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A Critical Reading of Female Subjectivity in *Fifty-five pillars, Red Walls*

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Abstract:

The paper attempts to read through the representation of gender in Usha Priyamvada's Pachpan Khambe Laal Deewarien, translated in English as Fifty-five pillars, Red Walls. It presents the layered character of Sushma, a middle-class working woman trapped within the rigid structures of patriarchy and social expectation. Sushma emerges as a figure who performs roles of a daughter, provider, teacher, and caretaker—while suppressing her own emotional and personal desires. The novel critically examines how women "side ntities are, constructed "through sacrifice and duty in a patriarchal society. How shies put on a pedestal and worshiped but never really seen and heard in the true sense. Another question that arises, is of performance. Is Sushma essentially feminine or she performs masculinity?

Sushma's life is plagued by emotional restraint and social performance. Her individuality is continuously subordinated to familiars' responsibilities, reveal in how patriarchy often exploits women's labor under the guise of duty and respectability. Judith Butler's idea of gender as performance becomes relevant here, as Sushma performs the role of the "ideal woman" according to societal norms, despite her inner dissatisfaction and loneliness. The relationship between Sushma and Neel highlights the tension between desire and social conformity. Although she experiences emotional intimacy and the possibility of personal happiness, she ultimately withdraws because society does not permit a woman of her age and status to prioritize her own desires. Her sacrifices not portrayed dichroic but tragic, exposing the emotional violence embedded within patriarchal structures. Sushma's limited agency reflects the condition of many middle-class Indian women who internalize social expectations and regulate their own behavior.

The symbolic setting of the "fifty-five pillars" and "red walls" represents confinement, surveillance, and emotional imprisonment. Thus, the novel becomes a powerful critique of gendered oppression, illustrating how patriarchy schools' women into silence, endurance, and self-denial while denying them emotional freedom and autonomy.

Keywords: Gender, Identity, Performance, Patriarchy, Masculinity, Feminism, oppression, Internalization.

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INTRODUCTION:

Usha Priyamvada's first novel *Pachpan Khambe Laal Deewari* (1961), translated as *Fifty Five Pillars, Red walls* (2021) by Daisy Rockwell zooms in on the life of a middle aged woman named Sushma Sharma. She happens to be a lecturer and hostel warden in a women's college by profession but is also the primary earning member in her family. The narrative's spatial setting, the college's "fifty-five pillars" and "red walls" functions as an extended metaphor and symbolises both shelter and control or restraint rather. It pigeonholes Sushma within institutional space therefore enabling and limiting her life and her being. The paper tries to map that how Sushma's identity is constructed through her social, professional and familial roles. It also investigates how she is able to exercise agency. What life presents her with? Does she have choices more or resistances?

How does she survive within a patriarchal social order? The major episodes, characters and their conversations and author's narrative strategies provides an exploration of three significant dimensions. First being the constructed identity shaped through vocation and also informed by sense of duty. The second one being social roles that restrict Sushma and do the unavoidable surveillance and the last being the delusional agency that

she exercises. The important question that arises here is if she exercises that agency on her own, willingly, or she is left with no other choice. Sushma's identity is a melting point of many factors. The most authentic mark of her individuality is the sense of burdening responsibility she is governed by.

Her identity is constituted of markers like education, professionalism and middle-class upbringing. She is the eldest daughter and a single woman in her thirties. Her vocational identity as a lecturer and hostel warden is important as it imparts economic independence and social attendance. This aspect of her life give her a different edge from the conventional domestic identities. Her profession confers on her a public presence and a pinch of authority, in correspondence to female students. Later in the novel the same position controls her. The institution that puts her on a pedestal changes into a confining space and sets institutional boundaries.

Her modern identity is quite chaotic as it is monitored by familial obligations. As the eldest daughter and sole earner, she shoulders the task of sustaining her family, a responsibility that the novel shows has been normalized and even demanded by society. This complicated responsibility is a window

through which Sushma peeps into her consciousness. Her worth is attached to self sacrifice and dependence. Priyamvada in carving a character like Sushma writes about a woman who is emblematic of a generation of women who had access to modern education and employment but their identities were anchored to familial duty. This negation and annihilation of the self under the crushing weight of duty is voiced by Priyamwada.

Sushma's inner life brings into picture the angle of private identity parallel to her public one or rather in contradiction. The narrative has some reflective portions that uncover Sushma in a way where she compares her professional achievements to the emotional void that chases her when is all by herself. This makes the readers read her vocational success against the absence of a life partner and against the daily grind of providing for others. A meeting with Neel makes her think about her - self sacrificial existence. Priyamvada registers her thought as, "Those years had dissolved quietly into the daily routine of life and questions of livelihood, and now walls had closed in all around her - of frustrating obligations, of the importance of her status and of her family." (p.50, 2021)

Priyamwada exposes this duality and emphasises that identity is not stable rather it is one contested category deeply influenced by economy, emotion, and social expectations. Stuart Hall's opinion about identity holds significance. He writes, "Identity can't be talked about with exactness, when a person moves out of his/her native place, one experience, one identity does not remain". Sushma keeps moving in and out of dual experiences and therefore her identity is in flux. Sushma inhabits several social roles simultaneously, and these roles have different normative pressures and possibilities. As lecturer and warden, Sushma is able to exercise formal authority. She commands discipline, mentorship and institutional responsibility. This role fetches her respect and a voice in the public and lets her experience competence and recognition. Within the college's "pillars and walls", Sushma's professionalism allows her to create structures of order and vigilance for younger women giving another dimension to her work.

Back at home Sushma is the provider and an emotional laborer. Her family takes her sacrifice for granted. The novel presents a dark picture of familial relations which are not symbiotic but parasitical in nature. They

lack gratitude and live by a sense of entitlement. Sushma's earnings become a resource for tender but visible exploitation. Her role is highly gendered. On one hand she is the provider of materialistic things and on the other hand she is not even allowed to think of herself. She lives by invisibilising the self. She can't afford to think of herself and the family also doesn't think of her. The giver in Sushma always suffers. When Sushma visits her home, she has got gifts for every member. Priyamvada writes about her giving nature, "She took out Sanjay's leather jacket, then the shirts she'd stitched for Vinay, knitting wool for Nirupama, the fabric for Pratima's shalwar-kameezes and matching dupattas, and finally a lovely blanket for her father and a sari for Ma". (p.60)

Even after being the only earning member she is expected to do all the emotional labor and take care of familial harmony even when her own needs are not only unmet but are also ignored and not seen as natural. With respect to her father's casual behaviour she thinks to herself, "Couldn't he have arranged her marriage if he'd wanted to? Was her father the only one who couldn't? The truth was that he hadn't even wanted her to get married." (P.62) Sushma is seen as the only support system by her father. Her life and her

dreams are not valid for him. Her subjectivity remains unrecognised by her father and other family members.

Priyamvada's Sushma carries the double burden. Her never ending duties for home and her obligations at work illustrate the weight of working women's existence. Sushma is also a figure of respectability in her community. She is a single, educated woman who upholds Samskara (cultural values). In her case though respect functions in two ways. She gets both protection and constraint out of her job. She feels strangled by her profession. As a teacher she is infallible. She is not allowed to be flawed. A book review defines the text as, "It is a book that looks at the agency of women who are made to bear the weight of society and family." She may have professional power like once she fined girls because they had gone to the cinema but the same girls do her moral policing because they had seen with Neel. Every other character fails to see Sushma the woman. Either she is seen as the lecturer or she is seen as the daughter or as a provider. The thought that she might have her needs and her desires, never occurs to anyone. Her college job shields her reputation but also circumscribes her choices, particularly regarding the relationship with Neel Kashyap. She cannot

openly express desire. It is almost like she is not allowed to desire let alone expressing it. These roles are intertwined. The professional respectability strengthens her social standing and influences familial expectations but it also becomes a surveillance tool turned against her only. When the students gossip about her she is taken aback. Her embarrassment gets registered in the words, “Her cheeks burned and she wished the earth would open and swallow her. Something that was priceless and heavenly had become cheap and risible in the eyes of the world.” (p.153). The morals govern Sushma’s subjectivity. The novel uses conflicts among these roles to dramatize how a woman’s life must constantly negotiate competing for acceptance. Agency on the other hand in the novel lies in small acts, little choices made but if Sushma’s character is studied properly it will appear a case of limited autonomy. Sushma’s agency in the novel is complex and incremental rather than revolutionary. Priyamvada hesitates from showing drama oozing and big acts of revolt. She rather emphasizes everyday decisions and interior acts as loci of agency.

The angle of emotional choice also enters the novel when Sushma meets Neel, a young man. He fans feelings in Sushma. The equation awakens in Sushma a desire for

intimacy and personal fulfillment. The novel here shows her making choices. She learns to respond to this desire and for the first time has a choice to whether acknowledge it, suppress it, or take an action on it.

While interrogating Sushma’s subjectivity her professional autonomy also stands out. At her workplace Sushma does exercise decision-making power by disciplining students, managing the hostel, and maintaining institutional order. These daily acts of governance are forms of agency and power both that constitute meaningful public power, even if restricted to an occupational sphere. Is this real agency? Does it come at a price?

However, the novel also shows the limits of Sushma’s agency. In her case financial freedom does not translate automatically into complete subjective autonomy because she remains governed by the structural and cultural factors like family dependence, social stigma and internalized cultural values. They seem to curb her. Sushma’s sacrifices are not only external impositions but also internalized values. She herself fails to break free and it reflects that agency can also be self-limiting when shaped by long-standing cultural instructions. When later in the novel Meenakshi asks Sushma to marry

Neel, her reply is a reflection of the internalised conservative thoughts. She says, “I can’t marry Neel. I am five years older than him, after all.” (p.163) Sushma thinks of everything and everyone under the sun. This self suffocating tendency doesn’t allow anyone to think of her. In her review writes about the theme of the novel Suhasini Patani ,”Priyamvada’s distinctive world, where women are at the center, explores the complex relationship between freedom and obligation.”

Priyamvada in the novel deploys spatial imagery of “the fifty-five pillars and the red walls” time and again. It operates symbolically to reflect Sushma’s position. It serves as a spatial metaphor. The pillars suggest structure, tradition, and the weight of institutional and familial architecture; the red walls suggest both protection and enclosure. The question that arises here is of Sushma seeking protection. What does she need protection from? With such a professional positioning Sushma finds an identity but she also suffers emotional imprisonment.

Sushma’s work place as a space is progressive. It is a site of female education and work but only virtually so. It has its own conservative approach and also a bit of moral policing. There exist codes, hierarchies, and

emphasis on moral ethical presence. It also is a space that lacks real and true sisterhood. Other female teachers pull each other down and believe in conspiring against each other. Swati’s pregnancy outside the marital framework leads to a suicide attempt and it becomes a discussion topic for teachers. Sushma feels that the teachers are far from being educated women and appear servants to her. Mrs Puri, goes on to pass comments like, “People who violate social standards must surely be punished. I have absolutely no sympathy for Swati.”(p.52) The space clearly lacks solidarity and female friendship.

Sushma’s movements within her institutional space highlight how public institutions under the guise of imparting education can become places of both liberation and regulation. The hostel, where she is warden, becomes a micro-society that echoes the larger social world. The college in the novel stands for expectations regarding behaviour, reputation, and social roles. This is how the setting becomes an active force in shaping Sushma’s subjectivity and mediating her agency.

Priyamvada’s narrative style advocates interiority. It closely focuses on Sushma’s thoughts, reflections and emotional responses. The readers are allowed an access

to the protagonist's inner subjectivity. This narrative focus is crucial for understanding agency that is not merely performative but cognitive and affective. The novel chronicles Sushma's reflections and this way the text counters reductive interpretations that might cast her in the shade of a passive victim but still. Interestingly Sushma emerges as a subject who compromises, resists, adjusts and conforms.

Usha Priyamvada does not idealise rebellion nor does she validate sacrifice. In doing so she meditates upon the trapped and troubled subjectivity of Sushma and psychological costs of the paths she undertakes.

Sushma's character invites critical points of interrogation. In one scenario, she comes out as an ultra modern feminist subject. She is educated woman, does paid work, commands professional authority. She is also painted with desires beyond marital frame. Her subjectivity is colored with craving Neel. The side of Sushma where she happens to have public participation and economic independence make her strong and self sufficient but on the another hand she is constituted of repeated sacrifices and the sheer inability to honor her autonomy. This is an illustration of the restricted and socially tailored woman. Here Priyamvada's critique

is subtle but unmissable. Sushma's character in the novel does not demand violent overthrow of patriarchy. It exposes the inequities of everyday. From emotional exploitation, entitlement within families, and the policing of women's reputation that sustain gender hierarchy, the novel seems to have all of it. A critical look at Sushma is suggestive of the notion that a more evolved and informed transformation is required. It demands a cultural and an institutional shift. Sushma's narrative also counters superficial dichotomies. It questions both domains public and private. Such categories seem to interpenetrate in lived experiences. Her subjectivity is a clear example of failed social visibility. The presence in the public doesn't guarantee autonomy.

Usha Priyamvada's novel is different in its spatial setting and in inviting attention to the interiority of a woman who is not sexually transgressive yet who experiences deep longing and moral conflict. When Neel tries to convince Sushma to marry him, Sushma shares her part of the story. She says, "I have many responsibilities. My father had a stroke, and there are my two sisters and two brothers. I must do everything." (p.170) Jayshree Misra in her review 'The Walled Mind' acknowledges this perturbing tendency of Sushma and writes, "In this

concisely written poignant novel , or novella , given its brevity , the protagonist, Sushma Sharma vacillates between the newly awaken love for Neel , and her duties to her family”. Sushma is trapped in herself adorned responsibilities and moralities. Not for once does she think of herself. She as a woman is not taught to put herself first.

The translation of the book in English says a lot about the relevance of the narrative. Perhaps the readers continue to find relevance debates about gender, moral scrutiny of the woman, her freedom and suppressed subjectivity. It can be concluded that the novel presents a nuanced character of Sushma whose self is conflicted.

Priyamvada's Sushma is a densely layered protagonist whose identity, roles, and agency presents and resist categorization. She has buried bits of the modern and traditional, powerful and constrained, reflective and compelled. Her agency and crippled existence gets manifested in every day practices like in the routines of professional leadership, and decisions about duty. The novel is neither a lamentation of Sushma's tragic fate nor it is a celebration of her dwarf and crippled success. It presents a complex portrait that invites readers to consider how

social structures, familial obligations, and internalized values shape the trajectories of women's lives.

Sushma's story matters because it reveals how agency is exercised within constraints rather than only by overcoming them and can it be called agency. Her compromises and small resistances deepen the debate about autonomy. Her subjectivity gives glimpse of negotiations with dignity. The novel shows how responsibility is borne and only and mostly by women, and how always emotions guide and shape moral choices of women. For contemporary readers, Sushma's life prompts questions about the relationship between economic independence and personal freedom, the ethics of familial duty, and the forms of social change necessary to broaden the scope of women's agency. The episode of Sushma's encounter with Neel, who opens the window of possibility in her life is the seat of perusal in the novel. The initial willingness of Sushma to be open to the experience of desiring a man is a soft assertion of the self against a disciplinary worldview that denies women the idea of desire and pleasure. Her subsequent hesitation and will to conceal, to negotiate and to surrender to the familial pressure and even the social pressure is shaped by economic responsibilities, and internalized

moral codes. This angle exemplifies the twin truths of Sushma's portrayal. Her desires open horizons for agency but social obligations and internalized norms first narrow the choices only to kill them later. Jyoti Punwani in her book review that got published in *The Hindu* opines, "In its glimpse into the way dreams of young girls

are broken by dead conventions, of the prison a successful single woman's home can turn into, this novel rings true even today." Most women even today haven't been able to learn that they can prioritise themselves. Sushma's subjectivity is a window to such wretched lives.

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