

A Study To Explore Depiction Of Gender Stereotypes And Feminist Concerns In Sandhya Tiwari's Short Story Collection Female Friends (2023)

Tejasvi Reddy
Lecturer, SWCIET
Mumbai, India.

Abstract

This study aims to explore the depiction of gender stereotypes and feminist concerns in Sandhya Tiwari's short story collection titled "Female Friends." The collection addresses various facets of women's experiences and relationships, shedding light on the complexities of their struggle in a patriarchal society. By critically analyzing Tiwari's narratives, this research aims to uncover the author's engagement with gender stereotypes, the exploration of feminist concerns, and the portrayal of female friendships as spaces of resistance and empowerment. Through an interdisciplinary approach that combines literary analysis and feminist theory, this study seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding gender representation in literature, particularly with regard to the portrayal of women's agency, solidarity, and challenges in confronting societal expectations. The outcomes of this research can help promote a deeper understanding of how literature can both challenge and perpetuate gender stereotypes, ultimately offering insights into the potential for feminist discourse and the empowerment of women through literary works.

Keywords: Gender Stereotypes, Feminist Concerns, Sandhya Tiwari, Female Friends, Short Story Collection, Indian Writers in English

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I. Introduction:

The representation of gender stereotypes and feminist concerns in literature has evolved over time, reflecting changing societal attitudes towards gender roles. While earlier works often reinforced traditional gender norms and portrayed women as submissive and dependent, modern literature has increasingly challenged these stereotypes by presenting strong, independent female characters who defy societal expectations. These portrayals not only highlight the struggles faced by women but also shed light on broader feminist concerns such as equality, empowerment, and dismantling patriarchal structures.

When it comes to Indian Writings in English there are very few writers who are actively challenging gender norms and presenting strong female characters. However, the few writers who do so have made significant contributions to the feminist discourse in India. (Tiwari, 2019) Their works delve into complex issues such as gender inequality, domestic violence, and women's rights, offering a fresh perspective on the experiences of Indian women in a rapidly changing society. These writers play a crucial role in shaping public opinion and inspiring future generations to question and challenge traditional gender roles.

However, in the recent past a breed of fresh voices have emerged who are pushing the boundaries of feminist discourse even further. These new voices are not only addressing the existing issues but also shedding light on intersectionality, caste-based discrimination, and LGBTQ+ rights within the feminist movement. By amplifying marginalized voices and bringing attention to previously overlooked struggles, these writers are expanding the scope of feminism in India and paving the way for a more inclusive and diverse movement. One such voice is that of Sandhya Tiwari, who is an academician with two decades of experience in teaching literature at postgraduate level and guiding research scholars. Sandhya Tiwari's work has been instrumental in highlighting the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression and advocating for a more cohesive approach to feminism. Through her poems, essays and short stories, she has explored the ways in which gender-based discrimination intersects with gender inequality, shedding light on the unique challenges faced by working women. Additionally, Tiwari has been a vocal advocate for women empowering women, W4W rights, emphasizing the importance of feminist mentorship and sisterhood concept while deliberating the concept of inclusivity and recognizing the struggles faced by women in general, across India.

Female Friends (2023)

Sandhya Tiwari's collection of short story collection, aptly titled *Female Friends*, serves as a powerful tribute to womanhood, delving deep into the intricacies of women's lives, relationships, and struggles. It is a collection of fourteen short stories of varying lengths. In all these stories there is an urgency resonating the necessity for women to stand united by empowering and supporting one another. With her profound storytelling abilities and strong feminist voice, Tiwari presents a collection embedded with feminist theoretical references, challenging societal norms and shedding light on the multifaceted nature of being a woman in today's world. She weaves together a fabric through her women characters that reflects the everyday experiences of women. Through her stories, she invites readers to empathize with the characters and their unique journeys. Tiwari's use of personal tone with 1st person narratives in three of the short stories helps to unpack the layers of oppression and discrimination faced by women daily.

The first story titled "Veena Tara" revolves around the life of women on whose names the story is named. The struggle of an aspiring author Tara and her artist friend Veena, grows into a strong bond. As they navigate through the challenges of pursuing their creative passions, Tara and Veena find solace and inspiration in each other's company. Their shared dreams and unwavering support for one another propel them forward, transforming their individual struggles into a collective journey towards success and self-discovery. In one such interaction Veena consoles and motivates her friend saying-

"Tara! Trust my words. I believe in your talent as a writer. Your words have the power to touch hearts and inspire change. Don't let self-doubt hold you back. Embrace the challenges and keep pushing forward. Your unique perspective is needed in the world of literature. Remember, every great writer starts as a beginner. So, keep writing, keep honing your craft, and never stop believing in yourself. You have what it takes to make a difference." (FF, pp2)

Tara realized that her self-doubt was just a hurdle she needed to overcome, and she felt determined to embrace the challenges ahead. She knew that her unique perspective could bring something new and valuable to the world of literature, and she was ready to keep writing, honing her craft, and making a difference. Thus, through thick and thin their friendship wins over. Similarly, the remaining short stories also revolve around episodes where women were subjected to humiliation either owing to destiny driven situation or their own making. But, they rise and shine once the clouds of illusion are cleared.

A Feminist Journey Through Sandhya Tiwari's Short Story Collection

This short story collection though with short episodes of a kind of urgency do not fail to impress upon the major concern related to women in contemporary times. It is a contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding gender representation in literature, specifically focusing on the portrayal of women's agency, solidarity, and challenges in confronting societal expectations. By analysing depiction of women's experiences and perspectives in literature, this research seeks to explore the evolution of these portrayals over time, shedding light on the progress made and the work that still needs to be done in achieving gender equality. For instance, Manju Kapur's novels also provide readers with a glimpse into the lives of modern women, their struggles, and their aspirations for independence. The theme of husband-wife relationships is a recurring motif in her works, where she exposes the exploitative tendencies of patriarchal societies, where men hold dominant roles, and portrays women who challenge traditional norms. Through her storytelling prowess, Kapur illuminates the obstacles faced by women in breaking free from societal expectations and finding their own identities. She emphasizes the need for a shift in traditional gender roles and advocates for empowering women to achieve true gender equality.

One of the central themes in *Female Friends* is the rebellion of the male superiority and chauvinist attitude. Tiwari's stories challenge the objectifying lens through which women are often viewed, emphasizing the significance of women's agency and self-definition. By capturing authentic female voices and experiences, the collection encourages readers to see women as vibrant, complex individuals beyond their external appearance. The author has skilfully integrated the existing gender stereotypes and has challenged and contradicted the promotion of such practices by making other women characters from the stories as her mouthpiece. In the second short story titled "Amria-The Sweetest and Strongest Nectar", the author brings to fore the complexities in the life of a widow who was subjected to secondary treatment owing to her being a single woman without a support. Amrita who was working in an MNC Suncroft from where she wanted to join in a managerial position. But she was shocked after an incident where she was told,

"Being a single woman and a widow, do you think you can handle the demands of such a high-pressure job? The interviewer's comment though not expected in any formal interview set-up, was a misfortune that turned into an opportunity for Amrita. (FF, pp8)

Amrita in Tiwari's story is an empowered lady who instead of succumbing to societal expectations, chooses to embrace her independence and pursue her career. Despite facing adversity, she remains determined to prove that being single and a widow does not define her ability to excel in her chosen field. She is no time musters to retort with grace and poise and responds,

“My marital status has no bearing on my ability to excel in this role. I have proven my capabilities in previous positions, and I am fully committed to dedicating myself to this job.” (FF, pp8)

Over a period of time, Amrita evolves into a champion fighting for the cause of single women by joining hands with other women who have also experienced some kind of differential treatment but chose to remain mute. Thus, Tiwari’s protagonist, Amrita, becomes a harbinger of change in spite of destiny deprived her of conjugal bliss of a life partner.

Throughout her short stories, she underscores the importance of recognizing the diverse struggles faced by women. Within her narratives, characters from varying socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicities, and sexual orientations forge connections and build networks of support. This emphasis on the power of sisterhood echoes feminist theories that call for solidarity among women to dismantle systems of oppression. With nuance and skill, Tiwari challenges the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures that limit women’s freedom and agency. By portraying women navigating the complexities of familial and societal expectations, the collection highlights the need for women’s liberation from restrictive gender roles. Dr Tiwari’s stories remind us that dismantling patriarchal norms and gender discrimination is a collective responsibility and that a feminist future can only be realized through concerted efforts.

Female Friends also investigates the diverse ways women navigate their identities, sexualities, and the societal pressures surrounding them. Dr Tiwari’s characters grapple with themes of self-discovery, self-acceptance, and the liberation that comes with embracing authenticity. These stories challenge normative notions of femininity and celebrate the autonomy of women in shaping their own lives.

Dr. Sandhya Tiwari’s *Female Friends* also offers readers a unique perspective on the intersectionality of gender and the depiction of gender stereotypes. Through her stories, Tiwari explores the complexities of women’s experiences in different social, cultural, and economic contexts, shedding light on the interconnections between various aspects of their identities. The concept of intersectionality, coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, acknowledges the overlapping systems of oppression that individuals may face due to their intersecting identities. Tiwari’s collection delves into this theory by emphasizing the varying experiences of women in different societal contexts. By examining the intersectionality of gender with other aspects like caste, class, and sexuality, Tiwari reveals how these intersections shape women’s lives and their navigation of gender stereotypes.

One of the prominent themes explored in Tiwari’s stories is the portrayal of women’s agency and empowerment. By showcasing female characters who challenge societal norms and expectations, the author breaks down gender stereotypes and highlights the multifaceted nature of women’s realities. Tiwari’s stories also debunk traditional gender roles and stereotypes. In the short story titled, “Beware! The Tables are Turned”, she presents a powerful narrative about Aradhana, a woman who defies societal pressures and subjugation as a result of uncanny office politics and chooses to pursue her dreams of a successful career opting to start her own food industry venture subsequently excelling as an entrepreneur.

“Aradhana decided it was time to reclaim her happiness and find a new path. She started her own business in the food industry. Born into a family where rituals and tradition were followed, Aradhana knew what place traditional authentic cuisine holds in society, including the elite section.” (FF, pp36)

In another story titled, “Sara Stands Corrected”, the author tries to embark upon the façade of marriage as something that has to be a bond to last forever, irrespective of the post-wedding revelations of indifference and resistance to generate a zone of compatibility. The story revolves around Sara, a young woman who enters into a marriage with high hopes and expectations. However, as the plot unfolds, it becomes evident that Sara’s perception of marriage clashes with the reality she experiences. Through her journey, the author explores the complexities of relationships and challenges societal norms surrounding the idea of lifelong commitment. The author through the character of Sarah challenges the idea that a women’s worth is solely determined by her pulling through the relationship just to retain the marital status. This story offers an empowering message for readers who may feel constrained by societal expectations. Through such narratives, Tiwari encourages readers to critically examine and question the deeply ingrained gender roles and stereotypes prevalent in society. Her stories shed light on the experiences of women from different socio-economic backgrounds, highlighting the disparities and discrimination they face.

II. Conclusion

Sandhya Tiwari’s *Female Friends* is an outstanding collection of short stories that seamlessly integrates feminist theoretical references to shed light on the complex realities of being a woman in contemporary society. The author opens up conversations about pressing social issues related to gender, intersectionality, and stereotypes. Her narratives intricately interweave various identities and experiences, allowing readers to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities faced by women in contemporary society. Tiwari’s stories encourage readers to critically engage with the prevalent gender stereotypes and challenge societal norms, ultimately inspiring dialogue and facilitating positive change. By exploring diverse female experiences, challenging the male gaze, embracing intersectionality, and questioning patriarchal norms, Tiwari stimulates meaningful conversations

around gender equality and women's empowerment. *Female Friends* serves as a powerful platform for feminist discourse and a must-read for anyone interested in understanding and appreciating the multifaceted lives of women.

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