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## INVISIBLE LABOUR, GENDERED EXPECTATIONS, AND THE ILLUSION OF EDUCATIONAL EMPOWERMENT IN SELECT INDIAN TEXTS

H.Vani,

Assistant Professor,  
Department of English,  
MMK & SDM Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Mysore, India

### ABSTRACT

Contemporary discourses on women's empowerment frequently position education as a pathway to liberation, autonomy, and social mobility. However, literary narratives reveal the limitations of this assumption within patriarchal societies where women continue to bear the burden of unpaid and invisible labour. This paper examines the relationship between women's education, gendered expectations, and invisible labour in Indian women's fiction through a close reading of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* by Shashi Deshpande and *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur. Drawing on feminist theories of social reproduction and engaging with Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, the study argues that education alone does not dismantle deeply entrenched cultural norms that assign women primary responsibility for caregiving, domestic work, and emotional labour. The paper highlights how the burden of care: reinforced through ideals of the "ideal woman," motherhood, and tradition, continues to structure women's lives despite educational advancement and emphasizes that inclusive higher education must move beyond access and address the socio-cultural frameworks that sustain gender inequality.

**Keywords:** Invisible Labour, Social Reproduction, Educational Empowerment, Motherhood, Burden of Care, Traditional Roles

### INTRODUCTION

The relationship between women's education and liberation has long been central to feminist debates on gender equality. In contemporary discourse, education is frequently celebrated as a transformative force that enables women to achieve autonomy, intellectual freedom, and economic independence. Access to higher education is often assumed to empower women to challenge patriarchal structures and redefine their roles within society. However, feminist scholarship and literary narratives consistently demonstrate that educational attainment does not necessarily translate into genuine liberation. Even as women gain access to education and professional opportunities, they remain constrained by deeply entrenched expectations of caregiving, domestic labour, and emotional responsibility.

In many societies, including India, these expectations are reinforced through cultural ideals of the “ideal woman,” who is expected to embody self-sacrifice, devotion to family, and emotional resilience. Women are socialized to prioritize the needs of others over their own aspirations, and caregiving is framed not as labour but as a moral duty. The widespread practice of women leaving their parental homes after marriage and integrating into their husband’s household further intensifies this expectation, marking a transition into roles centered on domesticity and care.

As Simone de Beauvoir argues, one is not born but becomes a woman, highlighting how gender roles are socially constructed and internalized. Similarly, Nivedita Menon observes that patriarchy often operates through the normalization of gender roles, making unequal divisions of labour appear natural and inevitable. These insights are crucial for understanding how women’s education exists within structures that continue to privilege caregiving and domesticity over intellectual autonomy.

This paper examines how Indian women’s fiction interrogates the tension between education and the persistence of invisible labour. Through a close reading of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *Difficult Daughters*, the study explores how female protagonists negotiate intellectual aspirations alongside the burden of care. Drawing on feminist theories of social reproduction and engaging with Virginia Woolf’s argument in *A Room of One’s Own*, the paper argues that education, while enabling, often coexists with enduring patriarchal structures that limit women’s autonomy.

## **SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND INVISIBLE LABOUR**

Feminist theories of social reproduction provide a critical framework for understanding the persistence of gender inequality despite women’s increased access to education. Social reproduction refers to the labour required to sustain everyday life and reproduce the workforce across generations, including cooking, cleaning, childcare, caregiving, and emotional support. Although this labour is essential for the functioning of society, it is largely performed by women and remains unpaid and undervalued.

Silvia Federici argues that women’s unpaid domestic labour forms the foundation of economic systems by enabling the reproduction of labour power without compensation. Similarly, Nancy Fraser highlights the contradiction within capitalist societies that depend on care work while simultaneously devaluing it, resulting in what she terms a “crisis of care.” Tithi Bhattacharya further expands this framework by emphasizing that the maintenance of life itself, through caregiving and domestic labour, is central to economic systems, even as it is systematically devalued and feminized.

The concept of invisible labour underscores how this work is normalized and rendered unseen. Arlie Hochschild’s notion of emotional labour highlights the expectation that women manage not only physical tasks but also the emotional well-being of their families. Her concept of the “second shift” further demonstrates how women continue to perform the majority of domestic and emotional labour even when they are employed outside the home.

Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* offers a complementary perspective by emphasizing the material conditions necessary for women’s intellectual freedom. Woolf argues that financial independence and personal space are essential for creative and intellectual work. However, the persistence of domestic responsibilities continues to limit women’s access to such conditions, reinforcing the tension between education and autonomy.

## EDUCATION, GENDER CONDITIONING, AND THE LIMITS OF LIBERATION

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru's childhood reveals how gender roles are socially constructed and internalized from an early age. Her mother's repeated reminder "You're a girl. Don't forget that", serves as a mechanism of gender conditioning, reinforcing the association of femininity with restraint, obedience, and domesticity. These moments illustrate how patriarchal values are transmitted within the family, shaping women's identities and expectations in ways that align with the demands of social reproduction. Saru's later success as a doctor complicates this dynamic. Although she achieves financial independence and professional recognition, her success disrupts traditional gender hierarchies within her marriage. Her husband's discomfort reflects the persistence of patriarchal expectations that position men as providers and women as dependents. Education, rather than functioning as a tool of liberation, becomes a site of tension, revealing its limited transformative power within rigid social structures.

Moreover, Saru's experiences highlight the centrality of emotional labour within marriage. She assumes responsibility for maintaining relational harmony despite personal distress, reflecting the gendered expectation that women must sustain the emotional stability of the household. This invisible labour underscores the broader burden of care that continues to shape women's lives.

A similar tension is evident in *Difficult Daughters*, where Virmati's pursuit of education represents a desire for intellectual freedom and self-definition. However, her aspirations are continually undermined by familial expectations that prioritize marriage and domestic responsibility. Education, in this context, is not perceived as a means of independence but as a transitional phase before fulfilling traditional roles. Virmati's experience reflects the coexistence of competing identities: the educated modern woman and the dutiful daughter or wife. Her internal conflict illustrates the limitations of education as a means of liberation. While education expands her intellectual possibilities, it does not free her from the cultural norms that continue to define her role within the family.

## MARRIAGE, MOTHERHOOD, AND THE BURDEN OF CARE

The burden of care becomes even more pronounced when examined through the lens of marriage and motherhood. In both novels, women are expected to assume primary responsibility for caregiving, reinforcing the gendered division of labour within the household. Marriage functions as a key institution through which these expectations are normalized and sustained.

Motherhood, in particular, occupies a central position within social reproduction. While it is often idealized as a natural and fulfilling aspect of womanhood, it involves significant physical, emotional, and psychological labour. Women are expected to manage childcare, nurture emotional development, and balance caregiving with professional responsibilities, often without recognition or support.

Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution is particularly relevant in this context. While motherhood may hold personal meaning, it also operates as a social institution that imposes expectations of selfless caregiving and constant availability. This institutionalization reinforces the gendered distribution of care work and limits women's autonomy. Even educated and professionally successful women continue to bear disproportionate responsibility for childcare and domestic labour. This reveals how the cultural construction of motherhood obscures the labour involved, rendering it invisible and undervalued. Consequently, women's educational achievements do not translate into an equitable redistribution of labour within the household.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of the selected texts demonstrates that while education provides women with opportunities for intellectual growth and professional advancement, it does not automatically dismantle the patriarchal structures that shape their lives. Cultural ideals of the “ideal woman,” reinforced through traditions of marriage, motherhood, and caregiving, continue to assign the burden of care primarily to women. The persistence of unpaid domestic labour, emotional caregiving, and childcare responsibilities reveals the structural foundations of gender inequality. Through the lens of social reproduction, it becomes evident that women’s labour remains central to sustaining family and social systems while remaining largely unrecognized.

Indian women’s fiction thus exposes the illusion of educational empowerment by revealing the enduring constraints placed on women’s autonomy. Meaningful gender equality requires not only access to education but also a transformation of the socio-cultural structures that distribute care work. Addressing the burden of care is therefore essential for envisioning a more equitable society.

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