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Interrogating space and identity: Rereading Anuradha Marwah's story Womanspace in Tis Hazari

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Abstract

This paper attempts to question space and identity in Anuradha Marwah's story "Womanspace in Tis Hazari." In a patriarchal society women tend to lose their identity and personal space. They have to fight each and every in quest of their identity and a "room" (space) which they can call their own. This paper seeks to depict, in a patriarchal society women belonging from different social strata find it equally difficult to find a room (space) for their own, where they can live and work without any constraint.

Keywords: Space, identity, patriarchy, selfhood, misogynistic

Introduction

"Women have been quite oppressed ... a large section of Indian women are suffering even today." - Shashi Deshpande

The space far above has been conquered. Man has been on the Moon. Yet, till date there is no space in the earth which can be defined as an out-and-out women's space. Agitations have been launched on the political, social and cultural fronts in demand for human rights and liberties; many of which have been realized too. It is not that these uprisings have not at all stood in a good stead for women: women too can feel that their position today is more developed than what it had been yesterday. Never the less, the iron grip of patriarchy, which has constrained and strangled women's progress over centuries, does still make itself felt in some basic areas of family and social life. Where the question of equal rights in terms of property and space is concerned, society still turns a deaf ear to woman's legitimate outcries, and asserts, by hook or by crook, male domination. In her famous work, "Room of one's own", Virginia Woolf wrote: "A woman needs ... a room of her own to call herself independent." Truly so. In a structure which is still of a phallic nature, to a large extent, women generally fall short of a room of her own, where she can live and work with no constraints heaped upon her. It is a sheer irony that, although behind the construction of a cozy room (read home) the woman's contribution is immense, she is often denied a free space in it and even intrigues are made to exile her into desolation. Just a few decades ago, old widows, whom Gayatri Chakravarti Spivack defines as subaltern, unable to speak, used to be cast frequently out of the home which they had served all their life with docility and dedication, into an utter loneliness and insecurity in Varanasi or Vrindavan. Even today, cases of abandonment like this occur in a disguised form. Women are still found vulnerable to patriarchal injustices. In the last few years, print and social media have decimated gruesome and shameful information of how 'worthy' sons, in collusion with their very modern wives, conspiratorially cornered their old mothers, deprived them of even the barest rights and provisions, and even forced them to handover their husband's property (house, chattels etc.) to them (son and daughter-in-law). Not only that, news of elderly women having gone to the court with a tearful complaint of having been thrown out of her own house by their sons, has been flashed several times by print and social media.

It is in the light of this gloomy, insecure position of women even today when much progress has been made in many different fields of life, that I venture out to attempt a review of Anuradha Marwah's deeply touching story, "Womanspace in Tis Hazari".

A professor of English, Zakir Hussain, Delhi College distinguished fiction- writer, Playwright and theater director, Anuradha Marwah has outlined in her story, "Womanspace in Tis Hazari" the necessity for women to consolidate themselves into a well- integrated sisterhood, irrespective of their class, community and creed, as they all are confronted with the predicament of losing their identity, their room and of being subjected to otherness by ruthless patriarchy. If they are to retrieve their own space which they have lost to their masters, they must struggle together hand-in-hand.

We have in this story two female protagonists who have nothing in common in terms of social hierarchy, class and academic status. The woman, who is the narrator of the story, should pass for an elite lady, "Bhadra Mahila" as far as her independent economic status, her high academic strata --- etc are concerned. However, the protagonist doesn't belong to the "new woman" category as conceptualized by the mid-nineteenth century patriarchy, meant to serve as a metaphoric purveyor of the essence of femininity. - She strides out into "the World" in the role of a Vakeel (Lawyer). She is liberated and enlightened about her right to a "limited space". Unlike her typically submissive counterpart, designed as a custodian of that "family home" where she is subverted into a non- descript, the narrator rises into a rebellion against the treachery and deprivation meted out to her by her cruel, misogynistic husband, and wages a legal war, demanding divorce and self-assertion. It is only natural that, the opposing lawyer voices a conventional androcentric allegation against her about "breaking the home".

The other protagonist, on the contrary, is a subaltern – age-laden, "frail and vulnerable", weighed down by endless pressure. However, both women are the same boatsisters for the very reason that, both are in the court with a plea for justice which they have been robbed of by their respective families.

The narrator appoints a lawyer to win for her a divorce because she being conscious of her rights and selfhood, refuses to reconcile herself to her "husband's betrayal: the humiliation and insults." The old woman, involved in a property dispute, appears to be very credulous. She is seeking to a civil judge her right to have a roof over her head. She says to the narrator whom she meets in the court room: "They Have thrown me out of the big house, but I have my Manjit Puttar he will get me Insaaf."

The poor, fragile old woman might have been pawned in a game of guiles contrived by her husband, son or son-in – law, may be, to make her "sign petitions, claim properties" all to benefit themselves at the cost of her deprivation. While the narrator is well aware of women's identity and empowerment, and knows how to fight for it against her antagonist, the old woman is obviously in the hold of that very vicious circle of patriarchy which has been at the root of all her plight and agony. Anyway, the narrator, despite being in a far more vantage position compared to the old woman, also feels the "baggage of existence" very heavy at the "shattering of life – long certainties about family and home".

While driving out of the court complex, the narrator catches sight of the old woman sitting between two men in a scooter rickshaw. The man she is smiling on may have been her Puttar who had earlier snubbed her into silence in the court, dehumanizing her into "a mechanical toy".

The old woman looks conciliatory. For the time being the narrator feels that she too had better be so, swallowing "the bitter pill of being treated as a lesser human being.", instead of waging a war against injustice. It reveals the painful ambivalence, which even enlightened woman often suffer in a dragnet of male hegemony.

The narrator's chat with an NGO friend of her raises in the story such burning questions as women being domestic violence victims, older women's debarment because of their unawareness of their own rights, their neglected condition in the family.

Conclusion

In the concluding part of the story, we telescope through the vision of the narrator a very unpleasant sight of the two men, buying liquor from a wine shop, leaving the old woman alone and exhausted, "tilting precariously towards the wide open side the scooter rickshaw". The narrator's poignantly satirical reference to the old woman's Manjit Puttar having "already turned his back on her" is a metaphoric revelation of her destitution.

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