

# SEARCH FOR IDENTITY AND CULTURAL CONFINES: A FEMINISTIC STUDY OF MEGNA PANT'S ONE AND A HALF WIFE.

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## **Abstract**

**Meghna pant is an Indian contemporary writer, speaker and journalist who has written actively on various issues related to gender inequalities including domestic violence, body-shaming, surrogacy and rape etc. Pant's works include novels, short stories and non-fiction writings. She has also shared her views about the evils of domestic violence on TEDx talks. This research paper is focused on the analysis of Pant's debut fictional novel One and a Half Wife and the issues and dilemmas endured by divorced women in India as depicted in the novel. Expression of identity is an important theme of the novel that has been analyzed in the paper through various details illustrated in the novel. Theory of Feminism is an integral part of the discussion about gender equalities with respect to social, cultural and economic aspects of the society. It aims to provide equal rights and recognition to women in the society. In our patriarchal communities, male gender unequivocally occupy a superior position in comparison to female gender. This paper also aims to show how the identities of women remain veiled in the shadow of their male counterparts.**

**Keyword: Feminism, Gender inequalities, Indian, Contemporary, Identities, Meghna Pant, One and a Half Wife**

## **1.INTRODUCTION**

Meghna Pant is an Indian contemporary author, feminist, journalist and speaker. According to her feminist ideas should flourish in Indian societies until true gender equality is accepted 'by all' and 'for all'. In an Interview, she states that "Feminism is not an

ideology but a process. It is about creating an equal society not just for women, but also for men. It is about believing that women are equal to men – equal in access, opportunity, and respect. Feminism is saying that women should be paid the same as men, and that men shouldn't have to pick up each restaurant bill." (outlookindia.com)

*One and a Half Wife* deals with the story of Amara Malhotra – single girl child of her parents – and her family's migration to America in search to fulfill their illusory American dream. Amara is an obedient Indian girl who is groomed by her mother right from her birth to acquire the most important goals of a girl's life – an American education and a prince-like husband to support. Amara is brought up in an orthodox family and she is trained to follow all decisions taken by her mother regarding her life or her marriage. The book beautifully captures the contemporary aspirations of Indian parents for their children as well the stigmas conjoined with the concept of 'being divorced'. By definition, Divorce refers to the termination of any marriage when a couple decides to live separately and sign the legal papers by mutual consent. In other words, divorce is the ending of the marriage and this ending of intimate relationship leaves the concerned people broken, sad, depressed and emotionally vulnerable. A divorce is a sign that the relationship between the couple was not happy or satisfactory and it leads to melancholic feelings of guilt of not being able to sustain the bond. But besides this individual sadness and frustration, divorce becomes the cause for social humiliations and dishonor for the involved persons. Although divorce leaves equal disheartening impact on a man's heart and mind, women are subjected to endure severer consequences and criticism than men on social and cultural level. Women are considered as the linking unit of the family

and therefore, the blame of a broken home falls on the woman's share.

In *One and a Half Wife*, Meghna Pant remarkably attempts to display the effect of divorce on a woman's life and honor. Amara – who was raised with the teachings that marriage is an invincible institution and a woman's life should be dedicated to her husband's desires – finds herself divorced, the most appalling and bewildering situation for her. How she survives the circumstances and manages to keep her identity intact are the main events around which the web of the story has been weaved by the author.

Feminist writings aim to establish equal grounds for women's position and recognition in societies. Although influences of women's empowerment in contemporary times have resulted in improving the women's positions and appreciations but still there are various stereotypes that are bound around the life of female identity. Women are acquiring more appreciation on professional fronts but burden of domestic chores, cooking meals and rearing children are still considered their unannounced responsibilities. In most of the cases, if a woman wants to pursue her career, she must possess the capacity to balance her whole household responsibility as well as professional work. In any case, men are considered as the primary provider for the family and women are supposed to prioritize their homes' responsibilities. In Indian societies, Divorce is considered a taboo and divorced people are subjected to face social and cultural stigmas attached to the notion of 'being divorced'. Divorce leaves a deep saddening impact on the psychology of the concerned people. When the marriage of a person breaks, it becomes very difficult for him/her to overcome the depressing contemplations and devastation of the relationship. Although it is a decision taken by partners' individual consents, still termination of a marriage leaves people broken and vulnerable – socially, culturally, personally, economically as well as psychologically.

In Indian male-dominated communities, women have to endure several challenges after the legal termination of a marriage. More often, women are held responsible for not being able to sustain the relationship. On the legal front, there are various laws that are available to assist the situations faced by divorced women. They have rights to demand alimony (one-third of their ex-husbands' property) for financial stability but on social level, they become targets of humiliating behaviors,

dishonor, mockery and social exclusion etc. According to a recent survey, India has the lowest divorce rate among all countries of the world. But unfortunately it does not imply that India is the dwelling of happy marriages. "A low rate of official divorces also implies that the people involved have little or no access to legal apparatus that help end a bad marriage. Poor literacy and financially dependent women get the raw deal there from the get-go." In Indian societies, one of the major reasons for the lack of 'formal divorces' is the ideology that marriage signifies bond between two families and not between two individuals. Hence the problems like 'What will people think?' and each member's own interpretation about the 'ruining of the life' become major barriers even if the marriage is miserable for both partners. Another major issue is the social stigma attached to the impression of divorce.

*One and a Half Wife* is the debut novel of contemporary writer Meghna Pant, published in the year 2012. This exceptional novel foregrounds the life of a traditional girl – Amara Malhotra – who considers the institution of marriage as the basis of her identity. She was taught from early childhood that a girl's life should be dedicated to her family and her husband. Such life is honorable and worth-living. But when the turn of events render her into a 'divorcee', she has to face challenges regarding her family, her identity and her honor. Her own mother perceives her as a failure and a dishonor for their family and tries to hide her daughter's divorced status in order to avoid the disgraceful situation. But eventually Amara survives the circumstances, gets a job, refuses any financial support from her ex-husband, helps a young and abused pregnant girl to get divorce and manages to find another companion for herself. Pant is an ardent advocate of women's rights and liberty and this mission of the author reflects evidently in the book.

## 2.ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Meghna Pant is the Indian Contemporary writer whose works echoes the gender issues, identity inequalities and feministic concerns. She was born in Shimla but spent most of her childhood in Delhi and Mumbai. She has completed an undergraduate degree in Economics and Statistics from St. Xavier College, Mumbai. She won a scholarship for a MBA in Finance at Nanyang Business School, Singapore. She completed her Masters in

International Management from the University of St. Gallen Switzerland. She is a renowned speaker and journalist. After the completion of her MBA, Meghna opted to become a business journalist. She has shared his ideas in various discourse standings including famous TEDx show, Pune International Literary Festival, Kala Ghoda Literary festival, Jaipur Literature Festival and Young Maker's Conclave, #RiseWithTwitter, Lucknow Literature Carnival, Litomania, Think Literature, Chandigarh Literati TISS Literature festival, LitOfest, Women Writers fest etc. Pant talks liberally on social issues such as rape, domestic violence, body-shaming, miscarriage and surrogacy etc. Pant has worked as business news anchor with various renowned channels including NDTV, Bloomberg-UTV and Times Now. Till now in her career, she has got the chance to meet and interview President Obama, Mukesh Ambani, Sir Richard Branson, Hillary Clinton, Ratan Tata and Shah Rukh Khan, among others. Pant is the sister of famous comedian and artist Sorabh Pant. She currently lives with her husband in Mumbai and blessed with a daughter. Her articles have appeared in various publications such as The Hindustan Times and The Huffington Post. Pant understands the hidden predicaments faced by women in patriarchal societies and tries to foreground the essential and rarely-shown aspects of a woman's existence. She expressed her views on the social judgments faced by the actress Rati Agnihotri while she revealed about her abusive marriage. (Pant, shethepeople.tv).

Meghna herself had been a victim of domestic violence for a long time before she decided to speak up against her offender. It is partially the reason behind her passion to speak against domestic violence as she had gone through the terrible experience of being a prey to it. Domestic violence is a serious and inhumane social threat but in most of the cases, women remain unable to gather courage to speak about such practices due to fear of facing social judgments and dishonor. Meghna rises as an inspiration for such people and gives them hope to liberate from their despairing situations. Through her TEDx talk, Meghna shared her message 'Stop the Violence, Stop the Silence' to the general public in order to spread awareness against domestic violence.

Pant's works include short-stories, novels and non-fiction writings. She is also credited for abridging the world's longest epic, *The Mahabharata* in one hundred

tweets. *One and a Half Wife* is her debut novel. The story revolves around the issues and dilemmas endured by divorced women in Indian communities. This novel won the National Muse India Young Writer Award in 2013 and was shortlisted for several other awards. This novel has been discussed in detail in the next section of this research paper.

Pant's debut short story collection is *Happy Birthday!* which was published in the year 2013. The title of the book is drawn from one of stories with the same title. This story deals with the life of a wealthy but unhappy woman who lavishly celebrates her birthday with her husband but some unlikely events change the course of her life. Other stories of the collection are also narrated remarkably well and leave a deep impact on the readers' mind. Stories of the collection possess the quality of introspection and poignancy. Another contemporary writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni suggests that "These are stories with a large heart and a keen eye, deeply aware of the complex, sometimes uncomfortable realities of India, its many layers. Meghna Pant knows how to create characters that will surprise and move you." (goodreads.com)

*The Trouble with Women* is the second short story collection by Meghna Pant, published in the year 2016. This collection presents the haunting and moving stories about the dilemmas faced by Indian women. Major themes of the stories include abortion, sexual harassment, domestic violence and molestation etc.

First non-fiction book by Pant is *Feminist Rani* that was published in 2018. This book presents the compelling interviews of various famous personalities who talk about the problems and biases faced by women in contemporary societies. The book is co-authored by Shaili Chopra and Meghna Pant. Conversations with Kalki Koechlin, Sapna Bhavnani, Deepa Malik, Aditi Mittal, Gurmehar Kaur, Tanmay Bhatt, Malishka Mendonsa, Gul Panag, Ankhi Das, Aarefa Johari, Rana Ayyub, Rohini Shirke, Shree Gauri Sawant and Sorabh Pant are presented in the book. These conversations reveals the perspectives of these personalities on pressing social issues like oppressions of identities, concept of feminism, body-shaming, female-genital mutilation in Shia sect of Muslims, women entrepreneurship and marital-rape among others.

Pant published her another non-fiction book *How to get published in India* in 2019. The book provides beneficial information for aspiring contemporary authors about

composing the manuscript of the book, editing and formatting of the content and final publishing process with best marketing tools and strategies. Contemporary best-seller author Amish Tripathi states that, "I wish I had this book when I started my career as an author." The book is categorized broadly in four chapters. First chapter deals with writing, editing and formatting of the contents and it also offers few tips for being a good writer. Second chapter is dedicated to the issues and process regarding the publication of any book in India. Third chapter provides information about marketing strategies and the fourth chapter includes the compilation of useful guidelines offered by masters of the writing trade. This chapter includes tips by Jeffrey Archer, Twinkle Khanna, Preeti Shenoy, Vikas Swaroop, Shobha De, Durjoy Dutta and Namita Gohkle among others.

Besides winning the National Muse India Young Writer Award in 2013 for *One and a Half Wife*, Meghna Pant has received several other accolades and recognitions including FON (Fellows of Nature) South Asia Short Story Award (2016), Bharat Nirman Award (2017), Laadli Media Award (2018), The Lifestyle Journalist Women Achiever's Award (2019) and FICII Young Achiever Award (2019). Besides she has been shortlisted for Word Hustler's Literary Novel Contest (2012), The Cinnamon Press Novel Writing Award (2012), Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award (2012), Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award (2014) and Commonwealth Short Story Prize (2018). She was recognized as Radio One Youth Star in 2015 and Sheroes Mentor in 2016. Furthermore, she was included as judge for Six Degrees Game of Blogs in 2015 and Laadli Media Awards in 2016.

### 3. ANALYSIS OF ONE AND A HALF WIFE

*One and a Half Wife* is the coming-of-age story of Amara Malhotra – a naïve and obedient Indian girl – whose life is dictated by her mother's notions and moral tenets. She is the single child of her parents and the story starts when she is 14-years old. From her early childhood, Amara knew nothing but to conciliate her mother, "it is Biji's desire contoured Amara's identity." Her own identity was shadowed by the desires that she needed to fulfill before herself – 'God's desire', 'Biji's (her mother) desire' and 'His desire'. "His" was her future husband whose presence in her life since early

childhood never made her feel that she was the only child. An illusory "He" was present in every conversation, her toys, her dressing-style and her etiquettes. She was supposed to become an epitome of 'ideal woman and wife' for her unknown husband.

**The spectre of another human being was so strong that Amara felt like she had an invisible twin, whose identity had been meshed into hers. She accepted that she was to have no 'I' in her life; before meeting Him she would be known as 'We', the Malhotra family and after meeting Him she would be known as 'Us', the married couple. (*One and a Half Wife*, 9)**

Amara was instilled with the notions that for a girl, institution of marriage was eternal, it was irreversible like aging and everlasting as death. It was imperishable. So when she heard of the "Failed marriage" of her neighbour's daughter Shikha Arora, it was incomprehensible for her to understand the meaning of divorce. After her divorce, Shikha's parents allowed her daughter to live with them; but they had to suffer social exclusion and mocking glares of the people of the society. They were avoided by everyone and nobody invited them to parties or weddings. People stopped to buy groceries from their small storefront and they their presence was not acknowledged during evening walks. Amara was prohibited to buy anything from Aroras as her mother was sure that "Shikha's jinn" would affect her daughter. But Amara felt sorry for her Shikha didi and sometimes she used to leave flowers outside Didi's house to make her feel better. Shikha was divorced within two years of her marriage and now she lived with her parents but her status of being a divorcee had reduced her honor in the society. Here, pant displays a pathetic picture of the consequences that a divorced woman has to face in the societies. Shikha was an intelligent and pretty woman. She won a scholarship to a medical school and was trained to become a doctor but all her talent was blemished by the label of "divorcee". She was humiliated and dishonored for no mistake of her own.

After Amara's birth, her mother got a generous suggestion from her American brother who offered to apply green cards for their family. Biji (Amara's mother) was elated by this offer as she saw it as the incarnation of achieving her inaccessible American dream. In America, Amara was exposed to a whole different world. Her Indian traditional upbringing and her mother's

constraints made it impossible for her to embrace American Culture. During her initial years in America, she tried to change her identity by imitating her sophisticated cousin Riya. She tried to wear short dresses and apply modish make-up but all her efforts ended up in futile imprudence and humiliation. Eventually, she accepted herself and focused her attention on her study and career.

Amara's life took a turn when a wealthy and sophisticated Indian woman noticed her in Riya's Birthday Party and decided to marry his son with Amara. Biji was delighted with this match and Amara found herself married to a Harvard-educated, single child of super-rich parents, Prashant Roy. But this marriage proved to be miserable for Amara as Prashant had no interest in her. He had married Amara out of his filial obligations for his mother. "He had married her out of duty to his mother. A familial duty executed out of love could not translate into marital happiness". (*One and a Half Wife*, 132). Amara was unable to comprehend Prashant's coldness towards her. She made every effort to modify herself according to his likings. She changed her whole identity for his sake but Prashant remained indifferent to her. After the death of his mother, Prashant decided to divorce Amara saying that he could never love her as her wife. Amara begged him to stay and save their marriage. The thought of being a divorcee broke her more than any pain or humiliation that she had faced in their relationship. She was more afraid to face her parents and society than to think about her own predicaments and pain.

**Talking about marriage in bad terms was considered sacrilege in the Indian community. Everyone around her was married, and claimed to be happy so, despite public fights and snide rumors. She often wondered if there was anyone else who had daily failures in marriage, like she did." (*One and a Half Wife*, 139).**

When Amara went back to her home – broken and divorced – she was very sad to find that even her parents blamed her for her circumstances. They did not try to understand her perspective. They did not even ask her about the pains and sufferings that she was going through. They kept asking her the reason behind her divorce. But Amara had no answer to their questions. Prashant never hit her, neither was he unfaithful. He was not alcoholic, or unemployed, or bad-tempered. Even

his mother was very good to Amara. "Prashant and Amara's marriage hadn't died dramatically. There were no adulterous dalliances or freakish discoveries. Their marriage had died of errors and neglect. It had died under a long protracted illness for which there was a diagnosis but no remedy. The disease had no name. So how could she explain it to Baba and Biji." (*One and a Half Wife*, 158). According to Amara's parent, it was her fault that she did not make any effort to save her marriage. To save themselves from further humiliation and disgrace, they decided to return India. They were reluctant to bring Amara with them but she insisted. On the warning that she will not utter anything about her "situation" in India, Amara and her parents journeyed back to India after their stay in America for 16 years.

On coming back, Malhotra family was astonished to see the changed India, so much different than they had known and anticipated. Streets had been transformed into roads. Several new apartments and buildings had been constructed in the area around which they had lived. Transformation was not limited to architectural intentions. Mindset and thinking of the societies had also become modern and more liberal. Biji was surprised to find that Shikha – whom she had despised in the past – also lived in the same building with her second husband and two children. Their building also gave shelter to a live-in couple who lived there together without marriage but nobody objected their stay. Baba got a job in India that paid him double than he earned in America. Biji got the lifestyle that she had hoped to fulfill in the form of her American dream.

In the beginning of their return, Amara blamed herself for her parent's sufferings. She let them confined her in her room but slowly she realized that she was being punished for no mistake of her own. With the help of Shikha didi, she overcame her sadness and guilt. Shikha introduced her to a group dedicated to help people who were divorced or facing any problem in their marriage. Amara met Lalit in the group meetings and was impressed by his frank, helpful and kind behavior. Since Amara had decided not to demand any alimony from Prashant, She started her own business with the help of her American friend, Stacy for financial stability as well as for personal satisfaction and independence. The only difficulty she had to face were the troubles created by a local gang, 'Pranna', which aimed to protect "Indian Culture" by bullying people who – according to Pranna

#### 4.CONCLUSION

– were destroying Indian culture and morals. It is after the encounter with Pranna that Amara realized,

**“Modern thought in India was gurgling along like a river with two polarized banks. By one bank was an aberrant section of people, who had diverted from conventional norms, and by the other bank were the extremists who wanted to protect society by controlling the aberrant people. The two banks could never meet.” (One and a Half Wife, 218).**

Amara had to face another challenge when she got a chance to help Kanika, 21-year old girl whom she met at the Group meetings. Kanika was the daughter of Anirudh Sharma – the leader of the Pranna Gang. She was pregnant, victim of an abusive marriage and wanted divorce. Amara did not care about her own safety and with the help of Shikha didi and Lalit, she managed to help Kanika by finding hospital for her delivery, managing adoption procedure for her baby and arranging her journey to America. But after the birth, Amara could not give up the baby to orphanage and despite her parent’s disapproval, she decided to adopt the baby herself.

*One and a Half Wife* is the story of Amara and how she develops from a naïve teenager to an independent woman with her own identity. Towards the end of the story, Lalit proposes Amara to be her wife, but in spite of being in love with him, she declines the proposal. Primary reason behind her decline is that she has decided to adopt Kanika’s child and does not want to hand over her own responsibility to Lalit. She feebly convinces Lalit,

**“You’ve loved me so entirely that I couldn’t ask for more. I could not be in love as much as I am with you. But marrying you will be an escape, a way of running away from my problems. It will be unfair to you.” (One and a Half Wife, 289).**

Therefore, even though Amara knows that Lalit loves her unconditionally and she admires his sense of love, loyalty, courage and fairness, she does not want Lalit to marry her out of pity. This decision of Amara reflects her strength to live life on her own terms. She realized that she was always resilient but shadow of other people’s desires and expectations prevent the emergence of her own identity.

Meghna Pant, in *One and a Half Wife*, aims to break the unfair conventional dogmas imposed upon the identities of divorced people in Indian societies. Divorce – by no means – is a favorable or preferable solution of any problem but sometimes it becomes the necessity for the involved people. Indian societies are often judgmental in such cases and “being divorced” is still considered as taboo in large portion of our country. Although the novel presents the difficult consequences inflicted upon divorced people, it also provides a ray of hope in the transitional mindset of Indian societies. The difference of 16 years conveys tremendous change in the behavior and tolerance of the people against conventional concepts and culture.

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