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# Maiya Saheb in *Kasingara*

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### Abstract

*Kasingara* (2034 BS) is the debut novel of Gita Kesari, which traces the story of Maiya Saheb. The essence of the study lies in exploring how the novelist has mapped the journey of Maiya Saheb from her young age to middle age, thereby highlighting the different trials and tribulations she was exposed to. The reason behind her sufferings was that, she in her youth gave birth to a baby boy out of wedlock. She was afraid of the humiliation and social taboo she might have to face, so she abandons her newly born baby. The study focuses on how Maiya Saheb transforms from being a meek, submissive woman into a woman who questions the societal structure and gender bias deeply rooted in patriarchal societies.

Keywords: feminism, gender, gender role, liberal feminist, patriarchy.

### Introduction

Gita Kesari's debut novel *Kasingara* (2034 BS) depicts Maiya Saheb as a woman who bears the brunt for breaking the cultural code of the society in her youth. The novel also examines the troubled life of Punte, the protagonist of the novel, who was born out of marriage in a feudal Nepali society. Maiya Saheb, the biological mother of Punte abandons her newly born baby as her unmarried status does not allow her to keep the child. Though her upper caste boyfriend who after knowing her pregnancy runs away, she decides to give birth to the child. Puna Maya, a street sweeper adopts the child and raises him. Punte suffers poverty, social exclusion and other atrocities because he belongs to the lower caste. The story of Maiya Sahab revolves round the chain of cause and effect in a patriarchal society

where women are not independent. Feminist critics have been continuously advocating that the female characters be given independent agency and an individual context that exist outside of the patriarchal world (qtd. in Belsey and Moore 114). Therefore, *Kasingara*, has been selected to study the women characters created by a woman writer.

Kesari's characterisation is unique in its feminist consciousness which eloquently articulates her voice. The author questions the traditional normative roles of male and female within a patriarchal society. Arundhati Roy posits, 'a feminist is a female who negotiates herself into a location where she has alternatives' (*An Ordinary* 32). *Kasingara*, portrays Maiya Saheb as a more enabling and empowered woman by overturning gender roles and explaining the restraints of masculine rules. And in doing so, Kesari triumphs in redefining conventional gender roles appointed to women. She tells in her essay "On Female Identity and Writing by Women": "Women's experiences differ from men's in significant and regular ways". (178).

Gita Kesari's choices validate the perspective of Krizner & Mandell, "the vantage points from which events are presented" (222). Judith Kegan Gardiner, a feminist critic, believes that 'due to gender differences they live differently; as a result, their works reflect these gender variances.' She in addition elucidates, being a man in a male-dominated culture means not being like a woman. As a result, the behavior considered appropriate to each gender becomes severely restricted and polarised (189). She trusts the mentioned alterations within the understanding can be reflected in the texts. Elaine Showalter states, 'Gender marks all reading and writing by men and women' ("Introduction" 2). To investigate, advance and excavate the ways in which women are represented, feminist theory is used especially the liberal feminist theory. 'The overarching goal of liberal feminism is to create a just and caring society in which freedom thrives. Women and men can only prosper equally in such a society' (Tong 13). To analyze images of women, the theory is quite relevant and as there is no particular method that a feminist critic can use, she can opt for any method. Guerin points: 'masculine writers appear to be more interested in deeper relationships, but female authors frequently react with open endings. Feminine logic in writing is generally associational, whereas male logic is sequential and goal-

oriented. Female subjectivity puts male objectivity to the test.’ (201). Thus, a feminist approach is the best one to analyze woman’s work. Undeniably, rather than sticking into a particular theory this study has applied an eclectic method.

*Kasiṅgara* is written in Nepali language, so my transliteration and translation are used.

### **Maiya Saheb in *Kasiṅgara***

The novel primarily centers on Punte and Maiya Saheb plays a vital role to highlight the issues of women in the novel. She becomes the victim of patriarchy because she transgresses its values; steps out of the boundary set for her as a woman by having premarital sex and then getting pregnant. Under patriarchal tradition, premarital sex is prohibited, and a girl is expected to remain virgin before marriage. Indeed, virginity is so much valued and if a girl is found not being virgin in marriage, she is sure to be sent back to her parents. Similarly, motherhood outside marriage is condemned. Katrak aptly notes:

From birth to death, traditions inform and control women’s lives. When women confront customs, they frequently have to negotiate and operate within the constraints of patriarchal structures such as marriage: straying outside of tradition sometimes leads in severe repercussions on the female body, which may be exiled and outcast in society. (208)

She breaches patriarchal tradition by violating the values of chastity attached to female body. Not only her body has become profane, she is a matter of shame for the society; and as a fallen woman she will be ostracised provided her identity gets revealed. Though the baby has no role in it, he too will be troubled in different ways. Thus, the mid-wife, an experienced woman reminds her about the troubles that she will have to face because of her transgression and persuades her to abandon the baby. She obeys her in the hope that someone might find the baby and raise him. This justifies Millett’s assertion that women who are disobedient to the restrictions imposed on them would be intimidated. She asserts intimidation is universal in patriarchy. The streetwise woman recognizes that she must act feminine if she is to thrive in patriarchy, or she will be subjected to “a range of cruelties and barbarities.” (qtd. in Tong 52). It

also shows the violation of rights of women in the garb of culture under patriarchy. Susan Moller Okin mentions, 'Many breaches of women's basic human rights occur within families and are justified by cultural, religious, or traditional reasons' (33). The cultural aspects associated with the purity of women's body forced Maiya Saheb to abandon her baby. 'Since the maximum cultures we are acquainted with are patriarchal' (Bunch 251) women have no right to their body until now.

Maiya Saheb is an educated woman and appears to be courageous with a strong will power. However, she negotiates with the situation for the sake of social security. Tyson points 'if a woman wants to survive, she must play the part of a good girl, a virgin who will be an ideal wife and mother in the future; a promiscuous woman with a bad moral will not only be rejected from marriage but will also be socially outcast' (89). Being afraid of the social exclusion, Maiya Saheb abandons the baby, goes to her parents inventing a fake story that she has been sick and residing in a friend's house. Katrak asserts that 'being educated, thinking, and literate does not automatically enable women to confront patriarchal dominance over female bodies' (239).

Maiya Saheb is loving, kind and affectionate one. Being married to Major Dambar Bahadur she plays the role of an ideal wife; remains loyal and charitable to the poor. She loves and cares her son, who is now growing up in poverty and misery as the son of the street sweeper, Puna Maya, though she cannot expose it explicitly. In the eyes of the society, she remains only charitable to him. Katrak quotes a fictional character who remarks, "In marriage a woman must sometimes be a fool. A good woman does not have a brain or a mouth" (218). Exactly, she acts as if she is unaware of the fact that even if Punte has got shelter, he is deprived of the basic needs. She cannot revolt against the social injustice and raise her son on her own. Because of her performance of the ideal feminine role, she is able to lead a respectful live as the wife of Major Dambar Bahadur. To be socially acceptable, women in marriage are required to exhibit particular characteristics like submissiveness, kindness, self-sacrifice, and perseverance. She embraces all the qualities of a virtuous wife. Her role justifies Beauvoir's claim, "Woman as Other" opines, man may conceive of himself without the presence of a woman. She can't

imagine herself without him. And she is just that man's edict; as a result, she is referred to as "the sex," implying that she appears to men primarily as a sexual entity. For him, woman is sex – pure and simple sex. (209-10). She has embraced the idea that wedding for womenfolk need to be protected at all expenses.

Maiya Saheb is now enjoying wealth and status. After five years of marriage, she delivers a baby girl and her rice-feeding ceremony is celebrated. The narrator mentions that it has been a much-awaited occasion for Maiya Saheb to get the recognition of a mother. "*kasale āsa rākhēko thiyo ra unko gharṁā paṇi yo kshāḍa āūcha bhaner?*" ["Who has expected that such celebration would be made in her home"] (13)? The birth of the baby girl rescues her from the charges of a sterile woman. In many traditional communities, as Katrak' observes, 'a woman without a child is considered a failure, not a full woman; infertility is considered unpleasant, even a curse' (209). Her married life gets accomplished with the birth of her daughter, Usha.

As a sensitive and thoughtful woman, Maiya Saheb minutely observes the paradox of motherhood under patriarchy. She questions to herself how many mothers have got the chance to celebrate the birth of their children and remain happy. 'Patriarchal ideology paradoxically constrains and regulates women by exalting motherhood. The expectation and accomplishment of motherhood governs women's lives' (Katrak 213). The novelist juxtaposes the birth of the two children by the same mother: one within the marriage which brings happiness and respect to the mother, and another outside the marriage which is a matter of shame for the mother and her life may be accursed if the truth is revealed. She needs to comply with the patriarchal norms attached to motherhood. In this regard Katrak mentions, 'because they are denied an autonomous life and identity, women succumb to and absorb the exact male-dominated beliefs that work against them' (237). Despite her love for her son, she cannot hold him because, "The mother can deliver a child however cannot provide her child a social identity. She is a 'soil' into which man 'sows' his seed, and therefore can claim the child as his" (Dutta 84). To be a mother one should be an official wife to someone. In this context, in her essay "Male Hegemony and Colonisation of the Female Body," Rayamajhi questions, "Does not a woman have the right to make a choice about her role in reproduction" (7)? Not being

able to procreate a (male) child she constantly feels guilty. The hegemonic discourse of motherhood subsequently transforms her into a psychologically alienated victim. Her alienation is caused due to the social ideology that perceives motherhood as essential for feminine identity. It shows how women are entrapped in their own body by the patriarchal notion of motherhood.

Maiya Saheb, despite her affluence and charitable nature cannot support Punte as much as she desires. She all alone bears the pain and agony on seeing her son suffer. After Punte runs away from his home and nobody knows about his whereabouts, she falls sick. However, she cannot express the truth. She is represented as a moderate inclined, pragmatist, affectionate and considerate person. She is empathetic in the sense that she does not intrude her viewpoints on others. As a good mother envisioned by patriarchy she guides and cares for Usha and reminds the fact that even a minor mistake of a woman may destroy her whole life. Women must pay a high price for defying convention. Tradition defines female duties within patriarchal frameworks and limitations, both within and beyond the home. 'Women are valued for their roles as wives and mothers; unmarried women, lesbians, and widows experience prejudice' (Katrak 157). Well acquainted with the working of society, she as the mother of a grown-up daughter reminds her:

*siddhānta ra byābhārikatā bhanekā duitā chutṭachutṭai hun [ . . . ].  
swasñīmānisako jīvanamā sāno bhūlale pani ṭhūlo hāni lyāūḍacha.*

[Practice and principle are two different things [ . . . ]. A minor mistake of a woman may cause her a great trouble.] (43)

Maiya Saheb critically analyzes the psyche of the society. Though in principle the society emphasizes on women's independence in practice it does not applaud empowered ladies. It shows that marriage is mandatory for the girls for the social security.

Trouble keeps on harassing her. Punte, who has run away from his home, makes his fortune in the Indian Army as Captain Jit Bahadur. Major Dambar Bahadur unknown to Jit Bahadur's real identity fixes his daughter's marriage with him. Though Usha and Jit Bahadur are siblings, unknown to the truth, have been living happy married life as a husband and a wife. But the circumstance brings them to know the truth after Usha meets her mother-in-law. After

knowing the truth Jit Bahadur (Punte) decides to murder Maiya Saheb for he thinks that because of her his life has been ruined. For Jit Bahadur, Maiya Saheb is a cheat, hypocrite, and fallen woman, who to save her false honor, has abandoned him. He questions what right she had to throw the infant into the bush: “*ke ma unako śarīrako kasiṅgara hu?* [Am I the dirt from her body?] (87).

Maiya Saheb too gives her statement. She questions the validity of the biased sexual understanding of people as nobody blames the boy’s father. Is she only to be blamed? Without a male, how can a female be pregnant?

[. . .].*ke duniyāṁ binā logne swasṅmānisale baccā pāūchan? tara khai yasapratiko pani praśna? chorāle cinyo ma janma dine kalaṅkinī āmā hū* [. . .].*tara khai dekhiyeko patita puruṣa, khai chorāle sodheko patita bābu mero ko ho bhanī?*

[Is it possible for a woman to deliver a baby without the participation of a man? My son has recognised me as an immoral mother [. . .] but why the corrupt father is not seen, why the son has not asked about his corrupt father?] (88)

Maiya Saheb accepts her mistake, the one mistake that she did in her youth was her inability to differentiate between love and lust that resulted in unplanned pregnancy. But, because of the single mistake she did while she was young, does she deserve the lifelong suffering? She has lived with guilt and remorse throughout her life, and now in the old age she has to see that her children, the siblings tied in matrimonial relation. What could be the harder stroke than this to a mother? But nobody cares for the boy’s father. If she had not the fear of social shame; if the society had accepted unmarried mothers no mother would abandon her child born outside marriage. The feminist dimension lies in her questioning the working of patriarchy. She is blamed as a characterless, cruel woman who has abandoned her innocent baby just to save her honor. But she asks, is she alone to be blamed; what about his unidentified father? This shows her transformation from a silent suffering woman to a confident and assertive woman who is commendable of her conduct. As a round character, she gets transformed in the course of action.

Maiya Saheb’s suffering, enveloped in the guise of prosperity and the status of a married woman, is known to her only. The novel shows how motherhood at the same time is valorised and ostracised



within patriarchy. Motherhood is accepted within marriage but outside marriage it is feared as it pollutes the society. Though women give birth to children they cannot experience motherhood on their own. Because “motherhood is ‘sacred’ so long as its offspring are ‘legitimate’” (Rich 42). Patriarchal double standards to motherhood forces Maiya Saheb to abandon her first baby born as an illegitimate one. But, after she becomes pregnant as a wedded wife to Major Dambar Bahadur, her pregnancy is celebrated and her daughter’s birthday is celebrated with fun fare. This reveals the paradox attached to women’s body in patriarchy.

### Conclusion

Maiya Saheb as a victim of patriarchy suffers throughout her life. She delivers the baby outside marriage and has to abandon the child; forced to live with the hidden secret. Again, after the marriage, she has the fear of getting revealed of her pre-marital sex, along with remaining infertile until she delivers the daughter. She compares the fate of her children, Punte and Usha, first born outside marriage, the latter born within marriage. Punte was abandoned, whereas Usha is valued as the Goddess Laxmi. It shows how a woman’s body is censored and constricted in the name of marriage and motherhood. The focus of the novel is on marriage and motherhood. As a critic to patriarchal double standards to sexual norms for women and men, she demands women’s autonomy to their body. In Nepali literature, Nepali women novelists have tried to raise female awareness by making their female characters as revolutionary ones as Maiya Saheb. Kesari has raised different issues of women, and has also advocated women’s right on their bodies. She has illustrated confrontation between the female characters and the society which is biased towards the female gender. Her female character, Maiya Saheb though suffered by the society in the novel, is found to be quite progressive. Here, the aim is towards inclusiveness and towards equal participation of both male and female for the prosperous society. Novel as a literary genre has converted into an influential means for the Nepali women to explore their experiences as well as to correct the biased societal norms



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