

At home as an ‘outsider’: *Subarnalata* and *Othappu*: *The Scent of the Other Side*

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ABSTRACT: The phrase ‘at home’ connotes familiarity, happiness and safety, while the image of an ‘outsider’ evokes the opposite sentiments. It is ironical and a seeming contradiction to feel as an ‘outsider’ in one’s own home. Though many literary texts have portrayed the poignant stories of characters who feel alienated within the precincts of their home, it is with the advent of feminist writings that ‘home’ as a site of alterity has been fully explored. The paper, by focusing on two novels, *Subarnalata*, a Bengali novel published in 1966 (English translation published in 1997), and *Othappu*, a Malayalam novel published in 2005 (English translation published in 2009), attempts to project the uncritical binaries such as home-outside world, secular-religious, and reason-emotion, and thereby problematises the concept of ‘alterity’ itself. We have tried to look at ‘alterity’ from a psychological perspective and explain it using the construal-level theory of psychological distance.

Keywords: Self and alterity, Home and world, Psychological distance, Construal-level theory, Patriarchal society.

Introduction

‘Home’ looms large occupying the entire world of a woman throughout her life, particularly if she is a homemaker and spends most of her time in running the home. Till a past few decades, the myth was that Home and Woman were complementary to each other. It was almost a universally believed fact that a woman was a happy ‘angel’ of her home, that she was most secure—both physically and emotionally—within the boundaries of domesticity. The make-belief construction of such a myth by the patriarchal society was a narrative that set out to trap the woman in home and limit her imagination to such an extent that to think or act otherwise became a taboo, especially in the traditional communities of South East Asia.

Feminist writings from this region have brought out the ambiguities, dichotomies and incongruities associated with lives of women. Thus, home as a site of emotional security, fulfilment and happiness is just one side of the coin—the other is home as a space for alterity. In simple terms, alterity means otherness. It is something contrary to identity, the point where we deviate from ‘self’. We shall use the term with an inclination to the concept of alienation keeping our discussion focussed on ‘home’ as a space of alterity. Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) in *The Second Sex* (1949) talks of marriage as a means of keeping a woman tied to the household where she is bound to perform tasks rendered hierarchically inferior to man and that makes her a victim of sexual inequality. Beauvoir writes: “Factories, offices, and universities are open to women, but marriage is still considered a more honorable career, exempting her from any other participation in collective life” (Beauvoir 188). Why is it that a woman cannot identify with her own home as something intrinsic to her sense of identity? Why is a space that is supposed to be her own just another place dominated by patriarchal norms? As Susan Bordo (1947–) in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1995) points out, “Men are not the enemy, but they often may have a higher stake in maintaining institutions within which they have historically occupied positions of dominance over women. That is why they have often *felt* like ‘the enemy’ to women struggling to change those institutions” (Bordo 29).

In this paper, we have taken up Ashapura Debi’s (1909–1995) *Subarnalata* (1997) and Sarah Joseph’s (1946–) *Othappu* (2009) as our unit of analysis to explore the concept of ‘home’ as a space of alterity in the life of a woman. We suggest that the ‘otherness’ or alterity is largely a product of mismatched construal of common actions resulting in deeply engrained psychological distances between the woman and the man. These psychological distances between the two formulate into an epistemic problem of understanding the other and many a time results in the victimisation of the woman.

***Subarnalata*—Alienation within the home**

Subarnalata is the second work of Ashapura Debi’s trilogy on life of women. As Nabaneeta Dev Sen (1938–2019) notes in her introduction to the English translation, “*Subarnalata* deals quite extensively with feminist questions in the Indian context” (*Subarnalata* viii). Set in the backdrop of the independence struggle, it is a narration of

Subarnalata's unceasing and lonely struggle for self-identity in an orthodox household whose members do not believe in respecting the women of the house. As a child, Subarnalata wished to attend school and complete her education; however, her father, yielding to the prevailing customs, married her off, shattering her mother's dream of giving her a proper education. Satyavati, Subarnalata's mother, even walked out of their home in protest against her husband's unfair act. Years later, Satyavati makes a startling confession to Subarnalata in a letter that reaches the daughter only after the mother's death as was originally intended. Satyavati had written: "If a woman can stay on in her home, and yet attain fulfilment, that is what counts. There is no need to leave the confines of home to achieve one's goal" (*Subarnalata* 160).

Yet, it was Subarnalata's staying on with her family and in her home that prevented her from attaining fulfilment. Lying on her deathbed in the veranda, where she spends her last days, "turning her face to the wall, away from her family and friends, away from life" (*Subarnalata* 3), she construes her life as nothing but a tormenting failure.

Why does Subarnalata feel so? After all, she had stayed in her home attending to her family's needs and often fighting for what she believed to be right; even during those times when the rest of the family was not in agreement with her and prevailed over her, she had never felt helpless. Ashapura writes: "Subarnalata crashed through every barrier, and [almost] always got what she wanted" (*Subarnalata* 38). Though not formally educated, she had acquired a vast array of knowledge and wisdom by reading and observing life in general. Of course she never had it easy. Unnecessary obstacles were often created by an insensitive family and she had to pay dearly whenever she asserted herself. Recall how she intervened to save Dulo, the boy who used to bring her books and magazines from Mallik Babu. When Dulo was caught by her brother-in-law Prabhas, she had to promise her husband that she would not read any books henceforth—that was her way of buying peace with him (*Subarnalata* 65–72). Then, for defying her mother-in-law, Muktokeshi, in attending the "puja" arranged by Muktokeshi's sister-in-law, Subarnalata had to spend a night out in the cold—a punishment for leaving home without permission (*Subarnalata* 81–83). Here, it could be mentioned that being forced to stay outdoors in the cold by an irritated husband is not just the fate of an ordinary woman like Subarnalata but—as Velcheru Narayana Rao (1932–) observes—even of a princess like Sita (Rao 26–30). When she was later allowed in, she speaks firmly: "Who on earth asked you to

bring me in? It wasn't necessary to have me revived, was it? Were you afraid of the neighbours? God, was there anything left to be afraid of after last night?" (*Subarnalata* 83).

Herein she realises the extent to which patriarchal society can stretch itself. Against this awareness, it was heart-breaking for her to witness her own sons practising everything that she had protested against in the unjust social system. Indeed, what ultimately broke her emotionally and physically was the sons' antagonistic response to her wish to publish her autobiographical writing, a wish that was clearly a final attempt to seek fulfilment. She painfully realises that, even in her own home—with its large veranda and an open terrace, a luxury that was not available to her during the earlier days of her marital life in a joint family—she could never make herself understood to the family, notwithstanding all her efforts and sacrifices. How true were her mother's words: ". . . do you know what matters most to people? It is the desire to be understood. The biggest regret in life anyone can have is that no one understood him [or her], no one cared" (*Subarnalata* 160). These lines from Satyavati's letter to Subarnalata succinctly capture the origins of one's 'otherness' even in one's own home.

Alterity—Why does one have to live in this otherness?

Our failure to understand the 'other self' or the incapacity to make our own self understood by others breed spaces of alterity. As J.N. Mohanty (1928–) says in *The Self and its Other* (2000), "I have found no way of expelling the other from within my own world. The 'foreign', then, is that which I do not understand. But understanding and failure to understand, the familiar and the strange have their place within every world" (Mohanty 113).

Thus, the 'other' is an 'other' in so far as he or she is not understood. In other words, the act of 'understanding' bridges the self and the other. The commonest understanding that all of us accomplish in our daily lives is empathy, that is putting oneself in somebody else's place. This points to our essential community life, as it is the community that enables the individual to put herself or himself in the place of another self. According to Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), there are higher forms of understanding, like 're-creation' (*nachbilden*) and 're-living' (*nacherleben*). The totality of life is grasped in these activities of understanding. The transference of the subject's own self into a given complex of expressions, the projection of

one's self into another person or a work, which is understood as empathy, is the basis of these higher forms of understanding (Dilthey 12).

While community life engenders empathy which is the basis of all forms of understanding, it is ironic that family, the smallest and commonest unit of community, often becomes the primordial site of alterity due to the systemic failures of 'empathy' and 'understanding.' In spite of having the potential to initiate changes in her own family life as well as in those surrounding her, Subarnalata fails to bring about any significant changes to their attitude. Though she had emphatically demonstrated the need to boycott foreign clothes and promote *swadeshi* in her family in support of the Gandhian struggle for freedom, others in the family were not sympathetic to her ideals. Rather, they ensured that she was defeated in this move (*Subarnalata* 73–76). On many other crucial issues, including providing proper schooling to her daughters, Subarna could not succeed. The point is that these failures seem endemic to any family structured in a patriarchal fashion. Ashapura reminds us:

. . . women who were capable of crossing all barriers to get out in the open, to stand by the side of men . . . did not come from dark, narrow, dirty lanes where dustbins lay overturned; where dogs fought over morsels . . . They came from a different world, from families that were willing to give them the support they needed. Their people were not bothered by what others said (*Subarnalata* 76–77).

Here, Ashapura seems to echo the widely prevalent belief in India that wealth affords prestige and power. Though Ashapura is undoubtedly aware of the relevance of 'class' along with 'gender,' her novel *Subarnalata* does not advance along that way.

The noted American academic bell hooks (1952–) seems to suggest that even in the case of her country—the land of opportunity as it is often described—the realisation that “class matters” is a recent one; hook writes:

For so long everyone has wanted to hold on to the belief that the United States is a class-free society—that anyone who works hard enough can make it to the top. Few people stop to think that in a class-free society there would be no top. While it has always been obvious that some folks have more money than other folks, class difference and classism are rarely overtly apparent, or they are not acknowledged when present. The evils of racism and, much later, sexism, were easier to identify and challenge than the evils of classism. We live in a society

where the poor have no public voice. No wonder it has taken so long for many citizens to recognize class—to become class conscious (hooks 5).

bell hooks notes that much before men started clubbing categories like class, gender and race together, feminist theorists had recognised the significance of ‘intersectionality’ of these categories. Sarah Joseph’s novel *Othappau* succeeds to a great extent in problematising ‘class’ along with ‘gender’ and ‘caste.’

Margalitha—A search for the true self

Othappu is about a woman’s yearning for a true understanding of her own self; in this quest, she begins to realise that she could be spiritual even while affirming her own sexuality (*Othappu* 103–106). As the translator of the novel, Valson Thampu, rightly notes, though the English equivalent of the Malayalam word ‘othappu’ is ‘scandal’, it “approximates to ‘othappu’ only in a limited, lexical sense” (*Othappu* xiii). Sarah Joseph in *Othappu* attempts to address gender, class and caste together, and in the process exposes the vacuum created by the uncritical binaries such as ‘spirituality-sexuality,’ ‘dignity-poverty,’ ‘reason-emotion’ and ‘self-other.’

Margalitha, the protagonist, is the daughter of Varkey-Master, from a wealthy ‘upper-caste’ Kerala Syrian Christian family. When she wishes to join the Convent as a nun to serve God, her loving father tries to dissuade her, knowing pretty well the hardships that lie ahead in a convent life. His words remind us of Satyavati’s letter to Subarnalata. Margalitha’s father asks her: “Who said you have to join the Convent to serve God? Serve the family, Margalitha. Serve your mother who struggles day and night. Concentrate and commit yourself to it. That will make you happy. God is joy, bliss. Joy comes only through work and service” (*Othappu* 54).

However, Margalitha is determined to join the Convent as she feels that family is an obstacle in the service to God. She feels that the concept of family is centred on the notion of ‘mineness’—*my* mother, *my* father, *my* husband, *my* children. And so she wants to escape this “wretched selfishness.” Moreover, while she seeks to serve the Lord, it is not as if she is merely thinking of serving the poor. She rejects her father’s sarcastic comment that she could help the family of “Junction Ayappan,” a ‘low caste,’ by saying that what they needed more

than financial help was the “comfort of human help” and that such a service could be carried out by “anyone willing to take some trouble” (*Othappu* 55). She says her primary motive behind the decision to join the Convent is to lead a life of “renunciation,” which is far more than a life dedicated to serve the poor and needy. Here, Margalitha is well aware of the difference between serving the needy while leading a life of affluence and comfort for oneself, and doing the same as one who has renounced worldly comforts.

Joining a convent aspiring to be a nun is an existential choice that one makes after many—often painful—deliberations. However, once the nun’s habit is worn, more painful is the decision to remove it so as to lead a secular life outside the conventional religious life of the convent. Even though both are acts of personal choices, the decision to lead the life of a nun is usually applauded while the decision to renounce that life is often looked down upon by the society. Margalitha experiences the wrath of the family and society once she removes her nun’s habit to return to secular life.

Having abandoned her chosen home, the Convent, Margalitha returns to the home where she was born and brought up along with her two brothers. Now her father is no more, and it is her loving mother who lives there, along with Margalitha’s two brothers and their family. Margalitha surely had anticipated that she would earn the displeasure of her family for leaving the Convent. In terms of a traditional Catholic family, a nun on her own deserting the Convent after taking the oath of “Obedience, Celibacy, and Poverty” is a scandal—an *othappu*, if you may—that tarnishes its honour and prestige. Indeed, Sister Aabelamma, her spiritual mentor, had warned her: “Once you are caught in a system, it is best to cooperate with its dictates. If you walk out, your rebellion will exact a crushing physical and spiritual cost” (*Othappu* 5).

Thus, her brothers’ act of cruelty, in throwing her into the cellar—a dark room “where raw fruits were stored to ripen”—leaving her to die in hunger and suffocation, was not totally unexpected. Her only hope in returning to her first home was her mother. It was out of love and concern that her mother had defended Margalitha’s decision against her father’s wishes. Margalitha remembered her mother’s words:

My child, family life—delivering children, raising them, and all the rest of it—is not as easy or enjoyable as it is made out to be. Those who see it from a distance may think it is. But those who have suffered the grind know the truth (*Othappu* 55).

She had deep sympathies for her daughter. Now returning to her home abandoning the nun's habit, Margalitha could see in the dim light her mother standing at the door trying hard to figure out the approaching person amidst the torrential rain. "To Margalitha, the distance between her mother and herself seemed like a blind alley that bred pain and fear. She had to walk that stretch; she had no other way" (*Othappu* 2). What Margalitha feared was not the physical distance between them; it was the "psychological distance," the distance that stood as a formidable barrier against "understanding." Margalitha had failed to realise her mother's helplessness. Unlike Subarnalata's mother-in-law Muktokeshi, who took charge of the household after the death of her husband, Margalitha's mother was not the matriarch who ran her home. Sarah deftly conveys the position of an old widowed mother in a typical Syrian Christian home by never ever mentioning her name in the narrative. All through the novel, she is referred to as "Margalitha's mother," "Varkey-Master's wife," or as "Rebekka's *amma*" (aunt).

Now the question to ask is: knowing well the repercussions of deserting the Convent, an act that would be deemed "scandalous," what might have pushed Margalitha to do so? Sarah does not narrate the travails and tribulations of the life inside the convent. We are told that Margalitha is unable to find the spiritual satisfaction that she had sought on joining the Convent. Sharing her anxieties and dissatisfaction about her Convent life with Sister Aabel, her spiritual mentor, Margalitha complains that she does not get sleep. Sister Aabel tells Margalitha: "Those who do right, sleep well. You must do what you believe to be right. It has been years since I slept. Many others with us here are sleepless too . . . Some, to be sure, sleep well; they are truly blessed" (*Othappu* 6).

Margalitha, however, does not want to lead such a tormenting life that chokes her soul and one that deprives her of proper sleep. *Othappu* is about Margalitha's search for her true self that yearns to break the barriers of class, gender, caste and religion.

When home engenders psychological distance

A convent, the home of a catholic nun, is a different kind of ‘family.’ Paul Zacharia (1945–), the noted Malayalam writer, remarks:

Convents are feminist communities which were formed without feminist intent . . . The nuns decide the structure and goals of their Order. There is no external pressure from the Church or the priests . . . The stance—we can live without men; we can look after our affairs; we make our decisions, we create our economic base—is quite revolutionary (*Othappu* 252).

However, despite such a revolutionary potential, the Convent as an institution, much like ‘conventional family,’ degenerates into an oppressive structure for some of the inmates. Jesme (1956–), a former catholic nun, has written in Malayalam, her personal account of the life within a convent: *Amen—Oru Kanyasthreeyude Atmakadha* (2009). Jesme describes the life within a convent as infused with intense “spiritual competition” towards pleasing the God and the clergy superiors—a competition that often borders on jealousy (Jesme 52–53). The hierarchical structure within the convent makes the inhabitants seek advancements within the hierarchy by availing of administrative positions for themselves. Sister Jesme narrates her ordeal in fighting against the hierarchy while attempting to assert herself. Her superiors even conspired to confine her to a mental asylum as she stood firmly by her beliefs (Jesme 155–162). However, unlike Sarah’s Margalitha, Sister Jesme had the support of her mother all through the travails of her convent life; the mother even chose to take the daughter home when the latter expressed her desire to leave the convent.

It is possible to explain the concept of ‘home’ as a space of alterity in the lives of both Subarnalata and Margalitha through construal levels and psychological distance. Experiences remote from us and the present seem to be ‘psychologically distant.’ According to the construal-level theory of psychological distance, people use a more abstract, high construal level when judging, perceiving and predicting more psychologically distal targets, thus judging more abstract targets as being more psychologically distant. Construal-level theory suggests that one of the factors that affect the construal level is the psychological distance between the perceiver and her goal. The higher the psychological distance, the more likely are perceivers to form high-level rather than low-level construals of objects and events (Trope and Liberman 441). Psychological distance is an experiential understanding of the self as close to or away

from an object perceived. It is thus egocentric: its reference point is the self, here and now. The ways in which an object of one's perception might be removed from that point—in time, space and social and hypothetical distance—constitute different distance dimensions. As psychological distance increases, construal would become more abstract, and as the level of abstraction increases, so too would the psychological distances people envisage. Construal levels thus expand and contract one's mental horizon. Subarnalata's idealistic view of a life where equality and education are also the priorities for a woman is a matter of constant turmoil in her family. Subarnalata's actions are construed at a more abstract, higher level whereas the interpretations by her husband and relatives are based on lower, concrete levels.

Reading a book on events of the Indian Independence movement is a way of expressing patriotism for Subarnalata (abstract higher level) whereas for her husband it is reading a book (discrete lower level) during the hours when she should be devoting herself to household chores. Subarnalata's burning of the sarees that her husband brought her from the British mills is seen as an expression of her adamant lunacy by her mother-in-law and the rest of her family members, while she herself construes the act as her way of serving the nation. When most of the nation is answering the call to shun foreign goods, she contributes in her own way to the cause. But this act of destroying the sarees meant to be draped for the Durga puja is construed (at a lower level of the construal) by her husband and others as sacrilegious. This is also true in a similar way in the case of Margalitha's act of leaving the Convent. Her decision to live with Karikkan, a priest who abandoned the vocation to be with Margalitha, meets with strong opposition from their families, society and the Church. The news of the "scandalous act" spreads so fast that they soon become outcasts in the very society that had once accorded respect to them. The societal members do not understand her urge for a spiritual liberation even as she is being truthful to her sexuality and sentiments (construed at a higher abstract level); instead, they look down upon her act as something immoral (construed at a lower concrete level). This might explain the dispassionate attitude of Subarnalata's husband or the indifference displayed by Margalitha's brothers to a woman's needs and desires. Not understanding the other creates psychological distances, thereby reducing propensities for empathy.

Could psychological distances be erased, so as to form more co-operative, empathetic relationships between the woman and the household? We believe fostering a culture of ‘dialogue’ would help us to obliterate the psychological distances. Dialogue is essentially ‘openness’ to the other. It could transform people, if carried out genuinely. As Martin Buber (1878–1965) points out, in genuine dialogue, a “living mutual relation” gets established between the parties in dialogue and they mutually engage with each other (Buber 22). Thus, dialogue has the potential to build bridges between oneself and the other.

Conclusion

A woman’s relationship with her ‘home’ ideally is that of comfort, fulfilment and satiation. ‘Home’ as a metaphor for ‘alterity,’ though not new, was often construed as a paradox, given the binary of ‘home and the outside world.’ The characters of Subarnalata and Margalitha represent a few among millions of women who strive for a space of their own, where the sense of alienation does not render them to become ‘others’ even within the home. When the other is not understood, alterity emanates from the gulf. We have tried to show perhaps why there is such a gap at all. Women are bound to question the age-old norms of patriarchy that mute their voices. Both Subarnalata and Margalitha, each in their own way, react to such oppressive attitudes of a patriarchal society.

Our focus here is on the psychology of ‘othering.’ The problem at hand is of a difference—a breach among perceptions of a single act at different levels. Our submission is that the alterity stems from a ‘non-understanding’ of the other’s actions, thoughts and desires. The relationship between men and women in patriarchal societies seems more like that of “master-slave” in Hegelian dialectics. In such a situation, ‘otherness’ or ‘alterity’ shall always reside in the home unless an initiative towards gender equality through ‘dialogue’ is imbibed and the hierarchical dichotomies are ruled out.

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