



# Appropriation and Sexual Obligation: A Feminist Reading of Khushwant Singh's *The Company of Women*

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**Abstract**— *The patriarchal perspective has continually made women a puppet in a man's hands. The male society assigns women a secondary position in the household. So, man becomes the principal governing factor that appropriates and subjugates women. This paper critically analyses how the men appropriate and sexually obligate women in one way or the other in Khushwant Singh's The Company of Women. Published in 1999, it is Khushwant Singh's fourth novel. It presents the episodes of appropriation and sexual obligation of women- ranging from an Afro-American teenager to a Bai in Bombay by the narrator. The concept of Appropriation of Women by Collette Guillaumin has been applied as a theoretical framework. After a thorough reading of the selected text, relevant sentences and passages have been cited as textual evidence. The research findings indicate that the text understudy affirms the appropriation and sexual obligation of women.*

**Keywords**— *Patriarchy, Women Appropriation, Sexual Obligation, Feminism, The Company of Women, Khushwant Singh*



## I. INTRODUCTION

The novel is about Mohan Kumar- a brilliant student who gets a full scholarship at Princeton University. Once in the United States, he is introduced to life's carnal pleasures, and he loses his virginity to Jessica Browne, an Afro-American teenager. Soon, he rises to prominence for having the seemingly largest organ on the campus, attracting many women to his bed. But, he remembers none except Yasmeen Wanchoo, a Pakistani lady who helped him experience how to lucratively quench older women who presumably lust after fine young men.

Upon his arrival to India, after graduating, he is nudged to tie the knot to a woman he barely knows. But he overlooks everything over his pressing desire to have sex, which is only possible after marriage in India. Unfortunately, he realises that his wife is cold and irritable, which gives him an even better reason to look for sex outside the marriage because he believes that "occasional adultery... did not destroy a marriage" (Singh 7). Since he feels no commitment to his wife, his marriage ends badly

after almost thirteen years. After the divorce, although he is relieved, loneliness leads him to sexual romps with his maid Dhanno. He, in fact, ends up advertising in newspapers for paid women companions to share his bed.

Convinced that "lust is the true foundation of love", Mohan begins his journey of unbridled sexuality in the company of some remarkable women, such as Sarojini Bhardawaj, the timid professor from small-town Haryana; Molly Gomes, the free-spirited masseuse from Goa, and Susanthika Goonatilleke- the seductress from Sri Lanka. Although the story offers a few dramatic turns, such as divorce or the unexpected death of Mohan, what lies underneath is how Mohan Kumar successfully appropriates the women associated with him- be it his wife Sonu, who takes responsibility for his children after divorce, his maid Dhanno-who provides sexual pleasures to Mohan in the absence of his wife and other women, even the live-in female companions like Sarojini Bhardawaj and Molly Gomes who ensure the proper functioning of the household

during their stay and his secretary, Vimila Sharma, who stays by his side on his death bed.

## II. COLETTE GUILLAUMIN'S THEORY OF APPROPRIATION

Appropriation of women is a fundamental form of women subjugation that renders them an object or commodity. There is no denying that women appropriation occurs in one form or another in every culture where patriarchy dominates. In the words of Euripides from *Medea*, "Of all creatures that have breath and sensation, women are the most unfortunate." (Euripides 24) Women feel marginalised even in elitist households, confirming that they are a different 'class' irrespective of religion, race, caste, or social status. Although there is a difference in the intensity or degree of oppression, exploitation, and appropriation in such families compared to lower-middle-class families, they are nevertheless pushed aside as dependent and weak entities. Simply put, women are treated as males' property and [mis]used as mere 'objects'. As per Colette Guillaumin's Feministic theory of appropriation-

The particular expression of this relation of appropriation 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, and the healthy members of the male sex. (Guillaumin 181)

The concept of appropriation of time refers to the marriage contract that does not specify the timeframe for women when they have to work or holidays when they do not have to work. Moreover, this does not concern just the wife but all the group members in general, like mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers, etc., who contribute to the maintenance and upkeep of the husband or the head of the family's property. The appropriation of body products refers to the authority of the male over the female body. For instance, in some cultures, a woman's milk is sold by the male members of the family, women don't have a say in the decision to have children, and though the mother bears the pain of bringing a child into the world, that child is considered a man's property. Sexual obligation occurs both in marriage as well as in prostitution. M. Ageyev, in *Novel with Cocaine*, writes, "... if womankind banded together and took the male path- the world would turn into a huge brothel." (Ageyev 104) The fundamental difference is that there is a time limit for a man's use of prostitutes, and he pays for it. On the other hand, a woman is not expected to commit adultery since she is appropriated, so her body does not belong to her. Instead, it belongs to her husband, so we

do not have male prostitutes in society. Lastly, the physical charge of elderly, disabled or healthy members of the male sex is burdened on the women since she is appropriated, thus expected to do all the tasks that men do not want to do.

### Analysis of the Novel

Mohan Kumar is a motherless child whose mother died giving birth to him and leaving a void - "I never knew a mother's love for her son; I have heard that it is a very special love, more so if the son is also the firstborn. Perhaps." (Singh 67) This absence of a wife and a mother made them dependent on the other women: "... a wet nurse from Agra to breastfeed me for six months... My dead mother's unmarried sister looked after me for two years." (Singh 67) His father even arranged for a maidservant who used to look after Mohan in his absence-

"...she kept an eye on me as I played with the neighbour's children. Sometimes when I was alone and if I pestered her enough, she would lift the kameez to her neck and let me suck her breasts." (Singh 67)

The first instances of women appropriation can be seen right in his childhood as his father burdened the responsibility of Mohan and household chores to his sister-in-law, who does not necessarily have to look after her sister's family. Still, Mohan's father and Mohan appropriate her based on time in exchange for nothing compared to the wet nurse, who at least got a monetary benefit. And then there is the maidservant, whom Mohan persuades to feed her breastmilk and thus appropriates her body products, even though she's not being paid for it.

When the hunt for a suitable bride for Mohan begins, the father-son duo is invited for tea or soft drinks and introduced to nubile virgin girls, which shows how a great emphasis is put on the virginity of an unmarried woman. Even Mohan, who wasn't a virgin himself, was glad he could get sex on a tap from a "virgin eager to opt out of virginity" (Singh 4). One of the main reasons why he accepted to marry Sonu was because he was thrilled about the idea of deflowering her-

She was almost certain to be a virgin and looked the kind who might resent my not being one... Ultimately, I was fantasising about deflowering Sonu, the haughty little memsahib, and having her in bed whenever I wanted to, that made me decide in favour of accepting the offer. (Singh 109)

After marriage, they go on a two-week Honeymoon trip that ends abruptly as Sonu misses her

periods. She was a mere twenty-one and pregnant, and when she questions Mohan about not using a condom, he casually replies, "You didn't ask me to; I didn't take any with me... In any case, if you don't want a child, you can have it aborted." (Singh 129) Instead of apologising to his wife, Mohan blames her for not taking proper precautions. He doesn't even ask her about her pregnancy decision and suggests that she can get the unwanted pregnancy aborted without even considering her health. This is another example of women appropriation, where men force any number of children they want on their wives. And women are expected to accept and deal with their husband's decisions silently.

Even after the birth of his child, while his wife is busy caring for his son, Mohan sexually obligates Mary Joseph, his child's day nurse. "Mary Joseph came to say goodnight to me. I don't know what came over me. I took her in my arms and kissed her passionately." (Singh 139) But Mary doesn't resist or complain as she is left with no other option than to sexually satisfy her master as she wouldn't want to dismiss or anger him, so she complies with Mohan's whims and fancies. Such extramarital liaisons of Mohan with other women become the grounds for his divorce.

After his divorce, due to loneliness, he ends up advertising in newspapers for paid lady companions to share his bed. While waiting for the response to his advertisement, he establishes a sexual relationship with his maidservant, Dhanno. Although Dhanno was not the kind of companion he had advertised, as long as mental and emotional companionship was not available, "it was as good a substitute as any that a man could want." (Singh 19) Mohan appropriated her sexually as she was just a sweeper woman, and though catering to her master's sexual needs was not a part of her job, she submitted to his lust in exchange for some money.

The first woman who responds to his advertisement is Sarojini Bharadwaj- a divorced college professor from Haryana. She was trapped in a fraudulent marriage to an NRI who married her for dowry and got all the sex he wanted for fifteen days, later abandoning her with an unwanted child. By the time she realises she is pregnant, it is too late, and thus, she is forced to lead a miserable life alone. Her sexual obligation doesn't end with her husband. She even feels sexually obligated to Mohan. Although she got into live-in with Mohan on a mutual understanding, when he asks her to spend one last night with him before her departure, she accepts his request, "As you wish, I have a lot owing to you". After all, she had been given a full payment for her stay in advance. So, she felt obligated to

provide him with sexual pleasure for one last time before she left.

After Sarojini, Mohan takes up two more female companions, Molly Gomes from Goa and Susanthika from Srilanka. Both of these women are victims of child sexual abuse. The chapters reveal how Molly and Susanthika were exposed to sex at quite an early age by one of the male members of their respective families, which eventually resulted in a traumatic life experience. As Molly describes, "It was my own uncle, my mother's younger brother, a good twenty years older than me. Beast! Took advantage of poor, innocent me." (Singh 180) Just like Molly, even Susanthika shared the incident of how she lost her virginity to one of the male relatives-

I was sixteen. Nothing romantic about the deflowering. My own uncle, my father's younger brother. The usual thing, you know, a close relative whom you trust. It seemed harmless enough at first-kissing and cuddling, that sort of thing. Then he thought /he'd got me worked up and started playing with my breasts and stroking my crotch. I got frantic, and before I knew it, he had me under him on the floor and tore into me. I almost told my parents but held back because I realised I had led him on. (Singh 208)

Molly and Susanthika believed that they had led their uncles on, which is why, despite no real fault of theirs, they could not even tell their parents and thought they were sexually obligated to fulfil the sexual demands of their uncles. This also reflects how men consider young girls and women in the family their property that can be exploited or appropriated in whichever way they want. Even Mohan, who met Susanthika a few days ago, soon found his way to her bed.

Post Susanthika's departure, Mohan's appetite for women takes a steep dip, and it is on one of his business trips to Mumbai that Mohan takes out a hundred-rupee note and hands it over to the bearer as a tip and asks- "Can you get me a woman? ... Anything. Five hundred to a thousand." (Singh 220) The bearer gets him a woman who caters to Mohan's needs and charges him a thousand bucks. It was a cheap deal for Mohan, as all his anxiety and frustration from the past several months was wiped out instantly. When the lady was ready to leave, Mohan asked her name, but she refused, saying-

'No name. I am a married woman with children. I do this *dhanda* because my husband does not earn enough. You ask

the same bearer to get you the same *bai* he got for you last time. (Singh 222)

And once again, like Mary and Dhanno, there's this *Bai* from Bombay who her husband appropriates. She has to do menial work and is even forced to sell her body to earn money to keep the fire burning in the house since her drunkard husband doesn't care much about his wife or children. Thus, she, too, is being appropriated by her husband, who is making money off her time and body and even forcing the upbringing of his children on her.

Finally, there's Vimila Sharma, Mohan's secretary, whose relationship with Mohan is professional. She is being paid a salary for her office work, but she still looks after him when he is down with a fever.

'You still have a high fever'. She took his temperature. 'Hundred and two point five. The same as yesterday. Mr Kumar, if you don't send for a doctor, I will,' she said in a tone of authority. (Singh 224)

She's not been forced to do this, nor does she have an individual contract with him to take care of him in sickness, but she consciously feels it is her responsibility, as Mohan is her boss, so she takes up his physical charge.

### III. CONCLUSION

Taking the case of the female characters in Khushwant Singh's *The Company of Women*, we find them as women suffering in one way or another, being appropriated based on time, body, sexual obligation or taking up the physical charge of the male members in their lives. For instance, Sonu is appropriated by her husband based on her time and product of the body and still not even allowed to make a decision regarding her pregnancy. And then there's Sarojini, who falls into a fraudulent marriage and is physically appropriated by her husband and later leaves her in a pregnant state, never to return. Then there are the lower-class women like Mary, Dhanno and Bai from Bombay- being appropriated by their drunkard husbands. They have taken up the responsibility for their households and children and even accept being sexually obligated by their master in order to please him and earn a little extra money. Sexual obligation is also evident in the case of Molly and Susanthika, who were sexually molested by their male relatives, but had no courage to address the issue back then, as they both thought that they had led them on. And finally, there's Vimila Sharma, Mohan's secretary, who is only paid for her office hours. Still, she takes up the physical charge of her boss as he lies on the deathbed. Therefore, despite the appropriation, patriarchal norms often hushed and silenced

their voices. No matter how hard they try to unfathom the reasons for their miserable existence and agonies, nothing seems to end the appropriation imposed on them by a cruel society. These women are helpless characters tormented by the episodes of appropriation, exploitation, and sexual obligation time and again. And though they cry and shout for help, their lament is mostly unheard and goes unnoticed.

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