



“The Gilded Cage”: Oppression Experienced by Upper-Class Women in Novel *The Widows of Malabar Hill* (2018) by Sujata Massey

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Abstract

This analysis explores the issue of oppression towards women as a result of patriarchal practices, traditional traditions, gender roles, and social expectations in the novel *The Widows of Malabar Hill* (2018) by Sujata Massey. This is qualitative research that relies on text and applies feminist literary criticism to analyze the issue in the novel. This analysis aims to find out the forms of oppression experienced by the upper-class women in the novel. This research found that upper-class women experienced several forms of oppression including gender-based discrimination, gender-based marginalization, powerlessness, restricted access to formal education, restriction on property sales rights, being forbidden to work in public, limitation in freedom of mobility, cultural and religious practices, gender-based violence, and lack of legal rights. This research also indicates that even in the upper social classes, gender and patriarchal culture are the main causes of women's oppression. This oppression limits the opportunities that upper-class women have to develop their true potential.

Key words: oppression towards women, upper-class women, gender oppression, patriarchy

A. INTRODUCTION

In many countries, some women are denied fundamental human rights and face various forms of oppression. Oppression of women is a common societal problem throughout many nations. Among the many causal factors, a sociocultural component of patriarchal ideology plays a major role in limiting and controlling women's thoughts, movements, and lives. (Johnson & Johnson, 2001).

According to S. Sawant (2016), in a male-centric society, women have been assigned a secondary and inferior role in their family and society and faced injustice, restraint, oppression, subordination, and exploitation. Despite their education, women have been treated with disdain and reduced to the position of a

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toy and a machine; a lifeless item designed to satisfy men's sexual needs. Several cultures and religions justify the oppression of women by granting the man sexual power, which men must then strictly control in order to protect their purity and dominance (Napikoski, 2020).

Therefore, oppression is not solely intentional, but also the product of a complicated system that includes multiple factors such as institutional authority, social norms, stereotypes, legislation, or societal practices among others. It has numerous faces and presents itself in various ways, including politically, socially, economically, and culturally. Gender and class oppression are two of many forms of system oppression. (Panades & Chris Drew, 2023).

According to Ingrey (Ingrey, 2016, pp. 1–3), gender oppression is the act of limiting or prohibiting a person's freedom, dignity, or subjectivity based on their gender expression, identity, and/or role. She states that liberal and second-wave feminists view gender oppression as sexism and inequality between men and women; they oppose a patriarchal system that denies women's autonomy. In short, gender oppression is privileging men over women. Thus, women's oppression is a form of gender oppression.

Furthermore, Marxist feminists state that women's oppression is intrinsically related to social class. According to Duignan (2023) social class is a social group consisting of persons of the same social and economic status. Sociologists distinguish class into three categories including upper class, middle class, and working (low) class. The upper class tends to possess greater wealth and authority than the middle and low classes. It leads to a socially organized oppression based on class or prejudice and discrimination based on social class which is known as class oppression (Pincus & Sokoloff, 2014, pp. 9–15).

Based on the definition above, people from the upper class seem not to have experienced oppression. They may face discrimination and oppression due to other factors including gender, race, and religion (Mezzadri, 2015). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that it appears in different forms of oppression faced by the lower class. They may be subjected to societal pressures or expectations, discrimination based on gender or ethnicity, or systemic disparities (Pearl, 2020).

One of many literature works that reflect women's oppression is *The Widows of Malabar Hill* by Sujata Massey. It is a historical fiction novel set in Bombay, India, in the early 20th century. The story follows the life of Perveen Mistry, a young and intelligent Parsi woman who becomes the first female solicitor in India. The novel offers a portrayal of the oppressions that upper-class women like Perveen faces during this period. Furthermore, as Perveen navigates her legal career, she encounters a case involving the widows who are oppressed by the gender and religion. Despite the oppression imposed upon them, these upper-class women display a remarkable degree of agency.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This research is qualitative. Creswell (2014) states that “qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem.” It relies on text and image data. Qualitative research is concerned with a set of interpretive material practices in order to get a deeper understanding of the matter (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Therefore, the qualitative method is used in the interest of exploring and understanding the portrayal of oppression experienced by the upper-class women in *The Widows of Malabar Hill*; and capturing their agency in challenging the oppression by interpreting and analysing the collected data through feminist literary critique. *The Widows of Malabar Hill* is the debut work of Sujata Massey in the Perveen Mistry series, which consists of three books, that follow the adventure of Perveen Mistry as the first female solicitor in Bombay. Women's oppression is a recurring issue in *The Widows of Malabar Hill*. In 1916, Perveen experienced oppression by herself when she was a female student and when she left school to become a wife. In 1921, besides experiencing oppression by herself in her work life, Perveen also witnessed the oppression faced by her clients, the widows. The oppression occurred as the result of patriarchal practices, traditional traditions, gender roles, and social expectations.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Forms of Women's Oppression

1. Gender-Based Discrimination

In this novel, Perveen experiences discrimination based on her gender in school, as can be seen in the following quotation.

Even though the surname Mistry fell in the middle of the alphabet, the lecturer had assigned Perveen a seat in the back row, ostensibly because she was a “special student” and not enrolled for a law degree. (p. 30)

The quotation above reveals that upper-class women is allowed to get formal education. However, they are treated differently to male students. The lecturer discriminates Perveen solely because she is a female student studying law, which is considered as man-field, by placing her at the back row when her seat should have been in the middle. Perveen may be less visible and less likely to actively participate in class. This discrimination limit Perveen's educational experience and opportunity

It also reveals that female student who studies law will not grant a degree yet. This is a clear discrimination and violets women equal rights. This discrimination certainly disadvantages Perveen. Despite studying the law together with the male student, only she will not grant a law degree. It will limit her opportunity to get as great job as her male classmate will get.

Besides in education, Perveen also faces gender discrimination in public services such as restaurant, as can be seen in the following quotation:

“One gin-lime and a whiskey-soda, please. And nuts—”
“The hotel does not serve single ladies’ alcohol,” he said in an officious tone.
“But not men, hmm?” Perveen commented in Hindi.
(p.374)

The quote reveals that the restaurant provides different hospitality to women customer and men customer. Refusing to serve alcohol to Perveen based on her gender is a clear case of gender-based discrimination. This actions limits Perveen’s autonomy and freedom to make choices regarding what she can consume in a public establishment. It restricts her right to a service that would typically be available to male customer. It also implies that women should conform to certain behaviours and preferences.

2. Gender-Based Marginalization

Marginalization is an act of expelling a whole category of people from productive activities in social life. The society has determined that these individuals cannot or will not be assigned to work. It prevents people, who is being marginalized, from putting out their abilities in socially defined and acknowledged ways. (Young, 2011, p. 72)

“How dare you speak of being in charge?” Mukri’s voice was contemptuous. “You are not even accredited by the Bombay Bar. You have no power in the court.”
Perveen realized he must have looked into her background and had prepared to fight. His insulting declaration was intended to scare the begums into thinking she couldn’t defend them. (p.114)

From this quotation, it can be revealed that women lawyer cannot be assigned to court solely because of their gender. Her hard-earned degree at a top university is in vain because this exclusion prevents Perveen, who is being marginalized, from putting out her abilities to aid the widows in legally permitted and recognized ways. Her inadmissibility to appear before the jury aroused concern and scepticism among the widows about relying on Perveen and becoming her clients.

Another quotation that shows Perveen experiences oppression in form of marginalization is shown in the quotation below:

She was performing not only the tasks of a solicitor but also those of law clerk, translator, and accountant, but who was she to complain? There was not another law firm in

the city that would employ a female solicitor. “Pappa were you expecting a visitor this morning?” (p.12)

“I don’t think so,” she said with a dismissive sigh. “After all, I cannot argue cases in court. I have to rely on my father for that side of the work.” (p.287)

As Young (2011, p. 73) has stated, the exclusion forces marginalized individuals to rely on the help of others. In this novel, the exclusion forces Perveen to rely on her father, who has his own legal practice, to be employed as a solicitor and get a job in law field. She also needs to rely on her father for arguing the cases in court even though she is the one who writes the case defence files. It is clearly disadvantaging Perveen because the achievement and victory of defending a client that should have been earned on her behalf because of the defence file she created, was instead earned by her father. This exclusion also limits Perveen's opportunities to employment.

3. Powerlessness

Powerlessness is an erasure of the ability to make decisions regarding one's living or working situations. Powerless people lack the authority, status, and wit that individuals have (2011, pp. 75–77). In this novel, the power that the widows, Razia, Sakina and Mumtaz, should have as the owners of the estate after their husband passed away is abolished and handed to Mukri-sahib, a male household agent. This is due to the patriarchal culture where men hold power and dominate women. Therefore, The widows need the permission of the household's agent in everything, as can be seen in the following quotation.

“Mukri-sahib is the agent for the household—which means he stands as the man of the house. He manages everything. If he doesn't like my behavior, what might he do the next time he goes to the bank to withdraw funds for us? The bankers allow him full privileges.”

“What could happen with the allowances for food and clothing if he's unhappy?” Razia's voice rose. “Will there be money to pay for electric lighting in the house, for the fans to run? Already the children lost their governess.” (p.103)

It can be seen that despite being the superior of the household agent, the widows are inferior in authority to the household agent. It also shows that the society see women as an incompetent person because they are not allowed to manage their own property. Even though the widows have a lot of money, they cannot use it as they please. The male household agent has more power in the widows' wealth even though in fact that the agent does not own even the slightest of the wealth. It is a prove of women are projected to be inferior being no matter how high their social class.

Furthermore, powerless people are those whose powers are exercised without their consent (Young, 2011, p. 76). See the quotation below

“In a wavering voice, the widow continued. “He said if I didn’t give him the paper, he would go straight to Falkland Road and find a husband for Amina.”

The prospect was horrifying, but it was within Mr. Mukri’s rights as the household agent to arrange marriages for any of the females in the family—the daughters as well as the widows. Shaking her head, Perveen said, “What a dreadful threat.” (p214-215).

From the quotation above, it can be seen that the society considered women as the property of men. Therefore, the men are granted full control of the women’s life including the issue of their married. The right and ability to make decision regarding their own lives are completely erase solely because they are women.

4. Restricted Access to Formal Education

According to Frye (1983, p. 2), oppression is a set of barriers that restrict a group or category of individuals in various ways. In this novel, women are allowed to go to academy, but there is barrier that restrict them when enrolling in it. It can be seen in the following quotation:

“Our application must be cosigned by a responsible, employed family member. Our principal must meet your husband and possibly his father.”

“But why? I’ve got my own money. That seems—”

“Unfair?” Mrs. Roy gave her a wry smile. “I agree with you, Mrs. Sodawalla. I’d like to change the rules to allow women more control, but I am not a trustee with such powers. I suggest you prepare the application and bring it to the interview along with your father-in-law and husband. I anticipate seeing you in class very soon.” (p.158)

From the quote above, it can be seen that the approval of the father-in-law and husband is a mandatory requirement for a woman, or more precisely a wife, to enrol in the academy. This is the barrier that restricts women’s opportunity to get formal education in academy. Although a woman can pay for her education with her own money, she is not granted freedom and control in enrolling into academy by herself. The women especially the upper-class women, are forced to be dependent on men even though they can be independent. This shows that even educational institution supports the idea of man are superior to women by applying this requirements for academy application and oppress women.

5. Restrictions on Property Sales Rights

In this novel, women also lack the authority to sell their property by themselves, as can be seen in the following quotation.

“As you know, because of inheritance law, the property is chiefly owned by the children,” Perveen said. “Your children and Sakina’s are collectively entitled to more than eighty percent of its value. For you to sell the bungalow now, rather than wait years for the children to become old enough to fully participate in the decision, requires an exemption of sorts.” “What is an exemption?” Mumtaz looked anxious. “It means that a judge will allow a rule to be broken, if there’s good cause,” she explained. “To get an exemption to sell the property now requires authorization by a male relative. I’ve met your late husband’s cousin, Muhammed, who is running Farid Fabrics. Based on several conversations, I think he’d make a trustworthy and kind estate executor.” (p371-372)

The quotations above reveal that even though women are wealthy and the owner of the properties, they still need permission of men. It proves that the law does not support the independence of women. Rather, they advocate the domination of men towards women. This law restricts women's rights as property owners while benefiting men, since it is giving the men opportunity to exploit and scam the women.

6. Being Forbidden to Work in Public

In this novel, the society believe that man is suited for public work, while women is only suited for private work. It can be seen in the quotation below.

“But the first wife, Razia-begum, had borne him a daughter—eleven years old now, I believe,” Perveen said evenly. “He had his heir.” “But no son—he needed someone to work inside the mills. (p.16).

The quotation above reveals that the society believe that the only individuals who are supposed to works inside the mills, which is public work, are men. This is the same as Cudd (1994, pp. 22–26) states about oppression which is situation when individuals “face decreased options and diminished futures vis-a-vis other members of the society.” Women face reduced options and a diminished future compared to men because women are being forbidden to work in public. Women’s opportunities to be involved in the family business, that is done outside the house, are vanished simply because they are women. It prevents the women from discovering their potential in business and developing their own wealth.

7. Limitation in Freedom of Mobility

According to Panades and Chris Drew (2023), oppression is social injustice on individuals as result of a complicated system that includes multiple factors

such as institutional authority, social norms, stereotypes, legislation, or societal practices among others. In this novel, the stereotypes of women lead to the social injustice towards women, that is limitation in freedom of the women's mobility, as can be seen in the following quotation:

“Sir David and Lady Hobson-Jones, please excuse me. It shall soon be dark, so I'll just walk down the hill to the rickshaw stand.” “As I said, you must ride in the Silver Ghost!” Sir David huffed. “I review crime reports. Over the last year, a number of women traveling in cars and rickshaws have vanished.” (p. 66)

“Why should I send strangers to bother your father?” her grandfather answered crossly. “I'll come for the letter, then.” “You shall not travel about in the evenings. But I shall come to you with the letter, if you like.” He paused (p. 125)

Based on the quotation above, it can be seen that the society considered women as a weak being. Women are weak so they tend to be the main target of crime. Women are weak so that they need protection of men. As a result, women's mobility is limited. They need escort to go outside and are not allowed to go outside in the evening. This limitation is certainly disadvantaging women. It leads to the limitation of their opportunity to get a better life. It also maintains women dependency on men so that they will always need men in their life.

8. Cultural and Religious Practices

Sodawalla and Mistry are both Parsis. In this culture, there is a practice of seclusion for women when they are in their *binamazi*, Paris term for menstrual period. This seclusion prohibits women from leaving the seclusion room including going to the toilet. Perveen's original family, Mistry, had abandoned this absurd practice but Sodawalla was still practising it. Thus, Perveen was forced to join this practice, as seen in the following quote

Now that Perveen was alone in the little room, she realized the full horror of it.

Behnoush's voice was low and fearful-sounding when she spoke. “I don't know that word you use. Your body is shedding the dirtiest blood and dead eggs. This attracts Ahriman.” Perveen's heart felt like it was jumping out of her chest. “Good Zoroastrians live on a path—we choose the direction of good or evil through our thoughts, words, and actions. That is why I don't fear the devil.” From the other side of the door, Behnoush snapped, “I'm telling you. If you leave this room—you leave this house forever.” Perveen was alarmed. “Mamma, no! I don't wish

to go away. I dearly love Cyrus, and he loves me.” (p. 162-163)

This quotation reveals that Perveen are being forced to follow the practice and threatened with expulsion if she insists on refusing. The seclusion is categorized as oppression not simply because it is pleasant and frustrating for Perveen, as Frye (1983, pp. 13–14) states that a force or barrier cannot called as oppression simply because it is frustrating or unpleasant, but it reduces, diminishes, and immobilizes her live and activity which harm and disadvantages her, as can be seen in the following quotation:

It's a shame your in-laws did not agree to your enrolling at Bethune. However, the college is located in the north, and if nobody can escort you, they would naturally worry. Also, if you'd have to miss a week every month, you would hardly make progress. My suggestion to you is to investigate Loreto College, which is closer, and inquire whether you might be allowed to do classwork from home five days per month. You might learn of other orthodox female students in similar situations (p. 168).

According to the quotation above, the seclusion becomes one of the cause factor that diminish Perveen's opportunity to continue her study. The seclusion also limits Perveen's chances of attending the best schools as only a few schools allow students to miss 7 days of class per month. Even if she could continue her study, she would be far behind her classmates due to the number of classes she missed in a month.

9. Gender-Based Violence

i. Physical Violence

Violence is any act that attacks a person or the person's property for the sole purpose of humiliating and destroying the person (Young, 2011, pp. 80–81). In this novel, Perveen experiences physical violence in her married life. See the quotation above.

Cyrus's face was flushed a deep red, and his words were menacing. “You should have kept your mouth shut.” Out of the corner of her eye, Perveen noticed the young woman had left her chair and was sidling toward the door. Sharply, Perveen called out, “Get to a doctor before it's-” *Too late*, she would have said, but she was knocked backward with a blow from Cyrus. He had bashed her across the nose and cheekbones. Perveen staggered back a few paces. But there was no time to recover; in the next moment, Cyrus leaned in and punched her in the eye. “Don't do it, man—you're insane,” Bipin said. “Her

father's a lawyer—" "She's my wife," Cyrus roared. "I'll do what's needed." (p.187-188)

Based on this quotation, the society believes that women are submissive. Therefore, Perveen is attacked physically by Cyrus as a means to maintain his domination. According to Young (2011, p. 82), the fear of violence could keep oppressed groups subordinate. Perveen's action of continuing to voice her thoughts and ignoring Cyrus's order is considered as impudence because women are supposed to be submissive. Thus, he uses physical attack to uphold his power and silence her.

Furthermore, she becomes the target of the violation since she is a woman working in a man-dominated field, as can be seen in the following quotation:

When Perveen awoke, her throat felt dry, although her body was soaked. She had sweated, maybe for hours. It was all because she was wrapped up in a thick, rough blanket. Reaching out a few inches, she tried to tug the cloth down; but it just pulled tighter around her curled-up form. And then she remembered—Bruce Street, and the shock of a cloth sack coming down over her head. She had a memory of fighting against it and then being hit. (p.319).

According to the preceding quotation, Perveen was kidnapped in a violent manner because she is a female lawyer. The society believes that women are submissive. However, Perveen's involvement in Mr. Farid's case is considered as arrogant and improper. Since the society also believes that women are weak and less valuable, Perveen becomes the target of kidnapping in order to threaten her and make her give up on the case.

ii. Bullying

Violence is any act that attacks a person or the person's property for the sole purpose of humiliating and destroying the person. (Young, 2011, pp. 80–81). Besides physical violence, Perveen also experiences attacks on the property that she uses or will use in academy, as can be seen in the following quotation:

But after the first few seconds in her seat, she felt something cold and terrible seeping through her sari.

Not again!

The first time, someone had filled the groove in her wooden chair with water. On another occasion, her seat had been filled with black coffee; thankfully, she'd noticed and not sat down. This time, she'd sat down without looking first. She would not know what the fluid was until class was over and she'd reached the sanctuary of the college's ladies' lounge. This particular dampness

was sticky. An ominous sign, as bad as the smirking faces of the students sitting nearby.” (p29)

The quotation below reveals that instead of being beaten up, she becomes the target of bullying simply because she is a woman studying law. According to Australian Human Rights Commission (n.d.), bullying is frequent and purposeful acts or remarks directed at someone or a group of individuals that lead to distress and risk to their well-being. This is certainly affected her education. She could not focus on her studies and fell behind in some lessons due to the bullying. In addition, it also proves that women are always considered as less intellectual than man. This may be one of many causes of the students and male students bully Perveen. Even though in reality, Perveen gets better score than the male student, even the highest in law academy. The male students ignore the fact and bully Perveen so that they still can maintain their domination and being superior to Perveen.

iii. Doctrine that Women Deserve to be Beaten.

According to Young (2011, pp. 81–82), direct violation is not the only category of violence, the typical perceptions which say that someone is targeted to violation solely because of their identity is also categorize as violence.

Cyrus leaned in and punched her in the eye. “Don’t do it, man—you’re insane,” Bipin said. “Her father’s a lawyer—” “She’s my wife,” Cyrus roared. “I’ll do what’s needed.” (p. 188)

I will telephone your father and tell him that Mistry Law has been terminated. When you arrive home, prepare yourself for a proper beating!” “A beating?” Perveen defiantly met his gaze. (p.114)

The quotation above reveals that people in that era and place of the novel believe that it is normal for physical violence to be perpetrated by husbands to wives and fathers to daughters. Perveen is liable to violation simply because she is a wife who disobey her husband's orders. It is a prove that beside direct victimization, women is also being oppressed due to the everyday knowledge shared by the society. It causes the women to live under threat, depriving them of their freedom to live and voice their opinions.

10. Lack of Legal Rights

Young (2011, p. 58) defines oppression as a systematic constraint placed on a group as a result of unquestioned beliefs, practices, and symbols which is contributing to institutional regulations. In this novel, patriarchal beliefs that underlying the divorce law in Parsi harm women while benefiting men, as can be seen in the following quotation:

“According to Parsi law, a husband’s engaging in relations

with a prostitute is not cause for divorce or even legal separation.” Perveen felt disbelief. “But that’s unconscionable.” He nodded. “It has been our law since the Parsi Marriage and Divorce Act was passed in 1865.” “What if a husband hits a woman? Couldn’t that be grounds of divorce?” Perveen felt a surge of hope. “There were two witnesses in the room, and the tonga driver.” “Only if the violence is extremely severe,” Jamshedji said, looking soberly at her. “And then, the court might allow you a judicial separation. But the fact is, you did not lose an eye; you were not stabbed; you didn’t go to hospital. We can’t begin to present such an argument.” Perveen swallowed hard, not wanting to believe what her father was saying. “But he hurt me badly. His friends pulled him off me before he could kill me!” (p. 232)

As can be seen in the quotation above, divorcing her husband is very challenging for Perveen. According to the law, a husband’s engaging in relations with a prostitute is not considered as infidelity. Thus, the law will not grant a divorce or legal separation for the wife. It proves that the Parsi community’s divorce laws are patriarchal. They grant significant power and authority to husbands while limiting the right and agency of women in divorce proceedings.

Furthermore, only extreme severe violence can be grounds for divorce. It shows that violence in marriage, with women as the victim, is a normal things in Parsi community. It is influenced by the cultural norms that value man over women and considered women as the property of men. This cultural norms can perpetuate women’s oppression because the laws, that is influenced by cultural norms. are granting the men greater legal privileges and right. It leads to the unjust divorce settlement for women.

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This chapter concludes the analysis of this research. Based on the analysis, the upper-class women in novel *The Widows of Malabar Hill* (2018) experienced several forms of oppression including gender-based discrimination, gender-based marginalization, powerlessness, restricted access to formal education, restriction on property sales rights, being forbidden to work in public, limitation in freedom of mobility, cultural and religious practices, gender-based violence, and lack of legal rights. This oppression limits the opportunities that upper-class women have to develop their true potential.

Based on the research findings and discussion, oppression towards women is not limited to the low to middle class but also experienced by the upper-class women. On the surface, they appear to live a comfortable and luxurious life, yet their freedom and potentials are confined or limited as a result of patriarchal practices, traditional traditions, gender roles, and social expectations

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