

BEYOND BOUNDARIES: THE NEW WOMAN'S PASSAGE FROM CONSTRAINT TO LIBERATION IN THE NARRATIVES OF COLLEEN HOOVER AND CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

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Abstract: The concept of the New Woman has evolved as a significant literary and cultural paradigm representing women's resistance to patriarchal oppression and their pursuit of autonomy, identity, and self-realisation. Contemporary women-centred narratives frequently portray female protagonists negotiating complex social, emotional, and cultural constraints while striving for freedom. This paper explores the representation of the New Woman in the selected novels of Colleen Hoover and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Through a comparative and feminist literary analysis, the study examines how the protagonists challenge traditional gender roles, confront oppression, and reconstruct their identities. While Hoover's works focus on personal liberation from emotional and domestic abuse, Divakaruni's narratives foreground cultural negotiation, diasporic identity, and resistance against patriarchal structures. The paper argues that despite differing socio-cultural contexts, both authors depict women who surpass limitations imposed by society. They emerge as empowered individuals capable of shaping their own destinies. Their narratives contribute significantly to contemporary feminist discourse by redefining femininity as agency, resilience, and self-determination.

Index Terms - New Woman, Feminism, Female Agency, Liberation, Identity, Patriarchy, Colleen Hoover, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Empowerment, Contemporary Fiction

I. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the New Woman is one of the most significant breakthroughs in feminist literary discourse. The idea emerged in the late nineteenth century and was popularised by Sarah Grand. It contradicted prevailing notions of femininity that confined women to the domestic sphere, to submission and dependence. The New Woman wants social equality, economic independence, emotional independence, and intellectual independence. The figure continues to be revisited and reinterpreted in contemporary literature, in stories that consider changing gender dynamics and cultural realities.

Contemporary feminist fiction often features women struggling against patriarchal systems and attempting to take ownership of their identities. Contemporary authors, such as Colleen Hoover and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, offer strong depictions of women shattering social, cultural, and personal barriers. Although both authors write different genres, both writers focus on the female point of view and the transformative processes that women go through from imprisonment to freedom.

This essay explores how Hoover and Divakaruni's selected works depict the New Woman and her transcendence of limitations. The study discusses issues of empowerment, agency, resistance and identity development from a feminist perspective.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE NEW WOMAN

The New Woman emerged from patriarchal ideas that confined women to the private and intellectual spheres. Feminist thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, and Judith Butler challenged essentialist views of womanhood and stressed the social construction of gender.

The New Woman was characterised by self-awareness, resistance, and independence. She is not someone who fits into gender stereotypes, but rather actively negotiates her position in society, finding ways to define herself. This idea is elaborated in contemporary feminist literature through an exploration of the intersections of culture, class, ethnicity and individual experience.

COLLEEN HOOVER'S STORIES ABOUT FEMALE AGENCY AND LIBERATION

Colleen Hoover often writes about toxic relationships, emotional pain and female strength. Her protagonists often find themselves in constrictive situations where they are forced to make difficult decisions about their autonomy and self-worth. They go through difficult situations in life, but eventually come out of them stronger.

In *It Ends with Us*, Lily Bloom is a major symbol of the New Woman. She can't differentiate between abuse and love because she was raised in a home where domestic violence occurs frequently. The book looks at the recurring nature of violence and the mental barriers that keep victims in violent relationships. But instead of getting stuck in this cycle, Lily eventually decides to place her daughter's well-being and self-respect above emotional dependence. Her choice is an act of empowerment and repudiation of deep-seated tendencies of victimhood. The story illustrates how liberation often comes at the cost of difficult choices and personal courage.

Hoover's characterisation of Lily subverts the notion that women are to keep their relationships despite personal adversity. Rather, the protagonist, as a figure of the New Woman's commitment to self-determination, emphasises independence and emotional safety. Many researchers say that the book emphasises women's choices as a pathway to empowerment and defines agency as the ability to escape oppressive cycles.

And Hoover's women are also emotionally strong in self-reflection and growth. Their experiences show that liberation means mental freedom from fear, guilt and dependence, as well as physical leaving of oppressive situations.

IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION IN THE WORKS OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels explore the realities of women positioned at complex intersections of culture, migration, tradition and modernity. Her heroes often walk a line between societal expectations and personal ambitions. Women with no strong background or men teaching them the ways of life. Her protagonists weave their own path, learn from their mistakes, and are not scared to make decisions that can change the destiny of their whole family. They are not scared to break the curse of patriarchy.

Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices* represents the tension between duty and self-interest. She slowly seeks a life that recognises her individuality and her needs, but is limited by age-old customs and cultural obligations. Her experience is an example of the New Woman's denial of strict codes that prevent individual pleasure. Scholars have found Divakaruni's women characters asserting their agency and individuality while subverting the traditional and patriarchal restraints.

In a similar vein, the mythological character of Draupadi is re-imagined in *The Palace of Illusions*, from a very female perspective. Divakaruni gives voice and subjectivity to a historically silenced character, rewriting patriarchal myths and foregrounding women's experiences. Draupadi emerges as a complex figure who defies authority, articulates desire and seeks self-definition beyond ascribed roles.

Divakaruni's protagonists are often caught between the spaces of modernity and tradition. Their struggles are symptomatic of larger issues of identity formation within postcolonial and diasporic contexts. These women don't discard their cultural background but rewrite inherited values to create more inclusive and empowering identities.

A COMPARATIVE STUDY: RE-DEFINING THE WOMAN AND CROSSING THE BOUNDARIES

Despite the differences in their cultural backgrounds and storytelling techniques, Hoover and Divakaruni are committed to the depiction of women who resist oppressive structures and seek self-actualisation. Whether it be Lily Bloom or Anju, the protagonists in the novels of both authors take a stand for themselves and the future of their children so that their kids don't have to suffer what they did.

The primary themes of Hoover's stories are relationships and emotional liberation. Her protagonists are hampered by psychological limitations, trauma and domestic abuse. You find freedom in self-awareness and in rejecting toxic relationships.

Unlike Divakaruni's work, which deals with social and cultural systems that impact women's lives. Her heroines face patriarchal expectations, as well as the challenges of migration, tradition and communal identity.

However, both writers present empowerment as a process of transformation rather than a destination. The female characters undergo powerful journeys of self-discovery, slowly building the confidence and independence they need to transform their life. These stories depict the New Woman as a dynamic individual who learns to overcome hardship and assert her independence, but neither idealised nor perfect.

The two writers also question traditional definitions of femininity. They show women as active participants who can make significant choices, not as passive recipients of social norms. Their heroes cross boundaries and re-imagine gender for today's audiences via acts of resistance, self-expression and self-definition.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present research work is qualitative literary research, which helps us to understand and articulate the concept of the New Woman in the selected novels by the authors Colleen Hoover and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The original works of Colleen Hoover and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni will be used to present the study about the status of women in society. For the secondary information, reference books, research papers, newspaper articles, web-based sources, and interviews will be used. Qualitative research methods like critical analysis and interpretation will be used to complete the research work. The proposed study is aimed at describing the changes in the image of the women and how she has changed in during the course of time. Analytical and descriptive methods will be used for the completion of the work. The methodology will involve all the work done by the selected authors as the primary source. A thorough study has been done to form the research paper.

CONCLUSION

In the stories of Colleen Hoover and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the journey of the New Woman from oppression to freedom is powerfully portrayed. The two writers stress the difficulties women face in resisting patriarchal systems and in establishing their identities across a variety of cultural and social contexts. While Divakaruni's characters challenge cultural norms and rebuild identities that blend tradition and autonomy, Hoover's protagonists discover freedom by recognising emotional repression and reclaiming personal agency.

The comparative study indicates that the New Woman remains an important and evolving figure in modern literature. Her story is a microcosm of broader feminist concerns about empowerment, equality and selfhood. Hoover and Divakaruni make a significant contribution to the current feminist debate by depicting women who seize control of their own lives and liberate themselves from the constraints imposed on them. They also encourage readers to reconsider the potential for female agency and emancipation.

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