

GENDER INEQUALITY IN MALLADI'S *THE NEAREST EXIT* MAY BE BEHIND YOU

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality is the lack of equality in the attitudes of people which is established based on the gender of the people. It tends to reflect and mean so much in so many aspects of people's lives. Gender inequality and the resulting discrimination on the basis of sex are widely observed and acknowledged all over the world. Despite government steps to fight gender discrimination, gender inequalities persist within the family and at work place. The patriarchal system and its values are at the root cause of the majority of forms of discrimination against women. In their own families, women are dominated by their male relatives. Women have little decision-making power in the patriarchal dominated societies.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the nature and extent of gender inequality in Asmi's family and in her workplace. The study's main goals are to examine women's power dimensions in the family and workplace, as well as their participation in decision-making process. This empirical study is based on the life of Asmi, an Indo-American woman, who immigrates to the United States to get better job opportunities in America after completing her graduation but she gets American citizenship. The majority of women believe that if more women get more jobs gender inequality will be eradicated. However, this novel reveals that gender inequality exists in the family and in the workplace, even though many women get work in the work places. Factors determining these inequalities include a woman's employment status, her age, her marital status and the number of children she has. Malladi also suggests the ways to achieve gender equality and how the protagonist rises to the position of Vice President of her company despite constant discrimination and harassment against her.

Keywords: androgynous, gender inequality, business workbook, workplace harassment

Men and women are the two essential elements of human society. Even in societies, where all citizens, regardless of their genders have equal rights, women are treated lower compared to men. Inequality is a major problem that requires far more attention from people from all walks of life in each and every country on the planet. Women have been fighting for equality and justice since the nineteenth century, because become victims of patriarchal society. Modern women face domestic violence at home and mental harassment in their work place. Martha says,

Gender inequality is systemic; it is rooted in the unequal norms, structures and process of the workplace-systems created by men for men. Despite the growing presence of women in the workforce, the workplace still reflects the male standards of work ethics, which have been designed by men for themselves. (n.p)

In the past, women were treated as slaves and asked to stay at home to do household duties and give birth to heirs to their men. Women are given equal rights in many Western and the European nations. But in reality women are discriminated on the basis of gender in their working environments because men occupy majority of the posts. Still women are subjected to domestic violence, workplace discrimination and mental harassment, so obtaining justice and equality still appear to be a distant goal for this weak gender. The article deals with the mental and emotional abuse that Asmi, the female protagonist, endures at work place.

Many Asian women are under pressure to marry the grooms belonging to the same sect, caste and religion, selected by their parents. Marriage as an institution functions as a part of the culture in order to carry a family's reputation. However, if any woman chooses her life partner, the society looks down on them, causing their confidence to fall into pieces.

Asmi is a courageous woman and she has a little hope in the midst of the challenges she meets in getting her promotion. She subverts the challenges with her perseverance and determination. Asmi is an unmarried

American woman who has an illicit affair with a married French business man. Asmi is strong, self-assured, self-willed woman in this women-centric novel. Asmi is well educated and financially independent woman. Her decisions are not always the right ones and she let her heart guide her rather than her mind. Her decisions are also seen as resistance against the patriarchal dominance. She chooses to be a mistress to a married man, Etienne instead of getting married to a man of her parent's choice. She travels wherever she wants as a single woman. She devotes herself to her passions, goals, and dreams as a single woman. She never wants to jeopardise her work for the sake of her family and her culture.

Amulya Malladi makes this story as narrated by an expert businesswoman Asmi, and it highlights the development of Asmi from a simple post to the highest position as Vice President of a marketing company, the USA. This novel is considered as the book that encourages, raises, and supports women's attitudes toward obtaining a better position, negotiating a higher salary, and, most importantly, finding and maintaining the confidence within themselves to do their best and greatest.

The novel begins with Asmi preparing for a crucial meeting in her career. Asmi says, "In one's career, there are certain pivotal meetings. Those that define the future, the meeting that you tell others about for the rest of your career. Meetings where you wish had said this instead of that." (Nemby 1) She takes long time to get dressed in the most appropriate attire. Asmi makes the decision not to hide behind a man. She also speaks about the gender expression in the marketing sector. Gender expression refers to how a person expresses themselves to others and how they wish to be perceived by the rest of the world. A person can present as entirely masculine or entirely feminine. Alternatively, a person may present as androgynous or non-binary. Aspects such as mannerisms and clothing styles play a role in gender expression and presentation. Cara, Asmi's friend, disguises her femininity by dressing as a man. In contrast to the views of corporate world which ill-treats women who exhibits femininity in the official settings, Asmi shows her femininity by wearing earrings, nail colour, shoes and top brass in the working place.

Malladi mentions, "Gender inequality still exists ..yes, in your workplace too" (Nemby 12) Asmi enters in to the CEO's office to see if she will be promoted to a multibillion-dollar global corporation's top marketing executive position. The two candidates who are waiting for the promotion are Scott Matthew and Asmi. Asmi is more qualified, intelligent, and trustworthy than Scott. A person's individuality is expressed and rewarded through his/her career. A woman's commitment to her career demonstrates her desire to reach her full potential. Even though Asmi has the ability and potential to achieve her goals, she is unable to do so because she is a woman. The book *Closing The Gender Gap Act Now mentions*,

But irrespective of family commitments, many women find it difficult to climb the career ladder. In fact, inequalities increase the higher up the pay scale they go. The result is that, while in OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries women earn on average 16% less than men, female top-earners are paid 21% less than their male counterparts. The so-called 'glass ceiling' exists: women are disadvantaged when it comes to decision-making responsibilities and senior management positions. (15)

As a director and an expert businesswoman Asmi speaks and discusses about the gender inequality in the job market. Men are given more job opportunities than women even though they have more qualification, expertise and experience than men in their careers. She claims, "Men apply for a job when they meet only 60% of the qualification, but women apply if they meet 100% of them." (Nemby 282)

Malladi includes a special chapter titled 'Excerpt from the Business Workbook' in this novel. In that chapter, she discusses about the few facts that must be accepted in the workplace, particularly in the IT industry. She claims that gender inequality persists in the workplace. Second, she claims that it is more difficult for woman to get her promotion in that workplace than it is for man. Third, she claims that it is more difficult for women to be role models and there are only few women in senior leadership positions.

A woman faces different forms of workplace harassment, and all too often. She is hesitant to report sexual harassment for fear of losing her job. Even when she expresses her plight, she is usually ignored and blamed. When Asmi eats something in her dinner, she spills something on her white blouse. A male colleague takes a picture specifically of her breast with his cell phone, with stain. Asmi becomes angry and tells him to delete the picture but he does not do it. After sometimes, he sends that picture to Asmi with a satirical note of 'we miss you'. Asmi complains it to HR in her company. "They concluded that it was an isolated incident and the colleague was sorry about it. They suggested that Asmi should move on. Asmi did. She found another job in

another company.”(Nemby 55) She considers it as an insult to continue work there after she is insulted and the company does not take any action against the offender. So Asmi joins another company. Asmi establishes herself as a successful marketer despite her gender. Her male colleague feels threatened by the arrival of a successful woman, Asmi. So he harasses her in order to pull her down and increase his sense of power. As a result, Asmi becomes dissatisfied, becomes ill, and quits her job. This gives him the satisfaction of crushing a woman. Simone Beauvoir a French writer and feminist theorist asserts, “The conservative bourgeoisie continues to view women’s liberation as a danger threatening their morality and their interests. Some men feel threatened by women’s competition.” (Second Sex 33)

In this novel *Nearest Exit May Be Behind You*, Malladi discusses the traditional role of women in daily life, such as caring for their husbands, children, and career. Meharotrasays, “A woman’s place was the home and her primary responsibility was to bear sons and ensure the continuity of the family lineage.” (24) Women have responsibilities as a home maker, a child bearer and a cookeven though they work in the office but men, on the other hand, have no such responsibilities. Men can advance in their careers by focussing solely on them and avoiding distractions. Asmi considers herself a failure. She has a job but no husband or children to look after her. Women are frequently forced to choose between their family lives and their professional lives. Women, on the whole prefer their family life. Cecil, Asmi’s friend is in her early thirties and is recently married. She intends to resign from her job if she becomes pregnant. Asmi believes, “Men never did. A man never thought I’m going to have a baby, I wonder have this going to impact my career. No, he thought, that’s the wife’s problem and what’s worse is that the wife also thought it was her problem.” (Nemby 34)

A successful man has a successful family life with a good wife and children. However, most of the time, women must forego their careers in order to carry and feed their children. Only a woman who has a supportive husband can be successful in both personal and professional lives. In the chapter titled 'Career Vs Family...Who's Winning?', the novelist discusses about the life of Angela, a high performer with high potential working as a staff in GTech company. Asmi enjoys aiding Angela in moving up in her career. As Angela is pregnant, she applies for maternity leave and promises to return to work. But she never returns. To look after her new born baby, she gives up the job. It is clear that the loser is the woman not the man. The novelist claims, “However, so many women out there feel they don’t have options and don’t come back to work.” (114 *Nemby*) Asmi speaks about Martha, Asmi’s colleague. Martha works as a sales representative and is given the opportunity to interview for the position of the sales manager. But she fails to do so because she claims that she is unable to travel to the extended period of time that the job requires. According to Asmi, “Her opening with the disclaimer, tells the hiring manager, she doesn’t really care about the job, all she cares about is flexibility and it reinforces the stereotype that mothers try to work less.”(115 *Nemby*) If there is a conflict between personal and professional life, women are compelled to do their homework, so they usually give up their jobs even though they like to continue their careers. So they sacrifice their careers for the betterment of their families. But men never give up their jobs for the sake of their families particularly for bringing up their children.

Women today are victimised in the name of modernisation. She loses her identity and honour even though she is educated and has capacity to work in this globalised world. Even though the constitutions of European, American nations and India give equality to women they face discrimination in their workplaces. Even the intelligent category of women is treated inferior. This inequality is seen among the intelligent category of women, who have tried to they raise their voices in rebellion against the society. Though it appears that women are gaining equality, she gradually loses her equality by becoming weak and vulnerable. Society accepts male’s assertive nature, but does not accept woman like if she shows her confidence in her career.

Asmi gains access to the male dominated world and qualifies herself as an equal to man in order to become a complete individual woman. She is filled with self-doubt that her autonomous activity is in contradictory with her feminine characteristics after acquiring the individuality of a male. Novelist says “The woman who doesn’t speak up at meeting because her voice catches in her throat.” (14) Speaking up is seen as a masculine trait, while listening up is seen as a feminine one. As an independent and highly intelligent woman, Asmi has conflicts within herself because she considers herself as an equivalent to man but her feminine characteristics insist her that she is a woman. According to Simone Beauvoir,

To be a complete individual, equal to man, woman has to have access to the male world as man does to the female one, access to the other; but the demands of the other are not symmetrical in the two cases. Once

acquired, the seemingly immanent virtues of fame and fortune can enhance the woman's sexual attraction; but being an autonomous activity contradicts her femininity: she knows this. (818)

The novelist discusses how men and women are treated differently in their work environments. She goes on to talk about the disparities in job opportunities and how to solve the problem of finding a job. When her friends say about the firing of Scott, Asmi does not believe it. Finally, she is promoted from the post of the director to the covetable position of Vice President of the GTech company. Despite the fact that she faces numerous obstacles in her job, she reaches her objective of achieving equality to some extent and that provides her freedom and independence. Simone de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex*, "It is through work that woman has been able, to a large extent, to close the gap separating her from the male; work alone can guarantee her concrete freedom." (813)

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