

Gender Politics in Lakshmi Kannan's *The Glass Bead Curtain*

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Abstract

The Glass Bead Curtain by Lakshmi Kannan provides a striking depiction of gender dynamics in a patriarchal South Indian society. The book examines the challenges women encounter while juggling their own goals with inflexible social norms. It follows multiple generations of Tamil women over almost a century, emphasising how cultural conventions influence their identities and interpersonal connections. The novel, which is partially set in the 1920s and 1940s, depicts a time of profound social and cultural change as new concepts on gender roles, marriage, and family structures were introduced by the nationalist movement. Women who want autonomy face both opportunities and challenges as a result of these changes. Kannan's art illustrates how power relations function in families and communities and reflects more general feminist issues. This paper examines key moments that reveal the intersection of individual freedom and societal constraints, showing how Kannan portrays women's resilience and their search for identity in a male dominated world.

Keywords: Gender Politics, Patriarchy, Feminism, Identity, Power Dynamics.

Gender politics is a major factor in modern literature's challenge to established social systems. Lakshmi Kannan's *The Glass Bead Curtain* examines the status of women in a patriarchal society in post-colonial South India. Concerns about marriage, education, and women's fight for equality and identity are all highlighted in the novel. Despite coming from a wealthy Tamil Brahmin family, the main character Kalyani still has to deal with social constraints. The book highlights women's emotional and intellectual challenges as well as gender inequity through a variety of female characters from diverse backgrounds. Beyond national borders, Miss Susan O'Leary is a symbol of bravery and female empowerment. All things considered, the book offers a feminist critique of gender inequality and societal conventions.

"Kalyani was expected to act like an adult from the moment she got married, marking the end of her childhood." (Kannan, 23). The terrible reality of child marriage in traditional Indian society is starkly illustrated by this quotation. When Kalyani is married, she is only an adolescent. At this point in her life, she should be enjoying her youth, going to school, spending time with friends, and slowly learning about the world. Nevertheless, marriage changes everything

immediately. From that moment on, people expect her to behave maturely, speak carefully, and conduct herself as an adult woman, “Kalyani gained the fortitude to live life on her own terms, even beyond the glass bead barrier.” (142)

One of the most significant symbols in the book is the “glass bead curtain.” Although it seems lovely and delicate, a curtain composed of glass beads nonetheless divides areas. It stands for the customs, expectations, and constraints that society imposes on women, which are unseen obstacles. Moving past this curtain represents Kalyani’s development as a person. She gradually becomes more self-assured, knowledgeable, and independent. She starts to see how valuable she is. She begins to make her own choices rather than mindlessly adhering to social norms. Her inner power is evident in this metamorphosis. The author concludes with a positive message: despite the obstacles society erects, women are capable of overcoming them and forging their own identities.

The story by Kannan offers a critique of the gender stereotypes that still limit women’s freedom. The author creates female characters who don’t conform to social norms. By highlighting women’s inner anguish and emotional complexity, Kannan challenges the notion that women’s duties are fundamentally passive or defined by family responsibilities. Feminist readings of *The Glass Bead Curtain* highlight the importance of female unity and strength. The novel’s female characters’ relationships act as a site of resistance, giving one another the power and emotional support they need to survive in a patriarchal society.” Athai had a strong and inquisitive intellect despite wearing the white clothing of a widow.” (67). Widows were supposed to live quiet, simple, and constrained lives in traditional society. They were not permitted to live freely, join festivities, or wear colorful clothing. The white clothing represents melancholy and social exclusion. Athai is not like other widows, though. Her inner world is full of intelligence and curiosity, despite the fact that she adheres to external traditions.

The importance of education and financial independence in empowering women is a central component of the novel’s feminist critique. Kannan illustrates how education may be a tool for escaping the limitations of social expectations through the protagonist’s journey. The protagonist’s scholarly endeavours reflect a quest for understanding, self-discovery, and eventually freedom. The story also heavily emphasises economic freedom, as women who achieve financial independence are shown to be better able to make their voices heard in their families and communities. This is a striking message about the significance of women’s intellectual and financial empowerment.

She gained understanding and self-worth as a result of her education Books provided access to a world outside of one’s home Freedom of choice was promised by economic independence Her voice grew weaker without money Identity and confidence were shaped by learning Freedom became a pipe fantasy due to dependence. (41)

She becomes more conscious and starts to appreciate herself as a person as a result of her education. She can envision possibilities and independence thanks to books, which provide her access to a world beyond her household. Freedom of choice is another promise of education, particularly when it results in financial independence. Her voice weakens and she is unable to openly express her thoughts or make her own judgments when she is not financially independent. Because of her continued reliance on others, her aspirations of independence become a “pipe fantasy” an impractical goal. Therefore, the paragraph highlights that without both economic independence and education, true freedom is lacking. Although education fosters self-worth and self-assurance, this independence cannot be completely realized without financial resources.

Kannan also addresses the intersectionality of gender, class, and caste, demonstrating how these multiple layers of identity intersect to affect the characters’ lives. The novel’s female characters experience oppression due to their social and economic standing in addition to their gender. Class and caste differences are presented as major obstacles to human freedom and upward mobility. The

characters' difficulties are made more complex by this intersectionality, which demonstrates how gender politics cannot be comprehended in a vacuum. According to Kannan's story, women won't be truly empowered until these various forms of oppression are addressed.

Her reliance on money contributed to her incarceration. Freedom seemed far away without her own source of income. Dependency restricted her voice and options. She became silent within imperceptible bounds. (81)

This paragraph emphasizes how a woman's imprisonment is strengthened by her economic dependency. She cannot truly enjoy independence because she is financially dependent on others. Without her own source of income, freedom appears distant and unachievable. Both her alternatives and her ability to express her beliefs are limited by her dependence. As a result, she stops talking because of subtle social and economic hurdles rather than because she has nothing to say. The unwritten guidelines and constraints that govern her existence are referred to as these "imperceptible bounds." The paragraph makes it abundantly evident that having a voice, options, and personal freedom all depend on being financially independent.

The novel vividly portrays the negative consequences of child marriage, including mismatched relationships, incompatibility, early widowhood, and the resulting suffering of young girls. Kalyani's struggle, where she becomes taller than her husband, ends in tragedy. Kalyani's sister and sister-in-law face the threat of rejection for not knowing English, but Kalyani's skill in reading and speaking the language makes her the "savior" of the situation. Her family asks her to help Karpagam. The novel adds humor to these challenges, turning them into lighter issues. Kalyani becomes part of a turbulent, changing period, where laughter lightens the mood, and the family members grow closer, united through increased love, understanding, and mutual acceptance.

Child marriage prematurely ended her youth." Duties she didn't chose took the place of her dreams. Before it could influence her destiny, education came to an end. Understanding life came after responsibility. In a borrowed role, her voice was not heard. Social custom took away innocence. (29)

This section describes how a girl's childhood and goals are cut short by child marriage. She is thrust into adult responsibilities before she is emotionally or mentally ready. The obligations imposed upon her replace her personal goals. she does not select them. Her schooling ends too soon, before it can have an impact on her future or help her make her own decisions. She only fully comprehends life after being burdened by responsibilities, illustrating how unfairly her growth is delayed. She loses her identity and her voice is ignored when she lives in a "borrowed role" as a wife or caregiver, which silences women and denies them the opportunity to develop, learn, and follow their own life's path.

At the core of the narrative is the patriarchal structure that dominates the characters' lives. Kannan places the story in a society where traditional roles define the fate of women. From the very beginning, the novel presents women as subjugated to male authority, often forced to accept their societal roles without question. Their behaviours and identities are shaped by the cultural and familial customs that are ingrained in this framework. The female characters in *The Glass Bead Curtain* fight to speak up in a society that threatens their independence, while the men characters are typically viewed as the decision makers. However, in spite of these limitations, Kannan's female heroines are not passively submissive, rather, they skilfully negotiate the patriarchal system, pushing its limits through nuanced forms of defiance.

The Glass Bead Curtain by Lakshmi Kannan is an engaging examination of gender politics in a patriarchal society. Kannan questions conventional gender conventions and emphasises the complexity of women's lives amid a shifting social context through her nuanced portrayal of female characters and their fights for identification and agency. The book emphasises the value

of female solidarity, economic independence, and education in opposing patriarchal systems. Kannan also emphasises how gender inequality affects people psychologically. Gender politics have an impact on women's inner lives, as demonstrated by the emotional limitations, self doubt, and alienation that female characters often experience. The symbolic presence of walls reflects the invisible restrictions on women's voices and choices. But the narrative also makes references to consciousness and resistance, suggesting that self realization is the first step toward toppling repressive structures.

In the end, Kannan's writing provides a humanist analysis of gender relations by showing how gender roles could be reevaluated and inspiring readers to acknowledge the necessity of empowerment and equality in both private and public domains. In summary, *The Glass Bead Curtain* is a potent literary analysis of gender politics that highlights the day to day experiences of women who are subjected to patriarchal norms. Lakshmi Kannan asserts the value of autonomy, identity, and silent resistance in the fight for gender equality while urging an examination of conventional gender norms through nuanced storytelling and profound symbolic meaning

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