

Identifying Beauvoir's Idea of Equal Freedom in Munir's Unfettered Wings; Extraordinary Stories of Ordinary Women: An Existential Feminist Approach

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Abstract

Men and women are of equal worth regardless of their social and economic statuses but due to cultural and social restrictions, women are considered inferior to men and thus lack basic freedom of choice in their lives. Beauvoir negated this concept and demanded equal freedom for both men and women to attain meaningful existence of human beings through her philosophy of 'Existential Feminism'. This particular research aims to analyze and interpret the lack of freedom among women in matters of their life choices through the various themes presented in the novel under consideration using Beauvoir's Existential Feminist Approach. It is a qualitative study that discusses and analyzes the thematic structure of the selected novel. The main purpose of this research was to interpret the freedom of choice in both men and women and to interpret whether women lack basic freedom in their lives. This study can help future researchers in the field of both existentialism and feminism.

Keywords

Existentialism, Feminism, Freedom of choice, Lack of authority.

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Introduction

Women's struggle for equality in social, legal, political, economic, and cultural rights has its deep roots in the late 19th century. From the first wave of feminism till now women are working to end the discrimination they face based on their gender and their mere existence. Simone de Beauvoir has emerged as one of the greatest proponents of Feminism that demanded Equal Freedom for both men and women. According to her, "Individual freedom is only possible if others (women) were free too." Revising Sartre's concept of existentialism, Beauvoir explained that 'equal freedom for both men and women is necessary for meaningful existence of human being.' This concept of demanding equal freedom to make one's own life choices for women as well as men is known as 'Existential Feminism' (Beauvoir, 1989). In one of her major works, *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir explained Sartre's concept of living in a bad faith in terms of women. She says that 'Tragic Women' are those who accept whatever society chooses for them and hence spend their lives questioning their existence and live in a meaningless life situation (Tony, 2004).

De Beauvoir's philosophy of existentialism is mainly concerned with 'freedom of choosing one's own life and transcending the pre-existing roles implemented by the society'. The lack of authority in making their own life choices leaves women in a state in which they have to suffer throughout their lives and have no existence of their own. Beauvoir's feminism further adds that since women are considered as inferior beings as compared to men, they struggle in life due to both the social norms and roles assigned to them, and men play an important role in making decisions in women's lives. Thus this research will be focusing on the existential crisis faced by men and women to identify and interpret Beauvoir's equal freedom based on the data selected from Munir's novel. The conclusion will be based on the interpretation done by the researcher using an existential feminist approach of Simone de Beauvoir. The researcher will carry out a qualitative analysis on the selected novel to interpret the themes in the novel that represent the condition of men and women living according to societal rules. The comprehensive detail related to this research along with the research questions and the problem that it will focus on is given in the following sections.

Significance of the Study

The main purpose of this research is to identify whether women are receiving equal freedom in terms of their life decisions or not. For this purpose, the researcher will identify and interpret various themes presented in the selected novel to represent various aspects of women's life using Beauvoir's Existential Feminist Approach.

Theoretical Framework

In the present study, following theoretical framework has been selected to analyze the novel, *Unfettered Wings; Extraordinary Stories of Ordinary Women*.

Existential Feminist Approach of Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986)

Simone de Beauvoir was a belatedly recognized philosopher and an undoubtedly recognized feminist theorist. She explained the idea of equal freedom of men and women rather than the

freedom of men only, the feminist political movement of the 1960s and 1970s was greatly influenced Beauvoir's idea of 'Equal freedom' (Lisa, 2005).

Following are the themes that are mainly focused in the research paper.

- i. *Women are considered inferior*
- ii. *Marriages in Patriarchal Society*
- iii. *Honor Killing (Prejudices related to Women)*
- iv. *Equal Freedom (Free Will)*

Research Problem

Both men and women are living socially encouraged lives. But women lack basic freedom of decision making in matters of life choices and thus face unnecessary consequences.

Research Questions:

Q1. What is a lack of freedom in decision making and how it varies between genders?

Q2. How Women are represented as mere objects in society?

Objectives of Research

This research aims to analyze freedom of choice in both men and women through selected novel.

Literature Review

Silverio (2019), defined and elaborated how the roots of existential philosophy were considered to be dominated by men before Simone de Beauvoir despite of her equal share to both existentialism and feminism during her lifetime. Through the analysis of *The Second Sex*, she concluded that Beauvoir made women aware of their current situation and explained what they can do for themselves to change their present sufferings (Silverio, 2019).

Similar Kabeer (2003), also provided the basis to achieve gender equality and describes the resources that will make positive changes in women's life. By explaining the meaning of empowerment as "the ability to make choices" she claimed that the absence of choice has a different impact on men and women as gender inequality escalates the power relation between men and women. Furthermore the researcher proposed that education, paid work, political representations can increase the capacity of a woman to deal with this world but a lot of work is still required to improve women's place and power in society (Kabeer, 2003).

Desmawati (2018) also explained that everyone should have equal political, social, economic, and cultural rights regardless of their gender. Desmawati (2018), aims to explain different types of feminism through various female characters in the novel, 'Little Women'. For this purpose, the research has qualitatively described the struggle faced by various female characters for their survival in the patriarchal society through the selected novel. Desmawati (2018), concluded the study by claiming 'Little Women' as a feminist novel for having described four different types of feminism through its female characters (Desmawati, 2018).

A study (Munir, 2016), attempted to analyze the basic themes as well as the identity crisis proposed in Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Birds Sings". This paper qualitatively analyzed the identity crisis and issues of double colonization represented in the selected novel. The study focused on how 'Black Women' are surviving Patriarchal Colonialism and concluded that Black Women are undoubtedly facing an identity crisis also they are struck in the labyrinth of double colonization (Munir, 2016).

The study (Saddiqa, 2017), analyze the representation of gender in fantasy fiction. For this purpose, the researcher has adopted a qualitative approach and multimodal analysis to represent how gender is portrayed in fantasy fiction. The study collected nine primary school fantasy fiction to show how fiction can impact children's minds. The researcher concluded that women's representation in children's fiction is stereotypical as women are portrayed as weak and inferior to men. The researcher also added that such portrayal of men as superior and women as inferior impacts children's mindset and embedded stereotypical ideologies in their minds.

Methodology

The research methodology is qualitative and academic, as the research is based on Munir's *Unfettered Wings; Extraordinary Stories of Ordinary Women* (which describes its author's view of life). Qualitative research is considered as the descriptive analysis that focuses on getting information through either literature or open-ended and conversational communication. This technique not just answers "what" questions yet in addition "why" and "how" questions as well. The qualitative research methods are used for in-depth analysis and further questioning of respondents' dependent on their reactions, where the researcher likewise attempts to comprehend their inspiration and sentiments. Inferences can be drawn quite easily from the data that is obtained by the results of qualitative methods. The outcomes of qualitative research are more detailed and the deduction can be drawn effectively from the information that is taken out (Marshall, 522). For this purpose, research starts with the particular observation that helped to select theory and to draw the conclusion from the research. It is a deductive approach focusing on the selected novel, to draw the conclusion related to existential feminism.

Discussion and Analysis

The detailed discussion and analysis of *Unfettered Wing; Extraordinary Stories of Ordinary Women* by Sana Munir is as follows;

Sample 1

Chapter 1 (Farida – An Unforgettable Monsoon in 1947)

Free Will

In this chapter, it has been observed that various male characters take their life decisions free willingly for themselves and for their family member, such as Asfaq's decision of staying alone in Patiala as well as Laal prior desire to send everyone from his family to Lahore and stay in Patiala house despite having the fear of being killed. At the end of this chapter, when Laal

decides to marry Farida off with another person as a child bride is also an example of Free Will as here Laal takes control over his granddaughter's life so that he could give her a secure future after his demise.

Prejudices and Women (Honor Killing):

Women are the victims of prejudices in a patriarchal society. Men relate their honor to their related women and burden them with their false honor. Farida once described a scene from post-partition camps. She said that once a young lady came back to her father after seven months. She was pregnant and immediately wrapped her body around her father upon seeing him. While she was shedding tears of relief everyone else around her turned up their noses in disgust. Even the father didn't accept her, who was desperately looking for her earlier. This shows that how women are disguised for what they are not responsible for.

Marriages and Women in Patriarchal Society

Women are considered as a liability in a patriarchal society. Thus when a man is unable to carry their responsibility, he marries them off. In this chapter when Laal got sick and knew that soon he is going to be dead. He gave Farida away as a child bride to an already married schoolmaster. In a patriarchal society, men take decisions of when and where they are marrying their sisters and daughters. The same happened with Farida as Laal gave her away and she had to become a child bride. Thus this chapter as a whole indicates that women cannot make decisions in their lives and have to follow the rules that someone else especially society has assigned to them. While on the other hand, men are portrayed as firm decision-makers of the house who cannot only decide for themselves but also for women living or related to them.

Sample 2

Chapter 2 (Reema – The Keeper of Secrets)

Free Will

When Reema's mother found out about Reema's painful experience. She willingly decided to cover the whole situation to protect her daughter from the evil eyes of the society in which she lives. Society always blames women. Even though women are the victims, society always opposes women that it was their fault or that they could have stopped the despicable in the world to harm them. Thus to protect Reema from the questions and disguise of society, Nargis decided to just let this matter go. She never asked any questions from Reema about that dreadful day when Billu raped her daughter nor she demanded any reasons from her. Thus we can say that to protect her daughter Nargis used her Free Will.

Objectification of Women:

In a patriarchal society women are merely considered as objects to fulfill man's needs. In this chapter when Nargis (Reema's mother) and Ashfaq (Reema's father) are talking to Billu about how he needs to change his life for the better. Ashfaq has seen him wandering around with his bad company. She explained that "A man cannot be balanced without a woman" in an attempt to take him to the right path. This shows that women are considered as objects as in patriarchal society the only purpose of women's life is to bring brought up men to the right paths. While

in reality, women do not just exist to change wicked men's lives but they also have their purpose of existence. However, in a patriarchal society, a woman's sole purpose is considered to balance other men's life who have lost every good in them.

Self-Blaming

Living in a patriarchal society, women always blame themselves for not being able to protect themselves. A sense of guilt always remains in them that pinches their soul throughout their life. Reema spent her life living in this guilt too. It had been seven decades, three-quarters of a century but still, Reema is unable to talk about the painful episode of her life when her uncle Billu – her bogeyman betrayed her and used her to quench his lust. After all these years, she could not think of that wicked day without feeling that it was her fault and she could have stopped him. She had been cooking up the best defense for years to avoid guilt but all she came up with was, 'I was stupid'. That day Billu not just raped her, but tormented her soul for life. He damages her so much that she spent the next seventy years of life thinking that it was her fault and she could have stopped him. But all her guilt was in vain as the damage was already done and she could not do anything to mend it. This shows that how women feel guilt from whatever bad happens to them, whatever was not supposed to happen.

Marriages in Patriarchal Society:

In a patriarchal society, marriages are only to please men regardless of what women want. As in this chapter, Ashfaq and Nargis suggested Billu get him a woman because they saw the lustful spark in his eyes. In a patriarchal society, people do not think if a man can fulfill the responsibility that comes with marriages, they only see that a man wants women for his desires so the only way for him to fulfill his needs is by getting married. Thus marriages in a patriarchal society have just become a way to fulfill a man's sexual needs. Thus this chapter indicates that women are objectified and have no mere existence in a patriarchal society. As their sole purpose is to fulfill men's needs.

Sample 3

Chapter 3 (Maria – The Wanton One)

Free Will:

When Baseer decides to move to the city because he knew he can never have a better life in the desert, where it can be said that Baseer was not living in a bad faith. As he did not spend his whole life being in a desert where he did not belong but rather tried to make his life better and find the true purpose of his existence. This decision also explains the free will of Baseer. Later on when he went to the city of lights and was trapped in the magic spell of Maria's beauty. He willingly spent days and nights in front of Maria's house so that he could have a glance at her. Maria too willingly allowed him to wander around her and her house as she was enjoying the childlike awe of the young man. In her amusement, she also decided to spend a night with him and thus it can be said that both Baseer and Maria were acting upon their free will. Though this

chapter represents that women can make their own decision but it also shows the way women are afraid of being judged by society.

Sample 4

Chapter 4 (Summi – The Soldier’s Wife)

Free Will

The same act of sacrificing precious time with her wife for his duties can also be described as the quality of free will in Murad. And his act of kindness towards Nadir’s mother and his feeling of being responsible for her is also considered as the free willingness of Murad.

Sample 5

Chapter 5 (Habiba – The girl with topaz eyes)

Marriages in Patriarchal Society

Women are considered a burden in a patriarchal society. Before marriages, they are considered to be a burden for their father and brothers and after marriages, their burden is transferred to their husbands. Still, in a patriarchal society, their only purpose is to get married. Sikander in his impatience wanted to marry off both of his sisters so that they do not have to worry about them anymore and can be able to do their job of kidnapping people even better. In a patriarchal society, women have no existence or purpose other than getting married. After Sikander had killed his sister, seeing the situation and emotional condition of Ayesha, Rustom decided to marry her off with his nephew. This also represents that how decisions made by men in their impatience create chaos for women in their lives. Sikander murdered his sister and damaged Ayesha emotionally but he was not the one who faced the consequences of it but rather it was Habiba and Ayesha who had to face the unnecessary chaos in their lives. Thus it can be said that women are inferior to men in a patriarchal society and are a burden to their families.

Honor Killing

Habiba was a fifteen years old girl who didn’t know how to control her inner childlike desires. In the absence of her father and brother when she found the abductee in trouble she went to him without worrying about the cultural and social norms that restrict her from going to an unknown male for any reason. When Sikander found her in the abductee’s tent he got angry and shot her in the middle of her eyes without thinking any second thought, in the name of honor. The writer describes that how women are treated in the name of honor and are being killed for men’s fragile honor. Thus from this chapter’s analysis, we can conclude that women are considered as objects and burdens in a patriarchal society. Men related their honor to women and bound them to unnecessary restrictions so that they can protect their honor. But in reality, women are born in this world to become the honor of their men but they have their purpose and existence. But in patriarchal society women do not have any existence other than a mere object. As explained in this chapter before that both Ayesha and Habiba were already experiencing extreme restrictions for being women by their father and brother. But the little attempt of giving medicines to the abductee by Habiba which she did in her innocence made a huge fuss in Sikander’s mind and he swore to kill her upon seeing her in the tent and so he did.

The writer here described the helplessness of women as upon hearing the arrival of her father and brother Habiba got scared and could not get herself out from the abductee's tent. She also described that how men do not think twice when it comes to their honor. Similarly, Sikander in his anger killed his sister who had been taking care of him for years.

Sample 6

Chapter 6 (Nazia – In pursuit of happiness)

Free Will

Since we know that Nazia has filed for divorce because her husband was abusive. Though she had to go through a complex process as the law doesn't allow women to demand divorce until she can prove that her husband was not the right fit for her. But despite all these difficulties she dared to go through all the struggle so that one day she might get what she deserves. This brave act of Nazia represents her inner free will. As she wasn't living in a bad faith and did her best to take hold of her life. Though society was criticizing her very much still she had the will to live a free and independent life where no men can abuse her as her husband did. Thus we can say that Nazia had free will and did not choose to live in a bad faith for her life.

Marriages in Patriarchal Society

Nazia was not impressed by the whole idea of marriage in a patriarchal society. As in this society, only men get to choose when they want to marry and girls get chosen and are expected to go with the flow. No matter how much a girl wanted to pursue a career after a certain age she has to get married so that she is accepted in society. Women are bound to follow every societal rule while men are bound to nothing. Thus women have a lack of ability in a patriarchal society. Thus it shows that how women face social and cultural trauma in a patriarchal society. Most of the women spend their lives living in a bad faith and do not value their existence. But if any woman has tried to change her life, society and culture would consider her as characterless. Thus women face various difficulties in a patriarchal society. Marriage is one of the most decisions of anyone's life and in a patriarchal society, women do not get to take part in making this important decision of their lives. In a patriarchal society, women are expected to follow what men decide for them as in a patriarchal society men get a chance to choose women for them while women don't and are expected to go with the flow.

Sample 7

Chapter 7 (Saima – On the trait of a dead bride)

Marriages in Patriarchal Society

As explained before, women cannot make decisions in their life and hence follow the unnecessary consequences. Later in this chapter when Saima solved the murder case of the newlywed bride, she found out that her parents had forced her to marry Saleem even though she was in love with another guy. This bad decision made by Azra's family lead her to carry on an extramarital affair with her ex-boyfriend which ultimately triggered her husband to murder her. This shows that how having no freedom of choice impacts women's life as harsh consequences are waiting for them. Most of the women do not play a role in making the most

important decisions of their life and thus have to find another way to fulfill their desires. This shows the existential crisis faced by them. Furthermore, the writer has also shown an example of a good marriage in this chapter through the marriage of Saima. Saima had married her fellow inspector who is a caring and supportive human being. This shows that if women get a chance to decide for themselves or even if they play a little role in making one of the most important decisions of their lives, they can live a peaceful life. But in patriarchal society men relate their egos with women and decides for them without even concerning them and thus leave them to face future consequences.

Honor Killing

As explained before, men relate their prejudices with women and could not bear any woman going against them. Thus when Saleem found out that his wife is having an affair with her ex-boyfriend, he killed her for his honor.

Sample 8

Chapter 8 (Beena – Love me like Shah Rukh Khan)

Women living in Illusions

The writer explained the concept of expectation vs reality through this chapter. Beena has always been a dramatic girl who assumed that his husband would also be as loving as the actor of Bollywood films is. Though she was a real person but still in her heart she always desired to have a more romantic person as her husband. Her husband always used to forget the date of their wedding anniversary but she never minded. For her fifth wedding anniversary, she wanted to watch a Shah Rukh Khan's movie but due to the tension between Pakistan and India on orders, Bollywood movies had been removed from all cinema houses until further notice. This discarded her as the only thing that kept her away from reality was the movies of Shah Rukh Khan which were not available anymore. That's why she got angry and shared her feeling with her husband about how rigid he reacts to everything. This behavior of Beena can be explained through the aesthetical stage of Kierkegaard as she was living in her unrealistic bubble and were avoiding reality.

Sample 9

Chapter (Meera – Professor Crank)

Marriages in Patriarchal Society

The writer explained early in this chapter that Meera was not so impressed with the concept of marriage from a very early age. As she had seen various abusive marriages in her life. Her family tried to marry her off so that she won't have to live alone for her entire life but as she crossed the age of thirty-five the quest of finding an eligible partner for her became slow as no groom was looking for such an aged bride. Furthermore, she also had to change her city so that her relatives could stop criticizing her. The whole chapter shows that in a patriarchal society how women are expected to get married at a young age regardless of their status. But unlike other Meera was a little privileged for being an army brad and thus she could make a decision for herself and how she wanted to spend her whole life.

Sample 10

Chapter 10 (Eeman – Keeping Faith)

Women are considered inferior to men in Patriarchal Society

In this chapter, the writer described a situation of a mother who just had her fifth daughter. She always wanted to have a son. As she knew that in a patriarchal society women are tend to be weak creatures as compared to men. Women always need a man's shoulder so that he could support them in their lives. While women are considered a burden. Zainab was one of her daughters, but due to the trauma she faced throughout her childhood she decided to treat her daughter and sons equally. When someone said to her or wished for her to have a son she would get offended as according to her both of them are equal. This shows the working of society, that how women are considered lucky when they bore sons while they are considered as unlucky if they bore daughters. Zainab was always against this mentality as she spent most of her childhood in the trauma of not being a boy, a supporter for her mother and family. Thus we can say that women are considered inferior in society.

Findings and Conclusions

This research involves the analysis of *Unfettered Wings; Extraordinary Stories of Ordinary women* using Existential Feminist Approach. It gave a deep insight into the process and intentions of the writer through the help of Simone de Beauvoir's philosophy of Existential Feminism. It elaborates how the writer has explained that both men and women are influenced and impacted by social and cultural norms i.e. socialization. As they are bound to follow strict restrictions proposed by society so that they can be accepted by society. Moreover, this research has been conducted qualitatively and it also elaborates how women lack basic freedom in making life choices and thus face the consequences of decisions made by men or society. As men are considered superior to women in a patriarchal society and thus women are treated as objects. This study concludes that though men and women both face difficulties in living a free life as both are bound by societal and cultural norms through socialization. But women face additional struggles as men are considered superior in a patriarchal society and they relate unnecessary prejudices with women, leaving women to face the consequences of decisions made by them alone.

Moreover, the research gap of this research study was that there is no work done on this novel using Existential Feminist that focused on thematic analysis in such a detailed manner with the help of the above-mentioned theories. So, there was a dire need to analyze *Unfettered Wings; Extraordinary Stories of Ordinary Women* by following a theory to have a new vision and new perspective. This combination of text and theory makes it a new and exclusive work.

Future Recommendation

This study will help other future researchers in the field of existentialism and feminism. This novel can also be analyzed using other theoretical framework to extract the need of women empowerment.

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