American Journal of Education, Teaching and Social Policy
ISSN: 2113-136X (Print), **ISSN** 2113-139X (Online)
Journal Homepage: https://originaljournals.com **Special issue**

A MEMOIR OF CONFLICT: READING DICHOTOMY IN SHILPA RAJ'S THE ELEPHANT CHASER'S DAUGHTER

(Submitted: May 3, 2019; Accepted: June 30, 2019)
Volume 1 Issue 4, pp. 135-140, 2019

Guni Vats
Department of English, University of Lucknow, Lucknow

The two worlds I lived in had become overwhelmingly irreconcilable. I found myself stuck between them, tossed mercilessly from one to the other. When one set of values and traditions confronted the other, a meeting of the minds was out of the question. (Raj 151). Shilpa Raj's memoir *The Elephant Chaser's Daughter* is a reminisce of conflict; conflict of 'a home' and 'the home', conflict of stereotypes and progress, of East and West and the story of a young girl balancing her life through all the dichotomy. The piece of literature is amongst the first memoir ever documented by a Dalit woman. Raj's memoir is not an autobiography a reader would expect from a Dalit woman, but a bildungsroman. It is the story of the four-year-old Shilpa moving to Shanti Bhavan, to experience a world no one in her community would have ever dreamed of. It is not the helpless cry of the oppressed, but the Ambedkarite celebration of education uplifting children of untouchables to become responsible citizens of the nation. Shilpa unashamedly recounts the horrors of domestic violence, of harassment, of the vicious circle of debt and the community drowning in the horrors of country liquor. Hers is a story of an outsider in her home and a home in the outside world, where she was not meant to belong. It carefully deals with the nuances of sibling jealousy, family expectations, and the tight grips of community superstitions that have fettered the Dalits for decades. In the village of Thattaguppe, the word of landlords was the word of justice and the Shanti-Bhavan-educated Shilpa refused to give up her authority of opinion. The memoir deals with the seriousness of caste and untouchability in the lives of these children who have the privilege to study but have to return to the darkness of age-old traditions. Through the snippets of her past and struggles of her present, Shilpa Anthony Raj weaves a narrative of hope and freedom.

Identity is a societal construction and confirmation of a name that exposes the caste, religious, and financial standing in society. Identity is not the description of an individual but the place that the society has pre-determined for the individual to remain confined in. Shilpa Anthony Raj began the journey to change how she would be viewed along with twenty-three other children, when a blue jeep parked in her village, cutting across the densely woven structures of caste and hierarchy. It was her father, a man who would drink and beat his wife while spending his time with other women of the village, adamant at getting his daughter admitted to the school that promised the only hope for them to become more than they were destined to be. The elephant chaser fought his wife tooth and nail and swore that he would educate his daughter even if it meant he would have to go hungry. The fight of a father to get his daughter educated was condoned and he was called names, but he bore every insult for a future none could envision. Education is not important in the Dalit sectors of India. Despite the reservation laws and political promises of their upliftment; they remain untouchables. Education is costly and worthless for people who would never be allowed to step foot in the places of the sanctity of upper castes. Women bear the worst of it; where their menstruation is celebrated, they are pushed on the paths of marriage and childbearing, with husbands who are elder, drunkard, and violent. Education is a distant dream and Raj's memoir proves how it is essential in the becoming of someone you were not destined to be.

Shilpa's grandmother would always say that destiny is what is written on the forehead. This destiny is challenged by Shanti Bhavan, a school meant to uplift the most oppressed. Shilpa is caught between the dichotomy of the destiny of her past and the opportunity of her future. The Christians of Thattaguppe were Hindu converts, who had escaped the clutches of religion but had found themselves still stuck in the hierarchy of caste and untouchability. Bearing an ancestry of Hinduism, they were haunted by the superstitions and ancestral interference in their lives. Shilpa's conflict is with the demons of the superstitious past and the progressive future that Shanti Bhavan promised. Shanti Bhavan was a heaven of opportunities that preached equality. A haven for the children of Dalits, it was an institution committed to touching their lives holistically. They were taught to be free and responsible at the same time. They were taught human values and were pumped with the self-confidence they would require to face the real world and carve a place for themselves and their family. Shanti Bhavan is an institution that promises to break the chain of oppression, while the caste hierarchy vows to confine Dalits in the swamps of untouchability. Author's home in the village is a testament to gender inequality, obsessive drinking habits of men, and an unfair patriarchal setup where women are meant to cook and clean and bear children. Shilpa is caught between the dichotomy of two, her memoir is her struggle to emerge as her person, an amalgamation of the best of both worlds.

The becoming of an adult is a continuous process of construction that evolves from the society outwards and the psychological identity inwards. The amalgamation of the two is important in constructing 'self'. Julia Kristeva takes forward the argument of psychoanalysts and applies it in linguistics to determine how a thetic phase occurs post chora that determines a subject. A subject-in-process is Kristevan way of explaining how the interaction keeps forming and deconstructing meaning in the forte of language that one speaks and internalizes, 'intensifying the semiotic disposition means identifying the shift in the speaking subject, his capacity for renewing the order in which he is inescapably caught up; and that capacity is, for the subject, the capacity for enjoyment.' (Kristeva 29) Shilpa's language of the outside world and inner conscience suffered the thetic-break twice. She has psychologically broken away from her mother's body as the other, realizing later that her father had never wanted her to have born and was planning to dispose of her. A second thetic phase occurs when the blue jeep breaks her from the outside world that had constructed her conscience, to begin with. At Shanti Bhavan, not only the world around her changed, but her realization of herself as an individual went through a sharp re-significance.

> Until I came to Shanti Bhavan, I had never thought about looking pretty. Most of the time I was dirty and wore simple clothes sewed from my grandmother's worn-out saris. Occasionally Amma cut my hair, crookedly, with blunt scissors…no one talked about hairstyles. I had never washed my hair with shampoo, warn shoes, or put on face lotion. But the absence of those luxuries didn't matter then as I didn't know they existed. (Raj 37)

Her first memories at her 'new home' were one of self-hygiene. She used shampoo for the first time and combed her hair well. She squeezed the flavored toothpaste on the toothbrush to taste sophistication. The identity of being dirty associates itself with being Dalit, Shanti Bhavan washed that identity off. They were taught to concentrate on their appearance, to learn posture, to learn cleanliness, and appear put-together. They were woken up at dawn and encouraged to clean after themselves and tend to their gardens. The residential school taught them mutual respect and equality, an important lesson at building the self-esteem, that they had never learned back home. Shanti Bhavan was stark different from their villages, set up in a vast piece of land in known terrain, it was a gated haven of security and progress. The trauma of breaking away from the parents could be understood when the young students would call their wardens and teachers 'Aunty' or sometimes even 'Mummy, and Dr George would be called 'Daddy'. Children at Shanti

Bhavan had two sets of parents, Amma and Appa back home and Daddy and Aunties in the school. Siblings were soon replaced by classmates, a diverse group that had come from similar backgrounds who could understand each other and help each other build. The competition was from the outside world, Shanti Bhavan was protected. The existence of Shanti Bhavan and their own homes created a sense of the otherness of self. The life back home became so alien to Shilpa, that she would resent staying in shabby lanes amongst drunkards and molesters, 'observing the lives of those who lived in the shabby huts on either side, a sense of my own insignificance overwhelmed me…' (158). When the family becomes an outsider and the outside world becomes family, a strange sense of alienation takes over, one that shreds the inner self and forces identity in distress.

The *ghar-bahar* conflict takes a new turn in Shilpa's journey, where signification shifts and meanings change. 'Negating or denying the symbolic, without which he would be incapable of doing anything, the subject may imagine the thetic at the place of an object or a partner' (Kristeva 114). Tagore's conflict of the Home and the World, expressed in his 1916 novel, takes a new meaning in Shilpa's memoir. Moving from her village to the residential school at four years of age, shifted meaning in her life. Sharp contrasts are documented in her memoir, from the treatment of girls and boys to the importance placed to human values, they were brought up in a world much ahead of the times of her village. She was torn between her two homes, so much so that she would feel an alien at the home she was born in, and feel guilty in her place of bringing up. The two homes were not different only in the context of the space they were situated, but the virtual times they existed were different. In her writing, Shanti Bhavan moves with rapid energy of enthusiastic progression while the village rots in its stagnant lanes. The school is filled with exciting possibilities, and the village is frozen with shattered dreams. The writing and pace, the semiotic governs Raj's symbolic; the hurried paragraphs are dedicated to her life at school and the slow, unsure, confused passages are given to her village. The two worlds are so different than when the first time parents come to meet their children at Shanti Bhavan, they fail to recognize them.

> Plenty of confusion erupted since some parents could no longer identify their children. We looked so different to them, dramatically transformed by our clean clothes, full cheeks, haircuts, and huge smiles. Some mothers embarrassed themselves by grabbing the wrong child… (Raj 45)

The conflict of the homes ran deeper in the psyche of the author. Once the meanings shifted, the understanding of the world changed. The aesthetic of the man-woman relationship and its acceptance deconstructed. The village taught her that men had the sole ownership of knowledge and only they could make decisions. Whatever the father said was to be treated as the final word, and this hierarchy deepened in caste circles when whatever the landlord said was to be treated as the word of wisdom. Shilpa had witnessed many instances of domestic violence in her home when the drunk father would slap and beat his wife blue. Shanti Bhavan taught her that men and women were to be treated equally and that nobody had the right to decide for her life until she consents. The country liquor was so prevalent that she in her innocence believed that it was only normal for a man to drink, it was later in Shanti Bhavan that she learned that excessive drinking is a disease. While the village gossiped and treated every relationship frivolously, Shilpa had learned to voice her opinion sensitively, she would even act as an intermediary in the fights of her parents, though she would lose at the end, 'Contrary to the widespread village notion that girls should not voice their thoughts, I put my disappointments and frustrations on full display. Playing parent to my parents was the most difficult task I had ever undertaken' (Raj 211). She grew up to understand the oppression that her mother had to face, but also the history of hardship her father had to endure to become whatever he was. She was raised to be a mature young lady, who was not a victim of the violence but a mediator who swore to resolve things respectfully.

I couldn't help seeing myself as an outsider and that realization made me terribly sad. How would I ever fit in to a permanent life in the village? How would I find in myself the qualities those women in the fields had found? (Raj 161)

To be a woman of the village and to be a woman in Shanti Bhavan were very different in their inception of the concept of 'a woman'. Thattaguppe trained its women to be good, decent, 'dutiful' wives, 'Most men in the village preferred obedient, dutiful wives.' (113) Menstruation was marked as the threshold of marriageable age for young women in the village, while Shanti Bhavan encouraged them to study and aspire to good-paying jobs so they could break free from the vicious circle of caste oppression. 'Ever since I started my periods, I had been treated differently. Grandfather instructed Grandmother to set aside a glass of milk occasionally, as he strongly believed that girls who had come of age needed to be strong and healthy' (Raj 117). Once the girl reached the marriageable age, she was protected like the cubs are protected. Every moment she stepped out of the house, she had to be accompanied by a guardian. She was treated as a precious property. Kavya, Shilpa's younger sister would crib that she didn't have periods when her elder sister enjoyed the privileges of a menstruating woman. Her education was not worth any attention because she was a girl, she was pre-determined to get beaten by her husband and give in to her domestic duties. 'My education meant nothing to them. They couldn't see its value, especially since I was a girl' (Raj 133).

The memoir that recounts the fantasy-haven of Shanti Bhavan is also burdened by the tales of oppression painted in the dark lanes of the village. The village wisdom that forbids the girls to wander alone or even to talk to boys collectively hushes any instances of molestation carried inside their homes. Women were the most vulnerable when left alone with their families. Shilpa writes about her experiences with her uncle, experiences of harassment, and molestation. '…I felt strong hands press down on my collarbones in a tightening grip. I felt my uncle's cheek gently rubbing against mine. His moustache tickled me as he slowly traced the side of my face with his lips, I then felt his lips moving from my cheek to my mouth. I froze…I didn't know whether I was more anxious or ashamed' (Raj 136). The sexual harassment at home was later conveniently justified by her grandmother because she was intended to marry her uncle nevertheless. Even when she tried to speak about it at school, her grandmother straight away refused any such activities and Shilpa was forced to the trauma of guilt and shame in an act where she was the victim. The alienation at home proved so strong and traumatic, that when once Shanti Bhavan struggled the fear of closing down and Shilpa feared never going back, she almost gave up to the wishes of her family and agreed to marry her uncle. The self, the other, and the otherness of self were the paradigms that pushed the author towards a conflicted trauma. She was a bright student and an enthusiastic writer dreaming about becoming a journalist and within a month, she was tiptoeing her way to her uncle's cot to demand his attention. The desperate need to be accepted by the family drove Shilpa to almost give up her dreams of a better future and surrender to the laws of the land.

Caste and gender were the realities of Shilpa's life. The school could have offered a protected universe, but the practical life threw them back in the clutches of reality. The author writes about the stories of women disgraced, a colleague who had dropped out of school and was now entertaining drunk men of the village, pregnant. She remembers the saga of a classmate's mother who was burnt to protect her honor, and the son covered his hands with gloves hiding burnt wounds from trying to save his mother. Trauma was never an alien feeling for Shilpa or other students of Shanti Bhavan, but they had together learned to overcome it and use education as a tool to write their destinies. 'Boys didn't look down upon girls. It was beautiful to realize that the same boys who witnessed their fathers kick, burn, and emotionally destroy their mothers would never raise a hand to a girl or make her feel less worthy' (Raj 226). The realization that the children who came from violent backgrounds could change their outlook is a very important lesson of her

memoir. It changes how society sees Dalits; it breaks the vicious circle of oppression. Shilpa Anthony Raj was a sensitive passive audience to the stories she heard at school, but her relationship with her younger sister and her parents define how she viewed oppression and discrimination.

We are introduced to the image of Shilpa's Amma through the initial resistance of her willingness to separate her daughter from her. She remains a passive object for the story author had weaved through the life experiences of her father. She was the woman who was wooed, beaten, and cheated. She was the mother who had transpired to distance her daughter from her husband. It was only later, through Shilpa's words that we trace Sarophina's existence. A strong woman, determined to carve a world of her being, left her children in the village and went to Singapore as a house help. Shilpa resists and revolts her mother's absence but soon gets habitual. Her thetic break from her mother occurs thrice in her lifetime, at her infancy, when she is sent to Shanti Bhavan and when the mother decides to go to Singapore. Years pass in her absence and Shilpa grows distant. The mother does return, but her presence is alien. In the story of Shilpa's alienation, her mother's absence plays a drastic role. She learns how to be a woman from her actions and falls in the crevices of dichotomy the moment she learns her mother's dubious intentions. A woman who would fight her husband all day would give in a matter of seconds to only pacify him. Her mother was the mystery she could never solve.

> In the space of a single second, all her bold declarations of wanting to be free of my father's tyranny vaporized and her emotional dependence on him was exposed. She couldn't consider living alone in a village where single women are not safe. I was furious with her for behaving as though it was all her fault… (210)

Kavya's death (or suicide) is how the memoir begins and ends, all rest is Shilpa's effort to understand her sister's death. Kavya and Shilpa are the personifications of the conflict that Shilpa writes about. While Shilpa gets the privilege of studying in Shanti Bhavan, Kavya is left to get educated in the local school. A fiery spirit, she is a free-soul who wanders through the village with an air of belongingness. While Shilpa is always an alien, a visitor, Kavya is the daughter of the village. Shilpa gets to write her destiny and Kavya is left to suffocate in the streets rotten with country liquor. Shilpa's conflict restricts Kavya's freedom. The constant comparison and the tormenting reality that she would be stuck in the oppressive hierarchical untouchable community, Kavya dreamed to fly away from the fetters. The vocal resistance at her mother's claim of love, the resentment at Shilpa's biased treatment created a valley of complex amidst the siblings who were meant to support each other. Shilpa, the eldest daughter was always an outsider to the close bond that her siblings, Francis and Kavya, shared. Though she dreamt of constructing a better future for them, she could never instigate the hope in Kavya. Kavya eloped, a young adolescent girl left her home with boys who could offer her a material pleasure. She called Shilpa after months, pleading her to be accepted back in the village, but all that returned was her corpse. A corpse of a girl who dared to break the rules of the patriarchal, oppressive community was not even accommodated a burial place amongst the villagers. Her death was scorned at as her life was, she was buried in a corner reserved for unnatural deaths. Kavya's death was Shilpa's thetic break from her village.

> The men placed Kavya's coffin by the side of a small, deep pit that a few relatives had already dug for the grave at a far corner of the yard in the secluded section reserved for those who died in unholy ways. It was hard for me to understand how my sister, even in death, could be relegated to lowliness in the same house of God where she used to worship. (Raj 242)

Shilpa's dichotomy was resolved in the death of the only person who made her village home. At Kavya's death, a relative told her to go and never return because nothing was left for her in the village. Shilpa returned to her home, Shanti Bhavan straight from the burial grounds. The conflict

of being and becoming is never resolved in a human subject, but what happens when the signification of meaning is in a perpetual contrast? Shilpa's memoir is a celebration of her opportunity at Shanti Bhavan but is also her wail of irreconcilable grief at the loss of her other self, her sister. Being brought up in a haven where boys and girls were treated equally, she would never be able to forget how women are trivialized back home. Her attempt at understanding her sister's death takes her deeper to a voyage of oppression, the conflicted lives that never had a chance to absolve themselves. Being called an 'American Desi', or taunted at her accent and education, she would never take offense because she realizes the sacrifice, she and her family had to make her who she is. The dream of breaking the vicious circle of illiteracy and oppression doesn't get resolved by a school or twenty-four children who spend fourteen years of their lives trying to rewrite their destinies. They live in a perpetual state of conflict of self and other, of belonging and alienation, but they are the only hope of their families to dare to dream of something bigger than the fate they are forced to. Shilpa is the elephant chaser's dream of entering *Gunna's* kitchen, an area warded off-limits from the untouchables.

> Who could have ever imagined that the girl in the far corner of the stage once begged on the streets, that the boy in black tie smartly turning his partner was the son of a construction laborer, or that the tall, slender girl dancing off to the side had watched her murdered father's body burn on a pyre? (Raj 230)

Works Cited

Ganguly, Debjani. *Dalit Life Stories*. *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture*. V. Dalmia and Sadana, editors. New Delhi: Cambridge UP, 2012. pp. 124-141.

Guru, Gopal. "Dalit Women Talk Differently: Gender and Caste." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1995. pp. 2548-2550.

McAfee, Noelle. *Julia Kristeva*. Routledge, 2015.

Morris, Thomas D. *Southern Slavery and the Law, 1619-1860*. U of North Carolina P, 1999.

Raj, Shilpa. *The Elephant Chaser's Daughter*. New Jersey: Worldview, 2017.

Waugh, Patricia, and Rice Philip, editors. *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*. Oxford UP, 1989.