

## CROSSING THE THRESHOLD: TRANSGRESSION AND RESISTANCE

**Dr. Lakshmi Muthukumar**

Associate Professor and Head,

Dept of English,

SIES College of Arts, Science and Commerce,

Sion West, Mumbai – 400022

### Abstract

The idea of the threshold has fascinated feminist researchers and scholars and has provided critics with an exciting visual manifestation of the act of transgression and resistance. The concept of a threshold is fascinating as it presents a human person with a perennially open choice. It enables us as citizens to make the personal political and the political personal whenever we choose to, as we compartmentalize our lives as women and lead them in the midst of these slippages between the private and the public spheres. The threshold as a space has an innate liminality that holds great potential in terms of imaging women's attempts at surmounting barriers created by gender socialization and acculturation. The paper looks at the Jewish American woman playwright's employment of the idea of the threshold in her political drama *An American Daughter* as an interesting liminal space.

The idea of the threshold has fascinated feminist researchers and scholars and has provided critics with an exciting visual manifestation of the act of transgression and resistance. The concept of an *umbartha*<sup>1</sup> is fascinating as it presents a human person with a perennially open choice. It enables us as citizens to make the personal political and the political personal whenever we choose to, as we compartmentalize our lives as women and lead them in the midst of these slippages between the private and the public spheres. The threshold as a space has an innate liminality that holds great potential in terms of imaging women's attempts at surmounting barriers created by gender socialization and acculturation. Meera Kosambi an Indian sociologist writes about the popularity of the threshold as an image in the context of feminist literature.

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<sup>1</sup> The word "umbartha" means "threshold" in the Marathi language. The image comes to one's mind because of an upbringing mired in a Maharashtrian ethos in Mumbai with a fair amount of exposure to Marathi cinema, myth and culture. Culturally, the image aptly depicts the limits that patriarchal society draws around a married woman's freedom within the space of the home. The act of crossing this threshold is therefore seen as an act of disobedience and protest.

The image-and the metaphor- of the threshold brings us to the public/private dichotomy that has had a long and chequered career in feminist literature. The once-popular binary, corresponding to the male/female spheres of activity, with social transition being marked by the image of women crossing from the private into the public sphere, began to be questioned by some feminist scholars more than a decade ago (Kosambi 7).

While she cites Gisela Bock who includes this binary among one of the most “discarded conceptual frameworks of women’s history” (in Kosambi 7), she adds that the public/private distinction has again gained popularity among researchers and academicians. Mary Ryan, for instance, underscores the utility of this distinction in historical research while simultaneously stressing on the relative nature of its usefulness, “We certainly cannot apply the quartet of public and private, male and female, in some simplistic fashion across time, place, and human experience” (Ryan 14).

This is an important observation. In the context of Wasserstein’s political drama, *An American Daughter* Lyssa is a privileged white, educated, prosperous, heterosexual woman, who for all practical purposes enjoys a public presence in her role as surgeon and a conventional “private and personal” life complete with husband and two children. As an American citizen, therefore, she straddles the private and the public and in the eyes of civil society and the media is making the best of both worlds. She is not a woman suffering from “a problem that has no name” that her American suburban counterparts suffered from three decades ago. She straddles both worlds efficiently and perhaps, as civil society and the media note in the play, a little too efficiently. There is envy and surprise at the alacrity with which she discharges her duties and when she commits indiscretions the media latches on to it and exaggerates its importance thus pre-empting her entry into the world of active citizenry as a candidate for the Senate elections.

The *umbartha* is seen by Kosambi as a “tenacious metaphor”, one that contains within itself “an image of restrictive, restricted and dangerous periphery” (4). Kosambi refers to Jabbar Patel’s 1981 film *Umbartha* with a screenplay by Vijay Tendulkar based on Shanta Nisal’s novel *Beghar* (Homeless, 1976). A comparison of Lyssa’s situation with Sulabha’s is illuminating. Kosambi sees in the film “a Marathi cinematic statement of the evolving feminist consciousness” (4) in Maharashtra’s public discourse that effectively deploys the threshold as a metaphor. Sulabha has everything and yet she feels she has nothing. In the traditional patriarchal set-up apparently blessed with an affluent husband, daughter and an extended family, she finds herself suffocated with nothing to do. She wants to participate actively in society. Consequently, she registers for social work that requires her to shift residence to the place of work.

This act necessitates a crossing of the threshold of the home, the *umbartha*. When she returns she finds that her family has forgotten her existence completely. Her husband is having an affair with another woman, her daughter has been adopted by her sister-in-law who does not have children, and her mother-in-law refuses to accept her. Sulabha defies society and confidently leaves her marital home thus empowering herself in and through her quest for selfhood and identity. Lyssa’s situation is very different both culturally and socio-politically.

While Lyssa leads an active public life and an apparently satisfactory private life, she feels the need to draw on the political legacy that her father’s familial history bestows on her. She wants to play an active role in contemporary US politics. She has strong pro-choice views on abortion and wishes to assert her candidature in the forthcoming Senate elections. She obviously feels that an active political role will give her considerable epistemic authority and privilege. She

can put her knowledge to use in a more practical way by changing policy decisions and consequently the discourse on crucial subjects such as abortion. Wasserstein's play depicts a woman's attempt to retrieve the public sphere in a more inclusive way when she finds herself positioned in an unequal playing field. She may be privileged, relatively speaking, but she is still disadvantaged in that the public sphere that she inhabits is a partial one.

A few questions assail us when we analyze the play's ending. Assuming that it suits us as citizens holding a rather "imperial Roman view of legal citizenship" (Bellamy 97) to keep the two spheres compartmentalized as binaries as if they were not feeding into each other, we tend very easily view them as completely divorced from each other. This happens when we repose complete and rather "idiotic"<sup>2</sup> (in the Greek sense of the word) faith in the governmental bodies as impartial agencies who will provide every citizen with an equitable framework for their activities (97).

One cannot help wondering if Lyssa was not taking the easy way out by withdrawing her nomination. She seems to lay down her arms rather tamely for a woman "who has bite". She retreats from the gate that would have lead her into a world of politics as a truly active citizen of the public sphere and instead chooses to be content with her role in the private domestic sphere and a physician in the public sphere. Unlike Sulabha in the Marathi film *Umbartha*, who bravely crosses the threshold, Lyssa retreats. Has she been cornered, stifled and gagged by a patriarchal media? Has she tamely allowed herself to be victimized by giving them cause for it? Was not the slip, after all, a telling one? Shouldn't she have ideally answered the jury notice? One could take two positions.

Did Lyssa throw the jury notice away because she had too many commitments as a professional woman and a proactive mother and wife? Or was the gesture a sign of arrogance stemming from the belief that she was anyway doing a lot of good work and therefore could afford not to be bothered with minor "bureaucratic details?" (AAD x). Critics have seen the play as a combination of several genres. Balakian for instance views it as a "drawing room comedy, comedy of manners, political satire, social problem play and a domestic infidelity drama" (Balakian 141). The play alludes to a real life incident involving Zoe Baird who was a corporate lawyer for Aetna, nominated to be attorney general, but forced to withdraw her candidature for the post in 1993. She and her husband had hired illegal aliens from Peru (the Corderos) as domestic help and had also failed to pay their Social Security taxes because the Corderos had no Social Security numbers.

This incident made Zoe Baird seem like a person who had abused her privilege, position and influence. Wasserstein alludes to the controversy as Jurygate instead of Nannygate and sees the issue as ironic in an era of liberalism where a woman was being disqualified from office because she was unable to find a full-time American baby sitter. A few days before this incident, Hillary Clinton, then only the wife of a presidential nominee, also came under fire for publicly declaring that she did not want to stay at home and bake cookies. There was a huge uproar and Hillary Clinton had to eat humble pie and soon made a public appearance wearing a headband while holding her husband's hand.

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<sup>2</sup> Bellamy observes that the English word "idiot" actually comes, etymologically, from the Greek word 'idiotes' which is an epithet used to "describe someone who concentrated entirely on their private affairs to the neglect of the public realm"(97).

Wasserstein has referred to both these incidents in her play very deliberately in order to draw attention to the fact that though America may be the land that champions democracy, when it came to women, the land was far from free and equitable. According to Christopher Bigsby, Wasserstein's alludes to these instances in order to reveal "something about the nature of American society, the moral confusions of liberalism, the inner contradictions of the new feminism and the destructiveness of a conservatism which itself now took different forms" (Bigsby 362).

The title of the play is also extremely significant and seems to underscore Wasserstein's point that Lyssa's identity is constantly being decided by the role she is presently playing in a highly patriarchal American society as the *daughter* of an American Senator and the granddaughter of Ulysses Grant. She is Lyssa, the person, **last** and in her mediatized role as the daughter of an American Senator she is caught in a catch 22 situation out of which there is no escape and if at all she has an "out" it is only by making a tame compromise. She is advised by her father to ignore the injustice and go one with her life, an advice that is also coincidentally inherited, a typically patriarchal piece of advice, in an apparent democracy where gender debilitates active citizenship. Wasserstein's pivotal characters Dr. Lyssa Dent Hughes and Dr. Judith B. Kaufman are both victims of "multiple patriarchies" in the play. Wasserstein portrays both these friends as foils to each other in a play that uses the idea of the threshold as an interesting liminal space.

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