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The Interplay of Privilege and Subjugation: A Study of Appropriation in Shashi Tharoor's *'The Great Indian Novel'*

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ABSTRACT

In Indian society, the traditional belief that men are superior has often led to women being controlled and limited in their roles. Men typically hold power in households, using it to control, take advantage of, and dominate women, keeping them in subordinate positions. This societal attitude is reflected in literature, where authors often portray men as oppressors and women as victims. This study examines how men exert control over women in various ways in Shashi Tharoor's book "The Great Indian Novel." The story, which retells the Indian epic Mahabharata against the backdrop of India's struggle for independence and modern politics, serves as the context for this analysis. Using Collette Guillaumin's idea of women's oppression as a guide, this paper looks closely at specific parts of the text to support its arguments. The research confirms that the book indeed highlights the theme of women being controlled and dominated by men.

KEYWORDS: Patriarchy, Women Appropriation, Women Subjugation, Feminism

INTRODUCTION

The patriarchal norms ingrained in Indian society have long treated women as mere puppets in the hands of men, reflecting a social system where men are expected to exert control and exploit women for their own benefit. This system, known as patriarchy, establishes a hierarchical structure where the eldest male member—the patriarch—exercises authority over his wife, children, other family members, and even servants (Bhasin 3).

Consequently, men hold significant power as they appropriate, exploit, and subordinate women, relegating them to secondary roles within the household. Given that the family is viewed as the fundamental unit of society, the male figure assumes the role of the household head, exercising

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control over household matters and decision-making processes. This control extends to managing women's labor, productivity, and freedom of movement. Simone de Beauvoir emphasized –

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's influence on literature has led to a prevalent theme where men are portrayed as oppressors and women as sufferers in many contemporary works. The majority of literary creations often depict women through a male perspective, with studies focusing on male characters' importance. Shashi Tharoor's "The Great Indian Novel" retells the Indian epic Mahabharata against the backdrop of India's struggle for independence and modern politics. Tharoor intertwines historical figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, and Subhash Chandra Bose into recognizable characters from the epic, such as Pitamah Bhisma (Gangaji), Dhritarashtra, and Pandu. The novel even parallels the Indian National Congress Party with the Kaurava Party from the Mahabharata. However, female characters in the novel are largely limited to roles as nurturing mothers, devoted wives, and obedient daughters. Tharoor equates women's appropriation in the novel with these roles—being responsible for caring for children, fulfilling husbands' demands dutifully, and obediently following commands as daughters. Additionally, the novel portrays domesticity as another aspect of women's appropriation, emphasizing women's roles in managing household affairs and meeting others' needs in line with patriarchal views.

This paper seeks to analyze the novel using Colette Guillaumin's theory of Appropriation from a feminist viewpoint and explore how patriarchy influences the domestic realm in Indian society. The study aims to question the traditional view of women's roles in the literary text as secondary and instead argue that female characters hold equal importance. This perspective on the novel has not been explored previously, making it a valuable addition to existing literary criticism.

Sexage, a concept coined by French theorist Colette Guillaumin, delves into the notion of women being appropriated, where men's ownership extends to defining women's needs, thereby controlling their actions and existence. This appropriation manifests across various domains, from household responsibilities to the labor market, resulting in women being undervalued and often receiving

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lower wages or no wages compared to men. Guillaumin emphasizes that the exploitation of women forms the foundation of discussions about gender relations, regardless of the theoretical framework employed (Guillaumin 179).

Guillaumin posits that appropriation represents a fundamental aspect of women's oppression, reducing them to objects or commodities rather than autonomous individuals. This oppression extends beyond workplace or household exploitation; it encompasses physical appropriation, likened to forms of slavery or serfdom (Tyson 99). According to Guillaumin's theory of appropriation, key expressions of this relationship include (a) controlling women's time; (b) appropriating products derived from women's bodies; (c) imposing sexual obligations; and (d) bearing the physical burdens of caregiving for dependent individuals within the female group, such as children, elderly, or infirm members, alongside healthy males (Guillaumin 181).

The appropriation of time involves dictating when women must work and when they are granted time off, impacting not just wives but also other female family members like mothers, sisters, and daughters. These women, despite lacking individual contracts with the male head of the family, are expected to contribute to maintaining and managing his property, including tasks like laundry, childcare, and meal preparation. This setup within patriarchal systems views women, especially wives, as possessions of men.

The appropriation of women's bodily products is evident in certain cultures where male family members sell women's milk and compel them to nurse other children in neighboring households. This practice highlights men's control over and exploitation of the female body. Moreover, children are often viewed as men's possessions, with women having no say in determining family size or bearing children. Husbands make these decisions unilaterally, burdening wives with responsibilities, even if it becomes overwhelming for them.

Women's sexual obligations extend to both marital duties and participation in prostitution, where the main difference lies in payment and time constraints within the latter. Adultery is often more severely punished when committed by women compared to men, emphasizing the notion that women's bodies are considered the property of their husbands.

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Furthermore, the physical care of children, disabled family members, or elderly relatives primarily falls on women's shoulders in patriarchal setups. As noted by Tyson, this caregiving work is mostly unpaid and performed by female family members or religious figures like nuns in certain cultures. Consequently, in patriarchal societies, women are relegated to roles as social tools, expected to fulfill tasks deemed undesirable by men.

The novel opens with a discriminatory tone as Ved Vyas, also referred to as V.V. ji, searches for someone to transcribe his memoir recounting the book's story. During this search, he makes the following comment:

"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 immediate rejection of considering a woman as a transcriber solely based on her gender and the assumption that she lacks the intelligence to handle the task highlights the societal bias against women. Despite being physically and mentally capable of performing at the same level as men, women were often denied opportunities to showcase their abilities. This bias is further evident in the novel when V.V. ji suggests Priya Duryodhani as a candidate for the position of Prime Minister, only for her candidacy to be dismissed solely due to 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 in the novel are marginalized by cultural norms, societal traditions, and religious practices, perpetuating gender inequality and subjecting them to appropriation by men throughout their lives. This is evident in the portrayal of female characters in the story.

The first female character introduced in the novel is Satyavati, a fisherman's daughter, whose life exemplifies various forms of appropriation. She is primarily appropriated in terms of time, as she takes on the responsibilities of managing her father's household and performing household chores.

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Satyavati's physical appropriation, including sexual expectations, becomes evident when her father, without consulting her, offers her to the sage Parashar along with his bed. Even when Parashar requests Satyavati to accompany him as a maidservant, he seeks permission from her father rather than directly involving her in the decision-making process, highlighting her perceived status as her father's property. Despite her father's decision, Satyavati accepts her fate without voicing her own desires, as disobedience was considered a grave offense, and maidens were expected to comply with authority to avoid curses.

After her marriage to King Shantanu, Satyavati's life continues within the confines of the palace walls, fulfilling her role as a dutiful wife by bearing children for her husband. Her compliance and obedience to societal expectations further emphasize the societal norms that restrict women's autonomy and agency, reinforcing the theme of appropriation and subjugation throughout the narrative.

Next in the narrative are three sisters: Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika, who are forcefully taken by Gangaji to be wedded to his brother Vichitravirya. While Ambika and Ambalika resign themselves to their fate without protest, Amba boldly asserts her previous commitment to Raja Salva, stating”
"I had already given myself, in my heart, to Raja Salva, and he was going to marry me"
(Tharoor 21).

Despite her plea, she is allowed to depart for Saubal, Raja Salva's palace. However, this decision sets off a series of hardships in her life, beginning with her lover's refusal to accept her back, stating:
He responds harshly, pointing out that she had willingly spent numerous nights in her lover's palace and now expects him to overlook that and accept her back as his wife. He decides to send her away on the return train, ending their relationship definitively (Tharoor 22).

Disheartened by her lover's rejection, Amba returns to Vichitravirya, hoping for acceptance, but even he refuses to take her back. He acknowledges her actions publicly, leading to her social disgrace and ostracism: "The girl's given herself to another man... everyone knows about her disgrace by now" (Tharoor 22).

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Thus, Amba's independent decision results in her being rejected by both men, leaving her marginalized and abandoned.The fate of her sisters, Ambika and Ambalika, within the royal palace is also bleak. Their husband's untimely death forces them into a situation where they are compelled to engage in sexual relations with V.V. ji, their husband's half-brother, to ensure the lineage's continuity and family legacy. This portrayal underscores the societal pressures and constraints placed upon women in patriarchal societies, where their autonomy and choices are often disregarded for the sake of societal expectations and familial obligations.

Throughout the novel, female characters are portrayed without independent identities, existing solely in relation to men. This lack of individual agency is exemplified by Gandhari, who, while blindfolding herself, expresses, "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).

This sentiment encapsulates the societal expectations placed on women to limit themselves to roles that please and serve men, primarily focused on fulfilling their needs and bearing children. Gangaji's selection of Gandhari as a bride for Dhritarashtra underscores this perspective, emphasizing her value solely based on her potential to produce offspring: "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).

This narrative reinforces the societal expectation that a woman's worth lies primarily in her ability to bear children, reinforcing their secondary status in relation to men.

However, when Gandhari gives birth to a girl child, her husband's disappointment becomes palpable: "Is that all I shall have to show, for the hundred sons you once promised me?" (Tharoor 90).

Failing to fulfill his desire for a son, Dhritarashtra ostracizes Gandhari, relegating her to a neglected corner of the palace, where her existence holds no value in his eyes. Eventually, she passes away in solitude, abandoned by her husband and finding solace only in her daughter: "Ignored by her husband and daughter lost in mutual consolation... Gandhari was gone, but her dark, devastated

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pupils spoke of greater suffering and solitude than most of us can endure in a lifetime of the light" (Tharoor 303).

Similarly, another female character, Kunti Yadav, the wife of Pandu, faces a similar fate to Ambika and Ambalika. Pandu, due to his infertility issues, compels Kunti to engage in relationships with other men to conceive an heir, highlighting the societal pressures and expectations placed on women to fulfill male-centric desires and lineage continuity.

"I really don't mind you sleeping with another man to give me a son," Pandu tells Kunti, citing the family tradition where women had done so in the past to ensure the family line continues. He urges her to find a suitable Brahmin and fulfill this expectation (Tharoor 86). However, when Kunti reveals that she already has a son from a previous relationship, Pandu reacts with anger and disbelief, questioning her faithfulness and expressing offense (Tharoor 86). This reaction exposes the double standards prevalent in a patriarchal society, where a woman's autonomy and choices are disregarded unless they align with male desires or family expectations.

Kunti complies with Pandu's wishes and bears sons for him, thus becoming appropriated in terms of time, bodily products, and sexual obligation. She also takes on the responsibility of caring for her children diligently, despite them being viewed as her husband's property. However, as her sons grow up, Kunti feels abandoned and unappreciated, lamenting their thoughtlessness and ingratitude, which echoes her sentiments toward her husband, Pandu, whom she perceives as selfish and ungrateful (Tharoor 375). This portrayal highlights the emotional and social challenges faced by women in patriarchal setups, where their sacrifices and devotion are often taken for granted or overlooked by the very individuals they serve and nurture.

Draupadi Mokrasi, the wife of the Pandavas, endures appropriation, mistreatment, exploitation, neglect, and even ignorance from her five husbands, which is evident to those around her. Despite this, she maintains a dutiful silence, masking her pain and suffering. The narrator questions whether he can ignore the visible signs of Draupadi's distress, such as cuts, bruises, and burns, and dismiss them as insignificant, akin to how Kunti downplays injuries as minor kitchen accidents (Tharoor 541).

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One glaring instance of Draupadi's mistreatment occurs when Yudhishtir, the eldest Pandava brother, puts her at stake in a game of chance, even after the Pandavas become slaves to Priya Duryodhani and her clan. When Draupadi confronts Yudhishtir about this betrayal, questioning how a husband who has lost his freedom can wager his wife, he remains silent, refusing to acknowledge her plea. This silence extends to the public humiliation in court, where Duhshasan strips Draupadi, emphasizing the idea that women are viewed as men's property and can be appropriated or exploited at will by men (Tharoor 548). This stark portrayal underscores the power dynamics and gender inequalities prevalent in society, where women's voices and rights are often disregarded or silenced in favor of patriarchal norms and male dominance.

CONCLUSION

The female characters in Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel, including Satyavati, Amba, Ambika, Ambalika, Gandhari, Kunti Yadav, and Draupadi Mokrasi, depict the struggles of women within their domestic spheres. They grapple with the reasons behind their suffering and try to challenge their fate by speaking out and fighting for their rights. However, their efforts are often stifled by the patriarchal norms ingrained in their households.

Satyavati's life decisions are made for her by her father, leaving her without agency or control. Amba's independent choice leads to her societal ostracization and labeling as "soiled goods." Similarly, Ambika, Ambalika, and Kunti Yadav are coerced into relationships with other men to ensure the continuation of the family lineage.

Gandhari faces rejection and neglect from her husband when she fails to produce a son, relegating her to a marginalized existence within the palace. Draupadi experiences extreme mistreatment, exploitation, and neglect from all five of her husbands, culminating in a public humiliation that underscores women's status as possessions of men.

Despite their efforts to resist patriarchal oppression, these women remain subjugated and appropriated by male authority figures within their domestic environments. Instances of domestic violence and oppression further highlight their struggles, with their cries for help often going unheard and ignored. Ultimately, these characters reflect the pervasive influence of gender inequality and male dominance within Indian society, particularly within the confines of the home.

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