

The Status of Women in Terms of Their Reproductive Capabilities: A Study of the Novel “The Collector’s Wife” by Mitra Phukan and “Rebirth” by Jahnvi Barua

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the crucial role of women in the progress and development of a country and the challenges they face due to historical discrimination and unequal opportunities. The paper focuses on fertility behavior, which is influenced by various socio-economic and cultural factors, including women's status, economic dependency, and autonomy. Infertility is a serious issue that affects the lives of couples, especially women, who are at a higher risk of experiencing social stigma, emotional stress, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. The patriarchal society's bias towards men further complicates the status of infertile women, who are often subjected to ridicule, shame, and even domestic violence. This paper aims to analyze the novels "Rebirth" and "The Collector's Wife," which provide insight into the challenges faced by women in societies that prioritize motherhood and the pressure to produce offspring. The analysis of these stories can shed light on the cultural and societal norms that perpetuate the discrimination of women, especially those who struggle with infertility.

Keywords: women’s status, infertility issues, social factors, cultural elements, motherhood

Introduction:

The overall progress and development of a country is largely dependent on utilizing the skills and abilities of all members of society. Unfortunately, women have historically faced discrimination and have been denied equal opportunities in various social, economic, and cultural spheres. This lack of involvement of women in development activities not only hinders their own growth but also impacts the progress of the entire nation. Different socio-economic and religious groups have varying attitudes towards family size and desires for children, making it important to understand the factors that influence fertility behavior. Women's status, including their economic dependency and autonomy, is likely linked to their ability to have children. Infertility has significant negative effects on the lives of couples who experience it, particularly women who are at a greater risk of experiencing violence, divorce, social stigma, emotional stress, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. This condition not only affects a woman's physical health, but also influences her psychological well-being, leading to sadness, anger, depression, anxiety, loss of social status, lack of self-esteem, and poor quality of life. Infertility is not just a medical issue but a social one as well, particularly for women. Women are often blamed for the

inability to have children, while men are encouraged to marry other women in the hope of producing a child and continuing their lineage.

It is commonly believed that every woman has a natural desire to give birth to a child, and when this wish is not fulfilled, it can lead to a range of psychological problems such as anger, betrayal, guilt, sadness, jealousy, self-esteem issues, anxiety, depression, and poor quality of life. Society typically expects couples to have a child shortly after getting married, but it is often overlooked that some couples may choose not to have children, not because of a disability but simply by choice. According to recent estimates, around 15% of Indian couples suffer from infertility, and among them, women are often blamed for the issue. The status of infertile women in India is complicated due to several factors, including cultural norms, lack of awareness, and social and economic barriers. In India, women are expected to bear children and are often viewed as incomplete without them. The inability to conceive a child can lead to social ostracism and abandonment by their family and community. This stigma is particularly pronounced in rural areas, where social norms are more rigid. Additionally, the status of infertile women in India is further complicated by the patriarchal society's bias towards men. In most cases, women are blamed for infertility, even if the problem lies with the man. Men are not held responsible for their role in infertility, and women are often subjected to ridicule, shame, and even domestic violence.

Moreover, involving women in development activities is crucial for the overall progress and development of a country. Fertility behavior is influenced by a range of factors, including women's status, economic dependency, and autonomy. Infertility has serious negative effects on the lives of infertile couples, especially women, who are at a higher risk of experiencing violence, divorce, social stigma, emotional stress, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Infertility is a social position for women, who are often blamed for their inability to have children while men are encouraged to find other partners to produce offspring. Understanding these social and cultural factors is essential to promoting gender equality and empowering women to achieve their full potential.

To further explore the correlation between women's status and their ability to have children, this paper will analyze the novels "Rebirth" and "The Collector's Wife." By delving into the lives of the female characters in these stories, we can gain insight into the challenges faced by women in societies that prioritize motherhood and the pressure to produce offspring. The analysis of these stories can shed light on the cultural and societal norms that perpetuate the discrimination of women, especially those who struggle with infertility.

The novel "The Collector's Wife" is a poignant tale of a woman's struggle to come to terms with infertility and societal pressures. Written by Mitra Phukan, the novel delves into the emotional turmoil that the protagonist, Rukmini faces as she grapples with her inability to conceive a child.

The story is set in Assam, India, in the 1970s, a time when society placed a great deal of importance on a woman's ability to bear children. Rukmini, the wife of a wealthy collector, is considered an ideal wife by her husband and his family, but her inability to bear a child is seen as a major flaw by society. Mrs Rukmini Bezboruah is a member of the upper class in the provincial town of Parbarpuri, and is married to the District Collector. She lives in a large house on a hill, works as a part-time college lecturer, and has caring in-laws. Despite her seemingly privileged life, she feels incomplete and unhappy.

The story takes place in Assam during a time of insurgency and protests. Rukmini witnesses the abduction and killings by extremists, while her husband Siddharth is busy with his administrative work and rarely at home. Rukmini longs to have a child, but her sexual relationship with her husband lacks passion.

The novel also explores the complex relationship between Rukmini and her husband, Siddharth. Despite their deep love for each other, their inability to conceive a child creates a rift between them. Rukmini got married to Siddharth ten years back and she couldn't bore him a child. In all, she is facing an emotional deprivation. Rukmini feels that her life is dull and uneventful. Her husband is distant and unable to spend much time with her due to his demanding job, and their marriage has become boring over the years. She is yet to have a child, and sometimes faces criticism for this, despite her privileged position in society. Rukmini's personal ambitions of pursuing writing or a regular job have been hindered by societal expectations of her as the District Collector's wife. As a result, the only job she can find that is suitable or tolerable is a part-time lecturing position at the local college. Meanwhile, Rukhmini was also facing a difficult decision about whether to undergo GIFT (Gamete Intrafallopian Transfer) due to her age of 35 and the decreased fertility rates associated with it. She found comfort in her friendship with Manoj, who was introduced to her through a colleague's brother. Manoj was previously married but had gotten a divorce through mutual agreement. Her life takes a turn when she meets Manoj Mahanta, and they become close friends, leading to a moment of physical intimacy that brings joy and color back into her life after nearly a decade of dissatisfaction. However, Rukmini becomes pregnant with Manoj's baby, but she keeps this a secret from Siddharth and let him believe that the child is his own. However, as both Siddharth and Manoj become embroiled in the violence of the terrorists, Rukmini's newfound happiness is quickly overshadowed by the horrors she witnessed.

The societal pressure placed on women to bear children is a common theme in many cultures around the world, and Rukmini's situation in the novel is a prime example of this. Despite her many achievements, she is judged and criticized for her inability to conceive, even though it may not have been her fault.

It is important to note that Rukmini was not at fault for her infertility. In fact, it is likely that her husband was the one with fertility issues. However, society often places the blame on women when it comes to issues of fertility, and this is highlighted in the novel. Rukmini is constantly made to feel inadequate and incomplete because she is unable to bear a child, despite her many other accomplishments.

On the other hand, Siddharth does not face any scrutiny or judgment for his infertility. He is not burdened with the societal expectations of being a parent and is not made to feel like less of a person because of his inability to conceive. This is a stark contrast to the treatment that Rukmini receives and highlights the inherent gender bias in society.

It is unfortunate that women are often solely responsible for their ability to bear children, despite it taking two healthy individuals to conceive a child. The pressure placed on women to have children can be overwhelming and often leads to feelings of inadequacy and guilt. It is important to recognize that fertility issues can arise from both partners and that both should be held accountable for the situation.

Through Rukmini's story, the novel highlights the societal pressures and stigma faced by infertile women in India. It sheds light on the emotional trauma that they go through and the impact that it has on

their mental health and well-being. The novel also emphasizes the importance of empathy and support in dealing with infertility, and the need for a shift in societal attitudes towards infertility and childlessness. Overall, "The Collector's Wife" is a beautifully written novel that captures the emotional depth and complexity of infertility. It is a poignant and thought-provoking tale that highlights the importance of empathy, understanding, and support in dealing with infertility. It is a must-read for anyone who wants to gain a deeper understanding of the emotional toll of infertility and the societal pressures faced by women who are unable to conceive.

On the other hand, Jahnvi Barua's "Rebirth" is a poignant novel that deals with the emotional journey of a woman struggling with infertility. The protagonist, Kaberi, is a successful journalist in her thirties who is married to Ron, a loving and caring husband. Despite their happy married life, they are unable to conceive a child, and this leads to a feeling of despair and hopelessness.

The novel explores the complex emotions that Kaberi goes through as she grapples with the reality of her infertility. She is haunted by the idea that her inability to have a child has robbed her of her womanhood and her identity as a wife. The pressure from society to have a child exacerbates her feelings of guilt and inadequacy, and she begins to feel like a failure. She finds herself isolated and lonely as she struggles to come to terms with her situation.

Barua's writing is sensitive and nuanced, and she captures the depth of Kaberi's emotions with great skill. She depicts the protagonist's inner turmoil with empathy and understanding, and the reader is drawn into Kaberi's world of pain and suffering. The novel also sheds light on the social stigma attached to infertility and how it affects women. Society often places the blame for infertility on the woman, and this leads to a lot of emotional distress for her. The novel explores how Kaberi's infertility affects her relationships with her husband, family, friends, and colleagues.

Kaberi's inability to conceive puts a strain on her relationship with her husband, Ron. As a result, Ron gets involved with another woman, which further complicates their relationship. However, when Kaberi is finally able to conceive, she keeps it a secret from Ron.

Kaberi's desire to keep her pregnancy a secret from Ron reflects the complexity of her feelings towards him. While she hopes that Ron will come back to her and leave the other woman, she doesn't want it to happen solely because she is pregnant. Instead, she wants Ron to return to her because he loves her and wants to be with her.

Kaberi's decision to keep her pregnancy a secret also highlights the fear and uncertainty that she feels about the future of her relationship with Ron. She is unsure whether Ron will choose to stay with her or leave her for the other woman, and she doesn't want to rely on her pregnancy as a way to keep him with her.

Ultimately, Kaberi's desire for Ron to come back to her because he loves her for who she is, rather than just because she is pregnant, highlights the importance of genuine emotional connections in a relationship. The fact that she is willing to risk losing Ron in order to have him return to her for the right reasons speaks to her strength and independence as a woman.

Through Kaberi's story, Barua also addresses the issue of motherhood as a societal expectation. Women are often judged and evaluated based on their ability to bear children, and this puts immense pressure on

them. The novel challenges this notion and asserts that a woman's worth is not defined by her ability to conceive.

The novel also explores the theme of rebirth and renewal. Kaberi's journey of self-discovery and healing is depicted as a metaphorical rebirth. In "Rebirth," Barua skillfully weaves together the themes of motherhood, infertility, societal expectations, and rebirth. The novel is a powerful exploration of the human condition and the resilience of the human spirit. It is a story of hope, healing, and transformation.

In summary, "Rebirth" by Jahnvi Barua is a thought-provoking and emotionally charged novel that delves deep into the issues of infertility and societal expectations. Through the protagonist's journey of self-discovery, the novel offers a message of hope and renewal. Barua's writing is evocative and poignant, and she captures the complexity of human emotions with great skill. "Rebirth" is a must-read for anyone who is interested in exploring the human condition and the complexities of the human psyche.

Conclusion:

After taking into account all the different aspects related to social and cultural factors, it can be said that the status of women capable of reproduction is not the same for all. In India, the situation is particularly complex for women who are unable to conceive due to various social, cultural, and economic reasons. Such women face a great deal of stigma and societal pressure, which often takes a toll on their emotional well-being and leads to conditions like stress, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. To tackle this issue, there is a dire need for increased awareness, better access to healthcare facilities, and infertility treatments that are affordable and within reach of all women. More importantly, there should be a shift in the cultural mindset towards infertility, where women should not be held responsible or outcast for a medical condition that is beyond their control.

To conclude, it is essential to acknowledge the varied and intricate factors that influence the status of fertile women in society. The situation of infertile women in India is particularly sensitive and demands immediate action in terms of social awareness, healthcare infrastructure, and affordable treatments. There is a pressing need to change the cultural perception towards infertility, so that women can have a fair and dignified position in society regardless of their reproductive capabilities.

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