

**WOMEN EMPOWERMENT, WISDOM AND INNER CONFLICT
IN NEELUM SARAN GOUR'S REQUIEM IN RAGA JANKI****1.Sumati kumari**

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Women empowerment is a process through which a woman gains self-confidence and self-respect. It enables her to make independent choices. An empowered woman can challenge social barriers and establish her own identity. Neelum Saran Gour's Sahitya Akademi Award-winning novel *Requiem in Raga Janki* portrays the inspiring biography of Janki Bai Ilahabadi. The life of Janki Bai is full of courage, struggle, and determination. She is an extraordinary singer and possesses outstanding musical talent, but people often judge her on the basis of her gender, social background, and the scars on her face. She is a wonderful artist, but society often defines her identity as a courtesan. However, she never cares about the limitations imposed on her by society. She remains devoted to her music. As a result, she gradually earns recognition through her talent. Gramophone recording becomes an important milestone in her artistic journey. Her voice is one of the earliest to be recorded on a gramophone. Janki Bai achieves name, fame, and money, but she continues to search for dignity and respect. The novel shows that her emotional struggles shape both her personal and professional life. In the novel, there is a significant moment in her statement in which she states: "*Funkaar ka imtihaan soorat se nahin, seerat se liya jata hai, huzoor.*" (Gour 21) In these lines, she believes that a person's true worth lies in talent, not in physical appearance. This paper adopts a qualitative research methodology based on textual analysis and close reading of the novel. This paper examines the themes of women's empowerment, wisdom, and inner conflict through the character of Janki Bai in *Requiem in Raga Janki*. It argues that Janki Bai transforms discrimination and suffering into strength, self-respect, and self-expression. Her journey from social rejection to artistic recognition presents her as a powerful symbol of women's empowerment in Indian English literature.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment, Wisdom, Inner Conflict, Janki Bai, Identity, Neelum Saran Gour, *Requiem in Raga Janki*.

Introduction

According to the traditional point of view, women empowerment is the process of giving power and opportunities to women. When we say “giving power and opportunities to women,” it implies that power and opportunities are in someone else's hands and that a woman becomes empowered only when someone gives her these opportunities. However, in modern thinking, women empowerment is not about giving; it is about acquiring. It is the process through which women develop self-confidence, self-awareness, and become capable of making independent choices. Thus, women empowerment is both an external and an internal process.

Neelum Saran Gour's *Requiem in Raga Janki* explores these dimensions of women empowerment through the life of Janki Bai. She was a renowned classical singer. The most prominent theme of this novel is women's empowerment. It also throws light on the themes of wisdom and inner conflict. Through the life of Janki Bai, the novel wonderfully depicts the life of an Indian woman who faces social prejudice and discrimination. She fights against the obstacles of prejudice and discrimination and succeeds in creating her own identity. . The most pathetic fact about Janki Bai is that people often judged her as a courtesan. There was no one in society who admired her only as a talented singer. At the young age of twelve, she was brutally attacked by a man. Her crime was simply that she refused his unethical proposal. However, society expected that a courtesan should accept all such advances. Janki Bai was a courageous girl. She had the courage to refuse without thinking about the consequences. After the attack, she was popularly known as "Chhappan Chhuri." However, people admired her singing but never forgot the scars on her face. The greatest irony of our society is that a woman is judged by her physical appearance rather than by her skills and talent. Whatever society believed or thought about her, she did not care about these things. She created her own identity as an authentic singer. She was among the earliest Indian singers whose voices were recorded on the gramophone. Through her mesmerizing voice, talent, and hard work, she proved that a woman's real beauty is inward, not outward. She says in the royal court of Rewa.

***"Fankaar ka imtahaan soorat se nahi, seerat se liya jata hai, huzoor."* (Gour21)**

This statement explains that an artist should be judged on the basis of his/her talent and skills, no matter whether the artist is beautiful or ugly. It is the tendency of our society to judge a woman on the basis of her physical appearance. In this novel, Gour has depicted the inner conflict of a woman through the character of Janki Bai. Throughout her life, she suffers from emotional pain and social judgment. Her desire for gaining respect from her husband remains unfulfilled. Like an ordinary wife, she wants a few words of praise from the mouth of her husband. Her circumstances were really not favourable, but she never surrendered to her hardships. She fights with her sufferings, and her journey leads to wisdom, self-realization, and empowerment. This paper interprets the themes of women's empowerment, wisdom, and inner conflict in the novel *Requiem in Raga Janki* by Neelum Saran Gour.

Research Gap

There have been several studies which have been conducted on the topic of women's empowerment, identity, and courtesan culture. But limited scholarly attention has been given to Gour's *Requiem in Raga Janki* in such a detailed manner. In several existing research studies, one can find women's empowerment in general terms or the social condition of courtesans. But in this paper, one can find a new aspect of women's empowerment, the inner conflict of a woman, and the role of wisdom in a woman's life. Another important point is that, empowerment in the novel has interpreted as artistic success and social visibility; whereas it's contradictory and struggle-based in nature. This aspect is underexplored. The aspect of wisdom developed through lived experience and its relation to identity formation. It has also received limited critical attention. Therefore, there is a clear research gap in analyzing the novel from a combined perspective of women empowerment, inner conflict, and experiential wisdom, which this study aims to address.

Objectives of the Study

To interpret the concept of true women empowerment through the character of Janki Bai Ilahabadi in *Requiem in Raga Janki*.

To analyze the inner conflict and emotional struggles of Janki Bai within a patriarchal society.

To examine the role of wisdom in shaping her identity.

Research Methodology

The present study is based on qualitative research. It examines Neelum Saran Gour's *Requiem in Raga Janki* through close reading and textual analysis. The study focuses on the themes of women's empowerment and inner conflict as reflected in the character of Janki Bai. Both primary and secondary sources have been used for the purpose of analysis and interpretation.

Analysis and Discussion**Women Empowerment through Janki Bai's Character**

Neelum Saran Gour presents Janki Bai as a woman who challenges the limits imposed by society. Her life is full of hardships. Yet she never loses her dignity. The novel suggests that women empowerment is not only about education, wealth, or public success. It is also about courage, self-respect, and the freedom to define one's own identity. Janki Bai is sold into the courtesan community during her childhood. From childhood, she faces prejudice because people judge her profession before recognising her humanity. Her life becomes more painful when a British soldier attacks her. He did so because she refused his unwanted advances. The following lines from the novel show how brutally he attacked her at such a young age of twelve:

"He bore down on Janki, picking up the burfi knife on the way. He thrust it into her again and again, continuing the charged rhythm of his thrusting.

Breathing hard, eyes bloodshot, the knife mangling Janki's flesh in a gale of gashes until she slumped." (Gour 29)

These lines show the disgusting behaviour of patriarchal society. Here, male ego is more important than the life of an innocent girl. But this incident did not have the power to break the courage of Janki Bai. She succeeded in the battle between life and death. Not only did she survive, but she also worked upon her artistic passion and mesmerizing voice. Although the attack leaves scars on her face and body, describing this incident, the narrator says:

"Those who call Janki Bai 'Chhappan Chhuri' from this belief that she had fifty-six gashes are mistaken because eyewitnesses are of the opinion that she had many, many more wounds on her person." (Gour 48)

The above statement explains that, in patriarchal society, wounds are remembered more than her achievements. Even her nickname, Chhappan Chhuri, is a reminder of the violence. It also explains that a woman wants to cure her wounds, but society scratches them again and again to defeat her spirit. But these grief, agony, and anxiety never defeat her willpower. She fell down but stood up with full courage and dedication. In this way, this novel explores the theme of true empowerment, in which a woman acquires empowerment.

Wisdom through Lived Experience

In Janki Bai's personality, one can find her wisdom in tackling situations, smartly. One of the most significant moments in the novel occurs when Janki Bai argues before the Judge:

"Allow me, Sir, to write a verse or two..."

"Grant me some lines for my secret soul's anguish." (Gour, 159)

Apparently, it looks as though Janki Bai requests permission to write poetry, but these lines carry a much deeper meaning. She is not only asking but also demanding the right to express her thoughts and emotions.

As a courtesan, society accepts her singing talent but refuses to recognize her as a poetess, thinker, or writer. She reminds the Judge that she deserves the right to express herself beyond her identity as a singer. She reminds the Judge that although singing is her profession, she is also a human being who can think like a poetess or a writer. She talks about the equal intellectual space for women. In this way, writing poetry becomes a symbol of freedom, self-respect, dignity, and identity.

The Judge's final reply, "Granted" (Gour, 159), is equally important. It recognizes Janki's right to speak and create. The scene suggests that, through her wisdom, a woman can recognize her rights. When she recognizes them, she can raise her voice for them.

Another best example of her wisdom appears in the royal court of Rewa. The King of Rewa orders her to show her face to the audience after listening to her song. But she politely refuses and says:

"Fankaar ka imtihaan soorat se nahin, seerat se liya jaata hai, huzoor." (Gour, 217).

The statement shows the philosophy of her life. She believes that an artist's true identity lies in her talent rather than her physical appearance. She does not insult the King but politely presents her opinion.

Her calm response shows her emotional maturity and intellectual wisdom. She understands that society cannot change overnight. So, she does not waste her energy on every insult. She focuses on her art.

Her attitude shows that wisdom is not simply knowledge but the ability to respond smartly. Thus, Gour presents wisdom as the result of Janki Bai's lived experience.

Inner Conflict and Psychological Struggle

Janki Bai becomes a renowned singer. She gains name, fame, and money, but her life is filled with emotional conflict. Public recognition brings fame to her life, but it does not bring personal happiness. Throughout the novel, she desires personal happiness. She struggles to balance her identity with her emotional needs. This inner conflict makes her character more complex. Her journey is pathetic and realistic. Marriage is the most difficult phase of her life. She wants to create a happy family. She adjusts her lifestyle according to her husband. She ignores her performances and interrupts her riyaz. She always remains ready to fulfil her husband's needs. She cooks for him like an ideal wife. She even gives her earnings to her husband. The author describes her sacrifice through the following lines:

"She learnt to make light of her performances, to stay silent about her earnings, to put aside her riyaz to attend to his tiniest needs." (Gour, 275)

These lines reveal that Janki puts all her efforts into making her husband happy. Her emotional burden can be seen here clearly. Although she is admired by the audience, the admiration she desires from her husband is missing. She receives little appreciation from her own husband. This contrasting situation creates a deep psychological struggle between public admiration and personal loneliness for her. She continues to struggle in these situations for a few years, but at one point she realizes that love cannot survive on sacrifice alone. Mutual respect, trust, and understanding are equally important for a healthy relationship. She gets only disappointments from her family, but she never loses hope. She continues her musical journey and maintains her success through singing. Her emotional pain does not make her weak. Instead, it becomes the source of inspiration to move ahead in life.

This inner conflict makes her character inspiring. Neelum Saran Gour presents the hidden struggles experienced by many women in our society through the character of Janki Bai.

Conclusion

The novel Requiem in Raga Janki by Neelum Saran Gour presents the life of the renowned classical singer Janki Bai. Her life is a remarkable journey of struggle, courage, and self-discovery. Through her character, Neelum Saran Gour presents a fresh perspective on women's empowerment. The novel shows that real empowerment lies in acquiring equality and dignity. Helping oneself is true empowerment. Being aware of one's rights is empowerment. Recognizing one's inner potential and working on it is empowerment. Even when people try to bring you down, rising again with confidence is empowerment. Janki Bai fulfils all these definitions of women's empowerment. Through the character of Janki Bai, the novel presents wisdom as an outcome of life experiences. Wisdom is not gained only through bookish knowledge. The lessons learned from life and personal experiences make a person wise. Life is a teacher that first takes the examination and then teaches the lesson.

The foundation of Janki Bai's wisdom lies in the bitter experiences of her life. At the same time, the novel explores the theme of hidden emotional struggles behind public success. Janki Bai receives worldwide recognition as a singer, but in her personal life, she struggles for acceptance, love, and respect.

Thus, Neelum Saran Gour brilliantly depicts the life of the gifted singer, Janki Bai. She is a symbol of courage, wisdom, patience, and self-respect. Her journey reminds readers that true empowerment is not the absence of suffering but the ability to transform it into one's greatest strength.

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