

Despotism of Gendered Spaces in TanushreePodder's *Nurjahan's Daughter*

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Abstract

In the twentieth century, feminist theorists and critics work towards revealing the marginalized voices of women writers in literary history. The deconstructive strategies provide some valuable notions for the feminist theorists to dismantle the gendered binary oppositions. The study aims to deconstruct the concept of phallogocentrism in TanushreePodder's *Nurjahan's Daughter*. It also depicts the concept of deconstruction of womanhood and the reconstruction of feminine identity. It also uses the approach of L'écriture feminine to release women's oppressed creative agency and transform phallogocentric structures. It analyses the protagonists' quest for selfhood and self knowledge. It looks at the psychological growth and changes in each character and determines whether or not the sense of self is reconstructed or deconstructed at the end of their journey to self-discovery. By deconstructing the symbolic, phallus this article is to focus on the necessity for a female structure and a feminine discourse free from male assumptions.

Keywords: Phallogocentrism, deconstruction, l'écriture feminine, binary.

Silent and hidden operation of gender is everywhere in history, politics and social life. Patriarchal hegemony marginalizes and silences the flourishing sound of women and there is a hidden antropocentricity of gender in history. Literature has an effective tool for bringing about social changes and the writers mirror the society and its values and have the potential to recreate and redefine the role of women. The role of Mughal women in history is magnificent which is generally neglected by the mainstream historians. Male-centric history is written by historians who only give prominence to the male Mughal rulers although the Mughal women contribute to the Mughal Empire. Their ideologies impact rulers greatly and many of them are the 'king makers' who rule the Mughal world behind the veil. The pivotal aims of the study are to deconstruct the concept of phallogocentrism, to redefine the concept of womanhood and to reconstruct feminine identity. Women writers who write about women have a significant role in bringing women to consciousness and deconstructing phallogocentrism. The writers with the female pen and reflect the experiences of women in male-centered contexts and as social reformers redefine female identity. As the pioneers of change, they question the rightfulness of the dominant assumptions and reshape the false assumptions and ideas of the dominant discourse.

TanushreePodder attempts to include alternative versions of her perceptions of the past and provide new visibility to the marginalized, suppressed or neglected so far. She scrutinizes and interrogates earlier readings of history in the context of a critical deconstruction of the canon, calling for an alternative and multi-perspective approach. Through this she centralizes the marginalized and suppressed voices, bringing to fore alternate structures of discourse. An approach of this kind necessitates the assertion of the legitimacy of the histories and an identity of the little-acknowledged communities. The select critical approach, deconstruction allows the author to unveil the suppressed, minimized and marginalized.Podder redefines femininity to deconstruct the patriarchal narratives and represents women's experience in feminine language to undermine Phallogocentric norms in literature. Furthermore, her novel promotes the feminist project for women's representation to emphasize women's visibility to empower female readers' by rewriting history as her story. Women are transformed from 'victims' to 'rebellions' and remade the 'othered' women characters of the Mughal dynasty to speak as 'subjects' through deconstructions of the known notion of gender roles.

InPodder's *Nurjahan's Daughter*, the protagonists Nurjahan and her daughter Laadli are set in juxtaposition to each other, the former rebellious and the latter self-reliant. The novel begins with the birth of Laadli, The author gently describes the mind of Sher Afghan, the father of the child as, "A man who had no son was only half a man. They all had strapping sons. Daughters were incidental... it was the sons who brought glory"(7). It reminds the readers how much importance a son means to parent compared to a daughter.Nurjahan lives in a society where sexuality is considered as the privilege of man. She deconstructs the privilege of man and reconstructs it as an opportunity of woman and she turns her husband, Sher Afghan's attention towards her daughter by fulfilling the sexual urges of her husband. She changes him to accept their daughter with great love and affection without gender bias.

Podder portrays her female characters as newly liberated women, an embodiment of empowerment to liberate from patriarchal patterns.Nurjahan is not a self sacrificing woman, her plans and actions vacillate between confrontations to a celebration of selfhood. She is aware of society's attitude towards women and she knows the way to liberate herself. In the beginning of her journey, in the harem of Emperor Jahangir, she is provided with very low facilities as she is a widow. She is tactful to use her talents to upgrade her and shines in the harem as a gem. Her ambitions are wide, constantly strives for power. The inner power of Nurjahan is described as, "The fire of ambition consumed her totally, she wanted to achieve more" (104). As a crane waits for big fish to come, she rejects to become a mere concubine of Jahangir to earn immediate wealth and love. She wants to be the wife of the emperor, her marriage is not only based on the idea of romance rather it is about to get the profit from the marriage.

The author deconstructs the conventional role of women in the Mughal court and reconstructs as powerful empowered female characters. They obtain the ultimate responsibility of deciding their paths which make them truly happy. The characterLaadli is just the opposite of Nurjahan. She desires to live a peaceful life free from royalty. Laadli does not hesitate to tell her

mother that they do not sail in the same boat, implying that there is no satisfaction in the life of royalty. She remarks, "Fine dresses, jewelry and cosmetics didn't interest her. The crown held no lure for her"(160). Nurjahan feels empowered only on getting the power of an but for Laadli it means to free from the royalty. Laadli always dreams of her way to live a life with a family bond. Laadli inspires her mother to lead a different but comfortable life in the final stage of her life. The author skillfully presents the protagonists with a strong sense of self, who dare to dream the impossibility by placing their strengths in taking advantage of the trends that are prevalent in their society. She rewrites the history by providing a medium for self-expression, and enlightenment.

Podder is adept at the spontaneous use of the approach of H el ene Cixous', L'ecriture feminine; a theory foregrounds the importance of language for the psychic understanding of self. The language that is used in the *Nurjahan's Daughter* does not follow masculine construction but has a feminine quality as it amalgamates ambitions and desires. Sahoo declares the concept of Derrida's discourses as, "Language is neither the product of our experience, nor is the medium for conveying our thoughts, but it is the very framework that produces our experiences"(34). Podder uses the language to appear herself as a gyno-centric novelist and deconstructs the Derrida's concept of discourses effectively. When Nurjahan rejects the proposal of Jahangir, a patriarch, he exposes his inner conflict to Mohammad Sharif, a trusted minister to him as "What can a man do if a woman denies him her heart.... I wouldn't be able to bear her rejection"(125). The influence of NurJahan over the Emperor is pictured through various events. As politically ambitious, powerful and brave enough to openly defy the male authority Nujahan exercises her power behind the veil. NurJahan remains behind the veil and earns the title of Padusha Begam and control the harem. She occupies emperor's seal to make over the common people and she possesses coins minted in her name to make allies. Nurjahan with her growing popularity and ever expanding riches becomes a threat to the close male associates of Jahangir. Men in particular do not like a woman taking control over decisions showered upon them. It gives them a feeling of inferiority and challenges their existence as men. It is very similar to the role played by the contemporary woman who is also active as a law making body.

Podder uses binary structures of patriarchal language and deconstructs of differences to otherness. The word veil can be taken as a symbol of power and slavery. When men wear, it becomes the mask of Zorro, a masculine symbol of an outlaw or power, it is also used as a weapon to hide identity. It symbolizes slavery for women. She takes the veil as a symbol of power instead of slavery. She uses the veil as a weapon to hide identity during her visit to jharokha. Podder unveils the life of Mughal royal ladies to demonstrate 'veil or no veil, a woman is powerful'. The central women characters of the novel are potential subjects rather than objects of oppression. The author pictures the ambitious, apprehensive and active characters in empowering language that transports the readers' imagination into the realms of Mughal history. They are decisively strong individuals who shape their destiny in the dominated world. They act

as the representatives of creative women, who know the possibilities of women rather than their limitations. They are not victims instead they are rebels or victors.

Podder deconstructs the stereotypical image of motherhood and reconstructs two distinct maternal qualities through the characters of Nurjahan and Laadli. Nurjahan is presented as a woman who puts her ambitions first rather than motherhood. She marries Jahangir and in the journey of success and fame she shuts her eyes against the needs of her daughter. She finds pleasure only in achieving the crown and power. She gives importance to her needs and utilizes her daughter to achieve her personal goal. Contrary to Nurjahan, Podder represents Laadli as a model of 'perfect motherhood', the good mother, the noble mother-saint, considers her daughter as her highest priority, and usually sacrifices her own interests for the good of her. Laadli is decisive when she calls her daughter 'Arzani' who proves to be her salvation.

Another aspect of deconstruction approach is binary oppositions. It brings forth the need of a center where one term is central and other marginal. Moreover the center wants to fix the binary opposites. According to Jacques Derrida, "Nevertheless, up to the event which I wish to mark out and define structure....it has always been at work, has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center"(90). Podder portrays Nurjahan as a central character, struggles at the beginning as a woman remains confined within the harem and her family, but shortly she steps into the world of imperial men who are the rulers and lawmakers of the Mughal world. Here Jahangir, a male chauvinist becomes marginalized and the marginalized is portrayed as the center. Jahangir comments to Nurjahan as, "You are my queen, my world. I have given my empire to you" (219). Jahangir surrenders everything to Nurjahan. He just needs the care and love of his twentieth wife. He has the hope that, Nurjahan possess the power to lead the whole dynasty to the peak of success.

Podder inserts the perception that society has over women and how male supremacy is glorified in many aspects. By putting on the lenses of patriarchal society, she finds the expunged life history of powerful women who are hidden behind the veil. Through the aspects of reconstruction, she empowers the protagonist, Nurjahan and Laadli. Self knowledge requires deconstructing the old assumptions and discourses about the self. This process of deconstructing the logocentric structures of the self is made possible by experiences of loss. She occupies dominant positions in the male dominated society while the patriarchal hegemony marginalized and silenced the blooming sound of women and their achievements. All along the journey, the women characters observe the realities of life and fight the outside forces imposed upon their conception of selfhood. They turn inward to understand the cultural limits. It allows them to progress towards self-knowledge.

Deconstruction thus helps the author not only to unveil the concealed phallogocentric desires and power play in traditional literary texts but also to move beyond such writing to create a liberatory space for women's voices and bodies. *Nurjahan's Daughter* sketches the supremacy of the woman to man as a multifaceted entity. She represents womanhood, motherhood, and also adds humanity within the protagonist Laadli, which is an impeccable example of self liberated

woman. On the other, Nurjahan has the power of the body, sexuality, and desire and power. Thus the female subjects are deconstructed and a new discourse for women is established. She speaks through specifically feminine voice and proves that women will be able to free themselves from patriarchy. It also gives a voice to the women of contemporary age to get inspired by such characters located in history to redefine and assert female autonomy.

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