

FROM MARGINALIZATION TO EMPOWERMENT: FEMALE IDENTITY AND AGENCY IN ARIA ABER'S GOOD GIRL

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.23340323>

Keywords

Feminism, Female Identity, Female Agency, Marginalization, Empowerment, Intersectionality, Cultural Identity, Self-Definition.

Article History

Received: 25 June 2026

Accepted: 16 September 2026

Published: 10 October 2026

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Abstract

Literary depictions of women are concerned with issues of female identity, autonomy, and resistance against patriarchal structure. Contemporary fiction, in particular, delves into the negotiation of externally imposed patriarchal expectations, as well as attempts to define an independent female sense of self. Aria Aber's *Good Girl* offers a valuable contribution to this discourse through the experiences of Nila Haddadi, a young Afghan-German woman grappling with gender, cultural displacement, belonging, and personal freedom. This research examines the construction of a sense of womanhood and woman agency, focusing on how patriarchal expectations, cultural norms, migration, and social marginalization impact Nila's identity, and how the idea of the 'good girl' as a socially constructed identity regulates female behaviour, sexuality and choice. Through the Nila's experiences of alienation, desire, grief, and artistic expression, the tensions between conformity and self-determination are exposed. Nila's engagement with photography and creative expression offers a means for articulating experiences that do not conform to traditional ideas of womanhood. Her process of agency formation is not a simple transition from oppression to liberation, but a gradual negotiation, resistance against patriarchy, and self-definition process. The study concludes *Good Girl* challenges traditional notions of female empowerment and redefines identity as a fluid, socially and personally constructed process through exploring the intersection of gender, culture, migration, and artistic expression. On the whole, the study presents a nuanced portrayal of the struggle towards empowerment, as a process of recognizing oneself, challenging patriarchal norms and reclaiming voice and agency, rather than an absolute liberation from social and cultural restrictions.

INTRODUCTION

The literary representation of women has always been linked to the issues of female identity, autonomy, power. and resistance against patriarchy. Literary texts in different historical and cultural contexts have reflected the social structures that affect women's lives and have also offered spaces for women to engage in challenging restrictive conceptions of femininity. In patriarchal societies, specific norms exist with regard to women's behavior, sexuality, appearance, relationships, and social roles. Patriarchal expectations

can restrict a woman's freedom and impact her own self-awareness. "Patriarchal system has significantly influenced the societal status of women. It is inherently male-centric, being man-made, and it relegates women to the status of the 'second sex,' subaltern, and even slaves" (Qasim et al., 2024, p. 172).

Women are marginalized on basis of their gender, ethnicity, culture, migration and disbelongingness. Women are burdened by the patriarchy imposed expectations, impacting their sense of self, their sense of identity, and their sense of personal agency. These experiences illustrate how marginalization can be internalized, how silence is enforced, how self-surveillance and emotional regulation influenced by patriarchal expectations can affect the self, and how conforming to social identities can be an experience of marginalization. Empowerment is not necessarily an oppositional stance to these patriarchal imposed limitations, instead, agency can develop over time as a result of negotiation, self-expression, resistance and reinterpretation of socially constructed identities.

Afzal et al. (2024) observe, "Literature has long served as a powerful medium for reflecting the complexities and realities of human life, acting as a lens through which pivotal events that have shaped human culture are immortalized" (p. 869). In contemporary diasporic literature, the experiences of those who move between—and navigate—more than one cultural setting are focused. The issues of belonging and identity constitute a complicated problem for women who reside in the inter-cultural world. At times, cultural norms, family expectations, gender norms and the values of the community in which they live can result in a sense of conflict. In this context, female identity is a field of negotiation where conformity, resistance, belongingness and independence converge. Literature can be a very effective tool for sharing the experiences of marginalised women. Aria Aber's story of Nila Haddadi, a young Afghan-German woman navigating the complex entanglements of culture and relationship within and beyond her own, is an important contribution to the current discussion on female identity and marginalization, cultural belonging and personal freedom, desire and migration, and the female voice in modern literature. The story of the novel is primarily located in the sociocultural setting of Berlin. It sheds light on such issues as female identity construction, female marginalization and female diasporic experiences through narrating the story of the Nila's character. Nila's experiences highlight that female identity is not just predetermined or fully autonomous, but is continually negotiated with social attitudes and cultural institutions. Within this context, the idea of 'good girl' is of immense significance as it connects to concepts of 'appropriate female behaviour', 'respectability', 'obedience', 'morality', submissiveness, conformity to patriarchal norms, and 'emotional restraint', which are socially constructed. Nila's attempts to conform to these standards demonstrate the potential of femininity as a form of social control, which could also encourage women to monitor their appearance, behavior, emotions, and wishes. Meanwhile, as an Afghan-German woman, it becomes complex because gender plays a role with ethnicity, cultural heritage, migration and belongingness. For her, marginalisation does not occur as a result of gender alone, but rather as a result of multiple and overlapping expectations. The novel depicts how the characters might have developed an identity because of patriarchy, particularly when their understanding of a good girl diverges from a girl's understanding. Nila starts to realize how her identity is being limited by patriarchal norms. This awareness brings to life a critical connection between "marginalisation" and "agency"—it is this consciousness that gives rise to questions and negotiations of the masculine structures that have shaped her identity. Her struggle to perform as an outsider, followed by her discovery of voice and development of a more independent sense of self shows the complex process of marginalization and empowerment. The novel, thus, examines how women's agency can be expressed by negotiating rather than utterly transcending the social and cultural contexts that affect women's lives, and how identity reclamation, self-expression, and self-definition can be powerful means of empowerment. Hence, the novel is not a solely anti-family, anti-cultural, anti-feminist or anti-social message, but rather a process of negotiation to which Nila can contribute to bring her experiences to life and to guide her life.

Review of Literature

Marginalization constitutes a momentous concept in literary and feminist studies. Literary feminist studies examines the marginalisation of a person or a group within social, cultural and political systems. In relation to women's experiences, patriarchal systems are important factors in the production and maintenance of marginalisation, setting gendered hierarchies, limiting autonomy and defining socially acceptable feminine behaviour. Feminist analysis should not ignore the experiences of marginalized women because gender oppression may overlap with other forms of social oppression (hooks 2000). The representation of marginalised women in literature, thus, examines the intersections of patriarchy, ethnicity, class, culture, migration, and displacement to create complex experiences of inequality and exclusion. Marginalization can take place externally in the form of constraints or internally as internalized norms that shape women's identity, actions, emotionality, voice, and social belonging. Marginalization does not necessarily eliminate an individual's capacity for agency, as other women may gain agency through the negotiation of social expectations, expression of their voices, redefinition of imposed identities, and choice within patriarchal structures that limit their agency. The marginalization-agency interface is, thus, significant in feminist literary studies, as it shows the possibility for women to counter the limiting social structures and to negotiate and shape their identity. Contemporary feminist studies, therefore, examines not only women's marginalization within patriarchal structures, but also the ways in which women negotiate, resist, express and develop a sense of agency in reaction to these structures.

Deepa and Manjula (2026) explore the concept of marginalisation of women in literature in relation to the concept of patriarchy, female identity, intersectionality and resistance. They have identified that domestic confinement, silencing, economic dependency, physical assault, and cultural limitations are all recurring forms of marginalisation of women. The researchers also draw attention to the need to move beyond the image of women as victims to that of women as actors who have the power to challenge the oppressive structures through education, mobility, storytelling, and literary expression.

Good Girl is a coming-of-age novel by Aria Aber, about the struggle for identity, belonging, family, and cultural displacement as experienced by the young Afghan-German woman called Nila in Berlin. It presents a conflict between Nila's personal desires and the cultural and familial expectations which influence her sense of self. It also highlights Aber's migration, memory, sexuality and her challenges of negotiating multiple cultural identities. Most importantly, the novel is an intimate examination of a young woman's quest to understand herself, as she deals with the social and cultural pressures and contradictions that she encounters (*The New York Times*, 2025). *Good Girl* is a coming-of-age tale that focuses on Nila's epiphany about her identity, belonging, and the suffocation that comes with having a narrow range of expectations imposed upon her as an Afghan girl. The review highlights the conflicted nature of Nila's Afghan-German identity and her inability to balance her experiences across two cultures that both question her conduct and her identity. It also underscores the novel's examination of the expression of art, family roles, and the stress of building the 'good girl' image. (Naseem, 2025). Vojdani (2025) interprets *Good Girl* as a bold exploration of Nila's cultural identity, alienation and self-hatred as an Afghan-German woman living in Berlin. The reviewer highlights how Nila's attempts to run away from her cultural identity through nightlife, sexuality and artistic ambition reflect the psychological impact of racism, displacement, and social exclusion. She commends Aber for her vivid portrayal of the atmosphere and the multifaceted nature of Muslim girlhood, but she also notes that the novel is repetitive and very long. She emphasizes the political dimension of the novel and how Nila's identity crisis is connected to the anti-immigrant sentiment in Germany and the general alienation of immigrants (Vojdani, 2025).

Existing scholarship on Aria Aber's *Good Girl* has largely focused on themes of cultural identity, migration, belonging, displacement, and the experience of Afghan-German womanhood. Nevertheless, the relationship between the process of female marginalisation, identity construction and the gradual unfolding of agency have not received adequate critical attention. Especially the ways in which Nila is

able to negotiate patriarchal expectations, cultural pressures, emotional regulation, and self-expression are under-researched. The aim of this study is to fill this gap and explore how Nila moved from marginalization to empowerment through the reclamation of her identity, her agency, and her female identity.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The methodology employed in this study is qualitative and interpretive. *Good Girl* by Aria Aber is the primary text, and the secondary sources are books, journal articles, and critical studies related to the novel. The analysis is feminist literary with reference to Simone de Beauvoir's concept on the social construction of female identity and Otherness, Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, and Saba Mahmood's philosophy of agency and negotiation. Selected passages, characters, experiences and narrative elements of the selected novel are examined in order to identify gendered expectations, marginalisation, cultural identity, and female agency. The study focuses on the interactions of these dimensions in relation to the development of the protagonist in the social and cultural environment depicted in the novel. The textual evidence gathered is used to interpret what is happening in the text to illustrate the ways in which female identity is produced, how multiple ways of being marginalised work, and how agency is negotiated, expressed and resisted against the constraints of social expectations under patriarchal structure.

Feminism is a large, intellectual, social, and critical movement that aims to analyse gender inequality, question the power of patriarchy and advocate for the freedom, equity, and self-determination of women. Feminism, more generally, is a protest against established male-dominated systems that define and limit the experiences of women, and against the systemic marginalization of women in social, political, economic and educational spheres. Overall, it aims to make the processes of gender-based oppression null by achieving the full realization of the rights and equality of women in all areas of life. Feminism, in this respect, is a political movement that is focused on bringing social change by eliminating systemic gender inequalities (Mohajan, 2022). Feminism shows how the personal is political by highlighting the personal experience of inequality in the context of structural power relations and specifying its intersectional perspective on the issue of patriarchy and its intersection with class, race, and colonial histories. In doing so, feminism offers a transformative critique that is intended to challenge systems of gender oppression under patriarchy (McAfee, 2023). Feminist theory allows for an analysis of the depiction of women, the construction of femininity, and the ways in which literary texts reflect, reinforce, or challenge gendered systems of power. Feminist criticism has evolved in a variety of theoretical ways that focus on gender construction, representation of women, oppression, identity, marginalization, and agency. Instead of assuming that women pass through same experience of oppression, contemporary feminist scholarship recognizes that female identities are shaped and impacted by different social, cultural, political, and historical circumstances. The view has led feminist thinkers to look not only at the systems which limit women's choices but also how women engage with systems and make choices within them. In this regard, the present study applies feminist theories of Beauvoir, Crenshaw and Mahmood to explore the sense of female identity, marginalization and agency in *Good Girl* by Aria Aber.

Simone de Beauvoir: Female Identity and Otherness

A basic understanding of feminist philosophy by Simone de Beauvoir is her idea of the social construction of female identity. Beauvoir (1949), in *The Second Sex*, clarifies that the sex of a woman is not solely defined by a difference in her physiology, but rather by social and cultural processes as well. She emphasizes the importance of socialization, cultural expectations, and patriarchal structures in shaping female identity by making this distinction. This distinction is important because it highlights the role of socialization, cultural expectations, and patriarchal structures in shaping female identity. Beauvoir (1949) extends the notion of Otherness to place woman as the Other subject to man who is historically made the norm. This

unequal relationship, further, restricts women's autonomy, and confirms women's socially given definitions of being feminine. As Qasim et al. (2024) explain, women have historically been positioned "as second-class citizens" and treated "as objects or puppets, with their experiences consistently marginalized and classified as subaltern" (p. 171). This positioning echoes the structures of gender inequalities in which women are deprived of equal recognition, authority and autonomy. Qasim et al. (2024) further observe that "the subjugation and oppression of women have persisted throughout history, with women consistently being marginalized across various societies globally" (p. 174). This ongoing marginalisation is strongly linked to the Beauvoirian concept of patriarchy, with males representing the norm and females being defined through their relation to males. Beauvoir (1949) illustrates how patriarchal society restricts women's possibilities for autonomous existence, condemning them to what she describes as "a mutilated and frozen existence" (p. 390). It is, thus, important to consider the theory of Otherness when analyzing the ways in which women's identities are created as a response to and product of patriarchy, social norms, and culturally imposed feminine roles and expressions. Beauvoir's concepts are helpful in explaining how Nila's identity is being formed by the external expectations placed upon her, and how she is slowly progressing from the socially constructed identity to an increased sense of agency.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Intersectionality and Marginalization

Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality is useful to examine the overlapping and intersectional aspects of marginalization. In *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*, Crenshaw (1989) critiques the "single-axis framework" through which discrimination is often understood separately in terms of race or gender, arguing that such an approach "erases Black women in the conceptualization, identification and remediation of race and sex discrimination" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). She further explains that "the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" (p. 140), demonstrating that overlapping forms of discrimination can produce distinctive experiences that cannot be fully understood through a single category. Crenshaw (1991) develops this argument in *Mapping the Margins*, emphasizing that "the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately" (p. 1244). Therefore, intersectionality breaks the monolithic perception of women as oppressed and calls for attention to certain social and cultural positions. The concept is especially pertinent for Nila in Aria Aber's *Good Girl*, whose experiences are rooted in not just gender, but also in her Afghan-Germanness, cultural identity, migration, and questions of belonging. Crenshaw's theory enables this study to examine Nila's marginalization as a multidimensional experience, while also considering how her awareness of these intersecting pressures contributes to the development of female agency and self-definition.

Saba Mahmood: Agency and Negotiation

Mahmood's notion of agency is an important lens for examining how women can mediate social and cultural constraints. Agency does not always mean resistance to domination or rejection of norms. She argues that agency should be understood as a "capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 29). She also explains that agency is "not simply a synonym for resistance to social norms" but a "modality of action" (p. 29). Mahmood (2005), thus, proposes that people can act in ways that include inhabiting, negotiating, reinterpreting and responding to social and cultural structures in which they live. She emphasizes that "agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 29). Nila's search for empowerment does not require her renouncing her cultural identity, family

expectations, or socially constructed femininity but through her self-expression, negotiation, emotional awareness.

Conclusion of Theoretical Framework

The theoretical perspectives of selected theorists collectively provide a comprehensive feminist viewpoint for analyzing female identity, female marginalization, and female agency. The idea of socially constructed womanhood and Otherness offers a starting point for understanding how the Other is constructed as woman within the patriarchal system. In the theory of intersectionality developed by Crenshaw, gender is also interwoven with ethnicity/culture and nationality to create multifaceted experiences of marginalization. Mahmood's notion of agency also extends the model to include the ability of women to negotiate and take action within the dominant social and cultural systems. These perspectives give the conceptual underpinning for interpreting Aria Aber's work, *Good Girl*, and for exploring how the female identity is negotiated, how marginalisation is felt in various ways of social constraint, and how agency is found in negotiation, self-expression, and self-definition.

Textual Analysis and Discussion

Constructing the Marginalized Female Self: Gender, Culture, and Social Expectations

Aria Aber is a German-Afghan author, who is interested in issues of identity, migration, belonging, cultural displacement, and women's lives in negotiating various social and cultural expectations. Her writing often explores the connection between individual identity and social institutions that shape individual identity. *Good Girl* explores questions of femininity, family, culture, belonging, and self-definition through the experiences of Nila, an Afghan-German young woman, in the context of her life in Germany. The novel depicts her growth in the context of a rich social setting in which the norms of feminine conduct shape her sense of self and her perceptions. Nila's experiences illustrate how gendered and cultural norms can lead to the erasure of women's identity and how they can provide a space for the gradual development of self-awareness and agency. Her experiences demonstrate that femininity is not simply an inherent characteristic but something she learns to perform in order to gain social acceptance. Her awareness of how she appears and acts shows how much she is influenced by outside expectations. She observes that "looking right mattered as much as doing right" (Aber, 2025, p. 90). The statement indicates that respectable femininity is determined not only by a woman's actions; but also by her appearance and manner of self-presentation. Nila is, thus, taught to regulate herself based on norms set by patriarchal society. This Beauvoirian view of the social construction of womanhood suggests that femininity is created or produced by cultural norms. Nila's experience is, therefore, an early version of marginalization in which her identity as a woman is limited by imposed externalized notions of acceptable womanhood. The tension between socially constructed femininity and individual identity becomes more explicit when Nila states, "I knew how to behave before I knew who I was" (Aber, 2025, p. 103). This statement captures the conflict between social conformity and self-discovery. Nila has learned the codes of appropriate feminine behaviour before developing an independent understanding of her own desires, values, and identity. Her sense of self is consequently formed under the influence of expectations that precede her own choices. Butler's notion of gender performativity is especially apt to the experience because gender identities as socially recognizable are created and sustained through repeated behaviours and performances. The difference between having an identity that society approves and building an identity that she feels is hers is obvious in Nila's statement. This awareness of that difference is important because it can lead to questioning of the patriarchal norms that have been used in constructing her femininity.

Nila's marginalization is further complicated by the cultural aspect of her feminization. She is an Afghan-German woman, who is confronted with expectations related to gender alongside ones related to cultural identity and belonging. Her experience is, thus, influenced by multiple identities. She recognizes the

unequal weight placed upon her actions when she reflects that “mistakes felt louder on me” (Aber, 2025, p. 116). The term “louder on me” indicates that Nila feels she is “on trial” and that her actions are read within a social and cultural context. The experience of Nila can be better understood because the term ‘intersectionality’ helps to explain Crenshaw’s perspective. Gender is not separable from ethnicity, cultural background, and diasporic identity, resulting in a complicated sense of social judgment. Nila’s errors are not only seen as failures on his own part, but as acts with social and cultural implications. Her femininity is a product of gender and culture simultaneously, and her experience is different from a universalized notion of female oppression. This convergence of identities creates the concept of marginalisation as a multi-layered phenomenon in which Nila is expected to conform to gendered, familial and cultural norms at the same time. But her awareness of these pressures also brings about a process of self-consciousness. As she begins to see that the expectations that are imposed on her are socially and culturally created, Nila slowly separates between her imposed identity and her desired identity. Therefore, the textual portrayal of Nila’s femaleness sets up the first phase of the shift from marginalisation to empowerment. These early experiences show how the norms of gender and culture shape female behavior and lead to social constraint. Meanwhile, her increased sense of these expectations marks the beginning of self-definition. *Good Girl*, therefore, does not present Nila as just a passive recipient of social norms; but rather, her awareness of those becomes the foundation for negotiating them. Her transition from learning how to “behave” towards questioning who she is marks the starting point for her slow process of gaining agency.

Silencing the Female Self: Emotional Regulation and the Internalization of Gender Norms

Emotional expression is important dimension of female identity, as social expectations,, sometime, affect how females are allowed to express, control and suppress their emotions. Women’s behaviour is shaped in a patriarchally regulated environment in such a way as they are expected to be composed, controlled, and regulated in their emotions. Marginalization of Nila’s female identity is not just reflected in her actions; it is also expressed in her emotions and feelings. Nila observes that “calm was expected, even when I felt anything but” (Aber, 2025, p. 129). The contrast between “calm” and “anything but” reveals the tension between her internal emotional experience and the behaviour expected of her. Her feelings of anger, frustration, and desire are controlled by expectations that she must keep her emotions under control. The emotional constraint is, thus, linked to the feminine, which is an instance of how gender norms are manifested in emotional expression. Repeated regulation of this sort is part of the performance and reproduction of socially recognizable femininity, as Butler would see it. Thus, emotional self-control exhibited by Nila is not just a matter of self-discipline, but a matter of internalization of gendered norms, influencing the perception of what is considered acceptable behaviour.

This internalisation is also seen in Nila’s relationship with silence. She reflects that “each unsaid word made it harder to know what [she] actually believed” (Aber, 2025, p. 89). As she suppresses her thoughts and emotions, she becomes confused about her identity, while her silence limits her ability to express herself. The quotation, thus, creates a powerful link between voice and identity: If a person is regularly told not to voice her thoughts and feelings, then her capacity to understand and define herself can also be limited. This silence, from a feminist point of view, is a reflection of one of the ways in which marginalization can work internally, that is, through the internalisation of external expectations. It seems that Nila has lost her capacity to know what she actually wants, as a result of a long period of conformity, leading her to confuse the expectations imposed by patriarchal society with her own wishes. Thus, silence is an integral part of the process in which her feminine identity is controlled; she learns to value social acceptance more than self-expression. Meanwhile, Nila’s awareness of the consequences of keeping silent is an important shift in her consciousness. The discovery that her own voice has been stifled leads her to understand the need to discover and voice herself. The slow progression from silence to self-expression,

thus, is an important element in her emergent agency. She is able to express herself, by speaking and articulating her own beliefs; rather than simply taking on another identity that others impose upon her. The significance of silence lies precisely in this internal transformation. Not only is Nila denied the opportunity to express herself, but she starts to doubt if the thoughts and beliefs that live within her are her own. Thus, the formation of identity is influenced by social conformity. The difficulty of self-definition through self-expression due to repression increases the psychological effects of marginalization, which is well evident in her silence. At the same time, Nila's awareness of this consequence represents an emerging form of agency. Finally, she learns that silence has alienated her from her own convictions. And a voice that will articulate her thought, becomes an act of self-definition for her.

Marginalization can affect not only an individual's social position and emotional life but also the way the body responds to experiences of pressure and constraint. Women faced with chronic social and cultural expectations might experience the body to manifest anxiety, tension, and insecurity, which are hard to articulate verbally or think about. There is also a representation of the internalization of social pressure of Nila's body. She observes that "my body stiffened even when I told myself I was safe" (Aber, 2025, p. 104). The difference between conscious awareness of safety and involuntary body tension is indicative of the fact that the social/emotional pressures have become so ingrained in her physical reactions that she cannot even imagine feeling safe without them. The body serves as a repository of experiences, some of which may not be conscious and rational. From an intersectional feminist perspective, this tension can be understood within the overlapping pressures of gender, culture, and social expectations that shape Nila's experience.

The above-discussion makes it clear that in the case of *Good Girl*, there are also implicit normative constraints that are internalised by the person, such as how a women should feel, speak and behave. Nila's awareness of this inner struggle is a significant step in her growth of agency. She starts to recognise the difference between what is socially appropriate and what is emotional and intellectual and she is becoming more aware of herself. The agency is, thus, a gradual process that happens when internal constraints are recognized. The path towards empowerment starts with with full resistance; rather than with the capacity for recognizing the norms that have formed the self.

Reclaiming the Female Self: From Social Conformity to Identity and Agency

Recognition of the conflict between social identity and personal experience may be a key step in the process of developing female self-awareness. A major turning point that takes place is when Nila witnesses the disparity between what she is doing and what is happening within her. She states, "what I showed didn't match what I felt" (Aber, 2025, p. 141). This is a major struggle that is presented in *Good Girl*; the idea that Nila realizes that her face doesn't necessarily reflect who she is in herself. Recognizing this discrepancy is her shift from unconscious conforming to self-awareness, because she starts to realize that her expectations that have affected her behaviour and self-presentation could be wrong. The difference between what she "showed" and what she "felt" emphasizes the distinction between an externally-inferred identity and the internal sense of self. The awareness of Nila implies that the performative presentation of a "good girl" has separated her public identity from her personal wants, feelings, and convictions. This is important because it allows her to ask herself if the identity she is expected to embody is the one that is true to her.

Nila, therefore, starts to realize that being a "good girl" is not a fixed or natural state of womanhood, but rather a product of social norms and expectations. Contrary to what she "showed" and what she "felt" held up the gap between performed identity and experienced identity, revealing the tension between social conformity and personal authenticity. As she becomes more aware of this division, she realizes that her required behaviours, emotions and attitudes are not necessarily in line with her own wishes and her understanding of herself. It is a fundamental step in the process of transition from marginalisation to

empowerment, as it is the point at which a person can differentiate between the expectations that are imposed upon them and their own personal values, desires and beliefs. This awareness for Nila also leaves space for self-reflection and independent decision making, so that she can reflect on how socially feminine roles have entered into her self-concept. It appears, therefore, that empowerment does not always begin with the rejection of social norms, but rather with an awareness and questioning of identities imposed by social norms. This is one of the ways that Nila slowly moves from an externally imposed identity to a more self-defined identity.

Reclamation of identity is a dialogue with the past, but not a denial of the influences of past culture and personal history that have formed one's sense of self. People can maintain current awareness of aspects of their heritage which are significant to them, and extend their own choice of how those influences will affect them in the present and the future. But it doesn't mean Nila has to totally abandon her cultural heritage and personal history. Her later reflection, "I could carry parts of the past without letting them decide everything" (Aber, 2025, p. 195), represents a more developed understanding of agency. The verb "carry" is important because it indicates that the past is still a part of her, but its influence over her future is diminished. Nila learns that she can embrace her cultural and personal identity, but not be defined by it. This is akin to Saba Mahmood's definition of agency as a capacity that can be mobilized in social and cultural structures. Agency is not necessarily about resisting familiar structures, but can also be about how people negotiate, reinterpret and respond to the circumstances of their lives. For Nila, this negotiated agency is manifested in her development. She doesn't try to forget her cultural past but begins to understand how it will contribute to her identity. The novel, therefore, offers a view of empowerment as a process that takes place over time, and one that is negotiated, rather than an outright repudiation of the family, culture, or the feminine. Nila's agency grows when she becomes more aware of herself, and when she revisits her expectations of herself. Her development shows that there is no such thing as a wholly separate construction of empowerment from the patriarchal frameworks that have formed her identity. In Nila's case, empowerment happens by choosing which parts of these frameworks she will keep, renegotiate and reinterpret, and which she will reject. The process also expands de Beauvoir's notion of becoming, since Nila slowly comes to understand that she is not merely a passive recipient of an imposed femininity, but instead assumes an active role in the creation of the woman she would like to be. Initially she learns to act like "the good girl", but as she becomes more aware, she begins to doubt whether these are her own values, desires, and sense of self. Her trajectory, therefore, demonstrates a shift from performed identity to identity reclamation that involves self-definition as a form of agency. *Good Girl* does not take the easy route of viewing liberation as a sudden and total break from marginalisation, but rather looks at empowerment as an ever-changing process of awareness of social constraints, negotiation with cultural expectations, expression of individual desires and increasingly independent choices.

Nila's development is an example of reclaiming identity does not equal abandoning her cultural/personal history, it is gaining control over her understanding about her personal/cultural history and how much her cultural/historical past affects her future. It takes time for this to happen and Nila becomes a subject to whom others can expect to conform, rather than a subject who takes an active role in the construction of her identity, as it were, the tensions and complexities of marginalisation, agency and empowerment.

Finding a Voice: Self-Expression and the Emergence of Female Empowerment

For marginalized groups, self-expression is a positive route to expression of identity, voice, and personal agency. Women who have been moulded by a male dominated society can use their creativity as a means of communicating their experiences and perspectives which are often hidden, even if not entirely suppressed. The process of transitioning away from the marginal and empowering for Nila becomes an important means of self-expression. Her ability to see, understand and represent the world through photography is the way to realize her. By developing through art she begins to transform from an object

that can be looked at to a subject that can look and see, that can see and represent the world in her way. The act of taking photographs, therefore, can not only be an art form but also a medium through which Nila can find out her identity, and make use of her individual perspective. Nila is free to decide what to observe and what to record; what her surroundings will look like and what her experiences will be. Her artistic practice is, therefore, an ongoing process of self-formation, enabling her to move from being more dependent on expectations of others to a position where she can create and relay her own interpretation of the world.

Photography is more significant than career. It becomes a means for Nila to discover who she is, what she belongs to and how she can relate to the outside world—and an awareness of herself that what she was in the past. Photographing enables her to view things, record moments and document moments in her own creative way, rather than just being told how to do it. Her artistic work provides a means for re-thinking history and identify her ownself . It also allows her to be more powerful in her representation, rather than being an object of observation and interpretation.

Saba Mahmood's notion of agency can also be used to interpret Nila's art expression. Mahmood challenges the notion that agency is always an opposition to the existing structures. Rather, agency can be found in how individuals negotiate and behave in social and cultural contexts that influence their life. Nila's creative practice is one way that creates agency for her, the opportunity to negotiate gender, culture, belonging and identity. In her photographs, she is not only rejecting the architecture of her environment; rather she is creating her own way of expressing herself. She can re-invent her life and gain a newfound sense of control over her own interpretations and representation of the self.

Emotions can be a valuable source of knowledge of self when people start to identify the ways in which social expectations have influenced their actions and restricted their options. Emotions like anger can be a challenge to the idea of silence, obedience and emotional control for marginalized women, and they can open up space for self-awareness. Emotional aspects of this emerging agency are, therefore, also important. Nila realizes anger is not only a negative feeling, but a means to learn about the limits she has faced. She states, "anger showed me where I had been small for too long" (Aber, 2025, p. 182). The quotation changes the way Nila views anger, from something that she simply has to put aside, into an opportunity for self-awareness that helps her become more aware of the restrictions being placed on her. In the phrase "small for too long," Nila is aware of the ways in which longstanding conformity has limited her expression of her needs, desires, and individuality. She is not prevented from voicing her discontent by the expectation of feminine composure, and she starts to understand that her feelings point to a place that she needs to explore. Therefore, anger serves as an identification of limits that have become her sphere of activity and starts a process of re-thinking her relations with these limits. In doing so, emotional awareness plays a role in helping her to feel more in control of herself and establishing her agency. Rather, she starts to hear herself, to attend to those emotional reactions and works to make sense of her experiences, thus moving further toward self-expression and reclamation of identity. Anger becomes, thus, a part of Nila's growing voice. The feeling that once challenged her ideas of feminine restraint now helps her to feel herself and see the limits imposed upon her. This emotional sensitivity translates into agency, as she becomes more aware of her own experiences.

Conclusion

Good Girl by Aria Aber is a study of complex female identity that is constantly shifting in response to gender, culture, social pressures and personal experience. The novel depicts Nila's journey and exposes the ways in which external norms of femininity can exclude women by controlling their looks, actions, feelings, and expressions, and how cultural and diasporic identities intertwine with this process. As Nila becomes more attuned to these patriarchal pressures, she begins to challenge the identity that has been built around her by patriarchy, and makes steps towards self-definition. Her photography, her emotional

expression, recognition of anger, reconsideration of her cultural past, all become important forms in reclaiming her voice and exercising agency. Nila is, thus, empowered not by giving up on her family, culture, or social context, but by negotiating, reinterpreting, or deciding on how she relates to them. Overall, *Good Girl* depicts the journey from marginalization to empowerment as a gradual one: one that takes place step-by-step through consciousness, reclaiming identities, self-expression and agency, and developing one's ability to negotiate social and cultural systems that influence one's identity.

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