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Unveiling Female Agency in *Keeping Corner* by Kashmira Sheth

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Abstract:

This paper explores the pivotal concept of female agency within the framework of women's empowerment and feminism in contemporary Indian children's and young adult literature. Female agency represents a woman's capacity to act and make decisions autonomously, wielding control and authority over her own life. In the context of Indian children's and young adult literature, the presence of feminist ideologies is increasingly evident, characterized by the inclusion of strong female characters and a resolute commitment to gender equity. Recognizing and nurturing female agency in this literature is paramount for dismantling patriarchal structures, addressing gender disparities, and cultivating a more just society.

This paper places a particular emphasis on the novel *Keeping Corner* by Kashmira Sheth, a prominent work in the realm of children's and young adult literature. The analysis not only highlights the novel's ability to captivate young readers but also scrutinizes it through a feminist lens, emphasizing themes of female agency. Furthermore, the paper explores how "Keeping Corner" introduces young readers to significant historical and cultural facets, enriching their understanding of gender dynamics in India. Through this examination, the paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on feminist literature for children and young adults, ultimately advocating for a more inclusive and equitable literary landscape.

Keywords: Female Agency, Feminism, Women Empowerment, Gender role, Young Adult Fiction, Children's literature.

Introduction:

Vital components of a successful transition into adulthood encompass more than just physical well-being and skills; they also include a sense of agency. This concept of agency is an individual's capability to take independent actions and make decisions within societal boundaries. It is intrinsically linked to aspects like identity, freedom, choices, and motivation. Additionally, insights from existing literature on enhancing the capabilities of adult women imply that fundamental aspects of decision-making involve the ability of young individuals to make choices, have the freedom to move, possess a positive self-perception, and access resources. According to Clare Bradford, the agency is described as “the making of choices and taking responsibility for them, in accepting the moral imperatives which in a properly functioning civil society should determine ‘the choice we choose’” (31). In Bradford’s understanding of agency, the agents “To be able to act—to have agency—also means being able to answer for our actions, to be responsible” (33). Furthermore, many experts contend that this sense of agency significantly influences the sexual and reproductive lives of young people. It empowers young women to influence the timing of marriage, select partners, cultivate balanced relationships, and make informed health-related choices. In contrast to the limited amount of literature on personal initiative among youth, a substantial body of work has addressed the notion of empowerment and the role of agency in defining empowerment for adult women. Several scholars have summarized this body of work, offering a comprehensive evaluation of various approaches to gauging and analyzing women's empowerment and defining agency. These summaries converge on the idea that empowerment definitions consistently encompass two primary aspects: resources and agency. Resources denote the enabling factors such as health, education, employment, and more. However, it is the concept of agency that stands as the defining element in most interpretations of empowerment. Definitions of agency encompass terms like choice, control, and influence. They typically refer to the capacity to impact one's own well-being, make strategic life decisions, and manage resources and choices that shape significant life outcomes. This ability to make strategic choices extends to various life aspects such as marriage, education, employment, and parenthood, many of which are infrequent occurrences. Hence, it becomes essential to consider small actions and decisions as agents for these infrequent occurrences. By applying feminist theory and concept of Agency, this paper attempts to explore young adult fiction's female characters who are determined to assert their agency., and

aims to analyze the evolution of female protagonists' portrayals. It investigates why diverse, female solid characters are essential in our society and culture.

Feminism is a study of female experiences and how it is different from men. It started from Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 in New York, which was the first women's right convention. This movement demanded equal social and legal rights for women, including voting rights. The movement resulted in a right to vote for women in America in 1920. Since the time, the feminist movement evolved and it became more open to different race, class, religion, nationality. The feminist movement emerged and gained more international appeal through Feminist theory. The assumptions society made on women were for the very first time challenged by Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin in her book *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in (1792). She argues that women are essential to the nation because they educate children and they could be companions to their husbands. Rather than becoming a mere ornament to society or a property to be traded for marriage. Virginia Woolf in her book *A Room of One's Own* in (1929) conveys that how patriarchal society averts women from acquiring their productivity and potentiality. Woolf states, "A woman needs money and a room of her own if she is to be able to write," she also argues that a change is required in the form of literature because most of the literature has been dominated by men out of their needs and uses. Works like *sexual politics* by Kate Millett in (1970) and *Gender Trouble* in (1990) by Judith Butler was highly influenced by Simon De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in (1949). The book claims that women are not subservient to men, but they are just different. She argues that women in every part of history have been described as the "other" sex, or "second" sex, which is less than the "normal" male sex. She famously states that "One Is not born, But Rather becomes a woman". Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* says that above statement by Beauvoir differentiates sex from gender, where sex is biological and gender is cultural. Gender is related to identity, which is gradually acquired with time.

Judith Butler's idea is that we all participate in a kind of performance related to our gender, which we practice daily. This performance is how we express ourselves and repeating our action becomes our identity. In her book *Bodies that Matter* from 1993, Butler explains that agency is "a reiterative or articulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power" (xxiii). Expanding on this and including the concepts of power and subjectivity, Butler argues that power shapes and brings a person into existence. In other words, when an individual

takes on power, they start to show their agency as a person. Roberta Seelinger Trites, using Judith Butler's concept of power, explores how individuals can tap into their potential power. She argues that this power allows a person to develop subjectivity, which in turn leads to agency. Trites distinguishes between Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, ultimately concluding that Butler aligns with Foucault's idea that power is an ongoing process. However, Butler's perspective suggests that individuals can be internally motivated and take proactive actions, not just reacting to prevent oppression. Furthermore, Trites in *Disturbing the Universe* delves into how adolescents, in particular, can become empowered and take responsibility for their actions. She contends that various forces constantly influence young adults, and as they learn to navigate these influences, they gain a type of power that fosters their sense of subjectivity. This newfound subjectivity then paves the way for them to assert agency. Trites emphasizes that "The need to recognize one's own agency is a central pattern of adolescent literature; we achieve adulthood more comfortably if we recognize that we have some control over the various subject positions we occupy" (129). Virginia Woolf's statement from 1929 succinctly captures the essence of gender disparities in societal values. She acknowledges that the values held by women often diverge significantly from those established by men. This recognition highlights the importance of considering and valuing diverse perspectives and experiences, particularly in the context of gender equality and feminism. Woolf's work has been influential in challenging traditional gender roles and advocating for a more inclusive and equitable society.

In contemporary Indian children's literature and young adult literature, signs of feminist thought become apparent through the prevalent inclusion of female characters and the committed pursuit of gender fairness. Indian Feminists like Mahasweta Devi, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Nivedita Menon, and Devika Rangachari are amongst many of the feminist who constantly raised their point through many ways. In her 1988 essay titled "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*", (1988) Gayatri Spivak focuses on the marginalized people in third-world nations during the colonial period. She examines how the specific gender-dominated moral norms in their particular context and culture often silenced subaltern women. To truly comprehend the perspective of Indian women regarding agency and their role as agents of change, it is essential to recognize how historical and cultural factors have shaped how women's agency has been perceived and restricted. Traditional Indian literary works often relegated girl characters to minor roles or depicted them as passive participants. However, a transformative shift has unfolded in recent decades. Indian authors like

Mitali Perkins, Devika Rangachari, Anita Desai, Ranjit Lal and Kashmira Sheth have embarked on a journey to craft young adult novels that deliberately challenge this established norm. Within this evolving landscape, a significant portion of the literary works produced by Indian writers in young adult literature can be aptly characterized as embodiments of feminist children's and young adult literature. Notwithstanding, identifying work as feminist children's literature often hinges on the protagonist's triumph over challenges rooted in gender disparities, a recurring narrative motif found in many of these novels. Devika Rangachari, in her Essay *Substance or Illusion?: Young Adult Literature in India* states that:

Young adult fiction in India has only taken baby steps and does not yet constitute a identifiable genre. Fresh themes are being approached with caution by authors and publishers alike. However, the fact that new waters are being tested and boundaries of themes are being pushed augurs well for the future. (25)

Kashmira Sheth, an esteemed author known for her young-adult novels like *Keeping Corner* and *Koyal Dark, Mango Sweet*, as well as her picture book *My Dadima Wears a Sari* and the new series of Nina Soni chapter books, holds a special place in literature. Originating from India, Sheth beautifully weaves her memories of her homeland into her literary creations. Her journey brought her to the United States at seventeen to study at Iowa State University, where her uncle was an instructor. With a degree in microbiology, she ventured into a role with the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection. However, after becoming a mother, her interest gravitated towards children's literature. This shift led her to record her life encounters. In 1994, her debut work of fiction, "*Blue Jasmine*," emerged as a recipient of the Paul Zindel First Novel Award. After her inaugural novel, Kashmira crafted a highly praised collection encompassing picture books, chapter books, and young adult novels. Notable titles include *Keeping Corner*, *Boys Without Names*, and *Tiger in My Soup*. Through her writing, Sheth spotlighted Indian culture, shares immigrant narratives, addresses social justice matters, and underscores the transformative power of self-discovery. For her remarkable contributions to children's literature, Kashmira Sheth was rightfully named the 2020 Wisconsin Notable Children's Author. Her work features relatable characters and intricately woven narratives, garnering accolades including starred reviews, honours, and awards. The Children's Book Award Committee takes great pleasure in bestowing this accolade upon a storyteller of her calibre.

"*Keeping Corner*," authored by Kashmiri Sheth, is a noteworthy young adult novel. Published in 2007, it has garnered acclaim for its historical accuracy, captivating narrative, and exploration of cultural and societal themes. Set in early 20th-century India, the novel revolves around Leela, a twelve-year-old girl widowed due to the prevalent custom of child marriage. The story delves into the practice of child marriage, which was widespread in parts of India during that era. It sheds light on the plight of young widows, often marginalized and confined to a life of seclusion referred to as "*keeping corner*." Leela's journey unfolds amidst societal expectations, grief, and personal transformation. In the face of traditional limitations, she embarks on a quest to challenge her prescribed role and the constraints imposed upon her due to her gender. She aspires to transcend her circumstances and carve her path. The text's narrative artfully explores themes encompassing gender roles, women's empowerment, cultural norms, and the pursuit of individual agency. Against the backdrop of India's struggle for independence from British colonial rule, the story gains additional layers of historical and societal context. Kashmiri Sheth's writing is acclaimed for its sensitivity and authenticity in portraying the hurdles confronted by young widows and women within a patriarchal society. The novel is commended for captivating young readers while introducing them to significant historical and cultural subjects. The text *Keeping Corner* offers a window into the challenges and aspirations of a young girl in a complex and evolving world. In doing so, it contributes to young adult literature, encouraging readers to reflect upon societal norms and personal autonomy critically.

The central characters in these narratives are young women from the middle-class strata. They portray empowerment and progressiveness, projected through the lens of feminism. These characters actively work to challenge, and in some cases reject, traditional social roles assigned to Indian girls. Their actions underscore the belief that both girls and boys should hold equal societal worth and be granted parallel opportunities, especially of education and self-determination. By rejecting conventional norms that paint girls as passive, dependent, confined to domestic realms, and of lesser value compared to boys, contemporary Indian authors not only celebrate the potential of girls but also depict girlhood as a state of empowerment and change for a better future. This is achieved by positioning these young girls as focal points within the narrative. Additionally, these authors skillfully interweave the lives of these girls and women into potent networks of familial and communal relationships. Throughout these narratives, the girl protagonists consistently achieve transformative outcomes by exercising agency after a massive realization of patriarchal

dominance in the society. Their actions lead to improvements in their lives, the lives of those they hold dear, and the overall well-being of their communities. However, these new roles for Indian girls, while progressive, also carry their own expectations and hopes, albeit with distinct parameters. The novels vividly celebrate the capability of girls to effect positive change in their lives and strengthen the bonds within themselves and their communities. These celebrations entail intricate negotiations between gender dynamics and established traditions. The narratives seem driven by a desire to challenge and reshape the foundations of traditional Indian patriarchy.

In the context of Kashmira Sheth's work *"Keeping Corner,"* a distinct illustration of this approach becomes evident, challenging conventional notions that confine girls solely within the familial realm. A novel based on the story of her aunt, this narrative notably delves into an extreme manifestation of such confinement, specifically exemplified through the plight of Brahmin child widows in pre-Independence India. The central figure, Leela, becomes emblematic of this narrative endeavor. Traditional customs dictate that she must 'keep corner,' an injunction compelling her to remain within her household for an entire year following her widowhood at twelve. Leela's understanding of keeping corner came from her unannounced misfortune without realizing its depth: "Ba and I had never talked about it, but there was a saying that a widow's life was a living death, a widow could not go out. I would have to stay in the house. It was called keeping corner" (53). Even of the conclusion of this designated year of keeping corner, Leela's life trajectory, as dictated by societal norms, portends a segregated existence—marking her as an outcast and an encumbrance upon her family. However, Sheth deftly engineers an affirmative trajectory for Leela, who steadfastly rejects the confines imposed by traditional conventions governing Hindu widows. In a display of resolute agency, Leela adamantly protests against the injustices perpetuated by these norms. Eschewing the confines of her home and evading dependence, Leela embarks on a path of education and self-reliance. She becomes a teacher, a vocation that not only sustains her but also enables her to champion the notion that girls and women possess the capacity to make significant contributions to society. Her influence extends beyond herself, as she catalyzes a shift in perception among others, compelling them to recognize the inherent value and potential of females.

Leela's subsequent engagement in Gandhi's freedom movement is a testament to her transformative journey. Positioned against the backdrop of India on the brink of Independence,

she emerges as the quintessential embodiment of the burgeoning Indian girl. This attains heightened significance within the narrative's temporal context. Placed under the constraints of stringent Hindu behavioral norms by her relatives, Leela, recently bereaved, embarks on a contemplative journey. Through the lens of Feminism, she endeavors to critically assess the traditional, patriarchal roles and customs imposed upon women within the Hindu framework. As a young Indian woman, Leela initiates a process of probing these customs, driving Leela spurs her to raise queries about the origins and purpose of these customs, as she shows her disagreement: "I was filled with so much rage, I wanted to shout and scream. Who started this? And why? Can anyone benefit from it?" (59). Such introspection leads her to reject the status quo decisively. Pondering who initiated these norms and to what advantage, she experiences a shift in perspective. The ensuing revelation fuels her resistance against traditions that she perceives as artificially constructed, a realization that prompts her to assert, "I don't want to follow this custom." (59). This burgeoning defiance marks Leela's transformative evolution as she challenges the antiquated customs that confine her. These conventions, which effectively imprison her, become the focus of her rebellion. Significantly, Leela's perception of herself extends beyond the individual realm. Instead, she envisions her place as intertwined with the broader societal fabric. This realization dawns upon her as she comprehends her role within the broader context of child widows, widows in general, and the overarching roles that women hold within Indian society. The Society that indeed never fails to remind that "A widow must learn to live like a widow" (60).

As Leela acquaints herself with Gandhi's forward-looking and contemporary outlook on the evolving roles of women in India, a newfound awareness takes root. She starts identifying the inherent injustice ingrained within traditional social and religious mandates that seemingly irrationally dictate the conduct of women. Discontent with her family's feeble contention that such norms are immutable due to their historical continuity, Leela expresses her dispute: "Gandhiji thinks widows should be able to go to school. What good are all [his] ideas if widows and their families don't take the lead? Ba, I want to study, and I need your help (236). Leela's collaboration with Gandhian ideologies supported her to find a path to attain agency in its most actual form. Initially, Leela perceives her social standing as an immutable outcome predetermined by fate or 'kismet.' She grapples with the overwhelming dominance of societal norms, which appear insurmountable in contrast to her apparent lack of agency. However, a gradual transformation unfolds as she grasps the potential of her actions to bring about change in her life. Through daily

newspaper reading and immersing herself in other educational pursuits, Leela became acquainted with the philosophical tenets and activism of figures like Gandhi. These influential figures are at the forefront of the endeavor to emancipate women and the entirety of India. As a result, Leela recognizes the interconnectedness between her actions and the broader societal tapestry.

Veena Paintal shares the perspective that women often face a challenging battle for their survival in societies that are predominantly controlled by men and their selected groups or circles. This viewpoint underscores the idea that women frequently encounter various forms of gender-based oppression and discrimination, and they must struggle to assert their rights and existence within such environments. This theme aligns with broader feminist discussions on gender inequality and the need for societal changes to ensure women's equal rights and opportunities. With the guidance of supportive individuals like her teacher and brother, Leela not only embarks upon decisive action driven by an agency to realize her aspirations, but she also awakens to her capacity to contribute towards the modernization of Indian society. Guided by her teacher and supported by several relatives, Leela embarks on a transformative journey reminiscent of numerous young female protagonists in the works of Indian women writers. In a narrative that places tradition-bound gender disparities at the forefront, Leela undertakes a resolute confrontation with the core conflict—thus emerging as a new archetype of the Indian girl with an agency of her own. This process of transformation, shared by other young adults of middle or upper-class backgrounds like Leela, embodies the essence of the new Indian girl.

This transformative evolution manifests in various ways, often encapsulated by endeavors such as pursuing education or assertively participating in activities historically earmarked for males. Regardless of the challenge, the common thread remains: these emerging new Indian girls unfailingly triumph over adversity. A striking illustration of this triumph unfolds in the narrative of *Keeping Corner*. Leela herself embodies this transformation, drawing inspiration from Gandhi and later joining India's freedom movement. In doing so, she exemplifies an innovative paradigm for an Indian girl to own her agency as a revolution. This paper attempts to realize how vital it is to acknowledge that her journey is facilitated by her societal standing. For instance, her brother's willingness and capability to fund her advanced education, a prerequisite for becoming a teacher, significantly contributed to her success. Works like *Keeping Corner* offer narratives where girls, driven by their determination and agency, embark on a journey of transformation to become new

embodiments of Indian girlhood. This transformation often involves seeking education and championing gender equality. These narratives serve as a source of inspiration and illustrate the possibility of achieving gender equality.

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