STAR
Research Journal

Available online at www.starresearchjournal.com (Star International Journal)
ENGLISH

Negotiating Patriarchy : Gender Roles and Familial Expectations in Fatima Farheen Mirza's A Place for Us

Vandana Viswanath

Assistant Professor, Postgraduate Department of English, Sree Narayana Guru College, Chelannur, Calicut. Affiliated to the University of Calicut.

Abstract:

This paper attempts to examine how Fatima Farheen Mirza's *A Place for Us* represents gendered family roles in an immigrant Indian - Muslim household in the United States. The main argument of the paper is that the family becomes a major postcolonial site where patriarchy is both reproduced and challenged in a subtle manner. Based on postcolonial theory (Bhabha, Spivak , Fanon) and feminist criticism, the study attempts to explore how son preference, maternal sacrifice and constrained autonomy of daughters structure the everyday life of the family, and illustrate how the family becomes a microcosm of the broader histories of colonial authority and migration. The analysis focuses on characters such as Rafique, Layla, their daughter Hadia and son, Amar, to show how rigid expectations of obedience, piety, and domestic labour affect familial bonds even when they are justified as cultural preservation. But simultaneously, the non-linear narrative of the novel and its scenes of female solidarity reveal subtle forms of resistance in which women renegotiate marriage, motherhood and belonging by maintaining a connection with tradition. Reading these tensions through the lens of postcolonial family theory, this article argues that *A Place for Us* reconceives the immigrant family as a "third space" in which gendered roles are neither fully oppressive nor liberating, but dynamically constructed in response to displacement and diasporic life.

Keywords:

Gender roles, Patriarchy, Immigrant family dynamics, Postcolonial theory, Hybridity, Third space, Cultural identity, Female agency and resistance

This paper analyses gender and family roles in Fatima Farheen Mirza's *A Place for Us*

(2018) and argues that the Indian-Muslim immigrant family in the novel functions as a postcolonial "third space" where patriarchal norms are both reproduced and subtly

renegotiated. Drawing on postcolonial theory and feminist criticism, the paper traces how son preference, maternal sacrifice, and the restricted autonomy of daughters structure the

emotional and cultural life of the family, while favouring subtle forms of resistance and reconfiguration.

The study locates *A Place for Us* within postcolonial diaspora fiction, emphasizing how family becomes a key site where colonial histories, migration, and religious identity

intersect. The paper adopts Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and third space, Gayatri Spivak's notion of the subaltern and Franz Fanon's insights on the psychic traces of

domination, alongside feminist readings of gendered labour and motherhood. The central thesis of the paper is that the author, Mirza, portrays the immigrant Muslim family as a conflicted, yet dynamic zone in which gender roles break unity while simultaneously

enabling novel forms of female resilience.

Postcolonial theory understands family not as a private, sealed unit but as an

institution firmly structured by histories of empire, displacement and racialization. Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of "hybridity" and "third space" allow the reading of the immigrant home

as a contact zone where a collision and rearticulation of Indian, Muslim and American norms occur. Gayatri Spivak's question of whether the subaltern can speak frames the position

occupied by women in patriarchal and diasporic households. Also Frantz Fanon's work on internalized authority clarifies how colonial power is reflected in authoritarian parenting and son preference as seen in the novel.

Within the novel's family, patriarchal structures operate privileging the son and the authority of the father. In the novel, Rafiq, the father, frames the world strictly in terms of what is religiously right and wrong. He holds his son's choices, especially about faith and romance, to be very important to maintain the family's honour. As Hadia once observes, "Right and wrong, halal and haram – it was her father's only way of experiencing the

world"(Mirza 193). At a point in the novel, the son, Amar, states that he did not believe in his father's God. But, in contrast, the daughters are expected to comply quietly with decisions about marriage and conduct. The son is privileged by the parents, in many cases, even when it was the daughters who deserved the recognition more. In the midst of Hadia's wedding celebration, Layla moves away from the hall in search of her son, Amar, who was estranged

from the family primarily due to the differences of opinion that he had with his parents,

especially his father. Layla is reminded by her daughter, Huda, that she should be focussing more on her daughter who was

getting married, rather than looking for her absent son.

"Mumma," Huda said, "it's your daughter's wedding. Can't you focus on that?"(Mirza 268). "In Europe and in every so-called civilized or civilizing country, the family represents a piece of the nation. The child leaving the family environment finds the same laws, the same

principles and the same values" (Fanon 112). The son's transgressions are seen as central to the family honour while daughters are expected to sustain religious and domestic order. This is similar to the postcolonial critics' concept of the "re-traditionalization" of gender roles in migrant contexts, where women are tasked with safeguarding cultural continuity. "Victorian

domestic ideals were transposed onto and used to legitimize colonial projects. By invoking

notions of familial hierarchy, purity and civilization, imperial powers were able to frame their colonial ambitions as a moral endeavour" (McClintock 30). The father's role reflects the

figure of the nationalist patriarch who control's his children's bodies, marriages, and futures, in a way that resembles the disciplinary power of the colonial and postcolonial state.

The mother's (Layla) position exemplifies the feminization of cultural labour as identified by feminist and postcolonial scholarship. Layla acts as a mediator between

conflicts in the family. She also preserves rituals and absorbs great emotional strain, while

rarely being granted full narrative or social authority. During her daughter's wedding, Layla's entire experience of the ceremony was being affected by her concern about the absence of Amar, her estranged son, from the hall. She was desperate to project an image of a happy and united family, through the act of gathering and posing for a family photograph. "What was most important to her was that he be there for the family photograph so she could finally

replace the framed one that hung above their fireplace"(Mirza 268). She considered

humiliation as a deeper wound than heartbreak as she tries to protect the family from public shame. This is in tune with Spivak's observation, "The subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak 308). When analysed through the lens of Spivak's theory, Layla's apparent compliance masks a subaltern voice which is expressed indirectly through choices about care, silence and

protection rather than overt rebellion. Thus, maternal sacrifice becomes both a mechanism of patriarchy and a limited tool of agency, as she navigates between loyalty to husband, children and her faith.

The lives of the daughters, Hadia and Huda, illustrate the ambivalence of gender roles in a diaspora. "Third World women, as a group or category, are automatically and necessarily defined as religious, family-oriented, poor, uneducated, victimized, etc"(Talpade 40). The

daughters gain educational and emotional resources which are associated with Western

modernity, but at the same time, they are bound by expectations of modesty, piety and

arranged marriages. Through Layla, her daughters are made to accept the idea that marriage proposals are to be accepted in a

very innocent manner, with no trace of desire. “It was an absurd expectation placed on women: that they agree to marriage without appearing as though they wanted it. That they at least display innocence. Hadia never understood what was so threatening about a woman expressing a desire and being unafraid to express it.”(Mirza 229-30). This is an instance of how double standards work based on gender, in matters related to sexuality. It shows how daughters are considered as carriers of family honour, with

marriage proposals scripting daughters as modest and voiceless. In the light of feminist theory, such norms are seen as social performances rather than religious absolutes.

Postcolonial feminist analysis of immigrant women shows that such figures often inhabit

hybrid subject positions by adopting selective “modern” autonomy while safeguarding family obligations. The small acts of assertion made by the immigrant women, such as their choices in love, career or ritual observations, figure as what Homi Bhabha terms as “shy civility” –

gestures which respect tradition outwardly while quietly bending its rules.

Mirza’s non-linear, multi-perspectival narrative reflects what postcolonial critics

identify as fragmented non-teleological storytelling that contests particular histories of nation and family. The novel moves through the memories of various family members and exposes how gendered expectations are experienced unevenly. This reveals the lack of harmony

between a father’s belief in benevolent authority and, a daughter or son’s sense of injury. The wedding frame of the daughter, Hadia, operates as the ritual focal point in which the family publicly performs a ritual of unification even as hidden grievances and gendered sacrifices appear, exemplifying the postcolonial family as both spectacle and the site of contestation.

Through the perspective of Bhabha’s “third space”, the family home emerges as neither a replica of the “homeland”, nor a fully assimilated American unit. “It is the ‘in-

between’ space that carries the burden and meaning of culture and this is what makes the

notion of hybridity so important” (Bhabha 38). It assumes the form of a hybrid arena where norms are always renegotiated. Gender roles become important instruments in this

negotiation. For the daughters, the school also is a key contact zone and proves to be a “third space”, where education opens a space for fashioning the self, in a way which is different

from that of the family’s self-prescribed role. Hadia believed that “…nothing compares to the promise of stepping into a classroom knowing that she will step out a different person”(Mirza 102). This was true in the case of their religious beliefs also. As Hadia realizes, a specific

belief had been impressed upon her in a specific way, by her family.

Hadia became more aware of her choices, of what was important for her to keep and what had just been an inherited, unexamined habit…Her faith

became a highly personal affair : what did it matter what others believed? She had friends of other faiths or no faith at all…She could hold in her heart a

belief in Islam as well as the unwavering belief that every human had the right to choose who they loved, and how, and that belief was in exact accordance with her faith: that it is the individual's right to choose and the individual's

duty to empathize with one another, Didn't the Quran itself contain the verse, *We have created you from many tribes, so that you may know one another*. (Mirza 230)

She harboured a private hope that with real hard work, she could alter the course of her life by choosing a preferred course of study and later on, enter into a profession of her own

choice. In the novel, women are asked to embody "authentic" culture while men move more freely between cultural codes producing tensions that simultaneously fracture relationships and generate new, improvised modes of belonging. Thus the novel invites a reading of the immigrant Muslim family not as thoroughly oppressive, nor completely liberating. It is found

to be an unstable formation reshaped by postcolonial histories, diasporic precarity and everyday acts of gendered navigation.

By applying postcolonial and feminist theory to family dynamics in *A Place for Us*, this paper demonstrates how the author reimagines the immigrant household as a key site

where colonial pasts, religious identity and gender politics converge. The analysis contributes to postcolonial family studies by showing that attention to gendered labour, maternal

mediation and daughters' hybrid agency is very important to understand how immigrant families both reproduce and revise inherited power structures.

WorksCited

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994. Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin White Masks*. Pluto Press, 2008.

McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest.*

Routledge, 1995.

Mirza, Fatima Farheen. *A Place for Us*. Hogarth, 2018.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Duke University Press, 2003.

Nelson, Cary and Lawrence Grossberg, editors. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*.

University of Illinois Press, 1988.