

BEYOND MARRIAGE: GENDER, AGENCY, AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS IN SONIAH KAMAL'S *UNMARRIAGEABLE*

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Abstract

This research article aims to explore the struggle of women against the social constructs in Unmarriageable by Soniah Kamal. Applying the Beauvoir's feminist ideas in her work The Second Sex, the novel shows how women grapple against traditional gender roles and how generational gap hinders the struggle of young girls for their freedom from social constructs. The study reflects the prevailing religious and traditional roles in Pakistan where women seem striving for their liberation. Feminist approach by Beauvoir critiques on patriarchal society where women are deprived of opportunities and they are dependent on men for their financial freedom. The study unveils how lack of education and opportunities keep women conform to prevailing traditional roles and restrict them from achieving their goals and dreams. It also explores the unconscious fears of being unmarriageable especially for women in Pakistani cultural context. The study reveals how women resist against the loss of their individuality and struggle for their identity and freedom. Blending the ideas of Beauvoir with the text of Unmarriageable, the study reveals how education can bring change in society if both male and females are given equal education and opportunities.

Key words: Unmarriageable, Gender Roles, Social Constructs, Marriage, Females Education, Gender Stereotypes

Introduction

Unmarriageable by Soniah Kamal is an adaptation of Jane Austen's renowned work *Pride and Prejudice*. Pakistani-American writer, Soniah Kamal is the author of two novels, *An Isolated Incident* and *Unmarriageable*. Her first novel has won her Townsend Award in 2016. Jane Austen's wit and social criticism made her think critically and pen down her ideas in *Unmarriageable* about the prevailing societal norms and women's struggle against patriarchal society in contemporary Pakistan. *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen has been set in the early 19th century particularly in the counties of Hertfordshire and Derbyshire where she exposes the marriage market and explore different reasons of marriage including love, convenience and financial security. Elizabeth has been portrayed a strong woman who resist and struggles against the societal norms and her marriage with Mr. Darcy proves her own choice regardless of any financial security. In comparison, set in the small town of Dilip Abad, the *Unmarriageable* addresses same women's struggle against social constructs in Pakistan. The story revolves around the Binat family which comprises five sisters and their parents. Mrs. Binat has been portrayed to represent the social constructs while her daughter, Alyss showcases women's struggle against the prevailing societal norms. The novel weaves the themes of marriage, financial freedom, and

gender roles in a patriarchal society. Alyss emphasizes the importance of education and believes in being financially independent rather than hunting a wealthy man for marriage. Through the character of Alyss, the novel marks a profound commentary on how women have been deprived of their goals and dreams and how they have been confined to the specific roles of mother and wife under the weight of marriage. The novel majorly focuses on its main character Alyss who defies societal expectations and aims to pursue her dreams. Contrary to this, her mother Mrs. Binat always tries to impose these social norms on her daughters. This contrast explores the prevailing societal constructs and the women's struggle against them.

While considerable research has been devoted to the novel; which provides groundbreaking insights about factors affecting gender roles, less attention has been given to the prevailing social constructs like marriage. *Unmarriageable* by Kamal is a multifaceted novel that tends to reinforce women's voice and expose the prevailing social norms in the society. In the novel, Kamal has shattered the social constructs like marriage and titled it as main cause of women's passivity. Kamal critiques the marriage market and its effects on women's lives. Through the lens of Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, the study aims to bridge the gap and explore the origin of these societal norms of marriage and how they are defining and controlling women's lives.

Literature Review

Unmarriageable, in modern Pakistani society, showcases women's plight against the entrenched gender stereotypes. It draws our attention to women's subjugation in patriarchal society where they strive for their freedom and how societal barriers hold them back to achieve their dreams as Kamal portrays through her protagonist character Alys. The novel has been analyzed in terms of marginalization of women, phallogocentrism, and cultural materialism which shed light on how women, when they are deprived of opportunities, surrender to the prevalent social constructs. Shagufta Ramzan explores the marginalization of women in a patriarchal society. Women are marginalized in patriarchal society through social norms and these social norms are influenced and shaped by cultural ideologies. In contemporary Pakistani society, religion is used as a tool of production that shapes the social norms, reinforce gender roles, dictates women's behaviors and decisions. Conversely, in western society as depicted by Austen, it is class system that marginalizes the middle-class women. The patriarchal ideologies, though influenced by different cultural factors, tend to silence women's voice in all matters. "The restricted aspects are there in the minds of the people regarding the social norms and social ideologies which are being produced by the religion in Pakistani society while by the class system in the western culture the females of the middle class were not to be so exposed before the natives" (Ramzan, 2023, p.353). Christina Henderson Harner (2012) in her study calls Soniah Kamal as 'A Pakistani Jane Austen' (p.1). "Kamal's adaptation critiques the lingering legacies of patriarchy and colonialism and the unequal power dynamics they have created" (Harner, 2021, p.1). Cultural materialism has so much influence in our thinking process. Parents are influenced by materialism and ignore the personal qualities, values, ethics and emotions over good fortune. Marriage has become a business that would benefit family, especially from a financial standpoint. "In Pakistani society as well, the desire for riches is maintained as the idealized representation of security" (Abid et. al, 2020, p.327). Alys faces a of criticism but she remains bold, straightforward in her nature. She teaches the students as she wants to teach and she get married according to her own choice. Similarly, Qitty who becomes a victim of body shaming ends up her career as famous blogger

whose voice reaches to all women. Both the characters rise above their challenges and find their voice in unfair societal practices (Razia, 2022).

Laurel Ann Nattress finds out the financial cost of marriage in Pakistan as depicted in the novel, “No wonder Mr. Binat is terrified of the expense of marrying off his five daughters” (Nattress, 2019). Leigh Kramer states in her review that, “While society may not know what to do with an unmarried woman, a bad marriage, particularly in a patriarchal society, can be a cage stifling the woman in it” (Kramer, 2019). Ilana Masad remarks that Kamal's *Unmarriageable* succeeds in being both a deliciously readable romantic comedy and a commentary on class in post-colonial, post-partition Pakistan, where the effects of the British Empire still reverberate (Masad, 2019). Claire mentions the struggles of Alys with her identity as a victim of British Colonialism and that she finds herself uncomfortable with the national identity (Claire, 2019). Rachel was intrigued by the rich culture of Pakistan as pictured in the novel as she comments, “I enjoyed the how the rich culture is in this story” (Rachel, 2019). Cynthia A. Graham finds Kamal's narrative spicy in the novel, she makes a vivid contrast how women are viewed in the Pakistani Culture and how they view themselves (Graham, 2019). Despite considerable research on the novel, the dominant social constructs have been overlooked. In my research, through the lens of Simon De Beauvoir's work in feminism, I'll explore the root causes of these social constructs, why they have been imposed and how women have been trapped through these social norms over the years. This research will provide detailed study on the impacts of these societal constructs.

Theoretical Framework

The Second Sex by Simon De Beauvoir provides a critical lens to analyze gender roles, the marriage market, social constructs, and women's struggle in *Unmarriageable*. This groundbreaking work in Feminism deconstructs the patriarchal family system and prevailing social constructs in society. Through her remarkable work, she breaks the ice and argues that gender roles are not assigned by nature rather they are the product of a society, defined and modified by men. She argues that women have been deprived of opportunities and they have been confined to certain domestic roles assigned by society as she quotes, “The most mediocre of males believes himself a demigod next to women” (Beauvoir, 1949, p.36). Through the lens of Simon De Beauvoir's feminist work, the novel has been critically analyzed.

De Beauvoir's concept, “One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman” (Beauvoir, 1949, p.352) exposed the gender roles, historical dominance of men and surveillance of women based on their genders. The character of Alyss resists the traditional gender roles and reinforces the idea of Beauvoir that women are not obliged to marry and live the rest of their life being wives and mothers only but they can also define their own roles and live an independent life.

The role of education and upbringing explores that girls are taught to serve better and look better while boys are refined and polished in such a way that they could be more creative and contribute to society. At this a key figure in Feminism, Marry Wollstonecraft in her first work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) makes a point of saying that, “The instruction which women have hitherto received has only tended, with the constitution of society, to render them insignificant objects of desire—mere propagators of fools!” (Wollstonecraft, 1792, p.69). In the novel, we see how a student of Alyss named Jenice abandons her education and finds marriage her ultimate fulfilment. This reflects the impact of childhood upbringing influenced by social constructs and male-oriented education.

Additionally, De Beauvoir highlights the oppressive patriarchal approach, especially marriage, motherhood, religion, and social norms which has limited women to test their creative potential and contribute to society as she quotes, "To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man" (Beauvoir, 1949, p.924). All the characters in the novel are struggling with these social norms, their sole debate is about marriage, and how to find a good husband and live a dependent life. Kamal through her characters contrasts a struggle between women and these social norms.

Discussion and Analysis

Human beings are bound by religious values and societal norms. These societal norms draw a contrast and set the debate between males and females because one gender has always been overshadowed by the other and it always has been deprived of freedom and opportunities such as education and financial stability. When it comes to shed light about that immanent gender then it always has been females. Women throughout history have been confined to certain domestic roles and they could not contribute significantly in any of the creative works. Time span of hundred and thousands of years has even masked their identity, they have become objects in patriarchal society where men modify them according to their own desires and they can't even question anything considering it as their ultimate fate. Marriage is one of those social constructs that not only cut the wings of women but also make them fragile dependent women. "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single woman in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a husband" (Kamal, 2019, p.6). The line illustrates the ultimate approach of women that they always end up marrying a man when they can try different opportunities and contribute to the society through their creative works.

Simon de Beauvoir exposes these social constructs and argues that they are not holistic and moral duties rather they are just product of man-made rules which aim to strengthen the authority of men over women. In her work, *The Second Sex*, she argues that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 1949, p.352). The line explicitly highlights the societal restrictions imposed on women. Right after the birth, women are alienated from social freedom, and financial stability and they are tasked with specific domestic roles like housewives and mothers which mask their talent and restrain them from creative works. "As it always upset her that young brilliant minds, instead of exploring the universe, were busy chiseling themselves to fit into the molds of Mrs. and Mom" (Kamal, 2019, p.7). It hints at the pain of Alys who is against and traditional roles and believes in persuasion of dreams and focusing on personal development. She believes that these societal barriers stifles women's ability to thrive in their professional life and contribute in the society. To bolster her idea, Alys gives example of Jane Austen who preferred her work over everything, she didn't surrender to systematic barriers, and she is still remembered because of her works. She shatters the old minds that women can only be good caretakers and redirects the motives of women in their lives. "She didn't get married, but her paper children-six wonderful novels-keep her alive centuries later" (Kamal, 2029, p.10). While analyzing the study, it is also observed that how social constructs conceal women's identity as Beauvoir states "The fact of being a human being is infinitely more important than all the singularities that distinguish human beings." (Beauvoir, 1949, p.921). She believes that women must have freedom for their actions and choices. They should not follow the traditional roles blindly rather they must think for themselves and then come up with their own choices. "A woman's duty is to look after the children and run the household" (Kamal, 2019, p.142). It

highlights that how women have been caged in specific domestic roles and they are expected to only serve their husband and his family. Kamal, in her novel, wants women peek beyond prevailing social constructs and make their own identity through their contribution in the society.

Women's education is one of the major factors that reinforce tradition gender roles. Throughout their lives, women are taught to be best wives and mothers. They are trained to maintain their appearances so they may grab good prospects for marriage. Education makes you think what is right and what is wrong while women's education is intentionally modified in such a way that they only think about what already exists in the society. "She is taught that to please, she must try to please, must make herself object; she must therefore renounce her autonomy." (Beauvoir, 1949, p.365). Beauvoir sheds light on women's educational system that they are trained to be passive and focus on their appearances. Contrary to this, boys are taught to be assertive and independent. As we see in the novel when principal of the school, Naheeds gives these remarks to Alys, "Our duty is to send their daughters home exactly as they were delivered to us each morning: obediently obeying their parents. We are to groom these girls into the best of marriageable material" (Kamal, 2019, p.16). It reflects that how education is corrupted to mold the women according to the society where they are trained to be obedient and good marriage materials. It also reveals that being obedient and submissive makes women marriageable and if they are not up to this standard, they will be rejected by the society. Alys does prove this when she implies her freedom, her personal choice and doesn't accept the proposal, she gets bouts of taunts by her mother for rejecting Mr. Kaleem's proposal, a loss of good fortune. Alys as a leading and heroin character in the novel breaks all the stereotypes that women are marriage material only and they should focus on their physical appearances as her mother times and again says, "Kismet has nothing to do with anything, it's all about looks" (Kamal, 2019, p.217). Alys has been portrayed as a strong woman who believes in financial freedom and does not compromise her goals over marriage as Virginia Woolf in her famous work *A Room of One's Own* argues that, "A woman must have money and a room of her if she is to write fictions" (Woolf, 1929, p.4). Throughout the novel, she always prefers reading books and having bold and argumentative discussion with everyone. She values personal and financial growth rather than appearance as she says; "Books over looks" (Kamal, 2019, p.266). She is not that much obsessed about marriage as her sisters and mother is as she knows marriage is just a part of life not a life. "I'm not a gold digger. I refuse to seek a rich roti. I'm going to make my own money and live happily ever after my own terms" (Kamal, 2019, p.151). Kamal has made a contrast between Alys and her mother Mrs. Barkat. We can see a generational gap between the two, one is trying to come out of the cage due to the influence of modern and rational education while other (Mrs. Barkat) is stuck and holding the traditional norms in her life. For Mrs. Barkat having married to a wealthy person is all of life purpose, while for Alys, life is bigger than this. Both these characters draw a contrast between prevailing social contrast and women's struggle against it.

It is further observed that there are certain standards set in the society that if define you are marriageable or unmarriageable and these standards are quite different for both genders. As Beauvoir critiques in her work *The Second Sex* that, "She also has the function of satisfying the male's sexual needs and caring for the home" (Beauvoir, 1949, p.539). For women, it is their physical appearance, how they can please their men, how they can take care of their children and manage all households' responsibilities while for men their social status matters the most: doesn't matter how aged he is and if his character is acceptable. He is the one who will decide which girl is suitable for marriage while women are supposed to wait for proposal and then

accept it blindly, they can't even imagine to reject it. "Please, Qitty, for my sake try to lose some weight before Nadir Fiede. No one wants to marry a fat girl" (Kamal, 2019, p.38). At other point Mrs. Binat says, "The uglier and darker the Rich Men, all the better for you" (Kamal, 2019, p.38). These statements show how women are trained and expected to maintain their physical appearance over their intellect and financial stability. They are not taught to earn and live an independent happy life. Thus, they only find marriage as their ultimate life purpose and always seek for a good hunt. "When she is a young girl, the father has total power over her; on her marriage he transmits it entirely to her spouse" (Beauvoir, 1949, p.127).

Expanding on this idea, it is observed that myth of femininity is a big lie women have ever been told. Through the character of Alys, Kamal skillfully demolishes this myth that women are passive, maternal and nurturing figures. Men use this myth to maintain their control and reinforce women's subordination. Women can write well, speak well, and earn well if they are given opportunities education. It is not only men who are obliged to earn for their family rather both women and men can earn and support each other. "That's because we bring home the bread and you bring home the baby and there is no biological clock on bread and there is one on baby" 'We can do bread too' Alys said" (Kamal, 2019, p.126). It reflects a patriarchal mind and a resisting woman in Pakistan. In patriarchal society, social constructs are widely imposed with the addition of emotions such as glorification of motherhood to keep the women always caged and enslave. "As for the husband, he sees a "baby" in his wife; for him she is not the companion he expected, and he makes her feel it; she is humiliated by it" (Beauvoir, 1949, p.600). Beauvoir emphasis that women can only be a contribution in society if they think openly and do not compromise their goals and dreams for societal norms which aim to cut their wings and make them fragile immanent creatures in society.

Conclusion

Unmarriageable by Kamal is a groundbreaking work in Feminism. The novel marks a profound commentary on how women become victim of unfair societal norms that aim of reinforce male dominance and make women dependent in the society. The novel weaves the themes of marriage, materialism, and women's financial freedom that are prominent in Pakistani society. Kamal sheds light on women's struggle in male-dominant world and she highlights that if a woman challenges these social practices, she'll maker her place just like Alys: she becomes a symbol of resistance, and Qitty: she becomes an artist that helps her voice her concerns and protest against society's unfair practices. The novel seeks to address the importance of women's self-empowerment, financial freedom and independence in their actions and choices. The study explicitly explores that how social constructs are instilled from one generation to next generation and that they have no divine connection rather they are social products which aim to diminish women's freedom and perpetuate male dominance in the society. Marriage is one of the social constructs that is the part of life but society has made it life itself for women and they are made to believe that marriage is their ultimate success for that they have to disregard their goals and dreams.

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