

IN SEARCH OF THE DAUGHTER'S SPACE: DECONSTRUCTING THE NOTION OF DAUGHTERS AS 'PARAYA-DHAN' IN ANITA DESAI'S CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY

Nikhila Maria James,

Research Scholar, Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady

Abstract

This paper attempts to demonstrate how Anita Desai has deconstructed the trope of the girl child as 'paraya-dhan' ('someone else's wealth') in her novel *Clear Light of Day* (1980). In the novel, Bimla Das and the two Misra sisters, Jaya and Sarla, defy the construct of daughters as belonging to their husband's house. Written at a time when girl children were still considered as their father's responsibility until their marriage and their husband's responsibility after marriage, Desai has challenged the notion of women as incapable of taking care of themselves and their family. This paper examines the factors that enable Bimla and the Misra sisters to challenge this stereotype and expose the patriarchal system of marriage that positions daughters as 'paraya-dhan'. Apart from a change in one's marital status, marriage for a woman also necessitates spatial displacement from one's parental house to one's marital house. In remaining unmarried, Bimla deflects the 'paraya-dhan' narrative and spatial dislocation that comes with marriage. The paper shall also analyse the characters Bimla and her brother Raja as a challenge to the established gender roles of women as the dependent and man as the provider and lay bare the "constructedness of gender" roles (Butler, 1999). The paper draws on the work of Gayle Rubin, Judith Butler and Simon Beauvoir to substantiate the arguments.

Keywords: Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day*, performativity, gender roles, spatial displacement

Introduction

In the Indian context, conventionally, daughters have been considered as 'paraya-dhan', literally translated as "another's money or property" (Meaning of paraya-dhan in English Rekhta Dictionary). Gayle Rubin has traced this view of women as objects of exchange between men as the basis of kinship systems across cultures whereby communities establish social, economic and trade relationships with each other. Rubin draws from Claude Lévi-Strauss to imply that "marriages are a most basic form of gift exchange, in which it is women who are the most precious of gifts" (1975, p.173). This view of daughters as someone else's property denies them an identity and

agency of their own. They are defined in relation to their father before marriage and takes on the identity as someone's wife after marriage. Within this system, a woman is denied the opportunity to forge her identity and own a space or a home that she can claim as her own. A daughter is reminded from a very young age that one day she will marry and leave for her husband's home. There are constant reminders that her parents' house is a temporary abode from where she will be displaced following her marriage. Apart from a change in one's marital status, marriage for a woman also necessitates spatial displacement from one's parental house to marital house.

Spatial displacement necessitated by the institution of marriage and a daughter's inevitable separation from her parents have over time come to be equated with the inability of daughters to take care of their parents and siblings or contribute to the running of their house. In time, daughters became defined by their lack and inability to sustain their parents and their parental home, whereas it was the result of the patriarchal system which necessitated that a daughter could no longer remain associated with her parental home after marriage. This skewed perception led to practices within families and society at large that conferred authority, power, and respect to male members while women came to be viewed as 'paraya-dhan' and hence lesser than men. Hence, an entire social system of inequality and oppression came into being based on anatomical difference between the sexes which congealed "over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, 1999, pp. 43-44).

Methodology

In Butler's words, "domination occurs through a language which, in its plastic social action, creates a second-order, artificial ontology, an illusion of difference, disparity, and, consequently, hierarchy that becomes social reality" (1999, p.150). In the novel, Desai "expose the tenuousness of gender "reality"" (Butler, "Preface 1999", xxiv) and proves that "gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions" (Butler, 1999, p.178). There is nothing "essential" about daughters that makes them 'paraya-dhan.' Taking on from the essentialism v/s constructionism argument, this paper adopts the anti-essentialist approach to gender, whereby it recognises that "the

natural is produced by the social" (Fuss, 1989, p.3). In addition, girl children have been considered as the responsibility of their father, brother(s) and later their husband, needing protection and security. An unmarried daughter or divorced daughter has been conventionally looked down upon as a burden to their family. However, these concepts have been challenged by Desai in the novel.

This paper attempts to study the daughters— Bimla, Sarla, and Jaya — in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* as a challenge to the notion of 'paraya-dhan' and how subsequently they create their own space at their parental home. In the novel Desai makes it clear that a daughter can indeed take care of her family. Rather than treating Bimla as a character that calls to be viewed with sympathy owing to her unmarried status, in the novel, we find a woman who has taken on the responsibility of the entire family, including nursing her two brothers and aunt while running the household. In remaining unmarried (though one cannot say for sure if it was out of her own choice or circumstances), Bimla steps outside the prescribed place of daughters as belonging to another space — the space of their in-law's house. Bimla deflects the 'paraya-dhan' narrative and spatial dislocation that comes with marriage.

Discussion

Clear Light of Day opens on the day after Tara and Bakul's arrival at Tara's parents' house in Old Delhi. Bimla, Tara, Raja, and Baba are siblings. Their parents had been dead for some years now. Tara had left India after her marriage to Bakul, and Raja had followed his idol Hyder Ali to Hyderabad. Bimla stayed back at home, or rather, was left behind to look after their autistic brother Baba and take care of their father's insurance business. There is a sense of unease in Tara from the beginning of her

visit to her home. Tara is beguiled by a sense of guilt at having escaped the trappings of her house and Old Delhi while leaving her elder sister Bimla to take care of things back at home.

Bimla is aware of her status as a spinster and how society and her own sister views her. However, unlike Tara, Bimla does not shy away from addressing her unmarried status. On a casual walk together, Bimla is aware of the expression on Tara's face while Bimla is playing with her cat. Bimla is direct in addressing the common perception of society about unmarried women. She says to Tara, "I know what you're thinking," she said. 'You're thinking how old spinsters go ga-ga over their pets because they haven't children. Children are the real thing, you think'" (p.10).

The sight of Baba and Bimla going over their daily routine of having tea silently on the veranda in the morning and Bimla's attempt to make Baba go to office, makes Tara feel guilty at having abandoned her siblings and the care of Baba to Bimla, while she travelled the world with Bakul and their daughters, moving within diplomatic circles. However, soon Tara realises that Bimla is better off than she is. Being unmarried, Bimla does not have to explain herself or justify her actions to anyone. Bimla leads her life on her own accord, while Tara stops herself from even going to the garden to pick fallen guavas from the ground and is held back from enjoying a cone of ice-cream as she wonders how her daughters would have reacted to such a 'silly' sight. When Bakul stops by and watches Bimla, dressed in her nightdress give lessons to her students, she does not bother to explain herself to him or feel any sense of shame in being not 'presentable' in the strictly expected manner of dressing. While Bakul watches

Bimla and her students with raised eyebrows, "Bimla nodded and laughed and wriggled her toes and waggled her pencil, completely at ease and without the least sense of guilt" (p.27).

Following the death of their parents, Bimla took up the role of everyone's caretaker. Bimla struggles to care for Raja, who was down with tuberculosis; Aunt Mira, who had a drinking problem and delirious fits, and Baba, the youngest of the siblings who was autistic. While Tara decided to stay away from home and spend time with the Misra sisters, going to parties and cinema, Bimla had to drop out of her studies and take to nursing her family members. Bimla does not receive any help from Raja either even after he recovers from TB. When their father's insurance business representative Mr. Sharma approaches Raja after their father's death, Raja refuses to have anything to do with the business. He leaves it to Bimla and Baba. Raja is more concerned about the riots in Delhi that followed the 1947 Partition. He felt that it was his duty to protect his Muslim landlord and friend, Mr. Hyder Ali and his family. He deflects his responsibility towards his family.

Bimla comes to realise that she is not to expect any help from Raja, the supposed head of the family owing to him being their father's male heir. In one curt sentence she rounds it up, her realisation and resignation to what lay ahead of her as the sole provider and caretaker of her family. She says, "No, that's only for me to worry about... That, the rent to be paid on the house, and five, six, seven people to be fed every day, and Tara to be married off, and Baba to be taken care of for the rest of his life, and you to be got well again- and I don't know what else" (p.102). Though Bimla feels resentment at Raja for abandoning her to the task of running their

home, she takes it with a sense of dignity. When Dr. Biswas suggested that she could relax a little once Raja recovers from his TB and takes his “father’s place,” Bimla laughs at the suggestion. “‘Father’s place?’ Bimla mocked, and then stopped: she would not reveal more” (p.104). Raja’s only act of service for his family was lighting his father’s and Aunt Mira’s pyre and no more (p.100,151). Raja turns up to execute his socially prescribed duties as a son in the public sphere, but not in the private sphere of running his family. Raja felt too important about himself to be worried by such flimsy matters as “a few cheques and files in father’s office” (p.102).

When Raja recovers from his illness and decides to leave for Hyderabad, Bimla does not stop him. She does not make any attempts to express her need for help:

She kept calm while Raja packed his bags, put away all his things, telling her that now he would go to Hyderabad. Looking up at her as she watched silently, he shouted ‘I have to go. Now I can go. I have to begin my life some time, don’t I? You don’t want me to spend all my life down in this hole, do you? You don’t think I can go on living just to keep my brother and sister company, do you?’

‘I never said a word’, said Bimla coldly.

‘You don’t have to. It’s written all over your face. Just go, go, take your face away. Don’t sit there staring. Don’t stop me.’

‘I won’t stop you.’

‘I’m going.’

‘Go,’ said Bimla (p.153).

This exchange marks the breakdown of the ‘paraya-dhan’ narrative. Each question put forth by Raja reeks with a sense of doubt and fear — the fear that he might be accused of foregoing his duty as

the provider and protector of the family. Raja washes his hands off his duties as a son and a brother, with a sense of guilt. He is aware that Bimla herself could pose each of these questions at him. As the unmarried daughter in an Indian family who is considered as ‘paraya-dhan’, Bimla could also ask Raja about her need to get married, her need to be provided for and protected. However, Raja leaves no space for Bimla to accuse him of foregoing his duty as a brother and neither does Bimla intend to voice it out.

Raja, conscious of his obligation as the son in the family to take care of his unmarried sister and autistic younger brother, tries to put on a show that he will not abandon his family. But Bimla can see through the farcical situation where Raja tries to play the role of the male head of the family, reassuring himself and his sister that he is a dutiful brother. Raja himself is aware of his act of deserting his sister and tries to gauge himself out of guilt. When Raja promises Bimla that he will come back, Bimla does not respond but merely shrugs her shoulder. Bimla knows it as well as Raja that he will not return and that Bimla will be left to fend for herself and Baba. Raja and Bimla offer a contrast to the Indian notion of men as the head of the family and women as ‘paraya-dhan’, as a liability to be married off, belonging to some other family. Through the depiction of Raja and Bimla, Desai makes the point that what is perceived as what a man/woman can/cannot do is the result of culturally designated gender roles and performance and not inherent to their sex.

Dr. Biswas and Bakul are two other men in the story who asks Bimla to not worry about her house and its demands. Bakul makes passive statements about how Bimla’s hair has greyed and graciously observes that she has “too many worries”

(p.123). As the well-established son-in-law of the family, who had a home in Washington and worked in the embassy, he could have stepped in to ease Bimla's responsibilities. But Bimla receives no help, and it is probable that she would have rejected any help from him either, given that she had resolutely taken on her family's welfare into her own hands. Dr. Biswas tells Bimla that she should take time for herself and that she cannot be a "slave" to Raja, Aunt Mira and Baba (p.132). But neither Bakul nor Dr. Biswas has a solid plan as to how to manage the household otherwise. They give out meaningless words of solace, asking her to go easy on herself, to worry less, toil less, and be more carefree.

Desai presents two other women who have also defied the 'paraya-dhan' narrative. The Misra sisters Jaya and Sarla were married, 'rejected' by their husbands, and returned to live with their father and their three brothers. They worked throughout the day and evening to earn money to run the family while the Misra brothers took up businesses that failed one after the other. It is worth noting the words spoken by Mr. Misra, the father of the Misra sisters and the brothers (Brij, Manu, Mulk), which goes against the classic narrative of sons as the breadwinners and daughters as liabilities, to be disposed-off through marriage. He says to Bimla, "You and my two girls- you are too alike- you work and let the brothers enjoy. Look at my sons there... drinking whiskey all day that their sisters have to pay for- did you ever hear of such a thing?... Useless rubbish, my sons" (p.49).

Conclusion

This paper argues that Desai has scripted a different trajectory for the three women characters in the novel- Bimla, Jaya and Sarla- as capable of taking charge of their own life and their family and provide

for them. They do not cut sorry figures owing to their unmarried or divorced status and are not at the mercy of their family or their husband's family. In Bimla's case, equipped with her education and the money from her job as a college lecturer supplemented with the profit from her father's insurance business, it makes it possible for Bimla to run the family. However, running a family takes more than producing money. Bimla takes on the mental and emotional load of being the host and provider for everyone around her. The Misra sisters also defy the 'paraya-dhan' narrative. Once married and now divorced, they return to their parents' house and run the household. Although they did not study beyond school, they earn money by providing music and dance classes and by running a nursery school. Neither Bimla nor the Misra sisters are spoken of as a liability by their family, probably because they earn and provide for their family. It can be surmised that Desai is hinting at the necessity of educating girl children and equipping them to be financially independent if they are to break out of the 'paraya- dhan' narrative.

In the novel Desai has exposed the misogynistic system put in place by patriarchy, which puts women in an unfavourable position. Patriarchy has instituted a system where married women have to leave their parents' house on marriage and live with their husband's family. Over time, the guilt and shame of 'abandoning' one's family into which a woman is born has been put on women's shoulders. Whereas it is the gender system in place that has necessitated such an arrangement, over time it has come to be viewed as a 'lack' on women's part that they cannot take care of their parents and their family. Through the character of Bimla, who is educated, employed, and financially stable, Desai has dismissed the

view that women are incapable of taking care of their parents and belonging to her husband's family. Instead, such an arrangement stems from socially and culturally instituted gender roles.

Desai's novel reiterates that "gender proves to be performative" and not innate (Butler, 1999, p.33). No woman is born as a 'paraya-dhan', but moulded as one under patriarchal set ups. While Bimla flouts the system by staying unmarried and taking care of her brother Baba and their house, she does not try to guilt trip her brother Raja, who abandons his own family and his traditionally allotted role as the male head of the family to pursue his own personal interests. The novel calls for neither the reader's sympathy towards Bimla for her unmarried state, nor direct their anger at Raja for 'failing' in his role as the man of the family. Desai exposes the fluidity and "constructedness of gender" roles (Butler 49). A daughter is just as capable as a son in running the house and "what we take to be "real," what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality" (Butler, "Preface 1999", xxiii). Gender roles do not come pre-installed in one's sex. Being financially independent makes it possible

for the daughters to provide for their family. Bimla and the Misra sisters, designated by their sex as belonging to their husband's house, defy it and claims their space at their parents' house.

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