



Research Paper

From Marginalization to Power: Identity Formation and Trauma in the Character of Kuru Queen Satyawati

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Abstract

The present study examines the relationship between identity formation and psychological trauma through the character of Satyawati, the Kuru queen in the Mahabharata. Using the Feminist Trauma Approach proposed by Judith Herman, Shoshana Felman, and Ann Cvetkovich, the paper analyzes how patriarchal oppression, social exclusion, and gendered expectations shape Satyawati's fragmented identity and emotional suffering (Herman 32; Felman and Laub 58; Cvetkovich 12). Traditional readings of the Mahabharata often portray Satyawati as ambitious and politically manipulative; however, this study reinterprets her as a woman negotiating trauma, survival, and selfhood within a patriarchal social order. The study draws upon primary texts such as the Mahabharata and the Bhagavata Purana, along with feminist reinterpretations like Kavita Kane's *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*. Theoretical insights from Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* and Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score* provide the framework for understanding trauma as both psychological and socio-cultural phenomena (Herman 21; van der Kolk 43). Feminist and psychoanalytic perspectives are employed to examine the silencing and marginalization of female experiences within mythological narratives. Satyawati's identity crisis begins with her social displacement. Though born into royal lineage, she is abandoned and raised in a fisherman's household, resulting in social alienation and fractured selfhood. Her epithet "Matsyagandha" symbolizes humiliation, exclusion, and imposed identity. Her encounter with Sage Parashara further reflects unequal gendered power relations that restrict female agency and bodily autonomy. The separation from her son Vyasa and the silence surrounding her suffering reveal the erasure of women's trauma within patriarchal discourse (Mukherjee 74). The paper also explores trauma associated with marriage, motherhood, and dynastic responsibility. Satyawati's marriage to King Shantanu emerges as a political negotiation rather than an emotionally reciprocal relationship. Her later decisions to preserve the Kuru lineage expose the burden placed upon women as custodians of dynasty and continuity. Kavita Kane's *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* reimagines Satyawati as a survivor whose ambition functions as a strategy of resistance and self-preservation rather than moral corruption (Kane 118). The study concludes that Satyawati embodies the intersection of trauma, resilience, and feminine agency, making her a significant representation of gendered oppression and psychological conflict in epic literature.

Key Words: Feminist Trauma Theory, Identity Crisis, Patriarchal Oppression

I. Introduction

The present study explores the complex relationship between identity formation and psychological trauma through the character of Satyawati, the Kuru queen in the Mahabharata. Using the Feminist Trauma Approach developed by theorists such as Judith Herman, Shoshana Felman, and Ann Cvetkovich, the paper examines how patriarchal structures, gender oppression, social exclusion, and forced roles shape Satyawati's fragmented identity and emotional suffering. Although Satyawati occupies a significant position in the genealogy of the Kuru dynasty, traditional readings of the Mahabharata often portray her merely as an ambitious and politically manipulative woman. This study reinterprets her character as that of a woman negotiating trauma, survival, and selfhood within a rigid patriarchal framework.

The research draws upon primary sources such as the Mahabharata and the Bhagavata Purana, along with modern feminist reinterpretations including Kavita Kane's *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*. Secondary theoretical texts such as Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* and Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score* provide

a framework for understanding trauma as both psychological and socio-cultural. The study also incorporates feminist and psychoanalytic analyses that examine the silencing of women's experiences in mythological narratives.

Satyavati's identity crisis begins with her birth and social displacement. Born to a king yet abandoned and raised by a fisherman, she exists between two worlds without complete acceptance in either. Her label "Matsyagandha," associated with the smell of fish, becomes symbolic of societal humiliation and exclusion. The study interprets this imposed identity as an early source of trauma that affects her perception of self-worth and belonging. Her encounter with Sage Parashara further intensifies this trauma. Though often romanticized in mythological retellings, the incident reveals unequal power relations where Satyavati's agency over her body and future remains limited. Her pregnancy, separation from her child Vyasa, and silence surrounding the event reflect the suppression of female suffering within patriarchal narratives.

The paper further investigates the trauma associated with marriage, motherhood, and dynastic responsibility. Satyavati's marriage to King Shantanu is rooted not in emotional fulfillment but in political negotiation and survival. After Shantanu's death, she assumes the burden of preserving the Kuru lineage, compelling Vyasa to perform *niyoga* to secure heirs for the throne. These actions reveal the immense pressures placed upon women to sustain family and dynasty, often at the cost of personal desire and emotional well-being. Her later withdrawal into the forest symbolizes emotional exhaustion and the loss of identity once her social duties are fulfilled.

Kavita Kane's *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* offers a feminist reinterpretation of Satyavati, presenting her not as a power-hungry figure but as a survivor shaped by systemic oppression and internal conflict. Through this lens, ambition becomes a means of resistance and self-preservation rather than moral corruption. The study concludes that Satyavati's life reflects the enduring struggle of women seeking identity and agency within patriarchal systems. Her character embodies the intersection of trauma, resilience, sacrifice, and transformation, making her a powerful representation of the psychological and social consequences of gendered oppression in epic literature.

II. The Rationale

This research seeks to unravel how an identity crisis can lead to profound trauma through a nuanced exploration of the multifaceted character of Kuru Queen Satyavati.

III. Objective

- To delve into the saga of Satyavati, the formidable Kuruqueen, and unravel the intricate tapestry of her reclaimed identity.
- To explore the delicate interplay between identity crisis and trauma, where echoes of the past reverberate through the corridors of the self.

IV. Review of Literature

The character of Satyavati in the *Mahabharata* has received considerable scholarly attention in the fields of feminist literary criticism, mythology, psychoanalysis, and trauma studies. Existing scholarship largely focuses on her political ambition, dynastic role, and influence over the Kuru lineage. However, fewer studies critically examine her psychological trauma and identity crisis through a Feminist Trauma Approach. The present study attempts to bridge this gap by analyzing Satyavati as a woman negotiating identity, trauma, patriarchy, and survival.

One of the foundational texts relevant to this study is Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*. Herman defines trauma as a psychological response to experiences involving violence, helplessness, and domination, particularly within unequal power structures (Herman 33). She argues that women's trauma has historically been silenced or ignored by patriarchal societies. Herman's framework is useful in understanding Satyavati's experiences of social exclusion, emotional suppression, sexual coercion, and forced responsibility. Her theory helps establish that trauma is not only an individual condition but also a socio-political experience shaped by gender and power relations. Similarly, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* explores how trauma often remains unspoken because language fails to adequately represent suffering (Felman and Laub 5). Their concept of silenced trauma is significant in interpreting Satyavati's emotional invisibility in traditional readings of the *Mahabharata*. Although Satyavati shapes the destiny of the Kuru dynasty, her emotional struggles and sacrifices remain marginalized within the epic narrative.

Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings* expands trauma studies by connecting personal suffering with cultural and collective memory. Cvetkovich argues that trauma can emerge from everyday experiences of oppression, exclusion, and marginalization rather than only catastrophic events (Cvetkovich 17). This perspective becomes relevant in understanding Satyavati's identity crisis arising from her social displacement and patriarchal

expectations. Her transformation from Matsyagandha to queen mother reflects not only social mobility but also emotional fragmentation and alienation.

Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score* further contributes to the understanding of trauma as a deeply embodied experience that continues to affect identity and emotional well-being (van der Kolk 21). His work emphasizes how traumatic experiences remain psychologically embedded and influence an individual's actions and relationships. This theoretical perspective supports the interpretation of Satyawati's decisions as responses shaped by unresolved emotional conflict, survival instinct, and social pressure.

In the context of feminist literary criticism, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* provides a significant framework for understanding the patriarchal construction of womanhood. Beauvoir argues that women are historically positioned as the "Other" within male-dominated society (de Beauvoir 26). This notion is applicable to Satyawati, whose identity is constantly defined through her relationships with men—as daughter, wife, mother, and queen—rather than through her own individuality and desires.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" further examines the silencing of marginalized female voices within dominant ideological systems (Spivak 287). Spivak critiques the inability of patriarchal and colonial narratives to truly represent women's experiences. Her theory is useful in analyzing how Satyawati's voice and suffering are overshadowed by the heroic narratives of male characters in the Mahabharata.

Scholarly studies specifically focused on Satyawati also contribute significantly to this research. Pradip Bhattacharya's *The Mahabharata: A Literary Study* examines Satyawati's role in shaping the political future of the Kuru dynasty and highlights her strategic intelligence and influence (Bhattacharya 114). However, Bhattacharya primarily focuses on her political significance rather than her psychological struggles. Similarly, Shalini Shah's *Women in the Mahabharata* analyzes the representation of female characters and discusses how women are subjected to patriarchal expectations and sacrificial roles within the epic tradition (Shah 67). Shah's work provides important feminist insights into Satyawati's social position and gendered experiences.

Sudhir Kakar's article "Satyawati: A Psychoanalytic Study" presents a psychoanalytic interpretation of Satyawati's personality, ambition, and emotional motivations (Kakar 54). Kakar interprets her desire for power and dynastic continuity as rooted in insecurity and social displacement. While the article offers valuable psychological insights, it does not sufficiently engage with feminist trauma theory or patriarchal oppression.

Modern literary reinterpretations such as Kavita Kane's *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* provide a contemporary feminist perspective on Satyawati's character. Kane reconstructs Satyawati not as a manipulative queen but as a resilient woman struggling against caste prejudice, patriarchal oppression, and emotional isolation (Kane 118). The novel foregrounds her agency, ambition, and trauma, thereby challenging traditional interpretations that reduce her to a politically ambitious figure.

The existing body of literature demonstrates that while Satyawati has been studied from literary, psychoanalytic, and feminist perspectives, limited attention has been given to the intersection of identity crisis and trauma within her character. Therefore, the present study contributes to existing scholarship by employing a Feminist Trauma Approach to analyze how patriarchal structures shape Satyawati's fragmented identity, emotional suffering, and struggle for agency.

V. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The present study, *Quest for Identity Resulting in Trauma: Reflection through the Character of Kuru Queen Satyawati*, investigates the interconnected dimensions of identity formation, patriarchal oppression, and psychological trauma through the character of Satyawati in the Mahabharata. The research is grounded in the Feminist Trauma Approach, which combines trauma theory with feminist literary criticism to analyze how women's experiences of suffering, silencing, and resistance are represented within literary and mythological narratives. The study examines the manner in which patriarchal structures shape Satyawati's identity and contribute to her emotional fragmentation, social displacement, and psychological distress.

The theoretical foundation of this research is primarily based on the works of Judith Herman, Shoshana Felman, and Ann Cvetkovich. Judith Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery*, argues that trauma emerges from experiences involving domination, helplessness, and violation, particularly within systems of power and gender inequality (Herman 33). Herman further emphasizes that women's trauma has historically been ignored or suppressed by patriarchal institutions, making recovery and representation difficult. This framework becomes significant in understanding Satyawati's experiences of abandonment, sexual coercion, emotional isolation, and forced motherhood in the Mahabharata. Her trauma is not merely personal but deeply embedded within social and political structures.

Shoshana Felman's contribution to trauma studies is equally relevant to this research. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Felman and Dori Laub examine how trauma often remains unspoken because language itself becomes inadequate to express pain and suffering (Felman and Laub 5). This concept helps in interpreting the silences surrounding Satyawati's emotional experiences in traditional epic narratives. Although Satyawati plays a decisive role in shaping the Kuru dynasty, the emotional consequences

of her sacrifices and suffering remain largely unacknowledged. The study therefore interprets her silences as symbolic of the suppression of female voices within patriarchal discourse.

The research also draws upon Ann Cvetkovich's theory of cultural trauma presented in *An Archive of Feelings*. Cvetkovich argues that trauma should not only be understood as an individual psychological condition but also as a cultural and social experience shaped by gender, memory, and identity (Cvetkovich 17). This perspective enables the study to analyze Satyawati's identity crisis as a consequence of social exclusion and patriarchal expectations. Her transformation from "Matsyagandha," a marginalized fisherwoman, to the queen of Hastinapura reflects both empowerment and emotional displacement. The multiple identities imposed upon her reveal the instability of feminine selfhood within patriarchal systems.

The study further incorporates feminist literary criticism to examine the representation of women in epic literature. Feminist theorists argue that literary narratives often define women through their relationships with men rather than through their own subjectivity and agency. Simone de Beauvoir observes that woman is historically constructed as the "Other" within patriarchal society (de Beauvoir 26). Similarly, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak critiques the silencing of marginalized female voices and questions whether subaltern women can truly speak within dominant ideological systems (Spivak 287). These feminist perspectives are useful in analyzing how Satyawati's identity is shaped by male authority, dynastic expectations, and social hierarchy.

The methodology adopted for this research is qualitative and interpretative in nature. Since the study focuses on literary representation, psychological interpretation, and feminist analysis, qualitative content analysis has been employed as the primary research method. Qualitative content analysis enables an in-depth examination of themes, symbols, and narrative structures related to identity, trauma, gender oppression, and resistance within the selected texts. This method allows the researcher to interpret hidden meanings, emotional conflicts, and socio-cultural implications associated with Satyawati's character.

The research is primarily based on secondary data sources, including books, journal articles, research papers, and critical essays related to trauma theory, feminist criticism, and mythological studies. Primary texts include the Mahabharata and the Bhagavata Purana, which provide the original narrative framework of Satyawati's life and role in the Kuru dynasty. In addition, Kavita Kane's *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* is used as a modern feminist reinterpretation of Satyawati's character. Kane's text is particularly significant because it reimagines Satyawati not as a morally corrupt or manipulative woman, but as a survivor negotiating power, trauma, and agency within patriarchal structures.

The process of analysis involves close textual reading of significant episodes from Satyawati's life, including her abandonment, social humiliation, encounter with Sage Parashara, marriage to King Shantanu, motherhood, and political decisions concerning the Kuru lineage. These events are analyzed through the lens of feminist trauma theory to understand how trauma influences identity formation and emotional resilience. The study also examines how patriarchal narratives erase or marginalize women's suffering while simultaneously imposing social responsibilities upon them.

Thus, the combined application of feminist trauma theory and qualitative content analysis provides a comprehensive framework for examining Satyawati's psychological and social struggles. The study ultimately seeks to reinterpret Satyawati as a complex female figure whose life reflects the intersections of trauma, gender oppression, identity crisis, and resistance in epic literature.

VI. Discussion and Analysis

6.1 Unveiling the Journey of Kuru Queen "Satyawati"

Satyavati, one of the most influential women in the Mahabharata, occupies a complex position within the socio-political and patriarchal structure of the Kuru dynasty. Although remembered primarily as the queen of Hastinapura and the grandmother of the Kauravas and Pandavas, her life reflects a deeper narrative of displacement, identity conflict, social exclusion, and psychological suffering. Through the lens of Feminist Trauma Theory, Satyawati's character can be interpreted as a woman whose life was continuously shaped by patriarchal control, social marginalization, and emotional sacrifices. Her journey from a fisherwoman to a royal queen reveals the tensions between personal identity and imposed social roles, ultimately leading to a profound identity crisis and trauma.

6.2. Satyawati and Her Real Identity

Satyavati was born to King Uparichara Vasu and the celestial nymph Adrika, who had been cursed to live as a fish. Although biologically connected to royalty and divinity, she was raised in the household of a fisherman chief. Due to her unusual birth from the belly of a fish, she was initially known as Matsyagandha, meaning "the one who smells of fish." This identity became a marker of social inferiority and humiliation. Her upbringing among fishermen concealed her royal lineage, thereby creating a split between her biological identity and her social identity.

In patriarchal societies, identity is often determined by lineage, caste, and social status. Satyawati's life demonstrates how women become victims of imposed identities. Though she possessed royal blood, society recognized her only as a fisherwoman. Simone de Beauvoir argues that woman is often defined not by her own essence but by societal expectations and male-centered structures (Beauvoir). Similarly, Satyawati's identity was constructed through external labels rather than her authentic self.

Her transformation begins when the sage Parashara encounters her while crossing the river Yamuna. Attracted by her beauty, Parashara grants her a divine fragrance and changes her identity from Matsyagandha to Yojanagandha, "the woman whose fragrance spreads for miles." This transformation symbolizes the patriarchal tendency to redefine women according to male desire. Though Satyawati gains physical and symbolic elevation, her agency remains limited because her identity continues to depend upon male intervention.

6.3 Crisis in Satyawati's Life

Satyawati's identity crisis emerges from the conflict between her personal self and the identities imposed upon her by society. Erik Erikson defines identity crisis as a psychological struggle arising from uncertainty regarding one's role and sense of self (Erikson). Satyawati's life repeatedly reflects this struggle.

As a young woman, she was torn between her hidden royal birth and her socially inferior upbringing. Despite her intelligence and ambition, she remained conscious of the stigma attached to her lower social status. Her marriage to King Shantanu intensified this crisis. Shantanu desired her beauty, but her father demanded that only Satyawati's future sons should inherit the throne. This condition forced Bhishma to renounce his claim to kingship and take a lifelong vow of celibacy. Although this act secured Satyawati's position as queen, it also burdened her with guilt and emotional conflict.

Feminist theorists argue that patriarchal societies frequently position women as instruments of dynastic continuity rather than autonomous individuals. Satyawati's marriage was not merely a union of affection but a political arrangement centered on succession and lineage. Her worth became associated with her ability to produce heirs for the Kuru dynasty. Thus, her personal desires and emotional needs were overshadowed by her reproductive role.

The crisis deepened after the deaths of her sons Chitrangada and Vichitravirya. With no direct heirs to continue the dynasty, Satyawati was compelled to summon Vyasa, her son born through Parashara, to perform *niyoga* with the widowed queens. This incident exposes another dimension of her fractured identity. She was simultaneously a mother, queen, political strategist, and custodian of dynastic survival. Each role conflicted with the other, leaving her psychologically burdened.

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity explains that women are often forced to perform socially acceptable roles that suppress their authentic selves (Butler). Satyawati's life becomes a continuous performance of duty, sacrifice, and political responsibility. Beneath these imposed roles lies a woman struggling with insecurity, guilt, and emotional isolation.

6.4 Trauma Emerging from Identity Crisis

Feminist Trauma Theory emphasizes that trauma experienced by women often originates from systemic oppression, silencing, and patriarchal violence rather than isolated incidents. Satyawati's trauma is cumulative and deeply connected to her unstable identity. Her earliest trauma can be traced to social humiliation. Being identified as Matsyagandha subjected her to symbolic degradation. Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth explains that trauma is not simply a painful event but a wound that repeatedly returns through memory and psychological suffering (Caruth). Satyawati's awareness of her social inferiority likely remained embedded within her consciousness even after becoming queen.

The encounter with Parashara also carries traumatic implications. Although often romanticized in mythological narratives, the incident reveals unequal power relations between a sage and a young woman. Satyawati consented under conditions shaped by fear, authority, and social vulnerability. Feminist readings interpret such episodes as examples of patriarchal coercion masked as divine destiny. The secrecy surrounding Vyasa's birth further intensified her emotional burden, forcing her to suppress a significant part of her past identity.

Her marriage to Shantanu introduced another layer of trauma. Bhishma's terrible vow, taken to fulfill her father's demands, became a source of emotional guilt. Satyawati indirectly became responsible for Bhishma's lifelong renunciation of marriage and kingship. Trauma in feminist discourse often emerges from internalized guilt and self-blame imposed upon women by patriarchal expectations. Though she gained royal status, the emotional cost of this elevation remained immense.

The deaths of her sons created maternal trauma and political anxiety. As the protector of the Kuru lineage, Satyawati witnessed the gradual collapse of familial stability. The practice of *niyoga* involving Vyasa and the widowed queens further reflected her desperation to preserve dynastic continuity. However, these actions also reproduced cycles of emotional suffering and patriarchal control over women's bodies.

Satyavati's life embodies the struggle between personal desires and societal expectations, transforming her from a marginalized figure to one of the most powerful women in the Mahabharata. Satyavati's later life is marked by loneliness, fear, and helplessness as she witnesses the growing conflicts within the Kuru family. The dynasty she struggled to preserve ultimately moves toward destruction. Her trauma therefore becomes intergenerational, extending beyond her personal suffering to the catastrophic fate of the Kuru kingdom. Feminist trauma scholars argue that women often bear the burden of preserving family and social structures while simultaneously suffering from those very systems. Satyavati embodies this paradox.

VII. Conclusion

Satyavati's character in the Mahabharata represents more than a mythological queen; she symbolizes the psychological and emotional struggles of women trapped within patriarchal structures. Her real identity remained fragmented between her royal birth and marginalized upbringing, leading to a lifelong identity crisis. This crisis intensified through societal expectations, political responsibilities, and imposed gender roles. Through the framework of Feminist Trauma Theory, her experiences reveal how patriarchal systems produce trauma by denying women autonomy, silencing their desires, and reducing them to instruments of lineage and power.

Satyavati's life demonstrates that trauma is not only caused by singular tragic events but also by continuous emotional suppression, identity fragmentation, and social marginalization. Her journey from Matsyagandha to the queen of Hastinapura reflects the painful transformation of a woman who gained power externally yet remained internally wounded. Thus, Satyavati emerges as a powerful figure whose identity and trauma continue to resonate within feminist literary discourse.

Satyavati's transformation from Matsyagandha, the daughter of a fisherman, to the queen of Hastinapura represents one of the most significant narratives of identity formation and social mobility in the Mahabharata. Her early identity was deeply shaped by social stigma and marginalization. The name Matsyagandha, meaning "the one who smells of fish," symbolized not only her occupation-based social location but also the rigid caste and gender hierarchies of ancient patriarchal society. Although she was biologically connected to royal lineage through King Uparichara Vasu, her social upbringing among fishermen denied her recognition and dignity within the larger social order. Feminist interpretations of identity suggest that women's identities are often constructed through external labels imposed by patriarchal institutions rather than through self-definition. In Satyavati's case, her identity as a fisherwoman overshadowed her innate worth and concealed her true lineage, creating a fractured sense of self. Thus, her early life reflects the tension between biological identity and socially assigned identity, demonstrating how women in patriarchal societies are frequently denied agency over their own selfhood.

The encounter between Satyavati and the sage Parashara marks a critical turning point in her transformation. Through Parashara's divine intervention, Satyavati loses the fish-like odor associated with her identity and acquires a celestial fragrance, earning the name Yojanagandha. Symbolically, this transformation reflects society's tendency to validate women only after they conform to socially desirable standards of beauty and femininity. While the transformation elevates her status and prepares her entry into royal life, it also reveals the patriarchal dynamics underlying female identity construction. Her social acceptance becomes dependent upon male recognition and divine approval rather than her own individuality or merit. Feminist theorists argue that patriarchal cultures often reshape women's identities according to male desire and social utility. Satyavati's transformation therefore cannot be viewed merely as a personal evolution; rather, it is a process through which her body, identity, and social position are reconstructed to fit the expectations of power and patriarchy. This shift simultaneously empowers and objectifies her, placing her within a system where her value becomes linked to political and dynastic significance.

Satyavati's eventual rise as the queen of Hastinapura further intensifies her struggle with identity, as she is compelled to negotiate multiple and often conflicting roles within the royal household. As queen, wife, mother, and preserver of the Kuru lineage, she occupies a position of immense authority, yet her power remains deeply entangled with patriarchal expectations. Her marriage to King Shantanu is secured only after Bhishma renounces his claim to the throne, an act that indirectly burdens Satyavati with emotional guilt and political responsibility. Her transformation into royalty does not erase her past but instead forces her to continuously reconcile her marginalized origins with her elevated social position. This internal conflict reflects the psychological dimensions of identity crisis, where personal history and social expectations collide. Moreover, her persistent efforts to preserve the Kuru dynasty after the deaths of her sons demonstrate how her identity becomes inseparable from dynastic survival. Consequently, Satyavati's journey illustrates that transformation is not simply a movement toward empowerment but also a complex negotiation between selfhood, social acceptance, and patriarchal obligation. Her life reveals how personal transformation can redefine a woman's place in society while simultaneously exposing the emotional and psychological costs of such redefinition.

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