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**Female Autonomy vs. Duty: Sushma's Turmoil in
*Pachpan Khambe Lal Deeware***

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Abstract

The term 'female autonomy' denotes the capacity and rights of women to make their own priorities in their lives, and assert their independence, especially within sociocultural contexts that often appear as obstacle and impede them to define their roles according to societal, familial, or cultural norms. Simone de Beauvoir: "Only in work can a woman achieve autonomy and can support herself." At its core, female autonomy challenges traditional gender roles that often restrict women to lifeless, dependent, or subordinate positions in family, work, or society at large. Usha Priyamvada is counted among those Hindi storytellers who have identified and expressed the monotony, restlessness, fear, anxiety and loneliness of modern life at the emotional level. This is why, on the one hand, her works possess a strong modern tone, while on the other, readers of all walks of life identify themselves with the incidents and emotions depicted in them. The theme of female autonomy is profoundly explored in *Pachpan Khambe Lal Deeware*. The research paper presents Usha Priyamvada's 1961 novel as a pioneering text of the 'Nayi Kahani' movement that exposes the psychological weakness and dark side of post-independence Indian modernity. It acts as a crucial critique of transition-era India and It demonstrates that education and financial security do not equal psychological or social autonomy. The writer efficaciously unmasks "parental duty" as a repressive tool that forces the modern woman to choose between financial autonomy for her family or emotional survival for herself. Critical discourse surrounding the novel recurrently highlights the paradox of the protagonist, Sushma, an educated college lecturer and hostel warden in Delhi. Sushma is the sole breadwinner for her parents, brothers, and sisters. She remains emotionally trapped by familial obligations. The research paper presents the emotional complexities and dilemma of a women who suffers between her familial responsibilities and personal desires. The research paper includes several instances and highlights close reading of text that explicates emotional turmoil of Sushma. The protagonist Sushma may not fully realize her potential due to her societal

constraints. The translation of original novel is published as titled "*Fifty Pillars, Red Walls*" by Daisy Rockwell. The title is deeply meaningful and coherent. It metaphorically represents the structure of society that holds women like her captive. The strong walls and pillars are stable, even beautiful – but they also confine, isolate, and restrain. The novel poignantly depicts that societal expectations play a significant role in shaping the women's lives.

Keywords: Female autonomy, dilemma, confrontation, societal expectations, walls and pillars.

This novel is set in post-independence India and focuses on the life of Sushma, who is a Hindi lecturer and a warden. The present paper employs textual analysis methodology to bring out keen observation of the protagonist's psychology. The writer masterfully develops spatial architectural symbolism to reflect the psychological imprisonment of the modern, educated working woman. This is unambiguously encapsulated in the titular image of the girls' hostel – the "fifty-five pillars and red walls" which serve as the physical limits of the protagonist Sushma's daily life as a lecturer and warden. These architectural elements function as objective correlatives for her internal claustrophobia, aloneness, and emotional stagnation. The rigid pillars and walls lock her into the role of the sole breadwinner, challenging her youth and personal desires. The text demonstrates how modern institutional spaces on the one hand offer monetary independence but simultaneously can transform into domestic and emotional prisons that restrict female autonomy. She is a woman who has a keen mind, a liberal outlook but saddled with the emotional and financial burdens placed by her family. Hence, she is not expected to marry due to family responsibilities. Daisy Rockwell writes in her note:

"Sushma is in her early thirties and has enjoyed great success at her job, but feels isolated and lonely. Her father has been unwell and receives a meagre pension which is not enough to support his family and pay for his daughters' marriages. (p. 6)

Sushma cannot stop how other women around her perpetuate an air of prejudice and judgmental attitudes placed on the actions of women. She does not like Mrs Puri's comments about her colleague Swati as:

"Do your social standards tell you to tear someone else's personal to shreds in front of everyone else? Each person's life is a difficult struggle which nobody else has the right to intrude upon." (p.52)

She is intelligent, independent and modern girl who respects herself and others also. But she is often irritated finding the colleagues who pass negative comments about each other being narrow-minded and unfair. She says to her friend Meenakshi:

"I just can't listen to them, Meenakshi! How old must Swati be? I found it intolerable that instead of helping her when she was in trouble, they were laughing at her plight." (p.53)

Her colleague Swati attempted to commit suicide and became the centre of everyone's conversations. Sushma often fills with revulsion and distaste hearing such conversations and feels as if she is not among educated women but rather amidst a crowd of uneducated and narrow-minded ladies. Daisy Rockwell remarks:

"Fifty- Five Pillars gives us- readers more than fifty years later- a window into a particular moment in women's history when women with apparent freedom and advanced education struggled for independence and autonomy" (p.6)

This nuanced conflict of the new and the old traditions and how women play a part in elongating social traditions with a supposed liberal and progressive sphere brought about by education and jobs form the core of the book.

The protagonist's yearning for independence, self-expression, and fulfilment is often stifled by familial and social expectations. However, through her inner world and subtle acts of defiance, the character seeks to claim ownership over her own existence. The women in the novel do not rebel in overt, dramatic ways but instead engage in a quiet form of resistance. For example, the protagonist's occasional decisions and reflections that break away from the pattern of traditional life represent an act of individual autonomy. She never hurts anybody but takes care of everyone around herself but still shocked when her colleagues, hostel girls and even her friend Meenakshi starts talking about her as Neel has entered in her life as little ray of happiness and strength. People became judgemental. She bitterly sobs and requests Meenakshi not to explain more:

"You did the right thing, Meenakshi!" she said tearfully. No one can be as cruel as one's dearest friends. But I have a request for you. Please never tell me what other people are saying about me again." (p.89)

Now Meenakshi realized that Sushma is very much shocked by her words. Shas shaken her horribly. While Meenakshi is a colleague and friend of Sushma, she serves as a "foil" – a character who highlights the protagonist's individualities through contrast. Unlike Sushma, who is heavily laden by family and social expectations, Meenakshi often represents a more "modern" or practical perspective:

"Meenakshi was always apathetic about her clothing. she loved to read and even more than that she loved hearing the names of books and showing off her knowledge of them." (p.48)

The text also portrays other colleagues who represent the "sour, frustrated spinster" stereotype. These characters contrast with Sushma's internal grace and her genuine, albeit tragic, capacity for love.

Social Reflection: Through Meenakshi and other staff members, the novel explores the "staff-room gossip" culture. While Meenakshi provides a social outlet, the environment as a whole reinforces the "vice-like clamps" of societal scrutiny that Sushma feels.

Shushma herself does not know how quickly the bond with Neel casually forged had taken root. She is like one of those cursed princesses in stories, she had awakened at Neel's touch. But wandering about with Neel or going to the movies are ways to pass time happily for a short while. When Neel enters her life, she is watching the birth of her own self with astonishment. She had become more generous towards the hostel girls and her senses had become more receptive but her colleagues don't like this change and gossip about her as Meenakshi informs:

"Miss Shastri was talking most of all, she continued, without looking at her. 'Everyone quite enjoyed it. She described everything: when you go out, who comes to your house when, who saw you at the cinema, who saw you at the club'". (p.86)

These decisions often challenge the roles women are supposed to play – like the role of a mother, wife, and daughter.

The text also portrays how women's desires are subjugated by familial expectations. Women, in the context of this novel, are expected to adhere to a role of nurturers and caretakers, and their personal growth is often sacrificed for family welfare.

"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. Sushma didn't need a lover. She didn't even long for a husband. But at times her heart sank for some reason and she trembled under the burden of her responsibilities towards her entire family. And then she wished there were two more hands to lend her support:" (p.50)

The struggle for autonomy is therefore portrayed as both internal and external battle – where external pressures conflict with internal desires for self-determination. Sushma has a life of her own seemingly away from her family and yet tied to them in ways she cannot escape. When a younger man enters her life, it not only makes her realize the empty loneliness that is ahead of her but also puts her at the centre of needless scrutiny. Yet Sushma is not a mere damsel in distress who the young man needs to save for she too knows just where she is. She is self-dependent and educated. she chooses to be away from love due to the people

The text looks at the agency of women who are made to endure the weight of society and family. She often goes through emotional turmoil which completely breaks her but again she collects her strength being a part of society and family. Sushma's dilemmas, her little joys and sense of aesthetics touch the heart of readers in many ways while the vice-like clamps placed on her frustrates the audience and readers to no end. Daisy Rockwell writes "There are scenes in which we witness Sushma carefully dressing for a date with Neel: the clothing and styles she chooses are fashionable for the time period, but her style of dress invokes the shrinagar rasa- the classical mood for romance." (p. 13)

Her mood swings are matched with her dressing sense as her lipstick matches her sari when she is happy. On being upset she wears none. Sushma meets Neel because of saris' packet that was sent to her by her aunt and Neel comes to hostel to deliver the packet when cupid strikes his heart for her.

And then, the story highlights that not much has changed for most women in all the years. The writing is reminiscent yet restrained, mirroring the emotional turmoil of Sushma but never bogged down by drama. The way the author establishes Sushma's character with a sense of aesthetics reflected in her taste of clothes and décor that reflect not just her emotions at times but the person she wants to be. All the colours in the story come from Sushma who meticulously constructs both her own appearance as well as the ambiance of her home:

"Taking the teacup from her hand, Neel leaned back against the sofa. A soft, pleasant light illuminated the room with its pale-yellow walls, fresh yellow curtains, orange sofa cushions and dahlias arranged on the table.

Sushma's black shawl slipped from her shoulders. The new long earrings with their shimmering beads looked lovely on her. She wore a light lipstick that matched her watermelon- pink silk sari."

The dahlias have an unusually sweet fragrance today,' teased Neel as he leaned down toward her." (p.117)

Neel falls for her at the first sight. Neel is always free to move about as he chooses to express himself and to be himself. The last sentence in the novel concerns lipstick: "send the taxi back, Meenakshi', she said, 'I won't go.'

Meenakshi walked to the veranda without replying, as Sushma rubbed her sweaty palm across her mouth to wipe the lipstick off." (p.196)

Despite her relative youth and elegance, she is reconciled to the well-organized loneliness of her life, until a chance meeting with charismatic Neel. Sushma becomes symbol of the educated Indian woman in Transition. She represents the modern Indian woman at a crossroads between tradition and modernity. She is well-educated and holds a respectable job as a lecturer in a college – a profession seen as noble but still bound by societal limitations. She is educated but restrained. However, Sushma is intellectually independent yet her emotional and personal life remains heavily regulated by traditional values.

Being financially self-sufficient, she supports her family, reversing the traditional gender role, but ironically this empowerment becomes a source of guilt and pressure. She is highly educated, a young, unmarried history lecturer and hostel warden at a girls' college in Delhi:

"Sushma ran her finger over the copper plate on the table. The letters of her name were into the shiny new surface. Suddenly her name sounded sweet and musical. She pushed the nameplate to one side and began sorting through the piles of mail on the tray. She glanced outside the blinds and felt impressed at her new status.... She caught glimpses of colourful dupattas and innocent dreamy faces and heard the laughter of carefree young voices." (p.19)

She is dutiful, intelligent, and emotionally mature. Though professionally independent, she is emotionally shackled by her middle-class family's dependency on her income and decisions. Back in Allahabad, her family consists of a disabled father, a traditional, dependent mother, and younger siblings – two sisters and a brother. Sushma sends money home every month, takes care of her siblings' education and marriage prospects, and bears the weight of the household's future. She is the emotional and financial backbone of her family – but not seen as an individual with her own needs.

Despite the appearance of strength and order, Sushma is deeply lonely:

"Sushma's heart was flooded with the laughter and gladness of the world. She recalled the tortuous paths she'd travelled in her life thus far each turn full of fresh hope. She'd forgotten how many bends in the road she'd already traversed. Now she'd reached the point when one turns to look back and her former aspirations seemed hollow in the sharp relief of reality; her delicate dreams had withered and faded." (p.19)

Her life is marked by monotony, emotional clampdown, and a lack of love or companionship. She begins to feel a sense of hope and warmth when she meets Neel, a charming, younger man who is emotionally open and shows interest in her beyond formal boundaries. Her long- thwarted desires uncurl. A romantic bond gradually develops between them. Sushma's maid remains a staunch supporter when others around her try to pull her down. This delicately shows that empathy and understanding for what a woman goes through do not come from one's social position and education solely but from a person's innate nature.

The story exposes a conflict between love and duty. As her emotional involvement with Neel deepens, she finds herself torn between love and duty. The age difference, social norms, and her family's expectations press down on her. She worries about being seen as immoral or unworthy – not only by society but by her own family. Her family, unaware or indifferent to her emotional needs, sees her as a sacrificial figure, someone who should always give but never want. Sushma says to Neel:

"Did you ever wonder, Neel. How it was that I came untouched and unblemished into your arms at the age of thirty- three". (P. 95)

In the end, Sushma chooses responsibility over love. She suppresses her feelings for Neel and continues to live within the "red walls" of her duties, sacrificing personal happiness for familial and social obligations. The title "Pachpan Khambe Laal Deewarein" , "Fifty Pillars, Red Walls" is deeply meaningful and coherent. These symbolize the hostel building where she works – but also metaphorically represent the structure of society that holds women like her captive. The strong walls and pillars are stable, even beautiful – but they also confine, isolate, and restrain.

This novel continues to resonate with readers – especially women – who feel trapped between the life they want and the life they're expected to live. It's a quiet but powerful exploration of emotional solitude and the cost of being the 'responsible one'. Sushma's inner world is filled with turmoil, which Usha Priyamvada captures with great psychological realism. She always carries silent emotions and it may be due to the fear of being judged in patriarchal society. There are so many scenes where reader are able to feel her helplessness and hesitation to accept the love for Neel in spite of being in love with him deeply. When Krishna aunty inquires about Neel and advises her:

"Neel's mother even came to Lucknow and quarrelled with me. She told me Neel was after my niece and wouldn't get married. I was surprised..... scold him if he does. Otherwise, his mother and sister will go about giving you a bad name, and I don't like that.'

I'll will scold him, 'said Sushma slamming shut the lid of the trunk." (p.176)

She undergoes guilt and self-denial. Despite deep love for Neel, she continually denies her happiness, believing it's her duty to sacrifice personal joy for the sake of her family: "Sushma's body convulsed with a sob. She lay with her head in her mother's lap and wept noiselessly." Usha Priyamvada writes that even her sobbing and crying are noiseless as if she has accepted this as her fate. She does not want to quarrel for her own happiness except the scene where her mother shows her anger on Sushma after her sister being rejected by groom's visitors: "You were the one who kicked up a fuss about the sari. What must they have thought when they saw you? You came in and sat down with no bangles, no earrings and a cheap sari". ----Oh, so did you have lots of jewellery made for me then? You are the one that wore a heavy gold chain- they must have noticed that'. But she grew emotional as she spoke, and her eyes filled with huge teardrops." (P. 130) The scene leaves an impression upon the minds of readers about Sushma being introvert and pure soul girl.

Pachpan Khambe Laal Deewarein is a heart-rending framework of a professional woman who resist against her suffocating context and continues to resonate with self-respect in contrary situations. Neel truly loves her and wants to marry her but becomes exasperated over Sushma's denial for marriage:

"How old are you, Neel, I am so much older than you Neel c. Our marriage would never be successful. I will always worry a young, pretty girl might snatch you away from me.'

'Is that how you see me?'

No Neel. No, Sushma clenched her fists and hugged them to her chest. This college, these pillars, they are my destiny, leave me here." (p.170)

She has come on a point in her life where she thinks that she is not lucky to get love in form of marriage. Once she was rejected by Narayan who loved her but could not marry her against his father's consent. Neel assures her and tries to clear her doubts but she somewhere is stuck in her hitches of life. Neel appears as a catalyst for desire as he awakens Sushma's long-suppressed desires. In his company she begins to feel desirable and seen against her trapped and suffocated existence. Neel presents a possibility for her actual independence by the proposal of marriage and move to Holland together. But now she has responsibilities for her younger brother and sisters. She is not ready to be selfish. This time, losing Neel, she feels a kind of emptiness and monotony in her life:

" I am nothing without Neel, only a shadow, the reflection of a lost voice; and now I will remain like this, wandering through the wastelands of my mind." (p.182)

The novel had got a cult status, birthing a television series in 1992 and generations of loyal readers to whom the protagonist Sushma Sharma's travails spoke viscerally. In television series, Meeta Vashisht played role of Sushma magnificently. This is the novel in which the protagonist struggles to separate her personal and professional life. Sushma is able to assert her hard-earned financial independence and follows her liabilities.

Neel's love comes with conditions deeply rooted in patriarchal expectations. He expects Sushma to quit her job, give up her hard-earned individuality, and move with him to Holland. The underlying meaning of Neel's demand is exactly the "male ego" and possessiveness. Even though he presents himself as a redeeming strength, the relationship ultimately becomes another coop for Sushma. He wants her entirely for himself, but refuses to respect her autonomy as a working, self-sufficient woman: "In analysing female agency within twentieth-century narrative fiction, it is critical to move beyond viewing empowerment as a static destination. Instead, it must be framed as an active, unfolding

trajectory. "She represents the tragic paradox of the mid-20th-century "New Indian Woman" who completes professional success but is trapped by patriarchal structures.

There is difference between Sushma and Ma, central character in *Tomb of Sand*, a novel translated by Daisy Rockwell. Ma, eighty years old woman has fulfilled all patriarchal socio-economic roles (as wife and mother) and is expected to fade away silently into death. After the death of her husband, she loses herself in deep depression. But she suddenly gets a change in her thought. She moves from her son's conservative house to her independent daughter's bohemian apartment, and ultimately crosses the physical, highly militarized geopolitical border between India and Pakistan to confront her past. She befriends transgender woman that is very shocking for society. On the contrary Sushma always puts family responsibilities above her romantic desires with Neel. She always fears like 'Log Kya Kahenge'. Sushma belongs 60s era of post-independence India while *Tomb of sand* is primarily set to 21st century. While Usha Priyamvada's *Pachpan Khambe Lal Deewaren'*(1961) exposes how early post-independence economic independence merely created a new, gold-plated cage of domestic exploitation for the Indian woman, Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* (2018) critiques this pattern by revealing that contemporary female autonomy achieves completion only through the radical renovation of the body, the rejection of familial guilt, and the dismantling of institutional borders: Mary Wollstonecraft observes:

"I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves."

Ma breaks her silence not as to plea, but to speak a playful, chaotic language that completely upsets the patriarchal system of her household. On the other, Sushma is always silent and leaves hope to live for herself. Neel loves her but advises her to leave job and move with him to Holland. He too ignores her feminine strength and independence. But both do not feel satisfied and completed in the surroundings whether they are among family members or in society. Simone de Beauvoir remarks:

"On the day when it will be possible for woman to love not in her weakness but in strength, not to escape herself but to find herself, not to abase herself but to assert herself – on that day love will become for her, as for man, a source of life and not of mortal danger."

Sushma proves to be real independent woman but she is not destined to be married.

To conclude Sushma faces adverse circumstances in her life since childhood. But she shows a courage, tough attitude and will power and becomes a strong pillar for her family. In exchange of this she has sacrificed her personal happiness, love and peace. She is heartbroken when she finds her mother worrying for her younger sister's marriage. Her mother never shows anxiety for Sushma's marriage as she is her sole bread earner. Sushma finds herself lonely, isolated and secluded. Neel emerges as a fleeting ray of personal freedom and joy but society does not accept this. Her friends, colleagues and relatives start to criticize her. This too terrifies her. Sushma is really a self-revered and dignified. Due to her life-long sense of duty and patriarchal conditioning she ultimately sacrifices her love. The novel highlights that a woman can earn financial security and freedom but her personal freedom still remains blocked due to family obligations, societal constraints and expectations.

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