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## Chick Literature as a Feminist Genre: Analysing Patriarchy and Inequality in Bharti Kirchner's Narratives

**M.Vishnu Varathan**

Part-time Research Scholar,  
Department of English  
Jamal Mohamed College, Affiliated to Bharathidasan University  
Trichy-620020  
[vishnuvarathan87@gmail.com](mailto:vishnuvarathan87@gmail.com)

**Dr.Shajahan Sait**

Research Supervisor, Associate Professor of English  
Jamal Mohamed College, Affiliated to Bharathidasan University  
Trichy-620020  
[apmshajahan786@gmail.com](mailto:apmshajahan786@gmail.com)

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### Abstract:

Chick literature is a potent vehicle for feminist discourse because it often emphasises the emotional and professional lives of women. This essay examines Bharti Kirchner's *Sharmila's Book* and *Pastries: A Novel of Desserts and Discoveries* as examples of chick fiction from the perspective of feminist struggle. The Indo-American author Kirchner challenges gender inequity and patriarchal conventions ingrained in both contemporary Western society and traditional Indian culture via her female heroes. The research examines how Sharmila and Sunya establish their identities and individuality while navigating dowry customs, professional competitiveness, and cultural expectations. Kirchner highlights the tenacity of women in overcoming sociocultural hurdles and challenges posed by repressive institutions through their hardships and victories. These stories highlight self-discovery, independence, and empowerment—all important themes in chick literature—and show how women's roles are changing in global situations. This study argues that Kirchner's writings represent chick literature not only as a commercial genre but also as a form of literary activism that challenges and reshapes gender relations, drawing on feminist ideas by authors such as Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan. Ultimately, it demonstrates how chick lit can lend a voice to women's experiences and aspirations, thereby contributing to the broader feminist movement.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Gender Inequality, Feminist Resistance, Dowry System, Female Empowerment, Cultural Identity, Immigrant Experience, Social Transformation

### Introduction

Chick literature, often known as "chick lit," has evolved from its beginnings as humorous fiction that focuses on the lives of young women into a potent storytelling genre that challenges gender norms and critiques patriarchal systems. Chick lit, which was first

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made famous by books like Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* and Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City*, was sometimes written down as escapist or shallow. However, in the last several decades, it has developed into a genre that can tackle important female topics, such as resistance, identity, and autonomy (Faludi, 1991). This change has created space for a variety of perspectives, particularly those of multicultural and diasporic authors, who utilise the genre to address structural injustices and cultural tensions in addition to providing entertainment.

One such author is Indo-American novelist Bharti Kirchner, whose writings significantly contribute to the evolving conversation in chick lit. Kirchner, who was born in Kolkata and grew up in India before moving to the United States, infuses her work with an international perspective. The intricacies of immigrant identity, gender norms, and the balancing act between tradition and modernity are often explored in her work. According to Dr. N. Sumathi (2021), Kirchner emphasises the difficulties South Asian women face in negotiating patriarchal structures in both their home countries and Western cultures through her female characters. Kirchner celebrates the strength and independence of women while criticising restrictive traditions, such as dowries, through figures like Sunya and Sharmila Sen.

*Pastries: A Novel of Desserts and Discoveries* (2003) and *Sharmila's Book* (1999) are two of Kirchner's best-known works in this regard. The main character in *Sharmila's book* is an Indian lady from Chicago, who must deal with the demands of an arranged marriage and the painful realities of her fiancé's past. This novel examines issues of cultural hybridity, personal autonomy, and the tension between family obligations and individual aspirations. Similarly, *Pastries* centres on Sunya, a bakery entrepreneur in Seattle, who must manage intricate personal connections while protecting her company from corporate intrusion. These books serve as excellent examples of how modern chick lit can transcend romantic clichés and delve into feminist issues in depth.

The main themes in Kirchner's stories are identity development, female resistance, gender injustice, and patriarchy. In addition to being essential to heroines' experiences, these themes also reflect the broader societal realities that women in all countries must confront. By opposing outdated traditions, such as dowries, or claiming their professional independence in environments where men dominate, Kirchner's female protagonists fight oppression in various ways. Their experiences tie closely to what Simone de Beauvoir called "the other", in which women find it difficult to claim their subjectivity in a society dominated by males (Beauvoir, 1949). However, Kirchner's heroes actively fight injustice, which sets them apart from the conventional literary depictions of women as helpless victims and makes them representative of feminist resistance.

This study seeks to show how chick literature serves as a vehicle for sociocultural criticism, in addition to being an entertainment medium, by analysing these works from a feminist perspective. By providing a voice to women torn between tradition and modernity, Kirchner's stories advance worldwide feminist conversation by providing a complex representation of empowerment based on individual agency and cultural negotiation.

### **Thematic Analysis**

#### **A. Patriarchy and Gender Inequality**

##### **Dowry System in *Sharmila's Book***

The dowry system, which still exists in both traditional Indian culture and its diasporic offshoots, is one of the most prevalent manifestations of patriarchy in Bharti Kirchner's book. When the heroine, Sharmila Sen, learns that her parents, who have been in the US for decades, plan to provide a dowry for her marriage to Raj, she challenges this long-

standing tradition (Sumathi, 2021). This act demonstrates how patriarchal traditions, based on social expectations and cultural memory, often endure beyond geographic borders. Sharmila questions and fiercely opposes the validity of this practice.

“Why should a man demand money or goods to marry a woman? Why should a woman permit money to measure her worth, especially when the money goes entirely to her husband’s family without a paise for her?” (*Sharmila’s Book*, p. 36).

Her resistance represents a larger feminist criticism of patriarchal institutions' commodification of women. The conflict between generational norms and contemporary aspirations, particularly among immigrant families, is reflected in her parents' fight to maintain antiquated rituals. This disagreement highlights how even well-intentioned parents may unwittingly support gender inequality by adhering to customs that treat women as nothing more than commodities, as Sumathi (2021) points out.

### **Male Dominance in Marriage and Professional Life**

The obligations imposed on women in marriage and the workplace, in addition to dowry, are clear examples of male dominance. The story in *Sharmila’s Book* criticises the power disparity in arranged weddings, where women are supposed to be "flexible, understanding, and selfless", but males often set the conditions (Sumathi, 2021, p. 57).

Sharmila is aware of these uneven processes, as seen in her reflections:

“The husband goes when and where he pleases and does whatever his heart desires. The wife is a support system first, a lover second or may be, a second lover” (*Sharmila’s Book*, p. 220).

This quotation emphasises how women in married relationships are denied agency. Similarly, Sunya in *Pastries* encounters male dominance in both her personal and professional life. She is not consulted when her boyfriend, Roger, makes choices that affect their shared house (Sumathi, 2021). These portrayals demonstrate how patriarchy restricts women's autonomy in various contexts, including at home, in romantic relationships, and in the workplace.

### **B. Female Resistance and Empowerment**

#### **Sharmila’s Bold Stance Against Arranged Marriage Norms**

Sharmila shows herself as a strong opponent of patriarchal conventions. She aggressively questions the roles assigned to her rather than passively accepting them. She is aware of Raj's shortcomings, including his past as a womaniser, despite their premarital relationship (Sumathi, 2021). Because of this insight, she was able to critically assess marriage as an institution rather than simply her spouse.

By asserting her individuality and challenging the fundamentals of arranged marriage, she defies the urge to fit into a romanticised vision of the submissive bride. Her audacity exemplifies the fundamental goal of feminism, as stated by Susan Faludi (1991): “to free women to define themselves instead of having their identity defined for them, time and again, by their culture and their men” (p. 116).

Beyond the personal, Sharmila's refusal becomes a symbolic act of resistance that encourages other women to re-evaluate their positions within patriarchal systems. According to Sumathi (2021), Kirchner makes Sharmila a change agent by using her as a spokesperson to reaffirm women's autonomy.

#### **Sunya’s Fight Against Cartdale in *Pastries***

Another instance of female resistance, this time in a professional setting, is shown in *Pastries* by Sunya's battle against Cakes Plus owner Cartdale. Sunya, who owns a small bakery in Seattle, must protect her company against unfair competition and corporate intrusion. She does not give up, even though she is a woman in a profession dominated by

men. For example, Sunya declined Cartdale's offer to purchase the bakery, saying: "Everything changes. All that I stand for vanishes... No, Dushan, I will not sell my bakery." (*Pastries*, p. 77)

Her will to maintain control over her identity and career is embodied at this moment. Her perseverance is demonstrated by her reluctance to give in to traditional male-dominated business methods, which also serves as a metaphor for the larger fight among women for economic emancipation.

### **Both Protagonists Challenge Societal Expectations**

Through their deeds, Sharmila and Sunya both subvert social norms. Sunya challenges biased preconceptions about women in the workplace, while Sharmila opposes patriarchal marital traditions. Simone de Beauvoir's claim in *The Second Sex* (1949) is reflected in their travels: "To decline to be the other, to refuse to be a party to the deal—this would be for women to renounce all the advantages conferred upon them by their alliance with the superior caste."

Both heroines represent female opposition by rejecting these connections and claiming their individuality.

### **C. Identity Formation in a Transnational Context**

#### **Struggle Between Indian Tradition and American Modernity**

Sharmila and Sunya, both Indo-American women, manage multifaceted identities influenced by two cultures. They continually negotiate between Indian culture and American modernity, living in their nexus. As she battles the beliefs her immigrant parents instilled in her and her own need for autonomy, Sharmila's internal conflict over dowry and arranged marriage is one way this struggle manifests for her (Sumathi, 2021).

Similarly, Sunya represents this composite identity. Despite coming from an immigrant family, she makes a point of being unique in both her career and personal decisions. Although this goes against South Asian women's conventional expectations, her choice to remain unmarried and operate her own company aligns with modern American values of freedom.

#### **Hybrid Identities of Sharmila and Sunya**

According to Homi Bhabha (1994), these characters are prime examples of "hybridity", which is the merging of cultural identities that create fresh, vibrant forms of selfhood. Being in a transitional position, Sharmila and Sunya took strength from both cultures while creating their own identities. They are neither completely Indian nor American. Their hybridity, an intentional attempt to reinterpret oneself beyond strict cultural dichotomies, is not only a result of location. According to Sumathi (2021), Kirchner presents her characters as strong, independent people who fight injustice by drawing on their international experience.

#### **Use of Food and Art as Symbolic Expressions of Autonomy**

Kirchner often compares female liberty to food and art. Sunya's invention of "Sunya cake" in *Pastries* is more than just a culinary breakthrough; it is a declaration of creativity and ownership. She is quite protective about the recipe, saying,

"Secrecy is still the most alluring spice" (*Pastries*, p. 9).

In stark contrast to the patriarchal inclination to deny such ownership, this concealment represents her authority over her economic and creative property. Mughal miniature paintings also serve as symbolic depictions of idealised femininity, as opposed to actual female action, in *Sharmila's Book*. Sharmila is reminded of the passive, ornamental position that women are often required to assume by a painting that depicts a veiled lady wearing a green sari (Sumathi, 2021). However, like the subject in the picture, Sharmila

decides to dig deeper and find her voice again. These symbolic components support the notion that artistic or culinary expressions are potent means of resistance and self-definition.

#### **D. Professional Competition and Economic Independence**

##### **Sunya's Bakery War as a Metaphor for Female Entrepreneurship**

In *Pastries*, Sunya's conflict with Cartdale serves as a potent allegory for female entrepreneurship in a male-dominated capitalist environment. Sunya is portrayed in the novel as a resilient underdog against a bigger, more formidable foe. This reflects the challenges that many female entrepreneurs, particularly those from underrepresented groups, face in the real world. Her court cases and medical examinations serve as metaphors for the additional scrutiny that women often face in the workplace. Kirchner, however, presents Sunya as strong and resourceful, in contrast to numerous tales that show women as victims of institutionalised discrimination. To resist outside influences, she leverages her honesty, high standards of cleanliness, and devoted clientele (Sumathi 2021).

##### **Female Success in Male-Dominated Industries**

Sunya's success in operating a bakery on her own and her refusal to sell out are representative of a larger story of women's accomplishments in traditionally male-dominated fields. Her persona challenges the notion that women are less competent or aspirational in their workplace. Rather, she exhibits leadership, tenacity, and strategic thinking. Sunya's path is quite similar to Betty Friedan's claim in *The Feminine Mystique* (2010) that "the only way for a woman to find herself is by creating a work of her own." Her bakery is more than simply a company; it is an expression of who she is and how independent she is. Furthermore, by turning down Cartdale's offer, Sunya reinforced her dedication to autonomy. She defies the assimilationist pressures that often come with assimilation into Western economic systems by opting to maintain ownership of her business.

#### **Conclusion**

Bharti Kirchner examines the complex relationship between gender inequity and patriarchy in *Sharmila's Book* and *Pastries*, providing a nuanced depiction of female strength and resistance. By rejecting dowries, defying traditional gendered expectations in marriage, or claiming economic independence, both stories demonstrate how women negotiate restrictive social structures. Kirchner's heroes utilise art and cuisine as means of resistance and self-expression, embodying composite identities forged through international experiences. Kirchner's writings serve as excellent examples of how chick fiction has developed into a powerful feminist subgenre. She contributes to the global conversation on gender equality and cultural change by amplifying the voices and experiences of women.

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