



Matriarchy and Margins: The Self-Other Dichotomy in *The Grande Matriarch of Malabar*

Pooja K

Research Scholar, Department of English,
Payyanur College, Kannur University
Email: poojakay0502@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

In the novel *The Grande Matriarch of Malabar* by Sajitha Nair, the theme of the Self- Other dichotomy plays a vital role in understanding the dynamics of power in a matrilineal society. Using Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of mimicry and hybridity, this paper examines the interconnections between the protagonist and other women in the narrative. Dakshayani Amma, the matriarch falls into a conflict within herself by imitating the patriarchal norms and also resisting it. Rohini, her grand daughter is the only soul in the narrative who talks back to Dakshayani Amma. Being raised up by two different cultures, Rohini embodies a hybrid culture, finally succumbing to her native land. This analysis explores the tension between the characters as they try to sustain and subvert their identities.

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Introduction

Identity can be defined as a state of being or a sense of self shaped by ones social, cultural, economic, and political influences. It includes both self-perception and how others perceive an individual. It is influenced by family, and social relationships. Thus, it is constructed in terms of binary oppositions such as self or other, insider or outsider, black or white, man or woman, civilized or barbarian etc. According to Bhabha (1994), a colonized subject is "faced with a dimension of doubling; a spatialization of the subject, that is occluded in the illusory perspective called the 'third dimension' of



the mimetic frame or visual image of identity. He posits identity as never fixed and shaped by historical and cultural intersections (p. 71). Identity is always in a state of modification. Stuart Hall (1990) asserts that we should think, of identity as a “production”, which is never complete and is always in the process. For him, there are two kinds of identity. Firstly, identity as “being” that includes a sense of unity and commonality, and second, identity as “becoming” (p. 223).

Bhabha categorises the world into self and other and talks about the dilemma it creates in the understanding of culture. By using the concepts such as mimicry, hybridity, and ambivalence, he considers culture as non- universal phenomenon. He believes that culture is open to changes and is never static. Hybridity is a positive term according to him. By mingling different cultures together, a new culture is produced which has the ability to destabilize the existing power. By mimicking a reformed, recognizable Other, the subject becomes a hybrid who achieves a sort of power and freedom to function. Bhabha (1994) claims that the mimicry is “constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference (p. 122).

A text produces a subject and the text is produced by a subject. Therefore, every text contains an underlying power strategy of its society as it is highly subjective in nature. Text and the context coexist. “Texts are seen as material productions of specific historical conditions and they are deeply embedded in social customs and political structures of power” (Ramakrishnan, 2011, p. 49). Our access to historical narratives is in the form of verbal or written records and other sources including the archives. But how these narratives are put together and their availability and unavailability are significant. As Spivak (2012) would say, “we must mediate upon how they (we) are written, rather than simply read their masque as historical exposition” (pp. 57-58). This process requires an understanding of the Self-Other dichotomy in the text that exist together. An individual is allotted to a subject position in a society depending on these factors. Metanarratives had given woman an image being confined to private sphere, whereas, men to the public. Domestic frameworks of femininity such as ‘wifhood’, ‘motherhood’, etc., made a woman acceptable to the society. But in a matriarchal system, women prevail over the conventional roles. But in both patriarchal and matriarchal structures, power is the inevitable factor that bridges a gap between the subject and those who are subjected to it.

The Grande Matriarch of Malabar by Sajitha Nair dives into the history of matrilineal system existed in Kerala and the changes it underwent through the gradual course of time. Revolving around the life of Dakshayani Amma, the matriarch of Kalyedath *Tharavadu* (ancestral home) in North Malabar, the text tries to reveal complex relationship between the characters and the social stigmas of that time.



The novel strives to explore complex relationships between women of three generations and their association with the cultural/ social environment.

The protagonist of the novel, the matriarch grandmother Dakshayani Amma is a dominant figure of the Kalyedath tharavadu in the North Malabar of Kerala. To a greater extent, her dominance bears a resemblance to the patriarchal system and we can find unequal dissemination of power among all the female characters of the novel. The novel divulges that even within matriarchy, hierarchies or social order persist, specifically along the lines of caste, and gender. The matriarch herself falls in a gap between her dominant self and the weaker Other in her personality. This can be examined through the lens of self-other dichotomy where the matriarch embrace authority, while other female characters stay in contrast to the matriarch, situated as the 'Other'. This article argues that power, regardless of gender, often needs an Other to operate. By leaning on the theory of Homi K Bhabha's mimicry and hybridity, this paper analyses the role of matriarch and her actual space in society. Does the matriarch in the novel mimics the male- dominated systems? Does the matriarch perform power in a way that subjugates other women in the novel?

Analysis

Dakshayani Amma, being a matriarch tries to imitate the dominant patriarchal culture. She constantly tries to fit into her commitments and responsibilities as a matriarch throughout her life. She always talked in an authoritarian voice. She commands and demands others of her household to obey her. She remains hesitant to changes. She refused to accept the idea of modernity and the undergoing changes in matrilineal system of Kerala with the colonial intervention. Though married to Chapunni, she stays away from her wifely duties and takes care of her ancestral house which she had inherited from her mother. She "was everywhere at once" (Nair, 2023, p.63). She supervises the workers in the field and ensured the smooth functioning of her house simultaneously. Her dominant nature and attitude made her the central figure of her family similar to a patriarchal figure and the people depending on her obeyed her. She stood adamant in her decisions and was not ready to accept the undergoing changes in the societies of Kerala followed by modernization. But her valour and nobility fades at night as she sobs thinking about her differently abled daughter. "Beneath the veneer of power, status and nobility, there was unfathomable pain" (Nair, 2023, p. 27). She becomes an ordinary woman worried about her daughter's future. On the one hand she is a martinet who is in charge of the whole tharavadu and its people. On the other, she becomes that fragile mother who wants nothing but marriage of her differently abled daughter to someone from a reputed family as hers. She boasts about her daughter's cooking and



organising skills. There are instances in the novel where she tries to lure Achuthan's friends to marry Pavizham by boasting about her daughter's beauty, and her cooking and sewing skills.

Pavizham, the only daughter of the matriarch stays different from her mother. Her deafness and dumbness symbolically signify her docility. Being shy and passive, she represents the subjugated femininity, whereas, her mother represents the unconfined patriarchy. Pavizham had no choice of her own and she obeys her mother. Dakshayani Amma's obsession for her daughter made Pavizham hard to choose her life. Though she learnt to read and write and laboriously communicated using gestures and sounds after her speech therapy, choices of her life were made by her mother. Her mother decided her marriage with Sadanandan, Achuthan's friend. After marriage, her mother's dominant space was replaced by her husband. After giving birth to a baby girl, her life circled around her husband and daughter. She lived the life of a dutiful wife and a mother until she died of heart attack.

Dakshayani Amma's glory of being a matriarch expanded with her son Achuthan's job that gave her an alternative income apart from other sources of income. She "managed the finances tactfully; was a good administrator and ensured that everything functioned with aplomb" (Nair, 2023, p. 100). Modern gadgets and equipment were introduced to the home along with the repair and construction of certain rooms in the house. Gradually, Achuthan became a submissive subject under his mother's supremacy. He neither had any opinion or voice in his own home. He carried out the orders of his mother similar to a submissive wife obeying her husband, "Achuthan places me and the tharavad before everything else, Dakshayani Amma often says (Nair, 2023, p. 156). When she found Gauri, Sadanandan's sister as her daughter in law, Achuthan married her discarding his love for Srikala, his childhood sweetheart. Even after marriage, significant decisions about his life were made by his mother. "Having metamorphosed into an able matriarch and being the supreme authority of the household, Dakshayani Amma's confidence fringed on arrogance. Not only did she like to have situations under control, but she also controlled people who revered her" (Nair, 2023, p. 170).

Bhanu has a prolonged relationship with Dakshayani Amma. Though, she was from the same caste, she belongs to the lower class and "lacked the family name of a tharavadu" (Nair, 2023, p. 31). Bhanu is a shadowy figure of Dakshayani Amma, having no opinions of her own and followed the matriarch whenever and wherever she can. She comes daily in the morning, does the domestic chores and leaves by dusk. Like other characters, Bhanu too is voiceless in the novel. She acts like a puppet and a secret keeper of Dakshayani Amma. She takes care of the children of Kalyedath as her own. The matriarch organized all the rituals and practices with the help of her better half Bhanu. During her absence in the house, Bhanu managed the household, working tirelessly and looking after Dakshayani



Amma's children and even stayed at nights to take care of them. Dakshayani Amma calls out Bhanu often, but she always remembered to keep a boundary between them so that Bhanu remains the 'Other' forever. Dakshayani Amma never considered Bhanu's son as a better groom for Pavizham because according to the matriarch, Bhanu's lack of tharavadu name suggest her disreputable status among the Nayar community. As Arunima says, "A popular proverb in Kerala of the nineteenth century states that 'even if one is a Nayar one should be born in tharavadu'.... To belong to a tharavadu meant to possess wealth, status, power and privilege" (Arunima, 2003, p. 11). There are occasions when Achuthan questioned his very existence at the tharavadu, but they were futile.

Dakshayani Amma's connection with her daughter-in-law Gauri was not harmonious. She treated her like one of her domestic helpers. Gauri, like other female/ male characters remained silent. She continued to exist as the 'Other' in Dakshayani Amma's life. She was soft-spoken, and with a few days, she "had adjusted to the rhythm and the routine" of the family (Nair, 2023, p. 160). She opened her mouth only when someone asked her something. During the initial days of marriage, Achuthan hardly talked to her. Even though they shared a room, she slept on the floor until the ice broke between them after a couple of weeks. Dakshayani Amma assigned household chores to her when she got pregnant and Gauri did righteously. She was furiously angry whenever Achuthan showed affection to his pregnant wife, "She nitpicked profusely and made every moment tough for Gauri" (Nair, 2023, p. 177).

Rohini, the granddaughter of Dakshayani amma is the only female character in the novel who has the freedom to talk freely to her. After Rohini's arrival, Dakshayani Amma's obsession for Pavizham got changed. She insisted that Rohini should grow up with her grandmother and not her father. Her bias between Rohini and other grandchildren was very evident that only Rohini was allowed to roam around Dakshayani Amma wherever she goes. But the physical proximity between them remained only until Rohini was taken back to her parents. Rohini's upbringing in a foreign land made her more rational and modern both in her physical and emotional outlooks. She utilised all the chances of mocking the matriarch regarding the primitive practices of rituals. Her stubborn attitude often annoyed the matriarch who teases her saying, "looks like you are making up of your mother's lack of verbal expression" (Nair, 2023, p. 209).

Rohini comes back to her native land after her mother and grandmother leaves the world. She found it difficult to connect herself with the house she spent her childhood. Caught between two different cultures, she submits to an ambivalent state neither belonging to the foreign land with her father and her step mother nor belonging to her tharavadu which has now become a haunted house. Her connection with the past is only in the form of stories people tell her about the matriarch and the legacy



of Kalyedath tharavadu. In the end she assimilates the tharavadu by converting it to a Malabar Heritage Home, that emerges from the idea of her foreign and traditional upbringing. It has the essence of her both cultures.

Conclusion

On the whole, one can say, Dakshayani Amma imitates the patriarchal norms because she wants to establish a recognizable space in the society as a matriarch. She apes another culture and at the same time use it as an element for resistance from her wifely duties. She gives orders and never accepts from someone. By incorporating the matriarchal elements with patriarchy, she appropriates and assimilates two different personas at the same time identifying her to be a hybrid subject. Whereas, Rohini, who is the only character in the novel who resists Dakshayani Amma's rigid customs and practices finally gets back to her home finding herself to be in a position of nowhere. Torn between two cultural upbringings, she converts the legacy of Kalyedath tharavadu to a heritage home signifying her acceptance of hybridity, imbibing her foreign and native upbringing together.

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