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**Title of the Book: Rickshaw Girl**

**Author: Mitali Perkins**

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**Publication Year: 2007**

**No of Pages: 96 pages**

**Price: INR.556**

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**Abstract:**

Feminism is a movement that started in the western countries much before it started here in India. The movement focuses on equal justice to women, equal rights as men, equal status in society and an unbiased political, social and cultural life. The status of a woman is reduced to that of “a being that conforms to justice and injustice equally”, without voicing out their opinion. However, the rage and anger that this inequality garnered forth in the minds of female activists and critics is what gave rise to feminism. The stigma around the roles of women is limited to domestic chores and procreation. Women in the past have been subjected to various types of violence and discrimination, but with the rise of movement concerning women's rights the scenario is changing rapidly. In India, the movement started late, but the female activists and critics left no stones unturned to bring freedom and equality into the lives of the women. Their hard work paid off and so women in the 21st century enjoy equality in every space, although not completely but better than the past. This critical book review will discuss the strength and the image of a girl standing out from the stigma associated with women before the waves of feminism.

**Keywords: Feminism, Gender Equality, Male dominance, Social Stigma, Society.**

## **Background**

The cult of women being weaker has been loud and clear in various Hindu scriptures and Hindu manuscripts. It is from these manuscripts that the role of women in the society is laid down. But it is evident in scriptures that there is no existence of a man without a woman. Devdutt Pattanaik in his book *Myth=Mithya* says, “A male form is essentially incomplete and presupposes the existence of a female form” (Pattanaik, 31). Even God has their female counterparts, without whom they are considered incomplete. There is Saraswati for Brahma, Lakshmi for Vishnu and Shakti for Shiva, but tragically, all these female counterparts are dependent on their male counterparts for their existence.

Our society has always considered women inferior to men, and maybe we owe this belief to our oldest Hindu traditions, where females have a passive role while men have an active role in worldly matters. The condition of women in India were pitiable, especially those who belonged to the marginalised sections of the society. They had no means of survival, money and equality in the society and that made the condition of women in India worse. Women in India were not given the basic right to education, right to speech, right to work, and most importantly right to earn their living. The voices of women were forced down upon and they could not fight for equality in society. Women faced discrimination in every field, starting from political to social to cultural to financial level.

The women’s movement in India is totally a different phenomenon, as it demanded equality to women in every aspect. Women in the political sphere were behind men, as they had no political rights until the era of independence. Although the fight for political equality started much earlier in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century led by Sarojini Naidu. After many attempts by female activists and female political faces, women in India got the right to vote in the year 1947, and the law stated no political discrimination based on sex.

In cultural and social aspects too, women have faced many challenges and shortcomings related to their identity and equality. Women have been considered an

instrument of procreation and a preserver of cultures and that is how the status and identity of women have emerged with time. However, the movements and marches towards gender equality and cultural equality has now improved the situation of women. Women have overcome the sense of domesticity and limitations; they are now as capable and entitled to equality as men in our society are. There are still some corners of the world, where women are bound to household chores and family keeping. They are not allowed to move out of their houses and cherish their independence as men in society. This stigma around women has compelled many women writers to voice out their views on equality and disorder in the hierarchy of men and women. Many female writers have written out about the conditions of women prevailing in the society, not only to draw attention towards a more equal status in the society, but also to improve the condition of women in society.

### **Empowering the Role of Women in Mitali Perkins' Novel "Rickshaw Girl"**

*Rickshaw Girl* is a novel written by Mitali Perkins, published in the year 2007, recounting the roles of women in society and abandoning them through her narrative. The novel has aptly presented two different phases of a woman- one that of a woman who has subjected herself to the patriarchal norms and another of that girl who beats this stigma and shines forth, abandoning the gender roles made for men and women.

Naima is the protagonist in the novel who is among one of the best alpana makers in her village. Her father is a rickshaw puller, her mother is a homemaker and her younger sister studies in a village school. Her father can hardly make money to continue the schooling of both her daughters and so Naima helps her mother at home, cutting vegetables, washing utensils and sometimes drawing water from nearby. The urge to study still nurtures inside Naima. Every time when she sees her younger sister going to school, Naima wants that too. On the other hand, Naima knows deep down that after some time her sister will have to drop her schooling because of perpetuating poverty. Naima feels saddened seeing the condition of her father and she eagerly wants to help her father earn a living that would help both her father and her sister. Father would certainly get a helping hand and her sister can continue her schooling.

Naima has a male friend Saleem of the same age, who is also a rickshaw puller. They both are good friends, despite the fact that it is not considered moral for a girl to befriend a boy in her village. It is for this reason that they both meet secretly and they have their own signals, which no one knows apart from the two. We can see how society has laid down limitations for a girl where she is not allowed to talk to a boy, and if she does, it might bring defame to their family. Naima is very conscious of the mentality of her society and therefore she conceives her friendship from the eyes of society.

Naima is a rebel, who does not want to be subjected like other women and therefore she tries to improve her identity. The idea to become a rickshaw-puller strikes her mind and she is swayed away. She discusses the same with her friend Saleem, who makes fun of her telling that girls in their villages do not work, they are not allowed out after the sunset. After saying all this Saleem drives away with her rickshaw, but he could not withdraw the desire of Naima. She thinks of her parents, whom she thought would not allow her to pull rickshaws, as women do not work, they are just meant to sit at home and cook.

When nothing works in her favour, Naima decides to disguise herself as a boy and then work as a rickshaw girl. The thought of disguise that comes to her mind, is a metaphor of subjection, wherein a woman has to disguise herself as a man to get in touch with the world outside. Naima is determined and she decides to go to a nearby village to get her a job as a rickshaw puller. She comes across a woman who owns a repair shop and she is surprised by the fact that a woman is the owner and not merely a conformer. Since she was disguised as a boy in pants and kurtas, the shop owner did not say anything. This even Naima knew, had she been a girl, the women would not have even bothered to talk to her. The prevailing situation forces her to reveal her identity to the woman, who gives her a job as an alpina maker for rickshaws. Naima, therefore, no longer needs to disguise herself as a boy for the job.

Mitali Perkins has presented the fate of a woman, whose roles have been defined by society. Some choose to stay in that bound sphere, like her mother while others choose to fight the stigma and rise above dominance. Women are not allowed in workplaces, if allowed, they are paid less than men are. The disparity will continue but what matters more is the independent status of women in India, which the novels have rightly done.

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