

# Sketching Feminist Identity In Contemporary Short Stories: A Cross-Cultural Qualitative Analysis Of The Legend Of Lakshmi Prasad And Sabrina & Corina: Stories

Dur-e-Najaf,<sup>1</sup> Dr. Uzma Imtiaz,<sup>2</sup> Dr. Shafia Azam<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of English, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Email:

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Pakistan.

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Pakistan.  
(Corresponding Author)

## Abstract

In the contemporary world, feminism has strongly evolved because of the incessant efforts put forth by women all around the world. Together, the women have contributed to bring the ideas that specify a feminist identity, and in an attempt to maintain that identity within different demographics, women have faced strong resistance, especially when the tale belongs to diverse cultures. This paper studies the journey of women in their attempt to preserve their identity in the contemporary world as they belong to two different sides of the world i.e., East and West based on the contemporary short stories. This study is carried out on four short stories with each two taken from the collections entitled *The Legend of Lakshmi Prasad* (2016) by Twinkle Khanna and *Sabrina & Corina: Stories* (2019) by Kali Fajardo-Anstine respectively. The stories trace out the feminist identity within societies where the segregated or traditional impact intensifies in the light of “Downing & Roush’s Feminist Identity Model” and “Matrix of Domination Theory” by Patricia Hill Collins. A cross-cultural qualitative analysis inspects the feminine struggles to preserve their identity within the selected works.

**Keywords:** Feminism, feminist identity, cultural diversity, traditions.

## Introduction

Contemporary feminism has seen a lot of progress where we find women finally understanding their true places in society and recognizing their positions within society. Sticking to the rule of imitation of the current progression, the works produced by female writers have primarily focused on breaking the shackles of patriarchy in one way or the other. They have emerged as a force that negates the stereotypes and narrates the anecdotes of courage. The standards of a feminine identity that

have renewed themselves are one of the major themes we find across contemporary works. Anne Sexton (1928-1974) and Audre Lorde (1934-1992) have set forth the new modes of representation of women within contemporary society. Their poetry which is fearless yet remembers the struggles of the women seems to engulf every bit of emotion and turns them into something that seems a grand ideology. Mehrpouyan & Banehmir (2014) note that modern writers are credited for “the reflection of feminism and elaboration of feminist identity

within their works” with special reference to Sexton and Lorde (205).

Taking inspiration from these pioneers, many contemporary writers have written in a pattern similar to theirs discussing the modern take on motherhood, feminine power, personal experiences, and personal relationships. In the contemporary era, the storytelling tradition is reviving with pieces that are influential and extraordinarily trivial in their approach to the common readers. Extending the tradition, the contemporary writers from the East alongside the West have their observations regarding feminism hence they pen down the anecdotes that blend well with their specific culture as well as traditions.

This paper studies two different contemporary writers with their distinct approaches towards the issue of women's representation and identity within the community. The first collection is Twinkle Khanna which unraveled itself before the readers in the year 2016 carrying the attractive name of *The Legend of Lakshmi Prasad*. Twinkle is also known for her best-seller *Mrs. Funnybones* which was published in 2015. It was her debut novel and earned her acclaim far and wide because of the honest depiction of South Asian and essentially Indian everyday life on the pages of her book. Twinkle adds up her own experiences in her literary pieces and this is why she is known for portraying characters that are unapologetically courageous and bold. Talking to *Verve Magazine*, Twinkle states, “I definitely try to mellow down words because I want to get my point across without having a morcha (foxhole) outside my house or getting arrested!” (Tata, 2016). This is one reason her stories are quite often simple yet complex in terms of the concealed themes within the closet of simple language used by her.

The *Legend of Lakshmi Prasad* consists of four different stories with each protagonist

differentiating from the other one in terms of the circumstances and nature. The only thing that unifies all four distinct protagonists is their quest to explore their identity. We find each one getting an idea about life at the most unexpected moment and this sort of adds the sense of epiphany within each of the stories. One particular idea that resonates throughout the book is the presence of the feminist mindset. Twinkle herself adds, “People think feminists are aggressive, hardened people, which is not true. It probably filters down from the fact that when the movement was coming into being, you had to be strident in the face of such great opposition. Feminism is nothing else but advocating for equal opportunities for both genders. We are also trapped in many roles – either you’re a working woman or a homemaker. I think we have the ability to do several things at one time and do them all efficiently” (Tata, 2016).

Though there are four discrete stories wined in the collection, for the study only two are being selected. The first story carries the name of the collection title itself which is *The Legend of Lakshmi Prasad*. This story is a sweet tale of a girl named Lakshmi who identifies the traditional burden of dowry imposed on a girl’s parents, and this assists her in exploring her true self and she tends to transform her village with her wisdom for which she is credited by generations which follow her. The story carries a magical impact and the idea of exploring one’s true position amidst patriarchy is what actually lies deeper in the context. The story not only enables a girl to understand her hidden potential but also talks about the customs that act as a barrier for a girl in the Indian patriarchal society to survive. It tells that the “deprivation of South Asian women from their legal and economic rights is still persistent in areas where the discriminatory laws are prevalent” (Niaz & Hassan, 2006).

The second story from the collection is *Salaam! Noni Appa* which seems very peculiar in

its subject matter. This is because we find two sisters bonding in their old age and trying to overcome the feeling of loneliness from which they both suffer after their husbands die and children fly to foreign shores in search of better opportunities. The protagonist of the story is Noureen, known by her nickname “Noni” in her circles. She is a widow in her sixties who finds attachment to her yoga teacher and later on, finds love at this age. The story is significant since it tells about the common South Asian stereotype about a woman marrying in her old age which is disapproved within South Asian society. We find her getting ashamed at first but then she realizes that her life is controlled by her own self and she takes the reins of her life in her hands from society and decides to be with the love of her life which is happily accepted by the two other women of the family i.e; her sister and her daughter. The story was also converted into a play because of its unique plot. The writer in her attempt abolishes the established stereotype that marriage of an older woman is a taboo of its own kind. She replaces it with the idea and turns the way towards a more progressive idea of a woman ruling all by herself without the consent of the society which gives her a true feminist identity.

The second collection taken to carry out the study is *Sabrina & Corina: Stories* which is a debut collection from a Latin American author Kali-Fajardo Anstine. The collection which highlights the lives of Latina women in Colorado, America has a strange aura immersed in it. The collection was a National Award finalist and was widely acclaimed because of the portrayal of eleven different lives incorporated within a single piece. All of her characters demonstrate their own relationships with home — none of which are picturesque (Crawford, 2020). The complexities in the characters and the emotions of women throughout each story are significant as they narrate personal tales of identity exploration.

The stories taken for study are *Remedies and Sisters*. The first story makes a daughter witness of her mother’s journey in being a single mother and her attempt to get back to the love she once had. The story narrates the emotional journey of a broken family and also portrays the strong character of the grandma who is wise enough to understand the hurdles in a modern relationship. To the mother's shaking pride, the presence of the antithesis assists her in identifying reality and allows her to let go of her grief.

*Sisters*, just like the name describes the complex relationship between two sisters who have survived independently and are now to form their own families in order to get settled. We find the older sister “Doty” indecisive about her future and surviving the pressure which is inflicted upon her by her younger sister “Tina”. The pressure eventually results in an accident which transforms her perception of life as she finds out her true choices and understands the troubling patriarchy amidst this. The striking part about the collection is that “all of these stories were born of Kali Fajardo-Anstine's particular sense of identity, and, more darkly, of her experiences with violence against women, particularly women of color” (Arreola, 2019).

Feminism has always found a way to express itself within the silent voices too. Contemporary literature has seen an influx of writers belonging to different geographical areas and talking about feminism according to their particular cultures and traditions. East and West, both are poles apart from each other whenever we find out the traditional similarities yet women's discrimination is a factor common to both societies. The inequality faced by the women and the persecution they receive either physically or morally “might be viewed differently from one place to another, but it is something universal and circumstantial to every place it is in” (Ashley, 2020). This discrimination is at various levels. In

some societies, it represents itself within the basic human rights while in others we find racial segregation a common norm that enhances female suffering.

In societies where basic laws are disintegrating, the struggle to maintain identity as a feminist gets hard. The ideology of expressing yourself as a woman goes through trials and tribulations where the experiences might get different but the struggle is one binding material. The expression of their identity also depends a lot on the social group from which they belong as “marginalized women are the invisible as well as the silenced one” (Baird, 1999). So, this marginalization impacts their identities as women thus affecting the feminist ideology indirectly.

Identity in the contemporary world is dynamic and depends on several factors and the most primary of all is the position of women in the society in which they live. The positional impact leaves a deep imprint on social understanding and participation in society. Even if they “want to take leadership positions even in isolated backgrounds, their constraints are different” (Estrada, 2020). Gender-based stratification also plays its role where “the structure of power emerges with the relevance of specific sex associated with it” (Acker, 1973). Thus, these power dynamics constitute the specific identity of a woman based on her position within the society she lives.

The research reveals the factors that are responsible for making a woman understand her position and formulate her feminist identity within the contemporary world in the light of the literature being studied. It not only specifies the factors responsible for understanding the feminist thought pattern and making personal decisions regardless of the social power dynamic but it also discusses the constraints faced by women in their attempt to explore their identities. The study talks about the identity transformation that occurs within a female based on her experiences within a specific social context. This is significant because “female identity development is critical for her individuality as it describes her and decides her future life” (Marcelin, 2012) on the basis of her newly explored identity.

Furthermore, the works under analysis highlight the cultural factors responsible for setting up identities as distinct cultures have distinct arrays of contemplating women's issues, so this distinction between varying cultures is highlighted within the research where women perceive and respond to the patriarchy and social powers differently. These powers then give rise to “new solidarities and complex cultural identities on the basis of collectively experienced social injuries” (Alund, 1997).

Contemporary short stories provide narratives where women are seeking feminist identities based on their own cultural experiences. The diverging cultural contexts have a deep impact on women's struggle as they respond to the patriarchal norms distinctively. The identities thus transform their personalities accordingly. Thus, this research aims to find out the factors that assist women in constructing or deconstructing their feminist identities in the light of the selected stories. The study also traces the cultural distinction of the women presented in the stories and their status within their respective cultures. The study further highlights the impacts of the cultural norms and experiences on women

as portrayed in the stories and identifies the struggle of the women mentioned within the stories and its significance in shaping them.

### Literature Review

Feminism in recent times has seen a totally new dimension where women have started acknowledging their positions and are striving hard to make their identities prominent in front of the world. Despite certain geographical differences, they are still fighting for the same cause of acknowledgement and validation of their identities as free individuals leading their lives at their own norms rather than satisfying the traditional gender roles that are set for them. Virginia Woolf in her most prominent work "A Room of One's Own" (1929) highlights the issue of women's representation in the mainstream professions because of their traditional roles and the standard values of womanhood (Blomdahl, 2014). Cengiz (2015) notes that she "deliberately makes an attempt to mention inequalities which are persistent due to the social conditions alongside the familial conditions" (9). This signifies that though women are actively conscious about their position and are willing to go to the ways that make their destination towards the non-traditional system, still the deeply rooted patriarchy is a prime hindrance in their way. The same resonance of identity is felt in her work "Orlando" (1928) where she makes the protagonist a rebel not sticking to any particular identity as a way to protest against the gender differences prevailing between both the sexes and thus stopping women in order to claim their feminist identity fully. She is "determined about the fact that after Orlando's transformation, she should be rather identified as a woman than a man performing manly duties, for her the gender does not matter, and at times the character seems androgynous thus promoting feminism". This hesitation to conform to a single identity is itself a defiance towards patriarchy and the social setup that binds women in the traditional roles only and

discourages their individual progress as a human with ideas and choices of their own. The trend however seems changing as women with the fourth wave of feminism which originated in 2013 are questioning their existence as free and equal to the male members of the society more than ever. Growing up in a post-feminist scenario where they were told that misogyny no longer exists, the experiences of being sidelined and yet again sexualized eventually turned them into rebels who "have more than enough confidence to shout back" (Cochrane, 2013). They speak and yet the patriarchy tends to silence their voices making them conscious of their own choices. As women are culturally scrutinized too, hence, cultural values lead to variable identity parameters based on gender so the attitude towards the identity norms and personal experiences also contribute to constructing an identity of one's own (Van Breen et.al, 2017). Thus when culture steps in to stop the identity construction, the thoughts are then sharpened up on the associated criteria. However, the struggle continues to get out of the shackles of patriarchy and they emotionally and physically drain themselves completely to get a sense of recognition in the society while going by their choices. The journey might be different for every woman but the effort is the same which is the expression of the "self" is. "All women have an embodied self, but all bodies are not the same, nor are all bodily experiences reflected in the self in the same way" (Chrisler & Robledo, 6, 2018). The expression of internalized self becomes essential, voicing their ideas and desires then becomes necessary despite the patriarchal trauma imposed on them. They still keep on flowing their emotions out wherever they get a desired chance to reveal the spark of their minds and hearts. Women all across the world have contributed to making their identities prominent before the world. This is one reason that now we do find a non-traditional female protagonist in cultures where the hold of patriarchy is strong. Nadia

Hashimi's breakthrough work "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell" (2014) represents one such non-traditional protagonist Rahima who comes in front of the deeply embedded patriarchal system in Afghanistan, gets an education, and turns out as an acknowledged woman who is enlightened and educated. We find it evident as Rahima, the protagonist states, "But sometimes you have to act out of line, I suppose. Sometimes you have to take a chance if you want something badly enough" (41). Facing circumstances that are rough in order to claim an identity that earns personal satisfaction to a woman is one of the many themes today's feminist writers incorporate in their works. Similarly, "Amal Unbound" (2018) by Aisha Saeed is another childhood chronicle of a girl on her journey to explore herself within an unyielding patriarchal establishment. It narrates the "harrowing inequalities that exist in feudal Pakistan while maintaining an outlook of hope and optimism" (Kamal, 2018). The cultural differences though are strong when we take the turn from the eastern part of the world to the western globe, still the identity struggle imitates with the simulated efforts. Primarily, in America, over the past few years, women have emerged as power and have resisted the imposed traditional inequalities inflicted upon them. Women's identity within America because of the cultural diversity "is continuously evolving making it fluid yet stronger than ever" (Hossain, 2013). The diversity in terms of their cultural background acts as a decisive power and determines the rules for their identities. Afro-American women literary writers have felt the cultural and colonial amalgamation greatly and thus we find voices like Maya Angelou, who expresses her inner conflicts battling with the need to maintain her identity in her autobiographical work "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" (1969). Araluzea Plaza (2016) asserts that the work depicts "the perception of women by girls which is different than the perception society has about them", as

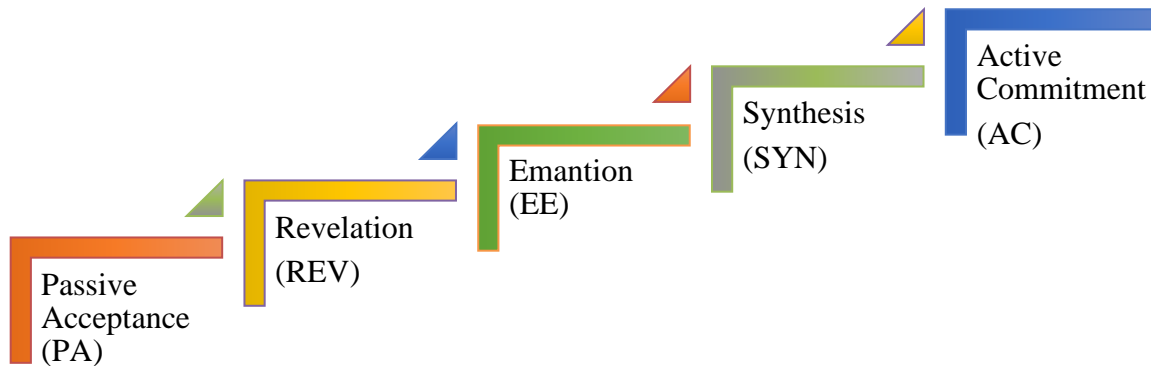
the protagonist feels a continuous perplexity in expressing her inner desires or conforming to the socially acceptable norms set for women. Apart from the black quest for identity, we come across the Hispanic women tracing their identity amidst diversity. The quest to express the inner feminist soul in these cases becomes more difficult as the racial prejudices equally collaborate with the cultural norms. Being a diverse group, Hispanic women are not usually given strong representation except for their domesticated roles. Their own cultural identity was affected in a way that instead of choosing their lives and sorting households, americanized "mothering" training was considered beneficial for "taming" the Hispanics within the Anglo society (Deutsch, 1987). Thus, an identity that focused only on the traditional aspects never represented their own individuality truly and they dealt with these issues of discrimination on the cultural and sexual level. The quest for self-exploration and negating false feminism becomes prominent in Julia Alvarez's "In the Time of The Butterflies" (1994) where we find prominent feminist figures standing up for their identity preservation by the name of "Mirabal sisters" who despite living with their own distressful stories manage to survive and express their inner desires completely. Alvarez as a writer seems fully aware of the objectification of the women prevalent in the culture preventing her from speaking for her choices, therefore, she takes a different take and develops characters that are extraordinary and "no longer remain objects so they are able to raise their voices for expressing themselves" (Broome, 2011). The portrayal of strong feminist figures serves as a guiding source for the writers coming after her who no longer "stick to the norm" and "wear the scars proudly".

### **Theoretical Framework & Research Methodology**

Identity is an essential part of individual life as it encompasses the values held by people, which

later on dictate their choices in life. Being a deciding factor, it becomes very hard to neglect its importance within a woman's life where the personal identity clashes with the social and cultural identities, thus making the expression of the former a difficult task. However, the contemporary pieces of literature picture their struggle to express themselves in the way they

want to alongside adding up the hurdles in the basket, midway their destination. On the basis of this belief, the analysis of the short stories under study is carried out on the model presented by Downing & Roush (1964) regarding "the feminist identity". It is a five staged model constructing the following ladder:



According to the model, Passive Acceptance (PA), is the phase in which women systematically accept traditional gender roles and their subordinate status due to lack of awareness of gender discrimination. Revelation (REV), is the phase in which women have undergone some crisis and contradiction that has caused them to break away from traditional gender roles, they also feel deceived, angry, and guilty about the past. Embeddedness/Emanation (EE), is the phase in which women begin to form emotional connections with other women and groups. Synthesis (SYN), is the phase in which women reconstruct their self-conception to include the positive characteristics of women and their own unique attributes. Active Commitment (AC), is the phase in which the most important thing for women is to apply their feminism to positive social movements and strive to achieve gender equality (Qt. in Liu & Zheng, 2019).

Expression of identity not only depends upon personal experiences but is also characterized by the cultural and positional values of a woman

which gives her an idea about her status within the society so that she can then express herself and her personal choices conveniently. Patricia Hill Collins (1990/2000) through her "Matrix of Domination Theory" tells that, "One's position in society is made up of multiple contiguous standpoints rather than just one essentialist standpoint. Collins emphasizes "that people simultaneously experience and resist oppression on three levels: the level of personal biography; the group or community level of the cultural context created by race, class, and gender; and the systemic level of social institutions" (Collins, 1990/2000: 227). At the level of the individual, she insists on "the power of the self-definition" (Collins, 2004: 306) and "self-defined standpoint" (Collins, 1998: 47), and that "each individual has a unique personal biography made up of concrete experiences, values, motivations, and emotions" (Appelrouth & Edles, 2016: Chap: 7:334). This theory is employed alongside the model to carry out a qualitative analysis where there are two levels of the respective analysis. As text is the primary source in order to carry out the

study, hence, a textual analysis is done which then corresponds to the secondary level where the character analysis has been done in the light of the written text. Together, both these levels of analysis contribute to the deductions which are then utilized for deriving conclusions.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

Twinkle Khanna (2016) penned down *The Legend of Lakshmi Prasad* which on first look resembles a tribute to the spirit of feminism that is hidden within every woman's soul. The story is set in a village where we get the revelation, "There's one thing even more remarkable about this place – it is the only village in the entire district where the birth of a girl child is celebrated with joy" (2). These lines are significant enough because they tell us how the patriarchal system works in India where the identity of a woman is never accepted from the time of her birth and amidst the stiff patriarchal norms this seems to be an exception that the readers find a place where a girl is accepted and welcomed in the family open-heartedly. Though some sort of chaos and curiosity arises in the minds the narrator clears that up by saying, "Things changed because of a young girl and her name was Lakshmi Prasad" (2). This is how the protagonist of the story a woman named Lakshmi Prasad is introduced and we also find that somehow, she has contributed to the acceptance of a woman's identity within the social system because of her effort. As the story progresses, we find the attention of the narrator inclined towards "Sukriti" who is Lakshmi's elder sister and is about to get married. Marriage is always considered an essential part of a woman's life, especially within India and particularly all across the South East Asian societies. So, we find Sukriti's marriage an important aspect not only for her but for her parents as they struggle to collect the dowry money for her wedding but still accept the norm that marriage should be made successful at the cost of anything. Bijandra Prasad's character

within the story is a typical representation of every father within South Asian society as he says, "Sukriti is all right, everything is alright, and it is manageable" (7). He knows that in order to ensure a successful marital life, he has to give her a lot at the time of marriage which is a concept very popular in these societies. So, we find how patriarchy and cultural traditions not only impact a woman's life but they have a significant role on the parents too as they have to make it certain that if they marry off their daughter then she never comes back because that is not considered a good omen in the Eastern cultures. This is depicted in the story as well when we find that Sukriti comes back home soon after marriage because her in-laws accused her of "not bringing enough dowry" and then the husband leaves her when she gives birth to a daughter when Sukriti's mother-in-law states that, "Sukriti was not pregnant when she left their house. This child was illegitimate" (11). This indicates the reluctance and hatred that a girl faces from the time of her birth since her parents are well aware of the effort, they have to make in order to bring her up and then marry her off besides protecting her honor as Surbhi Devi, mother of Lakshmi fears that, who will marry Lakshmi now? We had nothing to give and now after this..? (11). Another pointer to this is the belief of staying unmarried till a late age which is considered horrible for the parents. Goswami (2012) points out that staying unmarried at a later age conveys that the female head of the family in association with the male members is not competent enough to provide for the dowry (15). This connotation of shame associated with a woman is very common in Eastern societies, which becomes the greatest hurdle in a woman's way of self-expression.

Lakshmi as any other girl notices the humiliation of her newly born niece as well as her own sister. The shame and fear she notices on the faces of her parents, we find a change in her personality, as she observes the norms which are applicable to every single female striving hard for her



recognition. As per Downing & Roush (1964), her revelation phase begins this moment when she comes to understand the discrimination of a woman which is a practice within the society in which she lives. This makes her angry as the narrator says, "In all her seventeen years, Lakshmi had never felt such rage. A blinding rage where her heart thumped, her hands trembled, and even her ears felt like they were burning up with heat. In a quivering voice, barely in her control, Lakshmi said, 'Enough with this managing, of this bending. Ma, I am not getting married! Not till every girl in this village has something of her own. It's only when we have something that people will stop treating us like we are nothing'" (12). This according to the model brings the protagonist to the synthesis phase where she sorts out a solution and tends to change the social treatment towards women. She revokes the identity of a woman in a society where it is considered absurd for a woman to enjoy her social status as "she had thought of something that had not occurred to anyone in the hundred years that the village had existed" (14). We find her actively participating in claiming her identity along with the other women of the village when she presents the idea of planting "ten jardalu trees every time a girl is born in the village which will grow and belong to the girl from which she can earn by selling the fruit and arranging money for her education and dowry without bothering her parents." This idea of her transforms the village completely and the people who gave the least importance to a girl and despised a girl's birth in their house earlier start accepting a girl the way they accept a boy. This idea makes Lakshmi an icon as she becomes the savior of the rights of women allowing them to save their own money by working in their own fields and not depending on anyone else for their basic needs. She thinks of the "ten trees as the ten fingers with which we women can hold our own destinies firmly in our hands" (16). The idea of holding on to their own destinies in their own hands relates to the idea of

claiming their own feminine identities and modeling them the way they want which makes Lakshmi's efforts commendable enough as she breaks off from the traditions and sets her own path separately which distinguishes her identity from the other women of the village and she not only strives for her own financial freedom but for the women coming after her as well as we find Ruchira getting informed by her mother that, "This is the only village where people from any caste, even those with no land of their own, can plant trees for their daughters, wherever they find space, even by the side of the road" (17). This portrays how a single woman can transform society and struggle against primitive norms the moment she explores her inner capacity.

Salaam Noni Appa is another interesting tale by the pen of the same author. As the story begins, we find a very interesting exchange between the sisters Noni and Binni regarding Noni's daughter Malika's matchmaking to a boy which highlights how in Eastern societies marriage plays a pivotal role in the life of a woman as it takes her life ahead and transforms a woman's personality into a mature and responsible woman. Noni Appa's argument at the question of Malika's marriage highlights the changing trend of marriage in the culture slowly and gradually within the society as she believes that Malika will not leave London to settle into Houston and "she prefers being single" (20). This idea promotes the belief that "the patriarchal structure is changing slowly and women are becoming more assertive in terms of their needs" (Suri, 2020). This also signifies that women who belong to the Western world just like Malika have their needs cleared and defined before them and they do not let any other member of the family disrupt their personal choices corresponding to their fixed feminist identities as suggested by Collins (1990) based on their very own experiences. Binni's response also is important from the perspective that she believes that if Malika made her own choices incessantly "She is going to die a spinster" (21) which

suggests that late marriages of women in Eastern societies are often not approved by the families as they believe that it will become a cause of shame for the girl and the family as well. This is because of “the strong cultural stresses on the importance of female chastity that induced parents to arrange a daughter’s marriage at an early age to avoid potential situations that can challenge these so-called merits” (Singh & Chattopadhyay, 2020). This indicates that marriage is the potential constraint which is the most prominent hurdle in South East Asian cultures preventing women from maintaining their own individual identities regardless of being wives to someone. This is because family, an expression of power relations based on love, is totally conditioned on the choice of a woman’s life.

Another prominent difference between Noni and Binni, the two sisters, is that despite being alone. Noni seems to have made peace with her loneliness and she understands that she has to survive in the world alone so she indulges herself in different ventures. We find her very modern about the beliefs of personal freedom as compared to Binni who seems struggling with her loneliness, and she finds refuge from loneliness by spending her time at various places, sparing her time in various activities but not getting satisfied with any single one of them except being near to her sister Noni as the narrator tells, “Noni Appa now filled her days helping out at Muskan, a school for special children, and her evenings meticulously writing duas into endless lined notebooks, while Binni, with money to spare and an empty bungalow where the windows rattled with both the sea air and loneliness, attempted to keep herself busy by constantly trying to find an appropriate hobby, often recruiting her elder sister as a companion cum guinea pig” (21). Despite Noni being so outspoken about her personal choices, we still find her contemplating when she starts getting attracted to “Anand Ji”, their yoga teacher. A part of her reluctance to accept her feelings comes from the social

opinions about being in love at an older age. Anand ji, on the other hand, has adapted to the hobby of teaching yoga to avoid being at his home in order to escape from a problematic marriage from which he had suffered all his youth and has not escaped just for the sake of his son. The narrator informs that, “After retiring from his job in the Brihan Mumbai Municipal Corporation’s Garden department he had found it increasingly difficult to adjust to being at home for most of the day. The three classes he taught, two in the morning and one in the evening, were the only respite from a home filled with the high-pitched squeals of his wife and the non-stop commotion caused by her relatives who kept walking through his door like it was the revolving entrance of a motel. The incessant barking of his two small Lhasa apsos, Gulab and Jamun, added to this chorus. For Anand Ji, sitting by himself in the bedroom with a game of solitaire spread over the printed bed sheet, headphones plugged into his Walkman that invariably played Indian classical music as he hummed along, seemed the only way he could find refuge in his own home” (33).

This portrayal is significant enough because it tells about how not only women but men also suffer as a result of unhappy marriages. As husbands when experiencing negative emotions, they remove themselves from the social interaction and are left withdrawn. This is why he also feels attracted to Noni Appa because of their mutual understanding so he expresses his feelings before her upon which she remains silent. The most prominent reason for not expressing her inner desires is the shame associated with this relationship. We find that Noni lives independently on her own but still has a particular standpoint according to Collins (1990/2000) here she knows from her experience within the society that such relations are not respected in Eastern societies. We find that when she stops Anand upon the expression of his feelings, “the time to follow our heart has long gone by, Anand ji, the

only thing left for the poor thing to do now is to slowly stop” (49).

These lines indicate that despite understanding the need to settle down with someone in her old age, she still thinks of the society and the traditions that do not let her live her life by her own rules because, at the end of the day, a woman is always conscious enough of her limits and honor as set by the society which prevent her from expressing her own desires. She is aware of the fact that “a single transgression by a woman is considered to have besmirched the entire extended family and clan, negatively affecting the marital prospects of other children, especially the daughters” (Gupte, 2015). We also find that “She did not want the same people to start whispering about her, laughing at her, an old woman in an unsavory affair with a married man. Is this really how she wanted to be remembered? A life spent meticulously polishing and maintaining a gleaming reputation, only to let it tarnish at the very end?” (50). However, the moment she experiences her deadly ailment, things change for her as she concludes that no other person except Anand and Binni was there at the hospital caring for her not even her own biological daughter could tend to her ailing mother, the moment she needed her most.

This deduction works like an epiphany within the story and we find that she eventually accepts Anand’s proposal leaves his wife and gets out of the problematic relationship. Here we find the connotation of “feminism is for both genders” resonating because we find that these two characters despite being different from each other on the basis of their genders and experiences somehow stay at the same point of alienation within their relationships. Noni is suffering from loneliness because of the death of her husband Farhaan and as she had never allowed herself to remarry because of the social pressure and taunts that would be directed towards her, she now embraces her new identity as a free woman and

makes her own decision of starting a life with Anand who has stayed alone despite being married but in an unhappy relationship. We find that when she finally achieves the ability to express herself she regrets by saying, “I was so foolish that I refused to hear you out, foolish that I have spent most of my life worrying about what people will say, how they will perceive me” (62). These lines are purely feminist in the context that she eventually comes to know that her inner happiness, the expression of her own desires and choices is more important than the judgments of society because she explores through her experiences, her own “standpoint” that within life, she needs to speak up for the choices that are important to her regardless of the cultural and social beliefs about her.

Anstine, on the other hand, writes about women who with their Hispanic backgrounds are striving hard in modern America to become a part of it permanently. In this journey, their experiences differ which leads them to discover their identities as a strong woman surviving on their own. Remedies just as the name suggests is an anecdote of a Hispanic girl who witnesses two women in her life and their trials which teaches her to cope with her life eventually. Clarisa who is the protagonist as well as the narrator of the story shares her experience with her mother who has suffered from a broken marriage with a white man being a woman of color and is still in love with her husband despite his betrayal. Mother’s character within the story tells about the experiences of a woman as a single parent besides being a lover to a partner who has betrayed you in the past. It also sheds the veil of perfection of the “American dream” where the family is considered a unit and is working to benefit the cause of the greater America. As in America, a marriage usually offers hope of companionship, understanding, and the assurance to care for each other in difficult times” (Catron, 2019). Thus, Millie despite being a woman of color and her Hispanic ancestry has tried to mix into the White

society by marrying a white man, she still remains unsuccessful in becoming a part of that particular society and continues battling with her inner insecurities and the trauma of rejection. She tries to overcome the trauma of betrayal by bringing Harrison her half-son to her place, however, she fails miserably at bringing her up just the way she has brought up Clarisa and the misery of failure makes her mourn. As Clarisa says, "Everything was calm until Mama's sobs bumped throughout the hallway, interrupting the dead air" (79). At another place Clarisa narrates that "Harrison's face reminded her of Daddy's" and that is why she used to love him just like her. Millie seems a character who despite being separated from her husband is still unable to let him go completely and even though she tries to embrace her new identity as a single mother, she is unable to accept that. In her mind, she still wants to be with her husband who no longer wants her and this makes her grief enhanced than ever. The implication of "louse" mentioned in Harrison's head is symbolic of the presence of the memories of the man of the house that never go away completely even after Millie tries a lot to let them go but her weakness to stick to the identity of a single mother is intolerable to her and from her experience, her own standpoint as a wife and as a lover prevent her to accept her position from a standpoint of a mother, thus her identity remains a question of chaos throughout the story.

On the other hand, we are introduced to the matriarch of the family "Grandma Estrella" who also serves as a voice of reasoning throughout the story and knows about her daughter's emotional condition. Being a woman who has seen a lot, she is a critic of Millie's husband and a brilliant woman with ideas that work effectively. She knows the reality of the broken relationship and the inability of Millie's husband as a good partner. At one point she says to Clarisa, "Him leaving your life was the best thing that ever happened to you and your mother. If he wouldn't have left on his own, I would have chased him off

myself" (73). This is why she abhors the idea of her daughter dwelling on the memories of a disastrous relationship as she disapproves of that. Harrison's arrival at Millie's house is also concealed from her because Millie knows that her mother will never like the idea of going back to a thing that was finished a long time ago. But as the climax of the story begins, we find that she uses her voice of reasoning and tells Millie to move on by saying, "That man and his choices are behind you now" (80). This short indication works as an eye-opener for Millie and she finally accepts that she can never get back to the person she loved the most, and once she accepts, she stops putting her in trouble and drops Harrison back at his mother's place. Though it gets difficult for her at the beginning, eventually she makes peace with her new identity and realizes that she has to let go of the things and the people who trouble her and keep on living her own life for her own self rather than the validation of anyone else.

The narrator Clarissa and her stepbrother Harrison appear as foils because both of them are neglected by the man in their lives. However, Harrison suffers from double trauma as compared to Clarissa because he is also neglected by his alcoholic mother. Clarissa hates Harrison at the beginning because "he reminds her of Daddy, the only person who has left her". But, years later when they randomly run into each other, she accepts the reality that despite belonging to the same person biologically, they never belonged to their father emotionally. After this realization, she knows that she has an identity of her own and knows through the wisdom of her grandmother not to repeat the mistakes of her mother and be the master of her own life without any kind of contempt for someone who has the same traumatic past as hers.

Sisters is a painful account of a girl's life who realizes the truth of the relationships at the onset of her new life where she holds a new identity because of a disability. The introductory lines of

the story are specifically significant. “In the weeks before Dolores “Doty” Lucero had her eyesight stolen from her, she witnessed her life as if it were ordinary, taking for granted the way sunlight pressed through lace curtains as she woke in the mornings.” This makes the readers aware that to herself, her life was just a series of ordinary experiences where she always felt sad and lonely. Her disinterest in life and especially in relationships is one thing that seems troubling to her biological sister Tina. Both of the sisters because of their Hispanic background seem to be making a place within Denver to become successful. Another thing that makes their experiences significant is that just like every other Hispanic family, they had always seen their mother as the striving one who breaks one problematic marriage and gets into another one where both the sisters are consistently harassed by their step-father. Their quest for self-expression and the search for their true identities as other women begins as their mother advises them to run by saying, “You guys get married sooner rather than later. You are good looking enough” (51).

This statement takes the turn towards the idea that in every society and every culture, whenever it is a matter of a woman’s dignity and honor or whenever she is required to prove her credibility, the easiest medium for that manner is considered to be her finding a suitable suitor and starting a peaceful life which will remove all the troubles and trials of her life bringing her a new and respectful identity of a wife within the society as marital connotations are internalized often which ultimately correspond to the positive individual identity (Soulsby & Bennett, 2015). Doty witnessing a relationship that was not perfect and lacked the vigor of being near to an ideal, eventually stops taking interest in men as she does not want to suffer just like her mother and she is resilient on her decision until she is pressurized by her sister Tina to think of marrying a white to sustain financial independence.

The character of Tina is polar opposite to that of Doty. Despite witnessing a miserable marriage with another mother, she still wants to prove herself and retain the identity of an honorable American just like the white woman. As the narrator says, “Her sister had a thing for Anglos. They made more money, they could live and go anywhere in the city, and Tina believed each of the sisters could end up married to one. After all, they were both light-complected (52). We find her continuously switching white men and she eventually gets hitched up with Randy. According to her, financial settlement is the most perfect kind of deal one can ask for and this is why she sets Doty on a date with Joey.

Joey represents the typical white man who does not like to be rejected and forces Doty to get involved with him even when she rejects him. The portrayal within the story is an expression of exploitation of the race of color because of his white race. This is specifically significant because right from the first date Doty does not feel okay about belonging as an exotic item and suffering someone’s maltreatment. Ultimately Joey forces himself on Doty and in order to save herself from the assault Doty gets injured and becomes blind. Despite being the guilty one, Joey shows no regret and says, “You are lucky that it was just the two of us and I saved you” (66). These lines reflect the common perception of patriarchy about an assault that even if they are the ones who have hurt, they never accept themselves as the assaulters.

Doty, after experiencing this stays silent about the incident which leaves a big question on her quest for a feminist identity as she accepts the reality that she cannot change the circumstances. This makes Doty’s journey toward her identity incomplete as she in the words of Collins (2000) struck up by her particular standpoint of weakness and she accepts it as a part of her fate. This is depicted within the ending lines of the story where she says, “As a matter of fact, no one

says anything about it at all” (67). This indicates that though she has come to the realization of the partiality of the people regarding the incident of her assault still she finds herself in no position to express her inner feelings openly as she believes that this could damage her sister’s reputation in a society where Tina is trying hard to get mixed up. A part of her choice might also be the result of her cultural experiences as Latino women are quite often hesitant to come forward and look for help seeking or legal action (Cuevas & Sabina, 2010). This act from her though keeps her away from maintaining a true feminist identity of her own and defying the norms, yet the incident and her response transform her into a new person with a different mindset now.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the discussion and analysis, we can draw the conclusion that Patriarchy is deeply rooted in both the Asian as well as Latin American cultures as described within the stories. This makes it extremely difficult for the woman to come forward easily. As we find that Lakshmi despite having the idea still acts only when the patriarchal system of the village accepts it after much consultations and conciliations. In the same manner, Doty is prevented from enjoying her right of expression when she is subjected to an attempted assault and she remains silent because of the potential harm it can bring for both the sisters in the future because of their cultural differences and weakness within the social tier. Hence, it is the patriarchal ideology that makes us feminine and masculine, which assigns different roles, rights, and responsibilities to women and men (Sultana, 2011) and therefore acts as the biggest cultural hurdle eventually settling into the social setup.

Another significant finding of this study is that the inner dilemma of the women portrayed in the stories is one reason that their identities were ultimately blessed or deprived of expressing themselves. We find this in every story coming

from both parts of the world. Either it's Lakshmi or Millie, either the quest for identity makes Noni Appa suffer in solitude or it is Doty experiencing the pain in silence, it's the rage present within them that gets sparked up right when they experience an injustice. In order to attain the perfect identities where they would be allowed to express themselves completely, some cope in silence while others express it in front of family.

The study also concludes that Eastern culture is more judgmental and rigid compared to the American culture where individual suffering is more common because of personal traumas. This one trait gets domination in both the stories of the Eastern context where we find characters thinking more about the social implications of their decisions as compared to the Latin American culture where the characters are immersed in their personal traumas as we find Millie who does not care about the social norms and brings Harrison at her home just to satisfy her inner pain. In the same manner, Doty’s choice of staying unmarried despite the pressure comes from her own thought pattern and the only person she cares about is her sister for which she chooses to be silent and not the society on the greater part.

Based on the analysis, we can draw that each woman within the story has a different fall into a different kind of struggle for ultimately gaining or losing the feminist identity. Lakshmi’s struggle is collective as she strives for all other girls of the village as well, hence this makes her a true feminist compared to the other characters of other stories. Noni’s struggle is on the individual level where she sorts out a way to cope up with her loneliness and eventually expresses the feminist notion of living her life at her choice. Alternatively, Millie’s struggle is with her trauma and she attempts to get out of that trauma through Clarissa and Estrella, so her struggle is emotional. Meanwhile, Doty is the character whose struggle never ends but just begins as she chooses to

remain silent so her struggle intensifies with her guilt and fear making it the strongest of all.

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