A Study of Disempowerment of Women in Afsana Pichhal Pairi by Afzal Ahsan Randhawa

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Abstract

Women are generally deprived of their basic human rights in typical patriarchal societies. The present research explores the presentation of the miseries of deprived and distressed women in the selected text. The research is qualitative-descriptive and examines the selected text through an adapted version of Longwe’s (1991) “Women’s Empowerment Framework”. The results reveal that typical rural lower-class women are deprived of participation in decision making related to their personal lives, balanced gender roles, access to wealth and opportunities for their material betterment. The deprived women are doomed with no outway to relieve themselves from the clutches of cruel societal norms. The adapted theoretical framework can contribute to studying the literature created in typical patriarchal societies.

Keywords

Patriarchal, Disempowerment, Gender, Norms

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Introduction:

Poverty is a sin but if someone is poor and also has been blessed with matchless beauty, society counts it as an unforgivable sin. The society fellows try to torment such poor in different ways and they are teased to the extent that they attempt to end their life without thinking about their left behind family members and how they would survive in this cruel world and face the bitter realities of their lives. The situation becomes worst if the poor fellow is a woman. She is never forgiven by society for what she has often never done, wherein her poverty is considered her greatest sin.

“Pichhal Pairi” is a story of a woman who suffers for what she had not done. She was living in a village with her mother and father. Her father was a drug addict, who never tried to do anything to fulfil the needs of his family. So, to meet the needs of life, his wife had to go out of the house. This world is never fair to a woman especially if she is poor and weak, but has magnificent beauty. Once, a landlord of the village had an evil eye on Pichhal Pairi’s mother and wanted to have his evil desires fulfilled. But she was a pious lady, thus, instead of disgracing her honour she took her life by drowning herself in a well. At that time her only daughter, who was later labelled ‘Pichhal Pairi’ i.e. an obnoxious witch, was only three years old. She could not know what the future lies for her. The village fellows said her mother was not a chaste woman, and so is she. Now she was the responsibility of her father who had never tried to look after her. When she reached the age of seven, her father also died. The village landlord, who was responsible for her mother’s doom death, came forward, and owing to his sense of guilt, owned her as his responsibility, and brought her up like his daughter till her youth. He managed his wedding with a handsome dowry to help her lead a prosperous life. Her husband fell prey to what the village people had always to say against the girl and her deceased mother. Her husband once came home drunkard, declared her an illegitimate child and a symbol of the sin of the village landlord, beat her badly, and killed their baby son unintentionally in the heat of anger. She could not tolerate the death of her innocent infant son, reacted aggressively, and killed her husband on the spot. Thus, she is declared a ‘Pichhal Pairi’ forever throughout the community. The author of the story, Afzal Ahsan Randhawa, was a famous literary figure and a politician from Pakistani Punjab but is equally famous in Indian Punjab for his support of the Sikh Freedom Movement in 1984.

There are two female characters in the story, Pichhal Pairi and Pichhal Pairi’s mother, and the story revolves around these two characters. The economic status of these two ladies becomes a source of trouble for them. In the case of the mother, she suffers because she is poor, whereas the daughter, later labelled as ‘Pichhal Pairi’ suffers because of the dowry and the lands that the village landlord has given her and her husband. Both the ladies suffer; the former for the lack of wealth and the latter for having wealth.

Literature Review:

The literary works are a bigger part of the produced discourse, and thus they can provide significant amount of linguistic data for discourse analysis or critical discourse analysis. Gee (1999) views discourse analysis as a tool to understand a specific situation and intended targets i.e. “related semiotic systems” in which a text, or a literary work, is produced (p. 85). Since one of the primary functions of language is to communicate information, Gee (1999) further see
language as means of reflecting and constructing a specific discourse, its context and the situation (p. 82).

One important aspect of human civilization, which evolved with it, are gender patterns and annexed biases, irrespective of social or economic class. Gender is a social phenomenon and is closely related with power, status, class, race, identity and culture (Gee, 1999, p. 94). Gender bias exists even against the women in power (Telela, Samuels, & Pheko-Mothupi, 2000). Gender biases are prominently visible in patriarchal cultures. Gendered patterns are inculcated into males and females since their birth and then they grow themselves accordingly (McPherson, 2012). Patriarchal dominance creates, promotes and enhances social, political and economic hegemony even in the modern world (Made, 1996).

Gender balance and respect are important requirement for positive growth of a culture. Gender injustice, gender inequity and gender imbalance cause gender bias; a ‘gender just society’ can be formed through empowering women (Misra, 2006). Women empowerment involves enhancing women’s capacity “to influence and participate in making decisions which directly or indirectly influence their lives” (Garba, 1999, p. 130). Community member can be empowered “if their material resources and capabilities are enhanced” (Ngoddo, 2009, p. 141), and through empowering them to make “more effective choices and decisions to achieve what they need and want” (Ngoddo, 2009, p. 152).

Women have insufficient participation in decision making even of their own physical beings in patriarchal communities (Garba, 1999). Owing to being less privileged, women have less access to conventional as well as alternative medical treatment and care in many underdeveloped and developing zones (Bianco & Hunter, 2000). Women and minor girls are the frequent victims of both gender bias and gender abuse (Otoo-Oyortey & Pobi, 2003). Massive and comprehensive efforts are needed to empower women in their social life (Hemer, 2017). Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi (2003) assert that “Attitudes need to be changed among the public at large regarding the girl child, and gender biases addressed, in areas that include early marriage, girls’ education, inheritance rights, and employment” (p. 49).

While planning the grant of empowerment of women, it is important to see what factors disempower them. Disempowerment is reflected through 1) lack of participation in decision making process, 2) inequalities in availing opportunities, 3) less contribution in self and societal development, and 4) deprivation from education (Garba, 1999). In many cases, the victims or survivors of crimes may not wish to penalize the criminal by the law (Barata & Schneider, 2004). “Disempowerment occurs when a person’s or a group’s access or use of material resources is constrained, giving them less or zero probability in achieving their goals. The changes in the use of material resources and the intervention of outside agencies can be sources of constraints” (Ngoddo, 2009, p. 141).

There can many reasons for women disempowerment. “Empowerment is unlikely to be granted to the disempowered because some individuals or groups benefit from the disempowerment of others and are unlikely freely to give up the resulting ‘privileges’” (Garba, 1999, p. 132). Women face “hegemonies of patriarchal masculinity”, “men’s physical and emotional violence” against their “overburdened bodies”, and deprivation from “self-esteem and quality of life” (McPherson, 2012, p. 49). Bianco and Hunter (2000) view that efforts of economic
Restructuring of the disadvantaged groups also add to the miseries of women; resultantly, economic inequality among men and women increases. Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi (2003) view that poverty is associated with social factors as well as economic factors, and deprives women from developing social capabilities, availing basic human rights, choosing reproductive/sexual option, and benefiting from healthcare. Migration of families or communities from poor countries to wealthier countries also adds to the miseries of the individual of such communities (Bianco & Hunter, 2000).

There is an intense connection between “socially-situated identities” and “socially-situated activities” (Gee, 1999, p. 120). Thus many powerful people of a community are entitled to commit crimes against the power deprived individuals. Women in poverty, being marginalized and weakest creatures, are more often the victims of crimes by the powerful. Women’s wealth and earnings are used to add to the prestige of their male family members (McPherson, 2012). For the migrated communities, in case there is a dire struggle for survival, women and minor girls are often forced to sexual abuse, prostitution, rape, or other forms of sexual work; consequently they are more victimized for what they do whereas males are spared from the stigma and discrimination (Bianco & Hunter, 2000).

Crimes against women either lead to their disempowerment or they are a byproduct of their disempowerment. Crimes against women also lead to their deprivation from their rights and empowerment. The victim women are to face a social discrimination for the sin they have not committed (Bianco & Hunter, 2000). In many communities, crimes against women are committed by their near and dear ones. Male domination in patriarchal societies is a prominent factor in depriving women of their rights. Domestic violence is among the major crimes where the victims suffer from their close relatives. Many countries have laws to eradicate domestic violence but these laws, because they are less effectively implemented, often to fail to protect the victim and penalize the criminal (Barata & Schneider, 2004).

Violence against women is embedded in patriarchal communities and female bodies are “hit, kicked, cut, violently bruised, battered and broken; they are made black and blue” and women and girls are often made to endure violence by their male family members (McPherson, 2012, pp. 49-50). Violence against women is often associated with early marriages. The women are forced to enter into a marriage even at an immature age in most of the developed countries which often leads to the mother’s or her child’s morbidity and mortality (Otoo-Oyortey & Pobi, 2003). Garba (1999) opines that “empowering women is a means to an end, the end being to improve their lives and protect their rights to participate in decisions that affect them” (p. 130).

Social reforms are needed for the betterment of women rather than disparate individual efforts. For example, women who try to get rid of their turmoil living are economically and socially more vulnerable, and they may end up more troublesome circumstances (Otoo-Oyortey & Pobi, 2003). Women empowerment may be associated with availability of choices, availing those choices and achieving those choices (Ngoddo, 2009). Misra (2006) views displacement, dispensability, marginalization and devaluation as major contributors to women disempowerment. Parker (1993) recommends training of women to empower them. Misra (2006) suggests economic independence, positive self-image, self-awareness and autonomy for empowering women to end their miseries.
**Methodology:**

The research is qualitative in nature and is in the form of an analytical commentary on the selected text in light of an adapted theoretical framework. The researchers have investigated the impression of disempowerment of lower-class village women.

**Theoretical framework:** To examine the crises the two ladies (Pichhal Pairi and her mother) go through because of their economic status, the researchers have adapted the “Women’s Empowerment Framework” by Sara Hlupekile Longwe (1991). Longwe’s framework focuses on women's empowerment in relation to their economic status. According to this model, women have to face oppression and exploitation as a consequence of their poverty. This model is based on the following factors.

- **Control:** If women have equal control in decision making
- **Participation:** If women have equal opportunity to participate in decision making
- **Conscientisation:** If women attain an equal understanding of gender roles
- **Access:** If the women have access to the sources of wealth
- **Welfare:** If women have equal access to spend their wealth for their material welfare

The researchers have discussed the above factors integrated with the following factors taken from Naila Kabeer’s (1994) social relations framework. Kabeer’s (1994) model locates family and household in the social network and relates them to community, market and state:

- The influence of social relations in terms of determining the roles, rights and responsibilities.
- The gender relations and how these relations affect the women.
- The involvement of men and women in the earning tasks and control over income.
- The role of the institutions to contribute to gender inequalities.
- The operation of institutions to reflect different gender policies.
- The analysis of factors which become the source of problems

The researchers have attempted to in-depth explore the shades of disempowerment and sufferings of the leading female characters in the selected text.

**Analysis and Discussion:**

This segment is chunked, in light of Longwe's (1991) framework, into five subdivisions: control, participation, conscientisation, access and welfare.

**Control:** The factor of ‘control’ addresses the participation of women in various decision making processes in their personal lives, as well as in their near ones. ‘Control’ enables women to gain a balance of control over the various factors, without getting dominated by the opposite gender.

The phenomenon of control does not seem to be with the two female characters in the story. Throughout the story, the women are shown as economically disempowered. This disempowerment leads them to a multitude of troubles. The mother had to submit to the
decision of her family for getting married to a drug addict, whereas society forced her to continue her married life with that drug addict, and not demand a divorce or better treatment from the husband. The mother has to look for earning opportunities to ensure means of sustenance for herself and her baby daughter, but she is not entitled to govern the husband’s property. The daughter i.e. ‘Pichhal Pairi’ had to submit to the landlord for his decision to get her married to a lower class Allah Rakha. Pichhal Pairi says with great remorse, “Meri maan bhe Pichhal Pairi thee... per muqadar nay usay ek nakara afioni kay pallay bandh dia” (My mother was also an outcast who was tied into the knot of marriage with an opium-addict by the fate). This “muqadar” or fate, is nothing but the imposed norms of patriarchal society on the weak and suppressed women. Almost similar “muqadar” plays its role when the village landlord decides the fate of Pichhal Pairi, while marrying her with an obstinate, Allah Rakha. Her consent did not matter much here as well.

Pichhal Pairi’s parents had some agricultural lands, but since it is in a patriarchal society, the drug addicted father decided what to do with the land. What he does is “apni do chaar ghomoun zameen tu mera afioni baap afion ko bakhash gia thaa” (The father has sold the inherited land to pay for his opium). So the ‘control’ is with the male member of the family, even though he is a drug addict and an almost-mad person, devoid of any positive decision making. Whereas, society never interferes when a wrong decision is made by a male, the so-called head of the family. On the eve of Pichhal Pairi’s marriage, it is Allah Rakha, her husband, who gets the benefit and becomes the owner of the lands bestowed by the village landlord, and she remains the same powerless creature to bear the accusations and beatings. Society grabs her lands when she turns mad after her son’s and husband’s deaths. She is forced to accept the status of a “Dyne” rather than holding the lands bestowed by the village landlord. The wretched woman is forced to embrace poverty when no male member is alive. She is the silent victim facing the worst circumstances.

**Participation:** ‘Participation’ addresses women’s equal participation in the decision making process, policy making, planning and administration. A patriarchal society, and especially a village community, does not allow the ladies to participate in decision making, though such decisions are related to their lives. They are made to submit to the decisions made, sometimes by their families and sometimes by the invisible hands. In the story, it is Allah Rakha, who while being drunk, declares Pichhal Pairi to be the illegitimate child of the village landlord. Addressing the story narrator, she asks the society a thought provoking question, “Kia iski (the village landlord’s) itni badi neki kay badlay mei mein osay oski jawaniki ek bhool bhe muaf nhe ker sakti?” (Why could I not forgive the village landlord for his mistake during his youth for all the blessings he bestowed upon me?) Society does not approve of her attempt to forgive and acquit the person from the guilt that he (the village landlord) committed by attempting to disgrace her mother.

Even when the wretched Pichhal Pairi is allowed to participate, that is more than sharing a haunted place of the deserted land with a stranger (the story narrator) from another village, as he comments, “Es waqt mein aur Pichhal Pairi ... ek hi kashti kay swar thay” (At that time, I and the wretched woman were on the same boat).

In the societies like Pakistan, people of both sexes are socialized to their assigned aspects of lives. Pichhal Piari and her mother both have to surrender to be submissive wives, even though
their husbands were not even normal human beings as both of them were drug addicts and only contributed to the sufferings of their families rather realizing their responsibilities. Pichhal Pairi’s wish to have joined her mother through death also remains unfulfilled when she says, “agr osay merna hi thaa tu mujhay kion es dozakh mei chhord gye?” (If my mother had decided to commit suicide to save herself, she should not have left me in this living hell). This utterance shows her utter disappointment with her life.

In typical patriarchal societies, especially in villages, men own the agricultural lands, and they are supposed to perform their agriculture related roles and earnings. Whereas, women can participate in agricultural activities but, usually, as unpaid workers, or low paid workers. When the men do not perform their assigned as narrated in the story, society feels no responsibility to force them to do so. Rather, the responsibility to earn sustenance is entrusted to women.

**Conscientisation:** Conscientisation addresses the phenomenon of women’s attaining an equal understanding of gender roles. This factor helps to understand the differences between roles gender bound and sex bound roles. This factor also addresses gender based relations, beliefs, and division of labour, and being fair and agreeable for both sexes. Gender influences the way the people of a certain community demonstrate their social behaviours and actions. Gender also affects the division of labour in the household and related chores.

Pichhal Pairi’s mother has been forced to make efforts for the sustenance of the family as her opium-addict husband was not doing anything for even the basic necessities of his family. She is made to abstain to seek any help from her parents as the community practices neither permitted her to get rid of an opium addict husband nor get help from her parents and siblings. Her parents and siblings and all other relatives never made their appearance to protect her and her daughter from the doomed fate that they continued to face, even after the death. The community also did not make any effort to do something positive for the stigmatized but innocent women. Rather, the community aggravated their sufferings.

The powerful people in the community have been supporting gender stereotypes. The social norms are made the way that they make the powerful more powerful, and the weak the weaker. The young ones are trained the way to fit their roles according to the stereotypes. The story narrator, though being well educated, feels himself bound and submitted to these stereotypes, and thinks to run away from the doomed woman, he could not make himself courageous enough because he was thoroughly exhausted on that hot day. Gender stereotypes influence community practices, community laws, and informal and formal judicial systems. Such stereotypes affect legitimacy, inheritance, personal safety, and other due processes.

The women are forced into the roles that the patriarchal society chooses for them. Pichhal Pairi is forced into the role of an allegedly illegitimate daughter of the village landlord by her own husband, and has to face abusive treatment at her denial. After his death, the community snatches off her womanhood and makes her surrender to the title of Dyne or Pichhal Pairi. It is the woman who is forced to accept the role of “Dyne”. The male members e.g. Pichhal Pairi’s husband being an addict to liquor and her father being an addict to opium are never given any of such derogatory titles by society.

Patriarchal cultures develop belief systems to shape gender identities and behaviour patterns. The gender communities define what roles are appropriate for both men and women, and how
they are to go about their daily lives. Pichhal Pairi’s mother has to subdue herself to being stigmatized. Pichhal Pairi has to bear the beatings by her drunkard husband, as the communal norms do not give any chance to rebel. The village community is a powerful institution which has its rules, resources, and activities and, above all, power to ensure engender social roles. This powerful institution has informally drawn some gender specific policies. Allah Rakha blames and beats his wife since he is permitted by this institution to do so. In the storyline, it is the village community that ensures gender inequalities.

Access: This factor addresses women’s access to wealth. It is also examined whether women have equal access to avail opportunities through the legal framework or social norms. The two female characters in the story seem deprived of the right to access family wealth. Pichhal Pairi becomes “Lawaris, bilkul lawaris” after her father’s death. She has been titled “Pichhal Pairi” and “Dyne”, and thus has been completely devoid of access to the wealth (house, agricultural lands and animals) that she should still be the owner of after the death of her husband. The community forced her to live her life as a wretched woman for the rest of her life.

The patriarchal communities do not allow the trodden women to have their rights of survival, security and autonomy. The community’s concerns remain neutral or conservative to ensure the worst for the deprived and depressed women. The mother, in this story, has to commit suicide to protect her honour, and the village community affirms her suicide through the justification, “saray gaon nay yeh keh baat dba dee kay esay nakara afioni kay saath.. kab tak guzara kerti. Konwein mei chhalang na lgati tu kia kerti”.

The communal norms do not allow Pichhal Pairi to reform the image of her deceased mother who even after two decades after her death is still stigmatized with the blame of adultery. The village community poisons Allah Rakha’s ears with all such stuff against her deceased mother-in-law, and he accuses his wife to be an illegitimate child of the village landlord. The false hearsay not only destroys their happy marital life but also leads to Allah Rakha’s death. The only ‘access’ to say her version of all the doom fate Pichhal Pairi is facing is what she could say to the story narrator.

Welfare: This factor examines the extent to which women can avail opportunities for their material betterment. The women do not have equal access to spend their wealth for their material welfare including their health, food and income. The protagonist Pichhal Pairi is portrayed in extremely bad health. The readers can imagine her babyhood as a starving child whose mother can hardly manage enough food for herself and the daughter. The poor mother would have to go out of her house for the small earnings. The village life has limited income offers for the wife of an opium addict. The poor woman (mother) could not enjoy a happy marital life. The doomed fate did not spare the daughter who could enjoy only four and a half years of her married life. Afterwards, she was destined to be Pichhal Pairi forever.

Conclusion:

The literary work affirms the stereotypical image of doomed women in patriarchal societies where women are the silent victims of the worst circumstances. All the characters tend to manage gender relations as per the village community norms of typical oppressive patriarchal society, where not even a single character deviates from the communal gender norms. When it comes to rescuing a wretched woman, no one come forwards to help her. The character of
mother has to search for earning opportunities for the sustenance of herself and her baby
daughter, but she is not entitled to govern the husband’s property because of patriarchal
oppression.

Patriarchal society forces women into their traditional subordinate stereotyped roles. The
dominant village community, a powerful institution in this storyline and an ensurer of
patriarchal norms draws gender specific policies by which an insane husband can blame and
beat his wife since he is permitted by the institution to do so. The women are made to surrender
to their assigned gendered roles, and in case of a rebel, they are outcast as “Dyne”, “Nehs” or
“Pichhal Pairi” as it is portrayed in this story. Women of the lower class suffer more
disempowerment, especially when they are widowed or married to a stigmatized person.

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