



From "Sati" to "Parvati"

--Viewing Indian Feminism's Perspectives on Marriage and Love through *The Storyteller's Secret*

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Abstract. *The Storyteller's Secret*, a signature work by Indian author Sejal Badani, features female characters, beginning with the protagonist's grandmother, "Amisha," who persistently seek "freedom," especially autonomy within marriage and family life. Despite numerous challenges, it is undeniable that with the continuous advancement of domestic feminist theories, the strength of Indian women's fight for freedom and autonomy will increasingly grow with the changing times.

Keywords: Feminism, India, *The Storyteller's Secret*.

1 Introduction

The Storyteller's Secret, one of Indian author Sejal Badani's signature works, narrates the story of three generations of women in a protagonist's family from the British colonial era to the present. "Sati," the wife of Shiva in Indian mythology, died by self-immolation due to her father's disrespect towards her lover. She was reborn as the goddess "Parvati" of the snowy mountains, who is often considered the true form of the demon-slaying goddess "Durga" and "Kali," and is also revered by India's Shaktism sect.

In *The Storyteller's Secret*, starting with the protagonist's grandmother, "Amisha," the female characters continually seek "freedom," particularly autonomy in marriage and family. This quest for power grows stronger with the times, echoing how Sati, initially powerless against her fate, transforms into a powerful goddess. The narrative not only unveils a family secret but also portrays the complex struggle of Indian women throughout history.

2 Indian Matrimonial Traditions and the Emergence of Feminism

As a woman living in colonial India, my grandmother "Amisha" was progressive and constantly sought to change the unfair realities. However, constrained by the societal norms of her time, Amisha's efforts often fell short of her ideals, and she did not deny

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B. Majoul et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 2024 3rd International Conference on Comprehensive Art and Cultural Communication (CACC 2024)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 863,

https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-287-3_9

endorsing the Indian marital traditions of "endurance" and "sacrifice." Amisha represents a rudimentary emergence of Indian feminism, and through her character, one can glimpse aspects of Indian matrimonial customs.

The story of Amisha begins at a wedding. Amisha did not choose her husband; rather, he was appointed in a Brahma-style wedding, a prevalent ceremony across various Hindu castes today, where "after a period of Vedic observance and mutual agreement, the bride's father presents his daughter as a gift to the groom." [1] Beyond the dominant Brahma-style, seven other forms of marriage exist in India, but generally, any marriage approved by the bride's father is recognized and favored, whereas those not approved are not well-received. [1] This illustrates that traditional Indian weddings are typically arranged by the families of both the bride and groom. Furthermore, the dowry system in India also affects the attitudes of marriageable women towards marriage, their status within the family, and their circumstances after marriage. The Manusmriti dictates that the bride's family should not receive gifts from the groom's side as it equates to selling the daughter; however, gifting the bride at the wedding is commendable. [2] Hence, many families become impoverished by dowries, while grooms often choose brides who can provide the highest dowry and may abuse or murder wives who fail to meet high dowry expectations (Figure 1).

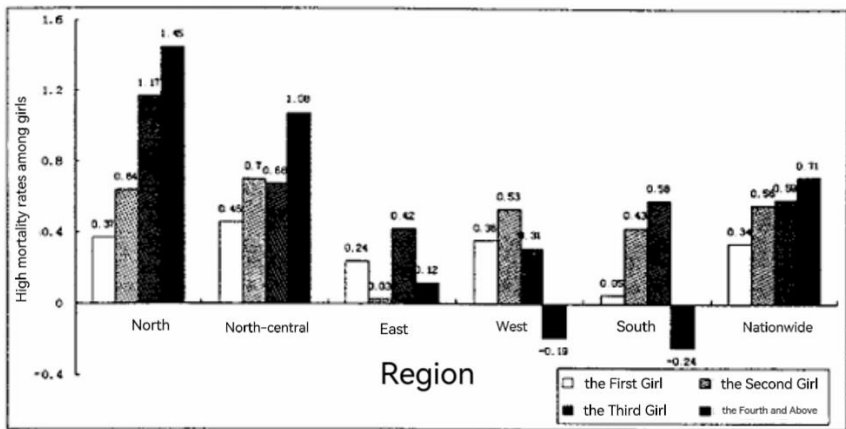


Fig. 1. High mortality rates among girls aged 12-47 months in India by region and birth order (From: National Family Health Survey, 1992-1993 & 1998-1999.)

In the novel, the young girl Neema chooses self-immolation to resist an arranged marriage, but ultimately her survival instinct

leads her to cry for help and she is saved. Her intended fiancé, disfigured by burns, breaks off the engagement. To preserve their reputation, Neema's parents hastily marry her off to a beggar who agrees to the marriage solely for the dowry. Neema's plight, more representative of British-occupied India, contrasts sharply with Amisha's marriage to a wealthy mill owner. Additionally, the author recounts the story of Neema learning to write from Amisha. In her writings, Neema expresses a willingness to exchange marriage for endless reading and books, while Amisha encourages her stu-

dents to reflect on choice and freedom. Both discover the irrational constraints and limitations Indian women face, particularly in marriage, and desire to resist, but their efforts to change their circumstances are limited by their era and social backgrounds. Neema's act of self-immolation only adds to her misfortune, while Amisha, despite her desire for freedom and advanced notions of equality, is unable to achieve significant progress in her struggles due to her limited influence and traditional upbringing (Figure 2).



Fig. 2. Child marriage of India (Form: Guang Li: "The Sorrow of Rajasthan - A Glimpse at Child Marriage in India," *International Outlook*, 1995, pages 27-28.)

Furthermore, in the story of grandmother Amisha, it should be noted that the freedom continually emphasized by Amisha, or perhaps by the author herself, is specifically freedom within the family and in romantic relationships. Marriage holds significant meaning in the lives of Indian women and is portrayed in the novel as "inevitable." The happiness of women after marriage often depends on luck, and according to the *Ramayana*, even if husbands are wicked, poor, or debauched, wives must treat them as supreme beings. "A wife must be obedient and submissive to her husband" underlies the behavior of many Indian women, a theme also evident in *The Storyteller's Secret*, where Amisha fasts and prays for her lover Stephen's long life during Women's Day. This ritual, which ends with the husband feeding the wife, fundamentally reemphasizes the roles of dominator and dominated, yet Amisha's willingness to follow this practice and see it as an expression of love, reveals inherent limitations.

3 Departure: The Initial Breach of Discipline

Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, points out that "the human body is both the object and target of power."^[3] Disciplinary power acts on the body through the allocation of space, coding of activities, scheduling of time, and the combination of forces. Simply put, this means "in a confined space, making the subjects act according to a planned behavior." Furthermore, "the primary function of disciplinary power is 'training,' not selection or recruitment, or more precisely, training for better selection and recruitment."^[3] As mentioned earlier, the "Women's Day fast" is an example where within the domestic sphere (a confined space), wives undergo a planned period of fasting (scheduled time and behavior) to pray for their husbands' longevity (purpose and reward). In this process, wives who can endure and complete the fast are seen as loving and faithful exemplars, thereby reaffirming and reinforcing the husband's dominant position in the marital power dynamics.

Indeed, the disciplining of wives occurs throughout the traditional Indian marriage process. Girls are trained to be perfect wives before marriage and continue to strive to do "better" after marriage. Refusing to marry or not performing "well" in marriage leads to punishment—sometimes social gossip, sometimes actual physical punishment. This discipline ensured women and their families' survival or enabled them to pursue a higher quality of life in times of relatively backward productivity and social norms. However, with the introduction of Western civilization into India, certain aspects of traditional marital relationships began to be questioned. Allowing women to work meant they no longer had to depend solely on their husband's family for support, a change that, along with the introduction of Western ideas, began to loosen the traditional order. This shift first manifested in the autonomy of spouse selection.

Amisha's act of falling in love with Stephen and bearing his illegitimate daughter may not be commendable, but it can be seen as a beginning: at least in Amisha's view, the traditional Indian disciplining of women in matters of marriage and love began to loosen. In the case of my mother Lina's marriage, the old servant Ravi, who had served Amisha for many years, struggled to ensure that she married the doctor she fell in love with at first sight. Afterwards, my parents moved to the United States to settle, and I, having grown up in America, finally had the right to free love and marriage. From the stories of three generations of women, it is clear that in their view, "departure" equals "freedom." Amisha saw going to England with Stephen as a means of "gaining freedom." After the birth of her younger daughter Lina, she demanded her husband agree to "not arrange her daughter's marriage lightly" and "let her go to America"; Ravi, deeply influenced by Amisha, also thought it good for Lina to "leave India." I have no plans to return to India and am even unfamiliar with Indian customs. When the disciplinary training imposed by society becomes a force far exceeding individual strength, the women in my family, especially my grandmother and mother, chose to leave. If one leaves the "enclosed space" defined by power relations, discipline naturally fails, and this is how I and my relatives have gained freedom in marriage and love.

Given the historical context of the story, women's departure might seem somewhat passive, but under immense social and legal pressures, leaving India to seek refuge in another country may indeed be the most feasible method of resistance. However, not all

Indian women have the conditions or opportunities to leave oppressive environments. Moreover, merely "departing" or "escaping" does not necessarily improve the living conditions of Indian women. In response to this issue, Indian scholar Sarojini Sahu has proposed more constructive perspectives.

4 Reshaping "Feminine Qualities"

Sarojini Sahu is a contemporary Indian feminist writer and theorist with significant influence. She has innovatively perceived the contradictions between Western feminist theories and Indian cultural traditions, and within the context of Western feminist theories, she has rediscovered India's own cultural traditions and definitions of feminine qualities. Sarojini believes that "Indian feminism can only be discussed after understanding the real situations of Indian women and uncovering local female traditions."^[4] Additionally, Sarojini draws on ancient Indian numerology philosophical thoughts, considering "masculine qualities" and "feminine qualities" as inherent, distinct, and complementary, with neither being superior or inferior. The so-called "feminine qualities" include innate wisdom (buddhi), compassion (daya), and divine love (bhakti), unrelated to discipline or eroticism.^[5] This stands in stark contrast to Simone de Beauvoir's famous assertion that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,"^[6] and indeed, Sarojini rejects many Western feminists' views that "marriage and childbirth are detrimental to women's struggle for freedom and independence." Sarojini believes that including marriage and motherhood, women's life experiences should be recognized and valued, and being a wife and a mother does not bring constraints but completes her societal role.^[4]

This provides us with insights to reinterpret the story of *The Storyteller's Secret*. If we continue to observe the three generations of women in the main character's family through the lens of Western feminist theories on "liberated women," they undoubtedly appear "insufficiently feminist." The grandmother, mother, and "I" find comfort in their partners and children, with the narrative spanning decades and primarily unfolding within the family setting, seldom touching on the women's "struggles." However, if we consider Sarojini's perspective on Indian feminism, it becomes easier to understand that "family" is also an integral part of women's identities, and a desire for marriage, childbirth, and happiness through these is one of the protected life experiences of women. It is important to note, however, that the world in the novel is undoubtedly more idealized than reality. Whether it is the grandmother, mother, or "I," all are born into affluent families with high social status, allowing the novel to portray a beautiful, romantic "female narrative." Sarojini's theory, however, has a significant shortcoming: it overlooks women's economic strength. Taking the novel as an example, *The Storyteller's Secret* undoubtedly presents an ideal society under Sarojini's theory, where gender equality prevails, and there is mutual tolerance and care, with both men and women valuing family, especially their children. Yet, whether it is the grandmother or the mother, their life's security and source of happiness still depend on having married well. "I," though economically independent, grew up and settled in the United States, no longer belonging to India. Indian feminist theories represented by Sarojini empha-

size too much on theoretical reconstruction and overlook the objective realities of life, making them appear overly compromising, weak, and idealistic. Thus, although Sarojini opposes the confrontational and aggressive aspects of Western feminist theories, completely discarding Western theories and guiding women's liberation movements solely by Indian feminism as advocated by her could lead women into another potentially dangerous situation.

5 Conclusion

In summary, *"The Storyteller's Secret"* demonstrates on a literary level the Indian women's pursuit of "freedom," while theorists like Sarojini Sahu represent the theoretical voices exploring the future for women. India's unique historical and cultural background influences the particular social status and living conditions of its women. On the other hand, the philosophical interpretations of "femininity" and "masculinity" have inspired new directions in feminist thought. This gentle Indian feminist theory, rooted in ancient Indian philosophy and not denying marriage and family, aligns more closely with local realities and is more readily accepted by the broader populace compared to Western theories. However, in practice, Sarojini's theory still appears somewhat inadequate due to its excessive idealization, but it remains a significant attempt for Indian women to discover and express themselves. The creation of *"The Storyteller's Secret"* and the emergence of Sarojini's feminism represent the ongoing reflections and trials concerning women's autonomy in marriage and love in India. Just as Sati ultimately transforms into a powerful goddess, as long as the exploration continues, Indian feminism and Indian women are poised to embrace a brighter future.

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