

The Portrayal of Women Characters in the Novel *Well-Behaved Indian Women* by Saumya Dave: The Study of Gynocriticism

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to examine how women characters are depicted in Saumya Dave's novel, *Well-Behaved Indian Women*, using four models of Gynocriticism proposed by Elaine Showalter. The research employs a descriptive qualitative methodology, relying on data in the form of descriptions and dialogues from the novel. The data are taken through reading the novel and relevant references. They are analyzed by organizing, managing, and interpreting using the chosen theoretical framework. The findings reveal that Dave's novel incorporates the four models of Gynocriticism, namely women's writing and woman's body, women's writing and women's language, women's writing and woman's psyche, and women's writing and women's culture, in its portrayal of the women characters.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, we easily encounter many well-known writers, including women who have created notable literary works. In contrast, in the past, men dominated the production of literary works while women were limited to being consumers of male-authored works. Women in earlier times were denied the chance to write due to their perceived lack of education and marginalization. This belief created a gap that allowed men to depict women based on their assumptions, without truly understanding the true nature of women's experiences. As mentioned by Showalter: "If we study stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics, and the limited roles women play in literary history, we are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be." (Showalter, 1979).

As men's depictions of women were deemed unsuitable, women took it upon themselves to portray their own experiences and establish their standards, rather than conforming to male ideals. During that period, women started writing and publishing their works. However, to be taken seriously, women often resorted to using male pen names when publishing their writings (Howell, 2014).

By women's endeavors to redefine the female perspective, Showalter (1979) categorizes these redefinitions into three stages: the Feminine stage (1840-1880), the Feminist stage (1880-1920), and the Female stage (1920-ongoing). The ongoing efforts of women's writing no longer revolve around rejecting men's portrayals of women or the need to use male pseudonyms, as women writers and their literary works are now readily accessible. In the present phase, women reject imitation and challenge the notion of personal experiences as independent sources of art, while expanding feminist analysis of culture to encompass literary forms and techniques.

As previously mentioned, contemporary times offer easy access to literary works created by women. These works serve as valuable sources for analysing social contexts, cultural and traditional conditions, and the distinguishing features between women's and men's writing techniques, among other aspects. This serves as the foundation for the current research study, which applies Elaine Showalter's Gynocriticism theory. The study aims to identify and examine the four models of Gynocriticism within the novel *Well-Behaved Indian Women* written by Saumya Dave, an Indian-American female author. This particular novel is chosen as the primary source of data due to its relevance and the potential for insightful connections and analysis using the Gynocriticism theory. The experiences and statements of the female characters depicted by Saumya Dave will be analysed through the lens

of the four Gynocriticism models: women's writing and the female body, women's writing and women's language, women's writing and the female psyche, and women's writing and women's culture.

The novel *Well-Behaved Indian Women*, published in 2020, follows the stories of three generations of an Indian family: Simran, Nandini (Simran's mother), and Mimi (Simran's grandmother). These female characters belong to a prominent family residing in America, yet still hold a respected position in their home country, India. Simran can be considered fortunate, as she possesses intelligence, holds a prestigious postgraduate degree in psychology, has successfully published her book, is engaged to a suitable partner of her choice, and comes from a prosperous family. Indeed, Simran's family is well-off, as both her parents are doctors. Nandini, Simran's mother, is a doctor herself, working at a clinic in America. Despite her professional commitments, she manages to strike a balance between her personal and occupational life, drawing upon the lessons learned as an Indian woman. These lessons, of course, were passed down to Nandini by her mother, Mimi. Mimi, the determined and clever matriarch of the family, hails from a lineage of accomplished and ambitious individuals who have earned great respect within Indian society.

Similar research has been carried out in previous studies and the researcher uses it as a reference. The previous studies are in the form of theses and articles that come from the same topic about Gynocriticism and from the same novel, *Well-Behaved Indian Women*. Four theses raise the same theory of Gynocriticism entitled *The Specialty of Women's Writing in Selected Poems by Susan Nguyen: A Gynocriticism Study* (Isnaeni, 2021), *Identifying The Specialty of Margaret Dilloway's Writing in How to Be an American Housewife (A Study of Gynocriticism)* (Ningsih, 2017), *Demolishing Androcentric Culture and Values in Qaisra Shahraz's Zemindar's Wife* (Nufus, 2017), *The Analysis of Female Character Under Patriarchal Society in the Holy Woman Novel by Qaisra Shahraz through Feminism Approach* (Tantriani, 2021). Two more previous studies are articles entitled *The Portrayal of Gender Inequality in Well-Behaved Indian Women Novel by Saumya Dave* (Faradita & Kusuma, 2022), *Madurese Women and Binding Culture in Muna Masyari's Martabat Kematian: Gynocriticism Analysis* (Hartanto & Roifah, 2020).

These previous studies, which include theses and articles, serve as valuable references for the researcher. They were selected based on their relevance to the same theory and data used in the present study. By utilizing these previous studies, the researcher can gain insights and comprehension regarding the issues addressed in the study. However, a notable difference between the researcher's study and the existing previous studies lies in the analysis of data extracted from the novel *Well-Behaved Indian Women* by Saumya Dave through the lens of Gynocriticism theory. Additionally, this study stands out by exploring problems inherent in Indian culture, which is renowned for its rich traditions.

2. METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative research design. It focused on analyzing the novel *Well-Behaved Indian Women* by Saumya Dave as the primary source of data. Data collection did not involve interviews or observations but rather relies on a literature review approach, which includes reading, recording, and processing relevant research materials (Zed, 2004). The data collection technique entailed reading the novel itself, as well as other references about Gynocriticism theory. The collected data underwent several steps of analysis, following the approach outlined by Bogdan & Biklen (2007). This involves working with the data, organizing them, breaking them down into manageable units, coding the data based on the four models of Gynocriticism, synthesizing the data, and identifying patterns. The data, in this case, consists of the utterances found within the novel *Well-Behaved Indian Women* by Saumya Dave. The analysis began by reading the novel, organizing the relevant utterances related to the research question, breaking down the data into the four models of Gynocriticism, coding the data accordingly, and finally interpreting the data using Gynocriticism theory and other relevant references.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

In the novel *Well-Behaved Indian Women* written by an Indian female writer, Saumya Dave, it is found that the female writer describes or portrays women characters in some ways. The writer builds the characterization of women characters into various attitudes, experiences, and cultures adopted that are found in the characters Simran, Nandini, Mimi, and other women characters. Those attitudes, experiences, and culture of the women characters found related to the four models of Gynocriticism: women's writing and woman's body, women's writing and women's language, women's writing and woman's psyche, and women's writing and women's culture. The four models of Gynocriticism appear in Dave's *Well-Behaved Indian Women* in various forms that are mentioned below.

3.1.1 Women's writing and woman's body

In this context, the body's structure is viewed as textual or content-related. Showalter (1981) suggests that biological criticism is a feminist criticism theory that enables the body to serve as a foundation. In Saumya Dave's novel *Well-Behaved Indian Women*, the researcher identifies various ways in which the author portrays female characters based on aspects related to the female body. These include assessing a woman's body as a criterion for marriage, societal limitations imposed on women due to their gender, and the expectation for women to play a role in determining hereditary traits.

In planning an arranged marriage which is usually done by parents, the aspect of physical appearance certainly becomes one of the aspects that is judged by a woman. It can be seen from Dave's novel that also describes about woman's body.

"Nobody wants to marry her with the burns on her neck. She helps my Parents make clothes, but that's all she can do in her life. Mummy and Papa paid dowry to one family, but they just stole it and the pulled out of the wedding deal." (Dave, 2020: 219)

Dave describes a woman character named Pallavi who has a sister who has burns on her neck because someone who proposed to her ended up with rejection. He doused Pallavi's sister with acid that was aimed at her face, but luckily only got into her neck. Due to that incident, Pallavi become pessimist that nobody would marry her sister because she has burns. From that sentence, Dave showed that physical appearance is an aspect of determining someone to be chosen as a bride, and a woman has to take care of and treat her body very well.

A woman has some nature that cannot be discarded or abandoned. In her novel, Dave describes that women have limitations in doing some things because of their nature. These things are related to religion, work, or even casual activities.

"You have a lot going against you. First, you're short. Second, you're Indian. Third, you're an immigrant. And last, you're a woman." (Dave, 2020: 49)

In the sentence above, Dave describes that a woman, female gender, does not deserve to be a doctor. In this sentence, it can be seen that being a woman with the characteristic of a woman's body—shorter than a man, less power than a man—is described as an object of discrimination. In addition, being stuck in the body of a woman who came from a different ethnicity also increases the discrimination of the woman character Nandini.

"The same thing happened again when she learned Hindu women aren't supposed to enter a temple or kitchen when they're menstruating because they're considered impure." (Dave, 2020: 60).

"They took her out of school once she started her period. Now she's married. They could barely afford her dowry. That's my main problem with our country. The minute a girl bleeds, she no longer belongs to herself." (Dave, 2020: 197-198)

"... Girls leave for all sorts of reasons: their families want them to get married or help at home or can't afford sanitary napkins and school tuition once they start menstruating." (Dave, 2020: 230)

Besides that, the limitations of doing some activities also occur in women characters due to the women's nature of menstruation. As in the sentences above, Dave describes the limitation related to women's nature of menstruation that affected any women's activities in religion, school, and other daily activities. In the religious aspect, a woman cannot enter the temple or kitchen when they are menstruating because they are considered impure. In another description of women characters, after women get menstruation, they are forced to stop studying at school. The limitation in education occurs because a woman who starts menstruating is considered mature and responsible for her needs and family. Women who already have the period have the choice between working hard to make money for the family or getting married to a proper man.

As mentioned before parents who looking for a bride in an arranged marriage consider a woman's physical appearance and body. When a woman has good physical condition, then they will also get good offspring, because that is what is expected from a woman—to continue the lineage.

"Her husband had told her about his parents' requests, so he had begun having procedural sex. Thrust, thrust, collapse ... her husband slapped her when she lost the baby. He demanded that a doctor confirm what Nandini said." (Dave, 2020: 205)

In the sentence above, Dave describes that the woman character was expected by her in-laws to make babies to continue the lineage. From that sentence, it can be seen that Dave describes a woman's body as a tool for making and placing babies. It is because that is what is expected from marrying a woman, she has a womb.

3.1.2 Women's writing and women's language

The women characters used the sentence structure in the form of Repetition, a repetition of sounds, syllables, words, or parts of sentences that are considered important. The sentences below used the Epizeuxis repetition, which is direct repetition by repeating words that are considered important repeatedly several times

"...And I'm your doctor. Your doctor. Nice to meet you." (Dave, 2020: 48)

This sentence shows in the woman character, Nandini, emphasizing to a patient that she is the doctor who will treat him by repeating the words ‘Your doctor’ twice. She repeats and emphasizes the words ‘Your doctor’ to let the patient know that she is the doctor because the patient seems to doubt her.

“She was with someone. And I mean, WITH SOMEONE.” ... “YOUR DAUGHTER WAS HUGGING AND KISSING ANOTHER BOY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE STREET!” (Dave, 2020: 53)

The next repetition that is expressed with anger is found in the character Meghna. Her sentence is also delivered with block letters, which means that she emphasizes the important words and mixture with anger. Meghna repeats ‘WITH SOMEONE’ to let Nandini know and hear clearly about what she is talking about.

3.1.3 *Women’s writing and woman’s psyche*

A woman character in this novel is described as having a psychological condition that tends to feel anxious about various things. Women easily experience anxiety that is caused by differences in brain and hormones in women related to reproductive processes such as menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause. The anxiety is found in the character Nandini who has anxiety about herself, her children, people around her, her job, and even other possibilities that may happen in the future.

“I’ve been worried. I am worried.” (Dave, 2020: 162)

“Can she really handle this? Will she be able to prove herself? Is she too young? Too old? Will people wonder why a middle-aged Indian woman got this job?” (Dave, 2020: 264)

The anxiety comes from the woman character Nandini about her career as a doctor. She got an offer to take a job as the head of the residency that is located in another city. The offer makes her feel so much worry about how she would tell her husband and his family. As it is known that Nandini is a wife that supposed to take care of and accompany her husband and family. Besides that, she also worries and has less confidence about the job. She is worried about whether she made the right decision or not by accepting the job as the head or residency. She is also not confident about her abilities, about people around her, and whether she can be accepted or not. It is because she is an Indian woman who knows that in her culture women are not more capable of building a career than men.

3.1.4 *Women’s writing and women’s culture*

Culture is a way of life that develops and is owned by a group of people, and then passed on to the next generation. According to Showalter (1981), cultural theory combines ideas about the female body, language, and psyche, and is interpreted in terms of their social context. Related to this, the researcher will show what women’s culture that was shown by Dave in her writing *Well-Behaved Indian Women*. The novel itself tells about Indian people in America, which means they have more than one culture in describing the daily life of the characters. Through this novel, Dave portrayed the Indian women’s culture towards marriage, women’s culture in family, women’s culture in society, women’s culture in workplace, and women’s culture in finding the equality.

The patriarchal system is a concept that is used in society, where men have a higher position than women. In this culture, there are clear differences regarding the duties and roles of women and men in social life, workplace, family, and others.

“Evenings of a family party were spent making sure the men were dining while the women prepared gulab jamun, sweet donuts, for dessert.” (Dave, 2020: 35)

In the findings above, Dave describes that women in the family have lower roles than men. A woman has a culture of serving the needs of the husband and family members as in the sentences above that women are preparing food for the family while the men are working and managing the finances. Dave describes that even though a woman has a career as a husband outside the home, she is still obliged to treat and take care of the family.

“Her following morning was spent cutting vegetables, feeding leftovers to the cows, washing clothes, and pinning them, across the thick rope in the backyard to dry. Her mother-in-law barked orders like clockwork from her rocking chair. Don’t burn the onions! If you care about your husband, you’ll feed him properly! Gain some weight if you want healthy babies! Nandini’s husband would watch the exchanges with his arms crossed.” (Dave, 2020: 204)

The finding above Dave describes the experience of Nandini on her first marriage. Not only cooking and taking care of her current husband, she was also obliged to serve food and take care of her first husband in the past time. From the findings, it can be seen that preparing food for the husband and his family becomes an inherent culture for a woman.

3.2 Discussion

From the first model of Gynocriticism, women's writing and woman's body, it was found that Dave describes the woman's body in her novel as the determinant for marriage, the limitation for woman's movements, and as the source of production of children. As mentioned by Showalter (1981) the most visible difference between men and women is their difference in body. The difference is that a woman is expected to have a good appearance and impress the family of a man by being able to continue lineage with her womb.

In the second model, women's writing and women's language, it is found that Dave describes the women characters as often using repetition when talking about something important, having the ability to say words that make others feel calm, and easily to say the words of 'sorry', 'please', and 'promise'. Women characters in the novel often show those words in order to please others and look for their acceptance, as mentioned by Showalter (1981):

"At a higher level, analyses which look for "feminine style" in the repetition of stylistic devices, image patterns, and syntax in women's writing tend to confuse innate forms with the overdetermined results of literary choice." (Showalter, 1981: 193)

In the third model, women's writing and woman's psyche, Dave describes the women characters as having a spirit of motherhood, having psychological conditions that are influenced by the partner, often feeling anxiety, having some types of emotions, and the psychological conditions related to the braveness and confidences of women characters. The psychological condition found mostly related to the mother and daughters, as mentioned by Showalter (1981) that a girl's core gender identity is positive and built upon sameness, continuity, and identification with the mother.

The last model of Gynocriticism is women's writing and women's culture. The culture of women might be different in each place, as mentioned by Showalter (1981) there are differences between women as writers: class, race, nationality, and history are literary determinants as significant as gender. As mentioned before the writer of this novel, Saumya Dave, is an Indian – American woman. Dave's background of class, race, nationality, and history affect her writing. Dave describes the culture of women in some areas such as in the family as a wife, daughter, and in-law, women's culture in the society, in the workplace, and the culture of women in fighting for equality in various fields. The study or analysis of the theory of Gynocriticism is currently widely used along with the development of women as the producers of literary works. Hence, many previous studies discuss or analyse women's writing in order to know specifically the differences between men's works and women's works.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Well-Behaved Indian Women is a novel of an Indian – American woman named Saumya Dave. The novel tells a story about women in the third generation namely Simran, Nandini (Simran's mom), and Mimi (Simran's grandmother). Those women characters come from a prominent family who lives in America and are respected in their home country, India. Simran is someone who can be assumed as a lucky woman. She is smart, graduated with a prestigious postgraduate degree as a psychologist, can publish her own book, has a good fiancé of her own choice, and also has a prosperous family. Her family is certainly well off, because both Simran's parents are doctors. Simran's mother Nandini is a doctor at one of the clinics in America, but she is still able to balance her personal and professional life according to what she has learned as an Indian woman. What Nandini learned of course came from her mother, Mimi. She is a determined and witty matriarch of a family with many generations of bright and ambitious people who also have attained the highest level of respect in Indian society.

From this study, it is found the four models of Gynocriticism that appear in Dave's description of the women characters in her novel *Well-Behaved Indian Women*. Dave describes the women characters that can be related to the women's framework in women's writing and women's body, women's writing and women's language, women's body, and woman's psyche, and also women's writing and women's culture. The descriptions of those four models of Gynocriticism are found in the women characters of the novel and mostly found in the main characters Simran, Nandini, and Mimi.

From the first model of Gynocriticism, women's writing, and woman's body, it was found that Dave describes the woman's body in her novel as the determinant for marriage, the limitation for woman's movements, and as the source of production of children. In the second model, women's writing and women's language, it is found that Dave describes the women characters as often using repetition when talking about something important, having the ability to say words that make others feel calm, and easily to say the words of 'sorry', 'please', and 'promise'. In the third model, women's writing and woman's psyche, Dave describes the women characters as having a spirit of motherhood, having psychological conditions that are influenced by the partner, often feeling anxiety, having some types of emotions, and the psychological conditions related to the braveness and confidences of women characters. In the model, women's writing and women's culture, Dave describes the culture of women in some areas such as in the family as a wife, daughter, and in-law, women's culture in society, in the workplace, and the culture of women in fighting for the equality in various fields.

From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that Dave portrays the women characters in her novel *Well-Behaved Indian Women* as women who adopt their culture, namely Indian Culture. However, they also balanced with the ambition and efforts to be equal to men in terms of establishing a career, education, or romance.

For other researchers who are interested in conducting a study about the same topic of Gynocriticism, it is suggested to read the previous studies that apply the same theory of Gynocriticism. It might be not easy to read directly to the Showalter's *Towards a Feminist Poetics* (1979) and *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness* (1981). To increase the understanding of how to apply the theory, the previous studies will help the researchers to give more views about it.

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