

## A Feminist Analysis of Gender Inequality in Sally Nicholls's *Things a Bright Girl Can Do*

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### Abstract

This study aims to depict the gender inequality experienced by the female characters in the novel. Gender inequality is discriminatory or different treatment received between men and women. Women are often seen as disproportionate to men and in a lower position, especially in education. In addition, gender inequality is still common and is the cause of women's struggles. This study uses a qualitative method to reveal the problem, based on the theory of Simone De Beauvoir (1953). The inequality experienced by female characters is have not chance to get the same rights as men in the form of education. This research concludes that women must do more in order to obtain their rights. In the novel, female characters must join a group of female fighters to defend their rights to get education and gain equality.

**Keywords:** *Gender inequality, qualitative method, women struggle.*

### A. Introduction

Sally Nicholls' novel *Things a Bright Girl Can Do* explores the theme of gender inequality through the story of Evelyn, a young woman determined to pursue the same opportunities as men. The novel is set in early 20th-century England, a time when societal expectations placed strict limitations on women's rights and roles. The central conflict arises when Evelyn expresses her desire to attend Oxford University, a goal her parents dismiss as unnecessary and impractical. They believe that her future should be dedicated to marriage rather than education. They have already planned for Evelyn to marry Teddy, prioritizing tradition over her personal aspirations. This stark contrast between Evelyn's opportunities and those of her brother, Kit, underscores the deeply ingrained gender disparity in their society. Kit is provided with every possible advantage to prepare him

for a future of financial independence and self-sufficiency, while Evelyn is expected to conform to societal norms that restrict women's autonomy.

Frustrated by the unfairness of her situation, Evelyn joins the Suffragettes, a movement advocating for women's right to vote. Through her involvement in activism, she begins to understand the broader implications of gender inequality beyond her own experiences. The novel portrays the struggles of women who fought for their rights, risking their safety, social standing, and personal relationships to challenge the status quo. Evelyn's journey is emblematic of the larger feminist struggle, where women were systematically denied access to education, employment, and political representation.

This study examines gender inequality as depicted in *Things a Bright Girl Can Do*, using Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory as a framework for analysis. In *The Second Sex* (1953), de Beauvoir argues that women have historically been relegated to the status of the "Other," defined only in relation to men rather than as independent individuals. This concept is evident in Evelyn's experience, where her value is determined by her role as a prospective wife rather than as an intellectual or professional individual. De Beauvoir's assertion that women must actively resist societal constraints aligns with Evelyn's decision to join the Suffragettes, demonstrating how feminist resistance can lead to transformative change.

Gender inequality in the novel is depicted through various aspects of Evelyn's life, from her limited educational opportunities to the societal expectations imposed on her. The patriarchal values in her household mirror the broader social structures that prevent women from achieving equality. Evelyn's frustration stems not only from personal grievances but also from the realization that countless other women face similar injustices. Her participation in the Suffragettes is driven by a desire to dismantle these oppressive structures and advocate for systemic change. Nicholls illustrates how deeply ingrained gender norms shape individual experiences, reinforcing the idea that inequality is perpetuated through cultural, institutional, and interpersonal dynamics.

Women's struggle against gender inequality in the novel is portrayed through acts of defiance and collective activism. Evelyn and her fellow Suffragettes engage in protests, endure imprisonment, and challenge the legal and social barriers that exclude women from full participation in society. Their resistance aligns with de Beauvoir's argument that women must assert their agency and reject the roles imposed upon them. The novel highlights the sacrifices made by these women, as well as the personal and political consequences of their activism. Despite facing opposition from family, society, and the legal system, they persist in their fight for equal rights, illustrating the resilience required to challenge entrenched power structures.

The scope of this study falls within the field of literature, focusing specifically on gender inequality and women's struggles as depicted in *Things a Bright Girl Can Do*. By employing Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory, the analysis aims to provide a deeper

understanding of how gender roles are constructed and maintained within the novel. The study is limited to the examination of gender inequality and women's struggle, ensuring a focused and coherent analysis. Rather than exploring broader feminist themes, the research concentrates on the specific ways in which Nicholls represents these issues through her characters and narrative structure.

The objective of this study is to reveal how gender inequality is depicted in *Things a Bright Girl Can Do* and to analyze how women struggle against these injustices. By examining the experiences of Evelyn and other female characters, the study seeks to highlight the structural barriers that limit women's opportunities and the ways in which they resist oppression. Through this analysis, the research contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender inequality in literature, demonstrating how fictional narratives can reflect and critique real-world social issues.

This study serves both theoretical and practical functions. Theoretically, it broadens readers' understanding of gender inequality and feminist literary analysis. By applying de Beauvoir's theory, the study provides insights into the ways literature can illuminate the struggles faced by women in different historical contexts. Additionally, it enhances the researcher's academic writing skills and literary analysis abilities, fostering a deeper engagement with feminist theory.

Practically, this study serves as a valuable reference for students and scholars interested in analyzing gender inequality and women's struggles in literature. By examining *Things a Bright Girl Can Do* through a feminist lens, the study encourages further research on similar themes in other literary works. It also underscores the importance of literature in raising awareness about social issues, demonstrating how fictional narratives can inspire real-world discussions about gender equality.

Sally Nicholls' *Things a Bright Girl Can Do* presents a compelling portrayal of gender inequality and the fight for women's rights. Through Evelyn's experiences, the novel highlights the systemic barriers that prevent women from achieving equality and the resilience required to challenge these injustices. Using Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory as a framework, this study examines the ways in which the novel reflects broader societal struggles for gender equality. By shedding light on the historical and cultural dimensions of women's oppression, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of feminist literature and the ongoing fight for gender justice.

## **B. Method**

This study falls under the category of qualitative research, as it does not rely on numerical data for collection or analysis. According to Blaxter et al. (2006, p. 60), qualitative research emphasizes descriptive data, which are presented in the form of sentences rather than numbers. In this context, the study aims to explore gender inequality

as portrayed in *Things a Bright Girl Can Do*, seeking to obtain in-depth insights into the issue rather than statistical measurements.

To achieve this, a descriptive qualitative approach was employed. Unlike experimental research, which involves treatments and controlled variables, or quantitative studies, which focus on numerical analysis, this research concentrates on textual interpretation. The data were gathered in the form of words, drawn from descriptions, analyses, and interpretations within the novel. The study involved a detailed examination of the text, with particular emphasis on instances of gender inequality and the struggles of the female characters.

The primary data source for this study was Sally Nicholls' novel *Things a Bright Girl Can Do*. This novel served as the central reference for the analysis, providing textual evidence to address the research questions. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the novel's themes, the researcher engaged in a meticulous reading process. The novel was read multiple times to grasp its overall message and underlying themes. Through this repeated reading, key passages relevant to gender inequality were identified, while irrelevant details were set aside. The selected lines were then highlighted for further analysis, forming the basis of the study's discussion.

The analysis of the novel was conducted using Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory. This theoretical framework was instrumental in interpreting the novel's depiction of gender inequality and the ways in which women resist and challenge societal expectations. By applying this perspective, the researcher sought to address the central research questions and uncover the novel's broader implications regarding feminist thought. After thoroughly examining the text, the findings were organized into a structured essay, allowing for a coherent discussion of the novel's portrayal of gender struggles.

Through this qualitative approach, the study aims to contribute to the understanding of gender inequality in literature, highlighting how *Things a Bright Girl Can Do* reflects and critiques societal norms.

## **C. Findings and Discussion**

### **1. Gender Inequality Depicted in Things a Bright Girl Can Do Novel**

This section will discuss women's position who are referred more inferior compared to men either in the family, workplace, and social life. Due to society's constructions and societal values, women are put in an unfavorable position.

Evelyn raised the subject of Oxford with her mother. 'Miss Dempsey thinks I could go to Oxford if I wanted. 'Really?' said Evelyn's mother. 'That is a pretty compliment, darling. Evelyn continues 'I want to go to Oxford next year and

study at one of the women's colleges. And Miss Dempsey thinks I could. 'But, darling!' she said. 'Whatever for?' Evelyn replied 'I don't know what for, exactly,' said Evelyn. 'Do I need a reason? I'd just like to, that's all.' (Nicholls, 2020, p. 15)

Gender inequality still occurs frequently; the quotation above depicts the issue in terms of academics. It can be known from how Evelyn's mother seems not happy with the conversation about the idea given by Evelyn. Evelyn gets a rejection by her mother in the first place when she mentions going to university. Her mother looks shocked and does not understand what Evelyn wants, especially Oxford. Evelyn is also asked by her mother what the degree is for. It implies that Evelyn as a girl does not need that kind of education.

Education for women is not something that really matters. There Evelyn's mother also mentions her father which shows that anything must be decided by a man. Evelyn as a daughter cannot decide anything by herself, it is her father who has the decision for her. It clearly shows gender inequality in a family. Education is actually the realm of learning for both men and women. However, the opportunity to get a higher education is more likely given to men than women.

This condition is not without reason but is motivated by a patriarchal view of society, namely the opinion that men should have a higher position and degree than women. In general, society still adheres to the notion that women are a second-class group, and their position is below men's. That's shown that gender inequality still considered as common things and not the problem for our society.

Evelyn tries to continue explaining her concern about going to university to her mother hoping that she will agree with it. Her mother ignores all her explanations and sticks with her perspective about women are better having a husband and family rather than continuing to get higher education. Evelyn did not know how to convince her mother because she only focused for her brother future.

'Just to learn things, you know – Latin and Greek and ancient history and all that. It'd be jolly useful having someone in the family who knew about classical civilization, don't you think? And anyway, what use is the university going to be to Kit? He's going to work for Teddy's father, isn't he? It's all decided.' 'But, darling,' said Evelyn's mother, again. 'Christopher will meet all sorts of people who'll be useful for him in business. He has to earn his living, darling – but there's no thought you'd ever have to do that. These university women lead very sad lives. I'd hoped for better things for you – a husband, a family, and a home of your own. Don't you want that?' (Nicholls, 2020, p. 16)

The quotation above shows gender inequality. Family is the smallest social institution with its social structure and system, as well as a group of people living under

one roof who have close ties and blood relations through descent and marriage. However, Evelyn herself experiences injustice treatment from her family. It can be known from how Evelyn's parents advised her to learn from ancient. It shows how Evelyn's parent declares that she does not need high education just like the ancient who did not go to school.

The parent also gives different treatment to Evelyn and her brother. Kit is allowed to go to university without any questions about why he should go there. However, Evelyn receives a lot of excuses from her parent. A long time ago no woman is going to school which is why Evelyn should continue that tradition. Evelyn's parent also states that rather than going to university she should have just gotten married and had a baby. This idea relates to Beauvoir theory. Beauvoir (1953, p. 13) states, "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman". It means that to be a woman, you are responsible to marry and give birth. This idea is stamped to women. Being a mother who raises her children is the only choice given to a woman.

Evelyn's mother said comfortingly 'Teddy's a very nice boy. But you can see it from our perspective, can't you? Going to Oxford costs a lot of money. Why don't you see how you feel next year when you leave school? I expect by then you'll be much more interested in golf, or something. But if you still want to crib up on stuffy old languages, perhaps your father and I could find you a Latin master to come and give you lessons. Far cheaper, and you could stay at home, which would be ever so much nicer, wouldn't it?' (Nicholls, 2020, p. 16)

The quotation above clearly represents the gender inequality issue. Evelyn is not given an opportunity to study outside the house. Meanwhile, her brother is able to study outside the house. As a man, her brother is given a higher education. It implies that as a woman, Evelyn is not allowed to see the world. Evelyn does not receive the same and equal treatment from her parent. Her brother gets the best university to study but Evelyn can not do that. Her parent does not mind paying more for her brother however they reject to pay expensive course for Evelyn.

This treatment surely puts a woman in a lower position compared to a man. Her parents are clearly seen sidelining Evelyn's position in the family. Evelyn's education is not allowed to be as high as her brother's. However, both women and men have the same right in pursuing education. If one woman can not do it then there is gender inequality.

Evelyn has some random things in her head. She asks herself why men can choose anything they want meanwhile women only can choose one.

'And it isn't just Oxford!' said Evelyn. 'It's everything. Why you and Christopher could be anything! Explorers! Soldiers! Inventors! What can girls be? Governesses, or teachers, or lady companions, or mothers.' (Nicholls, 2019, p.16). The quotation describes gender inequality. It is mentioned that a job

related to a man is seen to be powerful. The job gives man the to explore the outside world. However, job opportunities for women are all related to kids. It is done inside the house. Again, the woman has always been related to taking care of children and living inside the house. This illustrates the distinction between men and women. Man is strong, persistent, and powerful.

In contrast, the woman is weak and powerless. In other words, the man is the subject while the woman is an object. This of course leads to the position of man in society. Man has a more wider and vital role in society. However, woman has only a small impact on society because they work inside the house. It is invisible therefore people do not consider woman's work as important as man does.

A woman is always given responsibilities for domestic work. Sometimes people you knew got jobs working in their houses, sweeping their floors, and minding their children. Sometimes you came across them at closer quarters – working in the infirmary perhaps, or marching with the Suffragettes. ‘You just be careful, my girl,’ she said. ‘Marching’s one thing, but I don’t want you setting fire to no postboxes, you hear me? We ain’t standing bail if you end up in not clink.’ (Nicholls, 2020, p. 32).

The quotation above proves gender inequality. It can be known from the line “people you knew”, it refers to women. Sweeping the floor, and taking care of children must be done by a woman. However, man is not given this kind of response. When a woman and man are married, the domestic work is supposedly done by both not only women. Therefore, it can be concluded that woman is not treated equally to a man.

## **2. The Women Characters deal with Gender Inequality in Things a Bright Girl Can Do**

Women struggle because of their position as inferior to men, societal value expects them to be a wife and mother, and given double burdens. It can be seen from how Evelyn is a part of Suffragettes implies that she experiences injustice. Therefore, she fights for her and other women's rights she was doing all her best to prove that women deserve have the same rights. There are some correlation between the theory which are discuss about *Work and Education* as Simone mentioned in her theory.

Oh, how she loved this. There they were, all those people who spent their lives crushing her and her family: policemen, lawmakers, toffs, men. She swung the nightstick and roared. Perhaps they'd arrest her. She wouldn't care – not her! Nell had never been arrested, but she'd always secretly rather wanted to be. Only then she supposed she'd lose her job, and she couldn't do that. So she didn't actually hit any policemen and she didn't actually break any windows. (Nicholls, 2020, p. 69)

The quotation above depicts a woman's struggle. It can be seen from how Nell is worried about her life. When she swung a nightstick is a symbol that she needs help. Roaring can be said to be fear. Nell is afraid of living her life because she as a woman is not given equal treatment as a man. A different pattern of treatment done by society causes her to struggle.

People who are responsible to keep society safe are not there. It is mentioned that policemen, lawmakers, toff, and men are crushing women. It can be said that women are not in a safe place because all society is against them. The threatening action done by men illustrates that they are powerful and superior and woman is inferior. Women can not live their life freely because it is always oppression towards them.

All the time, for entire Evelyn's life, she did not receive the same rights as her brother, especially in education, so Evelyn was interested in joining the Suffragettes, a group of people who unite to voice women's rights. Evelyn conveyed that to her father and made her father very angry with what Evelyn had done.

Well. Since you and Mother decided I couldn't be educated, I've become interested in the rights of women. It suddenly seemed so – well. It was jolly interesting, actually. At the weekend, we walked to Buckingham Palace; there's nothing criminal about that. If anything, it was the policemen who were breaking the law, and—'Enough!' Her father was staring at her. 'Evelyn, this isn't some sort of a joke. I don't think you realize at all the people you're associating with. You don't know – how could you? – the things these women do. Really dangerous, mindless acts of violence. You could end up in prison. You could very easily end up killed. There aren't many things that are worth dying for, Evelyn. Is this one of them?' (Nicholls, 2020, p. 71)

The quotation above shows gender inequality and women's struggles. It can be seen from how Evelyn's father opposes her desire to join suffragettes in which women act to get equality with men. As a representation of man, her father strictly forbids Evelyn from joining the suffragettes. This means that men do not want to be equal to women because their position is above women's. They resist being in the same line as a woman because they think they are superior compared to the inferior woman.

Evelyn is treated unfairly by her father. Evelyn as a woman is only recognized by her sexuality. Her father always ignores her when she wants to reveal other sides of her as a woman. This term leads to woman's positions being treated unfairly. Moreover, from how Evelyn's father distinguishes her and her brother, it implies that he considered Evelyn as the second sex. Differencing in parenting between boy and girl is the beginning of how the woman is being mistreated in society.

The policeman grabbed her arms. She struggles, twisting herself, trying to remember the term of ju-jitsu they'd done at school. The policeman pulled her

arms upwards and she yelled in pain. (Nicholls, 2020, p. 91) The quotation above depicts women's struggle. It can be seen from how Evelyn is in pain while the policeman grabs her arms. It symbolizes how women become victims of violence done by men. De Beauvoir (1953, p. 275) states the idea of the Others emerges when a man defines himself as a subject and a free being. In the quotation man obviously is the subject of the action, while the woman is the object. Women should do burden things to get their rights.

Ironically, the action done by the policeman is shown men's superiority toward women. In this case, a man shows off their power and strength to a woman who is considered weak and powerless. Accordingly, police must help people to feel secure. However, their action shows harassment toward women even though the police, they did the harassment to women.

She felt a sob rise inside her, and she clenched her jaw against it. She couldn't cry. She wouldn't. But she felt very tired. She felt as though she had been fighting her whole life for something she could never have. She thought she had never felt so tired and hopeless in all her life. The whole world is going to Hell and her own small part of it was crumbling. (Nicholls, 2020, p. 194)

The quotation above depicts a woman's struggle. It can be known from how Nell is desperate for her own life as she is unable to get the life she wanted. No matter what she has tried to get her right, she will never have it. For her and other women to have the same opportunity to speak and decide what is best for themselves as men do is impossible. The injustice experienced by women causes them to struggle.

#### **D. Conclusion**

Based on the analysis in the previous chapter, it can be concluded that the women characters in *Things a Bright Girl Can Do* experience gender inequality in terms of education, societal value, job, and decision-making. It can be known from how Evelyn is restricted to go to university, unlike his brother. She is forced to marry and become a wife. Societal value treats women unbalance. Women do not need high education because they will only be a mother. The only woman is in charge to stay at home, cook, wash, and cleaning. Moreover, women character of the novel also receives unequal treatment in working place. Nell's mother is paid lower compared to men, however, she does the same amount of job. To add, women are also prohibited in terms of decision-making. They are not given a chance to decide what they want to do. It can be seen from how Evelyn's father decides everything including Evelyn's future.

Additionally, women also struggle in living their life in society. It is because society considers them as the second sex. Women are seen as inferior to men. Therefore, men see themselves as a powerful and educated human being while women are powerless and uneducated. It can be known from how Evelyn is abused by a policeman while trying to get equality. Moreover, societal value also makes women given double burdens. Carrier women, not only work but also still have to do tiring domestic work such as cleaning,

washing, and taking care of children. In comparison, their husband is not done this kind of job at home. It All has been prepared by their wife and daughter. In addition, women also harder to get a job. The position of women is below men's because women are given limited roles.

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