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Fragmented Subjectivity and Possibilities of Agency in Shruti Das's *A Daughter Speaks*

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Abstract:

Lacanian psychoanalysis, Althusserian interpellation, and Foucaultian discourse have all foregrounded the unstable and fragmented nature of subjectivity or self-hood. This fragmentation is even accurate in the case of women because of patriarchal domination and systematic exclusion of women from the public sphere. Shruti Das's "A Daughter Speaks" is a remarkable poem that expresses the fragmented subjectivity of an Indian girl and also opens up possibilities of an instrumental agency by reiterating the girls' helplessness and paradoxically weakening the normalization of this powerlessness by its compulsion for repetition.

Keywords: Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Althusserian Interpellation, Foucaultian Discourse, Subjectivity, Patriarchal Domination, Instrumental Agency, Normalization.

Subjectivity in contemporary critical theory is conceived as a cultural construction which is unstable and fragmented. Be it Lacanian psychoanalysis with the view that the subject's first awareness of itself as a complete whole through the spectral image in the mirror (real or symbolic) is accompanied by the frustration that the image is other, distinct from itself, or Althusserian Marxism with the view that the subject is variously constructed through several social and cultural "interpellations" that one goes through in one's life or Foucaultian "discourse" theory that foregrounds the numerous discourses one is subject to in life so that one's self is severally fragmented during social intercourse, the "subject" or "self" in critical parlance is fragmented, a becoming and never a stable being. This fragmentation is even accurate in the case of women because of wide-spread patriarchal hegemony and systematic exclusion of women from public life that feminist critics starting from Mary Wollstonecraft have exposed in all its hypocritical forms. The fragmentation of feminine subjectivity has resulted in a compromised agency when women internalized their subordinate role and disowned responsibility for self-realisation. Shruti Das's "A Daughter Speaks" is remarkable in its focus on the unmistakable pathos of the fragmented subjectivity of an Indian girl while not ruling out agency in resisting the debilitating social and cultural norms and calling for relocating the ubiquitous masculine gaze to a feminist position that romanticizes the routine activities of an Indian girl before her traumatic entry into the adult world dominated by man and addresses the reader as woman.

"A Daughter Speaks", the title itself is bold and defiant when seen in the context of Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speaks? Spivak has argued that any attempt to recover the voices, perspectives, and subjectivities of the social outcast is heavily compromised. She insists that "within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject ... the subaltern as female is even more deeply in the shadow" (287). Taking the burnt Indian woman in the pyres of her husband as an example of the subaltern, Spivak turns to colonial debates on widow immolation in India to point out how the combined workings of colonialism and patriarchy make it extremely difficult for the subaltern to speak or be heard. So she announces that "there is no space from where the subaltern [sexed] subject can speak" (297). Lata Mani arrived at similar conclusions about subjectivity of women when she observed that the entire colonial debate on "sati" was concerned with redefining tradition and modernity, that "what was at stake was not women but tradition" and that women "became sites on which various versions of scripture/tradition/law are elaborated and contested"(118). Nowhere is the sati herself a subject of the debate and nowhere is her subjectivity represented.

The core of Shruti Das's poem "A Daughter Speaks" is the subalternity of the daughter, her cultural compulsion to bear all oppression without protest - "A girl you said was born to bear". A daughter in the Indian context is bound to her mother by strong bonds of love and respect. So her very birth, "to see the sun and the bright earth", is an experience of fragmentation and when the cords, "that held you and me together" are cut. The fragmentation continues as the small joys and little pleasures of childhood - singing, dancing and picking mango blossoms - are stifled and her "bowl of watered rice and shred of dry meat" is snatched away from her. She could not protest, could not shout out against this injustice because of her social conditioning - "You taught me to smile and forget". The harsh truth of a girl's exclusion from the world in which she lived is repeated in her ears - "I was a girl you said/ the world was never mine. / and whatever was mine never mattered". The gulf between the cherished life and lived life widens - "Hunger blazed and burnt my hollowed eyes / Eyes that once had dreams". The scenes of patriarchal oppression are so wide-spread, in fact, no space on earth is safe for women - "They are in the shacks, in the huts, / in big houses, in the street alleys / lurking behind deep shadows". In a scenario like this, so detrimental to self-promotion, the girl's self is not simply fragmented, it is also lost in an amorphous mass. Individual voices cannot be distinguished - "I cannot say your cries from / mine and hers and hers". Women are denied human status altogether - "We lie like a heap of shredded cloth/ clutching each other, waiting / to be blown to the unknown/ by the next gust of wind". A woman is not expected to take root, to make her presence felt. She is not to be visible. The system ensures that women willingly accept a subordinate position. The power that inhibits woman, Foucault reminds us, does not flow from top to bottom; it has a capillary motion and it exudes from all the pores of society.

So does the daughter of the poem's title really speak? The lines of the poem that haunt the reader as a refrain are - "I am a girl you said", "I am helpless". When the nameless 'they' of the poem "...took away my / bowl of watered rice and shred of dry meat", the

“daughter” of the poem “smiles” and “forgets”. When her mother was “caught” and she “heard the sound of your bones cracking” and she could not do or speak anything because “I am helpless”. Nor could she act differently when “They howl in packs/ And jump on you and me” because “I am helpless”. Why is the daughter so helpless? Is it the naturalized patriarchal system or her instinctive deference to the teachings of her mother which is responsible for her repeated expressions of helplessness?

There are two selves of the daughter. The life from the moment of her birth “to see the sun and the bright earth” till her early childhood when life was defined by small, unsullied pleasures - singing, dancing, and picking mango blossoms - under the watchful eyes of her mother, constitutes the first self. The other self is the grown-up self- marked by a violent disruption - they took away her bowl of watered rice and shred of dry meat, “hunger, blazed and burnt my hollow eyes”, “Hunger and gutter pawed at me”, “They howl in packs / and jump on you and me”. The grown up self thus throws out a bleary picture of movement within a relentless cycle of extortion, exclusion, downright physical violence and impotent victimization. The division between the two selves comes out openly in lines eleven and twelve between the “hollowed” eyes of the present and the eyes of the past that “once had dreams”. “Hunger and gutter” left the grown up self with no choice but “to trade”. After this “trade” she was just a prey to predator man, who “hunt and howl in packs” and “jump on you and me” and she only cries helplessly. Nor was her cry an isolated wails, but it was indistinguishable from the cries of other women, perhaps all women. Victims of patriarchal hegemony, all these women are denied basic humanity, nay life. In fact, they “lie like a heap of shredded cloth” waiting to be blown away by the wind. The daughter is only a girl, she lacks substance and her subjectivity is only a vacancy. The ambivalence of the concluding line “A girl you said was born to bear” foregrounds the socio-cultural constraints responsible for the plight of women in India. A girl is expected to put up with, “to bear” all torture on her without a demur of protest. She is also born to “bear” i.e. to bear children and ensure the continuance of the race. Ania Loomba’s observation on the anticolonial and nationalist discourses on women’s subjectivity is worth mention here. She points out how the image of the Nation-as-Mother is used in these discourses to limit and control the activity of women within the imagined community. They have also literally exhorted women to produce sons who may live and die for the nation (180).

Society has ensured that a girl does not wriggle out of the cultural niche fixed for her. In the words of J.S Mill: “All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite of that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others” (444). Protest and public outcry are not considered proper conduct for a girl in the conservative Indian society. “I am a girl you said” and “I am helpless” - these words ring like a whining cry in the reader’s ears. Elspeth Probyn feels that women disappear into an ontological argument about their being because of this image of helplessness. “The very pervasiveness of the image of powerlessness flattens out any possible epistemological or ontological distinctions” (91). There is no distinction among the cries of “mine and her’s and her’s”

and women “lie like a heap of shredded cloth clutching each other” and the individuals making the heap are hardly distinguishable from one another. Sidonie Smith explain this loss of subjectivity in a different context: “Since the ideology of gender makes of women’s life script a non-story, a silent space, a gap in patriarchal culture, the ideal woman is self-effacing rather than self-promoting and her natural story shapes itself not around the public, heroic life but around the fluid, circumstantial contingent responsiveness to others that, according to patriarchal ideology characterizes the life of woman” (50).

The helplessness of the girl is a social construction, an idea planted in her mind: “I was a girl you said. / The world was never mine. / And whatever was mine never mattered”. Way back in 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft was filled with disgust to observe “the sly tricks practised by women to gain some foolish thing on which their silly hearts are set”. Women resorted to these tactical manoeuvrings because they were “Not allowed to dispose of money or call anything their own” (169). This socially constructed impoverishment accounts for the powerlessness of women. What kind of agency, responsible action for self-actualization is possible in this disabling feeling of impotent victimization? Constructed as man’s Other, throughout history, women have been living in a “constant state of ‘inauthenticity’ ” (Moi 92). It has restricted women’s agency and made them internalize their subordinate condition in the hegemonistic patriarchal order. The central contradiction of a woman’s being is that she, Simone de Beauvoir has said, “Stands before man not as a subject but as an object paradoxically ended with subjectivity, she takes herself simultaneously as self and other, a contradiction that entails baffling consequences” (794). This consciousness of one’s self as both self and other is similar to what W.E.B Du Bois terms “the double consciousness” of the American Negro: “ this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity”(3).

The daughter in Shruti Das’s poem is told that the world was never hers because she was a girl. This belief is naturalized by repetition over generations within the family and society at large. Like Du Bois’s American Negro, women in India still have to look at themselves in the eyes of men and as a result, denied true self-consciousness. According to Judith Fetterley this “invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male while being reminded that to be male - to be universal...is to be not female” causes “an endless division of self against self” and women as a result live in self-effacement, surrendering meekly before patriarchal oppression. What hope is there then for responsible action to reshape a different self in this debilitating attitude of self-effacement? Paradoxically the repeated expressions of helplessness in the poem open up possibilities of instrumental agency. Commenting on Foucault’s construction of subjectivity through discourse Judith Butler argues:

For Foucault, the subject who is produced through subjectivity is not produced at an instant in its totality. Instead, it is in the process of being produced, it is repeatedly produced.... It is precisely the possibility of a repetition which does not consolidate the dissociated unity, the subject, but which proliferates effects which undermine the force of normalization (93).

The repetition of the expressions “I am helpless”, “I am a girl you said” far from consolidating the association of helplessness and girlhood, undermines the force of normalization and adumbrates possibilities of resistance through consciousness raising and halting processes of self-realization.

Early psychoanalytic film theory was based on the premise that woman cannot “initiate” the gaze, she is the image. In keeping with this view Sidonie Smith said that woman remains bound “in her relationship to men and (their progeny) and defined always in relationship to a life cycle tied to biological phenomena and the social uses to which those phenomena are put: birth, menarche, marriage, child birth, menopause, widowhood”(54). Shruti Das’s “A Daughter Speaks” refreshingly relocates this gaze by foregrounding peculiar pleasures of young girls in India across all social classes like picking mango blossoms which are repeated two times in the poem. The poem is addressed to the mother, the “you” of the poem. The “you” and “me” expand to the “we” towards the close: “We lie like a heap of shredded cloth/ clutching each other”. The poem thus addresses the reader as woman thereby affecting an unobtrusive shift in approach that is significant from the feminist point of view.

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