

Anjana Appachan's Bahu: A 'New' Bahu

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Abstract: Anjana Appachan's *Bahu: A 'New' Bahu*. This paper aims to study Anjana Appachan's engagement with cultural determinism in the reconstruction of the female subject in the story *Bahu*. The shaping of the subject, dictated as it is by the ideology of patriarchy, colonialism, feminism, capitalism and many other isms, calls for a sharp and profound awareness of processes by which certain images of women become fixed, and these in turn are enforced in constructing women's self-representations.

The image making process of stereo-typed middle-class woman as preservers of the spiritual essence of 'Indianness,' which began in the 19th century, continues to the present. Reinforced by history, myth and media, the 'imagined' and the 'invented' images of womanhood as visual cultural symbols gradually became the perceived reality in a continuous process of making and remaking in keeping with the compulsions of the period. However, as Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan emphasizes, --the problems of the 'real' woman cannot lie outside the 'imagined' constructs in and through which woman's subjectivity emerges". She also stresses the need to resist the homogenized image of 'the new Indian woman' which irons out differences of class, caste, community and language.

The paper aims to show through the narrative the writer's construction of the female subject who is located at the intersections of subjectivity and cultural and traditional codes and norms.

The writer's representation of evolving female subjects, their individual journey towards self-realization, reflects a 'trans-gender' approach by enjoining literary embellishments and social commitments in constructing the story of self-reliant, purposeful female subjects who are able to step out of their middle class concerns. One hopes that the authority to name and speak for 'others' will assume a more inclusive perspective that will dismantle the presence of unequal structures and prepare the ground for entering into a dialogue with others—be it a husband, a master or a ruler.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Colonialism, Feminism, Capitalism, the 'imagined' and the 'invented' images, 'Trans-gender', Fractured identity, Diaspora, Alienation.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to study Anjana Appachan's engagement with cultural determinism in the reconstruction of the female subject in the story *Bahu*. Shaping of the subject, dictated as it is by the ideology of patriarchy, colonialism, feminism, capitalism and many other isms, calls for a sharp and profound awareness of the processes by which representations of certain images of

women become fixed, and these in turn, are enforced in constructing women's self-representations.

The image making process of a stereo-typed middle-class woman as preserver of the spiritual essence of 'Indianness,' which began in the 19th century, continues to the present day. Reinforced by history, myth and media, the 'imagined' and the 'invented' images of womanhood as visual cultural symbols gradually became the perceived reality in a continuous process of making and remaking in keeping with the compulsions of the period. However, as Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan emphasizes, the problems of the 'real' woman cannot lie outside the 'imagined' constructs in and through which women's subjectivities emerge". She also stresses the need to resist the homogenized image of 'the new Indian woman' which irons out differences of class, caste, community and language.

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The title of the story 'Bahu' (daughter-in-law) evokes layers of signifiers of a traditional Bahu and her role, determined and dictated by the socio-cultural patterns of Indian societies. This bahu is a stereotyped, archetypal figure who has no identity of her own, who has no space of her own, and who has no name or liberty. She is ever at the margins, the peripheries. Ironically the narrator 'I' 'centre-staging' the story is narrating the fact of her marginality.

The story of 'Bahu' (since no proper name has even been attributed to her and the story begins in the 1st person narration, so let's call her a Bahu) touches almost every aspect of the oppressive power of the patriarchal culture, ironically juxtaposing the *Beti's* (daughter) situation. It exposes the contradictory attitudes of the mother-in-law (again stereotyped), the husband and the society at large, with a rare poignancy. The text highlights the fact that historical and cultural tapes of measuring the womanliness of women are not the appropriate tools of measurement. Kumkum Sangari and Vaid validly point out, "Both, tradition and modernity have been in India, carriers of patriarchal ideologies and are eminently cultural constructs" (17)

The 1st person narration also suggests the inability and second-handedness of the right of others' narration and its validity in

depicting the psychological traumas experienced by women. But if a woman writes about a woman, for a woman, toward women, then the authenticity of her experiences being 1st hand cannot be doubted. The Bahu in the story is speaking 'of woman', to quote Helen Cixous "in her inevitable struggle against conventional man, and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history". (334)

From a feministic perspective, the subjection of women is the central fact of history, a key to most of their social and psychological disorders. A brief mention of some definitions of feminism will help to understand its development and contextualize this fact.

The early editions of The Oxford English Dictionary defined feminism as a "state of being feminine or womanly", as did the 1901 edition of **the Dictionary of Philosophy**.

However, by 1906, the **Dictionnaire of Philosophie** states feminism as "a position favourable to the rights of women." (21)

Ellen Du Bois found in her research on feminism and suffrage that the term 'feminism' was in general use around 1910 to describe a political movement & usage that originated in France (21)

According to Webster's Dictionary, feminism is defined as (a) the principle that women should have political rights equal to those of men; (b) the movement to win such rights for women".

Simone de Beauvoir in **The Second Sex** describes the relations of the two sexes as not being equal like that of two electrical poles—man represents both positive and neutral, as is indicated by the common use of 'man' to designate humans in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity... (15)

Teresa Billington Greig wrote in 1911 that feminism seeks "the organization of the world upon a basis of sex-equality in all human relations; a movement which would reject every differentiation between individuals upon the ground of sex, would abolish all sex privileges and all sex burdens, and would strive to set up the recognition of the common humanity of the woman and man as the foundation of law and custom". (Feminist Dictionary, 158). (24)

The text of the story projects and challenges not only the blind spots of others but also of women. For example, the biased and discriminatory attitude of the mother-in-law towards 'Bahu' & 'Beti' is a case of the point being made. The mother-in-law represents the patriarchal figure who dominates the house.

The strategy of glorification of the wife- duties and maternal role of women; the self-effacing', 'self-sacrificing' (10) heroine, all forgiving Sita-like women in the film within the story (10) contribute to make a 'feminine ideal' (that flourished in the 18th & 19th centuries) and 'feminine mystique' which derive their authority from the belief that woman's nature, whether divinely ordained or biologically determined, requires her to seek fulfillment in the submissive domesticity. The opening of the

story projects a story within a story, of the ideal Bahu in the film, and the social expectation of conformity to this ideal is hinted at and sprinkled throughout the story. The 'Bahu' is expected to be like the mythical Sita, but the 'Beta' (son) need not to be a Ram.

Kate Millet, a leading theoretician of new feminism, states in *Sexual Politics* (1970) that "the Christian Myth of Fall... still holds enormous power even in the rationalist era". (25) The mythical images of Sita, Savitri and Draupadi, likewise, serve the Indian women to suffer, yet not utter a word about their sufferings. It forms the foundation of sexual attitudes, for it represents the most crucial argument of the patriarchal, historical and post-colonial attitudinal approaches towards women, wherein the woman who did not accept them was held guilty of violating a certain social and moral code. As a result of this a woman, like the Bahu, starts feeling guilty and helpless:

"...they have assumed complete control over my life...But what could I do? It was all so strange, so bewildering. All those new people; new relationships; sudden do's & don'ts. Were they wrong or was I? I was overwhelmed with guilt. How was it possible for all of them to be wrong & only I right? (20)

Both in feminism and colonialism, the system creates a myth of the oppressor and the oppressed, the colonizer and the colonized. The oppressor/colonizer/ authority portrays an image of the oppressed/ colonized so lazy and wicked, that a 'victim syndrome' starts developing in them and they then lose all interest in self-hood and accept the myth of their intellectual, social, cultural, religious and even physical inferiority. Anjana Appachan weaves these ideologies and myths in the fabric of the text to manifest the life of contemporary women.

Liberal Feminism views liberation for women as the 'freedom' to determine their own social role and to compete with man on the terms which are as equal as possible. The Bahu is denied such freedom in the story: "I have no privacy at all, no independence... it is not my house". (24) She feels, "I cannot go on like this." (24) Thus the feminine consciousness bearing the cross of victim-syndrome needs to be thrown-off. Women feel guilty in talking about their desires, their sensitivity. If they talk they are labeled as 'hysterical' or 'neurotic' (24). Like the Bahu, they are charged with offences they never committed. They are persecuted even after attending to all their domestic and professional 'duties'. Yet instead of love, recognition or encouragement from the family and the lover turned husband, she is reprimanded as being 'a nag'. This situation horrifies her, "I had become a nag. My father called my mother a nag when they argued, my father-in-law called my mother-in-law one... Where O where was my sweet calm disposition?" (21) She has now been bracketed with all the stereo-typed women, whom "they endured". "Only my sisters and I knew my mother's anguish, all those frustrations year after years of it". (14)

The lover turned husband becomes a stranger, 'an alien' who does not understand her or help her even morally. She is like a

'diasporic figure' who has left her 'home' in search of bliss and entered a new 'house' which was so strange, so different and so bewildering with unexpected, unwritten codes of do's and don'ts. She remembers her parental home where 'our parents give us such total, unconditional love. Why do we feel we'll always have it?' (11)

Ironically, her expectations of 'Siddhartha' (Siddharth–Buddha the Enlightened) being sympathetic and helpful also fail. While confiding her problem with her friend, she realizes that she no longer loves him. She realizes that she will never be given a 'space' of her own (even the bed-room is shared by her sister-in-law's son); she will never have 'liberty' or 'time' to sustain 'her life' or pursue her way of life and hobbies. The time to think about herself and Siddharth is when she gets into the bus on her way to job or back home; that too when the bus is not too crowded and she finds a 'secure space' to sit. Then she would dream of Siddharth and herself, "having a place of her own; to have all the time in the world for each other. Blissful solitude. Wonderful, wonderful independence. It could never be. Siddharth did not want it." (23)

This togetherness is what she longs for, to be heard at least; "Are you listening?" she asks her husband. "I couldn't believe it was my voice. I sounded hysterical, crazed." (19)

Despite the fact that her in-laws' family was highly educated, their attitudes were highly conservative. She questions her life and its ways; where did her life leave her? She knew their reactions also. Ultimately she announces her decision to leave her husband and the house; Siddharth calls her crazy saying, "You can't do like this. How do you think it will affect my parents? Abdicating your responsibilities isn't the answer." (25-26)

The inter-textual and inter-cultural contexts become very poignant and flash into the reader's mind at this juncture. One recalls Nora of **The Doll's House**, who was also reminded of her duties and responsibilities toward her children and husband by Helmer, her husband, when she announced her decision to leave. Like Siddharth, Helmer also calls Nora's decision 'child-like, delirious and against social norms'.

Like Nora, the Bahu too leaves the house in search of a new world, a new identity without bothering about the socio-cultural codes and norms. Both defy all the customs and bondages that refuse to treat them at least as humans. Bahu refuses to 'pay the

cost' by sacrificing her values and everything she believed in. So much so that she does not even rue her miscarriage, nor does the loss of child make her regret her decision. Such women realize that first and foremost they have a duty to themselves. She, like Nora, takes to educate herself first, to de-colonize her mind, find her roots and breathe in "the smell of wet earth". (27) The overcast sky now bursts and the rain washes away everything, every mark of the victimizers and even her own sense of guilt.

Appachan writing on behalf of 'a speaking subject', as Norma Alacron emphasizes incorporating Julia Kristeva's concept of symbolic contract, can therefore be seen as a way for the female 'speaking subject' to position herself at the margins of the system and reject the traditional, historically imposed definitions of 'woman & man'. It enables the women writers and the women protagonists to do away with the tradition of seeing through others' eyes and recognizes the system within which women may have a voice, on the condition that they speak as future wives and mothers.

The writer's representation of evolving female subjects, their individual journey towards self-realization, reflects a 'trans-gender' approach by enjoining literary embellishments and social commitments in constructing the story of self-reliant, purposeful female subjects who are able to step out of their middle class concerns. One hopes that the authority to name and speak for 'others' will assume a more inclusive perspective that will dismantle the presence of unequal structures and prepare the ground for entering a dialogue with others—be it a husband, a master or a ruler.

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