

'WOMEN IN THIRD SPACE': LIMINALITY OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN SELECTED FICTION OF ARUN JOSHI AND AMITAV GHOSH

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Abstract: Third space in the context of the selected fiction of Arun Joshi namely *The Last Labyrinth* and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, and Amitav Ghosh, namely *The Shadow Lines* and *Sea of Poppies*, functions as an in-between hybrid space which facilitates marginal and voiceless female characters to reclaim their lost voices and rebel against the tyranny of patriarchy. Contrary to its earlier iterations, space has come to be thought of as something that is a result of human activity. Third space is used to denote a third existential dimension that arises when people find themselves in a space that simultaneously is and is not one's home. Such situations manifest externally as seen in physical uprootedness and displacement due to migration, and also internally as seen in various conflicts in personality, character and nurturing multiple worldviews. Hybridity is one of the prime factors responsible for such manifestations as seen in the women characters of Arun Joshi and Amitav Ghosh and this paper negotiates their situations in the context of third space.

Index Terms - third space, hybridity, liminality, female, suppression, marginality.

I. INTRODUCTION

The basic idea behind the term 'third space' is to refer to a 'third existential dimension' which we commonly encounter in most works of postcolonial fiction which is the condition that arises out of being in a place that simultaneously is and is not one's home. This idea of a 'third existential dimension' is perspectival and has been voiced by many critics and theorists using their own definitions and terminologies from Michel Foucault to Edward Soja, Henri Lefebvre and Homi K. Bhabha. It would be an understatement to reiterate that third space is and should be considered one of the serious concerns of the modern world- in arts as well as in our lives.

Since time immemorial Indian women has always been at the receiving end of the tyranny of patriarchy and they have always been stranded in the in-between liminal space between modernity and tradition. Age old traditions of the patriarchal system shackles her while the modern world shows her a future where she can be free of her bindings. The fiction of both Arun Joshi and Amitav Ghosh provide wonderful instances of multiple women characters who highlight this very conflict between two opposing forces and also how different characters respond being in the third space. Most of the characters are pushed to the margins simply because they are female thereby rendering them voiceless and incapable of ushering in any growth. It isn't surprising that they are empowered only in the third spaces which they occupy by dint of their position in the margins wherein they assume a different identity altogether.

II. THIRD SPACE AND LIMINALITY OF WOMEN CHARACTERS

Arun Joshi in his fiction gives mostly secondary roles to his female characters who are simply a means to an end in helping the leading male character to move forward in the narrative space. Therefore, they should be recognized as characters occupying the third space since they are dominated in their own world, rendered voiceless, and pushed to the margins. Meena Chatterjee in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is presented as a plaything for the protagonist Billy Biswas who gets bored of her and eventually she is written off as someone who has failed in her only purpose in life- that of being able to satisfy her husband's weird inner urges and cravings. He marries her and then comes up with hundreds of accusations against her in a way to justify his own lack of domestic commitment and his desire to fornicate with multiple women. In his own defense Billy says:

It might have been saved if Meena had possessed a rare degree of empathy or even a sufficient idea of human suffering. These, I am afraid, she did not have. Her upbringing, her ambitions, twenty years of contact with a phoney society- all had ensured that she should not have it. So the more I tried to tell her what corroding me, bringing me to the edge of despair so to speak, the more resentful she became.

(Joshi 133)

Having satisfied himself with such justifications as to how Meena has failed to make him happy, Billy embarks on a series of sexual escapades with Rima Kaul, a girl who had unfortunately fallen for his broken boy image, and quite naively hoped one day Billy would divorce Meena and marry her. Billy, however, only had one intention of being with her- to fulfill his wanton lust at the expense of her love. Billy himself confesses that he is quite aware of his own moral demise and depravity but is unable to stop himself. He puts on an act of being misunderstood and wronged by others before Rima to seduce her and she easily falls for it. She consoles him by saying "Oh, how misunderstanding you are, my poor boy. I know how you feel. Those who harass you should be put to death straightway" (135) and Billy wastes no time in taking advantage of her body. He confesses to Romi that he had even "hired a room in a third-rate hotel and like any common rogue I seduced her...I didn't even love her, not the way I pretended to" (135).

Even after this Billy is not satisfied and leaves both Rima and Meena and goes to live with a tribal woman Bilasia deep in the jungles. He leaves Rima on the pretext that his adulterous affair with her has turned into the very filth which he was trying to escape, and somehow both Billy and most critics of Arun Joshi's fiction has found a way to blame Rima for that. In the same way, those very critics blame Meena for what Billy did with Rima. Since the world of fiction mimics the real world it is not surprising that even with the fictional world women are blamed and held responsible for a man's shortcomings and inappropriate behavior. Billy himself gives us a lot of reasons, both psychological and spiritual, as to why he did what he did but at the end of the day he is what he is- a philanderer- as his own actions suggest nothing on the contrary. Rima is as much a victim of a cheating and delusional opportunistic male as much as she is a victim of her own dreams. She knew Billy was married and still committed adultery with him letting him take advantage of her hoping someday he will be with her forever. Till her death in the accident she remained in the third space as a character trying to cope with the will be or won't be dilemma. Billy's mysterious disappearance had further clouded his intentions with her and she believed that some misfortune had befallen Billy and that he was still in love with her. As a female character in Joshi's fiction, Rima's liminality arises from the fact that she was simply a means to an end for Billy or maybe the novelist even to justify the protagonist's turn to Bilasia.

Like Rima, Ila in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is also a victim of her own dreams and illusions. Ila is seemingly trapped between the Indian and the Western culture and she desperately wanted to be free from the former, or more specifically, escape from it:

Do you see now why I have chosen to live in London? [...] It's only because I want to be free.
[...]

Free of *you!* she shouted back. Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you.

(Ghosh 98)

Her dreams of being able to live life on her own terms, free from the bindings of patriarchal society, are never realized. She had always loved Nick Price since her childhood but he never paid her much attention. When they grew up and finally got married each had their own reasons- Ila wanted to marry her childhood love and also to settle down in England, while Nick married Ila allegedly for her father's fortune. Immediately after marriage Ila discovers that he has been maintaining extra-marital affairs with multiple women and he casually tells her that "he just likes a bit of variety; it's his way of travelling" (Ghosh 208).

One of the central characters in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, Deeti, is portrayed as a witch-like figure simply because of the color of her eyes:

...she had light grey eyes, a feature that was unusual in that part of the country. Such was the color – or perhaps colorlessness – of her eyes that they made her seem at once blind and all-seeing. This had the effect of unnerving the young, and of reinforcing their prejudices and superstitions to the point where they would sometimes shout taunts at her – chudaliya, dainiya – as if she were a witch: but Deeti had only to turn her eyes on them to make them scatter and run off.

(Ghosh 5)

Ghosh here shows us how women hailing from rural and remote areas of India have to suffer for the lack of education and proper reforms in the administration system in the country. The case of Deeti being drugged and raped by her brother-in-law in connivance with her mother-in-law and her husband's uncle Subedar Bhyro Singh on her wedding night itself simply because her husband is crippled and impotent reflects the heights men would go to in their exploitation of women.

Similar to Billy is Som Bhaskar in Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth* who pursues another man's woman, Anuradha, despite having a wife. Anuradha is introduced to us in the sense of her being Aftab's property although she is not married to him, that is, considering marriage even gives someone rights over his or her partner. Som pursues her and she finally gives in to his desires and falls for him but towards the end leaves him and simply disappears from everyone's lives. From her perspective as well as from Som's, she is in two different versions of third spaces: one created by her condition and the other created by Som as something achievable and unattainable at the same time. Som Bhaskar also justifies his pursuit of Anuradha in almost the same way Billy justifies his affair with Rima:

Geeta, Leela- had perhaps sensed the aloneness and had left it undisturbed for fear of disturbing more than they could handle. Anuradha, on the other hand, was the daughter of disturbance itself.

(Joshi 107-08)

Anuradha displays a rare intellectual fecundity in her assessment of Som's 'I want, I want':

It is not me you want—I know. You want something. You badly want something. I could see that the first time we met. But it is not me. That, too, I can see. I told you so in the dargah.

(Joshi 58-59)

Despite being a character possessing such intelligence and maturity of thought, Anuradha suffers from being stuck between Aftab's possession and following her desires with Som. Towards the end she does what seems to be a fitting logical conclusion to their love story- she leaves Som and disappears- and that is supposedly best for everyone else.

Just like Anuradha, Tha'mma in Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is a very strong character who is in the third space of her own creation: her own Dhaka which she created out of her childhood memories and which she believes still exists. Her strength of character comes out wonderfully in the following lines when she confesses to having harbored desires of killing the English magistrate:

I would have been frightened, she said. But I would have prayed for strength, and God willing, yes, I would have killed him. It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free.

(Ghosh 43)

While Joshi has portrayed the existential crisis and alienation of the modern man, at the same time, he also highlights how the modern woman suffers because of it since one way or another she is bound with it. No one seems to bother or even acknowledge the fact that the modern woman also has the same existential crisis, the same feelings of alienation. It is always about a man's suffering, man's anxiety...like Billy's, like Som Bhaskar's... but never about Meena or Rima or Anuradha or Leela. The character of June in Joshi's yet another existentialist novel *The Foreigner* is also a victim of a male's existential crisis. Sindi Oberoi, a victim of 'tremendous illusion' (208) tries to detach himself from June who was in love with him and wanted to marry him. His cold indifference leads June to turn to his friend Babu Khemka for emotional support and in the process meets her

death. So it all comes down to how women are used as means to an end in the journey of men. Meena, Leela and Rima were the means through which Billy achieves his end i.e. Bilasia; in the same way Anna, Kathy and June were the means to an unknown end for Sindi. It is interesting to see how patriarchy controls the narrative reins in Billy and Sindi's stories. Critics of Joshi's fiction are quick to judge women from the perspectives of the leading male characters only. Arguably, most of them seem to blame the earlier women in the lives of Billy as responsible for his degradation mostly because Billy himself thinks so. So even from a creator-created perspective, the women characters in Joshi's fiction like Meena, Rima, Leela, Anuradha and others occupy a third space because they are denied a perspective or voice of their own. The male characters are given a voice while the females are not.

IV. CONCLUSION

The female characters as seen in the fiction of both Arun Joshi and Amitav Ghosh all went through a defining moment in their lives which changed them as a person and they couldn't go back to who they were before. Their past had redefined them and although they clung to most of the memories of their past some of them moved ahead with their lives. Some of them accepted their lot and made peace with it like Meena Chatterjee and Ila, while others fought in all ways womanly possible to pave a better way of life for themselves like Deeti. Their position in the liminal zone between past and present, modernity and tradition, their own dreams and the society's expectations of them solidifies their respective third spaces wherein some of them regains their lost voices while some others transforms into completely different individuals. Both Joshi and Ghosh highlights the sad condition of the women in India from urban and rural areas alike and how they all suffer at the hands of the all-powerful patriarchal system. While Joshi highlights how women are usually blamed for men's faults and defects in character, Ghosh attacks the patriarchal system which has been one of the prime factors responsible for the suffering of women. Ghosh's women fight back with the system and even try to help other women in the process as we have seen in the case of Deeti and Tha'mma, while Joshi's women mostly make peace with their condition and silently accepts everything thrown at them as seen in Meena Chatterjee, Rima Kaul, Anuradha etc.

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