

Gendered Spaces and Patriarchal Trauma: Reading Bell Hooks and Sylvia Plath

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Abstract—*Spaces in relation with gender- emerges as contested sites marked by patriarchal power politics. The public and private emerge as zones wherein patriarchy is produced and sustained. The paper attempts to read 'Understanding Patriarchy'- an essay by Bell Hooks and 'Tulips' a poem by Sylvia Plath as gendered zones of resistance. Bell Hooks regards the domestic space as the domain where the grand narrative of patriarchy is sustained with patriarchy being depicted as a medical condition – 'as a crisis of man' wherein she subverts the normative framings of masculinity. Sylvia Plath in 'Tulips' critiques the objectification and violent aberration of a female body in a medical space – with the medicality emerging as a violent space of conversion and coercion of the female outsider. Medical space becomes for Plath an embodiment of patriarchal/state terrorism wherein the non-conformist female body is tamed to normalcy. In attempting to parallel Hooks and Plath (despite the difference in ideological and political locations) the paper intends to unravel the multiple underpinnings of patriarchy – as a psychic condition and as an ideological apparatus permeating the private and public.*

Bell Hooks in her essay *Understanding Patriarchy* traces how the grand narrative of patriarchy is produced and perpetuated in the domestic space of home. Hook's disrupts the normative understandings of *home/being home/homeliness* – upon unraveling the power politics and structured violence which constructs the intimate private space of home. The spectral presence of patriarchy is the 'image of the father' - later reinforced through multiple ideological apparatus including the Church and School. The specter patriarchy thus shifts from the domestic to public- wherein sexist supremacy is reinforced through ideology. Hooks disregards the normative understanding of misogyny as 'reinforced solely by male'. Shifting her focus to the structured violence implicated Hooks critiques the 'imperialist white-supremacist capitalist' frameworks which produce racist and gendered misogyny. Rather limiting her critique within a 'feminist' lens, Hooks engages with issues of race, coloniality and capitalism tracing Patriarchy as an ideological '*disease*'. This framing of misogyny in medical terms – as '*a social disease*'- debunks the normative framing of misogyny where the female is the passive victim/ the one in the *medicalised zone*.

The self-fashioning of individuals happens in a predetermined gendered script wherein socially constructed roles are coerced upon men and women. This coerced self-fashioning is traced by Hooks wherein she narrates episodes from her childhood where she was forced into being a woman. Hooks narrates how she was forced 'to serve and nurture' as opposed to her brother who was to 'think, strategize and plan' and respond with 'rage'. The 'manly' rage Hooks regards, is salient for protecting the phallic state – with the state and manliness executing gendered violence upon the female body. The performance of gendered roles, Hooks argues built in trauma upon the individuals. Narrating the physical pain inflicted by her father – the brutal whipping 'to remind her' of gendered space- Hooks notes how the re-enactment of 'patriarchal pornography' inflicts post-traumatic stress upon the bearer- 'the brutal whipping of a little girl by a strong man'. This Hooks regards is the 'experiential schooling' into the act of patriarchy so as to affirm the authority of the phallic figure – be man or woman. Debunking the gendered framing of misogyny – with man as the perpetrator and women as the passive victim, Hooks brings in women's ideological lenity to sexism. She cites the example of female headed households where women propagate 'false fantasies of gender' and idealize the patriarchal male role.

As argued before Hooks regards misogyny in medicalised terms –which affects primarily men and making them 'emotional cripples'. This framing of 'victimization of men' by patriarchy is pivotal in placing patriarchy as a structural violence wherein men are forced into performance of 'manliness'- thus ceasing 'to be a man'. This male crisis, Hooks regards is inflicted upon males predominantly from the domestic and extending to the public space. She regards misogyny 'as a crisis' affecting men denying them access to full 'emotional well-being'. This framing of men as actively 'affected' by patriarchy debunks the perceived framing of women as being pathologised by misogyny.

Hooks unravels the experientiality of patriarchy in the intimate domestic space of home wherein men and women are 'coerced' into patriarchal self-fashioning. She underlines the

capitalist and consumerist quality of patriarchy – thus centering her critique on the structural system. Indoctrination and acceptance of gendered identity, Hooks regards, becomes part of daily embodiment. The image of the female child (Hooks herself) beaten by her phallic father viscerally depicts the violence of patriarchy within the domestic space emerging to be the site of trauma. There involves a defamiliarization of the domestic- wherein the domestic ceases to be the intimate zone and rather becoming a violent space marked by power dynamics enforced by the spectral presence of patriarchy. The paper at this juncture, shifts its focus to the poem, *Tulips* by Sylvia Plath- where the medicalised female body is coerced into misogynistic violence. The paper frames the bodily violence inflicted upon Hooks and medical trauma upon Plath – in the domestic space home and public space of hospital.

Plath's poem *Tulips* traces the objectification and aberration of a female body in a medical space. Medical space –like the domestic space in Hooks, emerges as an embodiment of 'patriarchal/state terrorism wherein the 'non-conformist' female body is tamed to normalcy. Medical space in *Tulips*, emerge as a violent space of conversion and correction of the female outsider. The poet persona emerges as a figure violently stripped of history. She says,

*'I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses
And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons'.*

(...)

And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself'. (6-7)

The poet persona is effaced of her existence in the medical space. Losing control of self she becomes a passive victim incapable of agentic act. Lacking agency to act according to will she is monitored by the nurses. Plath employs militaristic (and thus phallic) metaphors to describe the action of the nurses who 'tend' the body of the poet persona. Plath traces the liquidation of agency in the medical space wherein the medical space is masculinized and mechanical. The invasion of the (female) patients body is depicted by Plath:

'My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water

(...)

Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage' (16-20)

The body, in the above lines becomes an object prone to the masculine medical gaze. The mechanized medicality is employed to bring the 'wronged' female body back to normalcy under coercion by nullifying her agentic acts. This could be paralleled to the patriarchal violence imposed upon Hooks by her father – the epitome of phallic figure. The objectification of the body furthers depicting the head 'as an object'. The loss of organic cognition is further asserted by the eyes which 'are looking' but 'not seeing'. The bureaucratization and eventual militarization of the medical space is depicted by the nurses who '*pass the way gulls pass*

inland in their white caps, Doing things with their hands, one just as same as the other'.

The body is mapable by medicine where the drug infused upon the female body acquires the phallic authority. It controls the agentic acts and the sleep of the poet persona becomes 'purchasable' and 'measurable'. The numbness of the body depends upon the amount of needle injected making the human body medically traceable. The female patient is placed under medical surveillance with the loss of ownership of one's own body. The reifying quality of the medical gaze – the eyes of the sun and the eyes of the tulips- is depicted by the poet persona:

'Nobody watched me before, now I am watched

I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow

Between the eyes of the sun and the eyes of the Tulips'.(44-48)

The female body occupies a liminal space- shifting between the domestic and the Unhomely wherein she slips away from the awareness of sensory self. The body and mind is deterritorialized with the poet persona becoming an outsider – geographically and psychologically displaced from known territories. This sense of loss and trauma of the poetic self could be paralleled to Hooks' experientiality of post-traumatic stress in the vicinity of phallic violence.

The paper has attempted to trace the performativity of patriarchy and its implications upon the female body. While the essay of Bell Hooks traces the experientiality and structural underpinnings of patriarchy Sylvia Plath in *Tulips* depicts the phallic violence imposed on a medicalised female body which is coerced into normalcy. The essay has attempted to locate the structured violence – in the private and public – and unravel the fissures of what is deemed as the 'normative'. Though belonging to different ideological and geopolitical locations, both Hooks and Plath critiques the 'phallic certainty' which is essentially traumatic permeating the private and public.

REFERENCES

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