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Equivocality and Apoliticism of Motherhood in Daar Se Bicchudi by Krishna Sobti

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Abstract: *Daar se Bicchudi* by Krishna Sobti hides its complexity underneath its layered narrative. Popular readings of the text bank towards representing Pasho, the protagonist of the novella, as a rebellious or a strong woman character. However, the paper enters the nuances of the characterisation of Pasho and argues that she challenges traditional feminist approaches, gaining her individuality from her spatial and temporal dimensions. It explores the equivocality in the narrative and through that approaches the apoliticism of Pasho's motherhood, which represents a different trajectory from patriarchal methods of violence.

Keywords: Motherhood, Woman, Politics, Feminism, Apoliticism.

The paper attempts to explore the complexities in reading the text *Daar Se Bicchudi* by Krishna Sobti within the purview of traditional feminist theoretical domains. The text represents a protagonist, Pasho, who remains undeveloped, consequently due to her passive reactions to her life experiences. Throughout the narrative, we see Pasho emotionally responding to the suffering she receives, albeit partially suggesting to herself to act on her beliefs at certain junctures in her life. The sole act of running away from her home proves to be riddled with ambiguities, which are usually ignored in favour of summarising her as a rebellious character. She is seen as crossing the threshold of her uncles' home in an act of building up a resilient disposition. However, if Pasho is to be seen in this light then her downfall in the rest of the narrative, where she is raped, sold, and beaten throughout till the end, represents her to possess a negative attitude towards life where she chooses to reject revolting, and instead to live a subservient life, subjugating herself to the whims of the society. This perspective asserts that Pasho plays the role of an inert tool to display the conditions of her times and be a representative of the idea of someone who has been untethered like a blown leaf in a turbulent journey through the storm, separated from the branch that composed her totality of life, as the title of the novella suggests. However, is Pasho simply a character laden with literary responsibilities to perform in passivity this romantic notion? Or is she someone who is a representative of a strong woman?

The paper argues that Pasho is neither a passive character nor a representative of a traditional feminist protagonist, who possesses a will to enter the politics and proceed to achieve an independent and autonomous life, but rather a representative of a ‘composite complexity’ and acts as a window to venture into a philosophical debate on different rivers of historical sensibilities.

The epigraph of the novella says,

नानी ठीक ही कहती थी
सँभलकर री,
एक बार का थिरका पाँव
ज़िन्दगानी
धूल में मिला देगा! (Sobti)

Nani rightly put indeed
you be careful
a slip of a step
will turn life
to dust. (my trans.)

This advice is repeated two times within the text, and at critical turning points, first on page 91 and then again at the climax of the story on page 123. Together with the epigraph and other repetitions, it acts as a refrain that helps set the theme of the story. This refrain and the title of the novel are the primary fixtures upon which the narrative balances itself. The flashbacks have been used as a narrative technique to bring a sense of intimacy with the feelings of Pasho, but over and above perform, albeit slightly, the role of breaking the linearity of the text; a major chunk of the weight is borne by hidden ambiguities that refuse to make this a linear text, but rather a site for constant reflection, as Pasho attempts to do. It is the appearance of this refrain, Nani’s (Pasho’s maternal grandmother) advice on page 123, that begins an inquiry into the intent of the characters, with a string of questions appearing because of its equivocality. In the original text, the word “ठीक,” which has been translated as “rightly,” represents that Pasho agrees to the advice after prudent reflection. However, in line with popular readings of the text, two dominant readings appear, contingent upon how Pasho’s

evocation of these lines is understood. The first reading builds upon Pasho's passive character and states that in accepting her Nani's advice, she shows remorse for following her will, and succumbs to the status quo by relinquishing the desire of rebellion. The second reading hears a subtle pause in the expression of these words by Pasho, centring upon the word "indeed," where it is regarded as being in a satirical tone. It is the reading of Pasho's passivity that will be discussed first.

If Pasho accepts that it is vital to maintain the status quo of the society, and one shall be careful and avoid "a slip of a step," silently acquiescing all that life throws at someone, then it brings up another significant scene for the inquiry that is her act of leaving her uncles' home. This raises the question, did Pasho leave on the premise that her uncles would kill her? If this is to be negated, then this builds up the perspective that the author by making Pasho the narrator and punishing her in the novella, aligns her thought with Pasho, and gives a didactic lesson to the readers that the nation was not ready during the times of Pasho, and neither in the time of the publication of the novella, nor will it be in the future, to allow a woman to venture out on her own to build her life. Sobti's apparent lack of describing the ideological and intellectual space, where Pasho would reflect critically upon her experiences and gain an individual personality, represents a lack of inclusion of a sustained rebellious and political attitude that could have sparked traditional feminist discourses to speak upon the life of Pasho. Sobti never leaves the path of empathy for Pasho; no "disdain" of the author ever reflects upon her. It is visible when Pasho's life is restored to a climate conducive to her growth. However, for the majority of the text, the texture of the narrative represents Pasho as a character who passively displays the horrors of a society; a society that is not conducive to sustaining the innocence, nor the physical sustenance of a woman.

Krishna Sobti has described, on pages 54 and 55, a scene where Pasho's uncles display their gratitude to Sheikh Ji for getting Pasho married to Diwan Ji. With tears in their eyes, they carry the expression of contentment with their restored honour. Pasho's young body was no longer on the streets and in undesirable spaces. Pasho was now married and settled away from the uncles. They were relieved to have the matter resolved. Gone are the days when Pasho used to flaunt her taut skin and her "*paranda*" clad hair. However, what makes this scene significant is Pasho's reaction to the knowledge of her uncles finding resolution, she says,

मुझ अजानी ने न तो कुछ सोचा, न समझा और रात घर से निकल पड़ी। शेखों की हवेली जाने की मत उस रात मन में न पड़ती तो रबब जाने आज कहाँ होती! मामू और मामियों के लिए जी तरसा। अच्छी-बुरी जो भी कहते थे, मेरे सगे-सम्बन्धी तो वही थे! (Sobti)

Being unaware I neither ruminated nor understood, and left home that night. If the idea of leaving to Sheikh's mansion had not surfaced in my consciousness, then god knows where I would be. The heart craved for the uncles and aunts. Good-bad, whatever they used to say, they were still my kin. (my trans.)

She reflects that, beyond their good and bad behaviour towards her, they were still her "kin," her uncles and aunts. Her act of simplifying their complex behaviour towards her creates an impediment in deciphering the underlying intent of their nature. Sobti begins its narrative with Pasho reflecting on her acidity effervescing through her words. After briefly introspecting upon her life, Pasho leaps ahead and begins the story with her childhood.

In the first chapter, there is a presence of Pasho's unreliable narrative. While she begins narrating with a mature understanding of life, she still introduces her youthful memories with her description of her immature and conflicted young mind. She is deducing, perhaps witnessing, from a perspective that is self-centred, immature, and afflicted with pain, with a fear for survival. Never has it been clearly mentioned if Pasho was indeed to be poisoned by her uncles, aunts, or *Nani*. She leads her beliefs on vague vexation of her *Nani*; *Nani*, who despite caring for her granddaughter's fate, compensating for the mother's absence, finally exclaims in a rage spell to her daughter-in-laws, "किन पापों का फल इस जन्म में मुझे मिलना था। बहु, इसे मौहरा दो मौहरा, ऐसी सोए कि जागे ना।" 'Which fruits of previous sins were I to receive in this birth. Daughter-in-law, poison her, make her sleep so she would never wake up again' (my trans.; 24). This creates a domino effect where every new event derives its verity by testing against this fear of being poisoned. There is a possibility that her uncles decided to marry her off somewhere instead of killing her, and while it takes away Pasho's agency, she is not in immediate fear for her life. This ambiguity of the true intentions of her uncles raises significant questions, especially surrounding *Nani's* words of wisdom. Thus, did *Nani* tell her that it is better to continue to accept the familiar violence that *Pasho* experienced, instead of bearing the brunt of the unfamiliar and alien violence? Or perhaps even to accept death by the hands of the family (if the uncles were

indeed planning to kill her in the name of taking her to *Jod fair*) rather than fleeing to save her life? It is problematic from several vantage points and makes it hard to justify such a demeaning view on life that it saps it of dignity. She remotely rejects in her head Manjhala's violence upon her body when he gives her a beating for not opening the door promptly. She chooses to continue to massage him instead, hoping to attenuate the situation. Her refusal to walk out of the unlocked room, when Manjhala leaves for the war, is yet another example of the fading embers of rebellion if she ever possessed them. Did she surrender for good when the ironically named Barkat raped her, relinquishing all volition? Or perhaps it was when she realised that she had no card to play in front of Barkat when he sold her off? She says, "जो मैं जानती, तू इस दाँव में है, तो गहना-गद्दा तुम्हारे हवाले न कर देती!" 'If I had known that you were planning this, wouldn't I have given up my jewels and possessions!' (my trans.; 82).

To answer the question, 'Did she cross the threshold of her uncle's home out of rebellion, intending to reach Sheikh's mansion?' one must reflect on the satirical pause in the refrain. Was *nani* 'indeed' right for saying that one must always conform to the status quo? The narrative refuses to abide by this aphorism. However, it does not seek to destroy the social order either. It would be redundant to continue to examine the second reading in the same manner of the first reading by supposing it to not have counterarguments, when the first reading strongly follows the narrative in the linear fashion, where Pasho is a blown leaf, a passive victim, revealing through her journey the ills of the society, and even though the author criticises the society it ultimately stands with the titanic and immovable nature of the status quo and advises to conform to its standards instead. However, the flaws in this reading are so glaring that every page of the text screams to oppose this view. Pasho's rebellion is not in her crossing of the threshold of her uncles' home, and neither the crossing of the threshold set by Manjhala would have proven her protest, for the ambiguity regarding her motive compels the reader to look elsewhere to derive the authorial intent. Her rebellion lies in upholding her spirit of survival and renouncing the violent possibilities that appear in front of her. She did not venture into the idea of violence objectively and rationally, but rather Sobti, through Pasho's existential situations and personal manner, alchemised her struggle in a brisk acceptance of peace for everyone.

Pasho's apoliticism is a 'composite complexity.' Here, apoliticism stands for Pasho's pacifist attitude, that is personal/subjective yet not political because it does not seek to invade other spaces. To break the

cyclical nature of violence, where the men are expected to continually perform the duty of annexing or defending the territory, subjecting them to no other choice but a territorial way of living, Pasho is a fecund site for transcending this dialogue, and moving to a poetical instead of a political space. Pasho never enunciates, or even insinuates, for her child to sacrifice himself for her honour. She has lost enough to never desire such misfortune for someone else. On the first page of the first chapter, she takes a leap from “न कोई जिए न जागे।” ‘Neither anyone shall live nor awaken,’ (my trans.) to “सब जिएं! सब जागें!” ‘All shall live. All shall awaken’ (my trans.) sublimating her despair into a blessing. Various realisations permeate her, commonly carrying a desire to limit her flailing ego that wishes to destroy everything in her sight; the ego that believed in carrying out justice through eye for an eye. She exists beyond the patriarchal dominance over honour and justice. Her crossing of the threshold of her uncles’ home was an attempt made to commit to survival. She continuously seeks throughout the novel for ‘*mawa thandiyan chawan*,’ ‘serene shades of motherhood,’ to sustain her life, to find a brief pause to grow roots and stand tall, firmly composed.

May she become a flourishing hidden tree
That all her thoughts may like the linnet be,
And have no business but dispensing round
Their magnanimities of sound,
Nor but in merriment begin a chase,
Nor but in merriment a quarrel.
O may she live like some green laurel
Rooted in one dear perpetual place. (Yeats 41-48)

She, thus, remains at the mercy of others to find any place that she could call her own. From an all-engulfing hatred, she furtively aligns herself with the path of love. Her motherhood is rooted in existential reality and thus, is part of this ‘composite complexity.’

The composite complexity is an idea that opposes the capitulating disposition, where the totality of life’s complexity is surmised to a singular abstraction. The dialectical thinking accepts life’s complexity, for it opposes essence and explores the dynamic nature of historical development. It is the acceptance of the quantum nature of reality, the overlapping of several spaces over each other, perceiving life in probabilities

rather than definite designs. Drawing from Lefebvre, Rekha writes, “Far from being static or a reified entity, spatiality is embedded in the contingency of temporality. Like time, it is a complex and contradictory process, a flux in which human beings continuously intervene” (164). This becomes integral in questioning not simply the direction of the wind that is blowing Pasho away from ‘home’ but its cause as well, for it is not the exclusive deterministic aspect of the status quo. The irony of the status quo lies in its volatility. It is composed of ‘accepted’ beliefs rather than ‘realised’ beliefs. This is the reason why Pasho’s lived reality becomes significant in questioning the trajectory and retracement of the metaphor of ‘separation from the bough,’ and discussing the relative questions that come into existence from putting these two elements in a dialectical enquiry. The accepted beliefs in the society have variances amongst them far bigger than the realised beliefs of aware individuals, especially because the unawareness tends to obfuscate the nature of reality as soon as the penetrating gaze of observation begins its inquiry. The realised beliefs form a composite complexity, for it is a composition of individual observations of the existential reality of the times. Thus, while it is not an irreducible singular form, the individual engagements with the existential reality come together to form a complex and harmonious composite reality. The still sad music of humanity is humming its tune throughout literature and across spatio-temporal boundaries. The herd attitude of fearing the arrow of time gives birth to a desire for entrapment. This vague desire wants to possess all things, transforming. Even when it desires a change, it looks backwards to replicate and produce a cyclical continuity of suffering. When Rabiyan warns Pasho to learn to keep in line and follow instructions, Pasho’s aunt replies instead, “इस चलते पानी का ठौर कहाँ...?” ‘There is no address of this flowing water’ (my trans.; 21). This attitude towards fluidity and acceptance of change indicates the deep-rooted desire of Pasho’s aunts and uncles to maintain the patriarchal gatekeeping. They represent a different historicity as opposed to Pasho, who fails to make sense of the violence and contempt her existence spawns.

Sobti re-evaluates the social order and brings into question the core of human nature. To the thesis of the society, Sobti presents Pasho as the antithesis. To evolve, society needs synthesis, but it refuses to engage with the complexity of life. It would rather choose to simplify the composite complexity of reality, while circumscribing the focus of development to its chaotic self-reference to violence. In a politically charged environment, the ontological questions are often buried and a created struggle overtakes the natural crisis of

human suffering. Thus, throughout the novella, it is apparent that the patriarchal forces are constantly shaping Pasho's apolitical disposition. However, it becomes apparent that the constancy, contrary to the transforming landscape, has been maintained through Pasho's motherhood. Here, it must be understood that Krishna Sobti represents violence as primarily patriarchal, similar to how Chodorow discusses the complexity of gender in her essay "Gender, Relation, and Difference in Psychoanalytic Perspective" as 'relational construction.' To further elaborate, it is not the male gender that is patriarchal, instead, it is the patriarchal forces that choose the male gender as their primary agent to proliferate their dominance. There is a constant interdependence between the sexes within the novella, where Pasho's unnamed step-brother becomes a primary example of a male who defies patriarchal infatuation with power and dominance. Similarly, traversing the complex and overlapping lines, Barkat's mother becomes an agent of patriarchy where she motivates her son to infringe upon Pasho's sanctity and limit her by defiling her body. Sobti's focus remains beyond the limitations of gender and repeatedly penetrates the existential question of human existence. Pasho remains a mother for the majority of the narrative's length. Her quest in the novella is her desire to seek and maintain human relations, and through them, survive against the disorder of life.

Nani's advice has more to do with maintaining balance while carefully manoeuvring through the hardships of life to sustain innocence against the enervating policy of a mature/rational and patriarchal society, rather than advising capitulation. Pasho's internal reflection on her emotions is her constant feature that is not present as vividly in the description of other characters. Pasho knows the right path upon which she wishes to lead her life. She is not devoid of voice, riddled with passivity. Pasho is a woman who accepts her desire to build a home and a family, with interdependence and love as its fundamental roots. She sustains certain emotions throughout the story in the hope of one day realising them. The tumultuous winds fail to move Pasho from her realisations of life, and eventually she finds a space to reconnect and grow. She keeps herself alive, not only biologically but also spiritually, with love, care, and concern never leaving her sensibilities. These values keep her contained against the splintering sharpness of the winds.

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