



## RE/READING OF THE ROLE OF PARENTING IN WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT THROUGH THE LENS OF POPULAR CULTURE

Anupama Vohra <sup>1\*</sup> & Himanshi Chandervanshi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English, DDE, University of Jammu, Jammu & Kashmir, India

<sup>2</sup>Department of English, Govt. College for Women, Parade Ground, Jammu & Kashmir, India

\*✉ [vohranu@gmail.com](mailto:vohranu@gmail.com)

Anupama Vohra: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4689-1254>

### ABSTRACT

*In the words of Kristof and WuDunn (2009): "The world is awakening to a powerful truth: women and girls aren't the problem, they're the solution." This thought provoking statement makes one ponder from where this awareness needs to be generated. The denial of girls' rights begins at home when generational hierarchies are added to gender hierarchies: daughters are devalued due to popular notion that familial allocations and investment in daughters is secondary due to their being paraya dhan. This paper based on popular culture from across the world emphasizes that when parents, family, teachers, and mentors demonstrate concern, build caring support systems, encourage and solve problems besides exhibiting resilient behaviour, optimism, resourcefulness and determination, it enables women to respond successfully to crises and challenges, to recover and grow from those experiences, and to attain empowerment.*

**Keywords:** Parenting, Patriarchy, Women, Popular Culture, Empowerment.

*"A woman should be aware, self-controlled, strong willed, self-reliant and rational, having faith in the inner strength of womanhood. A meaningful change can be brought only from within by being free in the deeper psychic sense."*

(Kapur, 2008, p. 17)

A woman has to play multiple roles, sometimes different professional roles in the

social setting along with the various care giver roles in the private home setting, that is, the role of wife or mother, or role of parent or daughter in the family as "is still the case that women continue to bear the brunt of the responsibility for childcare and the care of the home, regardless of their own obligations" (*The Gender Perspective*, 1995, p. 8). And while performing different duties a woman has to submerge her own self and

identity whereas: “The topic of the self” play a “pivotal” role in understanding “questions about personal identity, the body, sociality, and agency.” Besides, in patriarchal societies, “In law, in customary practice, and in cultural stereotypes women’s selfhood has been systematically subordinated, diminished, and belittled, when it has not been outrightly denied” due to deep-rooted forms of suppression, dependence on others and secondary sense of herself and her domestic/social place because “Throughout history, women have been identified either as pale reflections of men or as their opposite, characterized through perceived differences from men and subordinated as a result of them; in both cases, women have been denigrated on the basis of these views” (Anderson *et al.*, 2021).

Anita Desai in her essay “A Secret Connivance” (1990) argues that while most of the countries run on patriarchal strictures “where women are traditionally suppressed” India “deifies its women”(np) as mother goddesses and loyal wives devoted to their husbands as lords and masters. In accordance with these values, an Indian girl is brought up on established myths and legends celebrating these archetypes, and inculcated with the belief that her mission in life is to try and live up to them, even “if in reality she is nothing but a common drudge, first in her father’s house and then her husband’s.” She cannot speak out or rebel because to do so is to question the established myths and legends, “the cornerstone on which the Indian family and therefore Indian society are built.” (np)

Defining what is meant by empowerment is arguably the most critical aspect of assessing what it means to ‘be empowered’, or ‘to empower’. Empowerment, according to Oxford English Dictionary means “to give somebody more control over their own life or the situation they are in.” (p. 498). This definition highlights that empowerment in context of women is a multifaceted issue with varying interpretation in different socio-cultural, regional and national contexts. Women empowerment is the expression of redistribution of power that confronts patriarchal ideology and the male domination: “...women empowerment essentially means that the women have the power or capacity to regulate their day-to-day lives in the social, political and economic terms.” Women’s competence to regulate their day-to-day lives is fundamental in moving towards empowerment and has wider implications as it helps women to transcend their status of dependent thereby “enabl[ing] them to move from the periphery to the centre stage” (Bhuyan, 2006, p. 60).

In specific sense, the term women empowerment connotes empowering women to make them self-dependent “by providing them access to all those freedoms and opportunities denied in the past for no other reason except their being women” (Jharta & Jharta, 2003, p. 322). Such enabling measures might include “social legislation for their emancipation from age-old discrimination, education for their self-enhancement, economic opportunities for their self-dependence, and political and civil rights for gender equality” (Jharta & Jharta,

2003, p. 322). However, to be more specific, women empowerment would mean “enhancing their position in the power structure of the society” leading to an “increase in their access to the structures of decision making process which have otherwise been dominated by men” (Jharta & Jharta, 2003, p. 322).

The empowerment of girls and women can start within the family in the womb if female foetus is given a chance to survive and bloom in a congenial family environment. Family plays a central role in initiating the cause of women empowerment as it is the basic unit from where socialization starts:

It is within the family environment that an individual’s physical, emotional and psychological development occurs. It is from [our] family that we [children] learn unconditional love, [we] understand right from wrong, and [we] gain empathy, respect and self-regulation. These qualities enable us [children] to engage positively at school, at work and in society in general. (Centre for Social Justice qtd. in Jarvis *et al.*, 2014, p. 6).

It is due to this reason that the role of parenting in case of girls who become future women is crucial. Parenting is the “primary mechanism of socialization, that is, a primary means of training and preparing children to meet the demands of their environments and take advantage of opportunities within those environments” (“Parenting Matters”, 2015, pp. 19-20). Parenting refers to carrying out the responsibilities of raising and relating to children (both boy and girl) in such a

manner that the child is well prepared to realize his or her full potential as a human being. The practice of parenting plays the most fundamental role in people’s lives as it “prepare[s] them for socially accepted physical, economic, and psychological situations that are characteristic of the culture in which they are to survive and thrive” (Bornstein qtd. in “Parenting Matters”, 2015, p. 20)., families initiate the first integration of children into social life major by providing them basic personal and social identity, and capacity for love and intimacy. The practice of parenting extends and it further takes shape on the desks of school, with education and access to culture and information challenging the normative patterns of gender inequality achieved and perpetuated through:

Gender indoctrination; educational deprivation; the denial to women of knowledge of their history; the dividing of women, one from the other, by defining “respectability” and “deviance” according to women’s sexual activities; by restraints and outright coercion; by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power; and by awarding class privileges to conforming women. (Lerner, 1986, p. 9)

This further necessitates access to literacy, to science, to legitimate possibilities for girls to become all they wish for, make their own choices and decision making. This is essential for human rights, for health, for sustainable development, and for the fabric of societies as a whole.

However, in most of the cases, family plays a constraining role in furthering the cause of gender equality and women

empowerment as “the family’ is a mechanism of sexism” where “traditional, gendered, family arrangements contribute to the perpetuation of gendered subjectivity and sexist power relations” (Nelson, 1997, p. 117), and the “Family structure and societal structure” together “form a circular, self-perpetuating, downward spiraling circle” (Nelson, 1997, p. 51). As a consequence, parents, more often than not, either consciously/unconsciously “transfer their own gender biases” on which they themselves have been raised “to their children” (“What is gender-responsive parenting?” n.d.). As a result, they sometimes carry out discriminatory practices towards the girl child such as “Stopping a girl from participating in activities just because of her gender send[ing] a message that girls are weak or are inferior to boys” making the “girl child [can] easily feel discriminated against” (“7 types of prejudice”, 2022).

For this paper parenting moves beyond the confines of biological parents to include family members, teachers and mentors who guide, advise and nurture children at different stages of their lives. Parenting in this context is a cautious gender sensitive style of raising children within the family and the community that increases the chances of a child becoming the best person and adult s/he can be: cooperative, humane, considerate, peaceful and productive adults, fine marriage partners and supportive parents.

Popular culture refers to writings, media, cinema, performing arts, etc., which has wide and continued acceptance due to its

potential to capture the attention of a wide range of readers. Contemporary South Asian writers both male and female depict the social ethos of the community by portraying the ways daughters grow up in households dominated by patriarchs and internalize the traditional structures of gender and power that eventually crush their ambitions as they reach their youth. These writers strive to bring a paradigm shift in the people’s attitude toward females. Their creative output, especially in context of autobiographical writers, is often the result of social unrest and consequent protest against power structures in the society. These writers express their opinion, argue and protest through their writings. Many of these writers through their creative work directly or indirectly bring forth the good/bad parenting and its impact on women’s empowerment.

In a patriarchal set-up, male and female children are looked upon and looked after discriminately. The birth of a male child is a blissful moment which is accompanied with a sense of security about future, and celebrations: “When a boy is born in most developing countries, friends and relatives exclaim congratulations. A son means insurance. He will inherit his father’s property and get a job to help support the family” (Sivak & Smirnov, 2019). As such the male child is showered with love, affection, respect, better food and proper health care so as to keep him in good health: “Gender preference continues to manifest throughout childhood....Sons have advantages in nutrition, vaccination rates, and spending on healthcare.” On the other hand, “When a girl is born, the reaction is

very different” and the birth of a female baby brings about pain and lamentation and anxiety about her future: “Some women weep when they find out their baby is a girl because, to them, a daughter is just another expense.” Keeping in view the future role of boys and girls, as prescribed by a heteronormative society, boys are encouraged to be tough and outgoing while girls are encouraged to be home-bound and shy as “Her place is in the home, not in the world of men” (Eqbal, 2022, p. 275) reiterating that the “(idealized) vision of the family to which our society has traditionally subscribed, women are not only responsible for the maintenance of the home but are also confined to it” (Spence & Helmreich, 2014, p. 114).

In keeping with this sentiment, families invest more in sons’ education neglecting that of girls’: “From the families’ perspective, the costs of educating girls are likely to be higher and the benefits more tenuous than for boys” (Herz *et al.*, 1991, p. 25). Similar expression is found in Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) in which Ila Das’ parents discriminate between their daughters and sons. While they send their three sons abroad to different universities-Heidelberg, Cambridge, and Harvard for education, the girls are not given access to same education opportunities. This highlights that in families, boys are given preference over girls in matters of education as, “the private economic return from educating daughters may be less than that from educating sons... From the family’s perspective, if not from society’s, education for girls may seem a less attractive investment than education for

boys” (25). Anita Desai depicts in *Fire on the Mountain* that under the pretext of studies these boys waste their father’s money on drinks and horse riding. Consequently, their father plunges into financial crisis and finally succumbs to heart stroke. However, the three sons do not bother to attend his funeral. Thus, the responsibility of the family falls on Ila and her sister Rima. Anita Desai in the novel exposes the hollowness of the gender difference sending a powerful message across to stop discrimination within the family.

Across the world there exists the unfounded belief that man is the breadwinner of the family. Consequently, the male child gets the top most facilities and resources available with the family: “In some countries, couples pursue sons by having additional children at the cost of having a larger family size and under investing in daughters” (Sivak & Smirnov, 2019). Not only this, “Gender inequality starts even before birth” as “would-be parents tend to prefer their first (or their only) child to be a boy rather than a girl or to have more sons than daughters” as a result the girl child runs the risk of being aborted through the misuse of modern technology which leads to “millions of “missing girls” at birth due to sex-selective abortions” as most “prospective parents throughout the world have preferences with respect to the sex of their future children, and, of these, most have preference for sons over daughters” (Robertson, 2004, p. 183). In this context, Dogri<sup>1</sup> writer Sudesh Raj’s short story “Hypocrite” (2007) exposes the unnamed heroine’s severe distress when her

family comes to know of the sex of the foetus she is carrying in her womb. Following her pregnancy, her husband and mother-in-law take good care of her. But all her hopes are shattered when due to certain complicity, an ultrasound is done and the doctor being a friend of her husband discloses the sex of baby. The behaviour of her husband and mother-in-law changes who threaten her to abort the foetus to live in her marital home or keep the female foetus and leave her marital house forever. Though highly qualified, a practicing lawyer, her qualification doesn't come to her rescue. She bows before their wishes and aborts the foetus showing "sex determination of foetus still continues in all the [rural] regions of the country despite the enforcement of legislation on Pre-natal Diagnostic Technique (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse Act) which was passed in 1994" (Bhuyan, 2006, p. 60). The unnamed protagonist therefore, stands for every woman who undergoes similar stressful situations to terminate her pregnancy and the resultant feelings of motherhood because of marital /societal pressure.

Among those girls born many are deprived of school education because they have to take care of siblings at home: "In some parts of India, it's traditional to greet a family with a newborn girl by saying, the servant of your household has been born" (Eqbal, 2022, p. 275). For example, in the family of domestic maids usually the eldest daughter in the family looks after the younger siblings and performs household work, so that the mother can go for work on time highlighting that "sending girls to school deprives the family of instant

household work, since girls have more household work compared to boys" (Eqbal, 2022, p. 275). And since she is to be married off soon investing in her education is a liability, not an asset because of her *paraya dhan* and secondary status besides the demon of dowry cursing and destabilizing her from the day of her birth: "Parents with low incomes have to evaluate whether it is profitable enough to send girls to school. Boys get priority because they are seen as the future providers of economic security for their parents while girls' future role is to be married away" (Ovasdi, 2004, p. 152). Who understands it better than Nirmala in Munshi Premchand's novel *Nirmala* (1927) when she is married to a widower twenty years older than her and father of three sons: the elder son older to Nirmala by one year, raising the pertinent question of women's autonomy, agency, and decision making in matters related to marriage and the right to choose their life partners: "How many women have been forced to get married to someone that she doesn't love? All because of the belief that he will complete her, and because he will not allow the community to feel shame towards her. This fear of shame results in father's forcing their daughters to marry men that they do not love" (Sharawi, 2017). Similarly, Nazneen in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2004) silently accepts to marry Chanu twenty years older than her because "a good Muslim woman must be ... hidden and silent. Breaking the silence and speaking out has a heavy price ... and any woman who wants to "speak out" will not be considered a respectable Muslim woman" (Faqir, 1996, p. 12). This highlights that "Love marriage, or the concept of

individually choosing your life partner is not accepted by many [and] is not accepted at all within conservative families, and it is considered an illegal and immoral form of marriage” (Sharawi, 2017). Forced marriage restricts women within the confines of the home and discourages them to move ahead in their lives. Both Munshi Premchand and Monica Ali explicitly through their women characters’ point toward wrong and discouraging parenting, that is, looking upon daughters as liability and denying them articulation which leads to discrimination. Nirmala and Nazneen’s characters send across strong message for creating enabling environment at home to build confidence among daughters to empower them to move from silence to articulation.

The positive accepting attitude of parents toward girl child empowers her to face the challenges of life. Numerous approaches to women’s empowerment loom in popular culture each assuming diverse stance to the issue. Chandra Kiran Sonrexa in her autobiography *Pinjare Ki Maina*<sup>3</sup> (2010) underscores that it was only due to the decision of her father that she could continue her studies in a boy’s school much against the tradition of those times. She admits due to the strenuous efforts of her father, currently, she is a recognized creative writer which she proudly admits highlighting “education is an important instrument for increasing and bettering the chances of women’ employability and empowering women to think for themselves, become confident, and develop the capability of recognising more accurately the area of exploitation. In spite of inadequacies, education has made a definite

impact. It opens up an arena in which women can compete with men and prove their independent identity” (Ovasdi, 2004, p. 144). Her autobiography spreads the message that empowerment keeps the women going!

Dalit women’s narratives highlight the consciousness of mothers’ for education of their children, especially daughters underscoring “...the most important role in achieving strength and a central position will be played by women themselves. They have to work and struggle for that” (Kumar, 2004, p. 134). In accordance with this thought, Urmila Pawar in *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman’s Memoirs* (2008) narrates her mother’s concern for her education, “Look, I am a widow; my life is ruined. Yet I sit here, under this tree and work. Why? Because I want education for my children so that their future will be better. And you treat my girl like this? How dare you?” (69).

*Nil Battey Sannata* is a 2015 Bollywood movie which highlights the positive influence of parenting on girls. In the movie Chanda, a domestic help is ambitious to get her daughter Apeksha educated, who on the other hand believes that education is unlikely to change their social status. Discouraged by her daughter’s disinterest in studies, Chanda gets enrolled in the same school about which Apeksha feels embarrassed “and promises to quit [only] if Apeksha manages to beat her in maths” (“5 Inspiring Films”, 2021). The movie sends a strong message for girls’ education and highlights the positive role of mothers towards this end.

In the documentary, *To Educate A Girl* (2010), a young six-year old Ugandan girl Mercy's dream of going to school and pursuing education ultimately comes true through the efforts of an organization named Girls Education Movement which persuades Mercy's mother to enroll her in the school. As a result, Mercy takes the first step towards empowerment and breaks the generational cycle of illiteracy and consequent disempowerment in which her mother and grandmother had been caught.

Mexican American woman writer Sandra Cisneros in *The House on Mango Street* (1984) underscores the importance of girls' education through the character of Esperanza, a young Mexican American girl who despite living in extreme poverty is encouraged by her mother to pursue education against all odds: "Esperanza, you go to school. Study hard" (90). Esperanza's mother sets a positive example before her daughter and wants her to lead a life of self-dependence which can be achieved only by acquiring education: "Got to take care all your own" (91) reiterating "Women must become literate, as education is beneficial for them as well as their families. The family web is woven around the women. She has to be up to the mark and educated so that she could fend for herself and her family during the hour of crisis. The status of women would improve only if they educate themselves and grab every opportunity to become stronger and more powerful than before" (Bhuyan, 2006, pp. 62-63).

In her autobiography *Meyebela: My Bengali Girlhood* (1998) Taslima Nasrin

highlights the empowering role of positive parenting where Taslima Nasrin's father takes a firm stand towards his daughters' education against the wishes of society. Her father Rajab Ali does not allow his daughters to enter kitchen much to the dismay of his wife who wants to raise the girls as per traditional patriarchal norms where the future role of a woman is restricted to looking after the husband "—Why won't you let the girls come into the kitchen? Don't they have to get married some day and cook for their husbands?" (164) However, the father takes a firm stand in support of his daughters' education: "These girls are getting an education" to break the stereotype that girls' proper place is in the kitchen: "Why should they work in the kitchen? Haven't we got others to help with the cooking? I don't want either of my girls to go anywhere near the kitchen. They must spend their time on studies" (165).

In a manner similar to parents, mentors, too, play a significant part in furthering the cause of women's empowerment. A mentor, "is a guide, teacher, counselor, and developer of skills who "facilitates the realization of the dream"" helps an individual in achieving "vision that one has about the sort of life one wants as an adult" (Allen & Eby, 2011, p. 8). A mentor plays an influential role in a person's life similar to "a parent." Consequently, the "powerful role of emotional attachments beyond childhood" with a mentor "play[s] a critical role in healthy human development" (Allen & Eby, 2011, p. 8). Baby Halder in her memoir *A Life Less Ordinary* (2006) writes about 'the Sahib' her mentor, Prabodh Kumar, the



grandson of the famous writer Munshi Premchand, who gave her a notebook and a pen and asked her to pen down her life story: “Here. Write something in this notebook. If you want, you can write your life story in this. Whatever has happened in your life ever since you can remember up to now, write it down. Try to write a little bit every day” (152). Writing has a liberating impact on an individual stuck in a difficult life situation:

...writing can lead us out of the hole where we are struck. With the right prompts, we can find our way by making sense of the chaos unfolding within us. Words can ground us by helping us reach an understanding of what is happening, and we can rewrite the events we must live with. While we cannot change what happened, we can revise our interpretation of a painful experience and allow it to fit into the framework of who we are. (Marinella, 2016, p. 32)

This reinforces the importance of positive influence a mentor can have on the life of a woman who has been marginalized by the society.

However, there are challenges to acquiring education for women and the conservative societal beliefs hinder young girls from getting educated and empowered. From a young age, girls are indoctrinated with the belief that they are inferior to men, consequently in matters of education and employment, a wife should always be one step behind her husband: “Women’s subordination is deeply embedded in the consciousness of both men and women and is reinforced through religious beliefs,

cultural practices, and educational systems that assign lesser status and power to women. Both Hindus and Muslims teach to their women that husband is not less than a god to them (*Pati Parmeshwar* and *Khuda-e-Majazi*)” (Kumar, 2004, p. 11). The extract: “That’s important...A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he is an M.A., you should be a B.A. If he is 5’4’ tall, you shouldn’t be 5’3’ tall. If he is earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety-nine. That’s the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage” (137) from *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) written by Shashi Deshpande shows how a girl is socially conditioned by her family to accept the subordinate status of a wife. In a similar manner, Dalit woman writer Bama in her life narrative *Karukku* (2012) admits that the thought of imparting higher education to her instilled fear in the mind of her parents as they apprehended: “it would be difficult for me to find a husband in my community if I went in for further education” (74).

For women empowerment, awareness, assertion and gender sensitization is crucial. The initial sensitization needs to start for both boys and girls within family and continue. Malala, stood up for education and was shot by the Taliban. Her father Ziauddin Yousafzai in an interview said, “As a father, I did not silence Malala’s voice. I encouraged her to ask questions and to demand answers. As a teacher, I also imparted these values to the students at my school. I taught my female students to unlearn the lesson of obedience. I taught the boys to unlearn the lesson of so-called pseudo-honor. It is similarly the obligation

of schools and universities to instill the principles of love, respect, dignity and universal humanism in their students. Girls and boys alike must learn to think critically, to stand up for what they believe is right and build an effective and healthy society. “People ask me, what is special about my parenting, which has made Malala so bold and so courageous and so vocal and so poised? I tell them, “Don’t ask me what I did. Ask me what I did not do. I did not clip Malala’s wings.”” I take this to be the role model of parenting not to clip daughter’s wings but to empower her to realize her aspirations” (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2014, p.2).

An overview of popular culture underscores women’s discrimination within families as well as in society, where double standards in the case of education, marriage, spousal relationships, domestic violence, laws of patriarchal society, property laws, dowry system, sexual morality, sexual harassment as well as discriminatory social stigma and also less recognition and respect for women’s work to raise human consciousness are practiced. Women empowerment can only be possible when the family becomes the foundation by providing girls the secure ground to stand firmly and giving them space and support to self-empower themselves as the first seeds of empowerment are sown in an enabling familial environment with parents as the major actors providing through their actions, advice and contributions a springboard for women’s empowerment. In this context, popular culture plays a pivotal role: a reflection of society, a mirror to see through to stop discrimination “the ways in which women are represented on and in broadcast

media send important messages to the public about women’s place, women’s role and women’s lives” (Ross & Byerly, 2002, p. 62) as these images are located in the particular time and place of their production and consumption and accordingly carry specific use and exchange value.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Dogri is one of the twenty-two official languages of India and is one of the five official languages in JKUT and is spoken by people residing in Jammu region of J&KUT, and Himachal Pradesh and northern part of Punjab.

<sup>2</sup>means someone else's wealth. In Indian context, the term is commonly used in reference of a girl child, who after getting married becomes someone else's wealth, meaning an unmarried girl is just a guest at her parent's place; her real identity/recognition is with her in-laws.

<sup>3</sup>*Nightingale in the Cage* is the English title of her autobiography.

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