

**Modern Indian Writing in Translation**  
**Prof Dr. Divya A**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**  
**Stench of Kerosene Part - 4**

Good evening, everybody. Today I will be talking about Stench of Kerosene. I will be working on this paper and first of all, Stench of Kerosene, the work that I will be dealing with is a translation and by Khushwant Singh, and it was originally written by a Punjabi writer, Amrita Pritam. And my paper challenges a conventional reading of gender in Amrita Pritam's short story, titled Stench of Kerosene.

Two years ago, my reading of this text was heavily inclined towards looking only at the suffering inflicted upon Guleri by her in-laws. In the very process of reading, Manak's characterization just fades into the background while Guleri's horrific death tends to easily overwhelm the reader's sensibilities. Now reading the story in tandem with Bell Hooks' Understanding Patriarchy, a new perspective can be provided for this text.

In the first section of my paper, the key points from Bell Hooks' essay are discussed in great detail. And in the following session the main points from the essay, from Bell Hooks' essay will be used to substantiate the understanding of patriarchy in Stench of Kerosene. So firstly I will be discussing the main points that come under Bell Hooks' essay titled Understanding Patriarchy.

Firstly, I will be discussing about what, how does she talk about patriarchy? So the term that he uses is 'imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy'. And this term actually tells us about the ways in which there is a way in which patriarchy works. It is not just an, it is an interlocked political systems which operate within society. And one such political system is patriarchy. And this patriarchy is again enmeshed within other power structures, which exist within different societies.

So firstly, she provides a definition of patriarchy. So Bell Hooks calls it a 'political, social system that insists that male are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females. Endowed with write to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence'.

The definition of patriarchy provided by Bell Hooks is interesting, in the sense that she refers to patriarchy as a system. And in other words, this definition of patriarchy moves beyond individual actions of men and women. Also, she points out, Bell Hooks point out to the ways in which patriarchal thinking is taught. For instance, she emphasizes on the role of institutions such as schools, courthouses, clubs, sports arenas as well as churches, and she also talks about how home is the central space through which gender roles are taught by parents and learned by children.

Moreover, you see that the ways in which patriarchal thinking is taught at in society and at homes and it becomes so much entrenched within the psyches that at a point you feel that it's a natural way to organize life all together. And also, she talks about ways in which this patriarchal culture is maintained constantly. So one of the ways in which this culture is maintained is through blind obedience. So blind obedience is basically where you repress every other emotion other than fear, and you constantly destroy individual will and you submit to the voice of the authority. So, this is a way in which the system actually perpetrates.

And also she talks about the, Bell Hooks talks about the ways in which patriarchy affects men and women. And also, it is important to note that she moves away from the conventional rhetoric of blaming men for women's oppression. And also, she talks about you know, the negative impact of sexism on male identity. So she gives emphasis to the point of male pain in her essay. And also, she talks about how this system is very, very harmful to the male in the sense that it disables them to experience all sort of emotions, so they become emotionally crippled, and it is sort of, they become, they confine themselves to the system. And they tend to perform gender roles without much thinking. It's almost like this entity that they submit themselves to. They do not have any, you know, expression or freedom to, you know, move away from the overarching system, which actually supports the entire society. And also, she talks about the fact that, also it is very important to note that Bell Hooks does say that, you know, men also are being affected by patriarchal system. At the same time, she doesn't tell that just because, you know, the overarching system is responsible for men's actions, it does not mean that we can excuse men for oppressing women.

In other words, men are still responsible for perpetuating and exploiting women within the patriarchal system. And she recognizes and acknowledges the reality of both, in the sense that on one sense patriarchy as a system, which oppresses men and women. On the second hand,

she also acknowledges that men do oppress women. So she gives emphasis to both these realities, and that is how she, you know, talks about patriarchy in her whole essay.

And firstly, I will be talking about the reading of *Stench of Kerosene* from the perspective of conventionally looking at it, you know, like looking at the way in which we understand Guleri and Manak's actions.

So, if you look at the conventional mode of you know, blaming men for oppression and exploitation of Guleri, you can see that firstly, Guleri is someone who is easily you know, she easily fits into the mould of an ideal daughter-in-law. So, you can see that she is like totally into doing her day to day chores. She actually performs all the functions in her in-laws home without any complaint. And you can also see that she is like, perfectly fine there like as of now. And you can see that, once you know the point where she is unable to conceive that's when her life changes forever. She is abandoned, actually, she is abandoned. So taking advantage of you know, like Guleri's absence we can see that Manak gets married to a new woman. And the swift manner in which Guleri is replaced in her in-laws home is truly appalling. And also, we can see that Manak is easily able to move on from Guleri. I mean, it does sound very brutal and emotionless of Manak to, you know, like abandon Guleri move away from her life. And also, you can see that there are certain privileges that Manak does enjoy. He is able to easily proceed with this life whereas that is not the case with Guleri. She is abandoned to her own fate. And we can see that she dies a tragic death after she knows that her husband gets married to a new woman. And this is one reading of it. So this reading actually talks about looking at Guleri and how she submitted to this, you know, like terrible fate because she is not able to conceive a child. And you can also like quickly on the first reading, you can look and tell that Manak's actions are quite brutal and emotionless and he is not able to understand Guleri. You can call his actions very ruthless at the face value.

And this is my second reading. So second reading, I am reading the text again in relation to Bell Hooks' essay, understanding patriarchy. So you can see that the object of my you know, like paper was to look, was to challenge the first reading, but at the same time when I am challenging my first reading of looking at Guleri and Manak, I am not actually kind of like negating it totally. So that my second reading actually can exist in you know, parallel with my first reading. I will show you how. And so firstly, I will be using Bell Hooks' essay, *Understanding Patriarchy*.

So firstly, in my first reading, what I have done is I have looked at Guleri and Manak as individuals as their actions as you know, being private and separate. I am talking about Guleri and her exploitation. I am talking about Manak and how he is ruthless. But again, we can see that, we can take Bell Hooks' essay, our definition of patriarchy as a political social system to understand, like, the nuanced ways in which we can understand Guleri's oppression and Manak's actions.

So what I mean to say by this is that through Bell Hooks' essay, we can actually look at the ways in which Guleri is oppressed, and the rationale for Manak's actions can acquire a different dimension. And so firstly, I would like to tell you that there is no, you know, doubt that Guleri is completely exploited and betrayed by her in-laws. Because she is unable to conceive and you know, she dies a tragic death, she burns herself.

And however you know, we can see that there are seemingly other modes of understanding Guleri's existence and Manak's behavior which is in, the fact is that we need to know that her exploitation doesn't start at the point where she is betrayed by her in-laws. In the sense that her oppression starts at a point where she enters the text. So if you start reading the text from the introduction, you can see the ways in which Guleri is systematically structured within the entire society.

You can see that, so it's evident from the starting of the text that her hometown, Guleri's hometown Chamba is just a few miles away from her husband's place. However, she is not allowed to move outside her in-laws home. So you have various instances where you can see her pining to go to her place, but of course she does not complain. And also, we can see that she is allowed to go only for a few days and that too during the harvest festival to her native place.

And so also you can see that her way or lifestyle, the way in which the words used to you know, totally structure Guleri's world are totally interesting. Because you look at a lot of feminine images coming in to tell about the ways in which Guleri usually spends her time in her own home. So you have she buys you know, like totally going for dupattas and glass bangles and silver earrings. And there is a very rich world, and it's like completely sealed. You can see that she completely fits into it and like it's almost like there is no place of escape for her outside that you know, sealed world. And you also have it that she regularly performs all the household chores and like she is you know, total, nobody.

There is no place where she is actually like you know, oppressed or something. We do not see anything of that sort. But however, what I feel is that there is a way in which the entire text moves on. And we understand that she is completely sealed in that world. She is actually in the patriarchal system. And as I have already spoken before, the system is so entrenched that she actually feels all this might be very natural.

So if you look at this when Guleri, at one point when Manak and Guleri are meeting before their marriage she says to Manak, if you want me go and ask for my hand from my father. So you see that there is a very clear-cut system in which the entire you know, story is moving forward. You can see that she is placed very strongly within the patriarchal system that she even does not know that there is something happening like this.

And also, you can see that even the entire, the idea of marriage between Manak and Guleri is entirely placed within the economical system about the issue of bride price that comes in when Manak gets worried about how he is going to pay to Guleri's father. So you can see that the entire vocabulary in which the entire system of marriage is placed itself is very much rooted in the idea of the systematic functioning of patriarchy.

And at the same time, we should not limit ourselves by reading Manak's actions as being brutal and ignorant. And, as I tell you the first reading in which I have done, you can clearly you know, dismiss Manak by telling that you know, he is not considering it, he is not brave enough or he is not bold enough. But if you look at it, that is not the case because it is out of Manak's consciousness, he cannot actually insist on Guleri staying back, despite the fact that Guleri is not able to conceive. He is not able to vocalize it because he is so entrenched within the system, that he doesn't see it as an option himself.

So he can also see that the way in which the thinking is entrenched within Manak is, by his mother words. She is like be a man. And you can also see that at certain points, we have the sentence where he blindly adheres to what he has to do. He has to marry, he has to get a child. You do not see him come out of the system and he doesn't consciously, that option of like asking Guleri to stay back is very ruled out for him.

So this is a sentence from the texts that I will be reading. 'Obedient to his mother and to custom, Manak's body responded to the new woman, but his heart was dead within him.' So there is no question of like, moving outside the system. Manak just cannot consciously think about bringing Guleri back and he has to obey, he has to obey to the entire system. So this actually

shows us the way in which religion and marriage, etc. also overlap within the entire system of patriarchy, and they provide a definition to the way in which Manak exists within the society.

And also, you can see that Manak is totally, emotionally repressed throughout the story. You don't see him articulate his opinion in any manner, but at last towards the climax you can see that what he wants comes in the form of his unconscious you know, ways in which he thinks about Guleri actually come out in the story. And towards my conclusion, I would like to point out that the second reading in which I was talking about patriarchy as a system does not negate the first one of looking at Guleri's oppression and you know, and Manak's actions as being ignorant and ruthless.

And Manak's actions towards Guleri, you know, abandoning her, and like you know, moving on, you cannot justify it by just saying that Manak's actions are located you know, they must be, you know, situated within the larger structure of patriarchy, and you just cannot like brush apart Manak's actions by saying that you know, it is a larger system that is actually shaping Manak's identity.

And the superior position of male in comparison to a female is always there within the story. So you can see that Manak is invested with the capacity to move on with his life, while Guleri is unable to conceive. So he is able to abandon Guleri and just plainly move on with his life, and in no way we see him being socially ostracized or, you know, alienated from the society because the couple could not conceive.

We see that there entirely Guleri is the one who was actually kind of abandoned and like who was unable to take it and she like kills herself in the end. And also, it's important to know that when Guleri dies, we do not see any blame that is being put upon Manak. And unconsciously, there are some privileges that Manak keeps on taking it from the system. And we can actually see that this is how it's located.

So in the second reading, what I am trying to do is that we need to acknowledge two things. One is that patriarchy as a system functions and defines both male and female identity. We see that Guleri and Manak as you know, two representatives who are like functioning within the patriarchal system. On the other hand, you cannot negate the fact that you know, men oppress women. You can see that Guleri actually suffers you know, a kind of a, she dies but Manak actually has some kind of privileges that he you know, the system gives him and yes, that is it. Thank you.