CHAPTER THREE

Social Analysis of the Source Text

3.1 Introduction

By the term gender discrimination we understand the prejudicial treatment of a group or a person due to their gender or sex. It involves a reinforcement of behavior and attitude on the basis of traditionally stereotypical roles people have in the society we live in. Gender discrimination is practiced and supported in various ways which are crucial to our socialization into our sex roles. While in theory gender discrimination can affect both men and women, however, it is women who have been at the receiving end through the ages and across cultures, since most cultures in the world are male dominated. The right to be in the forefront and the power to control comes easily with the birth of a male child in the name of tradition and custom. The femininity women are socialized into are defined by the society which is again male dominated. “Being a girl or being a boy is not a stable state but an ongoing accomplishment, something that is actively done both by the individual so categorized and by those who interact with it in the various communities to which it belongs” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003:17).

Today we are more aware about the gender bias that exits in the society. Demand for equality for women has always prime concern of the feminists. We may agree to the fact that men and women are biologically different there but this difference does not necessarily mean that they should be treated as inferior than men. Yes the society has moved forward and we find around us women prime ministers, presidents, astronauts, but
the goal is yet very far for gender awareness to seep into the grassroots and bring over a social change where women will not face the double standards at every juncture of their life. In India where goddesses are worshipped and are symbol of power, wealth or knowledge women are still being burnt in the pier of dowry. They are subject to domestic violence, rape or prostitution. Gender stereotyping usually associated with a society which identifies with patriarchal norms is easily identified as prevalent in our society where it presents itself under guise of traditional Indian values.

In this chapter we discuss how the persistence of male dominance in our society limits the scope for women to actualize their potentials. The forced prostitution in the case of Shewli in Udo Megh reveals the gruesome reality of our civilized society which at every step points its finger at women for this kind of disaster and hence tries to keep the cruel attitude of the patriarchal society in dark. This is not the society which can appreciate a woman for her courage, the selfless dedication to her work or her strength to protest against what is wrong. Deya, represents the undaunted spirit, which is the absolute, elemental, inner urge of womanhood. It is the strongest force in her nature. In facing all the adversities she did not let her spirit die and stood by what she thought to be her moral duty. When the outworking of this force within her is hampered by the society and Soumya’s ego overpowered his love and confidence Deya she rebelled.

We have also looked at how language plays a vital role to reinforce the traditional gender roles, and sees women as inferior to men. Language itself can not be deemed good or bad, but it does reflect individual or societal values. We have cited several examples from Udo Megh which displays the way in which language can be used to stereotype gender.
3.2 Crisis of Modern Women

With the reading of the novel *Udo Megh* a serious question strikes our mind. With feminism playing a vital role in the modern world has it really contributed to the emancipation of a modern woman? Many skeptical brows are bound to raise on how far women's liberalization has become effective. Is it emancipation in the truest sense? It’s true that women of modern days have jumped over the hurdles of just being the age old stereotype restricted to the role of home making. After a painful struggle in the patriarchal society women have succeeded in putting their foot in other vistas of life that were unfrequented. In many cases they are at par with men with regards to economic status. Suchitra Bhattacharya’s female characters are modern in true sense. She portrays the character of those women which are urban, working and hail from the typical middle class. They do not hesitate to question the norm if it is wrong and strong enough to rebel. In this particular novel Deya, a modern woman has more self-respect and is a stronger person than the stereotypical woman, independent of making her own moves and exercising her own free will. But the indispensable question is whether all these external liberties have really succeeded in freeing her or has it involved further complexities as by products of her much craved liberalism and her fight for justice. Despite the fact of external emancipation, the most ironic factor is that a modern woman is flung into the reality of further complexities of the world where along with her homely duties she juggles a career as well and is often blamed if she fails to maintain the balance.
3.3 *Udo Megh*: Reflecting Gender Relations

Deya is a thorough professional, strong, determined and is not scared of hard challenges. She has extended her boundaries and created a space outside the domestic front and pursues the job of a news reporter, again a profession a woman is unlikely to opt, as her primary duty always lies with the family. But as soon as she enters home she is the loving and caring wife like any other ordinary woman who doesn’t underestimate her husband’s likes and dislikes and takes care of every small requirement of her husband. Today’s urban educated women may be fortunate enough in their attempt to extend her boundaries and find identities of their own but this has put modern women in more critical state. Today’s working women have to harmoniously combine her career and her roles as a wife or a mother or a daughter-in-law. The family does not spare a working woman from performing all the household works and expects her to look after every nitty gritty of household in spite of her tight schedule of job. We see Deya efficiently balancing both her career and home. On the contrary we see Soumya very reluctant to perform the minimum household work even on holidays.

Deya loved Soumya very much who came out of his house and married Deya against his mother’s will. But his was the last word for anything and Deya simply had to accept his decisions. She could hardly say no to any of Soumya’s decisions. But we do not see Deya complaining for anything. It was not before Shewli’s advent in their life that she could realize the hollowness of their relationship which looked apparently very stable and deep-rooted.

The true mental set up of a person can be understood only in adverse situations, when no mask of pretension can hide the hypocrisy of a person. Suchitra Bhattacharya’s introduces Shewli in the novel only to show the true face of the society and its most
intellectual creature called human most of whom do very little to valorize the glory of humanity. We talk about society’s evolution, redefining gender relationship and woman’s freedom. But could we really achieve the true emancipation of woman? Yes we may argue that we are in an age where the custom of burning a sati is banned or a widow’s marriage is not something illegal and strange. Today’s woman has set her feet in the plane of moon. Whether it is politics or any other prestigious job a woman has proved that she is no less than a man? But is this the lot of every woman of today? Is each one of them is educated and privileged irrespective of class or caste? No, this is not the whole picture and exceptions can not be set for examples. We may hoist the flag of modernity but has the light of modernity reached the grass root level? We have to pause to answer it. Reformations have taken place and there are happy signs of change but the transition is very slow. The traditional mentality still affects the modern vision. The goal of a gender neutral society promoting a woman more active, ambitious and independent is yet to be achieved.

The novel revolves around the serious issue of prostitution and how a so called modern society sympathizes or apathies with the victim. But how a modern woman is still victimized if not physically but mentally and asked to sacrifice her individuality and compromise at every step is not sidelined. For ages it was believed that the different characteristics, roles and status accorded to women and men in society are determined by sex, that they are natural and therefore not changeable. Gender is seen closely related to the roles and behavior assigned to women and men based on their sexual differences. Agarwal writes, “Gender inequality dwells not only outside the household but also centrally within it (as cited in Baland, Bardhan & Bowels, 2007: 274). It stems not only from pre-existing differences in economic endowments between women and men but also from pre-existing gendered social norms and social perceptions. From time immemorial women have followed what society has told them to believe without actually questioning it and looking within to determine if this is right. Home is the place she suits in and extending the boundary is labeled as something rebellious. Male constructed images of women are embedded in Indian culture in such a way that they appear quite ‘natural’. And women try hard lifelong to play her assigned role perfectly; show absolute
obedience and submissiveness to fulfill male expectations. But the irony is that there is no limit to the male expectations and their demands from women increase each day with new dimensions and when a woman raises her voice against such oppression it is subdued by violence. A woman, rural or urban, illiterate or educated, low class or an upper one, traditional or modern, experiences some form of male domination throughout her life. Gender inequality permeates the home, the workplace, and almost all aspects of life. Violence against women is the most insidious outcome of gender inequality. The cultural norms teach a woman from the time she is born to accept this as her fate. Women’s capability of decision making at home front or at workplace is always doubted and any such symptom in her is considered as transgression of female domain. Suchitra Bhattacharya’s *Udo Megh* is a novel which explicitly points at the subtle and loud entrapments of the male dominated society. She shows how the modern enlightenment is yet to change the age old male set up where a woman is considered a non entity. There are changes in the economic and social scenario but it has failed to bring any significant changes on the domestic front and overburdened woman leading to further complexities of woman’s suppression.

Women are usually encouraged to take up the stereotypical jobs such as secretarial, clerical, nursing, childcare, social work, elementary teaching and so forth. There has been an established ideology of what jobs are suitable for working mothers and what aren't. Her choosing of a profession illustrates her concern for making time for the family. At first, the thought of a woman leaving her family to go and find a job elsewhere was unfathomable. The present scenario may not be like the early days yet a woman is expected to give priority to her family over her career. When a woman chooses a career, she is to consider the effects it would have on her family life. Thus, the woman is placed in the difficult position of having to balance the multiple roles expected of her with the roles she wants to carry out for herself. In this connection we must say that Deya is lucky enough to continue her challenging profession of a reporter in a newspaper office, *Nabaprabhat*. Her husband has been supportive enough. But not her every colleague is as lucky as her. Her job’s demand doesn’t allow her to stick to a fixed time table. Deya talks about her friend Jayashree who was very nervous when her office work
demanded her to go home in late nights. Her conservative joint family doesn’t allow her to work so late. And in such a situation her husband seemed to play a neutral role. He couldn’t speak anything to support his wife. A highly educated woman is expected to sit at home and teach nursery rhymes to her child. Deya herself comments:

“amader profession e Jayashree ekebare misfit.

English: Jayashree is a total misfit to our profession.

Though women have made great strides in the field of various jobs they are too often discouraged by family members from choosing careers that infringe too much on family life. Thus through negotiating her emotional, intellectual and physical space women always have endeavored to safeguard their identities. Interestingly in Deya’s office the intake of women employees was less compared to the males. The women employees had the fixed time table of 12 p.m. to 6 p.m. No challenging task was assigned to them. Deya herself confessed that they were supposed to prepare page-filling news like daily horoscope, weather forecast or trivial news of entertainment.

Although it is encouraging to see today’s women taking of professional roles in various sectors of the society, however deep seated prejudices against women cripple a woman’s spirit everywhere, at home and outside. Though women have acquired the legal right to work, there is still plenty of sexism in the workforce. Most women take on a typical 9-5 office workday so that they can be home to cook dinner, do the laundry and oversee the children's homework; they come home is meant for the second shift duty. Though technically women can apply for the male dominant jobs, it does not guarantee that they will be equally chosen. Some businesses claim they do not discriminate, but statistics prove otherwise. “Women face wage discrimination too and excluded from the most powerful executive positions” (Benokraitis, 1996: 399). In many cases the issue of time commitment and maternity leave, play vital roles in hiring women employees. The notion that women might have children entails that they would necessarily take time off from work. This ultimately suggests that they will have to be paid for a specific amount of time without any work. That means that hiring a woman is not beneficial
economically. Unfortunately women are often defenseless to these discriminations. It is high time to see how we can change this reality. Women should not sacrifice a fulfilling career in order to maintain peaceful relations within the home and companies should not favor male workers for economic reasons. We must not forget that there is a direct link between a country’s attitude toward women and its progress socially and economically. The status of women is central to the health of the society. If one part suffers, so does the whole.

Deya in *Udo Megh* is constantly critical of such discrimination. It is she who speaks to the editor, Ranen Samaddar, regarding the monotony and nature of the job. So when there was a sudden change and women were engaged in the evening shifts, the co-editor of the newspaper, Mr. Ashesh is not happy with Deya as he believes that Deya is instrumental behind it. He warns her that she should not complain if her task demands her to stay in the office till mid night. She is outspoken and clearly states that she is not afraid of any such situation. Deya is in full praise of Ranen Samaddar who made the change possible and believed in Deya. But if we look at the comments of the experienced editor we will see that he could not surpass the typical male nature. In the beginning when Deya approached him he pacified her saying that a job in newspaper is not only about adventure. Newspaper is like a huge family and there are many trivial nitty-gritty things in a big family! As women are inborn housewives; they can handle these particulars well. He must have believed that relying on a woman for something challenging other than the routine work would be foolish. Women are presumed to be less competent (Carli & Eagly, 2002: 631). People doubt their judgmental quality and power of exerting influence. “Although women’s status has improved remarkably in the 20th century in many societies, women continue to lack access to power and leadership compared with men” (Carli & Eagly, 2002:629).Thus we see how a woman is left with least choices where age old ideology about sex roles plays the determinant factor of her efficiency in whatever she ventures and asked to be contented in what she is given.
Unfortunately a woman’s initiative is never appreciated however great it is, rather her endeavor is meant to face harsh criticism from the male section. Deya was happy that the authority didn’t doubt her capabilities and assigned her with covering important reports regarding interviewing the governor’s wife, enquiring about the stealing of a girl child or observing parliament election in the district of Howrah. But her capability couldn’t fetch any glory, rather her husband belittled the importance of her task saying that it was not Deya’s enthusiasm that drew the attention of the authority towards her but as there were no male reporters available at that time those tasks were assigned to her. In the novel we see how Soumya could not be whole heartedly happy when his cousin, Bugi appreciated Deya pointing at her smartness and prettiness. When Bugi praises Deya for her progressiveness to opt an odd job of a newspaper reporter Soumya belittles such loud praises of his wife and says that she does nothing special and works in a small local Bengali newspaper and also emphasizes that she doesn’t do anything odd or awkward. Negating Bugi’s observation about Deya’s guts and strength Soumya says that Deya is basically shy in nature. Perhaps Soumya tries to convince that Deya may take up a job which is primarily male dominated but she is very much feminine from the bottom of her heart. His wife is the traditional and conventional type. She is very much anchored to home, her actual place. Soumya said,

“Deya abosyo temon bekhappa kaaj kare na. Pray routine job i...basically lajuk type”

**English:** “But Deya does not do something very outrageous. Almost a routine job .... “Basically she is shy type.”

Suchitra Bhattacharya clearly dissects through patriarchy which circumscribes and belittles the identity of a woman. They negate the idea that a woman can be self sufficient and capable enough to create an identity of her own without male support. Stereotyped gender roles which are heavily biased against women do not value a woman’s individuality. Women still remain bogged down by the patriarchy in spite of all her achievements. Soumya wouldn’t have minded if Bugi had pointed at his broad mindedness to allow his wife to be economically independent and work in a challenging
job. But here Bugi was looking at Deya as an individual, a separate entity, not as the ‘other’ of a male.

Several cultural codes are imposed on women and the responsibility of carrying that tradition also rests on their shoulders. Woman’s place associates primarily to home and kitchen (Shands 1999:40). Her biological gender restricts her from accessing the things outside. In a patriarchal society man has played the role of breadwinner. It boosted his ego as he was the provider and protector. And a woman as the weaker section was meant to be domesticated and protected. Working both inside and outside the home is not a 21st century phenomenon; women have done it for decades. But being able to go into work hasn’t been an easy fight for women to win and there has always been strong suppression, sometimes cruel, to deter a woman from earning her livelihood. Women face enormous pressure to conform to traditional roles within the family. Education plays an important role in the shaping up of a woman’s identity. Women have started to question the patriarchal norms. Today they are more rational than earlier and now emerging into a new era of freedom and rights. A woman educated and employed gain status in the society. Status translates into power to influence family as well as society. Suchitra Bhattacharya’s novel depicts how the idea of a man, playing the important role of earning money for his family, is deeply rooted in the society. From the very birth of a child the process of socialization starts. A man has to be strong and capable enough to bear the responsibility of the family. His wife may earn but he being unemployed is something always a ‘no no’. Even today there is hardly any change in this mental set up. Ritam who struggles to be a successful writer is rebuked throughout the novel for being irresponsible and careless as he did not stick to any regular suitable job. It was not that he did not like to do anything but he considered himself a writer and wanted to succeed in this field. He could not tolerate hoaxing, deceitfulness or cunningness. He could not play tricks or be silent in the face of anything wrong for mere saving his job. And today’s job demands so. This is why in spite of his brother-in-law’s constant effort to get him a job did not work. He was rebuked for sticking to such baseless principles. His sister or mother could not understand why Ritam was reluctant to compromise to some extent to sustain his family. This was something unthinkable to Ritam’s mother that his son would
not do any job and her daughter-in-law would earn money. The society did not allow him to be in his dream world of creation. His mother said,

“tor ki lajja saram kichui nei re? Bie korechis, akta bachcha hoyeeche….”

**English**: Are you not at all ashamed? You are married and got a baby too….”

She felt as if Ritam was quitting one job after another as he was careless, irresponsible. His inclination towards writing was nothing but silly excuse. She was disgusted with her son and said,

“Bou khetekhute rojgaar kore ene khaoabe aar purushmanush sue sue thyang nachabe….”

**English**: The poor wife will do all the hard work to earn money and feed us and the man will simply lie down and dance his feet.

Ritam’s sister also did not miss a single chance to rebuke him for quitting all the jobs arranged by her husband, Ambar. She was disgusted with Ritam’s habit of quitting jobs frequently.

Ritam’s wife, Shrabani was a lecturer in a college and it was not that the family was going through hard times for Ritam not doing any job. Ritam also had no problem with his wife working and didn’t mind at all to ask money from his wife. But here the problem is somewhat more complicated. Families whether they are nuclear or joint are normally set up on patriarchal basis, with the male figures determining fundamental conditions and making the key decisions. Women had always been at home and were not allowed to enter the other arenas of life. From the day a girl is born she is constantly reminded of the things she is not supposed to do. She is taught that her place is at home and not in the world of men and she is worth less than a man. Her identity is forged as soon as her family and society limit her opportunities and declares her to be second rate. Subjugation and exploitation of women is a product of man’s vested teaching and women’s acceptance of them. The sexist suppression still continues as the prejudices
against women are naturalized in the name of religion, culture and tradition. A male should be the breadwinner as the head of the family and this is something accepted as natural because of a hierarchical social system which solidifies male dominance.

Awareness about gender bias has spread over slowly. But it will take a long time for this awareness to seep into the grassroots and translate into social change. Shrabani did not underestimate her husband’s skill of writing but she was at the same time ashamed of Ritam’s unemployed status. She confessed at one point that it was just for this reason that she was avoiding going to her parents. She felt embarrassed to stay at Chandannagar as her parents, relatives, friends enquire about Ritam’s job and she is unable to stand that situation. She said, “

“Chandannagare gie thakte pari na...baba dada der mukhe sab samoye akta prasno chinho jhulche...college,bondhubandhab,attiyasajan, kato jaygay je kato rakom mithye boli”

English: I can’t go and stay at Chandannagar...a question mark always hangs on the faces of baba and dasas. I have to lie in so many ways to my friends, relatives and at other places...!

When Ritam’s elder sister planned for a tour at Jaipur Shrabani simply refused to accompany them as her husband is jobless and therefore it does not suit her to go for such a luxurious trip. When her sister-in-law did not ask for any contribution it hurt her more. She felt as if it was a direct blow to her husband’s self respect. It was as if Ritam’s sister was showing pity to them. But Ritam did not looked at the matter so deeply and argued with Shrabani for behaving rudely with his sister. But she was steady in her point. She said,

“Amar ki kono attosamman nei? ...Tumi kichu bujhbe na. meyeder je kothay lage.”

English: Don’t I have any self–respect? You can’t understand at all where a woman gets hurt...!
When one of Shrabani’s colleagues, Mr. Hiren enquires about her husband’s income she felt awkward and lied to him. The societal set up still believes that a woman may go for a job but it is just additional when the family needs are met with her husband’s income. Woman’s job may be a pass time activity or just to satiate her ego of being self independent. Mr. Hiren commented:

“eta to manbe, main contribution ta husher i

English: You must agree that the main contribution is solely your husband’s.

When Shrabani didn’t respond to such a loud statement and felt awkward Mr. Hiren tried to lighten the seriousness of the matter saying, “May be he earns less than you.” But he was very sure that Shrabani’s family runs well with what Ritam earns. And Shrabani nodded as she could not utter the truth. He tried to help Shrabani to come out of her helplessness and shame and praised Ritam’s writing skill as his story was published in Nabaprabhat. She feels proud when somebody praises Ritam and his writing. In fact his skill of writing impressed her before marriage and Ritam also in a straightforward way let her know that he would be involved in writing and she might have to take responsibility of his family. And she agreed to it and was happy. But the harsh reality of life hardly let her to enjoy that contentedness and satisfaction. Ritam’s quitting traditional jobs overpowers his other good qualities.

Society criticizes a man who sits at home and lives on his wife’s earning. No one likes any change in gender roles. For a man depression follows unemployment. The hardest thing for a jobless man is the humiliation within the family itself. It makes him feel useless he takes money from his wife as he doesn’t contribute a penny. It hurts his male ego.

Now as the tables are turned. The fact that Ritam has to ask for money from his wife to bear the minimum expense of his cigarette makes him feel low. Though he didn’t pay heed to the comments of others he was surprised to know that his wife also felt pain deep inside her heart for his joblessness. He realized that though Shrabani did not nag or complain both his wife and mother tried to adjust to their depression. And it must be the
extreme point when Shrabani burst out and he was in complete dark about the tumult inside his wife’s heart.

“Ato baro bhul hoye gelo bujhte? Bar bar tar chakri chara nie Shrabanir raag ke atodin hesei urie dieche Ritam, bhebeche ota samoik, ota Shrabanir moner katha noy, atocho Shraboni je bhetore bhetore...!”

**English:** How could he make such a big mistake in understanding her? Time and again Ritam has laughed away Shrabani’s anger about his frequent job quitting. He thought it was temporary. It’s not what she actually means. But Shrabani in the bosom of her heart….!

Such reaction from Shrabani pricked him the most but he had no words to console her or defend himself. Though he was running around to get a suitable job his failure deemed to be his incapability and indifference to his family. Every conversation used to end with his incapability. And everybody was reluctant to understand his stance.

Modern men are still quite reluctant to marry a woman with brain. They advertise for women who are homely and traditional. Because they know that such meek and docile women will never raise her voice against him and will serve him lifelong as her duty. This is just because men feel insecure or suffer from low esteem when a woman is independent and works outside home. They are threatened that the ideas which women develop due to her education and exposure to the outer world will affect the marital relationship or to say correctly the power game. Suchitra Bhattacharya’s female characters are usually urban working women and she tends to show explicitly the problems they face internally and externally in spite of their privileged position compared to the uncountable number of women who are yet to be enlightened or strive for their rights. Somewhere she had hit the root of a very basic problem that the position of women in the society had remained more or less the same irrespective of their social strata. Yes, there are certain changes in the society though minimum where husbands do not have problem with their wives working. Yet the number of husbands like Soumya
who belittle their wives’ achievements and believe that it is they who play the pivot role to sustain their families and can do it without their wives’ financial assistance is innumerable. And the society always doubts the manliness of those few who are quite open to this issue and admit that they genuinely admire their wives’ contribution and do not have any problem with women’s equality. Being at home and depending on wife’s money is a stigma to a man. For a man being effeminate is a matter of shame. And time and again society pricks this weak nerve of men like Ritam and influences a man to behave like a man. It becomes obvious that the spouse who contributes the most will have the greater decision making power. And there will be nothing more shameful if a woman gets hold of the power at home and exerts influence on her husband. Men who do not hold nine to five jobs with a salary cheque that puts food on the table are not deemed manly enough. Money makes the world go round. Psychologically money has many meanings. Most importantly it represents an avenue of autonomy and self-esteem. Men do not have the option of staying at home and look after the family like a woman. They have the option if they can withstand the gossip, the ridicule and the general disapproval. And Ritam’s family and the surrounding were exactly doing the same. And interestingly Ritam’s mother feels very helpless as her daughter-in-law runs the family. She scolds Ritam as he punctured her dream to be a proud mother of a son. Even as a woman she can not appreciate Shrabani’s hold of the family; rather she rebukes her son for such a situation. Her son’s less or no hold of the family makes her feel weak and voiceless and she feels as if they were living on the pity of Shrabani. She feels embarrassed as her son is jobless. As an adjunct to the male a woman is always welcome but a woman strong, economically independent spells threat to the family as well as the society.

There is another instance in the novel which shows how a woman always has to compromise someway or the other. Deya’s sister-in law, Mahua had been throughout a good student. But after her marriage with Deya’s brother she could not go for Ph.D. She got involved in household things and after pregnancy it seemed quite impossible to speak out her desire to go for Ph.D. Now as her son was a bit grown up Deya asked her to start again. Even Mahua’s father-in-law encouraged her. But the universal mother-in-law complex of Gouri discouraged Mahua. Deya tried to argue with her mother saying that if
they engage a full timer there would be no problem. But there was no green signal from her mother. She pushed the ball in her son’s court and said that her son, Santu would do the necessary. She simply didn’t talk about this any further. Deya finds a reason behind her mother’s such indifference towards the matter of higher studies of Mahua. Her mother was a graduate in philosophy and could not do anything after marriage. In playing the ideal role of a good wife, all her intellect died in the kitchen and in looking after her family responsibilities. She must have nurtured the pain deep inside her heart. And her intention to keep Mahua engaged in household works and put out the light of hope for Mahua’s higher studies could be a kind of revenge. By encaging her daughter-in-law she tries to compensate her anger of suppression. She was doing wrong as she was allowing the injustice to continue in the next generation. She might be aware of what she was doing but she never had the voice against patriarchy but her suppressed pain turned her selfish and keeping her daughter-in-law confined within four walls she wanted to get the minimum satisfaction that she was not the only victim of the system of male dominance. Moreover a woman who is highly qualified is seen as too smart and savvy.

The author seems to question the institution of marriage itself, which has always been considered the predominant feature of Indian society. No one gets tired of singing praise of the permanence of marriage in India which is the base of strong family bonding. But Suchitra Bhattacharya seems to critically observe the criteria which make a marriage successful in India. Our culture teaches a girl from the very childhood that she is weak and feeble. The society in the name of tradition kills her vital spirit to move forward. She is like a creeper who has no power to stand on its own without the support of a strong tree. And marriage is something which gives her security and respect. Her territory is defined by the society and expected to be a reed which bends down with the flow of water. If she tries to stand like a huge banyan tree, inevitably she has to face the adverse forces which try to uproot her. So she is taught how not to rebel against what is going on and should do the best to save her marriage as it is she who has the responsibility to go to any extent to make the spiritual bond successful. Outside marriage she has no existence of her known and she should worship her husband as her god and make him happy. In his “Paradise Lost”, Milton said, “He for God only, she for God in him.” The family operates
on the principle of inequality between men and women. Like the mother-earth, she should be all-giving and not ever demanding anything in return. Thus in the name of marriage she is kept away from the public eye and confined within four walls. Thus home becomes the microcosm of the outer world, the macrocosm where the poisonous tree of inequality grows up and dries way the life blood of a woman. Suchitra Bhattacharya is not happy with such an institution of marriage which puts a full stop to a woman’s life. She lives her life not for herself but for others. If marriage demeans women’s vitality and try to squeeze her freedom do women have no right to raise voice against it? In many of her short stories like Samporko or Shikhar Thikana we have seen how Suchitra Bhattacharya’s female characters didn’t hesitate to come out of a marriage which was not working out. It is not their disbelief in the institution but their partners’ sense of superiority which was actually suffocating them. Her female characters remarried giving life another chance. They tried to live life without compromising their dignity. These women are not wayward or flippant trying to play with life. They love their husbands and care for them. They can do anything for love. But why should she tolerate any imposition from their male partners.

In Udo Megh we see Deya as a loving and caring wife. Though she has a cook at home but she loves to prepare dishes for her husband on holidays. Everyday she prepares breakfast for Soumya before she leaves for office. She takes care of every little thing of him. She avoids anything that can upset him. But in their relationship not everything is perfect. There are incidences which bring out Deya’s deep love for Soumya. But readers will hardly find such things in Soumya. Yes he doesn’t create opposition regarding her job. But hardly is he seen to value Deya’s decisions or ideas. He does what he likes to does. Deya herself admits that her family rotates round what Soumya likes or dislikes. It was almost three years to their marriage and Deya wished to conceive. But whenever she lets him know about her he simply speaks out his long term plans of buying a brand new car or home. He says, “No earthly force can change my schedule.” Deya feels that motherhood is something that would bring a sense of fulfillment in her but she has to be on the pity of her husband to decide upon the time which he thinks to be suitable to start a
family. Soumya has always been passionate about new things. He was adjusting with a motorbike as he didn’t want to buy a second hand car. He said,

“Soumya Sinha Roy doesn’t believe in second hand. Gaari, baari, bou, gadget computer – amaar possession e jakhon asbe they shall have to be virgin”

**English:** Soumya Sinha Roy doesn’t believe in second hand. Car, home, wife, gadget computer, whatever come to my possession has to be virgin.

This particular statement speaks for his typical male chauvinistic attitude. He is just like any other ordinary man for whom virginity of woman matters a lot. He considers wife as his possession. Soumya stands for patriarchy who takes woman as his property. Hence he believes that as he owns he rules. We don’t find Deya taking up a scuffle out of it. The reason may be her blind love for Soumya or the age old custom which all the time reminds a woman of her duty. Deya says, “*ki jiddi chele*” (What an arrogant boy). But does she find the space to demand anything for her? Or she knows that he will be least bothered about it. After marriage like any other girl she changed many of her habits in the name of marital adjustments. But did Soumya change any of his habits? In his schooldays Soumya had the habit of getting up at 3 a.m. and now after so many years also he couldn’t change this habit. Deya explicitly talks about his habit of wanting to initiate sexual intercourse at that unearthly hour. During the early hours of night even if Deya felt the sexual urge he never responded to her call. For a woman it is something like an insult. But she adjusted to that also. She says,

>“*Prothom rate Deyar jodi kakhono sarir jege uthe, Deya jodi kamonyay chanchol o hay, Soumya grajhyoi korbe na. Tar je samoytate Deyake chai, sei samoytate sada dite habe Deyake. Soumya bujhte chay na boichitro jodi abhyas e porinato hay, ta aksamoye klantikar theke.”*

**English:** At the start of the night even if Deya’s body desired something and even if she was restless with drive Soumya paid no attention to it. Deya needed to respond when he
needed her the most. Soumya did not want to understand the fact that anything unusual would seem boring once it became routine.

It did not matter to Soumya whether Deya is interested or not to get involved with him at that time. He satisfies his hunger when he is interested and Deya admits that she is tired of it.

In India, marriage is considered the definitive experience in an adult woman’s life. Consciously or otherwise, a woman is given to understand that her desires and dreams must henceforth be subject to those of her husband. Under such conditions, women find it difficult to talk about the physical violence that takes place under the guise of conjugal relations in the marriage. Any mention of rape or sex fills them with shame. The prevalent viewpoint is that when a woman marries, she is willing to fulfilling her husband’s conjugal rights. Once she has made this commitment, she cannot back out of it. Since sexual relations are part of the marriage set-up, a woman cannot refuse to have sex with her husband. By the same token, a husband cannot be said to have raped his wife. The society rather doubts the woman’s character and thinks that it was her fault not to adjust with her husband. In India, marriage remains the only route to social acceptance of adult womanhood. There are strong social incentives on women to enter into marriage. The same reasons act as a negative motivator, prompting women to stay in abusive marriages, simply because life outside marriage is not regarded very highly. Accepting that women go through the most heinous forms of abuse under the name of marriage may be the first step towards protecting women. Until then women will continue to be abused and raped by the one person they trusted enough to want to spend the next seven lifetimes with. One of Ritam’s friend, Somshankar in an argument with him in Coffee House said,

English: Love is actually a biological concept. The love between a man and a woman means only the body. The love that you cherish for a girl is not love. Actually you want her body. You can call it your secret lust or your subconscious sexual desire.

This is typical male voice of the society. By such depiction Suchitra Bhattacharya tries to give the grotesque reality of marriage.

The writer’s representation of Deya is strong enough to accept her as a woman who values relationships and a very sweet girl. She is not a girl to decide anything irrationally. In the end of the novel Deya’s decision of not continuing to stay with Soumya should not give the readers any wrong message. Till now there are ample examples to show how she is quite serious about her relationship with Soumya and is not a girl to put her marriage at stake for any trivial reason. Her one decision of helping a rape victim and bringing her home for shelter ruined her married life. And this time she seemed to be quite strong to stick to her decision because she knew that she had done nothing wrong. The Shewli episode in the novel brings forth the cruel and dirty realities of our society and plays an instrumental role to give an insight to Deya to rethink about her relation with Soumya. The sudden emergence of Shewli in Deya’s life shook her trust on her marriage. It forced Deya to rethink about saving a marriage which was shallow from inside devoid of respect, love and faith. However, inspite of an indication of Deya’s intention of ending her marriage, she has no plans to leave her marital home as she feels it to be her rightful place.

There are references in the novel which shows another cruel face of gender discrimination. Deya’s newspaper covered four incidents of abandoned new born girl child in found dustbins in a short span of six months. She also covered a story where a baby girl was stolen from hospital may be to kill her or to leave her in another dustbin. She wonders whether the society was advancing or going back to the barbarism of middle age.
We live in a society where a boy child’s birth is celebrated with pomp and joy. A boy will inherit his father’s property and support his family when the parents will grow old. In the name of marriage he will fetch lot of money from his wife’s home and will continue a line of descent. But a girl child’s birth is an occasion to mourn. In a world of men, she just another expense. And for poor families the birth of a girl causes great upheaval. When there is not enough food to survive any birth of a girl puts a strain on a family resource. But the monetary drain of a daughter feels even more severe where dowry is practiced. The poverty stricken families see their daughters as economic predicament. This attitude results in the widespread neglect of baby girls. Women are forced to produce a male child. At one point Shewli’s mother told Deya that they were from very poor Brahmin family and they were seven sisters. She told that with the hope of getting a son her father ended up with seven daughters. A poor family which doesn’t have money to feed the children or to provide them with education goes on giving birth to seven girls. Even an educated man like Soumya dreams of a boy, who will be a cricketer one day, to achieve what he could not. Not only sex selective abortions and but cases of female infanticide are very common. Everyone wants to get rid of her. Women live in a society where women’s rights mean practically nothing because her birth itself depends on the pity of the males. And mothers who lack their own rights have very little protection to offer to their baby girl.

This shows how gender inequality is eating into the whole society and the discrimination begins from the time a couple plans a baby. Science is developed enough to determine sex. And so many baby girls are killed in the mother’s womb and those who are lucky to see the light of the world are thrown to dustbins either to die or to meet with worst situation. Yes men and women are different but difference doesn’t necessarily mean inferior or lesser than men in any way.
3.4 Rape: Physical Form of Male Dominance

Shewli, the rape victim is placed at the center of the storyline to unmask the heinous face of male dominance where at every moment many precious lives like Shewli’s are lost without any hope of justice.

Shewli, the poor girl from slums eloped after marrying a man. Later she was sold in the red light area of Mumbai. There the girl was raped several times but luckily managed to escape and came home. Shewli must be amongst those very few lucky enough to come back. Perhaps the writer intends to tell how such a come back is never desired by society. Shewli’s return could never make her life normal as earlier. And the story line is built to problematize the issue. Deya happens to cover the news of this rape victim in Nabaprabhat through her friend Ritam. There is no mention of Shewli’s age but Deya says at one point that the girl is yet to bloom. The girl can be taken as a minor. Deya wanted to take the opportunity to cover the news so that the girl can be given justice and no girl becomes a prey further. Though she wrote about it in her newspaper without revealing Shewli’s name the incident couldn’t remain hidden and being unable to tolerate the harsh comments from the neighborhood Shewli’s mother committed suicide. The girl was left with no one to call her own. Deya felt as if she was somewhere responsible for the incident. Considering it as her moral duty she brought the poor girl to her house but her decision made her relation bitter with Soumya and ultimately led Deya to come out of the marriage.

In a society where women are marginalized, a raped victim is doubly marginalized. She is a woman, thus inferior to men and raped means no place for her in the society as she is a slut, a curse in the name of womanhood. Griffin (1971) in her Rape: the Politics of Consciousness writes that rape is a direct function of the degree to which women are socially, politically and economically powerless in comparison to men.
Not only does rape derive from power differentials, but sexual violence also serves to maintain the status quo (as cited in Ward 1995:22). This is the most cruel face of the patriarchal set up in the society which hardly considers women as human beings and so a rapist is not bothered to take a woman’s consent. Thus it shows no regard for women. Male aggressiveness and superiority bring down a woman from a human being to nothing but a mere body which can be intruded whenever a man wishes to. History also shows how during all wars the winning army ravaged the women of the captured country. It seems the winning over women bodies is equated with the winning of the land.

The origin of the Indian idea of appropriate female behavior can be traced to the rules laid down by Manu in 200 B.C. He says, “By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. (Manusmriti V.147). In chapter IX verse 3 he says, “Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence” (as cited in Stein & Arnold 2010: 88). Thus women’s lives are shaped by customs that are centuries old. She is advised not to cross her limits set by the society and if she does so she will be the sole responsible for the consequences. So it is not strange when society tends to blame the rape victim as if she is responsible for that crime either in whole or in part. People have a strong belief that certain behaviors of the victim may have encouraged the rapist. People who are under the notion that the world around them is intrinsically fair find it difficult to accept a situation in which a person is badly hurt and assaulted for no reason. This leads to a sense that victims must have done something as she met with such accident.
3.5 Society’s Stance Towards a Rape Victim

A rape victim is viewed by society as being ‘damaged’ who brings dishonor to the family. Instead of sympathizing with her, the family members scold her and even do not hesitate to pray for death. Shewli’s mother couldn’t be happy when Shewli came back. As a mother she can not forsake her child. But she didn’t know how to cope with the situation. She was really worried about Shewli’s future. When she came to know that Deya was there to write about her daughter in newspaper she looked reluctant to tell her anything because she was apprehensive of worse situation if the news gets publicized and people in the neighborhood come to know about her daughter’s rape. She was angry with Shewli as she had an affair with a man and eloped with him after marrying him at Kalighat. The man sold her in Mumbai. But she didn’t blame the man rather she was scolding her daughter for such a foolish act. She says, “Mukhe nudo jele dite hay” (I feel like putting fire on her face). With much anger she bursts out, “Oi haramjadi meye bangsher gaye gu lepe dilo!” (That wretch has brought disgrace to our family!). There are so many incidents in our society where a girl is killed in the name of family honor. The family doesn’t want to hesitate to kill their own child in the name of honor and tradition.

Society assumes that nothing can be done to help them out, so there is no need to try. Instead of blaming the rapist and punishing him the society provides no emotional and moral support to the victims, which they need badly. The gossip mongers go on speculating what might have happened to the girl. The rapists happily roam around as they are aware that, to some extent, the effort society puts into finding the rapist will reflect the value placed on the victim. People disbelieve, blame or even turn against the victim. They do not hesitate to ostracize her. As a rape victim brings stigma to the whole family the family members feel ashamed and go on blaming the girl instead of helping her to come out of the trauma. Driving rape victims into isolation and despair is one of the ways a male dominated society supports the ongoing existence of rape. The victim is
already wounded and such mental torture takes away the least zeal of starting a new life. She loses respect in the eyes of the society for no fault of her own. People are indifferent to her plight and fear to help her as they feel the victim is no one from her family and by helping her they may face the wrath from the rapist or his group. The society makes a victim feel very dirty and worthless. As she lost her purity she is a stigma to womanhood. This secondary victimization is the re-traumatization of the act of rape through the responses of individuals and institutions.

Matoesian (1993) wrote that

“…rape is not a violation of the social order, but a reinforcement of it. The state fails to intervene against violent male behavior perpetrated against women and thus condones and reproduces it. Even when rape is reported and prosecuted, the rate of conviction is much lower than for other forms of crime such as burglary, aggravated assault and manslaughter” (as cited in Romaine, 2009: 228).

The rape victim always tends not to file a case about the crime in the police station as there is no guarantee whether the rapist will be punished or not. A woman fails to trust the system which is male dominated. The victim is afraid that the news will be publicized once it goes to police and the guilty assailants escape due to the reluctance from the victim’s part to report the crime. Even filed the police don’t take the case seriously and for poor such a fight becomes almost impossible to challenge the system. In many cases police behaves rudely and discourages the victim not to file a case. Many are still obsessed with the idea that women fabricate the stories of rape to trap men or they are just being vindictive. Police threaten the family members to lodge a complaint if the rapist is from powerful position. The family is reminded of the social repercussions, attention and permanent social humiliation. In the name of enquiry the police make the life of the victim and her family hell. Moreover policeman is foulmouthed and may rape the victim in turn. A victim who takes such a case to the court ends up being raped not once, but again and again and the court room becomes the replica of the unforgiving society where a woman can never fight for her rights. The truth is that the perpetrators are
somehow never placed under the kind of microscope that women have to endure. The rape victim, and not the rapist, is put on trial.

Shewli’s mother, Kanan reported the police that her daughter was missing. At that time there was no clue whether she was raped or not. If she knew she also wouldn’t have been any exception. When Shewli came back from Mumbai with her mother didn’t inform the police of her come back as she feared that the police intervention would spread the news and they would not be able to live in that locality. She told her neighbors that the culprit took Shewli with the promise of marrying her and escaped leaving her. When Deya came to gather information about Shewli’s rape Kanan was doubtful about Deya’s intentions. Her daughter eloped with somebody and it was a scandal. Kanan could not simply fathom how horrible the consequences would be if the news of the rape of her daughter got publicized. In spite of Deya’s assurance she anxiously tells Deya, “

tobu didi...akhon tao akrakom badnam, takhon to...”

(Yet didi.... Now it’s one kind of scandal but then….)

Ritam’s aunt, in whose house Kanan worked as a maid servant, scolded him a lot for taking Deya to the slum to cover the story. She said that Ritam’s wrong step made Shewli’s life more pathetic as there was no escape from such a scandal. The foul mouths of the neighbors His initiative has closed the door of hope of Shewli’s marriage forever as people have come to know about the rape. She also informed Ritam how police was troubling the poor mother and daughter in the name of enquiry and the other day when Kanan was returning home from work some rogues stopped her and threatened not to open mouth to the police. The hooligans also scared Kanan by saying that if Shewli cooperated with the police and revealed anything she would be abducted and killed, dogs and foxes would tear off her dead body and it would float on the water of the Ganga. She was very angry with Deya’s action who in spite of being a woman and knowing the societal set up published the rape incident of Shewli in paper. How could she be so irrational to spoil another girl’s life? She tells Ritam,

“

Tomar bondhur o boilihari. Se nije meye hoyeo buyhte pare na kise meyeder bhalo hay, aar kise mando hay?”

"
English: Your friend! Bravo! I really cannot describe. In spite of being a woman can’t she understand what is good for a girl or what is harmful?”

The patriarchal illness has enfeebled women to such an extent that they remain silent in the face of oppression. They accept the exploitation in the name of fate. The society sows the seed of guilt in the rape victim because it has always been biased and supporter of male supremacy. Such a feeling of guilt eats into the victim. She may feel that there is something inherently wrong with her which has caused her to deserve to be assaulted. The psychological harm may last life long and the post trauma is unbearable for a victim. Survivors of rapes usually suffer from post traumatic disorders like depression, anxiety and also develop suicidal tendencies. Rape is the ultimate savagery against women. It damages the physical, mental and social well-being of its victims. The victim accuses and blames herself for all these. Not only does she lose trust in her own judgment but also loses trust in others to empathize with her. Deya brought Shewli to her home as after her mother’s death none of her relatives took her responsibility and she was not safe in that locality. A rape victim who came from red light area is considered a stigma to the society. People may hate her. But the hypocrite males do not want to miss the chance to take advantage of the girl. After Kanan’s death the poor girl is even traumatized more than earlier. She spends sleepless nights and gets scared of the nightmares of those scary days in Mumbai. Shewi shrinks with fear. The world seemed to her the most unsafe place where there are hyenas to tear off her body. She felt secured in Deya’s home and could not think of going anywhere else. Deya could not force her to go to a rehabilitation home. The very idea of rehabilitation centre was killing her inside. She groaned in the kitchen the whole night and begged Deya not to send her anywhere. Like any other girl she dreamt of leading a peaceful married life but whom she loved turned to be her greatest enemy who sold her for money. Her dreams are shattered. She trembles as she recalls those days. The girl seemed to be lost. She was fighting a battle with her own self. She was not sure of her capability of taking decision and highly depended on Deya. She blamed for everything that happened. She could not eat when Laxmi, Deya’s maid servant placed the dish full of delicious curries in front her. She lost sense of hunger and
sleep. She made herself responsible for her mother’s suicide. She felt that she was a great sinner for whom there would be no place even in hell. She said crying,

“ami papi maashi...mahaapaapi. Amaar narakeo jaayga nei......amar jonyoi ma more gelo maashi ....maake ami i mere felechi.”

**English:** I am a sinner, *maashi*. A big sinner. There is no place for me in hell too… *Maashi*, my mother died only because of me…. I have killed my mother.

But she was strong that she did not commit suicide after going through so much of pain. Rape is neither a sex crime nor a crime of passion. Rape is often premeditated. And rape is a crime of violence rather than sex. It is crime of violence against women. It is an attack by men on women’s bodies, on women’s feelings, on women’s very existence (Murphy 2004: 52).

Nobody is minimum compassionate to her so that her trauma can be lessened. She is treated as less than human creature. There are malicious tongues which volunteer their opinions. We often listen to comments like, “Dressed like this, what she expected?” or “if you didn’t want it why did you have an affair with the person” and there is no end to such comments. Nobody tries to understand what the victim might be going through. The irony is that the harshest criticisms come from women forgetting that they themselves can meet such an accident in life. Rape victims are considered to be sluts. Everybody points at her loose character. Deya rendered voluntary help to Shewli, believed her so that her trust on the victim can strengthen Shewli. Such noble intentions are always doubted. Even Soumya thought that Deya was doing those things for name and fame. There are many such comments in *Udo Megh* which show the deep feeling of hatred and disgust against a rape victim. Instead of consoling her Laxmi tells Shewli that she will never be a ‘*sati sabittir*’ (the word *sati savitri*, a pious and virtuous woman, is mispronounced by Laxmi). Laxmi says,

“haajaar baar saabaankacha korleo ento meyer kalonko dhoy na”
English: Even after washing a thousand times with soap the stains of an unchaste woman is not removed.

And now as being raped the stain in her character will never be cleansed again. Her implication is that a girl who is unfortunate to be raped is like the left over on a plate. Nobody wishes to touch it and throws it in dustbin. The society always tries to get rid off such woman. Deya’s mother, Gouri was very angry with her daughter’s irrational step of bringing Shewli at home. She tells Laxmi over phone,

“Bhadraloker barite gaye pore esob jhanjhat dhokay keu?”

English: Does anyone volunteer to bring these problems in a decent household?). She talks like all those indifferent people of the society who never want to take any responsibility on their shoulders and anybody doing so is considered to lack common sense. Gouri also says,

“hut kore akta nongra meyeke ghare dhukie dilo. Kharap rog tog nie eseche kina tar thik nei...”

English: All of a sudden she brought home that dirty girl. Even there is no guarantee whether that girl brought some disease with her or not

Gouri was worried if Shewli brought any contagious disease from the red light area. Such a thought intensifies her hatred against Shewli. After rape a woman can not be pure. She is considered dirty, rotten and like damaged good. Nobody trusts a rape victim as they believe that it is their fault to meet such an accident. Shewli is poor. Poor people are often treated as vulnerable. One can not swear on the firmness of a poor man’s character. A poor can not be truthful. They can go to any extent for money. Gouri doubts Shewli’s nature and thinks that the girl, taking the opportunity of Deya and Soumya’s absence, can steal anything from the house. Such a girl can cause harm even to a person who helps her. She instructs Laxmi to keep an eye on her. Laxmi though poor feels that she has more respect compared to Shewli as she is a virtuous lady and always tries to take
Ritam’s family was not happy with his involvement in the matter of Shewli. He faced lots of criticism within his family. His sister, Runu, believed that Shewli could never become a good girl after coming from the red light area. She is one of those who believe that such a girl of vile character can never return to the normal mode of life. It’s tough for such an inferior girl to leave bad company. She can not overcome the allurement of that forbidden world. Runu says,

“Nisiddho jibon jatoi apachander hok, tar akta moho o ache.....susangsargo theke kusangsargo tyag kara onek beshi kothin....or bhetorer sabhabtai oke khrap dike tanbe”.

**English:** Forbidden life may be disliked but it has its allurement too …It is hard to give up bad company compared to a good one…. Her inner instincts will drive her towards evil.

Ritam’s wife can not understand when Shewli was settled in Deya’s home what could be Ritam’s interest to help that girl any more. It seems as if everybody has grudge against Shewli. A raped victim is considered to be a woman of loose character, devoid of morality. Ritam’s mother Atasi apprehends that such a girl can never be trusted. She is worried that Shewli can put Ritam in a false position by doing anything mischievous. She says,
“meyeta konodin ki nastamo kore Babua ke fansiye debe.”

**English:** Any day the girl can trap Babua by doing something vile…!

Though Ritam tried to convince his family members that Shewli was innocent and just a victim of an adverse situation, everybody seemed to be consistent in their argument that such an unchaste woman could not be trustworthy. They go on scrutinizing her character and advise Ritam to keep safe distance from such an evil girl. Nobody shows pity for the helpless girl. Thus the society makes a rape victim feel that she is contaminated, defiled or desecrated. Because of the constant encounter with cultural judgments the victim’s condition gets worsened. In such a society chastity gone means everything gone. Her damage seems to be irreparable. Thus we see that not only males but overall females too did not sympathize with Shewli.

### 3.6 Sexual Coercion and the Issue of Prostitution

The novel explicitly discusses the serious issue of prostitution which is global and fatal. The last two sections of the novel are very important which build the climax of the novel. Shewli’s rape, her trauma, the society’s attitude towards her, everything gives a genuine reason and scope to discuss the seriousness of the matter, highlighting those factors which underlie this dangerous problem.

Shewli’s presence in Deya’s home was embittering her marital relationship. She was trying to arrange a rehabilitation centre for Deya but the girl was under such a shock that she didn’t agree to go anywhere. On her marriage anniversary Deya planned for a party to make Soumya happy and thought that everything would be normal again. But the party episode turned to be the ultimate disaster which leads to the break up of the couple. She calls her close relatives and friends. The conversations and arguments
amongst the guests regarding the rape of Shewli turned to spoil the party and ultimately bringing an end to Deya’s marital relationship. Suchitra presents a multi-voiced approach in this section revealing the complexities of the problem of prostitution.

Prostitution is met with a lot of prejudice and stereotypes, which make up the whore stigma. This stigmatization has a major influence on the lives, working conditions and the health of the women who are forced to work in the sex industry. It furthers these women’s social and social exclusion and compromises their dignity. The morally charged term ‘prostitution’ has been associated with deviance, corruption and criminality. Prostitution can be considered as a wood worm that has a capacity to eat away the whole infrastructure of the society. It instantaneously places women at a lower pedestal in the whole of the society. She is treated as a mere object of sexual gratification.

A prostitute sells her honor by offering to hire her body for base gain or for an unworthy doing. We have to rethink the ways in which prostitution exists in the sexually suppressive culture. The society sets boundaries to suppress the sex of women and prostitutes, byproducts of patriarchal society are considered deviants. The society sees these women as sexually immoral and men as the surrendered victims of their own uncontrollable sexuality. His being as a man permits his uncontrolled sex on his frequent visits to brothels. But fingers are raised only towards women.

Prostitutes are considered deviants and immoral as they freely engage in what most women deem to be a private, shameful subject. Having sex for money seems to stain womanhood. Prostitutes are generally from marginalized, poor and vulnerable populations. Prostitutes are engaged in this trade because of extreme poverty and most of the prostitutes come from a troubled background (childhood abuse, violent family background etc.). Poverty is a great force that drives an individual to think the unthinkable and do the undoable. Poverty kills one’s humanity and parents sell their daughters for food. The desperate need for money and the lack of alternate means and ways to generate income creates an environment where a faint hearted individual can easily succumb to the temptation of wealth that sex industry offers. Under such conditions the ethical values of a community is severely put to test. Traffickers fish those
who are easily can be deceived. One can not dessociate prostitution and human trafficking. Like Shewli, so many girls are cheated and betrayed by the false promises of love, marriage, employment and are sold in brothels. They are compelled to stay in prostitution by violence, coercion or threat. Commercialized human trafficking all over the world is in an alarming stage. These criminals must be punished for the horrendous act.

In Deya’s party Shewli easily drew attention of the guests. Everybody looked to be suspicious and started commenting on her. Many of them forgetting the fact that Shewli was a rape victim put her in the prostitution class as she stayed in the red light area of Mumbai for some days. It seems to be very irrational on the part of those so called educated people. The use of terms like prostitution or prostitute restricts a person’s identity to the activities she engages in. Such negative labels demean a person. Pointing at her gaudy dress Deya’s brother, Santu says,

“Ki kutsit saajposhake gurche….dekhei bojha jay ekebare oi class!”

**English:** What an ugly outfit she is wearing, eh! ….Just seeing her one can understand that she is from that class.

Deya actually bought the dress for Shewli and she choose strong colors thinking that the bright color would suit the girl. There is such a mental block in the mind of the people that they find everything dirty in a prostitute’s behavior even if it may not be the case. So her dress became symbolic of Shewli’s class which was again constructed by them. Deya’s cousin Chini rudely comments, “meyeta besh gede bosheche dekhchi” (The girl has settled herself here quite tightly, I see). She hardly could think in another direction. Where could a hapless girl, who was all alone without safety, go? Shewli must be given some time to be normal and come out of the shock. But Chini’s comment shows how indifferent people are!
There are arguments between Sukanya and Jayashree regarding whether prostitution can be termed sex work or is it justified to call prostitution a profession. Jayashree opposed to Sukanya’s continuous use of sex work and could not agree to call prostitution a profession. Jayashree could not understand how one can call it a labor. She believes that some pervert men are using women for lust. She says,

“Shrom abar ki? Kiser shrom? Kichu pervert lok akdal meyekhe use korkhe...tader ichcher biruddhe, tader bibeker biruddhe...ekhane shrom sabdotai baa ashe ki hisebe?”

**English:** Where is the labor? Which labor you are talking about? Some pervert men are using a class of girls...against their wish, against their conscience... Where does the word labor come here?

Sukanya is of the opinion that as the prostitutes earn money by rendering sexual labor it can be called a profession. It’s like any other job. Sanghamitra intervenes and says that if prostitution can be called a profession then why don’t we label stealing as also a profession?

We have to critically look into the matter to understand what actually goes under such labeling. Sex worker earns living by providing sexual services. But prostitution exists because of the attitudes, behaviors and demands of men. It is the culture of male dominance and violence where men think that they have the right to buy a woman’s body. It is their demand that has given birth to the sex industry which is growing and expanding throughout the globe. No other job is created specifically out of culture of violence, inequality and sexual abuse. There are no other jobs where a woman’s reproductive system is the site of work and she is at the risk of conceiving and other Sexually transmitted diseases (STD). Women risk death and serious physical harm for doing such a job. We live in a consumerist society, where priority goes to individualism and to the unrestrained consumption of people and things. In such a context, prostitutes as sex workers and their act as a labor erases feminist opposition to the marketing of women on a global scale. It allows the perpetrators to assert that women do this by choice or by taste. Viewing prostitution as sex work hides the extent of this sexual slavery and
reinforces the notion that women are simply interchangeable objects that must be accessible and ready for all men at all time and everywhere. What kind of job it is where women are incapable of negotiating unsafe sex or unhygienic working environment. She is denied of holidays or to go back to her home. Even children are removed by authorities. Unlike other jobs there is lack of freedom and choice.

The term sex work tries to draw a distinction between the economic activity and the person’s identity. The use of term ‘sex worker’ is a euphemism for the term prostitution. The word morality seems to be inseparable from the word ‘prostitution’. Using ‘sex work’ is a trick to give the implication that morality is no longer an issue. It is just about selling sex. It is an attempt to detach the stigma from prostitution. Words are coined, tweaked and employed with a certain message embedded in it and also with deep intention. There are uses like ‘prostitute woman’ and the word humanizes prostitutes by feminizing the issue. Again there is usage like ‘prostituted woman’ which highlights the victimization of women and their passivity. ‘Sex work’ sounds neutral and shows the commercial aspect of it. Hence the term is used to make it simply an economic activity and to avoid questions of morality or a woman’s identity.

When person chooses a suitable profession for livelihood there are education requirements. There are age bars too. Once a person takes up a profession there is growth. One feels proud to be identified as an intellectual of the society for choosing a proper way of earning at which no one can point finger. Does prostitution as a profession fulfill these criteria? In a job there are professional hazards. But by the word hazards do we mean bruises, beating, burning, suffocation, disease or death? No one can be forced to opt for a profession where he or she has no interest. But women are trafficked and forced to enter the hell. They are dehumanized into sex objects to be bought and sold in the market. There is no escape from it. Only death can give them ultimate emancipation. A job holder will not like to hide his identity from all or will not be ashamed of his profession. But a prostitute is and wants to remain anonymous. Nobody can think of deliberately choosing prostitution as career option. Kanad makes fun of Sukanya and says ironically that in such a situation proud fathers will not hesitate to say that his daughter has opted
for prostitution career. Like home science, in schools and colleges new subject of prostitution has to be introduced then. Actually the money a prostitute earns can not empower her as she finds no place for her in the society. This is because economically or otherwise, vulnerable women are coerced into selling their bodies and in our society it is nothing but sale of self. It looks more like sexual slavery than sexual service which should be condemned. Shouldn’t we be vocal against calling it an ‘oldest profession’? Bachchu, another guest of Deya, strongly gives a statement that he knows many girls who came into this line willingly and there are girls who take opportunities by using their bodies. Such an aggressive statement seems to express his instant made up logics only to argue with a female and to defend the male position from being called as oppressors and exploiters. But Debashis in spite of a being a man admits the fact that prostitution is made up by the patriarchal society, hence artificial. This is an arrangement so that outside the rules and regulations set by society a man can look for happiness and satiate his lust. So he emphasizes that prostitutes can not be laborers. They are just used as objects. He says,


English: This is an imposed situation. And artificial. The patriarchal society has created it. For their enjoyment. This is an arrangement so that men can go out to seek pleasure crossing the boundary of sexual dictum controlled by the rules of the society. Here women have no role to play. Why will they be considered laborer? They are just used as women and not as laborers

Sukanya was not a person to be subdued so easily. She again started arguing but this time about social acceptance of prostitution. She thinks that as there will be no end to patriarchy prostitution too will continue. Hence she says if a prostitute can be given some basic rights and this profession is legalized the status of prostitutes will improve.
She believed that if the profession had legal protection Shewli wouldn’t have been in such a helpless situation. She says,

“Duraachar i bolun, aar jai bolun jaddin purushtantro thaakbe, e peshta o tatodin bahaal thaakbe….Meyeder durgati kamaanor jonyoi to sikrititaar proyojan.”

**English:** Evil practice or whatever you say, this profession will remain unchanged till the patriarchy is there. This is what you said before. To lessen the distress of women that recognition is necessary

She also adds that such a legal protection will ensure good future to the children of the prostitutes. But Kanad opposes saying, “*system take abolish na kore system take tora aro pakapokto korte chaichis*”( Instead of abolishing the system you people are trying to make it permanent). But Sukanya did not have any proper logic to defend her point. She let others know that before joining *Nabaprabhat* she had worked for an NGO and in that connection she had visited some brothels. Seeing those prostitutes she came to the conclusion that many of them were not as unhappy in their lives as people from outside assume to be. Some of them have family, husband, and children. To her it was just like any other ten to five office job.

From outside the scenery may mislead people but no prostitute can be happy in leading such a miserable life. A prostitute has to lie when a customer asks if she is happy. The very edifice of prostitution is built on the lie that women like it as they get money. Man made society gives birth to such myths which allow such a violation of human rights to continue. Prostitutes know the fact very well the society will never respect them and even if she tries there is no way to escape the flesh trade. So when she is left with no option she tries to adapt and adjust. The whole life becomes a burden to her. Perhaps Debashish is right when he protests Sukanya and says,

“Maanush jato jaghonyo poribeshei thakuk na keno tar modhyei se ektu muktir batas khunjte chay. Setakei apni sukhra takma dite chan? ....e sukh nay, etaake bale abhijojan.”
English: A person, in however abominable state he or she is in, tries to find the taste of freedom in that. Do you want to put the level of happiness on that? Shame on you! … This is not happiness but abhijojan. Adaptation.

But Sukanya thinks that only legalization of the profession will improve their condition.

Many people who are in favor of legalization of prostitution believe that it will provide a generally healthier environment for prostitutes. It will stop human trafficking and safer sex will reduce transmission of STDs. It will also put an end to child exploitation and under age sex workers from participating in the sex industry.

But in reality legalization of prostitution means sanctioning all aspects of the sex industry: the prostitutes, the pimps and the clients. In many occasions prostitutes are arrested for publicly soliciting and suffer humiliation in the hands of police. So there is demand for decriminalization too. But one has to realize that decriminalization means decriminalization of the whole sex industry and not just the women. It means that pimps will be seen as legitimate sex entrepreneurs and men who buy sex will be accepted as legitimate consumers of sex. Legalization of the sex industry will convert brothels, sex clubs and other sites of sex trade into legitimate venues where commercial sexual acts will be allowed to flourish legally with no restraints. Brothel houses will spring up at every street corner with red neon lights proclaiming their business. People like Sukanya think that in calling for legalization of prostitution they are dignifying and professionalizing the women in prostitution. But dignifying prostitution doesn’t dignify women in prostitution. It simply dignifies the sex industry. Yes the prostitutes should not be punished for her own exploitation. Instead of arresting those gentlemen of the society, who crave for women body and rape them it is inhuman to punish the prostitutes who are forcefully dragged in the flesh trade. But decriminalization will enhance human trafficking. There will no fear in the minds of the pimps or the predators and taking opportunities of law they will expand the industry. The perpetrators will be smart enough to escape the law by using the fine distinction of forced and voluntary prostitution. A pimp will never confess that he has sold her in the brothel. And how will marginalized women ever be able to prove coercion? It will prove to be a boon to the flesh trade. It will
contribute to the demand for victims. The exploiters will exert pressure on the law makers. They will use power and influence to shape laws so that the flow of women remains uninterrupted in the sex industry. Men who would not risk buying women for sex openly would now see prostitution as acceptable. Legal barriers will not be there and with this social and ethical barriers will also vanish to treat women only as sexual commodities. It gives a wrong message to the new generation that women are sex objects and prostitution is a harmless fun. After legalization, the clients will not be afraid to mishandle and torture them and can force them to engage in weird sexual act to satisfy the customers.

Legalization is supposed to get prostitutes off the street. Legalization demands registration of prostitutes. But hardly a prostitute will come forward to reveal her identity. Rather she will be interested to be anonymous. Thus it will be tough to check street prostitution. Another interesting thing is that once legalized only women are asked to register and not men. The men remain nameless and faceless. Attempts are made to track women but not men who purchase sex. Those who talk about legalization of prostitution believe that it will improve the health condition of prostitutes as it will be mandatory for them to go for regular health check. But what about the men? Only health check up of women doesn’t protect them from various sexually transmitted diseases as male clients can transmit disease to the women. So unless the male customers are monitored how can be the safety policy will be affective? We consider murder or stealing as illegal and enforce law to curb them though we know that complete eradication of these crimes will never be possible. Nobody asks for legalizing these crimes knowing the fact that they are unstoppable. Then how can one demand for legalization of prostitution as it has only drawbacks? After gaining so many instincts of civilizations and social habits how can people go back far behind the animals by legalizing prostitution? Legalization is not the solution to the problem. Rather it is an admission of failure.

Bachchu in support of Sukanya says that the nation must have to do something great so that their children get normal life. The nation must give them some facilities unless and until it dies something effective. But strongly opposes to it. For him it is
nothing but a trick to make flesh trade alive ‘with no hazards’. He is right and hits the hypocrisy of people saying that nation is build by its people. He asks why those who are so aware of the rights of prostitutes don’t come forward to adopt a child of prostitute or get married to a prostitute or arranges marriages with his or her relatives to bring them in the mainstream life. He hits the pretentious face of those who talk big without understanding the basic problem.

Can a man show broad mentality to marry a prostitute? This very idea is bound to plant the seed of infidelity. He will think that such a woman can never come out of their past and can contact her ex-hookers. A prostitute is taken to be an adulterer by default and hence unsuitable family. Society looks at the prostitutes as they are diseased ones who blatantly display sexuality but it never defiles the men for whom the work. Society always has compelled to follow certain sexual codes. Rules are for women. A woman has to be monogamous. And men in spite of having a sexual life with his partner are more likely to have more sexual partners. And he is permitted to do so as he is a man. Prostitution is never a choice a woman makes freely. And women are punished for choices made by others. Prostitutes thus occupy an anomalous position in societies through out history. She is despised and excluded from mainstream society. And their ostracized status is the main barrier to their improvement. It makes them more vulnerable to exploitation and people consider their helplessness as their willingness. It is seen as a crime against morality. People question the morality of only prostitutes for leading a promiscuous life when male domination and the thirst for sexual power is central for giving birth to prostitution. Not only men but women too become blind to another woman’s pain. It distorts vision of their own feminine worth and they point finger to another helpless girl. The negative attitudes towards prostitutes are strong and contagious. Positive attitudes are not as contagious as the negative social reactions. They are treated as if they are filth.

In the party the debate about prost amongst the guests turned to be serious. All words are loaded. It does not remain a hush-hush subject. Everyone opens his or her mouth to let out their opinions. By sitting in a comfortable room and enjoying food and drink and
indulging in big talks, the pain and trauma of a raped victim can not be fathomed. It is mere pretension when nobody has any guts for changing the real status of prostitutes. One has to realize that it can’t be anyone’s choice but lack of choice. They go through a tormenting pain as well as public humiliation. People hate them as carriers of venereal diseases. Who infect them? Those who purchase a female body are more immoral than a prostitute. It seems that society does not allow an expiration date on the identity of prostitutes. Society assumes that nothing can be done much to help them and so there is no need to try. And it tries to create obstacle for those who genuinely help the prostitutes.

The party was over but what had happened made Soumya to burst out. He felt that Deya was solely responsible for what happened so far. It was the outcome of Deya’s wrong decision of bringing Shewli home. He says with much anger,

“Tumi barite beshya pushe rekhecho, tomar barite oisab alochana habe na to ki bhajan keertan habe?”

**English:** You have kept a prostitute in your house. Do you expect talks about religion and divinity in stead of those discussions?

He shouts at Shewli for getting dressed like a dirty woman. He asks,

“ki bhebechis ki? Eta ki beshyaabaari? Kon saahose erakom nongra seje aamar baarite ghurchis?”

**English:** What do you think? Is it a brothel? How dare you to hang around my house being dressed up like that?

Deya was surprised at Soumya’s behavior. The way he was talking surprised her. The very word ‘slut’ and ‘whore’ mean subhuman. She did not understand how Soumya could have so much grudge against Shewli as he knew that the poor girl was victimized for no fault of her own. Somumya blames Deya for doing such acts for fame. Grumbling he says,
“Mohiyoshi saajaar neshaay tumi sab sense lose korecho. Oke beshya na sajie ghorale tomar dhajaata ude ki kore?”

**English:** With the obsession of showing greatness you have lost all your senses. How can your flag of nobleness fly until you dress her up like a prostitute in front of all?

He emphasized on the word ‘amaar baari’ and warns Deya that he will not tolerate this nonsense in his house. Deya was stupefied by Soumya’s meanness. He orders Deya to throw that dirty girl out of his house. It was enough for Deya to tolerate. The typical male ego of Soumya came out of the mask as he said that Deya might earn but if she wanted to stay in his house she would have to obey him. He says,

“Rojgar karo bole tel bereche khub, ae? Amar katha sune thakte paro to thakbe, noile ghar dhore bar kore debo”

**English:** Have you become arrogant as you earn, *eh*? If you obey my words you can stay here or I will turn you out by the neck.

After such an incident the poor girl could understand this much that it was she for whom the couple was fighting. She realized that she was most unwanted not only in this house but may be in the whole society. Deya brushed aside all oppositions from her family and friends and tried to stand by Shewli. But it was beyond her imagination that this could turn to be so disastrous. She could not understand how could Soumya be so irrational to blame her for healing the pain of an oppressed? Shewli left Deya’s home. The next day Deya roamed around everywhere to trace the girl but in vain. When she came back home Soumya looked sorry. But he was repentant only for shouting at Deya not for what he spoke about Shewli. He was still the same blinded and arrogant Soumya. Now Deya also becomes strong to say that if she brings Shewli back what will be Soumya’s stance? Soumya was surprised to see that Deya was putting their marriage at stake for a third person? He could not see where he was wrong. He argues with Deya saying how could she give priority to a girl over their relationship?
After coming a long way with Deya, Soumya could not understand that he had hurt the faith and trust of Deya. He insulted her by questioning her values? He went on blaming Deya without understanding her point. Deya was now sure that life with such a self obsessed person is impossible. Somya expects unconditional love but he wants to impose his conditions upon Deya. She says,

“Bhaalobaasao khoye jay, bhaalobaasateo poli pore. Takhon ja thake, ta holo adjustment”

English: Love also decays; silt also gets accumulated on it. And what is left at that time is adjustment.

And she could not compromise anymore where there was no respect for her individuality or ideology. Without hesitation she could say that she did not want to stay with Soumya. Soumya asks Deya go to her father’s house. And Deya answered as if she was the representative of the age old male suppression. She says why always a woman has to leave house. Rather she says that if Soumya wants he can choose to go anywhere. Suchitra Bhattacharya jots down the end of the novel in such a way which gives her readers the scope to delve on the matter deeply to see how a woman negotiates with ‘pourusher mithya asfaalan’ (the false vaunting of an egoist man) or is negotiation should be the only choice of women? Should women still compromise?

Everyone has a journey which has twists and turns. We are scared of getting out of the four walls and fighting. Deya, a modern woman emphasizes the true sense of liberation. She does not need a man to make her feel worthy. In stead she carries her self-worth in her mind and determination. We see her as loving and caring. But she is heroic too. We can call her stubborn. She did not accept what was imposed on her. But she challenged. She has the inner glow, an undaunted spirit which crossed all barriers. She teaches that a woman must listen but with a frankly questioning attitude to the dogmatized options of man made society. When she chooses her new, free course of action it must be in the light of her own opinion, of her own intuition. Only then she can remake the world if she is not enchained by the males.
3.7 Language and Gender: An Analysis of the Novel *Udo Megh*.

Sex refers to those features thought to differentiate biologically between people classified as male and female, and gender refers to those features thought to differentiate culturally (Eckert and McConnell, 2003). It is the major construct that organizes our world and social life. The sex-gender system is a social, psychological and cultural totality. One can not understand the social organization of gender apart from the fact that all of us are psychologically sexed and gendered. It is tough to find one’s self, apart from being gendered. The gender-associated behavior is linked arbitrarily by society to each biological sex. Women’s sexuality and desires are made and treated as subservient to that of males. Masculinity and femininity are essentially coercive categories that straitjacket men and women. Sex is viewed as an ascribed status and gender as an achieved one.

Barring some matrilineal societies, woman is perceived as an adjunct to the male from the point of view of religion, social conditions and cultural traditions. In the dichotomous system of ‘self’ and the ‘other’ a woman is looked as the other and as the other she is self-alienated. De Beauvoir calls the Other the minority the least favored one, when compared to a man, "for a man represents both the positive and the neutral, as indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity" (Alcoff and Mendieta, 2003:150)

This is a man’s world. And here what they speak, their language becomes the matter of dominant discourse whereas a woman is not even supposed to open her mouth, rather she should listen to what a man speaks, to whom she always has remained subordinate from time immemorial. Sophocles writes in *Ajax*, ‘Silence gives the proper grace to women’. Language is a major component of human culture. It encodes a culture’s preoccupations and its values. In this connection we can bring in Lacan (1977)
here who emphasizes the crucial importance of language as the signifying practice in and through which the subject is made into a social being (as cited in Cameron 1998:56). In each speech act the individual and the culture speak simultaneously. So in an attempt to speak something we are also spoken. Language thus is the reflection of a society and interestingly in most parts of the globe it is patriarchy which has remained the pivotal point of the society. And one can not speak outside the structure of the society either of language or of society. Simone de Beauvoir says,

“...like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth” (as cited in Catharine A. MacKinnon, 1989:121).

Hence, the truth is constructed by language which is by default male. Feminists are of the opinion that inequality of sexes does not have a biological basis. But it originates in the cultural constructions of gender difference. Language itself is gendered. The language of literature, criticism and various disciplines actually has reinforced the patriarchal ideology. Feminists, however, struggle from inside to speak against the structure by being critique about the representation of women in language and discourse. Hence feminists have always tried to formulate a gender-neutral language, which in terms of language and epistemology are based on female subjectivity, experience and identity. Discarding the self/other dichotomy they should try to develop a perspective that confers selfhood all around. Elaine Showalter (1981) writes:

“The appropriate task for feminist criticism is to concentrate on woman’s access to language...on the ideological and cultural determinants of expression. The problem is not that language is insufficient to express women’s consciousness but that women have been denied the full resources of language and have been forced into silence, euphemism and circumlocution” (as cited in Cameron 1998:8).

“Women enjoyed far greater freedom in the Vedic period than in later India. She had more to say in the choice of her mate than the forms of marriage might suggest. She
appeared freely at feasts and dances, and joined with men in religious sacrifice. She could study, and like Gargi, engage in philosophical disputation. If she was left a widow there were no restrictions upon her remarriage" (Durant 1963:401). They had rights to be educated. Gargi, Lopamudra, Ghosa, Maitreyi, Apala are few of the names who were no less than their male counterparts in any aspect. The Upanishads refer to several women philosophers, who disputed with their male colleagues such as Vacaknavi, who challenged Yajnavalkya. The Rig Veda also refers to women engaged in warfare. Swami Abhedananda in his India and Her People wrote,

“India of the Vedas entertained a respect for women amounting to worship; a fact which we seem little to suspect in Europe when we accuse the extreme East of having denied the dignity of woman, and of having only made her an instrument of pleasure and of passive obedience.”

He also said:

"What! Here is a civilization, which you cannot deny to be older than your own, which places the woman on a level with the man and gives her an equal place in the family and in society” (1906:253).

But once the patriarchy system took roots, women were restricted to their households. From those times to the present it has been a saga of struggle for women to give themselves a better position in a patriarchal society. Feminism deals with gender equality, equality in terms of law, jurisdiction, language, labor, and education etc. for women in the face of hostility. Here one should not get confused by terms like ‘femaleness’, femininity’ and ‘feminism’. ‘Femaleness’ can be described as a matter of biology, ‘femininity’ as a set of culturally defined characteristics and ‘feminism’ can be looked as a political position through which suppressed voices are heard.

Today’s women are working hand in hand with men. Their endeavor to elevate their position in a man’s world is note worthy. Yet by a language that originates in womblike darkness, women are still spoken of as a weaker sex. Karl Marx’s theory talks about the conflict between the exploiter and the exploited, between the bourgeois and proletariat. This concept may be metaphorically and only metaphorically applied to the
domestic field as well where the husband holds the unquestioned authority and a woman is reminded of her limits within the four walls. Her language is labeled ‘powerless’ language (Lakoff, 1975). Men, like the ruling class holds the power to define reality and the rules of language reflect men’s language including grammatical and semantic structure. Women like the deprived class are always defined by the male tongue and lacks capability to promote themselves. The refusal of access to public language is one of the major forms of oppression of women within a social class as well as in trans-class situation (Cameron 1998:55).

Socialization is a process by which male-female power differences are internalized and thus paves the way of producing properly dominant men and submissive women. One has to go through this process to live in harmony in a civilized society. The members of the society are abided by its norms.

“If gender flowed naturally from sex, one might expect the world to sit back and simply allow the baby to become male or female. But in fact, sex determination sets the stage for a lifelong process of gendering, as the child becomes, and learns how to be, male or female” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003:16).

Culture is defined by language and one must know the intricacies of language to make a meaningful conversation. In determining gender roles, language both in its verbal and non verbal components, plays an important role. Gender roles are defined as those expected attitudes and behavior which a society associates with each sex. In this connection one has to understand the concept of sexist language. Sexist language is language which deliberately unconsciously is patronizing or contemptuous towards one sex, usually women. It refers to terms and usages that exclude or discriminate against women. Sexist language is not clear and inaccurate as it excludes more than half of the population and encourages destructive stereotypes. The meaning assigned to language affects the realm of the society and its outlook. A ‘master’ is a powerful or skilful man but a ‘mistress’ is a woman kept for sexual purposes. A ‘courtier’ is a polished man of high social status but a ‘courtesan’ is just an up-market whore. There is nothing wrong
with calling a man ‘bachelor’ but calling a woman a ‘spinster’ is contemptuous. Bachelor has the connotation of a man who is still eligible and has prospects for marriage. However this is not the case with spinster. This word evokes a mental image of a woman who has failed to find herself a husband and does not even have chance to get a match any longer. While the word bachelor embodies hope the word spinster, in contrast, encodes despair and frustration. Given our social set up such a woman also means a life long burden to the family.

Language acts as a mirror of reality which reflects the biased attitudes of the society which sings the praise of male supremacy based upon the characteristics of male sexuality. And it is the male dominance which is the chief cause of language difference between the sexes and we will elaborate this later. The social structure is such where women are denied the right or the opportunity to express themselves freely. It is not that women lack the capacity to use language which is the birthright of every human being but in the society’s most valuable spheres like religion, law, politics, science etc. women are found mostly silent and in many cases silenced. Her use of language is confined to the space of home, family and immediate community. To speak in the public domain is almost forbidden for her. The conventional language silences and marginalizes women. Powerful males fear that the access to knowledge will empower the weaker section called women and facilitate critical thought in them which will finally turn them rebellious in nature. So women are prevented to speak whether by explicit taboos and restrictions or by the more genteel tyrannies of custom and practice. And males monopolize language to suit their purpose. From very childhood a boy child is overtly or subtly rewarded for what he does or for what he speaks.

Males are expected to use more verbally aggressive, persuasive message strategies. Whereas women have generally quicker perceptions and it is believed that women emphasize to speak more prettily than properly. Their language conveys notions of weakness, inferiority etc. Women speak to please men. And men speak to convince or confute. Thus one can notice ugliness of language, its politics, its lack of clarity and its alienating quality which emphasizes on the peripheral position of women in the
patriarchal set up.

In her *Language and Woman’s Place* (1975) Robin Lakoff discusses the characteristics of women’s language and shows that women gives priority to family and values personal relationships while men are more concerned with politics, sports or community. Their language seems to be the proof of their powerlessness in the society. Lakoff says,

1. Women’s intonational contours display more variety than men’s. Their language is marked by wider range of pitch. Their use of intonation patterns resemble questions, indicating uncertainty or need for approval.
2. Women use diminutives and euphemisms more than men.
3. Women make more use of expressive forms than men. For example a woman will prefer to use adjectives like ‘charming’, ‘divine’, and ‘sweet’ instead of saying gender-neutral adjectives like ‘terrific’, ‘neat’ and ‘cool’ respectively.
4. Women use forms that convey impreciseness for example ‘so’, ‘such’ etc.
5. Women’s voices are breathier than men.
6. Women are more indirect and polite than men. One aspect of politeness is to leave a decision open without imposing one’s views or opinions on anyone else.
7. In conversation women are more likely to be interrupted, less likely to introduce successful topics. They won’t commit themselves to an opinion.
8. Women use hedges of all kinds more than men. Hedging is another aspect of women’s insecurity. Such phrases as ‘you know’, or ‘like’ are scattered throughout women’s speech which work as an attention getting device and also show the general insecurity of the speaker.
9. Compared to men, women use a particular type of tag questions. A tag question can be considered as a ‘midway’ between an outright statement and a yes-no question. When one has strong belief in his or her knowledge, he or she makes a statement. On the other hand, one prefers asking a question when one has lack of conviction or intends to seek solidarity. A tag question functions as an intermediate between these and is generally used when the speaker is stating a
claim but lacks full confidence in the truth of the claim. Lakoff writes, “…a woman, believing that a hesitant style will win her acceptance, will adopt it and phrase her opinions…deferentially….”

For example, John is here, isn’t he?

The speaker is already biased in favor of a positive answer and wants only confirmation from the addressee.

10. Man tends to use expressions like ‘shit’, ‘hell’, ‘damn’ but females avoid such strong expletives and use terms like ‘oh dear’, ‘goodness’, ‘oh fudge’. Vulgarity is censored in her language.

11. Women are more careful to be ‘correct’ when they speak. Thus they emphasize in using grammatically correct sentences and try to avoid colloquialism. One can find difference in the choice of lexical items when a woman speaks. Women make more precise discriminations in naming colors than men do. For example, to describe a painted pinkish shade of purple a woman will use ‘The wall is mauve’.

In framing a request women use super polite structures. For example, a woman to place a request for closing a door may use structures like

- ‘Please close the door’,
- ‘Will you close the door?’
- ‘Won’t you please close the door?’

But a male will prefer to say, ‘close the door’ which sounds more like an order than a request.

12. Women’s communicative style tends to be collaborative rather than competitive and more of women’s communication is expressed nonverbally especially by gesture and intonation than men’s.

Lakoff finds the women section in dilemma. Once a woman uses gender neutral language she is tagged as ‘unfeminine’ or ‘less than a woman’. Again if she sticks to use women’s language there is a possibility that she will be judged as less than a competent human being. An unruly woman who speaks rough and lacks the soft and gentle qualities of a woman is ostracized or made fun of.
Both men and women play significantly distinct roles in the society. There are different styles of speech and distinct vocabulary that is individualistic to each sex and the society expects certain behavior and attitude from each sex. Usually words associated with men convey sense of leadership, power and prestige. Whereas words associated with women have negative connotations and convey sense of powerlessness and inferiority. If we look at words like ‘man’, ‘common man’, ‘layman’, ‘mankind’, ‘humanity’, ‘manpower’, ‘forefather’ etc, the list gives the impression that women’s role in the society is not that important and they do not have any contribution at all. There has always remained the sexual division of labor. Only males are suitable for certain professions and home is the place where a woman suits. Though now women empowered with education have come out from the domestic sphere and try to find her place in the outer world the language of the patriarchal society remained unchanged which shows least recognition of such effort. Even if a woman holds a position of chairman, statesman etc. she is never addressed as chairwoman or stateswoman. When adjectives like ‘macho’ or ‘manly’ are attributed to a man, it is a matter of pride and gives the sense of boldness, strength and power. But if it is associated with a woman it demeans her and implies her unladylike attitude. Again if a man called ‘womanly’ which by default means shy, coy and submissive is considered disgraceful for a man. It indicates a man’s effeminate character. But in both the cases it is a woman whose position is criticized. A married woman must put Mrs. before her name but Mr. is enough for both a bachelor and a married man.

In Indian society a woman is seen in relation to man, i.e. daughter, wife, and mother or even as a prostitute, concubine or mistress and is hardly considered an individual. Thus gender discrimination is reflected in the various expressions of language at various levels like forms of pronominal reference, abuses, similes, idioms and proverbs etc. The Bengali society is no exception where are hierarchies are observed strictly in the household as well as within the society.
Suchitra Bhattacharya’s *Udo Megh* is written in an urban setting. Her central figure, Deya is a reporter who works in a renowned newspaper called *Nabaprabhat*, in the heart of Kolkata. She is the woman who is very much aware of her rights and very much vocal about her liking and disliking. Her profession demands a full time devotion where one should not be bothered about the odd work shifts and she is quite comfortable in working with her male colleagues. The writer has very skillfully shown how language is influenced by time and space. In Indian society a woman being subordinate to her husband is not supposed to address her husband by name. Hence addresses him with term such as such *suncho* which means ‘do you hear me?’ But a husband can call his wife by name. But Suchitra’s heroine, Deya is a modern woman who is educated and financially independent. She belongs to a time where every individual talks about equal rights. Perhaps her privileged status allows her to extend her limitations to some extent. Her language clears this point. She addresses her husband by name, Soumya, without hesitation. It may look odd in the time of her grandmother or mother. But she believes that her time is different from theirs and a woman is no less than a man in any sphere. Soumya is not a *potidebota* (one’s husband regarded as one’s deity) to her. She considers her husband more of a friend than a *swami* (a term very frequently used for husband), which can be literally translated as God or Lord towards whom she will look not with awe but with love and affection. Yet on one occasion Deya humorously calls Soumya ‘*sahib*’ which has a connotation of master, chief or boss other than a European or White man.

The *Samsad Bengali English Dictionary* gives a long list of English equivalents for the Bengali word ‘*poti*’ which are a husband, a master, an employer, a boss, an owner, a lord, a ruler, a king, a chief, a leader. But ‘wife’ and ‘a married woman’ are the two English equivalents given for ‘*stree*’ and ‘*potni*’. It obviously shows men play the important role in society. They rule it and the world is at their feet. But a woman’s place is secondary to that of a man. Terms like *potibrota* or *potiparaayana* (a woman who has taken the vow of serving one’s husband; extremely devoted to one’s husband) are very much accepted and a woman with such quality deserves respect from the society. In a
patriarchal society hardly a man will like to be crowned with such burdensome value. Interestingly subjection of a husband to his wife is looked down upon in the society and such a person is called stroino (henpecked) in Bengali. Actually domination of the weaker section is the norm but the other way is not acceptable.

In the novel there are many words which are associated with women and carry negative connotations. Language carries the ideology of the society and its people. In a patriarchal society many words are coined to indicate subordination of women. In the name of family, community or society women are forced to follow many rules and regulations. Those who accept them are praised but such words of praise are nothing but a fine trap to keep women in line and show her position in the domestic and in the social sphere. It is a mere trick to subjugate woman. For example, words like kulobodhu (virtuous wife belonging to a good family), sahadharmini (a wife associating with her husband in practice of virtues). But there is no masculine counterpart.

Shewli, the centre around whom the story of the text revolves, unfortunately landed in a brothel of Mumbai and was forced to prostitution. Though she had a devil’s luck as she managed to escape from the hell, society was not ready to accept such a girl whose chastity was outraged. She was easily labeled a prostitute though she did not have any hand in what happened to her. Everybody pointed finger towards her. Even people of her own sex were not sympathetic to her. Many times she was referred as ‘nongra meye (dirty girl)’. ‘Nongra’ in general means ‘dirty’ but here it refers to a vile woman or who is of abominable character because of her indecent character.

Ritam’s mother, Atoshi believes that it is not safe for Ritam to keep in touch with Shewli. For Ritam’s sister, Runu, up to now what Ritam did for the hapless girl was enough. Now too much indulgence in the matter may throw Ritam in further trouble. Atoshi thinks that such a girl is capable of putting Ritam in her trap. So it is better to stay away from her. She uses the word ‘nostamo’ to describe Shewli’s character. The word ‘noshto’ actually means ‘spoilt’, ‘rotten’ or ‘decomposed’ but when it is associated with women refers to women who indulge in adultery or victims of sexual assault. By using
the word ‘nostamo’ Atoshi tries to say that a vile woman like Shewli can play tricks to entice her son. Thus such terms demean women as they bring women down to the level of an object of sex.

Soumya calls Shewli ‘bajarer meye’. The literal translation of the phrase will be ‘a girl of the market’ but here it refers to a woman of cheap character who is easily available to men. He calls her ‘beshya’ (a prostitute). There is another term familiar in Bengali, ‘potita’ which refers to a woman who has gone astray from the path of chastity or a harlot.

Laxmi, the maid servant of Deya’s home says that after losing her chastity Shewli can never become ‘sati sabittir’ again. However, here the word ‘sabittir’ is a distortion of the word Sabitri as it was used by the uneducated maid servant. Sabitri was a chaste wife in ancient Indian mythology, devoted to her husband who won back her husband’s life from the clutches of Yama, the god of death. ‘Sati’ refers to a chaste and faithful wife who is intently devoted to her husband. Here one can make a connection with the ‘sati protha’ of the early Hindu society where a widow used to burn herself on her husband’s pyre which assured an easy entry to heaven not only for her but also for the family members. But in the name of religion the dirty politics of killing a widow was done to ensure that she wouldn’t claim her husband’s property. Laxmi rather calls Shewli ‘ento meye’. The word ‘ento’ is used in connection with food or drink which means left over on a plate after eating. It also may refer to something which has come in contact with cooked food. Laxmi also compares Shewli with the left over food which gives the impression she is no more fresh as so many people intruded her chastity. She can never go back to her early state again and thus will not be accepted by the society.

On quite a few occasions Laxmi addresses Shewli as ‘chhuri’ which is the feminine form of its male counterpart ‘chhora’ which means a boy or lad but ‘chhuri’ is a derogatory word used to refer a young woman. She also calls Shewli ‘Lokkhichaara meye’(in Bengali Laxmi is pronounced as Lokkhi). A girl is compared with Laxmi when she resembles goddess Laxmi in beauty and virtues. A very chaste and pleasing wife who
brings fortune to her husband is called Laxmi. Thus the word ‘lokkhichara meye’ refers to a girl who is bereft of grace and prosperity. As Shewli was no more a chaste girl, she lost every right to enjoy the status of being crowned with the title of Laxmi. Though she was not responsible for her present situation she was blamed for everything. She can’t anymore bring any fortune to any family. Rather her presence is feared to usher bad luck.

Once Shewli lost her chastity the rogues around were looking for the opportunity to get hold of her and exploit her sexually as if an unchaste woman is property of all. They call her ‘barobhaatari’. The word ‘bhaatar’ is a social dialectal use of the word husband in Bengali. Bhaatar refers to the person who provides bhaat (rice) to his wife. Barobhaatari is a slang which refers to a girl who has relation with uncountable. It simply refers to woman of ‘loose’ character who makes herself available for all.

Ritam while referring to the incident of Shewli’s elopement to Deya, uses terms like ‘dosti’ and ‘latghat’. The Hindi word ‘dosti’ means friendship. But here the word has a derogatory connotation when associated with a girl. It indicates that the girl doesn’t bear a good character. ‘Latghat’ means the state of flapping or hanging loosely. It refers to the act of flirting. Here like a typical male Ritam doesn’t go to the deep of the actual incident and makes fun of the situation.

Deya considers the act of Shewli’s elopement as something which every girl at such tender age is prone to do. She calls her ‘chhele manush’ which means innocent or childish. The word is used to mean the kiddish nature both of a girl and the boy though the word starts with chele (boy). On the other hand, meye manush is considered to be more of an insult. It refers womanly characteristics of a man. Again in Bengali children are always referred to as ‘chhelemeye’ and not ‘meye chhele’ which proves the upper hand of men over women. The word meye chhele bears negative connotation too which is an abusive term.
Once while coming back towards home Deya saw some women of the red light area who were over decked up and were waiting for customers. Deya was feeling sorry for them as she looked at those poor women. Suddenly a woman said out whether she was enjoying seeing a ‘khaanki’. *Khaanki* which is a vulgar and abusive term, means prostitute.

Shewli’s mother scolds Shewli by addressing her as ‘baapkhaki meye’. The literal translation will be a girl who has eaten her father. When a girl child looses her mother or father she is always made responsible for the incident. But if the father or mother of a boy dies, he is called ‘baapmara’ or ‘maamara chele’ meaning a boy who unfortunately lost his father or mother. The society is quite sympathetic to the unlucky boy but for such a disaster a girl child is always blamed. It is important to mention here that when one wants to be sympathetic to women one can use terms such as *baapmaamorra* etc but one doesn’t have words for male counterpart of *baapkhaki*. This shows that only women can be condemned for the ill luck that falls on the family and not men.

At many occasions in the text women are referred to as *putul* (doll) or talking doll. Hence they are lifeless, devoid of emotion and subject of play in the hands of the males. Women are praised as ‘*misti misti*’ which means sweet. A woman is expected to behave nicely, softly and soberly. She should be submissive. Anything aggressive or harsh is not allowed by the society when a woman is concerned. When Soumya’s cousin, Bugi praises Deya’s boldness of taking the odd job of a reporter Soumya emphasizes that she is basically of shy nature. It is the insecurity of the male who can not stand the boldness of his partner. Rather shyness, coyness and dumbness are the traits befitting a female character.

Another interesting fact is that a married woman’s original house where she is born and grown up is called ‘*baper baari*’ (paternal house) and not ‘*mayer bari*’ (mother’s house). Again when she gets married her new home is called ‘*sosurbari*’ (the house of the father-in-law) and not ‘*sasurir bari*’ (house of the mother-in-law). Ritam once humorously refers to such a serious issue and tries to point out how patriarchy has
crippled women. He calls women ‘*khontay baadha goru*’ which means ‘a cow tied to a peg or a stake’. Here he tries to show the helplessness of women in a male dominated society where like a helpless cow she is exploited and forced to obey her father, husband or son. In Bengali a woman is always called ‘*abola*’ which means ‘devoid of power or weak’. But there is no such term for a man. In Bengali it is said ‘*chhele biye kore*’ which means ‘a man marries’. But in the case of women it is said ‘*meyer biye hoy*’ which means ‘a woman gets married’. It is evident a man is always an active doer and women only play a passive role.

A woman is hardly considered an individual. The society has always treated her as an object which can be gifted, offered or used as males wish. Thus in Bengali the word *samprodaan* is popular, which is an act of gifting one’s daughter’s hand to her ‘would be husband’. In the text there is a reference to *debdaasi* which means a woman offered to the service of an idol of a particular temple. But on many occasions these girls were exploited by those who hoist the flag of religion.

### 3.8 Concluding Remarks

The irony is that some ‘feminists’ (Suchitra Bhattacharya too) refrain from calling themselves so. The word ‘feminism’ provokes images of self-insufficient, stoic women who fight for equality and rights in an otherwise patriarchal backdrop. In the deep-rooted patriarchal thought process the term ‘feminism’ has a kind of social stigma attached to it. In our tête-à-tête with Suchitra Bhattacharya let us know that she would like to be called a humanist than a feminist. Even Deya also tries to skip the minimum scope of the attachment of such tag with her name. Soumya makes fun of the word ‘feminism’ as he believes the efforts of women to bring change in the society are of no use at all. Actually in a patriarchal society it is really foolish to expect heart-felt appreciation from males for the struggle, women are continuing for the betterment of themselves, because their endeavor to break the age-old shackles of subjugation threatens the privileged position of
men. We can conclude the discussion here by quoting Taslima Nasrin who wrote in her book *Nirbachito Kolam*.

“amar shikkha, amar ruchi, amar medha amake manush korte pareni. Amake meye manush kore rekhe dieche”

**English:** My education, my taste, my intellect could not make me more of a human, I am still a woman and not a human being.

O’Barr(1984:260) in his article *Asking the Right Questions about Language and Power* claims that language serves as a major means of expressing, manipulating and transforming power relations (as cited in Kramarae, Schulz & O’Barr, 1984). Language reflects a complex network of social, political and cultural set up of a society. In this chapter I have elaborately discussed the relation between language and gender in terms of the differences between women and men in conversational practice. The examples taken from *Udo Megh* indicate that men’s language exert power and control over women and women are acceptable and appreciated as long as they fit in the norm of speaking a powerless language. The difference in the use of language by men and women reveal the fact that women are not in the same footing as men even in this twenty first century.