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Women in Popular Fiction: A reading of Gawa Melam by Karma Dolkar

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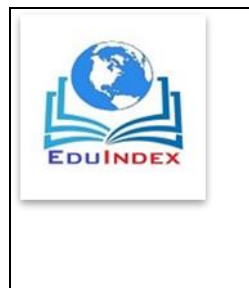
Abstract

Women have been represented as objects of desire in serious as well as popular literatures. By popular literature the researchers mean to say any kind of writing which aim at entertainment of the ordinary people in advanced society dominated by urban culture. Popular fiction, also known as Genre fiction is a branch of popular literature which developed in 20th century in Europe and America. Though they aim at purely entertainment but they also construct and popularize some of the stereotypical images of women characters. *Gawa Melam My aspiration* by Karma Dolkar perhaps is the first fiction in this category by a Bhutanese author.

In our present paper we shall be looking at Gawa Melam as a popular fiction and how it constructs stereotypical image of a woman who falls in love with the man who keeps on stalking and forcing himself on her, hence, advocating that woman love to be chased and stalked.

Keywords: *Popular Literature, Stereotype, Stalking, Dating Behavior, Obsession, Control.*

Karma Dolkar hails from Bhutan who studied and is now a resident of U.S.A. In October 2018, she published her first book in English title *Gawa Melam My aspiration*. The novel is a popular fiction about a love story. She received her basic education in Yangchenphug High School, Thimphu. Then she went to India to earn her bachelor degrees from St. Joseph's College, Darjeeling. She completed her post graduation in education from National Education College, Royal University of Bhutan. Her passions for learning lead her to the United States to pursue nursing in Santa Barbara City College when she was serving the country as a teacher in Lungtenzampa Middle Secondary School. She is a certified Nursing Assistant and also earned



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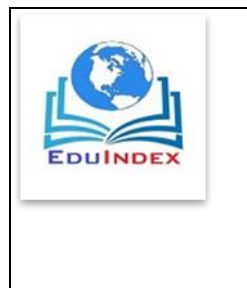
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her associate degree in Liberal Arts with a focus on biomedical sciences. Her debut novel *Gawa Melam My aspiration* (2018) is the first popular novel from Bhutan in English. The author has herself admitted that the novel is for pure fun.

Popular fiction considers the taste and claims to understand the interest of the readers. Therefore, popular fiction's development and success in the field of literature has a great influence on the readers. The reader plays a greater role in popularizing popular fiction which is also known as genre fiction. Literary fiction mirrors the real-life situation, conditions whereas popular fiction aims to entertain, to thrill and to comfort the readers. Popular literature is common with the masses whereas literary fictions are written for aesthetic purposes and written in a specific genre. According to Gracie (2011), "The prime aim of popular fiction is to entertain readers and keep them turning pages far into the night because they can't put the book down." One of the favorite quotes of popular fiction by Daphne de Jong states, "readers of "serious" fiction expect to be challenged and like to be entertained; readers of popular fiction expect to be entertained and like to be challenged. They're often the same readers in a different mood" (Gracie, 2011).

Popular fiction is a combination of two main elements: conventions and inventions. Convention means to do with tradition and culture, with stereotypical characters, plots structure, and common ideas while the invention is to do with unique creation with new ideas, different plot structure and creative languages. Both conventions and inventions play significant roles in a cultural context. While conventions represent the shared values of a society, inventions introduce new concepts to society. Conventions maintain the traditions, customs, and stability of a defined culture; inventions bring changes, new values. This explains the popularity of popular fictions since readers could find in these novels a piece of their lives, beliefs, and interests. Such findings bring them "satisfaction and emotional security" (Cawelti, 1976). At the same time, inventions provide them with new information about the world and the feeling of escape from ordinary life around them. The ordinary life of Gawa Melam: duty in the morning and household works in the evening, gathering with friends once in-while, livings with best friend are the conventions tradition and customs seen in Bhutan as the author portrays in her book. However, the contract



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marriage of a year between the protagonists is the new futuristic trend the author wants to prediction. The characters in novel represent the future generations where living together before marriage and popular fiction is a mixture of both traditional and modern to entertain the readers with creative and unique ideas with it reflecting and assessing the real issues of life. It is learning and understanding with entertainment. So even in popular fictions, women are presented like in serious literature. Women are presented weak, docile, submissive, gentle and controlled by the male counterparts. Males take the role of master with authority and subjugate their women to prove their power. Almost all the societies in the world are patriarchal where it is controlled predominantly by men. With modernization and change in attitude, people are trying to correct this imbalance of power in the society but the problem has its root embedded deep in every society, every man, every culture, and every religion and even in the notion of women. That's why the problem remains the same across the globe. The 20th century popular literature depicts stereotypical women who are exploited, discriminated and subordinated.

A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaleid Hosseini is the Genre fiction. It mirrors the life of women in Afghan society. It is the story of Mariam, an illegitimate daughter of Jalil. Mariam is forced to marry Rasheed who lives in Kabul. War in Kabul brings injured Laila under Rasheed protection and care. Rasheed marries Laila. Gradually both the wives are beaten, abused and they are nearly killed. The story is about the sisterhood shared by the two wives. Hosseini employs the convention elements of women subjugation with the invention of two wives resisting back enjoying the freedom at the end of the novel by Laila. There are many popular novels such as *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen and *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (1960) by Harper Lee. Though the primary function of the popular fiction is to entertain the audience however they discuss some serious issues and stereotypical of images of women. All these creative arts listed above address the women issues. How women are objectified and commodified with a value of saleable tag for profit.

According to Manner (n.d.), "Pop culture has a bad habit of presenting stalking as normal dating behavior." This is what really happens in the novel by Gawa Melam *My aspiration* by Karma Dolkar. Gawa Melam, a simple town girl is stalked by an heir and vice president of the



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Paljor Group, a multimillion construction company town boy Lekyang Paljor. According to Office on Women's Health (OWH) (n.d.), "Stalking is any repeated and unwanted contact with you that makes you feel unsafe. Stalking may get worse or become violent over time. Stalking may also be a sign of an abusive relationship." Stalking is harassment according to law. Someone's privacy is invaded if a person is stalked and chased on. Gawa, the female protagonist is stalked and her personal life is exposed to the male protagonist's cousins against her will. Her pieces of life are stolen by this group of wealthy cousins after accidentally meeting with Lekyang in dinner gathering with her group of friends. In the first encounter, Lekyang takes her for Palmo, his first love. The stalking and the chasing game begin from that brief encounter though the misunderstanding was cleared then and there. Her life was not hers alone from there.

"Honestly you are getting on my nerves. I have no energy to argue with you. Can you leave me alone? I don't know you and or whatever reason, you had for mistaken identity. But seriously I am not the one okay. I AM NOT THE ONE, PERIOD!" (p. 14).

"Lekyang, I feel suffocated with you hanging around me every time. I need space. I don't want your attention, and I need my life to be private. For god damn sake I am not your Palmo. Wake up!"

The lines state the frustration in Gawa's voice as she has been stalked many times as the lines indicate. She learned that even her boss is with the boy. Her life becomes miserable. She is stalked everywhere her workplace, home, and market and every time: in the morning, evening, late night and even during her off days from work. She is forced to have lunch with the boy during her off day against her will. Dolkar presents her female character emotionally and socially demoralized by a wealthy group of cousins. Her boss Aayang Norbu is discovered as Lekyang's cousin so her work place and working schedule are controlled and adjusted accordingly. There comes a day where she decides to resign the job in 'Coffee and Friends' Café though she is desperately in need of the job. All her rights in her life are controlled by Lekyang and his family when she learned that her new job is also run by Aayang and Lekyang. "He said, 'Congratulations, you are still Aayang's employee and mine,'" (p.48). Not only her job even her life's important discussion of marriage is forced upon her by blackmailing her and imposing her



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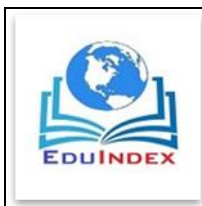
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for a year contract marriage. “Then this picture will reach your mom and your brothers’ right after the day breaks in. you have two 2 hours to decide” (Dolkar, pg. 72). The author displays the stereotypical images of a woman in Bhutan as well as another part of the world. Men forced themselves upon women; they compel their love and chased after. Subjugation, oppression, exploitation, domination, inferiority and powerless attributes of a woman are clearly projected in the novel. But the most interesting finding is that women love to be stalked and chased after. Gawa falls in love with the same guy who made her life upside down and blackmails her to marry him. McIntosh explains, “Movies often present stalker-like behavior as a harmless or endearing part of romantic courtship. In these narratives, a man’s obsessive, coercive, or stalker-like behavior is frame as expression of his love devotion. And even if the woman in question is initially upset or annoyed by his obsessive attention, his actions are inevitably framed as a compliment” (Jasper, 2018). Female’s voices are unheard or sometimes they are silenced, ignore all the signal of disinterested and the male doesn’t want to hear ‘no’ from a woman meaning from the inferior section. Males do not respect women’s boundaries, their space and their privacy and they are more concerned about their wants and needs. Nevertheless, these behaviors such as stalking, chasing and imposing themselves to women are considered as a sign of devotion rather than a troubling pattern of entitlement. There is no negative impact of his behavior. McIntosh continues, “As long as it’s done in the name of love, a man’s deception, his lies, his trickery, his manipulation: none of that disqualifies him from a romantic relationship. And even if the two don’t get together in the end, he’s still shown to be ‘nice guy’... In reality, of course the willingness to flagrantly violate someone else’s space, and someone else’s privacy, is major red flag. It’s behavior connected to deep-seated issues of control and extreme levels of entitlement” (Jasper, 2018). That is what exactly happens in the text *Gawa Melam My aspiration* by Karma Dolkar. Gawa and Lekyang draw a marriage contract for a year after Lekyang’s stalking, chasing, blackmailing and making her life miserable. She falls in love with him at the end of the novel. *Gawa Melam My aspiration* is a popular fiction with both convention and invention entangle to weave the strong entertaining as well portraying the image of women in changing the modern world.



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If a girl smiles, it is yes. If a girl says 'No', it means yes.

This is how the popular literature, cinema depict their male characters who keep in stalking girls/women in the name of love. For examples in James Bond movies and South Indian Movies the male characters impose themselves to the female protagonist. Sad part is that even Bhutanese which has a strong tradition of respect to women are going for popular fiction.

"The more you try to distance yourself from me, the more strings I am going to pull to keep you near me" (Dolkar, pg.61). Women's words are of no importance in communication. Whatever she says, he will understand and take it in the favor of him.

'Would you go on date with me?' Lekyang was persistent with what he wants.

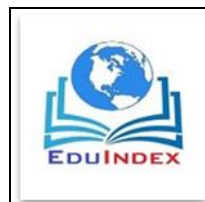
"I don't want any commitments. I have some prior plan and I have no time to get into any relationship," was the best answer she could give him.

Well then, it s even better if there is no serious commitment. We will get to know each other without getting too serious until we know if we are going in a right direction." Lekyang offered. (Dolkar, pg.61)

The male character imposes himself to the female even if she is not willing to. The male manipulates the woman character in the way he wants the women to behave toward him. Women's status has been inferior to men for long time and it is still in some places and embedded in the depth of some male constructed society. Women are ignored and their images are stereotyped. The popular fiction has only contributed in internalizing among the contemporary readers the notion of stalking as an accepted social behavior

Karma Dolkar explores popular fiction in Bhutanese context in entertaining features and challenging the readers as well to reflect on the story discussed with futuristic appeal. Dolkar represents stalking and chasing as love devotion rather than a destructive conduct as she addresses women have taken as compliment, a means to gain the love in return.

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