

From Impoverished Nobody to National Icon - The Triumph of Jaya Nigam's Journey in Ashwiny Iyer Tiwari's *Panga* (2020)

P.Sitharthan

Assistant Professor of English
Presidency College, Chennai

“... when I think of you (her husband), I feel happy. When I think of Adi (her son), I feel happy. But when I think of myself, I am not so happy.”

The release of Ashwiny Iyer Tiwari's *Panga* a slice-of-life film gained rave reviews all over and was critically acclaimed as an endlessly optimistic film that enables the central female character Jaya Nigam to shake off the familial complacency and rediscover her true identity.

Panga is a fairytale where a little boy liberates his mother from the confines of self-contained domestication. Basically a sports movie deals with a former forgotten Indian Kabaddi team captain and feted rider Jaya Nigam (Kangana Ranaut) now married, working as a railway ticket booking clerk. She has to hang her boots after delivering a premature birth of her son Adi who was badly need of special care to improve his immune power. The 32 year working woman Jaya Nigam in the struggle to balance between her profession and domestic responsibility ignores to nourish her passion to play kabaddi. The inner spirit in her kindles back into her sports life once again. The begins her practice just to convince his son but soon the feel it offers gives the unassuming wife and mother a chance to rediscover at her life and her personal happiness. She seriously pursues her goal of playing professionally again along with the support of family, friends and colleagues, and to prove to the world and to society that even mothers can have a successful comeback. The clichés of sports film genre in the portrayal of protagonist like a cocky, invincible smooth-talker who bulldozes her way through without a care in the world is completely ruled out and where the central female character is realistic and relatable. At one point the movie extends from sports to love and love only spreading all over.

The success of the film is the writing of the central female character Jaya Nigam by the director Ashwiny Iyer Tiwari, co-written with Nikhil Mehrotra and additional screenplay inputs and dialogues from Nitesh Tiwari. The character has a depth which clearly leaps out of the movies that are from the similar premise. The 2016 released Nitish Tiwari's *Dangal* is also a sports movie like *Panga* but the former focus only on the external action than of an internal journey of the character in the latter. By comparing the characterization of Jaya Nigam of *Panga* along with the similar comeback movie Omung Kumar's *Mary Kom* (2014), where both the women are totally different from each other in terms of successfully overcoming challenges in their second innings. Apart from the commonality of theme in the struggle of balancing family and profession with the support of the family between Jaya Nigam (*Panga*) and Sulochana / Sulu (Suresh Triveni's *Tumhari Sulu*, 2017) both the characters outwit each other in their own traits. The realistic kind of character like Jaya Nigam is a rare phenomenon in the making of Bollywood movies where most of the female characters are objectified with no substance. So there is a need

to study for understanding such character to explore more about the intricacies of nature and as well as to consider as a model creating dignified female characters.

In order to make a study or proper understanding of the characterization of a central female character like Jaya Nigam, a structure or a process is needed like Joseph Campbell's monomyth for male characters. Campbell's monomyth is a proven model for creating male characters which has been followed right from *Star Wars* fame George Lucas to the directors till date. When there is a perfect model for creating a male characters, a successful model for creating a female character becomes mandate. Maureen Murdoch, the disciple of Joseph Campbell felt the need for developing a mythic structure to create female characters on line with the monomyth for male characters. In her seminal book *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness*, Maureen Murdock evolves a ten stage cyclical process in creating a realistic female characters.

Murdock's *The Heroine's Journey* is a guide to understand how women lead the modern-day life in the quest of their identity and need for contentment in a patrilineal world. The author defines archetypal roles such as mother, father, daughter, son, masculine, and feminine are not gendered but rather they are the forces within the character of humanity needs to be recognized and accepted. The cyclic journey is comprised of ten stages where the heroine can experience more than one stage at once, by experiencing more than one journey at the same time. The stages of a heroine's journey are as follows.

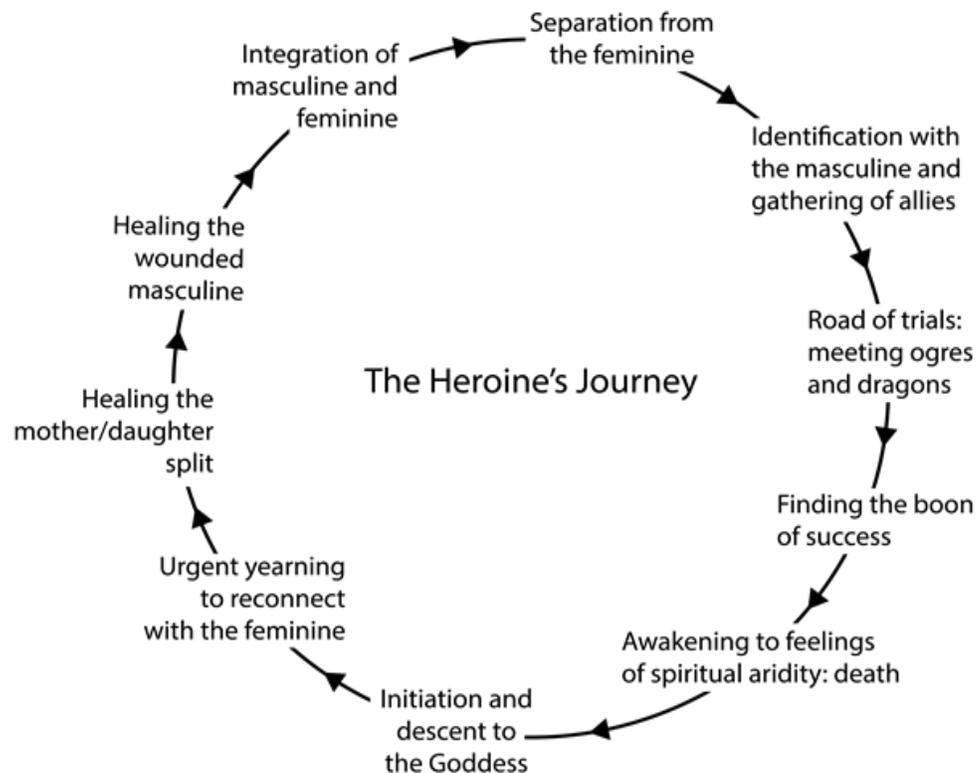


Figure I: Maureen Murdock's ten stages of the heroine's journey

With the model of Maureen Murdock's ten stages of the heroine's journey, the characterization of Jaya Nigam in *Panga* can be easily analyzed and understood in a much better way. For the purpose of the study of how the character of Jaya Nigam evolves, the ten stages of the journey is divided into three acts. The initial phase of the heroine's journey is Act I, starting with the two stages - Separation from the Feminine and Identification with the Masculine and Gathering of Allies. The Act II, the midmost phase of the heroine's journey deals with the next four stages - Road of Trials Meeting Ogres and Dragons, Finding the Boon of Success, Awakening to feelings of Spiritual Aridity: Death and Initiation and Descent to the Goddess. The terminal phase of the heroine's journey is Act III, analyzing the last four stages -Urgent Yearning to Connect with the Feminine, Healing the Mother/Daughter Split, Healing the Wounded Masculine, and Integration of Masculine and Feminine.

Act I – The Initial Phase of the Heroine's Journey

The first stage, "Separation from the Feminine" where the story gets triggered by the occurrence of an inciting incident where the heroine will be stepping out from her restricted routine or constructed comfort zone to find peace, to find her place or to find better than the existing world. In order to have her identity or to fulfil her desires she shed her feminine role and start her quest. To her the quest is primarily inward when compared to the hero whose adventure is external. The heroine's journey gets triggered by an inciting incident and should deal with issues like coping with the loss of everything the heroine loves and cares about, to know who betrays and how she has been disillusioned from the real self, her responses towards this change of events to exactly understand what's her "call to adventure" and the ways and means to proceed further, gearing up to refuse her traditional feminine role and finally probing the possibility of the villain.

In the movie *Panga*, the central female character Jaya Nigam gets jettisoned after seeing the young players in the railway station where she works, fails to recognize her as a former captain of the Indian Kabbadi team. After her pregnancy Jaya adept in suppressing consciously her past life and glory and subconsciously in her sleep it comes out in form of kicks leading a typical life of a working woman. The only fruit of the past of her passion is a job of a ticket booking clerk in railways. He leads a humble life, married, husband working in railways, a seven year old school going son. To her the world is nothing but her commitment towards her family than of herself and her personal desires and identity which is her major internal flaw. At the conscious level Jaya may suppress her internal instincts but unconsciously it is very much in her system that comes out by her kicks during sleep. The love of her husband and the development of the physical condition of the child stresses out her mundane life and prohibits her from thinking anything for herself. To be precise is strongly connected to the dominant traditional feminine archetype of a housewife, nurturing the needs of her family members by ignoring her internal longings.

The journey of Jaya Nigam starts by an inciting incident that happens during a family chat between Jaya's husband Prashant and her son Adi(tya). Prashant makes Adi to understand that

his mother is not just a caretaker but a strong individual having a glorious past (“Sabko samajhne ki zimmedari sirf meri hai?” – “You only know what she is, I know what she used to be”). She’s living with the inner contempt of what she could’ve made of her life and what she instead chose (“Main kya kar sakti thi, aur main kya kar rahin hoon - “I could have done so many things, and what am I doing”).

She has to bury her passion driven future because of the structural and cultural oppressions of being a committed wife and mother. She has to resign to a life of anonymity in spite of her colorful yesteryears. Jaya had disillusioned herself by her domestic bliss and lost everything she concerned about before marriage. Only then, after understanding the plight of his mother, Adi liberates her from the confines of self-contained domesticity and jobbery. He wants and pushes Jaya with the support of his father to pursue her dream of getting back to play kabbadi. This is the triggering moment where the turn of events start happening one after the other. Though the boy wishes for his mother’s comeback to sports but this “call to adventure” will not happen instantly unlike an external action for a hero because this is an internal struggle where the heroine Jaya has to challenge. Initially she is reluctant and pretend herself to console and convince her son’s wish for the reason it is complicated for her to reject the traditional role of sincerely performing her duties as a mother and wife. Here there is no visible caricatured villain disrupting her progress rather than her inner self disturbing her that she is selfish by ignoring the duties of a mother and wife.

Identification with the Masculine and Gathering of Allies

Once the realization happens after the triggering moment to the heroine, the compelling reason(s) will not allow her to refuse the call to miss an opportunity to explore herself. In this situation, some of her allies or enemies try to persuade her not to proceed in her journey. Once the decision is made to separate from the feminine, the heroine understands that it is not easy to abandon the tradition which has been valued by her from birth and valued till now by others. It’s a challenge, she needs to prepare emotionally to embrace traditional masculine traits to brave the new world. Here, the heroine make allies who may later turn out to be a mentor or a betrayer. The ally may be well acquainted or unfamiliar to the heroine. The ally who turns out to be a mentor is the male character which understands her and be with her in all her endeavours. To the contrary, the ally turns out to be a betrayer by not understanding her and may not be with her till she completes her journey successfully.

Apart from the support of the ally, the heroine has to equip herself by gathering weapons to fight against the newly chosen masculine way of life. This is possible by inheriting certain qualities according to the situation in an emotional, physical or spiritual sense. During this time the conflict of going ahead or not will not have the second option where the heroine will be on the point of no return. The battle begins with the bang by the heroine which is not an end but only a beginning. She cannot think of withdrawing herself and going back to the normal life. The success after her first obstacle compels to her to fight against the next level. The levels become infinite where heroine will be given greater responsibility or forced into a new leadership.

Once the inner call of playing kabbadi has been aroused by Jaya's son, Adi and husband Prashant, the call was suppressed by the commitments she has obliged with respect to her family and profession. Somehow the call overcomes the oppression by making a small compromise of pretending to take up the call for convincing Adi and starts her practice. But the practicing sessions instigates her inner instincts of sportsmanship to proceed her practice to pursue her dream of pushing hard to regain the lost place in the kabbadi team. The decision is not an easy one to implement instantly. She cannot abruptly halt her routine, so she has to make alter, adjust and accommodate arrangements appropriate to her family and job.

The challenge is two pronged – on one hand she has to toil to cope with the break of seven years from playing professional kabbadi and on the other side, performing the demanding duties of a wife, mother and ticket booking clerk. The patriarchal society is only favourable to men who has a single focused challenge of nurturing his passionate profession. Jaya has to fight herself internally to follow the masculine traits of pursuing her passionate goal only by making a few adjustments on familial responsibilities and externally she has to physically work hard to compete with the comparatively younger ones and the new techniques that are followed in the sport. Without the allies it is impossible for her to achieve these two internal challenges. The support and motivation extended by Jaya's husband and son proves to be good allies for overcoming the internal struggle and to ally with her friend and former co-player Meenu who is presently a coach helps Jaya to fight back to regain her form in playing kabbadi and also know and learn to new techniques and approaches in the game. With these two strong allies Jaya is set forth to keep forward towards her journey. As per the filmic logic, if there is an ally then the question is where is the villain? Apart from the situation there are absolutely no absolute villains except a few incidental villains. In this stage, the demotivation comes from Jaya's mother Rachna Nigam suspecting the problems that are to be encountered by her daughter in balancing family and sport.

The allies of Jaya Nigam are otherwise her mentors. Right from her seven year old son Adi, to her husband Prashant and to her friend Meenu guides her appropriately to overcome the different hurdles at different stages. Adi is the ultimate motivator during her initial days of her come back by waking her and being with her during the practice sessions. Prashant is the complete supporter by accepting the domestic responsibilities without any inhibitions and sustaining the same spirit even through rough patches he has to experience. Finally, Meenu, a professional coach her catch up the age and techniques of kabbadi and without her Jaya would have even dream into the initial entry of playing kabaddi for Railways, a gateway to represent the national team. Now Jaya is physically, emotionally and spiritually strong to move forward as the stakes are raised to rejoin the Railways team, to represent the Indian team and to perform well to bring glory to the country, to the sport and to her. The Act I ends here after the heroine Jaya Nigam crossing two stages where she is fully equipped to pursue her crucial part of her journey in Act II.

The Convergence of the Heroine

The second act of the heroine's journey starts with the third stage - Road of Trials Meeting Ogres and Dragons where the heroine has to deal with the internal issues of facing attachment, fear, grief, guilt, illusions, lies and/or shame to be successful. It is not necessary that the heroine should either undergo all the above mentioned seven emotional issues or to surpass one issue over the other. Instead, the heroine can face any number of issues in any order to solidify a strong spiritual internal arc that creates a very deep, three dimensional role.

The strength of the role Jaya Nigam as a heroine in the movie *Panga*, where she will be facing all these seven emotional trails. The major issue for Jaya is to understand the attachments she had imposed and developed by herself after her marriage. If she wants to continue her journey, some kind of adjustments has to be made within the relationship without any rupture. Jaya need to evaluate the familial attachments and how is that she continues to be a wife and mother by actively focusing on playing kabaddi.

The point to consider here for Jaya is to understand that the attachment is hindering and dilemma is whether to cling with it or. By the self-awareness of her motives, Jaya wisely decides to look for an alternative rather to commit herself to it. She also realizes her flaw of family commitment is only for her. She feels it is the responsibility of both the husband and wife and leaves the responsibility to her husband which he voluntarily takes up. So the issue of attachment is resolved by the understanding of sharing the family responsibilities rather dumping the entire responsibility on the shoulders of the wife in turn that dampens the dreams of her pursuits.

The gripping fear of thrusting the responsibility of maintaining the family into the hands of voluntarily accepting husband is her next issue. Her fear is more on taking care of her son Adi. He is under medication needs close attention and being a school boy, he is dependent even on fulfilling his own needs. She overcomes her fear and finds safety and security by tuning her supportive husband on each and every aspect right from the dosage of medicines for Adi to quick recipes for breakfast. The only thing she gives up is being with her family and taking care of it.

By leaving the son and husband to take care of themselves in order to chase her dream at times makes her to grieve and struggles to focus on her objective. The problems in handling domestic chores by her husband and the tantrums of Adi because of her absence disturbs her a lot. No other go for Jaya to get rid of her grief to be successful in her journey. She manages by having constant touch and providing guidance to Prashant and Adi. Moreover, she seeks the support of her mother to be with them when there is a need.

Though Jaya outsmarts the fear and grief, the guilt in her pricks a lot that she needs to rid of. She feels guilty of being selfish and fixing a situation for Prashant and Adi to sacrifice themselves for fulfilling her desire of playing kabbadi. She feels bad because of breaking the taboo by standing apart unlike other womenfolk from the traditional flow of nurturing and sacrificing for the family. Fortunately, she was not made to guilty by others for knowing and expressing her

sexuality and desires. Her stage-wise success based on hard work and the understanding of her allies helps her to overrule the grief from haunting her.

The illusions of being a woman, one cannot chase their dream career after marriage, the sole responsibility of managing the family, a devout wife and mother at the cost of her passion or desire, marriage and age as a hurdle for achievement are stumbling blocks for the heroine to haul victorious career. Jaya Nigam has to tear down the illusions that are manipulated by the matrilineal society by the manifestations of her intuition, imagination and determination.

The illusions of Jaya had extended its manipulations of telling lies to herself. These lies in turn prevented her from communicating and expressing herself. Normally people tell lies to others and be truthful to themselves. This is mostly possible with men but women like Jaya has to tell lie to herself as her family will not thrive without her full involvement. So she has to sacrifice her way of her living and restricting to the life given to her. When her son and husband wishes her to continue with the sports career she tries to lie the same to them. Fortunately her self-belief and the supporting system of her allies helps her unravel the truth of being herself.

Jaya has to face the problem of shame externally because the internal emotions like attachment, fear, grief, guilt, illusion and lies are resolved along with the support of her allies. Once she feels ashamed of herself (of course not intentional) when the junior players fail to recognize her as a former skipper of Indian Kabaddi team. The next shame is the lack of agility when compared to the younger players and finally not allowing her to the part of playing team during the world cup till the final match. All these shames together a blessing in disguise, otherwise Jaya may not prove her cent percent power and will to gain her identity and achieve who she wants to be.

Finding the Boon of Success

The winning of emotional combat is not the ultimate success of heroine's journey. This is only an initial victory that motivates the heroine and gives an illusionary sense of safety and security. Because of this wrong notion she may tend to relax a bit or to take a risk. She needs to be cautious in making decisions. One wrong decision may lead to ruin the whole journey. This is stage where her own ally may be a threat in not supporting her to continue her journey. Moreover, the heroine look for a new ally if needed and tend to atone with her feminine.

The twist in the tale of Jaya's journey in *Panga* happens in this stage. Jaya by her strong determination and hard practice makes a quick comeback to the game. This is her first success, the next is getting a place in the kabbadi to represent Railways. In her zone, the West Central Railways has already finalized their team and with great difficulty and the support of her friend Meenu, Jaya manages to represent Eastern Railways where they are coming up with a new team. In spite of succeeding to secure a place in Eastern Railway kabbadi team, the twist in the story is whether she is going to make the right decision of taking this opportunity or not. The problem is, Jaya right now settled in Bhopal and cannot immediately shift to Kolkata. If so, it will be like abandoning her family because her husband and son cannot transfer their office and school

immediately. So Jaya was in a fix and almost going back to square one, withdrawing herself from the onward journey. The support of her allies helps to make a hard decision by leaving the family to join the Eastern Railway kabbadi team. The atonement with her mother and feminine also onstage internally and externally in this stage. The compromise she makes with her mother to support her family in her absence is external and internal is where she is not rescinding her responsibilities of family instead in absentia she supports her husband, Prashant who is in charge of family affairs.

Awakening to feelings of Spiritual Aridity: Death

The awakening to feelings of spiritual aridity is the dark stage of the heroine's journey. The heroine has to endanger the utmost ordeal of her journey. This is the stage where the villain will be at acme to avenge and vanquish the heroine. She will be in a desperate condition of no hope of losing the battle. The most crucial of all is a situation where she has to say no to the authority or the father figure that emotionally shatters her. The emotional, physical and spiritual vigour of her is at its nadir and completely lost her confidence of coming out successfully to conclude her journey.

Jaya Nigam undergoes a condition where she was stripped away to nothing except to prove who she is. From her side she had done the maximum but the outcome goes out her control and turn away. The black moment on this stage is the struggle to get selected in the national kabbadi team. In the first list, Jaya's name is not included among the players selected for the kabbadi team. The selectors felt that her agility and techniques are not up to the expected international standards and firmly believed that a younger player may be given a chance for the future of the national team. The situation does not need a villain to trap Jaya from progress whereas her age and a break of seven years from playing after her marriage stands demonic against her selection from the national team.

Initiation and Descent to the Goddess

"Initiation and Descent to the Goddess" is the sixth stage of the heroine's journey. The descent is not an adventurous journey but a compulsory and sacred journey that strengthens the heroine and clarifies her "sense of self." To make this descent to darkness, Murdock explains, "...the woman puts aside her fascination with the intellect and games of the cultural mind, and acquaints herself... with her body, her emotions, her sexuality, her intuition, her images, her values, and her mind" (p. 90). The heroine succumbs to a crisis of some sort in which the new way is insufficient and falls into despair despite of deploying all of her "masculine" strategies.

The point of promotion will be the criterion for selecting Jaya to the national team than of her skills and experience. Considering Jaya has become the talk of the media regarding her selection, the selectors get convinced that Jaya's participation in the world cup will earn a goodwill among the people as well as it motivate other players. The descent gets initiated once the world cup matches start. Jaya was not included in the playing seven and she made to sit as a substitute by

the captain Smita. Match after match, as the team wins and moves on the next rounds Jaya was not given an opportunity to play. It looks as though her hard work and all her sacrifices go in vain. It is the moment filled with “confusion and grief, alienation and disillusion, rage and despair” (p. 88) for Jaya. This is more of a sacred spiritual experience where she remains calm, patient, and continues to be a team player. That’s the reason, when the opportunity knocks at her door in the finals she comes out in flying colours.

The Emergence of the Heroine

Urgent Yearning to Connect with the Feminine

The seventh stage of the journey is ‘Urgent Yearning to Reconnect with the Feminine’, the heroine would like to reclaim the affinity with the feminine and willing to accept her own self. The task of the feminine is to find out “being instead of doing” (p.128). The ‘being’ demands the acceptance of oneself, to remain with oneself and not necessary to ‘do’ to prove oneself. Murdock reiterates the same – “... If I can accept myself as I am, and if in harmony with my surroundings, I have no need to produce, promote, or pollute to be happy. And being is not passive, it takes focused awareness” (p.128).The revival of the new integrated feminine strengthens the heroine transforming a more sensuous being.

The difference that the viewers observe is the absence of big epiphanic moment for Jaya but the emotional resonance reverberates in a subtle form. The happiness she gets after achieving her goal is not only because of the separation of the feminine but because of partially sticking on to the feminine at a distance from the family. As soon as the final match is won, the way Jaya shared joy proves the urge in her to get reconnected with the feminine.

Healing the Mother/Daughter Split

At this juncture, the heroine has to heal the discarded feminine aspects in order to get back the mothering and mothered feelings. The healed relationship of mother and daughter after the split ascertains “by how a woman integrates the archetypal Mother into her psyche, which includes Mother Earth and the cultural view of the feminine” (p.135). The heroine takes pride of her body which was scorned and ridiculed by the matrilineal society. She feels as such “water under the bridge, turbulent at one time but becalmed now” (p.133). The turbulence she mentions here is the repercussion in her life because of the split from the feminine.

In the beginning of Jaya’s journey was only possible because of the separation from feminine but towards the end she has to reconcile with the same feminine in order to mould herself a complete being and to successfully complete her journey. First, the reconciliation happens with her mother breaking the barriers of misconceptions and misunderstandings between them. The mother and daughter understands each other beyond the constructs. The second reconciliation is being feminine without the sacrifice of self-desires. Jaya is a happy woman and no more the damsel of distress.

Healing the Wounded Masculine

The next-to-last stage of the heroine's journey is "Healing the Wounded Masculine" which makes the heroine to realize the optimistic aspects of her masculine nature that strengthened her will to bring her images into fruition, helps her to express her inner truth and assert her authority. The masculine is not gender, it is an archetypal force like feminine, a creative force that exists within both men and women and when it becomes unhealed it will turn out to be "combative, critical and destructive" (p. 156).

Though Jaya is terribly upset and unhappy about the patriarchy that denied her dreams come true but also realizes that without the support of the masculine's good heart nothing would've achieved by her. The masculine trait in her drives along with the masculine of outer world supports her to taste her success of being herself.

Integration of Masculine and Feminine

The final stage of the journey is "Integration of Masculine and Feminine," where the heroine faces the world or future with a new understanding of herself and the world/life. Heroine sees through plurality and can interact with a labyrinthine world that includes her but is larger than her personal lifetime or geographical/cultural environment. The integration of feminine and masculine changes "the consciousness on the planet from one of addiction to suffering, conflict, and domination to a consciousness that recognizes the need for affiliation, healing, balance, and inter-being" (p. 183).

The journey of Jaya Nigam is not an end but a beginning of the next journey because to a woman this is a pilgrimage to learn how to honor and preserve the dignity of all life forms and evolve herself as a whole by the integration of masculine and feminine. The eternal tussle between domestic responsibilities and fulfilling one's dreams that many mothers go through has come to a halt. Jaya is a complete woman now who can balance her responsibilities and dreams and that's how she has become a national icon.

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