

## Chapter 22

# Table, Chair, and the Persistent Patriarchy: A Feminist Critique of Vaidehi's "Going by Tables and Chairs"

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The chapter deals with the short story "Going by Tables and Chairs," which is in fact an excerpt from the long essay "Meju Kurchiya Moolaka," translated into English by Prakash Belawadi. The essay written by Vaidehi, one of the most significant names in Kannada literature, is a mixture of the writing styles of a short story and an essay. It deals with the gender politics revolving around the most common of the objects in our lives today: a table and a chair. The chapter attempts to analyze the operation of patriarchal norms in most Indian households; it also provides an insight into the minds of elder women, who with time have learned to discipline the younger women and girls into obedience and submission to men.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the short-story, 'Going by Tables and Chairs', Vaidehi (2010) talks about the masculinity that her society has imparted to the simplistic 'chair' and 'table.' A woman sitting in a chair is considered audacious and she is reprimanded for doing an activity that is meant for the males. She draws a parallel between the shaving sets and the table and chair and designates them as the "natural right of men" (pp.

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119). Even if some school-going girl feebly requests to get a chair for her because her teacher asks the students to maintain proper body posture while studying, the elderly woman retorts, “Ask [your master] if his wife sits in a chair to cook!” (pp. 120). While this statement depicts the confinement of the female gender to the ‘inner sanctum’ of the house, specifically the kitchen, it also denotes the oppression that a woman inflicts upon another woman.

The story offers a feminist critique of the most common of the activities and events that happen in the life of a woman living in the society that Vaidehi belonged to. In the house of the narrator, for instance, she satirically questions the relevance of a woman’s education by asking that even if she learns to write, who will a woman write to? If a woman acquires education, her eventual goal or ‘future mission’ is to get married and be ‘sent away’. If a woman is allowed to read, it is only for the sake of reading, nor for argument. It suggests the patriarchal control over the thoughts of women.

The women of the house, by and by, come to see table and chair as something that symbolised ‘Male.’ Vaidehi writes, “They symbolised position, office, and the hauteur of authority” (pp. 121). Meant only for the males of the house, it is believed that the grace and the worth of table and chair would diminish “if it were sat upon by the women, *contaminated* by menstruation and all” [Emphasis added] (pp. 122). In many cultures, menstruating women are seen as contaminated and impure, and “the patriarchal control exerted to control women’s behaviour and mobility during menstruation undermines their agency and equality” (UN News, 2019).

The narrator then describes the throne-like chair in which her grandfather, a lawyer, used to sit to handle his clients. She describes the table in front of the chair with almost a great relish. There are three chairs which are meant only for the “special Male clients only,” mostly for those who could converse in English (pp. 123). There is a bench too, for all other sorts of clients, but all men. It is significant to note that Vaidehi capitalises the letter ‘M’ of the male in her entire story, which perhaps, signifies her inner inferiority complex that has been imposed on her. She writes that there is no need for a human to teach the girls of the house even to behave, as the mere presence of the table and chair, even if unoccupied, did the business. It is no wonder to anyone that girls were supposed to dust the chairs and the table, illustrating the unacknowledged help and support of women that the men require to keep their lives in order. It is no new fact that tasks like these have been delegitimized as women’s work. According to Britannica, domesticity and motherhood were the traditional duties of women, which remain the chief pursuits even today.

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