

## Appropriation of Women: A Feministic Reading of Khushwant Singh's *Burial at Sea*

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**Abstract**

Broadly speaking, feministic theories bring to the fore the socio-political, cultural, religious, linguistic and psychological structures that undermine female role in life with the intent of deconstructing them and encouraging the intellectual onslaught against gender discrimination. This paper critically analyses how male-chauvinism in Indian culture 'appropriates' women and how they are treated as commodities in the novel *Burial at Sea* by Khushwant Singh covertly undermines the patriarchy through the creation of a female protagonist who breaks free and becomes self-willed, independent and confident. Colette Guillaumin's concept of appropriation is employed as a theoretical framework to analyze how women are appropriated. Through a close reading of the novel, appropriate sentences and passages are culled to provide textual evidence. The findings of the research suggest that the text understudy affirms women appropriation in Indian culture in one way or the other.

**Keywords:** Khushwant Singh, *Burial at Sea*, Patriarchy, Feminism, Women Appropriation, Female marginality.

## Introduction

The novel *Burial at Sea* starts with the death of Victor Jai Bhagwan, a committed patriotic industrialist who becomes a big tycoon by sheer diligence. He bequeaths all his property to his only daughter Bharti. As per his will, he is to be buried at sea and no religious rites are to be performed. Nobody other than Bharati's aunts, their husbands, children, Ma Durgeshwari, the tantric woman, and her pet tiger Sheroo, and the yoga teacher Swami Dhananjay Maharaj were permitted to enter the yacht to perform the last rites. Victor was the son of Krishan Mattoo Lal who wished to bring up his son as an English aristocrat. He employed an English maid to teach his son English manners. Later he was sent to Eton school and Oxford College in London. Victor returned as a polished gentleman. Motivated by his patriotic feelings, he wanted to westernize India and make it self-sufficient. He set up the industry and the business flourished and within a few years, he had the whole network of industries all over the country. Victor married Jaishree whom he used merely as a sex-toy and never gave her happiness. She bore him a daughter named Bharti. The latter attached too much with her father. Victor bought her a yacht from Europe and named it 'Jal Bharti' after her daughter. When she grows up she takes charge of the business of her father. She assists him and pacifies the situation during hard times brought on by the conspiracies of rival groups. She stands by her father through thick and thin. Victor's life is full of ups and downs until his death. The aim of this paper is to analyze the novel in feministic perspectives or more specifically, as to how patriarchy operates in Indian culture and how women's time and body are appropriated by men. The study will be conducted within the framework of Colette Guillaumin's theory of appropriation. Its basic assumptions will be set as benchmarks against which the novel will be analyzed. The study will also highlight the significance of realization on the part of women of their physical appropriation. The novel understudy has not been studied in this perspective; so this research will be a valuable addition to the existing criticism on the said fiction.

## Patriarchy

The word patriarchy which is frequently used by feminists and writers literally means "the rule of the father or the 'patriarch' in a family where the eldest male is the head of the family and controls his wife, children, other members of the family and slaves" (Kamla, 1994, p.3). According to Gerda Lerner (1993), patriarchy as a cultural phenomenon has roots in the ancient worlds which go back to the time of evolution of man. Over a period of time, it has become a general term to denote male dominance or male-chauvinism in different spheres of life. "It is a system of social structures and practices in which men selfishly dominate and exploit women to their own satisfaction. It can also be said to be an ideology in which men are seen as superior to women, that women are and should be controlled by men and that they are part of men's properties" (pp.3-4). Engels (1884) succinctly referred to it as the earliest system of domination

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 19:2 February 2019

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establishing that it is “the world historical defeat of the female sex.”Patriarchy may be noticed in many parts of the world with more or less differences and more or less similarities owing mainly to the varying variables like political system, culture, religion, and other regional characteristics etc. Family, being the basic unit of society, is said to be patriarchal when the male member is presumed to be the rightful head that has the authority to control and manage household affairs. He is the one who is the decision-maker, controls women’s labor, production and mobility. This has been noted by Kathleen A. Lahey (2002) when she wrote, "Most women procreate and nurture under conditions of such unrelenting male control that it is fair to say that all of the women's reproductive arrangements are subject to some form of patriarchal domination" (p.104). Women unconsciously internalize that the real authority lies with men and in this way family becomes a place that teaches patriarchy. Ways of life, living, routines and the mindset are transmitted to the following generations which become socialized into the patriarchal structures running through the family. Feminist theories have updated and expanded the understanding of Patriarchy in the second half of the twentieth century. A feminist theory typically characterizes Patriarchy “as a social construction, which can be overcome by revealing and critically analyzing its manifestations and institutions” (Tickner, 2001). For many feminists, however, Patriarchy is more than the divide that exists between men and women particularly with regard to the distribution of authority. Feminism considers it an unjust social system where women are oppressed, suppressed and discriminated against. As Carole Pateman (1988) writes, "The patriarchal construction of the difference between masculinity and femininity is the political difference between freedom and subjection" (p.207).

### **Colette Guillaumin’s Concept of Appropriation**

It is generally acknowledged that in various spheres of life, women are the victim of exploitation. From the works related to cuisine to the labor market, they are undervalued for their work and are given meager wages as compared to men. It is also acknowledged by almost everyone that the household chores they usually carry out are unpaid work. In fact, “the exploitation of women is the basis of all thinking about the relations between sex classes, whatever its theoretical orientation” (Guillaumin,1995, p.179). According to Guillaumin(1995), an appropriation is a primary form of women oppression that renders them as an object or commodity. The "appropriation of women's reproductive force" and the control of their bodies and their sexuality comes from radical feminism which is based on the premise that human production that happens in women’s bodies is appropriated and controlled by the male chiefly for his benefits. The male class enforces appropriation. Appropriation is not merely about their exploitation either at workplaces or in their households but it is more about their direct physical appropriation, by which she means “the reduction of women to the state of material objects and which she compares to slavery and serfdom” (Tyson, 2006, p.99). “The particular expression of this relation of appropriation (that of the whole group of women, and that of the individual

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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 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, 1995, p.181). The appropriation of time refers to the marriage contract that does not specify any timeframe for women for which they are to work. It also specifies no holidays on which they won’t have to work. This appropriation of time, however, “does not concern just the wife, but also members of the group of women in general, since, in fact, mothers, sisters, grandmothers, daughters, aunts, etc. who have made no individual contract with the husband, the ‘head of the family’, contribute to the maintenance and upkeep of his property (living or inanimate). The laundry, the care of children, the preparation of meals, etc., are sometimes taken charge of by one of the mothers or sisters of the spouses, by their daughter or daughters, etc” (ibid, p.182). Patriarchal setup presents woman particularly the wife as a property and each man the enjoyment of the class of women as if he has obtained a private ownership. The appropriation of the products of the body is common in some cultures where woman’s milk is literally sold by the male members of the family. It also implies man’s authority to [mis]use the female body. Women who are compelled to go house to house to feed the others’ children is an instance of this appropriation. For example, the decision of having the number of children is exercised by the husband and kids are the property of the male. “The wife must and will bear all the children that her husband wants to impose on her. And if the husband exceeds what is convenient for him, he will put all the responsibility on the wife, who must give him everything that he wants, but only what he wants” (ibid, p.183). The sexual obligation of women occurs both in marriages and the acts of prostitution. The main difference between the two is “...that the time limits are placed on a man’s use of prostitutes, and he must pay for the specific acts he wants” (Tyson, 2006, p.99). Guillaumin (1995) opines that apparently they are deemed as diametrically opposed to each other, but in reality, they confirm each other in their expression of the appropriation of the class of women. “The apparent opposition is based on the intervention or non-intervention of payment, that is, of a measure of this physical usage” (p.184). She also refers to the patriarchal standards of judgment of the same offense committed by a man and a woman. The practice of adultery on the part of a woman mostly becomes a ground for her divorce; in case of man, it is not necessarily so. It means a woman must be well aware that she is appropriated and her husband’s property. It means that her body does not belong to her personally, but to her husband. “A man’s recourse to prostitution is not adultery and is in no way grounds for divorce. It is thus that when a man has a sexual relationship, his body is not considered ‘taken in hand’; rather he keeps the ownership and subsequent freedom of use of it. He can use it freely, sexually or in any other way, outside of the link that he has established with a particular person, ‘his wife’” (ibid, p.185). Lastly, the rearing of children and taking care of the sick or disabled member of a family or the elderly are usually the responsibility of women. And often the households get the services of the paid workers who are

generally women. As Tyson (2006) maintains, "...the overwhelming majority of it is done by unpaid female family members or in some cultures, by unpaid female religious workers, such as nuns" (p.99). These areas of appropriation lead to intensify the disempowerment of women, enhance their marginality and deprive them of a sense of their individuality as well as "...of their independence and autonomy. In short, women are the social tool assigned to those tasks that men don't want to do"(ibid).

## Analysis

Although the novel understudy does not strike as a feminist document at first glance, however, there are some strains of feminist issues which can be explored through research. The novel is set in India where patriarchy dominates and women form a separate, 'other' class that is dependent, oppressed and subordinated. Not to speak of the women from lower, middle and lower-middle strata of society which make the bulk of the population, the elitist households have similar stories to tell. MattooLal household is highly affluent; he is a renowned public figure in India having close ties with celebrities like Mahatma Gandhi. He is one of the few who can afford to send his children abroad for education and who can appoint an English maid to look after them. When his son, Victor, grows up, MattooLal decides that his traditional wife, who lacks etiquettes can't nurture him properly or the way he wants. She is considered a rustic lady who knows nothing about life except for doing household chores and bearing children. In Feminist terms, she is completely appropriated by her husband. She has no voice whatsoever in household affairs. She carries out the routine works tirelessly. Both husband and wife seem to have internalized the patriarchal structures through their families. His wife, in particular, has no knowledge of how she is being objectified let alone launching a protest against her underprivileged status. "Her husband told her she was becoming an embarrassment, so after some time she decided to eat her meals alone" (Singh, 2004, p.13). This, of course, is a worse kind of discrimination in the name of westernizing his son. He employs an English nanny Valerie Bottomley who is to teach Victor the 'civilized' manners. The boy becomes highly meticulous and fluent in the English language in her company in a relatively short time. He is largely kept away from his own mother and this segregation, though not permanent, is an example of the appropriation or control of the product of woman's body, which in this case is Victor himself. Even Bottomley feels it profoundly and she "protested that he (MattooLal) was being unfair to Madam" (ibid, p.15). Later, the decision of MattooLal to send his son to London was purely his own. He did not feel the need for consulting his wife. She was just informed.

Women suffer primarily for their gender and secondarily for other associations. At the level of gender, even the other labels can't save them from oppression. Bottomley's case is quite relevant in this context. She is an English woman but being a nanny working in a patriarchal household, she is likely to suffer from sexual harassment. She is paid for bringing up Victor but

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MattooLal is bent on exploiting her for the only reason that she belongs to the vulnerable, objectified class of women. "...the missionary's daughter (Bottomley) giggled, and Mattoo heaved into her with schoolboy impatience. At forty he had finally realized a childhood fantasy – to fuck a white woman, a gorimem" (ibid, p.16). This is a blatant expression of physical appropriation or woman's sexual obligation. It is not even the case of prostitution, for she is not paid for this. Her duties don't include sex. But she seems to have no option than to yield and let him gratify his urge. In fact, not only her services but her body, too, is appropriated by MattooLal. "Behind his back, his friends described her as Mattoo'srakhail – mistress" (ibid, p.60). 'Rakhail' clearly has a negative and derogatory connotation in Indian culture. The word refers to a woman whose body can be used anytime for any length of time with the complete appropriation of time.

Mattoo's three girls are given a less space in the novel. It is on the cards that the novelist might have deliberately done so in order to invite the readers to plunge the depths of discrimination meted out to women. MattooLal never thought of making any of her daughter educated in some prestigious institutions. He was rather least concerned about their education at all as compared to his son. There is not a single incident in the novel where the girls express a voice either in household matters or the business of their father. They are controlled by a male member and their time and bodies are appropriated by him. Even their marriages are plain affairs. One can't expect from an Elite family to hold wedding ceremonies in so simple a way, but perhaps patriarchy is deeply entrenched in the psyche both of men as well as women. The girls seem not to have realized their subordination. "So in one year the three Mattoo girls got married without many people getting to know" (ibid, p.86).

Patriarchy transmits and the coming generations internalize the patriarchal structures. This can be seen in the case of Victor who more like his father exercises his manly authority despite the fact he studied in renowned institutions like Eton and Oxford. He marries a girl who stays with him for a short time, during which she merely acts as a 'sex object', completely appropriated in terms of time and sexual obligation. All he wants is to use her as a medium to bear him children. "Victor took Jaishree on the night of their marriage. She was barely seventeen and a virgin. She bled profusely but bore the pain without complaining. No words of love were exchanged between them" (ibid, p.89). It seems a pre-requisite for girls to be virgin. In most of the patriarchal societies, girls' virginity decides their marital intactness. Otherwise, it can lead to immediate break-ups. As for men, they are free to have as many extramarital relations as they can afford. As a matter of fact, Victor had slept with a couple of women before his marriage but it made no difference since he was a man – independent, strong and decision-maker. Jaishree died after ten months of her marriage while giving birth to a baby daughter. "He (Victor) had not said a loving word to his wife of ten months (ibid, p.90). His wife too had learned to remain a

passive objectified entity, for “Whenever he was in Shanti Bhavan, he had expected to find her in their bedroom, waiting for him to come in, shut the door, undress and mount her” (ibid, pp.90-91).

The emergence of Bharti, Victor’s daughter, however, shows a marked change in the operations of patriarchy in Mattoo household. She breaks certain preconceived notions of patriarchy by acting and thinking differently. Unlike her grandmother, mother and aunts she becomes more confident, self-willed, involved and independent. Right from the start, she becomes intimately attached to her father. This helps her gain more encouragement and confidence. With her father’s support, she makes herself deeply engrossed in the business spread across the country. Further, her decision not to marry is her own and nobody has the courage to make her change mind. Bharti engages in sexual acts a couple of times with individuals who are far older than her. On both the occasion, it can be observed that it is she who makes advances and tempts them to make love. Not on a single occasion, can she be seen as an oppressed victim?

While taking a yogic lesson, when Swamiji began to measure the distance between her navel and each of her big toes, she complained: “My father told me you measure him from his nipples to his toes. Why this gender difference?” (ibid, p.165). Later, “Without waiting for his response she sat up, took off her blouse, undid the strap of her bra, pulled it off and lay down again” (ibid.). The novelist tacitly assumes that the women of the coming generation in India are very likely to have realized their subordination and physical appropriation by men. They will be determined to deconstruct the existing patriarchal notions and stand out independent, strong and self-willed.

## Conclusion

One of the most striking features of the contemporary literature in English from the Indian subcontinent has been the sprouting of Feminist fiction – feminist not merely in the sense of being created by women but also in terms of giving voice to the pain, desire, and assertions of women in the socially constructed male-dominated institutions. The writers touching on this subject have tried to assess and interpret, overtly or covertly, the onslaughts on women at the altar of patriarchal institutions. The novel *Burial at Sea* by Khushwant Singh is not usually labeled as a feminist work but certain strains of female marginality and objectification can be researched; the part of which has been attempted through this study. Instances of women appropriation in the novel *Burial at Sea* have been explored in the light of Colette Guillaumin’s theory of appropriation. The study reveals that women appropriation occurs in one form or the other in Indian culture where patriarchy dominates. Women feel marginalized even in the elitist households, which confirms the notion that they are a different ‘class’ irrespective of any region, race, creed or social status. Albeit the difference in the intensity and degree of oppression in such families as compared to lower and lower-middle class families, they are nevertheless pushed

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aside as dependent and weak entities. More often than not, they are treated as the property of the male and [mis]used as mere 'objects'. The study also shows the text's covert agenda of empowering women as can be observed in the character of Bharti, the female protagonist, who somehow manages to break the shackles of patriarchy and stands out strong, independent and self-willed. Finally, this study fills an important research gap by giving the text a new angle and new explanation and by analyzing it in the perspective that has not hitherto been touched on.

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