

A Collaborative Research
on
Sabitari: A Recovering Patriarchal Woman in Regmi's *Chhinar*

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Abstract

This research paper explores the pervasive dynamics of patriarchy and its debilitating socio-psychological effects on women, focusing specifically on the protagonist Sabitari in Sanat Regmi's short story "*Chhinar*". Drawing upon Lois Tyson's feminist framework of the "patriarchal woman" and the "recovering patriarchal woman," this study examines how traditional gender roles are socially constructed and weaponized to maintain male supremacy and justify gender inequities. Through a qualitative textual analysis, the paper illustrates Sabitari's initial internalization of patriarchal norms—enduring child marriage, widowhood stigma, and a forced second marriage to an impotent husband. However, following public humiliation and being derogatorily branded a *chhinar* (whore) due to an extra-marital affair, she transitions into a recovering patriarchal woman. Rather than succumbing to social ostracization or linguistic double standards, Sabitari marshals the courage to resist patriarchal programming. She asserts her agency by becoming financially independent, taking control of her household, and transforming her marginalized status into a vehicle for radical community service. Ultimately, this paper

argues that while patriarchy systematically objectifies and marginalizes women, individuals can reclaim their identity, dismantle oppressive values, and achieve meaningful self-actualization through active resistance.

Keywords: Patriarchal Programming, Oppressive Values, Agency, Resistance, Liberation

Introduction

Many women, like Sabitari in Sanat Regmi's "Chhinar," are still the victims of male domination in the society. To suffer the harsh realities of domestic violence, gender discrimination, physical, psychological and sexual exploitations, insult and harassment is the way of their life. They are considered inferior, weak, submissive, irrational, and treated as second sex. This systematic subordination aligns with broader intersectional critiques of how patriarchal structures inherently destabilize female autonomy by prioritizing male authority across public and private spheres (Hooks, 2000). The subjugated women cannot enjoy freedom, equality and justice like their male counterparts in the society. In other words, they are the victims of patriarchy and its programming. Lois Tyson (2015), a famous writer and critic, defines patriarchy as "any culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles" (p. 81). In its simplest terms, patriarchy is a system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it. "Patriarchy is a social system in which men hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property" ("Patriarchy," July 7, 2021). A patriarchal woman is "a woman who has internalized the norms and values of patriarchy" (Tyson, 2015, p. 87). For her, patriarchy is sexist, that is, it promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to men. Women are oppressed by patriarchy economically, politically, socially, and psychologically; patriarchal ideology is the primary means by which they are kept so. In every domain where patriarchy reigns, woman is other: she is objectified and marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values, defined by what she allegedly lacks and that men allegedly have. A recovering patriarchal woman has learned to recognize and resist the patriarchal programming challenging its values.

In this research paper, we argue that though patriarchy assigns traditional roles to men and women to maintain male supremacy and justify inequities between them, the women can protect themselves from the damning effects of patriarchy and assert their identity and freedom to a great extent if they marshal courage, as Sabitari does in the story, to resist patriarchal programming. It is the tragedy of our society that though men

and women are considered the two wheels of the same cart, the women are treated unequally in different spheres of life. They cannot enjoy equal rights, freedom and justice as their male counterparts do. The impacts of patriarchy on women are multifarious, and women's issues have become more complex today. Despite several social movements and transformations, there are no fundamental changes in women's life. This persistence highlights how patriarchal mechanisms adapt fluidly to modern societal changes, continuously recreating gender divides (Walby, 1990). In every domain where patriarchy reigns, woman is still considered other: she is objectified, marginalized and defined in terms of male norms and values. There are multiple researches that have focused on male supremacy and privileges, discriminations and prejudices against women in several domains. The main purpose of this research paper is to clarify the concept of patriarchy and analyze the damning effects of it on the life of a woman like Sabitari, and find the ways how she can recover herself. To achieve the purpose, we have primarily focused my study on the following research questions:

- What is patriarchy and how does it operate its programs to subjugate women in the society?
- Why does the society question the character only of a woman but not of a man?
- Why does Sabitari go on helping and serving the needy ones in the village even though people characterize her negatively?
- Is she a morally loose woman or a true servant of the society?

Several researches have been conducted in this area of patriarchy but only a few of them deal somewhat with the issue I have raised. Muthukumar (2016) in his dissertation paper *The Dynamics of Patriarchy Marriage and Self-actualization in the Select Novels of Shobhaa De* attempts to explore the dynamics of patriarchy, marriage and self-actualization of women. However, his study is centered on the discussion of the evolutionary development of Indian English Literature, the emergence of women writers, the concept of feminism and modern trends along with Shobhaa De's life and works. Similarly, in the article "Domestic Violence Against Women and Associated Factors in Ethiopia" published in 2015, Semahegn and Mengistie assess the magnitude of domestic violence against women and associated factors in Ethiopia. According to them, domestic violence against women significantly associated with alcohol consumption, chat chewing, family history of violence, occupation, religion, educational status, residence and decision-making power. Domestic violence has direct relationship with socio-demographic characteristics of the victim as well as perpetrator. The researchers' major

finding was that appropriate health promotion information activities needed to tackle associated factors of domestic violence against women or to prevent and control the problem to save women from being victim. Although the writers talk much on domestic violence and control of such problem, the study is largely defensive in nature.

Critical Theory Today (2015) by Lois Tyson is an impressive work for critical understanding of contemporary issues. As a feminist she discloses how patriarchal programming blind women not to see the discriminations and inequities against them. Though she urges women to dismantle the patriarchal values and institutions, Tyson goes beyond patriarchal issues and focuses on gender studies. In the same line, York (2009) in his research paper aims to explore the relationship between traditional gender attitudes, community-level social capital, and acts of violence against women. The researcher pays heed to the study of traditional beliefs about gender or gender roles and weighs the impact of such beliefs on sexual assault and/or domestic violence. The analyses reveal that the prevalence of traditional gender attitudes exacerbates rates of violence against women. It is an undeniable finding that an integrated theory using social capital and traditional gender role attitudes is appropriate for studying violence against women. Like of York's work, most of the researches are found to have emphasized on the exploration of the nature of violence against women in patriarchal society and defense mechanism, hardly research discusses on empowering the patriarchal women to recover and assert their identity through the resistance of patriarchal values.

Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative research design rooted in feminist literary criticism and textual analysis to examine the socio-psychological impacts of patriarchy and the dynamics of female resistance. Rather than relying on empirical or statistical data, this research interprets textual evidence to investigate ideological programming and subsequent behavioral transformation within a literary framework.

Research Design and Framework

The primary theoretical framework of this study is derived from Lois Tyson's structural model of feminist criticism (2015), specifically focusing on the concepts of the "patriarchal woman" and the "recovering patriarchal woman". This framework is utilized to trace the psychological and behavioral trajectory of the protagonist, Sabitari, as she moves from the internalization of oppressive norms to active subversion. Additionally, intersectional feminist perspectives on structural dominance and language are integrated to critique societal double standards and linguistic marginalization.

Data Sources and Material

The primary source of data for this study is Sanat Regmi's short story "Chhinar" (2001). Secondary sources include academic journal articles, feminist critiques, and sociological literature regarding patriarchal systems, domestic violence, and gender-based discrimination, which serve to contextualize and validate the textual arguments.

Data Collection and Analysis Strategy

Data collection was conducted through a systematic process of close reading and thematic coding. The primary text was meticulously reviewed to extract textual evidence related to the core research questions:

Thematic Coding of Patriarchal Subjugation: Textual segments documenting child marriage, enforced widowhood restrictions, and socio-economic dependency were coded to analyze how patriarchy operates to subjugate women.

Analysis of Societal Double Standards: Instances of public shaming, linguistic targeting (e.g., the derogatory labels *chhinar* and *bhauji*), and the contrasting lack of accountability for male characters were analyzed to evaluate systemic gender asymmetry.

Evaluation of Resistance and Recovery: Sabitari's shift toward aggressive autonomy, economic independence, and unconditional community service was analyzed to evaluate how a marginalized woman can reclaim agency and challenge structural values.

Ethical Considerations

As a work of literary scholarship based on published text, this study does not involve human subjects, thereby requiring no institutional review board (IRB) clearance. Ethical considerations are strictly confined to maintaining academic integrity, preventing plagiarism, and ensuring the accurate representation and citation of the primary author's narrative and secondary scholars' theories.

Results and Discussion

Patriarchy assigns specific gender roles to both men and women. Through these gender roles women are programmed to see or to be blind at inequalities. Shedding light on the role of these gender roles Tyson (2015) says:

Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive.

These gender roles have been used very successfully to justify inequities, which still occur today, such as excluding women from equal access to leadership and decision-making positions (in the family as well as in politics, academia, and the corporate world), paying men higher wages than women for doing the same job

(if women are even able to obtain the job), and convincing women that they are not fit for careers in such areas as mathematics and engineering. (p. 81)

Patriarchy continually exerts forces that undermine women's self-confidence and assertiveness, then points to the absence of these qualities as proof that women are naturally, and therefore correctly, self-effacing and submissive. Patriarchy as an ideology programs both men and women socially in such a way that women often cannot see the ways in which they are oppressed by traditional gender roles. In Sanat Regmi's short story *Chhinar*, for example, Sabitari, the protagonist, is characterized as a patriarchal woman in the beginning. As a patriarchal woman, Sabitari performed her every gender role given by patriarchal society responsively. She was treated as object and second sex, however, she was blind to see it. When she was just in her puberty, "her father had married her off at an early age to a man who died soon after the wedding" (p. 225). Her family and society had handed over her as an object to the adult man of a distant village.

Sabitri was forced to marry and live with that unfamiliar person. It was her child marriage, when she was ignorant of her own body organs and of her own human rights. But unfortunately, she had to lose her husband just a year after their marriage, and she became a widow at such early stage. Her single life was full of restrictions, and she was understood as a social stigma. As she had internalized the patriarchal norms and values, Sabitari never thought of going against those discriminatory provisions of her culture and society. As a loyal and dedicated patriarchal woman, she did whatever her family and society assigned her to do. Just because she was a widow, no unmarried man could ever think of marrying Sabitari although she was young, beautiful and fascinating woman. After some years of her widow life, her parents gave her hand to a man named Sukai Ahir from neighboring village. Sukai is poor, feeble, unhealthy and quite senior in his age. However, Sabitari is compelled to live her life with that old and unhealthy man.

Contrarily, many people today believe such inequities are a thing of the past because, over time, many anti-discriminatory laws have been passed in an effort to guarantee women equal rights. However, these laws are found to have been readily undermined, if not completely sidestepped. For example, an employer can pay a woman less for performing the same work as a man simply by giving her a different job title. Even today many women face labor unfreedom and marketing discrimination. Moreover, women as housewife have to be limited to the household matters in the non-urban areas. Even if they get the job, they have to do the manual works like cleaning utensils, washing clothes, cutting grasses etc, which are deemed inferior works. Sabitari, for

instance, had no labor freedom in the early part of the story; she did not go outside for generating income for five years. When she goes, she has to do mere low paid household chores in her neighborhood. These works are considered only the tasks of women. In countries where such laws don't exist at all, women workers, of course, generally suffer even greater disparity (p. 81).

Patriarchy is sexist, which means it promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to men. This belief in the inborn inferiority of women is a form of what is called biological essentialism because it is based on biological differences between the sexes that are considered part of our unchanging essence as men and women (p. 82). In other words, women are not born feminine, and men are not born masculine. Rather, these gender categories are constructed by society, which is why this view of gender is an example of social constructionism (p. 82). Simone de Beauvoir famously observed this phenomenon, arguing that femininity is an enforced cultural construct rather than a biological destiny (Beauvoir, 1949). The belief that men are superior to women has been used, feminists have observed, to justify and maintain the male monopoly of positions of economic, political, and social power, in other words, to keep women powerless by denying them the educational and occupational means of acquiring economic, political, and social power. That is, the inferior position long occupied by women in patriarchal society has been culturally, not biologically, produced.

One of the major characteristics of patriarchy is that "many patriarchal societies frown upon the concept of divorce" (Felkins, 2013). Women, no matter what marital atmosphere they're struggling in, are encouraged and in fact, even expected to stay married to their husbands since they are the ones who ultimately get the custody of the children. The idea is that a woman cannot survive on her own, and will be subjected to abject poverty and a constant threat to her chastity and morals if she tries living without a husband. Similarly, no matter how violent or unstable a man may be, patriarchal societies believe that a father's presence is necessary for the child. Hence, divorce is largely opposed by cultural norms. In the story, though Sukai is poor, feeble, unhealthy and quite senior in his age, Sabitari is compelled to marry him. Neither he is able to fulfill her biological desire, nor can give birth to any child due to his eunuchry. Yet, he wishes to have a son to continue his family lineage. Even at this harsh context, Sabitari never thinks of divorcing him. Rather, she makes up her mind to fulfill his wish by keeping a relation with another man. However, she is thrashed, beaten and publicly

insulted by her husband. Despite this unbearable instance, Sabitari does not divorce him; she rather thinks of fighting against his cruelty and oppression.

Patriarchal gender roles are destructive for men as well as for women. Though conservative people promote patriarchy to exert dominance over women and maintain their superiority, the debilitating effects of patriarchal gender roles intensively influence both women and men. For example, generally men are supposed to have muscular body and superior to women by nature—but those who don't possess stronger muscles are often derided, by both patriarchal men and women, as weak and unmanly, as if the only way to be a man were to be a patriarchal man. Because traditional gender roles dictate that men are supposed to be strong (physically powerful and emotionally stoic), they are not supposed to cry because crying is considered a sign of weakness, a sign that one has been overpowered by one's emotions. For similar reasons, it is considered unmanly for men to show fear or pain or to express their sympathy for other men.

Expressing sympathy (or any loving feeling) for other men is especially taboo because patriarchy assumes that only the mutest and stoic (or boisterous and boyish) forms of male bonding are free of homosexual overtones. In addition, men are not permitted to fail at anything they try because failure in any domain implies failure in one's manhood. Failure to provide adequate economic support for one's family is considered the most humiliating failure a man can experience because it means that he has failed at what is considered his biological role as provider. The imperative for men to succeed economically has become an extremely pressurized situation (p. 83). If men can't achieve the unrealistic economic goals set for them in contemporary societies, then they must increase the signs of their manhood in some other area: they must be the most sexually active (or make others believe that they are) or be able to hold the most liquor or display the most anger.

It is not surprising, in this context, that anger and other violent emotions are the only emotions permitted, even encouraged, in men, for anger is a very effective means of blocking out fear and pain, which are not permitted, and anger usually produces the kind of aggressive behaviors associated with patriarchal manhood (p. 84). Sukai Ahir, for example, was often interrogated and criticized for being unable to marry a woman. "Sukai, shouldn't you get married? No house is a home without a housewife. They say a house without a housewife is like a ghost's dwelling" (Regmi, p. 224). He was often teased and suggested by the villagers to look for a woman whatever of its kind and settle down soon. On the one hand, there was a chance for him to be characterized as having

feminine qualities if he was unable to find a girl. On the other hand, it was the same society that wondered him how he was able to find such an attractive bride, and how he could have succeeded to marry a widow.

Generally, in patriarchal society, men are supposed not to have impotency. Every couple wishes for a male child as the heir of their family and who is considered pivot for the continuation of the family lineage. One who doesn't have a son finds himself living in the hell. The family life of Sabitari and Sukai perceived good for the outsiders for many years of their marriage until one day Sukai wishes for a son for the continual of his family lineage. It was a contradictory matter both for them as Sukai was impotent and unable to beget a child. But it was the same man who wishes for the second generation. Sabitari decides to keep sexual relation with Lakhsat, a man from neighbouring village so that she could fulfill her husband's wish to "continue his lineage" (p. 226). In this backdrop, is there any option better than making a relationship with comparatively a strong man who could satisfy her biological needs and help her become a mother as well?

In a patriarchy, everything that concerns men usually implies something usually negative about women. The main female characters are stereotyped as either "good girls" (gentle, submissive, virginal, angelic) or "bad girls" (violent, aggressive, worldly, monstrous). These characterizations imply that if a woman does not accept her patriarchal gender role, then the only role left her is that of a monster (p. 85). The concept of "good girls" and "bad girls" is another way another way in which sexist ideology continues to influence us. Patriarchal ideology suggests that there are only two identities a woman can have. If she accepts her traditional gender role and obeys the patriarchal rules, she's a "good girl"; if she doesn't, she's a "bad girl." These two roles – also referred to as "madonna" and "whore" or "angel" and "bitch" – view women only in terms of how they relate to the patriarchal order. Certainly, the notion of "good" and "bad" relative terms and the meanings can alter somewhat according to the time and place in which they live. But it is patriarchy that will do the defining because both roles are projections of patriarchal male desire: for example, the desire to own "valuable" women suited to be wives and mothers, the desire to control women's sexuality so that men's sexuality cannot be threatened in any way, and the desire to dominate in all financial matters.

According to a patriarchal ideology in full force through the 1950s, "bad girls" violate patriarchal sexual norms in some way: they're sexually forward in appearance or

behavior, or they have multiple sexual partners. Men sleep with “bad girls,” but they don’t marry them. “Bad girls” are used and then discarded because they don’t deserve better, and they probably don’t even expect better. They’re not good enough to bear a man’s name or his legitimate children. That role is appropriate only for a properly submissive “good girl”. The “good girl” is rewarded for her behavior by being placed on a pedestal by patriarchal culture. To her are attributed all the virtues associated with patriarchal femininity and domesticity: she’s modest, unassuming, self-sacrificing, and nurturing. She has no needs of her own, for she is completely satisfied by serving her family. At times, she may be sad about the problems of others, and she frequently worries about those in her care – but she is never angry (p. 86).

Sabitari is thrashed, beaten, and insulted publicly by her husband following the affair of her involvement in adultery by her husband. After the incidence, she is treated derogatorily as “*chhinar*” (a whore), and called by “*vauji*” by the folk-men in her village. She is treated as a whore because of her sexual relation with an alien man, however, the same man is taken normally; he lives a carefree life in the very society. As a “*chhinar*”, she keeps relation with different people. So, she is teased as “*vauji*” (sister-in-law) offensively in the village. However, she alone is the characterless person, not those folk-men who keep physical relation with her. In Susan Brownmiller's (1997) terms, men have genital supremacy and they keep relation with her because they can sex, but she can't (p. 13). But ironically, she had already lost her virginity that the society defines as it was only her second marriage. In other words, patriarchy creates the failure that it then uses to justify its assumptions about women.

Feminists argue that the persistence of repressive attitudes toward women’s sexuality is still also visible in the language they use. For them, language is phallus-centered, male-centered, and hence is discriminatory in nature. For example, men use the negative word “slut” to describe a woman who sleeps with a number of men while they use the positive word “stud” to describe a man who sleeps with a number of women. This linguistic double standard serves as a vehicle for symbolic violence, reinforcing structural dominance through daily vernacular (Bourdieu, 2001). Not only this, a woman is characterized as a whore or prostitute if she keeps physical relation with men, however, the men who keep relation with the “characterless” woman are never characterized or stereotyped negatively. In the story, for instance, Sabitari is referred to as *chhinar* (whore), and called by *bhauji* (sister-in-law) (p. 223) by the men in the society. Both *chhinar* and *bhauji* are insulting and derogatory words used especially

characterize women negatively. But the men who keep sexual relation with the woman in the village are not defined or characterized otherwise.

A recovering patriarchal woman has started to learn to recognize and resist the patriarchal programming. In patriarchal society women are socially programmed not to see how they are oppressed by traditional gender roles; patriarchal programming has blinded them not to see the thing as they are, rather they are in dark to see every instance of discrimination in natural way. For a recovering woman, such recognition and resistance will always require effort not just because she internalized patriarchal programming years ago but because that program continues to assert itself in her world: in movies, television shows, books, magazines (p. 82). In this sense, Sabitari is rather a recovering patriarchal woman than a recovered woman for she has not completely liberated herself from the influence of patriarchy but in the process of doing so.

The incident of extra-marital relationship gives a new turn in Sabitari's life. As a recovering patriarchal woman, Sabitari "turned aggressive and unpredictable toward Sukai" (p. 226); she wants revenge against her husband and against discrimination. Sabitari does not only challenge her husband's role in the family but also challenges the society and attempts to change its negative perceptions against her as a prostitute. After her image was tarnished publicly, she does not feel defeat. Rather she becomes an assertive woman who challenges her traditional roles. She leads her family, becomes decisive in household chores and activities. As a failed masculinity, her husband is saddened by both Sabitari and his married life. Every evening, he goes to "a hut near the village and becomes intoxicated with ganja and opium" (p. 227). She earns her livelihood by helping her neighbors in their household chores, and by keeping relation with the men as a prostitute. Not only this, she is determined to change people's attitude towards her by helping the people in dire need. By converting her marginalized status into a space of community agency and radical support, Sabitari engages in an organic re-articulation of power that counters traditional patriarchal limitations (Foucault, 1978). She saves the people at the cost of her life. She does social service hoping not for any gain and fulfilling her petty interests. For instance, besides serving the neighbors, she saves the life of a drowned child; cares the helpless but wealthy old man Ramadev in her village. She attempts to change the definition of character and morality and people's concepts towards sexual orientation through her social deeds.

Conclusion

Summing up, patriarchy, an ideology that privileges men by promoting gender roles, promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to men. It is the primary means by which women are oppressed economically, politically, socially, and psychologically. In every domain where patriarchy reigns, woman is other: she is objectified and marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values, defined by what she allegedly lacks and that men allegedly have. Women are programmed in such a way that women often cannot see or they are blinded to see the ways in which they are oppressed by traditional gender roles. Patriarchy continually exerts forces that undermine women's self-confidence and assertiveness, then points to the absence of these qualities as proof that women are naturally, and therefore correctly, self-effacing and submissive. Yet, the women can recover and protect themselves from the condemning effects of patriarchy and assert their identity to a great extent if they marshal courage, as Sabitari does in the story, to resist male domination and discrimination posing a challenge to patriarchal values and its institutions.

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