

# From 'Draupadi' to 'Dainty Dolls': Portrayal of Subjugation of Women in *Herstory*

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## Abstract

*Herstory* is a collection of 39 poems written by Neha Bansal, published under the Navodaya scheme of Sahitya Akademi. In the poems, Bansal reflects on the misery of womanhood and the male gaze, which ultimately renders a woman's identity less. These poems are full of voices from different women in time, speaking about their subjugation and the dominant male figure who has controlled their lives for years. The uniqueness of *Herstory* is that it deals with two major time frames – mythology and contemporary time – and both intersect. This paper explores this intersection by studying the portrayal of the subjugation of women in these 39 poems. Through the method of discourse analysis, the paper analyses the intersection of womanhood, the self, and masculine predominance and the relationship between the three elements.

**Keywords:** Womanhood, Subjugation, Mythology, Discourse, Masculine.

## Introduction:

If Jane Austen is obsessed with writings about Victorian women's lives, then Neha Bansal is obedient to follow this legacy- she extensively wrote about women in all their manifestations within the Indian society. No one can conclude

that a woman bureaucrat is writing about the subjugated position of women when she herself holds the power of leadership. But Neha Bansal, amicably, has reduced male-dominated society to nothingness when, in her poems, she questions the societal ethos and how many

women are subjected to violence and discrimination. She clearly states in the book's 'Preface' that "*Herstory* is the story of womankind." Readers will find this statement very true upon their reading of this gender-sensitive anthology of 39 verse-narratives, which, according to Bansal, are 'stories' of womankind. Not only does the poet explore different binaries of discrimination, but she also mocks the symbols of womanhood in her poems, one of which is the "dainty dolls". This essay explores the ways and symbols through which the poet portrays the subjugation of women in Indian history to contemporary times. Is the portrayal a defeat of the masculine control on women's bodies and desires, or is it the women who accept gender norms without any question, which renders them futile? Readers will realise upon their reading of all 39 poems that Bansal's portrayal of women and the discourse she touches upon destroys the notion of 'woman' in itself; that is, what it takes for a woman to be a 'woman' is nothing but a fantasy of false aspirations. The papers use discourse analysis to navigate the poems' critical reception and incorporate essential textual elements vital for this paper, and that is why not all poems were referred to. But the paper confidently proves its arguments and concludes by showing the Indianness of Bansal's poem – it is mythologically vibrant but culturally deficient.

### Mythology and Contemporary Women

The first poem, 'The Fall of Draupadi', delves into a pivotal female figure often referenced in English criticism: Draupadi. It is not the fall of

Draupadi but an irony to depict the fall of men who failed to follow the masculine order. These men are not only the five brothers but also Krishna, a god. In order to show the hypocrisy of men, the poet provides significant emphasis on the untrustworthy nature of men, "who broke the oath to her". So, it is not Draupadi, but these unworthy men who cannot be trusted for their endeavours. The next poem that follows is a reminder of the hollowness of marriage. The poem "Arranged Marriage: The Old-Fashioned Way" mocks marriage and the stereotypes imposed over a "Banarasi-clad" bride. Bansal observes that if marriage happens without the mutual consent of the partners, then the marriage is futile. The unnamed bride is completely silent with no autonomy to speak; "No questions were ever asked about the bride's aspirations." The transfer of the 'bride' from one house to another is termed marriage by this poet. Butler observes in *Gender Trouble*:

"The urgency of feminism to establish a universal status of patriarchy in order to strengthen the appearance of feminism's own claims to be representative has occasionally motivated the shortcut to a categorial or fictive universality of the structure of domination, held to produce women's common subjugated experience." (5)

Bansal also brings the stereotypical rules imposed when a woman is menstruating, which restricts her life, both spatially and socially. The very idea of a menstruating woman is considered disgusting in the Hindu tradition. Matrika J Chawla observes, "Culturally in many

parts of India, menstruation is still considered to be dirty and impure. The origin of this myth dates back to the Vedic times and has often been linked to Indra's slaying of Vritras. For it has been declared in the Veda that guilt, of killing a brahmana (murder), appears every month as menstrual flow, as women had taken upon themselves a part of Indra's guilt." (Chawla 74)

In her poem titled "Menstruation", Bansal brings the dichotomy of purity and disgrace. Upon reaching puberty, the moment a young woman undergoes her first menstruation, "her mother hugged her and thanked Almighty" (6). Yet this minor celebration takes the form of massive discrimination when this menstruating young woman's mother forbade me to enter the household temple, or touch the lime pickle, I so much loved." (7)

Bansal's focus on mythology through the element of subjugation confronts the very idea of man's control over a woman's body and desires. In the poem "Love Song of Hidimbi", Bansal explores the metaphorical transformation of demon-like Hidimbi into a silent, timid wife. For readers who are not aware of the character of Hidimbi, it has to do with the epic *Mahabharata*. Hidimbi, also called Hidimba, appears in the *Mahabharata*, one of ancient India's two major Sanskrit epics. She is a *Rakshasi* (demoness) and the sister of Hidimba, a demon king who ruled over a forest. When her brother orders her to trick the Pandava brothers, Hidimbi instead falls in love with Bhima, the second Pandava. She reveals her brother's plan, resulting in Hidimba's defeat by Bhima. Later, Hidimbi marries Bhima and has a son named

Ghatotkacha, who plays an important role in the Kurukshetra War. Today, Hidimbi is also honoured as a guardian goddess, locally known as Haḍimbā, in the Himalayan region. In Bansal's poem, the "cannibal" Hidimbi turns into a "flickering light" under the "sardonic gleam" of Bheema, which ultimately reduces her to nothingness. When she was a demon, she possessed power and authority that many men feared from her and also imparted her with a will of her own. Such an outcome is not possible when she 'transforms' into the wife of Bheema. Under the patriarchal structure, her position is equivalent to Draupadi's fall. Both women were more powerful before marriage than afterwards. It is the fall of Hidimbi after the marriage that "None could move the steely determination, and minute by minute all hopes die." (13)

In "Ahalya", Bansal shows the masculine power imposed on women. Narrating the story of Ahalya, the wife of sage Gautama, she brings the hollowness of desire and patriarchy. After getting cursed by an angry sage, Ahalya, "covering her nakedness, Ahalya stammered to explain," which reflects her submissive nature. While both Indra and Ahalya receive punishment, it is the man who has direct control over Ahalya's desires – first by Indra and second by the angry sage, her husband. Her transformation into a "still stony" statue is the patriarchal ultimate win over her—she can no longer speak or move and is dehumanised for distorting the feminine social structure, where women are subordinate figures under men.

The next poem based on mythology is even more disturbing than the other poems. Scholars

of Dalit literature must have read about nose mutilation prevalent among the Hindu society, which is very well expressed by Baby Kamble in her autobiography, *The Prisons We Broke*. Nose mutilation is a deliberate action by a male figure to chop off a woman's nose in order to decrease her beauty and make her less of an object of desire and lust. This procedure has been a prevalent way in India, often used by men to control women and their desires, until recently, when it was criminalised. Bansal's "Shurpanakha's Forlorn Song" explores this dimension and renders this as homicide. This element of controlling women's lives is a long-settled strategy to treat them as subordinate figures of social life – their status is even more pathetic than slaves or prostitutes. The poem starts with a tone of loss:

"How I wish I had known  
What stony hearts lay  
In those fair Aryan bosoms." (23)

This poem is written from a woman's perspective and by a woman poet, and hence, it offers the other side of experience rather than deeming Shurpanakha as a demon. She is maltreated and mocked by men who renders her identity less:

"They treated me like a common whore,  
and continued with their contemptuous  
laughter,  
But it was the scornful pride in her eyes,

that totally drove me insane thereafter."  
(25)

Further, after Lakshmana has chopped off her nose, readers get access to her mind and thoughts,

"It hurt me so to be violated like that,  
When not mere body but soul gasped in  
pain,  
Couldn't an evolved man like Rama,  
have counselled me out of my baser  
obsession?" (26)

Her body is violated by godlike men who are the heroes of many Hindus, yet they act more in the manner of demons. It is very rare to find the voice of Shurpanakha in literature, at least not in the mainstream literature. People know her as a demon, which deprives her of identity, as reflected in these lines: "Also deprived of my birth name, Meenakshi, I went down in history as a wanton *Rakshasi*." In her "Preface", Bansal writes,

"I attempted to humanize the much-maligned characters like Shurpanakha of Ramayana, giving her a voice to say her piece, even if the point of view doesn't cut ice with many sensibilities." (xiv)

Contrasting these mythological tales, Bansal also very vividly brings up the notion of a woman's life in contemporary times. In the poem "Mother-in-law", she navigates the journey of a bride to being a mother-in-law. The new bride is auspicious as compared to the

“inauspicious wombs that could squeeze out only girls.” (14) The new bride gradually turns into the mother-in-law who now has to bear her sons’ “flighty girls” wives and the “Alzheimer”. The loneliness of the mother-in-law is full of pain, and her inability to have someone who can understand her plight makes her alone. Bansal probably wanted to show the hollowness of human relationships, especially when it has to do with women, who play numerous roles in a man’s life. The poet also creates a binary between what is a rational woman and what it is to be a woman. Now this argument can be interpreted from the next poem titled “Gendering: Defining Roles in Early Childhood”. Colour, clothes, preferences, and choices are all decided the moment a boy or a girl is born in accordance with the gender, and Bansal critique this very thought in her poem. While the “heavenly blue” is:

“Strictly reserved for baby boys,  
Who are destined to cover the vast,  
Expanses of the limitless skies,  
The way eagles soar high  
unencumbered” (21)

the girl child deserves a:

“Dainty dolls with unattainable,  
Standard of anatomical perfection,  
Pouring in those pink nurseries,  
As each birthday brings heaps of  
presents,

Furthering the stereotype.” (21)

The very idea of gender as performance, as observed by Judith Butler, is complex yet a system of actions that children are taught very early in their lives. Symbols of sex and gender are attached with objects that child ‘should’ desire, irrespective of their choice. If “nerf-guns” is to do with boys, then “timid dolls” is for girls.

In her next two poems, “Postpartum Blues” and “The Unwed Mother”, Bansal points to the fact that motherhood, although a distinct phenomenon, is still very unfriendly and difficult. According to her,

“The grand narrative is that,

The motherhood is entirely glorious,

And the most natural thing in the  
world.” (27)

Much emphasis of the poet is on the postpartum depression and anxiety that follows just after the childbirth. Similarly, in her next poem, the poet questions the conflict between wife and daughter. The female protagonist is told by her mother that:

“that I was but a field,

To be given away to my husband,

Where he shall sow his seeds,

And reap the harvest.” (28)

But rather than listening to her mother, the unnamed protagonist questions the whole idea of male controlling woman’s life, and says:

“If the owner of the seeds would not,  
Accept his harvest, why can't I be,  
Both the field and celebrator of my  
harvest?” (28)

Thus, the autonomy of a woman lives within herself, irrespective of her surroundings. This idea reoccurs in the poem “The Witch Hunt”, where the woman is “paraded naked” because she is considered “dayan” by society. The dehumanization of women and their bodies, as Simone de Beauvoir famously asserts that “humanity is male, and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him” (Beauvoir 26), a formulation that exposes how women are denied full human status and instead constructed as the “Other.”

### Symbols of Contemporary Subjugation

The remarkable feat of Bansal's *Herstory* is the prominent symbolism of women's subjugation that she incorporates into her poems. These 39 poems are rich in symbolism. While there are many symbols used throughout the text, we will discuss contemporary symbols of the subjugation of women. In the poem “A Flower Crushed”, the flower denotes a young woman full of aspirations who is ultimately ‘crushed’ by the men who molest her. Contemporary India has observed numerous instances of rape and crime against women, which render them either physically scarred or ultimately dead. Bansal precariously picks up these themes and incorporates a narrative of womanhood and violence.

In “The Acid Attack”, the ‘fair and lovely’ is used to represent the cosmetics associated with women. Further, the ‘rose-petaled path’ transforms into ‘murderous rage’ when a woman is attacked by acid. This not only dehumanises her but also corrodes her physical and mental space. The illustrations add up to this. In “Honour Killing”, the ‘sun bled at the horror’ of the killing of a woman, who is raped by men. This short poem is full of symbols:

“when he hacked his only daughter,  
Into nineteen pieces, a gift  
For each spring she enjoyed on the  
courtyard swing enrapturing  
The family with her glee and picking up  
Yellow and pink wildflowers to weave.”  
(46)

In “Hiraeth”, the ‘Sil batta’ becomes a symbol to represent woman's dowry. In “Raksha Bandhan”, the sister quest for autonomy and freedom, is not to be considered a form of begging on her part but as a manifestation of her repressed desires:

“I'd want you to be the wind  
Beneath my wings and not the  
Jewel studded golden cage  
That would bind me for life!” (55)

Symbols take the form of complete attention in all the poems of Bansal. Her idea of depicting the various forms of discrimination and violence

that women experience is reflected in both the symbols used and the structure of her poetry. It should be noted by readers that these symbols are prevalent in poems dealing with contemporary themes, times in which we are living now. In her poems based on mythology, these symbols do not take up much space. The idea behind this is probably a deliberate attempt by the poet to show the hollowness of law and society, both of which have failed to provide and create a safe space for women in India. These poems restrict themselves to Indian culture only and fail to integrate the larger South Asian culture, but that does not mean that these poems are a futile effort. The poems are quite successful in raising questions that challenge old hegemonies and reveal new forms of discrimination and subjugation, thereby making women feel like 'others'. *Herstory* is an intersection of powerful words and violent collective male figures, and both are in conflict, trying to overpower each other, only to show the subjugation of women since time immemorial.

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