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Cultural Conformity and Feminine Struggles: Examining Internalised Misogyny through New Historicism and Collective Unconscious in Shevantibai M. Nikambe's *Ratanbai*

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Abstract

The study critically examines cultural conformity and internalised misogyny in Nikambe's Ratanbai, which serves as a site of cultural negotiation, highlighting the tension between tradition and modernity. The paper, framed through the interdisciplinary lenses of Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism and Carl Jung's concept of the collective unconscious, explores the theme of internalised misogyny as experienced by a high-caste Hindu woman in late 19th-century colonial India. Internalised misogyny is not only the result of historical and cultural conditions but also a representation of deep-rooted, archetypal narratives that are embedded in the collective unconscious of a society in transition. Employing the concept of the collective unconscious and situating Ratanbai's struggles within the context of broader historical transitions, this analysis integrates Stephen Greenblatt's theory of cultural improvisation, and it evaluates the archetypal and symbolic mechanisms that sustain patriarchal ideologies in the female psyche. The novella offers a multitude of perspectives regarding the interactions of gender, class, culture, and history in colonised India, particularly regarding the dichotomy of traditional obedience and modern self-determination, as well as the themes of education through which women pursue consciousness and the metaphorical framing of Ratanbai's journey as a moral and spiritual struggle.

Keywords: internalised misogyny, new historicism, collective unconscious, cultural improvisation, archetypes and narratives, patriarchal narratives.

Introduction

Amidst the political and social reforms of late nineteenth-century colonial India, gender emerged as a contested category, generating literary and intellectual interventions that sought to redefine the roles and expectations of women. Within this shifting socio-political landscape, a body of literature emerged, written both by reform-minded men and a small but formidable group of female authors, which reflected, resisted, and often internalised the very structures

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it sought to challenge. At the heart of many such writings lies a complex psychological and ideological phenomenon: internalised misogyny, the unconscious absorption and reproduction of patriarchal norms by women themselves. This paper explores how internalised misogyny operated within elite Hindu society at the time, as both a product of cultural conditioning and a strategy of social survival, through a close reading of Shevantibai M. Nikambe's novella *Ratanbai: A Sketch of a Bombay High Caste Hindu Wife* (1895). While major reformist narratives such as Pandita Ramabai's *The High- Caste Hindu Woman* (1887) exposed the brutality of Hindu patriarchy, they also often portrayed women as either victims in need of salvation or as moral gatekeepers of tradition. Similarly, literary works like K. Madhaviah's *The Story of a Widow* (1910), O. Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* (1889), and Toru Dutt's *Bianca*, or *Young Spanish Maiden* (1878) highlight the struggles of educated women but often frame these within patriarchal approval or containment. Even Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's visionary *Sultana's Dream* (1905), while utopian in tone, reveals the degree to which women's voices had to be radically reimagined to escape male oversight. In contrast, Ratanbai is striking for its introspective tone and for dramatising the internalisation of gendered obedience not through spectacle, but through emotional self-negotiation and quiet conformity. Nikambe, an educator and social worker associated with Pandita Ramabai's 'Sharda Sadan' (To provide education and a haven for young widows) and later founder of the 'Arya Mahila Samaj' (promoted women's education and fight against child marriage), writes not as a distant observer but as a participant in the reformist movements of her time. Yet her novella diverges from the more polemical reform literature by focusing on the psychological entrapment of a high-caste Hindu woman caught between duty and desire, education and obedience, and tradition and modernity. The protagonist, Ratanbai, enacts her social role with devotion, but she also gradually reveals the consequences: guilt, self-doubt, and the repression of independent thought. Her emotional fragility is not a natural feminine trait but the result of cultural conditioning that renders obedience a moral imperative.

It is implied that the characters in the novella do not naturally possess identity but rather perform it in response to societal pressures, as Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* demonstrates how identities are created via negotiation with power. Correspondingly, Jung's discussion of self-effacing and sacrificial female archetypes in his work, *Symbols of Transformation,* underlines the unconscious forces shaping the protagonist's self-conception and behavioural patterns. By combining these frameworks, the study reinterprets Ratanbai as a text in which internalised misogyny manifests as a culturally scripted means of survival rather than as passive acceptance. Although often dismissed as a conservative reformist work, the novella deserves scholarly re-evaluation as a subtle critique of patriarchal ideology from within its boundaries. Rather than implying submission, the story's subdued narrative and introspective tone offer new feminist possibilities based on the real-life contradictions of Hindu elite womanhood. By foregrounding the emotional, cultural, and ideological mechanisms of internalised misogyny, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of early Indian women's writing as both a mirror of social norms and a critique of them. Through a dual theoretical approach, Ratanbai is revisited to reestablish the novella's significance for feminist literary historiography and to place it in a broader discussion about colonial India's literary resistance, social conditioning, and gendered selfhood.

Internalised Misogyny through Collective Unconscious

Internalised misogyny is examined in this study as a psychological manifestation of patriarchal ideologies embedded in the collective unconscious memories of Indians. In her article 'The Curse of Internalised Misogyny and Self-Sabotage – And How I'm Learning to Challenge It', Kyaio defines internalised misogyny as "sexism turned inward towards ourselves and outward towards other women". It occurs when women internalise and uphold the very gender norms that oppress them. By internalising symbolic gender norms, Sorana-Alexandra Constantinescu further contextualises this process as a "naturalising" of subordination (126). Jung defines his concept of collective unconscious as an inherited stratum of the psyche made up of archetypes – primordial imagery shared across cultures and generations, which provides theoretical support for this unconscious absorption of patriarchal ideology. (Jung 3-5) According to Jung, these archetypes have a subtle yet significant impact on gender identities and appear in myths, dreams, and cultural narratives. Central among these are the Anima and Animus archetypes, representing the feminine image in the male psyche and the masculine image in the female psyche, respectively. Jung associates Anima with Yin (moon, dark, moist) and Animus with Yang (sun, light, dry), illustrating a gendered polarity within the unconscious. (Jung 14, 109) Characters like Vithabai and Kakubai, Ratanbai's mother-in-law, exhibit dominant Animus tendencies such as control, authority, and repression, which frequently override the caring feminine ideal. These symbolic inversions are effectively represented in the novella. Ironically, it is the male figures, such as Mr Vasudevrao, who exhibit Anima qualities, showing empathy, emotional involvement, and a progressive attitude toward the education and empowerment of their daughters and wives.

The novella foregrounds how women not only endure but often sustain the patriarchal structures that incarcerate them. The internalisation of sexist views is demonstrated by Nikambe through characters such as Kakubai, Vithabai, and Anandibai, particularly in the way elder women police younger ones. These women are compelled by deeply ingrained traditional gender conventions to seek patriarchal authority for validation, frequently at the expense of other women's autonomy. For instance, Kakubai mocks Ratanbai's attendance at a party, remarking:

> I cannot think what enjoyment the girls find in going to parties... Did we even handle a book? We went to the temples daily and worshipped Maravati... The girls of these days want to go to school, to parties, and sabhas, and eat fruit from the mlench hands. (Nikambe 48-49)

Vithabai, similarly, accuses Ratanbai of impropriety to prevent her schooling. Ratanbai protests, "You know Vithabai and her nature; she is against education and therefore trying her best to remove me from school" (Nikambe 78). These actions exemplify internalised misogyny—what bell hooks describes as "sexist oppression... internalised" so deeply that "women can and do perpetuate sexist oppression... occasionally disparaging those who challenge patriarchal oppression". (hooks 12) hooks further explains that women often ally with patriarchal institutions, believing "we are valueless and obtain value only by relating to or bonding with men". (hooks 43) Simone de Beauvoir concurs: "Many women are busy fighting one another rather than helping each other". (de Beauvoir 644) This self-negation-based interpersonal conflict is reflected in Sorana-Alexandra Constantinescu's observation that internalised misogyny causes women to devalue others as well as themselves, often measuring value against ableist, patriarchal, or racialised standards. (123) In the novella, such dynamics are not abstract

as they materialise vividly in the psychological collapse of Tarabai, who, unjustly blamed for her husband's death, attempts suicide after Kakubai's unkind remarks: "thinking that she was the cause of misery to others, [she] resolved to do away with her life". (Nikambe 83) Similarly, Ratanbai's statement, "I wish I had known how to converse in English... Oh! what shall I do with myself the whole day?" (Nikambe 62–63) underscore how profoundly women have internalised the value system that subjugates them.

In contrast, male characters such as Kamallabai's husband, Mr Vasudevrao, and Prataprao advocate for the education of their wives and daughters. Kamallabai's husband pleads, "Nothing will give me so much pleasure as to see my wife being educated at a good school". (Nikambe 65) Mr Vasudevrao asserts, "If Ratan was in my charge, I would send her to school today". (Nikambe 65) Even though it stays within the boundaries of benevolent patriarchy, Prataprao's persistence eventually helps Ratanbai's education. Indrani Sen rightly notes that Ratanbai's entry into "colonial modernity" is shaped as "a male project, propelled by reformist males, such as fathers and husbands". (10) Chandani Lokuge echoes this in her introduction to the novella: "Ratan's education is continued to its desired end only because of the intervention of her husband, who insists on it... The potential of the male voice... is recommended by the writer". (28) Ratanbai, washing his feet and praying for his glory, asserts his authority while Prataprao reminds her that her empowerment is conditional. This ceremonial interchange at the end of the novella moderates this seeming advocacy. This duality is what Mahadevi Verma critiques in Shrinkhala ki Kadiyan: "असंख्य विषमताओं का कारण, स्त्री का अपने स्वतंत्र व्यक्तित्व को भुलाकर □ विवेकशीलता को खो देना है..." (Verma 8) (The root of countless inequalities lies in a woman forgetting her own identity and losing her ability to reason... She seeks validation in a man's satisfaction, rather than within herself.) Verma's insights underscore the novella's core tension: women's societal conditioning keeps them from realising their subjugation. Through these symbolic and psychological portrayals, Nikambe reveals that women function simultaneously as victims and custodians of patriarchal structures, making Ratanbai a critical exploration of how collective unconscious archetypes perpetuate internalised misogyny.

Internalised Misogyny through New Historicism

Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism emphasises the interdependence of literature and history. Rather than treating historical background as external to literature, New Historicism insists that both literary and non-literary texts are shaped by the same cultural forces and discursive structures. At its core is the idea that texts do not merely reflect reality but participate in the production and circulation of cultural power (Greenblatt 1-9). A central concept in Greenblatt's theory is 'self-fashioning', defined as the process by which individuals consciously or unconsciously construct their identities through available ideological models. This process, Greenblatt writes, entails a "power to impose a shape upon oneself... an aspect of the more general power to control identity, that of others at least as often as one's own". (Greenblatt 3) Another closely related idea is 'cultural improvisation', which describes how people adjust their behaviour and identity within dominant structures in order to survive or gain authority. In literary analysis, this provides a framework to read characters' identities as socially scripted performances, not autonomous expressions. In colonial and patriarchal contexts, New Historicism is especially insightful, where identity formation is intensely shaped by competing discourses of power. Literature reflects these tensions, revealing how internalised misogyny, far from being merely psychological, emerges as a culturally conditioned performance of submission and conformity.

Colonial India in the late 19th century provides the historical context for the text's examination of evolving discourses around women's roles, independence, and educational opportunities. This context enables a New Historicist reading that views the protagonist's internalised misogyny as both historically situated and discursively produced. (Greenblatt 1-9)

According to Greenblatt's concept of self-fashioning, personal identity is not an isolated essence but something moulded through continuous negotiation with the ideological forces of society. Thus, cultural improvisation becomes a performative process by which individuals align themselves with the expectations set by cultural, political, and social institutions. These conflicts have a significant impact on Ratanbai's personality. She remains entangled in the traditional role prescribed by Hindu patriarchy. She is the embodiment of "duty, obedience, and submission", according to the narrator: "her duty was to please and to be most obedient". (Nikambe 23) However, her exposure to modern education and reformist discourse unsettles these inherited ideals. As Ratanbai endeavours to reconcile her growing sense of self with the burden of social expectations, the contradiction between tradition and modernity is not resolved but rather relocated throughout the story. Her small, symbolic gestures, like "merrily hum[ming] one of the infant school tunes and... singing softly a Sanskrit shloka" (Nikambe 25), become emblematic of cultural improvisation: acts of subtle resistance that work within, rather than against, dominant paradigms.

Critics such as Indrani Sen note that the novella "presents an exemplary, feminine model of Indian womanhood: docile, passive, eager to please". (Sen 20) However, this interpretation can be expanded to emphasise how Ratanbai critiques those very ideals from within. Although Ratanbai does not overtly rebel, her internal development, which was spurred by education and introspection, indicates an intentional transition from blind conformity to conscious negotiation of her identity. Chandani Lokuge, who describes Nikambe as "a diplomatic rather than radical educationist" and notes that "her reformist educational program was based on working through, rather than against, traditional ideology," echoes this moderate reformist position. (Lokuge 18) The novella, therefore, does not stage an ideological rupture but rather a slow reconfiguration of femininity within permissible bounds. Even the ending of the novella supports this view; in a climactic ritual exchange, Prataprao reminds Ratanbai that her empowerment remains conditional; in response, Ratanbai washes his feet and prays for his glory, re-enacting her subordinate role. (Nikambe) Rather than breaking patriarchal accommodation, this moment embodies its performative logic. Her empowerment is earned, but at the cost of reaffirming patriarchal validation.

In sum, Ratanbai can be read as a compelling illustration of cultural bricolage, a term resonant with Greenblatt's improvisation, in which identities are fashioned within, not outside, the constraints of hegemonic power. The novella subtly reveals how internalised misogyny, far from being a static condition, is a fluid cultural strategy employed by women negotiating their place in a world shaped by colonial and patriarchal authority.

Conclusion

In the context of colonial India, internalised misogyny has been examined as a historical and psychological phenomenon in Shevantibai M. Nikambe's *Ratanbai: A Sketch of a Bombay High Caste Hindu Wife*. This paper employs Carl Jung's concept of the collective unconscious alongside Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism to examine how patriarchal values are transmitted, symbolised, and legitimised through enduring archetypal patterns and historically

embedded power structures. This research offers a multidisciplinary textual analysis that employs Greenblatt's theory of cultural improvisation to contextualise these conducts within the broader sociopolitical context of 19th-century Indian femininity while also incorporating Jungian psychoanalysis to interpret the symbolic dimensions of gendered behaviour. The study makes a distinct contribution by linking archetypal unconscious mechanisms with the social reform narratives of colonial India, showing that women were not merely passive recipients of patriarchal ideology but were also active participants in sustaining caste-inflected gender hierarchies. It underscores the contradictory position of upper-caste women, who were both beneficiaries and victims of patriarchy, thus complicating dominant narratives that portray women as uniformly oppressed within reform movements. It fills a notable gap in the field by bringing together historical context and psychoanalytic insight in the analysis of early Indian feminist writing. While prior studies focused either on the historical background or literary narrative of reform, this paper bridges those domains by revealing how caste, class, and gender ideologies converge and operate through both the unconscious psyche and cultural systems. Future research could build upon this foundation by incorporating *dalit* feminist voices and comparing them with upper-caste reformist narratives to investigate how internalised subjugation varies across caste lines. This would deepen the understanding of intersectional patriarchy in colonial India and the limitations of caste-blind feminist reform.

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