

ASSERTING WOMAN'S INDIVIDUALITY THROUGH PATRIARCHAL DECONSTRUCTION: A STUDY OF KRISHNA SOBTI'S *TO HELL WITH YOU MITRO*

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Abstract

Patriarchy—literally is ‘the rule of father’. It can be a family, group, or government controlled by a man or a group of men. Patriarchy is a ‘male dominated power structure’ which describes a general structure in which men have power over women. It can be any social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family, the legal dependence of wives and children, and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line. In patriarchy male holds the center and they give meaning to the whole universe as per their benefits. In patriarchy women has been given stereotypical roles as a mother, wife, mistresses or sex-object ‘in her relation to man’. Woman is never recognized in her ordinariness; as a vibrant individual. However, throughout our history we have enormous examples of women who had disestablished patriarchy, asserting their own individuality. Since Renaissance in Europe, woman grew in consciousness. With this growing consciousness comes the realization that her subjugation to man was not ordained by heaven but created by a particular mindset. Thus began woman’s struggle for breaking shackles of dependence on man and patriarchal deconstruction. Women’s march is towards celebrating the glory of their existence as individuals in their own right. So, this paper is a modest attempt to show how the central figure in Krishna Sobti’s *To Hell with You Mitro* deconstructs patriarchy and while asserting her own needs and desires celebrates the individuality of her womanhood splendidly.

Keywords: Assertion, Individualism, Patriarchy, Deconstruction, Womanhood, Gender.

India is a patriarchal society with feudal hangovers. The man is considered to be superior to the woman. He is the master of the family and occupies leading positions in the society that gives him enormous rights over the woman to belittle her, ridicule and browbeat her to submission. The typical patriarchal mind set not only instills superiority feeling among man but also conditions woman to accept her subjugated state and patriarchal dictates. Patriarchy—literally is ‘the rule of father’. It can be a family, group, or government controlled by a man or a group of men. It is the name given,

To the whole complex system of male dominance by which most societies are run now and were run in the past. Patriarchy includes the systematic

exclusion of women from rights of inheritance, to education, the vote, equal pay, equal rights before law; it also includes the ways in which even more liberal regimes tend to leave women out of structures of power even when they claim to be regimes based on equality. (Wolfreys 64)

Thus patriarchy is a 'male dominated power structure' which describes a general structure in which men have power over women. It can be any social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family, the legal dependence of wives and children, and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line. In patriarchy male holds the center and they give meaning to the whole universe as per their benefits. The image that has been created by man for woman is that of "angel in the house," to quote a phrase from Virginia Woolf. Women has been given stereotypical roles as a mother, wife, mistresses or sex-object 'in her relation to man'. It is also important to note that patriarchy always define woman in relation to man as if without him, woman had no identity at all. Beauvoir perceives the man-woman relationship as:

She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other. (Beauvoir 21)

Then these stereotypes or images given to woman are uphold and reinforced by archetypes as well. To Aristotle, woman is inferior to man. Schopenhaur asserts that woman is by nature meant to obey. In India also woman had always been discouraged to get her due share in rights and choices. The unwritten law of male- domination never vests power to women, even in matters related to their own lives. In India woman is either raised to the status of goddess or relegated to a sub human condition. As a result she dangles between the two extremes and is never able to recognize her true self. Woman is never recognized in her ordinariness; as a vibrant individual.

However, throughout our history we have enormous examples of women who had disestablished patriarchy, asserting their own individuality. Since Renaissance in Europe, woman grew in consciousness. With this growing consciousness comes the realization that her subjugation to man was not ordained by heaven but created by a particular mindset. Thus began woman's struggle for breaking shackles of dependence on man and patriarchal deconstruction. According to Merriam-Webster online dictionary to deconstruct is, - "to examine in order to reveal the basis or composition of something with the intention of exposing biases, flaws, or inconsistencies." It can be any process that causes something to lose or shift from an established focus or essence. Thus deconstruction is to draw away from fixed origin or priority. It is a sort of technique used to move from ventured thinking of any kind to open-minded liberal thinking. Earlier patriarchy and its norms are holding center stage and consequently woman needs and aspirations are thrown to margins for the advantage of man. Man was the essence and supreme, while woman's place was always secondary.

It was with thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft, Kate Millet, Betty Friedan, Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir that woman's perspective was brought to the fore, and the patriarchs were forced to realize the dire need for re-conceptualizing and re-structuring the patriarchal norms and gender order. These women militants have de-centered patriarchy by rejecting male chauvinist ethos and by asserting their individuality. Following the lead of these feminists women all over the world who were subjected to untold miseries and tortures over centuries also have started to free themselves from the yoke of oppression and raise their voices. Now women are in the process of realizing their individualism, the possibility of being a "she," irrespective of

someone's daughter/sister, mother/mother in law and wife/daughter in law. Now womenfolk are re-writing the myths and legends in their own terms. Women's march is towards celebrating the glory of their existence as individuals in their own right. Seeking authentic selfhood or personhood, women are now celebrating their womanhood, and are quite in terms with themselves.

So, this paper is a modest attempt to show how the central figure in Krishna Sobti's *To Hell with You Mitro* deconstructs patriarchy and while asserting her own needs and desires celebrates the individuality of her womanhood splendidly.

Krishna Sobti, known as “the grand old dame of Hindi Fiction”, has given us many renowned works in Hindi and some prominent works of her are translated into English as well. Krishna Sobti won the Sahitya Akademi award for *Zindaginama* – a novel set in the feudal Punjab of the pre-partition days. The translation of her work in English includes—*Listen Girl (Ai Ladki)*, *Heart has its Reasons (Dilo Danish)*, *Memory's Daughter (Daar se Bichudi)*, *To Hell with You Mitro (Mitro Marjani)* and *Sunflowers of Dark (Surajmukhi Andhere ke)*. All her works are informed by an urge to get ‘to the roots of the patriarchal do's and don'ts, inhibitions and limitations imposed on woman’. Sobti compels us to rethink the status quo through emphatic female characters. Articulating provocative issues in her novels, she yanks society out of its comfort zones.

To Hell with You Mitro (Mitro Marjani) is the story of Sumitravanti, nicknamed as Mitro, the unstoppable daughter-in-law of the Gurudas household. Her mother-in-law aptly describes Mitro's character in few words,

When she's good, she's better than the best. When she's bad, she's worse than the worst. If in a good mood Mitro is your friend and all her belongings are at your feet. At other times, she becomes so estranged that she spits on her husband. (Sobti 81)

Mitro is a live manifestation of Sobti's uninhibited portrayal of female sexuality. She is what can be called physicality incarnated. She flouts the set norms by expressing candidly her sexual urge. Her resistance is against the patriarchal structure. Her courage is apparent not only in the audacity with which she taunts a closed society, but also in her ability to change her own attitude when she feels it necessary. Perhaps it is the basic honesty of her nature that allows her to face herself and all she has believed in as unflinchingly as she faces her husband's violent wrath and mother-in-laws awed remonstrations. What makes Mitro special is her indomitable spirit. Towards the end when she realizes the hollowness of her mother's existence outside family, she understands the significance of social and familial values.

One of the basic premises of *To Hell with You Mitro* is that any positive change in the position of women cannot be brought about without addressing to their position within family. Apart from being a set of kinship relations and household structures, family needs to be viewed as a power structure, maintained by patriarchy, through which a particular set of household and gender relationships are given meaning. As it is very much clear from the beginning that even though the whole household is maintained basically by Dhanvanti, mother-in-law of Mitro, but ‘the master’ of the house is Gurudas i.e. Mitro's father in law, even Dhanvanti cherishes calling him the head of the family, “Couldn't the master of the house get a little milk without being eyed!” (Sobti 8) Sobti also made an explicit attack on patriarchy when she describes that while Dhanvanti was trying to mind language of Mitro's husband, Sardarilal for Mitro and Banwarilal (Dhanvanti's eldest son) almost ordered her, “Ma, why don't you go and sit with Bapu? . . .

Dhanvanti got up like an obedient daughter” (Sobti 13). Her she reminds us of Manu’s assertion, that “a woman must never govern herself as she likes” (Jung 60), she must always depend and obey male members of her family whether it be her father, husband, son etc.

Thus, Sobti has shown an ideological dimension of family, and that ideology is primarily patriarchal in nature, according to which there are dominant norms and ideas about the roles of men and women in family and outside it. This ideology of family describes and creates separate spheres of work for men and women, which leads to the constitution, and sustenance of unequal gender relations. These unequal gender relations are valued not only by male members of the family but females, conditioned in patriarchy also support these norms with full devotion. As Dhanvanti tries to saddle Mitro in her own ideology, “Smitravanti, if he is stubborn, why don’t you drop your gaze? Looking at a man in eyes does not behove us women, bahu” (Sobti 11). But Mitro who “stood her ground facing him, big brown eyes unblinking” (10), hardly give any care to such preaching.

It is with the character of Mitro that Sobti deconstructs patriarchal norms and conventions. Mitro’s resistance against the repressive forces of patriarchy manifests itself in her transgressive activities. When she feels dissatisfied with her husband, leaving behind *Sita* and *Savitri* kind of sentiments she fancies about her appeasing escapades with males other than her husband. So powerful is this instinct in her that she is ready to stake everything. She does not spare her elder brother-in-law Banwari and passes comments on him every time she comes across him, “Jethji, what am I compared to my Jethani Suhagvanti, but spare me a glance too!” (Sobti 23) Banwari’s inspector friend captures the fancy of the girl and she dreams of having spent a good time with him,

Behind her closed eyes rose the tall moustached form of Niyamat thanedar, Banwari’s police inspector friend. He stood near her laughing and said, “Ai you morning glory, get up! Can’t you see who’s come?” . . . Mitro flung open her hands in delight. “You alley cat come drooling after the cream!” (Sobti 20-21)

Mitro with her dare-all-bare-all spirit, causes ripples in the orthodox, tradition-bound family of Gurudas, the family which predominantly uphold patriarchy. The double standards of patriarchy which deemed sexual behavior “inappropriate in a woman, and for which she is shown social disapproval, may be regarded as appropriate and as praiseworthy in a man” (Pilcher 34) are also despised by Mitro. She is not in agreement with the conventional patriarchal ideology where,

Young women had to safeguard their sexual reputation and avoid being labeled as sexually promiscuous, while young men had to demonstrate their sexual reputation in order to enhance their standing with their masculine peer group. (Pilcher 36)

Rather she is very candid about her sexual longings. Her indomitable spirit and frank, open expression of her insatiate sexual urge is something totally unbecoming of a middle class married woman. She frankly mirrors her physical passion as,

Jethani, there must be no man as cold as your brother-in-law. No joy no grief, no love-making, no desire no hunger . . . just kicks and blows and abuses and accusations day in day out.” (Sobti 17)

At another place also she expresses,

This fool of mine has no clue how to hold down a woman like me. I wait for him all decked up and pretty, and he goes out to buy provisions! Arre,

one who hasn't mastered the art of keeping a woman, how can he tame this wild Mitro? (Sobti 31-34)

Because of her openness in speech, she becomes the target of criticism by the members of her family, as her elder brother in law criticizes her saying,

There are always ten pairs of eyes on this house because of Majhli. It's not good, Amma. Work out something, persuade her to go to her mother's for a few months. (Sobti 82)

Her husband also finds her ways wanton and wild, and pronounces helplessly, "Amma, mark my words. This beauty will take the name and honour of this house down with her. Or she'll have me exiled across the black waters." (Sobti 13)

Brought up outside familial ties, Mitro goes on to flout what other thinks about her. Everyone in the novel tries to tame Mitro to accept and cherish womanly virtues of subservience to male authority. Her elder sister-in-law, Suhagvanti, the incarnation of typical daughter-in-law advises her, "Devrani, for daughters and daughters-in-law, the rules of the home and hearth are the farthest limits" (20).

Unlike her mother-in-law and elder sister-in-law, Mitro is not of the type of women who feel contented in performing subservient roles to their husbands thinking that this is what they are meant for. Her thoughts, actions, behavior are not even least controlled by the male hegemonic power. When Suhagvanti asked Mitro whether she has 'taken permission from her man' to visit her maternal home, Mitro's eyes flashed embers in anger and she retorted, "Am I born a handmaiden to the male? For nights on end, he doesn't spare me a glance, and I keep tugging at his wrap." (Sobti 93)

And what is more attractive in this bold diva is that even though she never bows to male supremacy or patriarchal ideology yet she loves her womanliness. She is fully aware of her physical charms. She thinks that she can win over any man as long as she has a beautiful, attractive body. In one of her discourses with her elder sister-in-law she asks her, "Tell me the truth Jethani, does any other woman have breasts like these?" (Sobti 18) The novelist has very beautifully described her introspection one morning,

She yawned, stretched languorously and looked at her mother-in-law with laughing eyes, as if to say – Sasuji, this youth is mine, all mine to flaunt. I didn't go begging for it. (Sobti 22)

Unlike Ammu, the old woman in *Listen Girl*, she has no desire to be born as a man in next birth. Ammu longs to be born as a man because in her present birth the chief thing she has understood in her life is the fact that men are the privileged one in this world and this basic premise is hard to be changed. Contrary to Ammu, in Mitro we have a woman who is like a happy go lucky chirping bird. Whenever and wherever she feels suffocated with patriarchal dictates, she raises her voice against it but never felt pathetic about her being a woman. For her there is no difference being a man or woman. She views both as equal, no one subordinate to other or dominant over other. When she is angry, she dares to fire her anger on her husband as, "Maaji, don't brood so over your son. His own deeds will fling him across the black seas" (Sobti 11). But when she is in good mood she even proclaim her to be his slave just to express her love, "here I am my lord, your slave at your service. If you wish, eat this up. If you don't, try me instead" (50). It is because of this natural loveliness of her character that compels her father-in-law to appreciate her here and there even though others scorn at her, "it is Mitro who is the life of this house. She has a terrible tongue. But she does liven up the house with her chirps." (99)

The climax comes towards the end when Mitro visits her mother's place and arranges for sexual escapades with one of her mother's clients in the very presence of her husband in the same house. Mitro realizes the hollowness of her mother's existence outside family when her mother reveals her that now no visits her mother and thus she feels terribly lonely,

Your mother's times are long over, Mitti! Now who is her friend and lover, who is her companion? . . . this cold hearth has neither heir nor owner now. Not even the name of a dead man to call its own! . . . this house now rushes up to bite your lonely mother, ri Mitti! (Sobti 111)

Now the same husband she cursed day in and day out now appears to her an invaluable treasure she cannot afford to lose. Here she evolves as an individual and understands the significance of familial and social norms. By making a character like Mitro understand the importance of family life, Sobti perhaps reposes her faith in the institutions of family and marriage which irrespective of their restrictions, seem to her important and therefore must be preserved.

In this way in *To Hell with You Mitro*, on one hand Krishna Sobti made Dhanvanti, Suhagvanti, Banwarilal and Sardarilal as mouthpiece of patriarchal norms and convention while on the other hand with Mitro she has given an antidote to patriarchy. Mitro's family members reiterate the set definitions and codes of patriarchy and for Mitro it is her chief task to dismiss these codes. She de-centers patriarchy repudiating its guidelines. She never follows patriarchal standards, whether it is in her speech, act, thinking or behavior. She is all in all a rebel who cast off masculine hegemony to margins and establishes and put to center her own desires and wishes, desires and wishes of a woman. Patriarchy accepts woman to be silent, submissive, unselfish, timid, conventional, and with no display of sexual desires; contrary to all this Mitro is loudmouthed, domineering, bold, frank, unconventional, and openly displays her sexual desires. Towards the end she comes to realize the worth of familial and social norms but for her these norms also have meaning after personal individuality only. She gains the ethical value of being virtuous and chaste but that is not even a slight hint that she will bow meekly to patriarchy. There is no change in her even towards the end. She was as vocal and expressive even in the end as she was in the begging. All that change is that she understood the significance of following those norms which are essential for a morally upright society, but this is not at the cost of losing her own individuality. She assimilates this new awakening of her in herself in such a way that increases the charm of her as person to a much greater extent. She remains the same Mitro who has deconstructed patriarchy and celebrates her individual identity as a woman.

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