

Negotiating Adolescent Identities: Case study of a Teenage Indian Girl

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Abstract

In this article, I look closely at identity construction in relation to the hegemonic discourses of gender available at a school and in society at large. More specifically, I conduct a case study of Anita (pseudonym), a teenage girl who attends a government school in New Delhi, India. I have analysed how she constructs and negotiates her identities in interview narratives and in pro-longed participant-observations. The paper looks at Anita's endeavour to achieve a sense of self in the intermediate stage between childhood and adulthood. It is thus important to look at how students construct their identities by negotiating and modifying the imposed social structures they engage with at school. The aim of this paper is thus to understand how Anita engages with the socio-cultural ways of meaning making available to her and the specific discourses that she mobilises emerge in her attempts to negotiate identity in everyday life at school. Anita's voice helps to understand not just her construction of identity but also her worldview through her experiences, feelings and everyday exchanges.

Keywords

Discourse analysis, identity construction, adolescence, discourse and identity

1. Introduction and Theoretical Background

Language use is an act of asserting and constituting one's identity (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1995). Identity is created, and recreated, in a social space through interaction with other members of the society. Post-structuralists have argued that an individual is not uniquely positioned, but is produced as a "nexus of subjectivities, in relation to power that are constantly shifting, rendering them at times powerful and at other times powerless" (Baxter, 2003, p. 27). Hence, individuals are shaped by the possibility of multiple subject positions within and across different competing discourses. Language use becomes an important site and event to understand the continuous construction and re-construction of identities by those involved in it. And, the sites where researchers can explore the ways by which individuals challenge and negotiate their own and each other's identities.

In this article, I look closely at identity construction in relation to the hegemonic discourses of gender available at a particular school and in society at large. More specifically, I conduct a case study of Anita (pseudonym), a teenage girl who attends a government school in New Delhi, India. I have analysed how she constructs and negotiates her identities in interview narratives and in por-longed participant-observations. The paper looks at Anita's endeavour to achieve a sense of self in the intermediate stage between childhood and adulthood. She is struggling to develop and discover her sexuality as a teenage girl which is socio-culturally determined as well. I would look at how she positions herself in this period of transition while drawing on multiple identities available in her social context. Cameron (2005) claims that at the stage of early adolescence individuals begin to invest in notions of socio-culturally propagated gender identities and explore the possibilities for themselves. Therefore, it becomes crucial to investigate the ways in which an individual might exercise her agency to construct her multiple identities while also keeping in mind the influence of dominant discourses of identity in society.

Giroux has called schools "sites of struggle", and quoting Giroux and Simon, Thapan (2014) states that in schools "meaning is produced through the constructions of forms of power, experiences and identities...schools are spaces where identities are fluid, made and unmade over innumerable times" (Meenakshi Thapan, 2014, p. 8). It is thus important to look at how students construct their identities by

negotiating and modifying the imposed social structures they engage with at school. The aim of this paper is thus to understand how Anita engages with the socio-cultural ways of meaning making available to her and the specific discourses that she mobilises emerge in her attempts to negotiate identity in everyday life at school. Anita's voice helps to understand not just her construction of identity but also her worldview through her experiences, feelings and everyday exchanges. Before I begin with the analysis of the interviews, I would like to give a brief introduction to the methodology, data and the research participant *Anita*. The analysis is then followed by conclusion.

2. Methodology

To investigate the construction and negotiation of gender identities by an adolescent girl at school, I chose to adopt a qualitative approach because of its arguably greater compatibility with a post-structuralist view of gender identities as a situated accomplishment. A post-structuralist discourse analytic approach to research typically draws on a combination of qualitative data such as interactional data, field observations and/or interviews (Edwards, 1997). I have integrated Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) theorisation of 'Identity and Interaction', to analyse the interview data complemented by field observations

The data on which this paper draws was collected over a period of six months from grade 9 of a co-educational government school, in an urban neighbourhood in New Delhi, India. The process of data collection began with field observations over a period of 4 weeks which lead to the first round of interviews. The interviews were semi-structured with the aim of holding a long conversation with students, to understand their context, opinions, and friendship patterns in a better way. A better understanding of classroom dynamics was also an objective of these interviews. Another round of interview of the same participants was conducted after two months in the second phase of data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants who had volunteered to be interviewed and were also assured of confidentiality by use of pseudonyms.

Interviews were carried out in and transcribed first in Hindi. Hindi transcripts were then translated into English as closely as possible without possibly affecting the overall meaning. After that, details of transcription were added to the translated data. I have followed the transcription conventions given by Du Bois (1991) in my study. For the purpose of this paper the examples are drawn from two interview transcripts of one of the participant *Anita*. This data was then analysed using a post-structuralist discourse analytic framework. The analysis was guided by a social constructionist view of the individual and identity construction.

3. Case Study of Anita

Anita is a 14-year-old girl studying in the 9th grade. Like many other teenage girls, she is dealing with issues of parental expectations, peer approval and peer pressure, boyfriend issues, academic performance, sexual vulnerability, discovering sexuality and so on. She comes from a lower-middle class background. Her father is a government employee and her mother is a home-maker with only primary school education. She has an older sister who works in a private firm in another city and comes to visit from time to time bringing expensive gifts for Anita. In the second interview Anita informed that her father expected her to do well in academics. She also talked about his father's high expectations from her academically and justified his high expectations by stating that he had the right to do so since he was spending a lot of money on her education. She was also threatened from time to time by her father to be married off if she did not focus on her studies. In fact, she stated in her first interview that her father "wanted a boy" and was disappointed when another girl (herself) was born into the family.

Anita positions herself as a rule abiding student at school. She states that she does not bring her mobile phone to school because it is against the school rules "*I have to leave phone at home, everyone tells me to bring it to school, I said no, I can't do it, it is not allowed at school*". She positions herself as mature and world-wise as she "*keeps family separate*" from her friends stating that she would "*get into trouble if I mix friends and family*". When asked if she helped with household chores, she proudly said she could cook and that she prepares dinner every day. She seems to be showing off her readiness to assume the household roles later in life as a daughter-in-law/wife, "*yeah I cook...my regular duty is that I prepare the dinner*". While talking about her future brother-in-law she demonstrated her awareness of qualities expected from a good groom. But she positions herself as different from her sister who has agreed to marry the groom of her parents' choice.

Anita states that “*it is difficult for me...a girl should also be allowed (to choose), it is her life as well, she has to live after all*”. It also suggests that she wants more control and have agency to make decisions for herself. She has different ideas about how to live her life as a girl/daughter in a controlling family and society. Though she is aware of the expectations from a good daughter she wants a different life for herself. She differentiates herself from her sister by stating that her sister “*will do as papa says*”. She also claims her mother support with her argument “*mom also said, it is her life she has to live so she should think now*”.

She does not face much monitoring at home as stated by herself. She provides reasons for it that her father is “only interested in (her) studies” and her mother can be easily duped as “she did not study much” and “comes from a village”. This allows her greater freedom to engage in romantic relationships and dating unlike other girls of her age that are heavily monitored by their families. She herself stated that “nobody checks her phone” or goes through her belongings. It allows her to have a relationship with a man who is eight years elder to her. Monitoring of children and adolescents by family members in India is a common phenomenon to ensure safety from sexual vulnerability and to censor anti-sociocultural elements such as drugs, engagement in unlawful activities.

Anita is also at the recipient end of her English teacher’s licentious attention. She clearly states in her interviews that she has nothing to do with it and does her best to avoid it. Though she herself suggests in another interview that she in fact enjoys his attention as it sets her apart from her peers giving her a higher status. At various instances she can be seen to be taking advantage of the teacher’s attention to establish herself as more powerful and resourceful in comparison to her classmates. At the same time, she can be seen as propagating the image of herself as helpless being a teenage girl who cannot complaint against the authority of the teacher. All these issues and Anita’s uninhibited demeanour to talk and share encouraged me to work more closely on her case.

In the next section I have presented theme-based analysis of Anita’s interviews. The first interview was of 30 minutes and the second interview was of 45 minutes duration.

4. Analysis

This section examines the gendered expectations in society from a teenage girl as understood and explored through the discourse analysis of Anita’s interviews. This section includes five sub-themes: (i) gender expectation in family, (ii) control and monitoring, (ii) son preference, (iii) sexual vulnerability, (iv) teenage relationships, and (v) marriage and chastity.

4.1 Gender Expectations in Family

Family acts as the site for reproduction of patriarchy and normative gender identities. Hess, Ittel, and Sisler (2014) have claimed that even though peer culture, school and media have significant influence during adolescence “the family continues to be an important environment in the formation and transmission of GRO [Gender Role Orientation]” (p.212). Thapan (2005) has also looked at different processes in family and in school which lead to construction of gendered identities in a particular class. Thus, it is significant to examine how Anita reproduces gender stereotypes at times and also how she defies, contests, or manipulates gendered expectations of her parents at other times.

Anita shows awareness of different expectations and restrictions in her society on boys and girls. She states that whereas boys have “*full permission to go out, girls are permitted till evening*”, “*I mean it’s a fact that boys have an upper hand in today’s world and girls re inferior*”. She states that boys are not affected as much as girls who get scared like herself after an incidence of molestation “*even if some incidence happens with them, they can go out and speak*”. Her statement also suggests the biased behaviour or treatment of parents who restrict the girl and increase monitoring in the name of protection.

She demonstrates her awareness of different standards of judgement of sexual attraction and vulnerability when it comes to boys and girls. She is aware of greater restrictions on girls in society and the practice of gender segregation enforced on girls to ensure their image or *izzat* in society as chaste and innocent. “*Girls are like, there are lot of restrictions on them, who are you talking to, why are you talking to them, what does*

he mean to you, you have to give all the details". She indicates her discomfort with all the excess probing and differential treatment of boys and girls.

Though she shows awareness and acceptance of patriarchal gender norms ("but then girls have to leave for their husband's house"), she also shows her awareness of alternatives. She has her own beliefs while she is aware of the norm in the society "I always feel that boys should, boys should realise that why does a girl leave her own house, boys should also leave for the marital home". She seems to know what she wants in her life even though her sister will be marrying a groom of her parents' choice "whoever I marry he should be the kind of guy who understands me, should understand feelings, I don't want him to **dictate**, that he wants me live his way, you will **do as I say**, I don't like such people at all who don't **give freedom** to the girl". Use of words such as 'dictate', and 'freedom' suggest that she is aware of the different kind of lives men and women lead as husbands and wives where the control over the girl changes from the hands of the father to that of the husband. She indicates consciousness that the norm is not to take the girl/daughter/wife's wishes into consideration in making major decisions for her life. Though she does believe that a girl's wishes should be taken into account, "you should ask, ask her as well that what does she want, what kind of person she wants".

(i) Control and Monitoring

The data indicates that Anita faces a lot of control and monitoring at home. She says that she is "scared of papa" and has had warnings from her elder sister about having a boyfriend. She is repeatedly told to focus on her studies. In fact, she states that her father threatened to marry her if she did not work hard to improve her academic performance "my dad already said that if I scored less this time, he will get me married". The threat is intensified by the fact that Anita is a teenager and under age for marriage. She is constantly reminded by her father to study harder since he is "spending so much" on her studies. Her sister even promised her a tablet as a birthday gift if she scored well in exams. Anita justifies her sister by stating that she only wants Anita to achieve what she could not.

Her mother dislikes that she talks to boys and likes to monitor who Anita talks to. In her words Anita's mom "stops me from everything, don't do this, don't do that". She states that she wants to live freely and not be stopped in everything that she wants to do. Anita constantly positions herself as the victim of her parents' controlling behaviour. She justifies their monitoring by stating that her parents (mother) do it because they are aware that she was once subjected to molestation. But she also states that she "wants to live freely" and that it is her life. She states that because of the control exercised at home she likes coming to school as she "can live freely at school, say whatever, I'm free". She positions herself as the victim of a patriarchal society that does not grant agency to the girl to make decisions about her own life.

(ii) Son Preference

Her interview reveals that her father would have preferred a son. Anita states that her father thinks that "sons can provide all that a daughter cannot". When asked that how her life would have been different if she had a brother, she stated that her father would have "given more status to the elder brother. I mean he would have considered him to be everything and would not have done much for me". Her statement suggests the lower status of a daughter in her lower middle-class urban context, where son is the preference. She said that her father does not take much interest in her life unless it is related to academics. She justifies his behaviour by saying that "he has hopes, he was hoping, he wanted a son, since he did not get a son now, he has placed all his hopes on us". Anita also implies that she is taken care and cherished by her mother and her sister who are always worried about her physical and emotional wellbeing ("she will call like 20 times, if I have eaten or not, she likes to know"). Whereas her father is concerned with her academic performance only "papa doesn't take much interest".

Anita wants to fight the stereotypical thinking of her father who wanted a son. She wants "to prove that even a daughter can do it" and "what a son cannot do a daughter can do that". She seems to be affected by her father's preference for a male heir and his belief in the abilities of sons to look after their parents. Therefore, she wants to prove otherwise and claim equal status in the family. She is aware that she would have had inferior status in the family if she had a brother or that her father would have treated her differently if she were a boy "Papa would have given more status to the elder brother". Dube (1997) suggests that the economic reason for son preference is that sons are the recipients of dowry unlike daughters for whom the parents have

to spend a fortune on the dowry and the wedding. Sons are also responsible for continuing the patriline and are expected to take care of the parents in their old age (Bose, 2012, p. 70; Miller, 1997).

She constantly positions herself as a caring and sensitive daughter as she is concerned about her mother and sister. This is clear from her statements such as *“her legs hurt a lot...so I told her to walk, that walking will help her with the pain”*, *“I tell mom that you must rest”*, *“I don’t want to stress out my mom”*. She is constantly trying to prove her worth as a daughter by taking care of her family. She tries to assume the role of the adult in trying to protect her family from any distress. Family honour is taken seriously in many families in north India and the onus of the maintenance of it usually falls on the girls/women in the family. Derne (1994, p. 204) states that *“Family honour is important to north Indians and it is closely connected with women’s modesty”*. When asked if she shared with her sister about the molestation she suffered, she said *“I don’t want to tell all these things to didi (sister) because they will hurt her”*. She also suggests that she broke up with her ex-boyfriend as she was taking a stand to protect her family’s honour, *“he threatened me that your dad is nothing in front of me”*.

She wishes to protect her father from any aggressive outbreaks by not sharing that she has been molested in the past and is at a vulnerable position at school with reference to the English teacher Paresh *“If I tell him then it will only make things worse, so I’m not doing anything that will worsen the situation”*. She states that by doing this she is only trying to protect her family from scandal or shame. Therefore, she has taken into her own hands to contain the damage the news might cause. Anita problematises the issue of ‘honour’ and her role in negotiating ‘honour’ for her family.

(iii) Sexual Vulnerability

Anita is the victim of her English teacher Paresh’s licentious attention at school. Her classmates appropriate this situation by saying that it is because Anita has had many relationships in the past and thus attracts unsolicited male attention. Anita constantly refers to what ‘everyone’ thinks of her or of her actions. Peer opinion matters a great deal to her. She is affected by the fact that some of her friends hold her responsible for attracting Paresh. Though she says that it does not affect her, *“I’m fine according to myself”*, she repeatedly gives justifications stating that she is misunderstood. At multiple occasions she positions herself as being misunderstood by her friends as indicated in her statements *“Paridhi thinks that I am trying to get close (to Paresh), so now I am trying to maintain distance from him”*, and *“these people are saying that now you are after Paresh”*. She suggests that her friends blame her for seducing the English teacher.

She positions herself as the victim of Paresh’s tactless behaviour *“Everyone thinks that he likes me, I said it doesn’t matter if he likes me or not, it all depends on me”*. She indicates that though her friends want her to take some action against Paresh she cannot do so as she knows she is in a powerless position with reference to a senior male teacher, *“now everyone is telling me to do something, say something to sir, now I said what can I say, I can’t do anything he is a teacher, everyone will think that the teacher is right, because in today’s world the teacher is right”*. She shows her helplessness in this case by saying that *“I can’t do anything”*.

She is also aware of her advantageous position with Paresh because of being a teenage female victim. Though she states that she was ‘shocked’ and ‘scared’ by Paresh’s behaviour, she does take advantage of her position to improve her status among her peers as suggested by her statements, *“he believes me”*, *“he talks to me openly, he talks to me in the whole class he doesn’t say anything to anyone else, everyone is like, everyone takes advantage of that they get their chores done from Paresh through me”* and *“I didn’t do anything for my own benefit”*. She decides not to share about Paresh’s advances with Paridhi as she would have reported it to Himadri. She is aware of the power she exerts over Paresh, *“he is ready to do whatever I say”*. Anita might have suspected that she will lose her leverage with Paresh if Himadri encountered or reported Paresh.

She also informs that she was blackmailed and molested by her family’s tenant over a period of time. She states that her young age and innocence made her a target, *“I was young, I was in standard six”*. Both the incidents suggest that she is neither safe at home nor at school. She is not only aware of sexual vulnerability but has also experienced it at a young age. In both her interviews she positions herself as a victim of an unspeakable event. She does discuss the event in the second interview. She indicates that she has been scared of going out alone after dark since that incidence and feels scared when her father is not home *“when papa is*

at office, I feel scared to go out". She confirms her realisation of being at the risk of sexual vulnerability by stating "I felt scared from the inside that what if something like that happens again", and "I don't have much courage". Though her mother is a stay-at-home mother she is not convinced for her security in her presence. She treats her father as the protector or shield against sexually vulnerable situations. Even though she is not always accompanied by him she feels his presence at home as ensuring and comforting. She repeats this belief in her second interview as well. She states that "it needs courage to" talk about being subjected to molestation. It also suggests her awareness that victims are expected to remain silent and be ashamed of their victimisation.

When she was asked if her father was aware of her English teacher's licentious advances towards her, she stated that she has not told him anything because "papa won't leave him if he gets to know about it". She again highlights her father's aggression and the need for her mother, sister, and herself to hide the events with her ex-boyfriend from her father in order to avoid any aggressive outbreaks from him, "so papa, you know we weren't telling anything to papa because then papa won't leave him, papa already said that if anything happened he isn't going to let it go". She indicates the need to contain male aggression through female intervention via secrecy while constantly positioning her father as the aggressive-protective-patriarch.

(iv) Teenage Relationships

Anita is judged by her friends for having boyfriends. She states that her friends think "that I am the fallen one". Her forthcoming attitude in case of her sexual attractions is treated as contemptuous. She is expected to remain discreet and dormant about her desires. She complains of being judged by her peers for openly discussing her interest and relationship with boys, "everyone is saying that I'm all over guys". She justifies that her attraction towards them is normal. Her peers link her free expression of sexual attraction to her sexual vulnerability with reference to the English teacher, "everyone says that because of this you're taken advantage of". It indicates little space for girls to express their desires or sexuality. Whereas maintaining one's distance from boys or at least being discreet about one's relationships is treated as a virtue by Anita's peers. Her molester blackmailed her by threatening Anita to expose her relationship with her boyfriend to her parents. Thus, indicating that a boyfriend is considered to be a taboo.

At multiple occasions Anita tried to play out the stereotypical husband-wife/dominant-submissive binary. She evokes her boyfriend's wisdom stating many a times that she was given important counsel and warning by her boyfriend in different issues. She uses her boyfriend's appropriation to add weight to her words "Himadri also said the same thing". She plays the binary of the damsel in distress and the man as the rescuer by indicating that she hides about Paresh's advances from Himadri (her boyfriend) as she is afraid he might react aggressively "he has already told me that I will take care of Paresh, I said don't do anything now, you do whatever if he does it again, I haven't told him yet".

Her peers suspect her for hurting herself because of her breakup indicating the expected behaviour from a teenage girl after her breakup in the previous relationship. She confirmed that she did take some pills when she was distressed that lead to her admission in hospital. She positions herself as being distraught by the breakup to the point that she was driven to act in a self-destructive manner. Anita naturalises her behaviour by stating that her friends were expecting it.

While talking about friends Anita positions herself as someone who needs support and counsel as suggested using words such as 'helped', 'suggested', 'share', 'support'. She positions herself as someone who does not get enough emotional support at home and uses that as a justification for her relationship with her boyfriend as she is 'lonesome' otherwise. She positions herself as someone with a delicate sensibility as she "cannot deal with so much anger" that she is usually subjected to by her friend Paridhi. According to her she has "never taken out my anger on anyone, I stay in my limits". She positions herself as in control of her anger and more sensible than her peers. She states that "I already face anger at home" and does not expect the same from her friends. She states that she has made friends so that she "can deal with issues at home". The statement also suggests her distress and lack of emotional support at home. Though the reasons that cause distress at home are not elaborated. She repeatedly positions herself as being victimised by her classmate Paridhi who misbehaves with her by scolding her and interfering in her relationship with her boyfriend. She claims that her friends leave her alone. She positions herself as timid, helpless and as playing the role of the reasonable friend by trying to avoid "fight for no reason".

(v) Marriage & Chastity

A the time of the interview Anita's parents were trying to arrange a match for her sister. She suggests that a suitable groom should "have his own house", good job, and earn well. She also indicates that her friends disapproved of her breakup with her ex-boyfriend, "everybody was like you left a guy who has a job". She indicates that girls are expected to be content with the groom of their parents' choice and be proficient in household chores. Anita took pride to say that she could cook and did it every day even though she is just a fourteen-year-old teenage girl. She states that in her society girls are expected to be "pure" and virgin at the time of marriage. She indicates that her family is afraid for her marital life since she was molested, "everyone thinks if, when I get married my husband will come to know that I was, you know, that something happened". She thus suggests that her situation may jeopardise her marriage because of the hegemonic gender expectations of chastity from unmarried girls.

When talking about Paresh Anita reasoned that it was wrong for Paresh to pursue her as "he is a married man". She felt that Paresh was cheating his wife of her right "I mean he should pay attention to his wife the way he is paying attention to me". She thus shows awareness of the expectations from spouses and the norms of behaviour for married man. It is interesting to notice that she does not state her being the underage student as the reason to justify Paresh's intention as misplaced.

5. Conclusion

This article examined the contradictory understandings of what it means to be a middle-class, urban, school-going girl in India while constructing and negotiating one's identity around male authority and gender identity expectations. It demonstrated that family, friends, and school play important roles in one's identity construction and gendered behaviour. The analysis investigated the simultaneous confirmation and manipulation of societal gender stereotypes by Anita. Anita was seen to be torn between expectations from her friends and boyfriend and her father's implicit expectation to comply with respectable femininity by maintaining the 'family honour' in all her actions.

Discourse analysis of Anita's interviews helped to identity construction is intricately linked with processes of socio-cultural meaning making. It also helped to understand the ideological forces acting upon an adolescent girl, which play a significant role in shaping and re-shaping the discourse of identity and gender. In case of issues of gender, within the classroom context, we cannot assume that there is simply one discourse determining gender. There may be dominant discourses constructing stereotypical assumptions about masculinity, femininity and binary gender differences, but there may also be resistant or oppositional discourses advocating, for example, gender diversity, inclusion or separatism. Discourses of gender will themselves be competing with other institutionalised or less formalised discourses within the classroom, for instance the discourse constituting peer approval.

The study facilitated an understanding of the complex and often ambiguous ways in which girls are simultaneously positioned as relatively powerless within a range of dominant discourses on gender, but as relatively powerful within alternative and competing social discourses. It is in the awareness of the potential for expression and self-empowerment, contained in the spaces between conflicting discourses and in the contemporary moments of opportunities for resistance that transformations lie. Though, broad generalisations cannot be drawn from the study of one particular classroom, as my emphasis is on specific constructions of negotiated identities in particular contexts, where further explorations may help the educators to become more aware of the discursive practices which govern learners' identity construction. Using language is the commonest form of social behaviour and experience. The role of the critical analyst is to look into a discourse for manifestations of ideology. In Foucault's view, the analysis of power does not exist prior to the analysis of language. It will also help to understand the ways in which unequal power relationships between participants are produced in discourses at school and society.

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