

## FEMINISTIC PERSPECTIVE AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN MEGHNA PANT'S ONE AND A HALF WIFE

**Nasreen Khadiri**

Research Scholar,  
Vels Institute of Science and Technology and Advanced Studies (VISTAS)  
Pallavaram, Chennai.

**Dr. R. Venkataraman**

Research Supervisor,  
Vels Institute of Science and Technology and Advanced Studies (VISTAS)  
Pallavaram, Chennai.

**Dr.V.Jaisre**

Co-Supervisor,  
Vels Institute of Science and Technology and Advanced Studies (VISTAS)  
Pallavaram, Chennai.

### Abstract

*Women have always been the essence of the society. But from time immemorial they have been subjected to different forms of suppressions-cultural, social, religious and financial. The dependence of women on their male counterparts results in losing their identity and especially in the case of immigrants they undergo identity crises along with psychological crises. This paper focuses on such journey of a woman in search of her self-identity in the male dominated society and her assertion through self-awareness that leads her towards emancipation. Meghna Pant in her debut novel One and a Half Wife clearly portray the pathetic condition of a divorcee in the culture-based Indian society and her struggle for emancipation.*

**Key words:** Feminism, Patriarchy, suppression, quest for identity, assertion.

## FEMINISTIC PERSPECTIVE AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN MEGHNA PANT'S ONE AND A HALF WIFE

- Nasreen Khadiri
- Dr. R. Venkataraman
- Dr.V.Jaisre

### Introduction:

**F**eminism has brought about a change and understanding in Indian women. It has made women realize that gender is a social construct that needs to be deconstructed. Though the three waves of feminism had brought considerable awakening, the fourth wave gave way for vehement revolting against diverse forms of oppression, exploitation, discrimination especially gender based and body-shaming. Meghna Pant is a young feminist author, speaker, journalist and columnist. Through TEDx talks she voices against domestic violence, abusive marriages and body shaming.

She is the winner of the Laadli Media Award 2018. She also the co-author of "Feminist Rani." Pant is of the view that to understand feminism one should remove all the gender prescriptions from one's life. According to Pant, Feminism should be a process; it should not stagnate as a sheer ideology. The feministic progression should be continuous till the Indian society understands accepts and resolves the gender equality as a trait effectuated "by all" and "for all." She is among the fourth of world feminists in supporting the equality of women with men. She is of the view that women should be treated at par with men with all due respect and should have access to all the opportunities.

The most important and controversial issue in Postcolonial Literature is the question of identity. The quest for identity arises only when the existence becomes uncertain that leads to the crisis of identity. In *One and a Half Wife* Meghna Pant has

successfully depicted the problem of cross-cultural crises that ultimately lead to search of identity

Pant in her debut novel *One and a Half Wife* explores the life and journey of an orthodox, middle-class young girl. She shows the pathetic condition of her female protagonist young Amara's dependence on her husband causes abnegation on her personal life and disruption of her normal life. Amara Malhotra, a young girl from a small town Shimla is the only dear daughter to her parents. Her middle-class parents desire and aspire to get her married and settle in America which is their 'American dream'. Though they have the American dream for their daughter's better future, basically they have deep rooted beliefs in the myth and have faith in Indian tradition and culture. In the opening of the novel, Meghna Pant shows how Biji- Amara's mother's desperate visit to the astrologers in the town to know her daughter's future is equally disappointed to hear "Green card no problem, Marriage not good fortune, Babuji will be one and a half wife" ( p. 2 )

Amara from her early years has been brought up by Biji with the notion that she cannot have a wish of her own. All her wills and wishes are intervened with her future husband's wish. Her life is moulded to obey authority and sheltered to the institution of marriage. 'She'd learnt at a young age that marriage was eternity gazing at itself in the mirror. It was as irreversible as aging and as permanent as death. Its end was impossible' (p 14).

Amara is imbued with three desires: 'It Is Biji's Desire' contoured Amara's identity and latched it on to 'It Is His Desire'. The 'His' was Amara's future husband, who existed as the epitome of Biji's unfulfilled dreams. (p 8-9).

In America, Amara struggles to cope up with her new life with American identity. Pant expresses through Amara the impulse of young Indians who in search of better life face the problems of adaptation and survival in the alien land. The cultural conflict arises in leaving one's own culture and enters another culture. The original culture comes into conflict. This effort of cultural transplant leads to quest for identity or crisis of identity. As identity is one of the most important factors, the immigrants find it difficult to fix their identity between two

different cultures.

Amara too faces difficulty in finding her identity in the American land. Her failures in school reports, her friendless existence, the emotionless rejection of the cousins make her to alienate herself. "At those moments, she wished she had been born in America like them or had stayed in Shimla, instead of being an outsider to both places" (p 54).

In order to get attention from her cousin Riya, she tries to imitate Riya. Her efforts to become friendly with Riya by wearing make-up makes her lose her very identity again. After a short realization she rejects her imitating ideas and continues to concentrate on her studies with the belief 'Tomorrow Amara would bring the Malhotra family's American Dream to life'. (p 51)

Since her life is moulded to obey authority, after her school life her higher education is again decided by Biji by not allowing Amara to follow her own wish of pursuing law. 'She had wanted to be a lawyer, like Baba, but Biji had dismissed the idea, convinced that the only thing Amara would learn from law school was to argue with her mother-in-law.' (p 18)

Helplessly Amara takes Accounting as her higher studies. Stacy - Amara's college friend comments show Amara can't have a boyfriend in college because it is again 'It is his Desire (Husband)'. In a patriarchal society a female child is always brought up under strict vigilance and control of her parents. She has to be delivered to her husband, (her new master) who thereafter will determine her future. From childhood a girl child in Indian society is brought up with all traditional feminine virtues so that she does not carry any blemish in her marital life.

Marriage becomes the end point to the parent's responsibility and what women undergo while fulfilling the societal expectation of being a perfect wife and daughter-in-law does not concern the society. Since Amara is a typical tradition bound Indian woman who gives importance to family and social relations, the traditional values and beliefs she has imbibed

from her elders are so deep rooted that she cannot boldly transgress the social norms of ideal wifhood. She finds herself as a person between traditional values and modern norms. During the birthday party at Dua Mama's house Amara notices the rich business man Prashanth Roy admiring her cousin Riya, and Riya too reciprocating him. But Prashanth's mother Damini selects Amara as her daughter-in-law for her obedience and traditional values. Her parents rejoice Amara's marriage with Prashanth Roy – the multimillionaire from Harvard. Like other girls typical to Indian society Amara is prepared by her mother Biji for a potential bride to Prashanth Roy.

After marriage Amara plays the role of ideal wife with the qualities of feminine self-sacrificing, empathetic and tolerant wife. But Amara finds herself difficult to adjust to Prashanth's rich high class snobbish lifestyle and taste though she tries her level best in transforming herself for him, his compelling eyes always accuse for her Indianness. Prashanth accuses her for everything she does. 'Why were you behaving like a girl from village? His words came out sharp and categorical like bullet points: Why did you talk with a piece of food stuck to your lips? Why did you refuse to drink? Why did you spell out your whole life story? Each bullet point left a bullet -size scar on her body (97)

Meghna Pant explains the crippling effect of marriage on a woman. Through her marriage Amara loses her individual identity after marrying Prashanth Roy. She alters her lifestyle in keeping with his taste and desire. Amara finds herself sorry for the loss of her self-identity after marriage. Though she is a good caring wife, yet she suffers from loneliness. She is unable to go closer to her husband's mind at any point of time. Both of them are totally opposite to each other. Pant describes her unhappy married life through suggestive images like 'she could never be a good hostess for *His* boss. In no time, so many bullet-size scars filled her body that she didn't feel whole anymore; she wasn't what she thought she was; she didn't know what she was anymore. She became empty. Her emotional struggles became an emotional violence against herself and him.' (p 99)

Pant brings forth the point that marriage still remains a social necessity where

women seek security and men respectability. Amara feels alienated from her husband and her spontaneity is marred by the institution of marriage. She struggles to find physical and emotional identity with Prashanth Roy. While trying to satisfy his needs, she loses her own identity. She finds her very identity not only as an affectionate wife but as a woman she is totally effaced.

Amara contemplates on the place of a married woman in a family to be that of an unpaid servant but a divorce from her husband will signify social and economic death in her Indian status. She is ingrained with the idea that a woman without a husband has no life. The social conditioning of Amara proves true Simone de Beauvoir's statement 'One is not born, rather becomes a woman'. (267)

Amara's hopes totally shatter and six years of her married life comes to a sudden end when she hears Prashant's decision to go for a divorce. The very word of him shudders her. 'She screamed hysterical now, I didn't mean that. I don't want you to go. Let's talk about this please. please don't leave me she fell at his feet.' (p 134) Losing all her feminine dignity and respect she falls at his feet begging to give a chance for rectifying their bond but Amara's pleadings go unheard and Prashant is stubborn in his decision of separation. Throughout her life the only ambition she knew was to get married and to be a good wife but her husband's decision for divorce clogs her mind with a lot of questions.

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'. (p 143)

The sudden shock makes Amara to undergo psychological crisis that makes her struggle to the extent that she loses her normal coping mechanism. Amara is engulfed with the feeling of confusion, unsure, perplexity within her while undergoing the crises of identity shock.

Amara was left alone. Her chest heaved up and down and the nerves in her body beat had turned inside out, leaving her hollowed out. She grabbed a baseball bat from the storage room, and began to beat the chaise lounge with all her strength. When the boiling blood in her turned to a simmer she fell down against the lounge cried till she could no more and got up to beat the patches made by her. (151)

Her parents after hearing their daughter's divorce refuse to accept her. Amara finds lost, her identity in the labyrinth of familial relationships. With utter desperation, confusion and shock pleads with her parents to allow her to accompany them to Shimla. As a divorcee she undergoes a lot of humiliation. She is considered an ill-omen, bad-luck and burden to her parents. This is the condition of any divorcee who comes back to her parental house in the Indian society.

In order to escape the bitter criticism and gossip, in Shimla Amara is kept locked inside the apartment. Her days move on with isolation and total rejection. Sense of alienation, frustration along with the quest for identity arise in her. It is only after meeting Shikha, her childhood neighbour, she understands the very meaning of her existence. Shikha Didi's words prove reparative: 'Your primary fault lies in that you are observing life instead of participating in it. Take responsibility for yourself. Focus on the future not on the past. (p 206) Amara soon realizes her inability to have an independent identity is her real problem. She has so long been either an extension of either her parents or her husband Prashant Roy's identity, now she wants to live life without restraints and fear of loss. Amara escapes from her claustrophobic home and starts her journey without any doubts and fear. By opening her own business Mc Corma and adopting the baby of a controversial politician she takes one step forward in her way of reclaiming her lost identity.

"Amara spend another few sleepless nights. This time she was not furrowed under the blanket of her sadness but soaring in a magic carpet of her happiness. And how she flew. She mulled over her ways and errors. Over the last year t

he three desires she'd grown up learning – 'It Is His Desire', 'It Is Biji's Desire' and 'It Is God's Desire' had ceased to matter. There was a call for a new desire and she could only think of 'It Is My Desire.' (211)

The above passage sufficiently marks Amara's metamorphosis and regeneration of self through a deep understanding towards life. The novel reveals how the female protagonist undertakes the search for a new identity through fortitude and courage. As an immigrant, Meghna Pant's Amara experiences many transformations with disintegration through her optimistic positive journey of life. Through her female protagonist Pant creates a new world for the socially secluded section of women in the society. Amara by exhibiting new feministic ideas and values tries to fix herself a new identity. Though her strength is tested many times, still she overcomes it with clear ideas followed in a subtle manner

Towards the end Amara finds herself self-effacing, dominating in leading her life with individuality. As an American returned Indian she exhibits liberated thoughts of freedom from dependency to independence, with her new bold feministic approach to life. She disapproves the prophecy of living as One and a Half Wife. Meghna Pant in her novel not only depicts the travails and traumas of the educated divorced woman from a middle-class family in the contemporary Indian scenario but also exposes the hypocrisy and prejudices of the educated immigrant men like Prashant Roy with his male chauvinistic attitude towards women.

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