

# Deconstructing Consent: A Feminist Reading of Patriarchal Power and Hegemonic Masculinity in Indian Society

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the autobiographies of Baby Halder and Temsula Ao, focusing on how their personal narratives reflect the complexities of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal oppression within Indian society. By analyzing Halder's *A Life Less Ordinary* and Ao's *Once Upon a Life*, the paper highlights how patriarchal ideologies shape their childhood, family dynamics, and personal choices. It discusses how both women, despite facing physical and emotional abuse, feel compelled to justify male dominance, either through cultural conditioning or survival mechanisms. Through a detailed analysis of their life stories, the paper explores how these women navigate and, at times, unknowingly legitimize the power structures that dominate their lives. The research engages with Simone de Beauvoir's feminist philosophy and Raewyn Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity to analyze how women internalize patriarchal ideologies, often justifying male dominance due to socio-cultural conditioning. Post-truth operates through selective narratives that obscure structural inequalities, compelling women to conform to traditional femininity while paradoxically seeking autonomy. The paper reflects on the significance of their eventual autonomy and achievements, illustrating how their personal empowerment emerges only when they break free from these oppressive structures. Ultimately, this study contributes to understanding the intersectionality of gender, caste, and patriarchy in literature, while emphasizing how autobiographical narratives can challenge societal norms and foster advocacy for gender equality. Through these works, the paper underscores the transformative potential of literature in addressing marginalization and promoting resistance against gender-based oppression in the contemporary world.*

**Keywords:** Hegemonic Masculinity, Post-Truth, Patriarchy, Gender Inequality, Resistance, Autobiographical Narratives .

## Introduction

The media is increasingly reporting on violence against women, whether physical or mental, in the present post-truth era. The public is susceptible to sensational news on social media, which often relies on unreliable sources. In the context of public deception and wilful ignorance, Serbian-American playwright Steve Tesich used the term “post-truth” for the first time in 1992 in his article “A Government of Lies” in *The Nation* (12). Oxford Dictionary defines Post-Truth as “...relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (“Post-Truth, n. and adj.”). Post Truth amounts to a form of ideological supremacy, whereas its practitioners are trying to

compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not. It is not necessarily fake but ideologically motivated. It is careful selection of some facts to establish a certain argument and deliberately ignoring the rest. Emotion devoid of truth constitutes the foundation of Post Truth. People are driven by personal interest and whatever serves this interest, they support it and believe it. Logical arguments and conscience are threatened, and influential public speakers become successful. People are building their perception with their limited knowledge. Truth has been replaced by believability. The post-truth era, where objective truth is ignored and facts and opinions are blurred, misinformation and manipulation of facts result in more heinous activities targeting women. Misinformation campaigns, spread of misogynistic viewpoints, online harassment, etc. foster a culture which even encourages this violence. These activities play a major role in portraying women as weak and vulnerable. A 2018 analysis about violence against women in different countries by WHO published on its official website shows how violence against women has become a global issue with its shocking numbers of women being subjected to physical or sexual violence. This analysis was conducted by WHO on behalf of the UN Interagency working group on violence against women. The prevalence data was collected from 2000-2018 across 161 countries and areas. As per the data, it was found that worldwide, nearly 1 in 3, or 30%, of women have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner or non-partner sexual violence or both.

### **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

This study adopts a feminist reading of power to deconstruct the element of consent as represented in women's autobiographical narratives. Employing a qualitative analytical framework grounded in feminist theory, cultural critique and textual interpretation, the paper examines how women internalise patriarchal ideologies and, through socio-cultural conditioning, often justify male dominance. By interpreting personal experiences within larger ideological structures, the study reveals how consent becomes a socially manufactured form of compliance rather than an expression of agency. The analysis emphasises how narratives of subjugation transform into acts of resistance once women recognise and challenge this conditioning. The selected texts *A Life Less Ordinary* (2013) by Baby Halder and *Once Upon a Life* (2019) by Temsula Ao were chosen for their compelling portrayal of Indian women negotiating power, identity and autonomy within patriarchal settings. Their autobiographical form offers authentic insights into the intersection of gender, class and social conditioning making them significant for a feminist deconstruction of consent and patriarchal authority.

### **Literature Review**

This review examines key feminist and sociological frameworks that inform the study, analysing how patriarchal ideologies and hegemonic masculinity have been theorised and represented within cultural and literary contexts. It draws upon the feminist philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir and Raewyn Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity to understand the normalisation of gender-based hierarchies in Indian society. Organised into two thematic subsections, the review first analyses how violence and discrimination against women become embedded within patriarchal structures and then discusses how masculinity itself is socially constructed and perpetuated as a form of dominance. These perspectives establish the theoretical foundation for analysing how autobiographical narratives by Baby Halder and Temsula Ao reveal and resist internalised oppression.

Simon de Beauvoir's analysis of the structures of patriarchy shows how patriarchy constructs and conditions woman as the "other". Her seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949) is an account that identifies patriarchy as "a concrete dispositional power that regulates and reproduces the partitions of gendered inequality and domination despite the absence of any natural or casual principle for their execution" (118). Man as the head of the community and the sole bread winner of the family sets traditional gender norms which silence the women and they start internalizing their oppression. One researcher has pointed out

“Violence against women is cultivated and normalized in the home and is directly transported into the public sphere” (Chapman 52). As the famous American author and political activist Barbara Ehrenreich points out, “we have been encouraged to think of patriarchy as a solemn undertaking, a millennia-old system designed to keep women down and young men from getting out of line. Its favourite notions, over the centuries have been Honor, Tradition, Power, and Glory” (13). When manhood is cherished, masculine qualities are also praised. The search for an ideal man or manly man results in the construction of the hegemonic masculinity.

Hegemonic Masculinity describes men’s dominant social roles over women and also presents the hierarchy of intermale dominance. This concept is developed by the Australian sociologist, Raewyn Connell in her famous book, “Masculinities” (1995, 2005). This theory takes its origin from the theory of cultural hegemony developed by the Marxist critic, Antonio Gramsci. Hegemony is the dominance or leadership of one state or social group over others. Hegemonic masculinity is defined as a practice that legitimises men’s dominant position in society. It justifies the subordination of the common male population and women, and other marginalised ways of being man (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). Hegemonic masculinity occupies its space in the psyche in the early childhood itself (835). The parents and teachers play significant roles in defining masculinity. Masculinity becomes the epitome of physical strength, aggression, dominance etc. The frequent use of male generic pronouns in the text books, everyday language, the stories they hear make the children gender conscious. Media idealise masculinity through the lens of hegemony and femininity is subordinated. Even the concept of family shown in the commercials reinforces gender hierarchy. Masculinity is celebrated through art and literature, and culture reflects the power relations in the society. Unfortunately, the society has no interest in idealising femininity and the female experience of struggle and oppression continues. The subordinated group of people who had been muted for so long had to follow the ideologies that justified hegemonic masculinity, which stereotyped them as the weaker section. The plight of the Indian women is no different. Priyanka Bhorpujari notes that misogyny permeates the political and cultural landscape in India. One researcher points out that in North India, a dishonourable conduct from the daughter’s side is considered to ruin the family forever. The parents are unfit to show their faces to the ‘biradari’ (community) again, so they think of even killing her (Chowdhry, Enforcing 1020). Chowdhry also writes “The man who beats his wife or the family that beats its bahu are all considered to do the right thing” (Infliction 44). Even though the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act was passed in India in 2005, women are beaten and tortured by their husbands, they are bullied, raped, abused, and even murdered. Wikipedia notes that as per the 2021 annual report of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) in India, 31,677 rape cases were registered across the country; an average of 86 cases daily.

### **Hegemony and Female Personal Narrative**

It is this India that Baby Halder and Temsula Ao belong to. Halder, who was abandoned by her father as a child, became a child bride at the age of 12 and a mother at 13. She left her abusive husband with her three children and worked as a domestic help to support her family. She wrote her autobiography *A Life Less Ordinary* after overcoming numerous obstacles. Temsula Ao who lost her parents when she was a kid, was later controlled by her dominating brother and later by her husband. In her personal narrative, *Once Upon a Life*, she narrates her fractured childhood and her difficulties as a single parent. Despite her hardships, she has become one of the major literary voices of Northeast India. In their autobiographies, both the writers use post-truth narrative and legitimise masculinity unknowingly even if they are oppressed or badly treated in lives by the males around them. This paper focuses on analysing how and why hegemonic masculinity has been legitimised in the post truth era. It also aims at making the women aware of their socially imposed gender identity and femininity and help them raise their voice of resistance against hegemonic masculinity and thereby eliminating the gender inequity prevalent in today’s patriarchal society. They are often compelled to justify male dominance due to socio-cultural conditioning and survival mechanisms.

In their autobiographies, both Baby Halder and Temsula Ao make conscious efforts to legitimize power

inequalities in the society. Patriarchy poses several hazards for women which sometimes can be impossible for them to deal with. In Baby Halder's personal narrative, *A Life Less Ordinary*, one can see how she has been subjected to hegemonic masculinity at different stages of her life. She narrates her miserable and insecure childhood when her father avoids the responsibility of taking care of his family, goes off to his job and eventually stops sending money leaving them to face the abominable conditions alone. What happens to the family after its sole bread winner leaves it behind? How does it affect the normal or ordinary flow of life of his wife and kids? Halder narrates

“Ma asked Baba's friends for help but none of them was in a position to take the burden of another family. Ma also thought of taking up a job, but that would have meant going out of the house, which she had never done. And after all, what work could she do? Another of her worries was: what would people say? But worrying about what people will say does not help to fill on empty stomach, does it?” (2)

It is clear for the readers from the very beginning how her life has been controlled and suffocated by the patriarchal society and how it shuts the doors of opportunity for a woman. She explains her mother's difficulty to go out of her house. It's because she feels insecure that she can't go out of her own house. Her mother can't cope up with the situation anymore and she goes up to the extent of leaving them behind. Halder narrates “Suddenly, it all became too much for her, and one day, with grief in her heart and my little brother in her arms, she just walked away from home” (3). She forces her readers to see how life starts becoming less ordinary for a little girl. The next shock comes when her father decides to marry her elder sister off a few days after their mother leaves them, “Didi wasn't even that old – just fifteen or so. But Baba wasn't willing to wait, and he just married her off so that no one would have anything left to say” (3). Baby's father marries again, and he brings his new wife home to his children. Life is not easy for the kids with their stepmother. They struggle in new circumstances when their elder brother takes independent decision to leave their family to somewhere else. Patriarchal society is ready to accept it. Baby could never think of it. The anxiety of Baby's father to marry her off ends her up in a disastrous marriage. Baby could do nothing except to follow what her father and stepmother asked her to do. She could never imagine a twelve-year-old girl marrying a man who was twenty-six years old. But that is what exactly happened in twelve years and eleven months old Baby Halder's life. Once again, the prevalent hegemonic masculinity in her father takes this decision on her behalf. Baby writes about her marriage “Little did Baby know that this was the beginning of her days of grief and pain, little did she know what the future held for her” (34).

How can marriage bring grief and pain in a woman's life? Baby answers this question with her life. The twelve years old girl must take care of a family now. Soon after her marriage, Baby becomes pregnant. Baby narrates an incident where the pregnant Baby watches the children playing and she wants to join them badly. A girl who has just turned a teenager wants to play with the children. But the same teenager girl is a wife, and seven months pregnant now. Patriarchy does not spare even childish innocence. At the age of fourteen, Baby gives birth to her elder son. A few days later she comes to know that her elder sister has passed away. She is just another hapless woman who ended lying wrapped in a sheet in the courtyard with no trace of her husband anywhere around her. Yet another victim of domestic violence! Still the woman, interpellated by patriarchy, goes on justifying her husband. After Baby comes back from her in law's house, a man named Ajit used to come to her house and play with her son. Though Baby soon realizes his real intention is and tries to avoid him, her husband suspects her to have an affair with him, and he starts beating her badly every day. Baby narrates “And for no fault of mine, I became the bad woman in the neighbourhood, while he got away scot-free” (81).

The patriarchal society is always alert to find fault with the woman and Baby goes through this terrible experience again and again. The real problem begins here. When a woman is subjected to prolonged violence and trauma, she becomes interpellated and starts legitimizing the male dominance. “I began to think that perhaps there was something wrong me after all: maybe the whole thing was my fault” (82-83). Baby goes on narrating how her suspicious husband follows her on her way to a neighbour's and hits her on the head with

a stone. Her forehead splits apart and blood gushes out. Her husband is not remorseful even after his heinous action. Baby remembers “I howled in agony all through the night while my husband slept on without a care in the world” (84).

Several such incidents have been narrated by Baby where the society is quite indifferent to her just because she is a woman and who is supposed to be oppressed and adjustable and should always accept naturally the real, material conditions in which they live. Accepting this society-imposed gender role is natural to them. They feel safe to be stereotyped or they consent to accept the socially made ideologies. Yet the shocking reality is Baby just can't present her father a wicked father figure, rather tends to justify him at some point. And in her husband's case also, she does the same. This “inherent female traits are in fact culturally and socially constructed” (Guerin 226). She tells only one side of her father's character and that of her husband's and deliberately ignores the rest to establish certain arguments.

Now let us find out the roots from where this thing started growing in Temsula. Though she became an orphan when she was almost a kid, she memorizes the experiences with her father and from her description we can get the hints how she was subjugated by patriarchy. Ao narrates in her autobiography, “Father seems to have had strict ideas about how to bring up children” (6). She remembers two occasions when her father wants his children to grow up following his ethics. One is when her father forbade her to accept a coin from a doctor, and he forbade them to accept a gift from a neighbour. Perhaps it might have hurt his male ego. These incidents are not so innocent. Temsula describes “It was the first time when father was so stern with me and when I think of this incident sometimes, my cheek still smarts from the slap of a father who in spite of his love for a favourite child would not compromise on his principles” (7).

Her father, whom Temsula remembers as “a serious-looking man” (13), had always been eager to keep up the idealized social norms of masculinity. Surprisingly, Temsula never shows any grievance against it. She claims and projects herself to be her father's favourite child and depicts more examples to establish the fact that whatever her father's behaviour may be, it is expected from a father figure. After her father's demise, her teenager elder brother put on their father's shoes and resumes from where their father stopped. He immediately takes his masculine role. For simple reason like not attending the school regularly, he becomes violent. Temsula describes “That evening he called out for us taking our full names and we trembled because whenever we were summoned in this manner, we knew we were in big trouble. Without any preamble he took up a cane and began hitting us” (43).

As expected, the most influential man in her life is her husband. She was married off to a wealthy man far above her social status at that time. Everybody in his family becomes skeptical about the new bride, a “village girl” while he has quite a few “town girlfriends” to choose from. It is difficult for her to fit into the new role of a housewife easily as she “did not know enough cooking, how to go shopping, preparing a menu and above all how to cope with a man both in bed and in the house and in society at large” (171). Like it always happens in patriarchy, it is her elder brother who takes the decision of her marriage about which she is not informed even. No one cares for her opinion. Temsula says “The worst handicap was that I did not know anything about this man who has become my husband; his likes and dislikes” (171).

In a later occasion, she manages to get permission to attend an evening college from her apparently liberal husband. Here she falls victim of the masculine domination as her father-in-law suddenly becomes active and scolds even her husband for not taking permission from him. At this point, even her husband is the victim of hegemonic masculinity at. Ao writes “I looked at my husband for support, but he kept quite all the while, and I realized that he was cowed down by their collective rage at what they presumed to be my defiance of their authority” (175). Temsula presents her husband as an apparent indifferent person though that man is never fit for the role. She says “...I cannot claim that I was the ‘victim’ and he the ‘guilty’ one.” This unsatisfied rather frustrated woman never thought of accusing her husband, rather presents some incomplete images about that man to establish how sincere she was in her household roles. Steve Jones points out “hegemony is not simply a question of meanings and values: it also takes economic, material and legal-political forms” (48). When

her husband joins politics completely avoiding his family for years, she never complains, rather takes pride on him. After he is elected as an MLA, he becomes busier. She accepts it passively because her mindset has been structured like that. Ursula Tidd points out in her discussion on Simone de Beauvoir, “woman has been constructed as man’s ‘Other’ and denied access to an autonomous existence. Men have positioned themselves as uniquely responsible for all aspects of public life and corresponding women have been confined to a marginalized position in society according to which they are made to support male interests” (51). It is like all his actions are being legitimized because she also relates herself with the power. But when her husband dies, Temsula is serving Dimapur University, attending the funeral is merely a sense of duty and obligation for her only because he is the father of her five children. Now she is become independent and has started pursuing her dream in academia. Her real potential starts flourishing only when she becomes free from masculine authority. She joins CIEFL, registers for Ph.D. and even attends a UGC project in the University of Minnesota. The ordinary woman who was brought up in a hostel as an orphan flourishes with her full potentiality, and becomes the Director of North East Zone Cultural Center in Dimapur only after she is free from dominant masculine egotistical environment.

### **Conclusion**

This paper explores how patriarchal power and hegemonic masculinity are normalised in Indian society. It reveals that societal conditioning to accept male dominance shapes the psyche from childhood. Despite abuse, Halder and Ao internalise oppression and justify men’s actions. This shows how socio-cultural norms make imposed gender identities seem natural. Genuine empowerment for women like Halder and Ao comes from breaking free from oppressive structures and pursuing their own paths. Their stories illustrate patriarchy’s impact and literature’s transformative potential. By sharing their experiences, these autobiographical narratives help understand gender, caste, and patriarchy’s intersectionality, fostering resistance against gender-based oppression and advocating for a more egalitarian society.

By employing post-truth, feminist theory, and the concept of hegemonic masculinity, this study has attempted to deconstruct the element of consent as a socially produced mechanism of patriarchal power. The findings demonstrate how autobiographical writing can serve as a form of feminist resistance reclaiming women’s agency through the act of narration. Future research could extend this exploration by examining how other factors such as religion cultural traditions societal structures and educational systems shape and reinforce the discourse of consent in women’s lives. Such inquiries could further illuminate the interconnectedness of ideology identity and institutional power in sustaining gender hierarchies. Integrating these perspectives into feminist activism and academic curricula could deepen public understanding of gendered oppression and strengthen movements towards equality and social transformation.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declares that they have no known competing financial interest or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### **Declaration of the use of AI-Assisted Technologies**

The author has used AI-assisted technologies such as Grammarly, Gemini AI, ChatGPT and Apple Intelligence for language suggestions, brainstorming and identifying relevant resources. All contents generated with AI assistance was carefully reviewed and edited. The author takes full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript.

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