International Journal of Science and Research Archive
eISSN: 2582-8185
Cross Ref DOI: 10.30574/ijsra
Journal homepage: https://ijsra.net/

(RESEARCH ARTICLE)

Check for updates

The wife, the public woman and the land: Addressing the question of ownership of women's body in select Indian short stories

Meetali Asiwal * and Monika Gupta

Department of English, Modern European and Other Foreign Languages, HNB Garhwal University, Srinagar, Uttarakhand, India.

International Journal of Science and Research Archive, 2025, 14(03), 148-153

Publication history: Received on 26 January 2025; revised on 01 March 2025; accepted on 03 March 2025

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.30574/ijsra.2025.14.3.0604

Abstract

From the perspective of ecofeminism, both women and nature seek their liberation mainly from one kind of oppressive authority – the patriarchal capitalism. While taking the liberation of women specifically into account, one may be confronted with different categories of women and their different situations and experiences making them subjugated. This paper focuses on one such category – that of the public woman (who is often regarded as a prostitute) – and delineates her representation in a few selected Indian short stories. These stories are "Giribala" by Mahasweta Devi, "The Housewife" by Ismat Chughtai, "Giribala" by Rabindranath Tagore, and "The Kept Woman" by Subodh Ghose. It further compares this representation with the figure of another category of women – the wife. The paper argues that the public woman and the wife are compared to and treated as one of the most priced properties of man – the land. Their liberation, however, depends on the different circumstances, rising from the difference in their treatment by the hand of their so-called master, the man. The authors have used the theoretical framework of ecofeminism and the methodology of textual analysis to read the mentioned short stories after giving an historical account of the land-like treatment of both the wife and the public woman in India and elsewhere.

Keywords: Ecofeminism; Wife; Public Woman; Land; Patriarchal Capitalism

1 Introduction

The dynamics of a woman's relationship with man and how it affects the dynamics of ownership of her own body have mostly been in the favour of men since the old times and civilisations. While the wives stay in a complete subjugation of men, the public women (*devadasis*, courtesans, prostitutes, etc.), have somehow managed to find a way to defy the absolute authority of patriarchy and other institutions over their bodies. In doing so, they do not just gain some sense of ownership on their own bodies, but also on wealth and property that they earn. This has cost them their reputation historically, but has also freed them from the golden cage of patriarchal institutions like marriage and family in which wives have always found themselves imprisoned. The difference in the situation of these two categories of women is due to their charted-out roles in a patriarchal environment which places them on relatively different stages of commodification. While the wife is to be owned like a virgin land and then made to reproduce the future owners of herself, the public woman has to be leased out temporarily for whatever services the owner demands of her. Just like the land, the ownership is much more rigid in the case of the wife.

To elucidate the above-mentioned, this paper first talks about the laws of ownership of land, property, and wealth, along with which the ownership of women is intricately tied from the ancient civilisation to the colonial period. The historical evidences taken, present the accounts of the ownership of wives, courtesans, temple prostitutes, etc., by men, along with their wealth. The paper further analyses selected short stories of the twentieth century India in light of the discussed

* Corresponding author: Meetali Asiwal.

historical accounts and the theory of ecofeminism. These stories delineate how woman's body is bought, sold, and used as land, arguing how these purchases and rules of ownership differ for public women who are considered 'disreputable'. With the help of this analysis, the authors attempt to state that when it comes to taking ownership of their own bodies, the public woman has always been more empowered as compared to the wife.

2 The Ownership of the Land and the Woman's Body: An Ecofeminist Question

The ecofeminist politics sees a connection between the land and the woman's body, both of which are treated as a property of a man to use, abuse and exploit as per his will. The ability of the nature and the woman to reproduce and nurture, has made them both the perfect objects on which men can capitalise. The capitalist nature of patriarchy solidifies women's image as inferior to men as even social rules demand that the property should always remain the prerogative of men, thus rendering women as dependent subjects. The man, who is the master of even the property of women he is related to, needs a woman only to reproduce a male heir so that the property can be inherited by him. The "…ecofeminists locate the exploitation and oppression of women and nature in patriarchy, where men control, plunder, rape, and destroy both…The feminist solution, in this case, is more women's voices, more women in positions of power, and more women at the table discussing their experiences and their ideas…" (Spear) on how to bring about the termination of male domination on nature or land as well as on their own bodies. In the similar vein, the condition of wives and public women in India have been compared here to depict how autonomy on one's self and body can liberate women in a way that they become their own masters. The wife who stays under the shadow of her husband throughout her life has very little to no right on her will, self, body and property. On the other hand, a public woman, who does not have any particular master, practices more freedom over herself and her property. This comparison brings one to the conclusion that challenging those representations where women are seen in the light of their functions as land may free them from the subjugation that they face.

2.1 The Ownership of Wife, Land and Property

The role that women and their bodies play in the patriarchal capitalist societies is not much different from the role played by land. Sukumari Bhattacharji, in her essay "Economic Rights of Ancient Indian Women" quotes *Rig Veda* to claim that Vedic maids gained some identity and significance only when they were married off and had a husband. Some of these maids were even bought and sold with the due consent of their parents, thus getting a master to own them. The essay also mentions the transactions involved in marriages of those times. Both dowry (*Stridhan* paid by bride's father to the groom) as well as bride price (known as *Kanyasulka*, paid by groom's family to the bride's father) used to be exchanged, although paying of bride price has been prohibited in *Manusmriti*, as this transaction would mean the selling of one's daughter (507). Bhattacharji, goes on to explain how, even though the laws in the scriptures give certain economic rights to women, the practicality of it comes down to the wife, as well as her property being owned by her husband, acting as her master. Thus, in all the instances, women used to be treated like a commodity to be bought, sold, and transacted over. Since their primary role as a wife used to be that of the producer of a male heir, their comparison to fertile lands is nothing new or surprising. Bhattacharji explains:

Control over women's property by men is part of a paradigm of an all-round control over her, ordained by the state through its religious instructor. The state in order to be in control of the means of reproducing human beings and in order to submit these means to the interests of the economic system which happens to be in force at the time, has been obliged to extend its control and subjugation to that of her own body. She has, therefore, lost the real ownership of her own body. (511)

Gerda Lerner, in her book *The Creation of Patriarchy*, explains the economy of the Mesopotamian civilization which was much similar to its Indian counterpart. She remarks that even though property, during this period, passed from man to man, the passage had always been through women. Men could transfer their property and its rights to their male heir only because women were available to offer sexual services and reproduce an heir for the property owner. Consequently, the ownership and transfer of women also took place much like that of the property. In her book, Lerner highlights how the ancient economies revolved around sale and acquisition of brides for their sexual and reproductive labour. She writes, "The main value to a family in having daughters was their potential as brides. The bride-price received for a daughter was usually used to finance the acquisition of a bride for a son" (106). Even Bhattacharji makes a similar remark for dowry in India, saying, "it may have been based on some notion of potlatch whereby the bride's father realised that what he spent as dowry would be realised back at his son's wedding". She further adds, "And it definitely signifies the social demotion of women, for, when a man marries and thus saves a girl from the ignominy of maidenhood, her father had to pay him a price for this good office" (508). This makes the Indian system of wedding transactions even more complicated, where the bride's family is paying to ensure a master for their daughter so that she is not left 'unhusbanded'.

In the patriarchal set-ups, even if the upper-class women enjoyed certain economic rights (theoretically in the form of *Stridhan* etc.), their sexual rights and choices were increasingly restricted. This restriction on women's sexuality and their body effectively reduced their status to that of the property or land itself because "these (economic) rights, such as they are, depend on her sexual and reproductive services to her husband, particularly on having provided him with sons" (Lerner 109). This, henceforth, becomes one of the most common and old ways in which a woman's body has been commodified, sold or leased out to reproduce. The body, just like the land, belongs only to one owner and its fertility as well as its chastity is of utmost importance to make it a marketable good. Neelam Jabeen writes in her doctoral thesis on the similar subject:

The commodification of women's bodies in such a context sheds light on the acute oppression of women where their connection with, and treatment like land provides a logic of domination to the oppressor. Treating land as a woman's body as his rightful property, seeing land as woman's body gives a similar sense of authority over land where every virgin piece of land is thought to be waiting to be 'husbanded'. (86)

There, however, exist other women than just the brides or wives playing their due role in these economies and environments as valuable possessions. With the patriarchal capitalist set up as the dominating force in most of the ancient societies around the world, the women who could be married off as brides with a dowry were considered to be of the luckier lot; because in the absence of enough resources to pay the dowry, the families used to sell their daughters as slave girls, prostitutes and concubines.

2.2 "Sacred Prostitutes": The Owner or the Owned?

In a patriarchal institution like family, where the head is a man, the woman who is married to him and was the mother of his children would enjoy certain economic rights as a wife, even if those rights are superficial. For the other categories of women like concubines, prostitutes, courtesans, etc., in the absolute absence of husband, the arrangement was quite different and comparatively progressive.

Anjali Arondekar, in her essay "What More Remains: Slavery, Sexuality, South Asia" gives an account of *devadasis* in the times of Portuguese India. She informs that *devadasis* (the slaves of gods) were called by various names: "Of note are the multiple terms used interchangeably over the years to reference these devadasis—they are initially referred to as Bhandis (slaves) or Adbhaktis (half-slaves), terms that eventually yield to a more amorphous term, Kalavants (literally carriers of Kala/art)". Arondekar also talks about the mention of these women in the historical records of Colonial India where "devadasis were described as being primarily 'chattel', enslaved workers, whose services shifted into regimes of sex and art only after their migration into foreign lands" (151). There also exist the "letters of sale" of these women which used to "bypass the nexus between subject and property that is the staple form of engaging histories of slavery. Instead, the letters speak of the deva/dasi's *mulya* (worth) through a vernacular of capital that requires the *yajeman* to provide a *hawala* (guarantee) also known as a *hami dene* (to give assurance of), as part of the *kharid* (the sale)" (152).

Despite their recorded status as slaves, these *devadasis* used to be great accumulators of wealth. Even though "We have seen that in general women were not allowed to earn or possess property" (Bhattachrji 510), the evidences in the historical records state otherwise. Bhattacharji writes, "Now the question that strikes us is: if women did not possess any money how could they make (such) expensive gifts. One answer is that rich 'ganikas' who ran their own establishments owned the wealth they earned after paying the state tax. A sense of moral guilt often prompted them to spend substantial portions of their wealth in pious enterprises" (511). Although she also mentions the actual ownership of *Stridhana* by wives in some cases, it may have been less likely in the presence of a male authority upon them. Arondekar also talks about various accounts where *devadasis* are recorded to possess wealth in the form of a large sum of money, the ornaments they used to wear, and the jewelry they used to load themselves with (153).

A somewhat similar case – that of the *naditum* priestesses in the neo-Babylonian period – has been mentioned by Gerda Lerner. *Naditum* priestesses practiced what scholars have termed as "sacred prostitution" (Lerner 125). These priestesses, who usually belonged to the upper classes (daughters of kings, bureaucrats, people with property, etc.), remained unmarried throughout their lives and dedicated themselves to the service of gods, performing sexual activities as certain fertility rituals. "The word *naditum* means "left fallow," which is consistent with the fact that they were forbidden child-bearing" (127). This suggests that even though they used to be fertile, they weren't exploited like wives and land to reproduce, which may be liberating in the ecofeminist perspective. These priestesses or 'sacred prostitutes', just like married women, brought dowry with them to the temples:

On their death, these dowries reverted back to their families of birth. They could use these dowries as capital for business transactions and to lend money at interest, and they could leave the cloister in order to take care of their

various business interests. Naditum sold land, slaves, and houses, made loans and gifts, and managed herds and fields…Unlike other women of their time, they could will their property to female heirs, who, most likely, were family members also serving as priestesses. (Lerner 128)

This suggests that with the absence of a direct authority over their sexuality and body, these women could own property, wealth and land. *Naditum* were also free to get married if they wished so. The condition of not having children, however, stayed persistent. One more thing that continued was the indirect domination and authority over the sexuality of these prostitutes, so that there could be a distinction between respectable and non-respectable women. A non-respectable woman would be the one who ran her own 'ale-house' which was equivalent to a brothel. So, even for the prostitutes, practicing the freedom of their sexuality to their own advantage could cost them their reputation, which had serious consequences. Despite all these restrictions over the money, sexuality, and collectively the independence of temple prostitutes, Lerner points out an interesting fact: the existence of such clear and rigid laws against the ownership of prostitutes meant that this category of women may have indulged in providing sexual services outside of temples and earning their own money (this may even have been the origin of commercial prostitution, around the temples).

Even Arondekar mentions that "several historical accounts…allude to the Goan devadasis as problematic purveyors of their historical dasi status. For example, Govind Narayan's *Mumbaiche Varnan* (1863) describes the rise of arts and theatre in Bombay (circa 1861). Narayan writes with great disgust about the rise of Goan 'dancing girls' who appear to have garnered clientele across the city" (152). Even though these women lost respectability in the society, be it 'sacred prostitutes' of India or the West, they may have been the only section of women having some agency over their bodies, sexuality, and property, challenging the patriarchal domination of the institutions like family and temple.

3 The Question of Ownership of Women's Body in India: An Analysis of Select Indian Short Stories

Such arrangements of physical and financial transactions surrounding the ownership of one sex over the other in the form of marriage or any other transaction involving money, as discussed above, have been represented in various Indian short stories. Kate Millet theorises in her groundbreaking work *Sexual Politics* that, "However muted its present appearance may be, sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power" (25). This sexual dominion and the resulting land-like oppression of women in India is evidently highlighted in the selected short stories. One may take some insight from these stories that talk of public women and their conditions in India. The historical accounts mentioned in the previous sections mainly talk of the times from the Vedic to the colonial period and relate largely to the rich and influential courtesans and *devadasis* of those times, excluding the accounts of prostitutes, sex-workers and other public women of lower status. This section takes their commodification or land-like representation into account, showing that it is not much different from what has been discussed earlier with the help of the historical accounts.

3.1 "Giribala" by Mahasweta Devi

Mahasweta Devi's short story "Giribala" is one such literary text that portrays the condition of rural people in Bengal. In the story, Giribala is married off to Aullchand – a man without any property – with a considerable bride-price. This makes Giribala a property of Aullchand, which he has bought with a bride-price. Aullchand's sheer disinterest in working and his ambition of owning a house makes him sell off two of Giribala's daughters into prostitution. Aullchand demands the right to sell the daughters as Giribala fails to reproduce a male heir for him. In this short story, it is seen that if a female body cannot be used for her reproductive services, the compensation could be made by selling off other female bodies for their sexual services.

3.2 "The Housewife" by Ismat Chughtai

Lajo, a character from Ismat Chughtai's short story "The Housewife" is an example of the question of the ownership of a woman's body and sexuality as per her relationship to a man. Ismat Chughtai introduces Lajo who does not have a father, brother, or a husband, telling us that, "When she reached puberty, her body became her greatest asset" (205). Lajo is a woman without any authority, whatsoever, upon herself and uses her sexuality for her survival. Thus, she is called a 'lowly woman' by the male protagonist of the story, Mirza. When Mirza's friend convinces him to take Lajo as his house maid, casually suggesting that she will do everything he wants her to do, the prude and orthodox Mirza takes her in reluctantly. For Lajo, "Any house that had no woman belonged to her" (Chughtai 207). Lajo, who "had given her heart away at first sight. Not to Mirza but to his house" (Chughtai 207), tries her best to become the woman of the house, and for that, tries to win Mirza sexually. In the process, his habit of frequenting prostitutes becomes a matter of worry for her. Gradually, however, the tables turn. Mirza starts seeing himself as the master of not just Lajo, but also her body and sexuality. He would get jealous if Lajo talks to someone else and would be critical of her "wantonness" (211). This explains a man's discomfort with whatever he cannot tame – whether it is nature or a woman's body. Lajo's sense of

freedom regarding her sexuality becomes a cause of fear and worry for Mirza. As per the societal norms of post-independence India, a house maid was not obliged to serve the master sexually. Mirza, however, starts feeling a sense of ownership on her body, and this ownership gets threatened whenever Lajo only as much as talks to another man. The man who himself visits prostitutes frequently is "tormented by the thought that her mouth would water at some exceptionally juicy offer and she would leave him" (Chughtai 212). The only way of curbing her sexuality and putting an end to Mirza's worry, then, is to get married to her and own her. Lajo, a free spirit, however, knows what that means. "All her lovers would eventually turn into her masters, and would then beat her" (213). After much speculation, however, Lajo is married to Mirza and becomes Kaneez Fatima. Mirza has now achieved what he wanted. He has "…bridled the wildness within Lajo with incessant nagging and scolding…Mirza was very satisfied with himself for having transformed Lajo into a decent, respectable lady" (Chughtai 215). The story ends with a divorce between the two due to further insecurities of Mirza regarding the sexuality of his wife. The divorce is a happy news for Lajo as she is now free from the bounChange of tds and obligations of a housewife and again is no one's property.

"The Housewife" shows a man's sense of ownership on the body of the woman associated with him and how easily it is threatened when the man fails to put restrictions on it. This treatment of woman's sexuality as something which is wild and needs to be tamed, or it becomes fearful and problematic for the civilized society, takes one back to the woman-nature relationship. A woman's sexuality is only good when it can be husbanded so that it can reproduce for the owner.

3.3 "Giribala" by Rabindranath Tagore

In this story, Giribala is represented as a woman who yearns for the attention of her husband, Gopinath, and her maid "freely gives expression to her regret that such a beauty as that of her mistress should be dedicated to a fool who forgets to enjoy what he owns" (Tagore). So, all her charms go waste as the one who has the sole right on them pays no attention. While the housewife Giribala yearns to serve her master, the latter has become a slave to an actress – who is an unmarried, professional woman without any male authority over herself. The envy and desire for the woman who has her husband's attention makes Giribala crave to go and see this actress, Lavagna, herself but she is not allowed to visit the theatre as it is no place for a 'decent woman' who is someone's wife. This opinion of the upper-class men of the pre-independence India reduces theatres to the status of brothels and actresses to the status of public women who are not as respectable as the housewives, just like prostitutes. The equivalence of theatre actresses to prostitutes was a common practice in colonial and post-independence India.

In the second part of the story, Gopinath leaves Giribala and flees away with Lavagna, which ties Lavagna to Gopinath and ends her career as a successful actress. Gopinath, however, never stops visiting the theatre and one day finds there, his wife Giribala playing the lead role in one of the stage plays. The story ends with Gopinath shouting like a madman, "I will kill her" (Tagore), thus asserting his authority over Giribala even after leaving her long ago. Giribala becomes a fallen woman by liberating herself from the authority of her husband but gains agency over her will and body. The opposite of it happens to Lavagna, who leaves her agency for respectability and ties herself to a master. The story suggests that the difference between a respectable and a non-respectable woman lies in the question of ownership. A respectable woman is not allowed agency, because she is under the authority of a man. A non-respectable woman has an antithetical fate.

3.4 "The Kept Woman" by Subodh Ghose

Another character who swings between the status and duties of the housewife and concubine is Lata in Subodh Ghose's short story "The Kept woman":

Like an efficient housewife, Lata will supervise all the servants at work. She will dole out the day's rations, then have a bath and go to the temple. Only after that will she have her breakfast. In this make-believe household, this routine will be followed thoroughly and devotedly. It is not inspired by love or attachment; it is a mechanical process that works on its own momentum. Prasad has to put up with this affliction like a passenger squashed in a second-class compartment, until the day reaches its destination – the evening. Only then does Lata becomes her own self again. (196)

Lata's own self is hidden from the acquaintances of her master, Prasad. For them, she is a devout housewife, and for Prasad only is reserved her avatar in which she converses intellectually with whisky in one hand and cigarette in another. She, being a kept woman, is owned by Prasad, who seems to be having the best of both worlds. He is enjoying, at the expense of both – sexual rights of a concubine/prostitute and economic rights of a wife, while maintaining a false marriage in front of the society. In this arrangement Lata is subjected to various abuses which usually come in the share of a wife. She wonders, "A man would abuse her and get away with it? No, not even a zamindar's son had such courage" (Ghose 197). She is able to think about her dignity only because she is at least free from the ties of marriage. Her relative freedom gives her a sense of power with which she is able to threaten Prasad to some extent. She keeps reminding him

that their arrangement is not that of marriage that cannot be broken. If Prasad owns Lata, he also knows that she holds his "reputation, dignity, and status at ransom" (Ghose 201).

The story, however, ends with Lata's downfall as she submits to the image of the housewife and refuses to break free from the abuses and oppression of her master. "She had come to care too much for this image she had herself built, with a ghunghat, sindoor, bangles…No, she couldn't destroy the illusion. She wouldn't even try to wreck it – she was hopelessly in love with it" (Ghose 203). Just like Chughtai's Lajo gives away her heart to Mirza's house, Lata falls for the glorious illusion of the housewife. "The concubine Lata could not become the harlot Champabai of Tarakeshwar even in the seclusion of the bungalow in the dead of night. Like an insulted, hurt wife, she could only sigh and say, 'No, why would you harm me?'" (Ghose 204) The mention of the harlot Champabai of Tarakeshwar here suggests that choosing that life, Lata could have been free of the ownership of Prasad but the cost of that was just too much for her to bear.

4 Conclusion

On the basis of the above discussed short stories, it could be said that the primary reason for the woman-land connection is because of the reproductive abilities of both which further translates into the crystallisation of patriarchy through the ownership of both woman and land (or property). Whenever woman's body cannot be used for its reproductive abilities, it is leased out like land and used for its sexual services or any other service that could be bought with money. The latter case, however, has some potential to defy the rigid laws of patriarchy as the ownership in its case is not absolute. The historical and literary evidences presented here show that there are certain opportunities present for women – even though not explored effectively by them – whenever they are left without an owner. Even by the theorisation of sexual politics by Kate Millet, one may infer that the end of sexual dominion may end the power hierarchy between the sexes. The way the discussed stories end, demonstrate something similar. Just like the land has no value without an owner, a woman – regardless of her status and position in society – feels useless and incomplete without a man. However, it is only when a woman considers herself as a submissive wife and yearns for a master (like Lata) that she could be used like a land. When she breaks free of the ownership of a man upon herself (like Tagore's Giribala and Chughtai's Lajo), she becomes her own master, and may finally find liberation from this woman-land connection in a patriarchal capitalist set up which is oppressive for her.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

References

[1] Arondekar, Anjali. "What More Remains: Slavery, Sexuality, South Asia." History of the Present, vol. 6, no. 2, 2016, pp. 146–54. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.5406/historypresent.6.2.0146. Accessed 10 Oct. 2024.

[2] Bhattacharji, Sukumari. "Economic Rights of Ancient Indian Women." Economic and Political Weekly, vol. 26, no. 9/10, 1991, pp. 507–12. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4397402. Accessed 10 Oct. 2024.

[3] Chughtai, Ismat. "The Housewife". River of Flesh and Other Short Stories: The Prostituted Women in Indian Short Fiction, edited by Ruchira Gupta, Speaking Tiger Book, New Delhi, 2016, pp. 205-220.

[4] Devi, Mahasweta. "Giribala", translated by Barshan Kalpana. 1982. PDF Download.

[5] Ghose, Subodh. "The Kept Woman". River of Flesh and Other Short Stories: The Prostituted Women in Indian Short Fiction, edited by Ruchira Gupta, Speaking Tiger Book, New Delhi, 2016, pp. 191-204.

[6] Jabeen, Neelam. Women And the Environment of the Global South: Toward A Postcolonial Ecofeminism. North Dakota State University of Agriculture and Applied Science, North Dakota, 2016.

[7] Lerner, Gerda. The Creation of Patriarchy. Oxford University Press, 1986. PDF Download.

[8] Millet, Kate. Sexual Politics, Columbia University, Press, New York, 1893.

[9] Spear, Jess. "Women and Nature: Towards an Ecosocialist Feminism". Rupture, Web. Accessed on 25.02.2024. https://rupture.ie/articles/women-and-nature

[10] Tagore, Rabindranath. "Giribala". Internet Archive. Accessed on 25.02.2024. https://archive.org/details/Giribala/mode/1up