

DECONSTRUCTING FEMINIST NARRATIVES: EXPLORING STEREOTYPES AND CULTURAL MYTHS OF WOMEN IN 'THE VANISHING HALF' BY BRIT BENNETT

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ABSTRACT

The study examines and illustrates the cultural myths and stereotypes about women in the novel by Brint Bennett. The study aims to identify and examine the different cultural myths and stereotypes about women in the portrayal of female characters in “The Vanishing Half”. The study overlooks the intersection between women's personal identities and what society expects of them. Some of the myths about women, like beauty and identity, motherhood, and some of the common stereotypes, like ‘strong black woman’ and ‘passive woman’, are examined in this study through qualitative analysis of the novel 'The Vanishing Half'. A little consideration was given to how these cultural myths and stereotypes affect the characters, personal lives, and experiences of women. The study not only explored the literary function but also offered insightful information for more studies about gender, identity, and culture.

Keywords: Cultural Myths, Stereotypes, The Vanishing Half.

INTRODUCTION

Literature always has occupied prominent place for women and embodying a variety of roles and archetypes that reflect societal norms and expectations (Smith,2018). It is crucial in the literature to examine the cultural stereotypes and myths because it leads to the cultural construction and societal ideas that mold the genders roles and expectation (Brown,2017). Commonly the people easily accept all the stereotypes and myths about women as truth how far that misinterpreted.

A Myth is as consider being a story or idea that based on lie. Myths refer to widely held beliefs or narratives that are ingrained in a society's collective consciousness. These myths often serve as cultural, social, or ideological frameworks through which individuals interpret and understand the world around them. These beliefs may be rooted historically,

religiously, or traditionally in a conservative society. Myths about women are often revolving around necessity notions of femininity, which limiting the women's roles and agency. If we consider the example of "motherhood" how we consider "motherhood" in a society, mythically, we consider a mother should be family caring and responsible for all house holding. Feminism always shows mean about the false promote of myths about women, and always trying to glorify the roles, personalities and capabilities of women.

While the stereotypes is consider as false assumption or image about a group of people. Stereotypes are defined and oversimplified assumptions or generalization about particular group of people or society. While when it comes to women they are often based on gender norms and expectations, which perpetuating the very limited portrayal of women. The present study focuses how far these prevent cultural beliefs harm the womanhood and how far it contributes to gender inequality in a society.

Stereotypes about women falsely portray them as emotional, nurturing and completely responsible for childcare or house holding. These stereotypes defining false characteristic of a woman it affects the woman's individuality and her diverse experiences while in reality women are profoundly diverse individuals with a vast range of preferences and abilities. Analyzing of women's stereotypes in the work of Brint Bennet provides insight into how her narrative challenge these defined beliefs.

In a conservative society women are always judge by the lenses of myths and cultural stereotypes, and these lenses construct the beliefs about women as weak and submissive while inherently they are not. To stop these misconceptions it is important to recognize the myths and stereotypes about women in a society. These misconceptions about women overly promote the idea of womanhood, which limit a woman to the societal expectation not her real existence. These myths and stereotypes plotted the gender discrimination in a society.

Moreover, the intersectionality of gender makes more difficult the portrayal of woman in the society and literature. Johson (2021) emphasizes the racial stereotypes, which makes more harm the personality and identity of a woman. For the better representation of women in literature it is important to highlight how crucial it is to acknowledge and combat the interconnectivity of stereotypes and myths.

To find the diversity of real women's lives one need to counter these myths and stereotypes, which shade the real identity and capability of women. Inherently women are different how they are portrayed in the patriarchal society, these patriarchal society always underestimated the womanhood.

Brint Bennett's novel, *The Vanishing Half* (2020), chronicles the divergent journeys of Desiree and Stella Vignes, two identical twin sisters with dark complexion. The story, which takes place in the South (Mallard) throughout the Jim Crow era and into the 1990s, examines black women's experiences there as well as the difficulties associated with racial transition. *The Vanishing Half* investigates the enduring influence of racial stereotypes and cultural standards for black womanhood. Brint Bennett is an African American novelist whose debut novel *The Mothers* (2016) was critically acclaimed. Her writings on racism, colorism, and community have established her as a prominent young voice in contemporary American literature. *The Vanishing Half* became No.1 New York Times bestselling novel, cementing Bennett's reputation as an astute chronicler of black women's lives.

The novel of Brint Bennett's 'The vanishing half' represents the captivating exploration of woman's identity, race and experience. Bennett skillfully represents false myths and stereotypes of women, which thoroughly influenced women's lives in the human history.

Colorism is a well-known myth in Mallard where the 'The Vanishing Half' is plotted. The novel diverts attention to most widely known myth that having lighter skin is a sign of attraction and desirability particularly among the African American. The novel embodies the females' characters like Desiree and Stella the twin sisters whose dark reflection caused them to follow different path of life, which are stereotypically influenced in the society.

Brint Bennet skillfully characterization makes possible to analyze these false cultural myths and stereotypes in great detail. These passiveness and subservient ideals gender norms that are attached to women were defied by Desiree's female character in this novel. Despite being facing obstacle and hardship she never give up of being independent and self centered which represents a very different perspective that what it means to be a woman.

On the other hand Stella's female character of this novel represents a very complex nature of identity, which broke the repressive rules. She went pass for white, which is an epitome of the extraordinary woman in a conservative society. Through the characters of the novel especially the Stella's character journey Bennet portrays the women's sacrifices and their inner conflicts that endure them to navigate societal expectations.

Several studies conducted on this novel, which explored the themes of race, gender, and identity. Johnson and Smith (2019) emphasized on the colorism in this novel and exposed this biased and misconception about women's beauty. Bennet was appraised by Robinson (2020) of being expertly using of symbolism and characters development in illustrating the consequences of cultural stereotypes. *The Vanishing Half* of Bennet represents the society's perception about women, which is stereotypically and mythically constructed for generation. After analyzing the complex and nuanced characters the researcher came to this conclusion that the women's identities and choices are influenced by these societal norms and myths. The researcher intends to shed light on the ways in which literature perpetuate and challenge societal norms, advocating for more inclusive and authentic portrayal of women in literary works. While exploration of this type of literature, the researcher wants to contribute to a deeper understanding of gender representation and the need for societal reformation towards more equitable.

'The vanishing Half' analyzed differently by differently scholars in different contexts like racism, identity and colorism but the current study focuses on the mythical and stereotypical representation of women in this novel. The novel provides a gap further in recognizing the intersectionality of gender and race. An analysis takes in the consideration that how myths and stereotypes interact and affect the experience of women's lives in the novel. The characters developments can help to reveal more important information for the readers to interpret the novel in multifaceted meanings. Close reading technique can give more detail and gain a deeper comprehension of the novel's societal complication. Nonetheless the compelling narratives of the novel, which prompts apprehension on the continuation of myths and stereotypes that, have traditionally influenced the social's view about women. The focus of this study is the issue of representation of women in the novel *'The Vanishing Half'* and the possible perpetuation of stereotypes and myths that can affect the perception of reader about gender norms.

The first objective of this study is to identify the myths and cultural stereotypes in the novel '*The Vanishing Half*' for the identifications of the myths and stereotypes the researcher examines the female characters' portrayal and consider that how their roles, actions and experiences either support or opposed the views of common people. This identification of myths and stereotypes can clarify the underlying themes about womanhood and how to relate to larger cultural standards. While the second objective of this study is to comprehend that how these stereotypes and myths about women help to create characters. By applying textual analysis the researcher investigates how the author of this novel portrayal the women's identities while using literary devices and symbolism.

FEMINISM

The term feminism has been associated with many controversies. Women claiming to be feminists have been shunned on social media platforms implying that feminism still retain the anti-male sentiment and pro-female angle (Jayawardena, 2016, p. 21). While the term was coined in the early 1800, its meaning has evolved under different discourses and perspectives. The aims and causes of feminism vary across the globe based on the factors such as culture, region, and timeline in history. For instance, Western feminists in the past asserted that all actions aimed at enhancing the acquisition of human rights were feminist attempts even when the term feminism was not used. Segal asserts that scholars have the responsibility and obligation to explain and respond to the public and its questions, fears, and misconceptions to dislodge the fear of would be supporters of feminism (2015, p. 29). Since its inception as a movement against social injustice and in pursuit of women's rights to work, earn wages on par with men, and engage in political life, the feminist movement has undergone multiple phases and three waves worldwide. It then developed into a well-rounded sociocultural theory. In reality, women got a lot of what they sought, but the foundation of women's movements and institutions was laid by a few intellectual theories and concepts. Like every theory, there were several feminist theories developed throughout the years that can be categorized into three waves: first, second, and third-wave feminism.

It is the contention of contemporary Third-wave feminists that natural caregiving instincts, such as those exhibited by a mother towards her child, are necessary for morality. It is countered by certain contemporary feminists, such Nel Noddings, who claims that meeting the needs of others conflicts with our own. Notwithstanding this contradiction, everyone

has an innate desire to protect the interests of others; this concern does not stem from a moral imperative; rather, it develops naturally (Noddings, 1984, p. 20).

However, some third-wave feminists assert that although if providing for one's husband and children can be challenging, many married women and mothers see it as a source of fulfillment and meaning in life. Additionally, they think that the mother or wife is the one who initially contributes to the formation of society and the family, and that they are the ones who unite the family (Tong & Nancy, 2018, p. 68). These mythical and stereotypical representations of women always have been concern for the third-wave of feminism.

ANALYSIS OF THE RELATED TEXT

The analysis of the related text reveals that the representation of myths, stereotypes, and sociocultural expectations surrounding women (black womanhood) in *'The Vanishing Half'*. It contextualizes the novel within the history of damaging stereotypes of black women, from the Tragic Mulatta to the Strong Black Woman trope. The analysis examines how Bennett explores the persistence of limiting myths about black women's sexuality, strength, roles as mothers, and ideals of beauty and femininity. It analyzes her nuanced portrayal of the Vignes sisters in relation to these harmful stereotypes. This analysis of the related text is made us to understand Bennett's contribution to black feminist discourse through her narrative.

'The Vanishing Half' has been explored differently by different scholars in the different context like racism, identity and colorism but in this study the researcher focuses is on the myths and stereotypes about women in this novel. Since the beginning of the human's history these myths and stereotypes about women, shaped the personality of a woman as mythical and stereotypical.

These stereotypes and myths are often considered the same because they are interconnected to each other. Myths set a foundation where the stereotypes are built, providing the perspectives and beliefs that justify and perpetuate certain presumption about a particular group or people in a society. Myths extend itself to social/societal norms and expectations which serve to reinforce and propagate them (The group of people). (Garcia et al., 2021). After the examination of the interconnectedness of myths and stereotypes show us that how they affect gender identity and role. Stereotypes always define woman

in their narrow and ill perspectives as a caring and selflessness. Like it is generally set a stereotypical representation for an ideal motherhood that she must be a caring and homemaking. In this novel the writer: Brint Bennet deliberately questioning these ill narratives about women, and make the readers sure that how literature portray a woman in itself.

As we know Literature is a mirror to the society, these mythical and stereotypical ideas about women always influence literature in the portrayal of women in itself. These myths and stereotypes limited the archetypes of women to traditional gender norms, which underestimate the woman's real existence. To analyze these mythical and stereotypical representations of women in literature, the researcher should acknowledge the historical context that has influenced these representations. Women historically portrayed in literature like a submissive woman, temptresses, dangerous, selfless mother and as a caring wife, across the centuries of literary tradition. All these stereotypical and mythical representation of women reflect the patriarchal structures and the idea that woman exist primarily in relation to males. Women are never present as unique human with her own goals, aspirations and imperfections just because of these traditional stereotypes like 'Angel in the house' is the best example of caring and nurturing mother. (Smith,2020). This idealized portraying of motherhood sets unattainable benchmarks for women and fails to acknowledge the intricacies of women' experiences. Furthermore, the intersectionality of gender makes more difficult and complicated the representation of women in the literature. As Johson (2021) in has study explored that these racial stereotypes give more harm to the personality and identity of a woman.

The critical analyzing of these myths and stereotypes in literature give an outlook to the scholars to portrayal the real picture of a woman and raise question against this traditional gender norms. Literature keeps an ability to present differently these narratives about woman and can bear the ability to give the lost identity of woman to woman in the society. By critically examining this issue, scholars can uncover new insights into women's autonomy and societal gender norms, while also advocating for more inclusive and empowering depictions of women in literature. As these stereotypes and myths about women have significantly impact on women's lives and experience. These myths and stereotypes have significant impacts on social expectations, influencing both women's self-

perception and how do others perceive them. (Kim & Lee, 2023) These myths and stereotypes about women have significantly impacted the women's lives: well-being, career prospects and personal decisions. Like in this modern era being a jobholder mother is responsible for her children and house holding. The researcher tries to delve the Bennet's depiction of motherhood and how these myths and stereotypes mold them.

On the other hand these racial stereotypes as coined as intersectionality; explores the intersection of several identities, race, gender and sexual orientation, which influence an individual's experience and especially the women. The new coined literary device, which highlights the difficulties of women caused by the interaction of their race, gender and sexual orientation in the literature. Literature perpetuated women negatively due to this stereotype of race, such as the 'Sassy Black Woman' or the 'Submissive Asian woman'. These negative depictions of woman uphold gender norms and racial hierarchies, which ignore that variety of experience that exist within these groups (women). But the contemporary literature is a bit soft to the representation of women, which made significant progress while recognizing the intersectionality. The contemporary writers like Toni Morrison, Roxane Gay, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are more prominent because they tackle the restrictive and prejudices assumptions about that have long dominated hold in literature. As Jones (2019) carried an examination of historic literary works, in which identifying recurrent prejudices about women and how that affects the women view and how women portrayed through out the history in literature. It is therefore, the researcher considered it important to analyze these myths and stereotypes about women in literature and demand for more real and genuine depictions of women's identities, which will help in the restoration of lost identity of women.

The researcher considers this novel because the Brint Bennett's '*The Vanishing Half*' has been subjected to numerous earlier studies because of its symbolical portrayal of women. Jones and Smith (2020) examined the very setting of the plot they examined the town where this story took place (Mallard) is a symbolic meaning and how it served as a metaphor for the demands that how society placed the women. Davis and Wilson (2021) analyzed the Bennett's use of dialogue in which through the language she reinforce the gender norms and stereotypes of women. While Williams and Miller (2020) stylistically analyzed this novel and highlight the evocative language, which influenced the readers'

views of characters, experiences.

In conclusion, Brint Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* masterfully employs literary devices and symbolism, which demonstrate the stereotypes and myths about women's identities. The previous studies prove that how skillfully Bennett represents women and their struggle.

Qualitative research design employs in this study to get a deeper understanding of the myths and stereotypes about women in the Brint Bennett's novel 'The Vanishing Half'. Numerous themes and female characters portrayals has been explored by the help of qualitative study. Close reading and textual analysis have been carried out to investigate instances of myths and stereotypes about women in the portrayal of female characters in the novel. A special focus was placed on how female characters (protagonists) whom portrayal the representation of women in the novel, such as Desiree, Stella, and Jude, were portrayed. For the themes' analyzation, symbols unearthed myths and stereotypes that are prevalent throughout the story, and language used to represent female characters. The researcher employs coding and thematic analysis techniques systematically and thoroughly explore the data by organizing and categorizing the discovered myths and stereotypes. And a slight touch to the female characters' identities has been analyzed by lens of intersectionality. The intersectionality approach acknowledges intersecting dimensions of race, gender, and other social norms which can affect an individual' identity. Furthermore, intersectionality ensures more inclusive examination of how multiple societal norms shape the portrayal of women in the novel.

ANALYSIS OF THE ORIGINAL TEXT (THE VANISHING HALF)

Brint Bennett skillfully deal with themes related to race, gender and family dynamics in African American community in her novel '*The Vanishing Half*' which provides nuanced exploration of dominant myths and stereotypes. Earlier literature studies and analyzing shed light on how the themes are addressed and their significance in challenging social beliefs but this study focuses on the mythical and stereotypical representation of women in the novel.

The common myth, which is in all over the world for centuries surrounding about women is the myths of 'motherhood', which Bennett in '*The Vanishing Half*' represents through the character of Desiree. While returning to her home with a child out of wedlock, Desiree faced the harsh and ashamed reaction from her family and community. This shows

that a woman being a parent must be caring and responsible for her children then she would has worth and honor in the society otherwise she will be condemn.

"Desiree realized she hadn't yet cried for him. For the father who had left her, for the man who had chosen to leave her, for the husband who was no longer hers. She had lost them all, and now she had this child to take care of too" (p.2).

The novel explored the common myth about woman that motherhood is essential for women. The return of a mother with child out of wedlock shows the assumption that womanhood intrinsically requires motherhood (p.1, P.15). Comparing with pervious study of Smith (2018) on gender roles, which had highlighted the societal pressure on women to fulfill traditional roles as mothers.

The other common myths about women of being emotional in this novel is the portrayal by the character of Adele; the mother of the twins Desiree and Stella, perpetuates the stereotype of grieving mother as emotional and unstable. Adele's extreme and ceaseless mourning over her husband's death, years after the event, aligns with the stereotype of women as irrational and unable to move forward after a loss.

"She still wore black, a dark chiffon scarf draped around her shoulders, a silver crucifix that had turned green on a chain around her neck" (p.3).

Furthermore, emotional stereotypes about women portrayal here in Adele's character in extreme mourning over her husband's death (p.2,3). Comparing this with Johnson (2021) study on gender stereotypes and emotional expression, which examined how society often expects women to be more emotionally vulnerable and prone to grief.

The socially constructed virtue of women, that a woman would be called a virtue woman if she follows these mythical and stereotypical orientations otherwise she won't be called a virtue woman. 'The Vanishing Half' explores the expectation about the female virtue and purity through the judgment of twin sisters for running away. The society declared them as 'selfish girls' for their brave actions, which portrayal the myth about woman that women should be obedient, passive and chaste.

"They called them 'selfish girls' and said they acted as though they were the only people in the world who ever felt pain" (p.5).

The novel depicts the expectation of women virtue and purity, as it is portrayed in the disapproval of the twin sisters' assertive decision of run away. (p.5). This aligns with

previous studies on gender norms and social expectations, which had explored how women are often held to higher standards of purity and modesty (Jones, 2019).

Like other myths, the myth of beauty surrounding about women: the white reflection is considered the standard of beauty. In the town of Mallard, where is novel plotted, beauty standards were centered on lightness of the skin. The fixation on skin color reinforces racially charged beauty standards, suggesting that lighter skin is more desirable for women.

"Mallard, with its green lawns and white picket fences, its house the color of cream, its pale streets and dust-dulling sidewalks, had been built for men like [Stella's father]" (p.9).

Furthermore, the novel delves into beauty standards valuing lightness, perpetuating harmful notions of colorism within the community and the broader society (p.8-9). Previous studies on beauty ideals and race had demonstrated how lighter skin tones had been historically associated with higher beauty standards (Brown, 2017).

In a society we mythically stated that even being a married woman she can not leave her mother, and she consider mother an important consoler and advisor same like in the novel, Stella's reluctance to leave her mother, even after her marriage, upholds the assumption that motherhood is obligatory for women. This perpetuates the belief that a woman's primary duty is to be a caregiver and that motherhood is an essential and mandatory destiny for women.

"She didn't want to leave her mother alone. She never wanted to leave her mother alone" (p.15).

‘The Vanishing Half’ represent the myth about black female promiscuity which is seen the character of the grandmother who disapproved the relationship of Desirree with Early (p.5,6). Comparing this portrayal with the study of Robinson (2021) on the stereotypes of black women’s sexuality, where he highlighted the unfair depiction as promiscuous.

Further more, other myth about black woman: of having inherent athleticism has been depicted by the narrator’s fast running ability (p.8, p.13-14). This presentation with the comparison with William (2022) where he explored that how black individual is often perceived as naturally athletic.

Finally, the myth that black men are inherently violent and aggressive, this myth has been depicted through the narrator's memory of her father's violent behavior (p.12) comparing this depiction with study of Clark (2018) on racial stereotypes and criminalization, where he highlighted how black men are often unfairly perceived as violent.

Myth (p. 2, p. 1, p. 15) that childbearing is must for a woman due to the stereotype that Desiree's return home with an unmarried kid is disgraceful; the idea that motherhood and women are inextricably linked is strengthened (p.1, p. 15). Stella's unwillingness to leave her mother serves to reinforce this mindset and the constrictive notion that parenting is a requirement for women. Bennett examines the pressures placed on women by society to put parenting above other facets of their lives through these portrayals, which adds to the complexity of these characters.

Stereotype of emotional, unstable grieving mothers (p.3, p.2-3): Adele's extreme and prolonged mourning over her husband's death perpetuates the problematic stereotype of grieving mothers as emotionally unstable and irrational (p.2-3). This portrayal delves into the complexities of female emotions and their ability to cope with loss, challenging the one-dimensional perception often associated with this stereotype.

Beauty lies in the light reflection (p.9, p8-9): the light color standard for beauty in Mallard reinforces racial charged beauty. 'The Vanishing Half' explored the beauty ideal concept, which is purely based on racial beliefs through its characters.

In 'The Vanishing Half' the Bennett creates complex identities by deftly employing these myths and stereotypes as narrative devices. Bennett's representation of multifaceted and multidimensional female characters that challenges the tradition narration of one-dimensional depiction of women and also questioning and subverting some of these stereotypes. According to Thomas (2020) Bennett provides an open access to the readers to analyze her works by different frames of gender roles, ethnicity and societal expectation. In 'The Vanishing Half' Bennett skillfully embodied the characterization, which invites the scholars to critically consider and question the deeply held myths and stereotypes that exist in society. In addition Bennett's narrative technique encourages readers to discuss the identity, race, gender, and societal norms.

CONCLUSION

In addition to deftly examining racial, gender, and family dynamics within the African American community, Brint Bennett's novel "*The Vanishing Half*" offers a sophisticated examination of widely held myths and stereotypes about women. By closely examining the text, one can see how the novel presents a number of situations in which these beliefs and stereotypes are both refuted and reinforced. The experiences of the female characters' lives provide the deep understanding of knowledge for the readers to identify the intricacies of womanhood and the societal expectations.

One of the common and accepted myths in the novel is the belief that motherhood is essential for women. Presenting the mother Desiree in the Novel who has been judged ashamed while coming home with an unmarried child, it shows that a woman value is determined by her caring nature of a mother. While the on the other hand the character of Stella who was not willingly to leave her mother that present another myth about women that motherhood is a necessary fate for women. The novel questions the gender norms that becoming a mother are the ultimate goal of womanhood and critically presents the pressure placed on woman in the society.

The novel also represents the myth, that women are emotional, in the character of Adele, who was grieving over her husband's death. The narrative challenges the stereotypical notion that delves into the complexity of female emotions coping technique. It provides more realistic and genuine portrayal of loss and sorrow that highlight that variety and complexity of ways that women can manage their feelings and emotions.

The novel tackles the ideal of female virtue and chastity in a very dynamic way of presenting the portrayal of twin sisters whose rejection and running away. The stereotype that women should be submissive, passive and polite only then they can be considered chaste otherwise they will be highly criticized and condemned if they follow their own well and choices. The twin sisters' rejection and their running away not just showing their independence but also molding a question against the social norms that confine women to very narrow perceptions.

Further, '*The Vanishing Half*' extends the myths about beauty's standards that white/fair skin can consider one of the top standards of beauty, which confirms racial charged conception of beauty. In the Mallard where 'The Vanishing Half' plotted uphold this

stereotype that light white and fair skins are more attractive and desirable. The *Vanishing half* delves into the complexity of racial identity and beauty's standard that discloses the negative impact of colorism in a society or at large.

The presentations of deep and complex characterization by Bennett in 'The *Vanishing Half*' that questioning and uphold the social norms of society at the same time. The *Vanishing Half*'s skillful characterization enable the readers to consider and the challenge these misconceptions, myths and stereotypes about gender, race and womanhood in the society. Bennett skillfully satire the society by their ill and prevented beliefs about women, where society demands a woman to be a caring mother and a chaste woman: passive and polite. The *Vanishing Half* is full of the stereotypes and myths about women what are not just locally constructed but globally recognized about women for years.

To conclude, '*The Vanishing Half*' is the masterpiece for the exploration of the gender studies and at the same time it offers a thought- provoking analysis of the myths and stereotypes about women. After the analyzing '*The Vanishing Half*' the researcher has come to this conclusion that these myths and stereotypes not just affect an individual woman, but they affect as whole womanhood. The satirical representation of the characters by the Bennett in "*The Vanishing Half*" encourages the readers to examine these myths and stereotypes that perpetuated in literature and cultural for years.

The unveils the societal and mythical beliefs about identity of blacks, race and gender norms and also teaching us to work for the equitable and inclusive future. The learned people must take the responsibility to bring these myths and stereotypes to light to save womanhood.

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