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**The Privileged Man and the Subjugated Woman-A Study of Appropriation
in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel***

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ABSTRACT

The patriarchal attitude of Indian society has always made women a puppet in a man's hands. Man is the foremost governing factor who appropriates, exploits, and subjugates women and assigns them a secondary position in the household. Society influences the literature; therefore, the man as the oppressor and the woman as a sufferer became a prevalent theme of the contemporary writer's pen. This paper critically analyses how the men appropriate women in one way or the other in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*. The novel is a mythological retelling of the Indian epic, the Mahabharata, set in the era of the Indian Independence Movement and modern politics. The concept of appropriation of women by Collette Guillaumin has been applied as a theoretical framework. After thoroughly reading the selected text, relevant sentences and passages have been cited as textual evidence. The research findings indicate that the text under study affirms women's appropriation.



KEYWORDS: Patriarchy, Women Appropriation, Women Subjugation, Feminism, *The Great Indian Novel*, Shashi Tharoor

INTRODUCTION

The patriarchal attitude of Indian society has always made women a puppet in a man's hands. It represents a system of social structures and practices in which men are supposed to pull women's strings and selfishly dominate and exploit women to their satisfaction. Patriarchy represents "the rule of the father or the 'patriarch' in a family where the eldest male member- the head of the family- controls his wife, children, other members of the family and slaves" (Bhasin 3). Man, therefore, is the foremost governing factor who appropriates, exploits, and subjugates women and assigns them a secondary position in the household. Since the family is considered the basic unit of society, when the male member is presumed to be the rightful head with authority to control and manage household affairs, 'He' becomes the decision-maker and controls women's labour, production and mobility. As Simone de Beauvoir asserts-

Man can think of himself without a woman. She cannot think of herself without man... she is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her, she is the incidental... he is the subject, he is absolute- she is the other. (Beauvoir 121)

Women, therefore, unconsciously internalise the fact that the absolute authority lies with men, and in this way, the family becomes a place that teaches patriarchy.

Society influences the literature; therefore, the man as the oppressor and the woman as a sufferer became a prevalent theme of the contemporary writer's pen. The majority of literary works inevitably portray women from a man's perspective, and literary studies have been based on the assumption of male characters' centrality. Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is a mythological retelling of the Indian epic, the Mahabharata, set in the era of the Indian Independence Movement and modern politics. Remixing the history lessons that Indians have by-heartened since their schooling days into the storyline of the *Mahabharata*, Tharoor assigns leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, and Subhash Chandra Bose into well-known characters of the epic like Pitamah Bhisma (Gangaji), Dhritarashtra and Pandu. Even the Indian National Congress Party in the novel takes the



shape of the Kaurava Party. However, the roles of female characters in the Great Indian Novel are merely reduced to caring mothers, dutiful wives and obedient daughters. For Tharoor, being a mother who takes care of her husband's children, a wife who dutifully fulfils her husband's demands and a daughter who obediently follows the commands are the characteristics equated with the appropriation of women in the novel. Furthermore, domesticity, understood as taking care of the practical matters of the home and satisfying the needs of others, is another feature of women's appropriation in the selected novel's patriarchal view.

This paper aims to analyse the novel within the framework of the theory of Appropriation by Colette Guillaumin from a feministic perspective and how patriarchy operates in the domestic sphere of Indian culture. The present study will challenge this perspective of viewing the role of women in the selected literary text as secondary and rather claim that female characters are equally important. The novel under study has not been studied from this perspective so far; therefore, it will be a significant addition to the existing criticism.

CONCEPT OF APPROPRIATION

Sexage is a concept from French theorist Colette Guillaumin which refers to how women are appropriated, that is, how ownership to define the needs of men seize their own being and behaviour. From household chores to the labour market, women are undervalued for their work and are given more nominal or no wages than men. Verily, "the exploitation of women is the basis of all thinking about the relations between sex classes, whatever its theoretical orientation" (Guillaumin 179). According to Collette Guillaumin, appropriation is a basic form of women's oppression that renders them objects or commodities. It is not merely about their exploitation at workplaces or households but rather about the physical appropriation, which is "the reduction of women to the state of material objects and which she compares to slavery and serfdom" (Tyson 99). As per Colette Guillaumin's theory of appropriation-

The particular expression of this relation of appropriation (that of the whole group of women, and that of the individual material body of each woman) are- (a) the appropriation of time; (b) the appropriation of the products of the body; (c) the sexual obligation; (d) the physical charge of the disabled members of the group (disabled by age-babies, children, old people-or



illness and infirmity), as well as the healthy members of the group of the male sex" (Guillaumin 181).

The appropriation of time does not specify the timeframe when women have to work or the days when they won't have to work. Also, it does not just concern the wife- instead, all members of the group, like- mother, sisters, and daughters, who have made no individual contract with the male head of the family, ought to contribute to the maintenance and upkeep of his property which includes laundry, taking care of children, preparation of meals, etc. The patriarchal setup assumes women, particularly the wife, as a man's property. The appropriation of women's body products is common in some cultures where male family members sell women's milk. They compel women to go house to house to feed the other's children. It implies man's authority to [mis]use the female body. Also, the kids are considered the property of the men. Women have no say in having the number of children, and the husband ultimately exercises it. Further, the wife must bear all the children that her husband wants to impose on her, and if he exceeds what is convenient for him, he will put all the responsibility on the wife. The sexual obligation of women takes place both in marriage as well as in prostitution. The only difference is that he has to pay, and there's a time limit on man's use of prostitutes. The practice of adultery mostly becomes a ground for divorce on the part of a woman; however, it is not necessarily so in a man's case. This proves that a woman's body does not belong to her but to her husband. Lastly, the physical charge of children and caring for disabled family members or the elderly are women's responsibilities. As Tyson remarks, "... the overwhelming majority of it is done by unpaid female family members or, in some cultures, by unpaid female religious workers, such as nuns" (Tyson 99). Therefore, in a patriarchal society, women are mere social tools assigned to do the tasks that men don't want to do.

ANALYSIS OF THE NOVEL

The novel begins on a discriminatory note, where Ved Vyas, also known as V.V ji, while looking for a person to transcribe his memoir, which unfolds the story of the book, comments-



"Don't talk to me of some weepy woman whose shorthand trips over her finger-nails; give me a man, one of your best, somebody with the constitution and the brains to cope with what I have to offer." (Tharoor 4)

The straightaway dismissal of taking up a woman transcriber just because she is a "woman" and doesn't have the brains to cope shows how women, though physically and mentally equipped to perform on par with men, were still deprived of the opportunity to prove themselves. A similar instance can also be seen further in the novel when VVji proposes the name of Priya Duryodhani for the post of Prime Minister, but everyone rejects her candidature simply because of her gender-

"A woman?"... Imagine, Ganapathi, that was all they found to say; that was the principal objection of the guardians of our nation to the forces of destiny. 'A woman!' they said- as if they were not all born of them. (Tharoor 456)

Women are marginalised through cultural institutions, social customs, and religious rituals. They continue to suffer from gender inequality and are appropriated by men throughout their lives, which is pretty evident from the examples of the female characters in the novel. The first female character we come across in the novel is Satyavati, a fisherman's daughter, who is appropriated based on time as she takes care of her father's house and the household chores. Her physical appropriation (including sexual obligation) is evident when her father, along with his bed, offers her to a sage named Parashar. Even when Parashar wants Satyavati to accompany her as a maidservant, he asks her father for permission-"With your permission, I wish her to accompany me for a short period as my maid" (Tharoor 8) instead of asking Satyavati, for she is thought of as a property of her father. Her father even agrees to send her as a maidservant to the sage without paying any heed to her views. And Satyavati accepts both her father's and the sage's decision, for "obedience was, of course, a duty, and no maiden wished to invite a saintly curse upon her head." (Tharoor 7) Even when she is married to King Shantanu, she is confined to the four walls of the palace, and as a dutiful wife, she gives "a good time and two more sons" (Tharoor 16) to her husband.



Next, we come across three sisters- Amba, Ambika and Ambalika, whom Gangaji seize by force from a royal assembly for his brother Vichitravirya. Although Ambika and Ambalika silently accept their fate, Amba retorts, saying- "I had already given myself, in my heart, to Raja Salva, and he was going to marry me" (Tharoor 21). Hearing this, she is allowed to leave for Saubal, Raja Salva's palace, but this one decision brings a plethora of adversities in her life, where first her lover refuses to take her back, saying-

He carried you away... You've spent God knows how many nights in his damned palace. And now you expect me to forget all that and take you back as my wife?... I'm having your carriage put back on the return train. Go to Ganga and do what he wishes. We're through. (Tharoor 22)

Saddened by her lover's behaviour, when she returns to Vichitravirya, even he refuses to take her back, saying-

The girl's given herself to another man. It was hardly my idea to have her shuttling to and from Saubal by public transport, in full view of the whole world. But it's done; everyone knows about her disgrace by now. (Tharoor 22)

And that is how her one independent decision turns her into "soiled goods", and she is thrown out of both palaces to fend for herself. The fates of her sisters, Ambika and Ambalika, in the royal palace, are not good either since their husband dies soon after the marriage, and they are forced to sleep with V.V. ji, their husband's half-brother, to ensure the production line of the family.

Throughout the novel, the female characters have not been given any independent identity. Instead, their existence is only relative to men, as Gandhari, while putting a bandage on her eyes, mentions-"Your world is mine, and I do not wish to see more of it than you do. It is not fitting that a wife should possess anything more than her husband does." (Tharoor 75) Thus, the only roles of women are to please their men, to be useful to them and to produce children- which is the reason why Gangaji chooses Gandhari as a marriage prospect for Dhritarashtra:



The main attraction of this lovely lady, from our point of view, is that she hails from a most productive line. Her mother had nine children, and her grandmother had seventeen. There is a story in the family that Gandhari has obtained the boon of Lord Shiva to have no less than a hundred sons. (Tharoor 44)

However, when she gives birth to a girl child, her husband's disappointment is quite evident- "Is that all I shall have to show, for the hundred sons you once promised me?" (Tharoor 90) Since she failed to give him a son, her husband shunned and discarded her to a corner of the palace, and her existence meant nothing to him. And eventually, she died waiting for her husband, who never showed up-

Ignored by her husband and daughter lost in mutual consolation... Gandhari was gone, but her dark, devastated pupils spoke of greater suffering and solitude than most of us can endure in a lifetime of the light. (Tharoor 303)

Another female character Kunti Yadav, the wife of Pandu, just like Ambika and Ambalika, is forced by her husband to sleep with other men to give him an heir since he can't do it himself due to his infertility issue-

I really don't mind you sleeping with another man to give me a son... Our mothers slept with their husband's half-brother, Ved Vyas when their husband died to ensure he would be graced with heirs... so you see? You'd just be following a family tradition. You've always done as I asked you to- so go find yourself a good Brahmin and give me a son. (Tharoor 86)

However, when she confides about her past to Pandu and tells him she already has a son out of marriage, he's angry and upset with her-

It was Pandu's turn to register offended astonishment. 'You? Have a son? By whom? When? And how could you talk so glibly of having been faithful to me?' (Tharoor 86)

This behaviour of Pandu shows the double standards of a patriarchal society, where a woman sleeping with someone out of her own free will was not appreciated. Still, it was absolutely okay if a woman was forced by her husband or family to sleep with another man for an heir. It was thought of as a part of family tradition. Kunti obeyed her husband's command and finally produced sons for her husband. Thus she was appropriated based on time, body products, and sexually obligated. She was even given the physical charge of children and



took great care of them, though they were her husband's property. However, when they grew up, she couldn't believe that her sons, the Pandavas, didn't bother much and left her to cope alone-

It's not possible that my five grown and nearly grown sons could be so thoughtless, so selfish, so ungrateful, as to repay all my years of devotion to them by walking out on me like that. Just like their thoughtless, selfish, ungrateful father. Leaving me,' she added bitterly, 'alone'. (Tharoor 375)

And finally, there's Draupadi Mokrasī, the wife of Pandavas, who was appropriated, ill-treated, exploited, neglected, and even ignored by her five husbands, which was pretty evident, but as a dutiful wife, she still chose to remain silent-

I look into the hurt in her eyes and claim it didn't matter. Can I acknowledge the cuts, bruises, and burns I had spotted on her arms and face at each visit to her home and dismiss them, as Kunti did, as minor kitchen mishaps? (Tharoor 541)

In fact, Yudhishtir, the eldest of all the brothers, puts Draupadi at stake, even after becoming slaves to Priya Duryodhani and her clan. And when Draupadi questions him- "How can a fallen husband pledge his wife when he himself is no longer a free man" (Tharoor 548), he chooses not to answer, instead becomes a mute spectator, as Duhshasan strips her in the court-which confirms how women always remains a "man's property" and can be appropriated in whichever way the man likes.

CONCLUSION

Taking the case of the above-mentioned female characters in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, Satyavati, Amba, Ambika, Ambalika, Gandhari, Kunti Yadav, and Draupadi Mokrasī, we find them as women suffering in one way or the other in their respective domestic spheres. They tried to unfathom the reasons for their miserable existence and agonies, making them suffer and reverse their fate by voicing their protests and fighting for their fundamental rights; however, that didn't end their appropriation; instead, their voices were often hushed and silenced by the patriarchal norms within their domestic spheres.

In the case of Satyavati, she doesn't have a say in any of her life decisions, which her father takes for her. On the other hand, in Amba's case, her one independent judgment turns her into



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"soiled goods". The fates of Ambika, Ambalika and Kunti Yadav are similar since all three of them are forced to sleep with other men to ensure an heir to the family. Gandhari- who fails to give birth to a son, is discarded by her husband and thrown into a corner of the palace. And finally, Draupadi, who was appropriated, ill-treated, exploited, neglected, and even ignored by not just one but all of her five husbands, is put at stake, confirming that women will always remain a "man's property" and can be appropriated in whichever way the man likes.

So, no matter how hard these women characters tried to fight against the patriarchal norms imposed on them by a cruel and callous society. They are subjugated and appropriated by male members in the domestic sphere, where episodes of domestic violence and oppression time and again torment these helpless characters. And though they cry and shout for help, their lament is mostly unheard and goes unnoticed.



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