. She feels awestruck. The passage reads:

Her (Meena's) heart banged and she knew something terrible would happen, somewhere in the world, and to her, if her sisters knew she was watching them. She opened her eyes only narrowly and had the presence of mind to keep her breaths long and deep. Kirti traced her nipples with Shanti's fingers and leaned in close, hovering her nipples like bees over Shanti's mouth. Involuntarily, though she knew this was impossible, Meena opened her mouth to take the nipples in, but she shut it instantly, feeling a loss she could not understand. (44)

These lines encapsulate the moment of intense emotion and fear experienced by Meena as she witnesses a physical display of love between her sisters. Her reaction, characterized by a pounding heart and a sense of impending doom, suggests a deep-seated fear of discovery and judgment. It also conveys her anxiety about her own feelings and desires, which she fears may not be accepted by her family or society. Meena's fear is aptly echoed in Lane's statement that, "by asserting a heterosexual norm and then measuring all other sexual behavior in relation to that norm, variations and differences can be categorized as *deviant, dangerous*, or from a religious perspective *sinful*" (573). Her effort to conceal her presence and control her breathing reflects her attempt to suppress her emotions and hide her true self, highlighting the internal conflict and struggle for acceptance that many individuals face in coming to terms with their sexuality.

The extract poignantly captures the complexity of emotions experienced by individuals grappling with their sexual identity in a society that often stigmatizes or rejects non-normative forms of love. As she grapples with her identity, she finds herself torn between societal expectations and her own desires for authenticity, as depicted in the novel: "Meena's heart banged against her ribs with an intensity that threatened to break its cage. There were long moments when Meena wanted to crush herself upon Kumud, to smell the

scent of her neck, to call her beautiful and to hold her close, but she held herself back. She knew this was wrong. She knew she could only hold hands with her sister-in-law" (65).

This quote underscores the intense internal struggle experienced by Meena as she grapples with her feelings for Kumud, her own sister-in-law. The description of Meena's heart pounding against her ribs suggests a mix of fear, desire, and longing. The phrase 'threatened to break its cage' implies a sense of urgency and overwhelming emotion. Despite her strong desire to express her feelings and physical attraction to Kumud, Meena restrains herself, indicating the internal conflict and societal constraints she faces. The quotation highlights the complexities of human emotion, particularly in the context of suppressed or forbidden love, and emphasizes the challenges individuals face in reconciling their desires with societal expectations. When *Ma* says, "Girls always love girls before they love anyone else, isn't it true?" (165), Preeti expresses her feelings, "My heart began suddenly to bang inside me then, and for the first time I recognized my aching, yearning love for Sachi" (165). It capsulizes a pivotal moment of self-realization and emotional awakening for the narrator. It reflects a deep understanding of the complexities of female relationships and the profound emotional connections that can exist between women. The narrator's heart 'banging inside' her signifies a sudden and intense emotional response, indicating a profound shift in her awareness and perception. In this context, Meena and Preeti challenge traditional notions of love and relationships, suggesting that emotional bonds between women are often foundational and powerful. They understand that "labelling homosexuals from a socially normative perspective as *deviant* was a mode of *social control*" (McIntosh, 183).

Preeti's recognition of her 'aching, yearning love for Sachi' marks a significant moment of self-discovery and acceptance of her own desires. This quotation exemplifies the novel's broader themes of identity, love, and acceptance, inviting readers to reconsider societal norms and expectations regarding love and relationships. Preeti Says:

Sachi and I were married and I was irrevocably and permanently in love. Sachi was very impressed with my letter to her and after one of our weddings, we held hands as tight as we could and we had lots of sex, and once, when no one was looking, we kissed. Another time Sachi pulled her pants down and showed me hers, and I shook my head and said I did not want to show mine to her, and then for the rest of the way back home, we did not know what to say to each other. I was nine then, already in love, already married, already sleepless, and finally one day I pulled my pants down and showed her mine, too. We never talked about it. (168)

This passage underlines the motif of metamorphosis and the nuanced nature of personal identity, prompting readers to contemplate the intricate process of individual growth and transformation over the course of one's life. Preeti and Sachi are in a world where males are no longer central. In this regard, Zimmerman describes lesbianism as "a kind of relationship in which two women's strongest feelings and affections are directed towards each other...spend their time together and share most aspects of their lives with each other" (34).

Preeti's statement "I understand Ma's love for Kumud only after I understand my own love for Sachi, and it is even later that I understand what Ma meant when she said to me once: A woman must love a woman first. There can be no other way. And in men, too, it is the woman in them we love" (376), delves into her evolving comprehension of love and relationships. Initially, she grasps her mother's affection for Kumud only after acknowledging her own emotions for Sachi. This realization leads her to grasp her mother's conviction that a woman must prioritize loving another woman, implying a profound bond and insight shared between women. The protagonist further ponders that in men, it is the feminine aspects within them that are cherished, suggesting a broader theme of appreciating and valuing feminine attributes and empathy in all individuals. This extract intricately examines the intricacies of love, gender, and comprehension, prompting readers to reflect on the nature of relationships and the fundamental essence of love. Throughout the novel, Ravindra skillfully employs language, symbolism, and imagery to convey the women's internal struggles and the societal taboos surrounding homosexuality. As Preeti navigates her desires, and confronts societal expectations, she ultimately finds the courage to assert her true self and pursue her own path. Through her masterful storytelling and poignant character development, Ravindra offers readers a compelling exploration of homosexuality and the enduring struggle for self-acceptance and liberation in the face of societal oppression.

Female Agency

The novel vividly portrays the protagonist's journey towards reclaiming her agency and autonomy amidst societal expectations and personal struggles. Meena defiantly asserts her right to make her own choices: "She picked up her baby and walked the city of temples in search of cinema halls and private screenings on small televisions. She found them tucked behind shrines and shrubs, and she entered dark auditoriums filled with the sounds of fantasy and lost herself within the hushed and excitable crowd. Oftentimes she was the only woman in the auditorium, and always she was the only woman with a baby in her arms" (121). This shows her determination to challenge traditional gender roles and assert her independence, highlighting the strength and resilience that define her character. She represents the complexities of female agency, portraying her defiance against societal constraints and her unwavering commitment to living authentically.

When a policeman mockingly tells Sachi to stay away, she rolls her eyes and says, "Men are just eww" (183). This statement acts as a female agency through Sachi's confident response to a man's comment, showing her independence and refusal to conform to traditional gender roles or expectations. Ma exemplifies female agency through her critique of traditional gender roles and expectations when she says, "Lord Vishnu is a nuisance. He reclines and rests on his useless snake...Poor Lakshmi has no other job than to massage his legs day in and day out. If he stopped sleeping on a snake and started doing something more useful, it would be better, no? Chronic pneumonia and severe rheumatism that is all it is. And that Lakshmi is an idiot. What is the point of being a goddess if you do nothing but press your husband's feet? Donkeys! (185). Ma's blunt assessment of Lord Vishnu and

Goddess Lakshmi challenges the notion of subservience often associated with femininity. Her questioning of the purpose of being a goddess if all one does is serving their husband highlights a feminist perspective on the imbalance of power and labor in traditional Hindu mythology. Ma's boldness in expressing her opinions, even about revered deities, demonstrates a form of agency where she asserts her beliefs and challenges societal norms regarding women's roles and responsibilities. Ma's female agency through her decisive and assertive response is also exemplified when she tells her husband, "If you touch him, I will finish your job for you later. I will chop him up and bury him with the beans." (201) Ma's threat to Papa if he harms Adi showcases her willingness to protect her family and take control of the situation. Her flat voice indicates a firm resolve, highlighting her strength and determination. She portrays her husband as "just a half-boiled egg, just a donkey" (261). This portrayal challenges traditional gender roles by depicting Ma as a strong, proactive figure who is unafraid to assert her authority and protect her loved ones. This moment of assertion signifies her bold and unconventional description of her husband, challenging traditional views of authority and masculinity. Her frank assessment reflects her independence and willingness to express her opinions assertively, highlighting her agency in defining family dynamics. In this manner, women characters in the novel emerge as new women free of "dependence syndrome" (Nahal, 17).

Patriarchal Society

The exploration of patriarchal society is portrayed with a profound depth and sensitivity in the novel. It vividly captures the protagonist's experiences within the confines of a patriarchal society, revealing the challenges and constraints imposed by traditional gender roles. Meena reflects on the limitations imposed on women when she "realized she was not a part of Manmohan's life. His life was with friends, in cities unknown to her. She was destined to wake alone in dim rooms, the ceiling dusky, the blue curtains purple in the darkness, the orange flowers the color of rust. "Society is a great judge, Meena," Manmohan said as she packed his bags for him."(55). This quote illustrates the profound impact of patriarchal norms on Meena's life. She comes to realize that she occupies a peripheral role in Manmohan's life, overshadowed by his friendships and activities in distant cities. This awareness leaves Meena with a sense of isolation, anticipating a future of waking up alone in dimly lit rooms, metaphorically representing her emotional detachment. This instance of total disorientation and isolation that Meena suffers from is similar to Sartre's Roquentin, who unable to share the collective joy of the Bouvillois, stands alone: "But after all, it was their Sunday, not mine" (81). Manmohan's remark, "Society is a great judge," underscores the influence of societal expectations on their relationship, suggesting that Meena's feelings of alienation stem from the pressure to conform to societal standards. This narrative highlights the constraining effects of patriarchal norms on individuals' personal lives and relationships, emphasizing the challenges faced by women in navigating societal expectations. In this situation, Meena feels alienated from Manmohan. Foreman aptly remarks, "Men seek relief from their alienation through their relations with women; for women there is no relief" (102).

Mohan pushes away his dinner plate for the food being salty and oily, and chides her for not focusing on her duties. He says, "You are a Chaudhary's wife; behave like a Chaudhary's wife" (247). The statement shows patriarchal attitudes and societal expectations prevalent in the narrative. His admonition implies an expectation for her to conform to a predetermined stereotype associated with her husband's status or surname. Bryson rightly opines that, "Patriarchy is primarily maintained by a process of conditioning" (185). This situation illuminates the unequal power dynamic within the marriage, where the husband asserts his authority to dictate his wife's behavior and reprimand her for failing to meet his expectations, thereby perpetuating traditional gender roles and societal norms dictated by a patriarchal framework.

Meen's concern about preserving her husband's prestige by providing basic hospitality to the guests reflects the expectation for women to fulfill domestic duties and maintain the family's image. The husband's earlier criticism of her cooking and emphasis on her role as a wife further emphasize traditional gender norms, where women are primarily responsible for domestic chores and reputation management. This portrayal highlights the unequal distribution of power and resources in the marriage, echoing broader societal norms that prioritize men's roles and contributions while limiting women's autonomy to the domestic sphere. In this sense, marriage is an oppressive and constraining institution, an "exploitative economic arrangement, which reinforces sexual inequality, and binds women to domesticity" (Tolan, 321).

Marital Estrangement

The novel portrays the protagonist's experience of marital discord and emotional turmoil within the confines of a suffocating marriage. Mr. Kajra's bitter statement, "What about you, Manmohan? Your wife is from India. If Indians came charging at you with stones and sticks, would you let her go? Where is her home now? With you or with people in her maika?" (295) reflects the theme of marital estrangement through the lens of cultural and personal identity. Mr. Kajra's bitter question challenges Manmohan's commitment to his wife, highlighting the idea of home and belonging. The question of whether Meena's home is with Manmohan or with her family in India suggests a sense of displacement and disconnection within the marriage. It implies that Meena may not feel fully at home or understood by Manmohan, possibly due to cultural differences or lack of emotional connection. This quote implies the theme of marital estrangement by highlighting the complexities of identity and belonging within a marriage, suggesting a lack of understanding or empathy between the spouses. There are several exchanges of dialogues that delineate the theme of marital disconnection through the depiction of emotional detachment and misinterpretation between Meena and her husband. The decision to separate someone, likely their children, "for their good and for your good, (392)" underscores a schism in their relationship. It suggests that the husband deems this action necessary for the benefit of both Meena and their children, yet it also signifies an inability to converse or address underlying issues collectively. This passage illuminates the theme of marital

alienation by illustrating a dearth of reciprocal understanding and emotional proximity between the partners.

Self-discovery

The protagonist's journey towards self-realization amidst the complexities of societal expectations and personal struggles is highlighted carefully. The statement "Her name is Meena Rani and she looks just like Meena Kumari, no? Just like in that movie where Meena Kumari wants to leave and does not leave." (272). encapsulates the theme of self-discovery by drawing a comparison between the protagonist, Meena Rani, and the renowned actress Meena Kumari. The allusion to a film where Meena Kumari's character desires to depart but remains trapped mirrors Meena Rani's internal turmoil and yearning for freedom. This parallel suggests that Meena Rani, akin to Meena Kumari's character, grapples with a comparable dilemma of seeking liberation from constraints yet feeling constrained. This association acts as a catalyst, prompting Meena Rani to delve inward, examine her aspirations, and embark on a journey of self-realization. Her remark "I will go to the palace with my complaints. I will seek out His Majesty!" (323) embodies a journey of self-discovery and empowerment. The protagonist's resolve to visit the palace and address the monarch signifies a profound realization of personal agency and the capacity for decisive action. It reflects a newfound confidence and assertiveness in navigating challenges and injustices. This proactive stance can be metaphorically understood as seizing control of one's fate and actively pursuing transformation, illustrating a heightened awareness of one's abilities and the significance of self-advocacy.

"I want nothing to do with the Pahadi land" (339) embodies a moment of self-discovery for the speaker, likely Meena Rani, as she expresses a strong desire to sever ties with her Pahadi heritage. This assertion marks a significant shift in her perspective, indicating a newfound clarity and resolve to carve out her own path, free from the influences of her upbringing. It suggests a departure from societal norms and expectations, as she endeavors to shape her identity and ambitions according to her own beliefs and values. This rejection of her past signifies a profound journey of self-realization and independence, as she asserts her individuality and pursues her aspirations with conviction. They come out of the "engagement and entrapment of patriarchy by asserting their femininity through self-realization and self discovery" (Swain, 49). Ravindra's characters epitomize the assertion of self by rejecting societal norms that deny them agency and autonomy. Their retreat to trees symbolizes a reclaiming of identity and a challenge to patriarchal expectations that seek to confine and control them. For instance, the character Asha asserts, "I climbed the tree not to escape, but to find myself" (45). This quote illustrates how literature can capture the transformative journey of self-discovery and resistance, serving as a reflection of readers' own struggles and aspirations.

Conclusion

Ravindra's *The Woman Who Climbed Trees* unveils a rich tapestry of human experiences, complexities, and societal dynamics. The novel intricately portrays the

protagonist's internal struggles, societal pressures, and the quest for authenticity and self-discovery amidst the constraints of gender norms and expectations. The women in the novel have emerged as dauntless from demure. They do not hesitate to rebel and revolt when injustices and humiliations affect their self-respect. They have come out as new women by defying society and displaying unflustered courage and self-assurance. Ravindra's women display prodigious daring and will-power, and rise above the deterrents of society to advance nearer to the goals they have set for themselves.

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