

BOOK REVIEW

Beyond the Superwoman myth: the feminist call for women's liberation

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Nilanjana Bhowmick, *How Not To Be A Superwoman: A Handbook For Women To Survive The Patriarchy*, Penguin Random House India, March 2024, 240 pp, Rs 399 (paperback) ISBN: 9780143464181

Introduction

How Not To Be A Superwoman: A Handbook For Women To Survive The Patriarchy, by Nilanjana Bhowmick, opens with Euripides' line from *Medea*, "Of all creatures that can feel and think, we women are the worst treated things alive," situating it in the feminist lineage of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Bhowmick examines how patriarchy enforces motherhood and caregiving as women's defining roles — expecting them to excel at home and in professional life while performing unpaid emotional and cognitive labour. The superwoman ideal masks exhaustion, especially evident during festivals, when women shoulder most of the domestic and emotional labour. She links these burdens to chronic stress, depression, and economic exclusion. While emotionally resonant and grounded in lived experience, this opening risks framing caregiving as inevitable, offering self-prioritisation as the main remedy without fully interrogating structural change. Its middle-class lens could have been widened through intersectional engagement with caste and class, and its critique of gendered myths strengthened with empirical data on the economic value of unpaid labour.

Chapter-wise summary

From this introduction, Bhowmick expands in the first three chapters on how women shaped by social conditioning and patriarchal structures live under constant tension between their authentic selves and the roles imposed on them, a split that undermines mental health and compromises the promise of equality. Patriarchy rarely supports self-awareness, making personal awakening an act of resistance pursued for one's own sake rather than for societal approval. Drawing on voices from both Eastern and Western contexts, she shows how moments of epiphany, often during midlife transitions, post-menopause, or family role shifts, can lead to self-discovery and the reclaiming of meaning. Rejecting the designated "superwoman" role, she urges women to resist overperformance and emotional overburdening. While empathetically portraying personal transformation within systemic constraints, this discussion could be deepened with more data on women's mental health and workplace inequality, as well as greater engagement with strategies for dismantling structural barriers alongside individual

awakening. Chapter three extends this by showing how family structures perpetuate gendered conditioning, with marriage and motherhood considered central to women's identity. Though the critique effectively exposes heteronormative pressures, it remains confined to man-woman binaries, with limited attention to the LGBTQ+ experience and structural solutions.

Bhowmick turns, in the fourth and fifth chapters, to the psychological costs of perfectionism and the pressures surrounding bodily appearance, especially in the Indian marriage market. Standards of beauty from adolescence to motherhood impose a lifelong scrutiny of women's bodies, fostering body-shaming, complexion bias, and internalised self-surveillance. These pressures reinforced by peers, media, and cultural norms, heighten the risks of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and body dysmorphic disorders. The ideal of a "perfect woman," Bhowmick argues, demands unconditional love, politeness, and submission while concealing its mental toll. Perfectionism framed as a perfect trap fuels addiction, self-harm, and the corrosive belief that women are never good enough. Extending this analysis into motherhood, she depicts it as a gendered construct that sustains patriarchy through unpaid, unacknowledged labour. "Mommy guilt" functions like a chronic stress disorder — silent, cumulative, and socially normalised — where self-sacrifice is glorified without structural support. Social media's "supermom" narrative deepens self-doubt, particularly among millennial mothers balancing careers, child-rearing, and elder care. While strong in advocacy for unlearning patriarchal conditioning, this section sometimes frames caregiving solely as oppressive, underplaying its emotional rewards and cultural complexity.

In the sixth and seventh chapters, Bhowmick addresses caste and gender-based oppression, showing how women transform inherited trauma into resilience. Through personal narratives, she illustrates how caste stigma, gender bias, and generational pain shape self-worth and identity, yet also become catalysts for creative resistance. Writing, art, and testimony emerge as acts of reclaiming dignity and resisting erasure. From this structural lens, Bhowmick moves to an intimate exploration of the mother-daughter bond, using concepts such as intergenerational trauma and role reversal to show how maternal suffering shapes daughters' identities in ways that perpetuate patriarchal conditioning. While empathetic and emotionally rich, these portrayals present the transformation from trauma to resilience too simply, and give limited attention to the socio-economic contexts that shape these dynamics.

The concluding section widens the scope to intersecting oppressions — financial inequality, motherhood norms, abusive relationships, and structural patriarchy — across domestic and workplace contexts. Bhowmick links societal conditioning, in which homemakers must prioritise children and working women are pressured to put family first, to wage discrimination, control over earnings, and the glorification of motherhood as a moral ideal. Psychological dimensions such as postpartum depression, imposter mother-feelings, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and post-traumatic relationship syndrome are woven into this critique, alongside the observation that heteronormative family structures reinforce men's economic and emotional dominance. The call for systematic change such as advocating therapy, solidarity networks, supportive workplaces, and rejecting the male gaze, is compelling, though at times overgeneralising women's experiences and offering limited intersectional nuance. Clearer causal links between family structures and financial exclusion, and stronger anchoring in feminist scholarship and data, would enhance the argument.

The epilogue, framed as a letter to the author's thirteen-year-old self, distills the book's themes into affirmations of self-worth, resilience, and agency. While intimate and emotionally resonant, its self-help tone shifts from structural critique to personal empowerment, underscoring the book's tendency to privilege individual transformation over sustained engagement with institutional change.

Strengths and limitations

Nilanjana Bhowmick's *How Not To Be A Superwoman* offers an empathetic, relatable account of the burdens women face under patriarchal expectations, weaving lived experience with feminist critique. It effectively addresses themes of

perfectionism, beauty norms, unpaid caregiving, and intergenerational trauma, while providing affirmations of agency and resilience. However, its focus leans towards individual self-prioritisation with less sustained engagement with systematic reforms or empirical data. Intersectional analysis could be deepened, and the emotional value of caregiving more fully acknowledged. Despite these limitations, the book succeeds in prompting critical reflection and offering practical strategies for navigating gendered constraints.

For readers of the *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics*, this book offers a compelling lens through which to examine the ethical dimensions of care, autonomy, and emotional health under patriarchy, urging the recognition of invisible labour as a public health concern.

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