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Patriarchy and Inequality in Bharti Kirchner's *Sharmila's Book and Pastries: A Novel of Desserts and Discoveries*

Dr. N. Sumathi

Assistant Professor of English

St. Mary's College (Autonomous)

Thoothukudi, India

Email Id: sumathijrj17@gmail.com

ORCID id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5021-8540>

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Abstract

Literature produced by men was a prejudiced one and focused mainly on the might of men and feebleness of female members. This was resisted by women writers and they started shattering the prejudiced views of men and gave a proper solution to it. Moreover, they violated the sanctities of women as mere service renders and broke the stereotyped images of women as the classical Sita or Kannagi who were projected as submissive partners having no identity of their own. It is only through the writings of women writers, the real identity of the women was recognized and they became equal partners at home and in the society. This awakening was highly instrumental in turning the dark pages of the history of literature and spread brightness and happiness everywhere. At present, gender inequality has gained global attraction and this has resulted in the production of vast literature.

Keywords: Disparity, Inequality, Discourse, Potentiality, Survival

Women's education has started raising questions on the issues of gender disparity in the male oriented society. The traditional patriarchal system in the humanitarian sector gets shattered due to the booming growth of women. The U. N woman Goodwill ambassador Emma Watson at a special event for the He For She campaign, United States observes that both men and women should enjoy freedom to be strong. She also says that gender should be considered as a spectrum not as two opposing ideals. The present paper explores how women challenge men in social, cultural and economic spheres and contribute to the gender transformation. This spotlight on gender issues has great impact on the structural and behavioral patterns of the social actors. The very system of patriarchy remains not only a great barrier to women's development but also proves an inhuman activity. In a journal article "Patriarchy and Inequality: Towards a Substantive Feminism" Mary Becker defines:

Patriarchy is a social structure, not a conspiracy among men. It is not always intentional; men need not intend to oppress women. Men too are subject to the enormous pressures of a social system that creates paths of least resistance consistent with patriarchy, such as going along with the locker room chatter about babes. Men as well as women are damaged by patriarchy. For example, masculine men are hurt when they learn to repress emotions and to deny their needs for connection and intimacy in order to avoid being punished as sissies and to maintain the control necessary to protect themselves from other men. (30)

Patriarchy curtails disciplined human action and this contributes to social injustice. It intrudes in the socio, political life of the female members and crushes their freedom and thereby breaks up their peaceful life. Moreover, it shakes the very foundation of their educational system and denies the fruits of wisdom. This defies their participatory and enthusiastic roles in political and social life. Bharti Kirchner, the reputed Indo American novelist explores how women can withstand the hardships of their personal and professional lives in her second novel *Sharmila's Book* and her fourth novel *Pastries: A Novel of Desserts and Discoveries*. This paper focuses on two particular aspects of gender inequality: social evil of dowry and professional competition.

The protagonist, Sharmila Sen, a Chicago – born graphic artist and aerobics instructor in Bharti Kirchner's second novel *Sharmila's Book* is a strong character whose modern thinking and whole expectations to get a full-fledged married life is in jeopardy as she envisions mysteries around Raj, her future husband and suspicions about his first wife, Roopa's death. She is a by-product of Indian and American cultures which help her develop an entirely different personality which is cemented by her traditional Indian life and American freedom and equality. Her premarital affair with Raj does not blind her to see his weakness as a womanizer. The narrator's feminine consciousness evokes an awakening in the minds of the women to better female members to face the challenges of the male oriented society. Bharti Kirchner uses Sharmila as her mouthpiece to echo the autonomy of women thus:

... But I'm beginning to wonder if this is going to be a typical Indian marriage. One where the package delivered to the door, expected to be there, always flexible,

understanding and selfless. 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...If this marriage wasn't arranged, I believe you'd be eager to nurture our love. You'd be here more. (Sharmila's Book 220)

The female protagonist, Sunyain Bharti Kirchner's fourth novel *Pastries: A Novel of Desserts and Discoveries* runs a Seattle bakery which is famous for Sunya cake amidst a lot of challenges from the patriarchal society. Despite being a small business owner, she is able to survive in Seattle because of her great spirit. Sunya denies revealing the recipe saying, "Secrecy is still the most alluring spice" (9). Though Sunya runs a small bakery Pastries, it has no equal in Seattle. She establishes an identity of her own in her immigrant land. In spite of being a woman, she stands courageous to encounter the bakery war. The bakery war between Pastries and Cakes Plus forms the plotline of the novel. She feels that she can create an identity for herself by being successful as a professional. Betty Friedan, the feminist comments in her work "The Feminine Mystique" that the only way for a woman to find herself is by creating a work of her own. Sunya too has a unique contribution by making Sunya cake whose recipe is not known to anyone. From the onset, the bakery war between Pastries and Cakes Plus leads to never ending economic and psychic troubles.

Social resistance in *Sharmila's Book* occurs when Sharmila resists towards the practice of dowry. As a typical Indian novelist, Bharti Kirchner's acute awareness of the social evil of dowry has been satirized in her narrative. Sharmila's bold attempt to attack this evil practice proves her feminine consciousness. Her fierce argumentative conversation with her father brings an ideal image of women. She stands as an epitome of a powerful woman who fights for the liberation of women from the shackles of this beastlike convention.

Sharmila's social awareness is exposed when she needs more room to breathe her real self. She contemplates on the marketing attitude of men in matchmaking. Her parents work hard to save fifty thousand dollars sacrificing simple pleasures of life. A glimpse of her inward refusal of dowry is as follows:

How could my parents pay a dowry knowing how I feel about that custom. It's as though I've been lashed three times: this story of the early sacrifices of my parents, the substantial amount they have saved the very fact that there is a dowry. Even after living in the States for all these years, they can't let go of the old customs. They'd like to mould my needs and wants to the expectations of what to me is antiquated, unfamiliar culture. Really, how much they love me! But I can't live a life based on a system that is unacceptable to me... So my price is fifty thousand dollars? (Sharmila's Book 243)

Economic resistance arises when the means of production is affected. In *Pastries*, the clash between Sunya, the proprietor of Pastries and Cartdale, the owner of Cakes Plus and her competitor is a struggle for the production of healthy food and survival. Sunya's valiant discourse to fight against the male entrepreneurs is commendable. Her commanding tone proves her inner strength. Again Dushan, her mother's would be speaks forcibly to make Sunya yield to the plot of Cartdale. He points out the rare chances of winning Cartdale who

has promised to give an executive position to the food reporter Donald J. Smith who would not make even a single negative remark about Cakes Plus. Kirchner has interwoven a conflict between two individuals who struggle to get success in business. This conflict runs throughout the novel. The resolution for the conflict is given only towards the end of the novel.

Sunya's combat with Cakes Plus run by Cartdale is expressed through her legal ventures to throw light on the negative aspects of Cakes Plus. She tries to point out all the health hazards that have crept in Cakes Plus. She seems to be aware of what is happening in the society. Her love for the society makes her rebel against Cakes Plus. The food inspector Irene Brown is an honest and the toughest health inspector the city has employed. Everyone was afraid of her especially the restaurant owners. Once Irene Brown eyed a minor food violation in Pastries that Jill, the new baker lifted a tuile cone without the assistance of transparent bakery paper. Since then she never repeated that sin. For the past two years, Sunya has received a clean bill of health from Irene. Cleanliness and food safety were the primary concerns of Irene Brown.

Sunya though caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, neither yields to the temptations of Dushan who influences her to give up fighting with Cartdale nor backs out from her baking business. She tries to face the war with her indomitable spirit. The famous feminist Simon de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* observes:

At present time, when women are beginning to take part in the affairs of the world, it is still a world that belongs to men_ they have no doubt of it at all and women have scarcely any. 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, (6)

Though the food phenomenon poses a threat to her, she smiles with courage. Cartdale's cunningness is expounded through his past business deals. He used to buy many shops. Cartdale explains how Sunya will be benefitted by accepting Cartdale's offer. Sunya can retain her position in the bakery along with her bakers and no possible changes will be made on the bakery. He is willing to settle all the bank loans of Sunya. Only when Sunya wants to desert the bakery, Cartdale will convert it into Cakes Plus. Sunya is ready to sell her Pastries on the street whereas she won't give up her pastries. Her inflexibility is defined in the following lines:

Everything changes. All that I stand for vanishes. I may not have inherited my mother's sweet disposition. Dushan, but I've got her tenacity and independence. She fought and fought to keep her doughnut shop against bigger outfits. I'll fight Cartdale the same way. No, Dushan, I will not sell my bakery. (*Pastries*77)

Sunya's bold stare reveals her stand to dispute with Cakes Plus. Her time is not favourable to her for the health inspector Irene Brown is on her vacation and unable to bring to light, the unhygienic conditions of Cakes Plus.

Bharti Kirchner uses feminine discourse of resistance through symbolic images. As a Bengali, Kirchner makes frequent references to paintings in her novels. The Mughal

miniature in Mrs. Khosla, Sharmila's mother-in-law's apartment shows a maiden clad in green sari and beautiful jewellery blushes through her veil. This painting is symbolic of how a woman is expected to be humble in the house of Mrs. Khosla. The painting of Mughal princess serves as the icon of the inner thought process. Like the Mughal princess, she will also be feminine and romantic. The Mughal painting which is a gift from Mrs. Khosla's mother serves as a reminder and a warning signal to her. She doubts as to whether her parents have given dowry without her knowledge. The narrator's discourse has an intentional dimension. It is clearly evident through a detailed description of the Indian practice of dowry. The gender bias grounded on dowry affirms the growing need for the equality of woman in the male domineering society. Sharmila's resistance against the very practice of dowry sounds unique. "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? (S B 36). The patriarchal society picturized by Bharti Kirchner is self-centered and weak. Contrary to the male members, her female characters remain strong and emancipate themselves from the enslaving attitude of the male gender.

Sunya and Roger, her Japanese boyfriend though living together, were separated in many aspects. Roger's self-decision making made Sunya realize that he was trying to manipulate her. Sunya always craved for equality. While he purchased cars, he never consulted with her. Sunya, the modern American woman pined for equality in each and everything. Despite his studies in France and wide travel, Roger takes all the decisions which are not liked by Sunya. Her statement that the young American women are tough to be pleased makes Sunya irritated. In turn, she turns to reply that women do not exist only to please men. Roger made a lot of interior alterations in the house. His change of colour for the walls and diagonal arrangement of the furniture reveal his independent actions. Sunya after being disjointed from Roger feels quite relieved for it. She is able to rediscover herself. Susan Faludi, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist in his *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* says,

Feminism asks the world to recognize at long last that women aren't decorative ornaments, worthy vessels, members of a "special-interest group". They are half (in fact, now more than half) of the national population, and just as deserving of rights and opportunities, just as capable of participating in the world's events, as the other half. Feminism's agenda is basic. It asks that women not to be forced to "choose between public justice and private happiness. It asks that women be free to define themselves instead of having their identity defined for them, time and again, by their culture and their men. (116)

As Plato believed, women possess natural capacities equal to men. Men should understand this and respect their partners. When men give due respect to the female members and women too realize their potentiality, feminism will run even in the veins of men. The task of the feminists will be quite easy when women are honoured in the society. The very system of patriarchy will be rooted out and inequality will disappear like the bubbles.

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