Narratives of Empowerment:
Connecting R.K. Narayan's "Selvi" with
India's Vision for Women in Stem

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of literature and policy to understand the empowerment of women in STEM. It views India's National Education Policy (NEP) through the lens of R.K. Narayan's short story Selvi. The story portrays Selvi, a talented singer, who transcends from being controlled and exploited by her husband to reclaiming her independence and agency. This narrative serves as a metaphor for the journey of women navigating systemic barriers in fields like STEM. The analysis of Selvi's struggles in the story identifies key challenges faced by women in STEM, such as gender biases, lack of autonomy, and limited access to opportunities. The study explores how the NEP addresses these barriers through initiatives such as gender-inclusive education, mentorship programs, and scholarships, designed to create supportive ecosystems that encourage women to thrive in STEM. By drawing connections between Selvi's personal transformation and the NEP's structural reforms, the paper highlights the critical role of resilience, self-realization, and institutional support in enabling women to break free from stereotypes and seize opportunities. Furthermore, it emphasizes how cultural narratives like Selvi can inspire and shape attitudes toward women's empowerment. The study concludes that blending storytelling with policy provides a powerful framework to drive gender equality and inspire the next generation of women leaders in STEM, contributing to a more inclusive and innovative society.

Keywords: women empowerment, stem education, national education policy, gender equality, literary analysis

The underrepresentation of women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields remains a significant challenge globally. In India, women face multiple barriers when attempting to enter or progress in these areas, including gender biases, societal expectations, and limited access to resources. However, with the introduction of India's National Education Policy (NEP) in 2020, new frameworks have been set in place to address these issues by promoting gender-inclusive education, improving access to STEM opportunities, and providing institutional support for women's academic and professional growth. This paper explores how *Selvi*, a short story by R.K. Narayan, serves as a metaphor for the challenges faced by women in STEM fields, particularly in relation to the systemic barriers that restrict their full participation.

Through an analysis of Selvi's journey of self-realization and the empowerment she achieves in the story, this paper will examine how these personal transformations reflect the struggles that women encounter in male-dominated fields like STEM. The NEP aims to reduce these barriers and provide avenues for women to thrive academically and

professionally. By examining the intersection of literature and policy, this research aims to show how storytelling, like Narayan's *Selvi*, can inspire and shape cultural attitudes toward women's empowerment and contribute to fostering a more inclusive and innovative society.

R.K. Narayan's short story *Selvi* is a compelling narrative about a woman's struggle for autonomy in a patriarchal society. Selvi, a talented and highly skilled singer, is initially controlled and exploited by her husband, who monopolizes her talent for his own personal gain. Her husband's manipulation and selfishness reflect the societal constraints that many women face, particularly in fields where their talents are often overlooked or suppressed because of their gender. Through this, Narayan provides a poignant commentary on the challenges women face in terms of autonomy, gender bias, and self-empowerment.

As the story progresses, Selvi gradually becomes aware of her worth and realizes that she is capable of achieving independence. This transformation is marked by her escape from the controlling environment created by her husband and her ability to take control of her life and career. Selvi's journey of self-realization, marked by resilience and determination, mirrors the struggles many women face in their quest to assert their autonomy, particularly in male-dominated fields like STEM.

Her transformation highlights several key themes: first, the importance of self-awareness and self-realization in breaking free from limiting circumstances, and second, the necessity of institutional support to aid women in their empowerment. These two themes resonate with the current gender disparities in STEM fields, where societal norms and structures often impede women from realizing their full potential.

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a comprehensive attempt to reform the country's education system to foster inclusivity and promote gender equality. The policy emphasizes access to quality education for all, with specific measures aimed at ensuring that women have equal opportunities to succeed, particularly in fields such as STEM. These reforms reflect a broader vision of creating a more equitable educational environment where women are not only participants but also leaders in all spheres of academic and professional life. A key aspect of the NEP's gender-focused reforms is the promotion of gender-sensitive curricula, which challenges stereotypes and provides a more inclusive educational experience. By creating an environment that encourages critical thinking about gender roles, the NEP hopes to dismantle the societal norms that prevent women from pursuing fields like science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. The policy also introduces initiatives to improve female representation in STEM, including scholarships, mentorship programs, and the encouragement of female role models in academic and professional settings.

The NEP also aims to address the persistent issue of gender biases within educational institutions. For example, the policy promotes the establishment of gender-inclusive classrooms where women's contributions are valued, and male-dominated narratives are challenged. By addressing gender biases early in education, the policy encourages young women to pursue fields traditionally dominated by men, such as STEM, and ensures they have the support they need to succeed.

Through these structural reforms, the NEP serves as a crucial step toward addressing the systemic barriers that women face in education and beyond, just as Selvi in Narayan's story transcends her oppressive circumstances through personal growth and institutional support.

In both Narayan's *Selvi* and in real-world STEM fields, women face gender biases that hinder their ability to succeed. These biases are often deeply ingrained within educational and professional systems, where women's abilities are either underestimated or dismissed. In the case of Selvi, her husband's exploitation of her talent is a direct consequence of her position in a patriarchal society. Similarly, in STEM, women often find their abilities and contributions minimized or undermined by institutional and societal expectations that view men as the primary figures of intellectual authority.

The barriers to women's autonomy in fields like STEM are compounded by cultural stereotypes about women's roles in society. Historically, women have been excluded from scientific and technical careers, with societal norms dictating that their primary responsibilities lie in the home or in care-based professions. The NEP, however, offers a counter-narrative to these outdated beliefs. By focusing on gender-inclusive education and creating supportive ecosystems for women in all fields, the NEP aims to shatter these stereotypes and open doors for women to enter and excel in STEM fields.

In *Selvi*, Narayan addresses the theme of autonomy, showing how Selvi's reclaiming of her personal and professional life reflects a broader shift in the societal narrative about women's roles. In a similar vein, the NEP's emphasis on providing equitable opportunities for women, including mentorship programs and scholarships, empowers them to assert their independence and break free from traditional gender roles.

Narratives like *Selvi* play a critical role in shaping societal attitudes toward women's empowerment. The story of Selvi's transformation is not just a personal journey but also a symbolic representation of the broader societal change that needs to take place to ensure women's equal access to opportunities. By highlighting her resilience and eventual success, Narayan challenges traditional gender norms and provides a blueprint for how women can reclaim their agency in oppressive environments.

Similarly, the NEP's focus on empowering women in education and ensuring that gender biases are addressed within the classroom serves to institutionalize the type of change that Selvi's narrative embodies. Cultural narratives, when combined with progressive policies, can inspire real change by shifting societal attitudes toward gender equality. Just as Selvi's story of self-realization inspires readers to question traditional power structures, the NEP's reforms aim to inspire future generations of women to break free from stereotypes and pursue careers in fields like STEM.

By blending the power of storytelling with policy initiatives, both *Selvi* and the NEP offer powerful frameworks for advancing gender equality and empowering women. The NEP's structural reforms provide the necessary institutional support, while stories like Selvi's offer the cultural inspiration to drive this change.

R.K. Narayan's *Selvi* offers a powerful metaphor for the struggles women face when navigating gendered barriers in education and professional life. Just as Selvi overcomes oppression and reclaims her agency, women in STEM must confront and overcome systemic barriers like gender biases and limited access to resources. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 provides a strategic framework to address these challenges by promoting gender-inclusive education and offering support systems designed to empower women. By drawing connections between Narayan's narrative and the NEP, this paper highlights the critical role of resilience, institutional support, and cultural narratives in empowering women to pursue their ambitions in STEM fields. Ultimately, both storytelling and policy play vital roles in shaping a more inclusive and equitable society where women can thrive in all spheres of life, particularly in traditionally male-dominated fields like science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

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