



Identity Constructions and Gender in Daisy Hasan's *The To-Let House*

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Abstract: This paper is a detailed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the novel *The To-Let House* that represents the indigenous struggles, the politics of identity and the construction of a 'woman's identity' amidst the unsettling environment of violence in the historical context of the North Eastern part of India. The paper would analyse and explore the underlying discourse operating in the novel and investigate the core theories and its impact through the conscious choices of the 'language in use' by the author. Daisy Hasan's *The To-Let House* is primarily marked with the identity constructions and its gradual evolution. The author not only just unravels the struggles that the characters undergo but also counterfeits a sense of identity instituting it towards one's self identity. The characters in the novel are unable to affiliate themselves into any one particular cultural identity; rather they constantly are struggling within themselves inwardly, in the midst of the violence surrounding them outwardly. This weakness and inability to assign an identity turns out to be a strong narrative that constructs a powerful discourse highlighting the nuances of 'belongingness.'

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Identity, Language, Indigenous Struggle, Gender

About the Author



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1. Introduction

Daisy Hasan was born in India in 1974 and grew up in a politically unstable Shillong of the 1980s. The novel *The To-Let House* does not talk of the present tranquil Shillong with its aesthetically pleasing landscapes and scenery, but on the contrary, it represents a Shillong which was then the most troubled region of the North East India (Hasan, Daisy, 2010). Daisy Hasan's *The To-Let House* is primarily marked with the identity constructions and its gradual evolution. The author not only just unravels the struggles that the characters undergo but also counterfeits a sense of identity instituting it towards one's self-identity (Murshida, 2019).

The characters in the novel are unable to affiliate themselves into any one particular cultural identity; rather they constantly are struggling within themselves inwardly, in the midst of the violence surrounding them outwardly. This weakness and inability to assign an identity turns out to be a strong narrative that constructs a powerful discourse highlighting the nuances of 'belongingness.' The violent search for identity with unerring pulse of memory is represented in the novel with a conscious choice of language by the author (Murshida, 2019).



This paper therefore shall be aimed at a detailed Critical Discourse Analysis of the novel *The To-Let House* that represents the indigenous struggles, the politics of identity and the construction of a 'woman's identity' amidst the unsettling environment of violence. The paper would analyse and explore the discourse running in the novel and investigate the underlying theories and its impact through the conscious choices of the 'language in use' by the author, at the level of words, then at the level of sentences and further analyse the whole discourse running in the novel (Murshida, 2019).

2. Language and Literature: Interconnection and Formation of the overall Discourse

Language and literature can never be separate and therefore this interconnection, as a result, form the overall discourse underlying any narrative. Although, may not always be consciously, sometimes authors, politically on purpose, prefer to choose a certain form of a language that decide on the discursive elements the narrative would articulate. Apart from the political consciousness in the narrative such a language also facilitates in the construction of the identities of the particular characters and the text as a whole through the systematic approach to literary language (Halliday, 1985).

Language, as it has been studied and acknowledged, is intrinsic in the transmission of culture and therefore cannot be simply confined as mere communication, rather, it indeed has to be credited with an essential feature of construction of one's cultural identity (Kramsch, 1998). Language is just not only a fundamental way through which most of the cultural expression is generally conveyed; it is also through language that cultural expressions are transmitted from one generation to another (Hall, 2014). Language therefore plays an integral part in the construction of identity (Hogg and Abrams, 1988). Since language allows all its speakers to choose the 'language in use' therefore the context as per the occasion and cultural space is relevant almost always (Halliday, 1994). Code-switching, along with other strategies, features to be one of the most significant and recurrently used devices in a bilingual and multilingual set up, such as in Shillong in case of Daisy Hasan's *The To-Let House* (Kachru, 1982).

Among the many other manifestations of context in the significance of 'language choice' one important materialization is what has been called as 'voice appropriation', where many of the indigenous narratives are said to be told and produced by 'outsiders,' and is also considered as a continuation of the colonial legacy. In case of literature production, 'appropriation' is observed all the way through and as Mikhail Bakhtin further explains that 'most of one's words are not one's own' (Edwards, 2009). Therefore the practice of cultural 'appropriation' and 'voice appropriation' is primarily apparent in the indigenous group narratives and story-telling/ retelling.

3. Why Critical Discourse Analysis:

Discourse constitutes society and culture and therefore there is no denying that discourse also has an ideological function and is historical (Zupnik, 1991; Dijk, 1997; Gee 1999). Thus, discourse mediates as the link between the text and the society. (Meyer, 2001; Tenorio, 2011) Since discourse is a form of social action so it has an interpretative and explanatory character.

Critical Discourse Analysis mainly addresses the issues regarding *social problems* and *political issues* (Dijk, 1997). It does not limit the analysis to the study of discourse structures alone without considering the social and political contexts of any narrative or text (Luke, 1988). Since we know that analyzing any social problem cannot be confined to a single discipline therefore CDA being interdisciplinary as a research methodology, accommodates to the requirement. (Deborah Tannen *et al.*, 2015) After the careful study of the discourse structures CDA elucidates them in terms of social interaction and social structure (Volosinov, 1973). CDA therefore investigates and explores relations of power abuse in society through the enactment of discourse structures as stated by Teun A van Dijk.

4. Critical Discourse Analysis of *The To-Let House*

Language in Daisy Hasan's *The To-Let House* effectively serves in both the communicative and the symbolic manner. The symbolic connotation of language in the novel mainly is concerned with the historical and cultural associations that have been accumulated since ages and its 'natural semantics of remembrance' of the narrator's memory with the context of Shillong in the backdrop. Therefore, this symbolic function allows the shared 'nuances' through the language in use, it is constantly translated and interpreted in the certain community and group



mentioned in the novel (Smith, 1971). This function of language is primarily determined by the cultural continuity in which the language is rooted and which is not open to all. This phenomenon often takes place in the case of the indigenous narratives in which a particular identity group and its language serves the political purpose of the cultural continuity which otherwise is not possible (Elahe and Shariffar, 2015).

Following the Faircloughian model of the relational-dialectic approach of Critical Discourse Analysis the following sections provide a sketchy (due to constraints in word limit) analysis at the level of words then at the level of sentence and finally at the level of the overall discourse of the text (Carranza, 1997; Sabir, & Kanwal, 2018). Fairclough's Model of discourse is a three-dimensional concept which involves:

- 1) Text's analysis that involve the objects of linguistic analysis.
- 2) Discursive practices in the production, distribution and consumption of texts.
- 3) Social practices that include the power relations, ideologies and hegemonic struggles that discourse reproduce challenge or restructure in the texts.

The Context: 'To start at the start is to start with cross-purposes and contradictions,' (Hasan, 2010, p.33) *The To-Let House*, a memory narrative is set in the violence, riot prone 'Shillong cracks open like a child's storybook.....In my memory it is such and we are still young,' as the author mentions in the preface to the novel. Setting the theme again the author mentions 'it is raining on the first page', the metaphorical rain that pours down all the incidents in the lives of the narrator and the other relevant characters, from the first page, unfolding history itself in the process of narration (Ballard, 1980; Faerch and Kasper 1984; Widdowson, 2004).

4.1 Text Analysis

Vocabulary, Grammar, and Cohesion in the text: This section deals mainly with individual words, word choices, word meanings, wordings, the grammatical structures, augmentation and metaphors in the text that the author has strategically utilized to get the intentioned effect in the overall underlying discourse (Behnam&Kazemian, 2013).

a. Un-Glossed/Un-translated words: Cultural 'appropriation and' 'Voice appropriation' in the text through linguistic appropriations (Rahimi and Riasati, 2011).

i. *The To-Let House*: Beginning with the title of the novel that is 'The To-Let House', the author chooses the word 'to-let' instead of other word like the rented house in order to imply that the house is not just rented but the people living in it are rather allowed in it as far as the other meaning of the word 'to-let' goes. As we clearly see, as the novel develops gradually, May and Governor are both accused as traitors for allowing the 'dhkars' or the outsiders in their house. Therefore the title in itself sets the theme of the novel and the author strategically chooses the word combination implying the context of the novel.

ii. *Momodome, Mohammedan*: The word 'Momodome' that seems to be a distorted anagram of the word 'Mohammedan' again implies the outsiders and how for a twelve-year-old the domes of a mosque or a gurudwara is only supposed to be compared with a 'momo'. The fact that he is, neither a *Momodome* nor a Mohammedan, but a 'blue-blooded, stone-eyed Khasi', is rather of much significance to the young Kulay than anything else.

iii. *maust, fonkshons, Maadom, haf, mony, A-Siamese, Fishland*: The narrator mentions the words must, functions, madam, half, money as it is pronounced by local speakers. This further gives an indigenous touch to the novel and a hint about the local way of talking and pronunciation.

The word Assamese and Finland has been mentioned as *A-Siamese* and *Fishland* to give a suggestion to the readers about the inclusive ideology that was working in Shillong which further leads to the riots that is witnessed by not just the narrator and her family but also the local population. A-Siamese and Fishland therefore has also been used in a sarcastic tone adding hint to the outcastedness of this mixed ethnicity couple.

iv. *Dhkar*: The Khasi word for an outsider and the most significant term in the novel throughout is the *Dhkar*. The novel revolves around the word 'dhkar' that is an outsider, to be more precise, anyone who does not belong to the



Khasi community. This outsider-insider clash paradoxically hits even the blue-blooded khasi, Kulay at the end after his original identity as a half Khasi is revealed.

v. *Sha-saw, kwai*: The khasi word for milkless tea *sha saw*, and the word *kwai* for betel leaves served with nuts are not translated but kept as it is to maintain the cultural fervor of Shillong. Although the author could have translated the words but instead the author's strategy was to use the original khasi words so that the whole culture is translated instead of few words.

vi. *Hindi liah...Khasi mein*: As it has already mentioned that identity plays such an important role in the novel, so the way children too, at a very young age, learn to figure out the difference between an outsider and a local, is alarming. Since the narrator's mother wore a *sari*, when Sissy Kay mentions that to Kulay, he immediately responds saying '*O! Hindi liah...I'm Khasi mein...*' and the question that immediately follows is whether they want to fly kites or fight.

vii. *tapmogleih*: The conventional tartan Meghalese shawl which is the symbol of the traditional culture of the local people.

viii. *Khar Neps*: *Khar Neps* another word to refer the outsiders who belong to the Nepali community, again reiterating the outsider- insider narrative.

b. Syntactic fusion: There is an abundant use of syntactic fusion throughout the novel. Few are mentioned as follows:

i. '*Because an offisore's wife is a MAHARRRRANI!*' while answering the reporter and justifying the fact that he was a corrupt bureaucrat involved with bribery, May's Father Hilarious L uses a fusion language mixing multiple languages.

ii. '*It's a Malki kite liah...*' Kulay swears when he is confident that he now has a much stronger kite than the others because his kite string is layered with crushed glasses.

c. Code switching: Instances when the speakers shift from one language to another or from one dialect to another. This novel because of its multicultural essence has lots of shifts between languages and dialects.

i. '*Naam Salty aur kaam namak harami*' (Hasan, 2010, p.94) The switching from Hindi to English and Khasi to English is seen throughout the novel.

ii. '*Arre! Clemmie toh mahila ho gayee...*' (Hasan, 2010, p.94) This is another instance we see a shift from English to Hindi and back to English again in the text.

Text Structure: Deals with large scale organizational properties:

i. Interactional control:

Most of the interaction that takes place in the text is in first person and second person point of view. The narrative style is of third person omniscient narrative too, to a certain extent with linear and nonlinear patterns in it. The overall effect of the narrative style not only gives the author the scope to dwell on her point of view but allows the readers have similar freedom in framing opinions and forming judgments. The smooth switches between viewpoints help the reader understand the discursive elements of the novel more clearly.

ii. Sentence length and complexity:

Apart from being a lyrical prose and offering a lot of linguistic innovations the text also has punctuation deviation as a stylistic feature that focus on certain kind of absurdity that is usually found in the modern fiction. Apart from the absurdity of the statements that are discussed these also focus on the absurd political scenario of the Shillong.

'WHAT IF THE WHOLE WORLD FARTED AT ONE GO' (Hasan, 2010, p.59) Benjamin gives Sissy Kay a batch with this written on it in bold back in a yellow background. There is a certain level of absurdity witnessed in the text. The absurd possibilities like the one mentioned are not ignored since the absurdities of violence are witnessed, any possibility of anything is perceptible.



I'M ONE IN A MILLION (Hasan, 2010, p.60) Kulay broods over the fact that how he was so different from the outsider 'dhkars' because he was 'cleaner...clearer' and 'one in a million' as he thinks about himself, than them. Kulay who believes himself to be a Khasi and is bound by his patriotic duties and responsibilities to save his motherland from the outsiders, the outcastes, until he learns the truth about himself that he is a half- Khasi because he was the son of Governor and Redcoat, the mistress to Governor, and not May.

GOD SET HIS SEAL AND MARLED HIM FOR HIS OWN (Hasan, 2010, p.222) This statement again that is found to be uttered by the narrator at the end of the novel as she visits his grave mentions the importance of Kulay in her life.

4.2 Discursive Analysis (Interpretation)

a. The force of the utterance is one of the most important features of the novel as it is a lyrical prose. The rhythmic quality of the prose bestows symbolic meanings throughout, setting down the thought progressions and emotional conditions of the characters. The poetic writing style of the author although seemingly lucid and simple have complexity, irony, symbolic sophistication and paradox concealed within it.

- i. *Will you get angry if you find me at your door again?*
Will you get angry if I enter your room?
Will you read to me at two in the night?
Will you wake up at four to see the moon?
Will you bail me out of jail?
Will you buy me books?
Will you eat my dinners and drink my drinks?
Will you put your head in the crook of my arm?
Will you wait for me?
Will you let your hair turn grey with mine?
Will you die if I die?
Will you mother my dust-laden children?
Will you love me always? (Hasan, 2010, p.17-18)

In this passage the author reveals a lot about the gender relationship that is evident in the novel. The repeated rhetorical questions beginning with 'will you...' tend to make the reader believe that the speaker pleads for the company of the listener but on the contrary, we find how Ma is abandoned by the father of her children.

The issue of gender in the novel is clear right from the beginning when the mention of the 'A-siamese man' is mentioned by Governor 'who wore pink shirts and yellow ties and beat the shit out of his taller-than-him wife'. Further we also find Kulay's cousin Phoebe's brother being called as Sissy Kay because of his effeminate and feminine nature. Further we also find Di questioning her femininity until she gets validation from Kulay. Di is also found comparing herself to Phoebe because she is enchanted by her and wanted to become her instead of accepting who she herself is. Further we also find the narrator saying, 'When we were small, we thought Charity was a girl.' As we see the women in the novel take up the stereotypical role of women with all the virtues of non-violence, peace, charity etc, we also find the narrator saying, 'We thought Earthquake was man.' because of the violent attribute that has been thrust upon the men by patriarchy. This also is the reason that we see Kulay assuming that it was his duty to defend his motherland from the *dhkars* because he was a 'blue-blooded stone eyed Khasi.....different-cleaner and clearer than them, the outsiders,' and a responsible male member of their community.

- ii. *Wishes for My Mother*
I wish, at this moment
You are lying on your bed
Awaiting your filthy end
And in a moment you'll be dead
I wish I could confess my sins
And make you confess yours
Get rid of the ache from beneath our skins



*Before I close all my doors,
I wish I could cry then
I wish I could shed some tears
I wish it would rain then
And wash away all my fears. (Hasan, 2010, p.196-197)*

The trouble between the relations of the parents and children is most visible in case of Kulay and May who are apparently mother and son but the truth that Kulay is not borne of May but Redcoat instead make their relationship obscure, May although she hated 'her' son and wanted to penalize 'his parents' but is unable to do so for the love of Clemmie for her brother Kulay. Kulay equally resents the fact that he is not May's son, and resents himself too, but at the same time he also longs for a mother whom he could complain to and reveal all his secrets to.

iii. *Thwack-thwack... get out,
Thwack-thwack... get out,
Thwack-thwack... get out of town.*

The strength of expressions in the ethnic violence is seen multiple times in the text. The sound of the knocks is always followed by a 'get out' and the 'get out of town'. During the riots the narrator and her family wait scared and hidden behind the door praying for their lives when May and Governor are held captives for allowing the 'Dhkars' in their house and hiding them.

iv. *Once. Thwack.
Twice. Thwack-thwack
Thwack-thwack-get out of town.*

The never-ending knocks with a 'get out' and 'get out of town' never leaves Di, Ma and Addy because of the prevailing political turmoil in the novel.

b. The coherence of the text

v. *My father went to sea, sea, sea,
To see what he could see, see, see
But all that he could see, see, see
Was the bottom of the dark blue sea, sea, sea. (Hasan, 2010, p.24)*

Taking an instance of the coherence of the text, the above rhyme talks about the kind of disillusionment that the narrator's father undergo. 'Sea' in the passage refer to the vastness of the world which the narrator's father goes to 'see' but then all he could 'see' was the darkness of the 'bottom of the dark blue sea'.

vi. *the Ministaars of the State
They arrived so late? (Hasan, 2010, p.83)*

Since as it is mentioned earlier the text also is sarcasm to the then political system prevailing in Shillong, the author mocks the arrival of the ministers since they always take the privilege of not coming in time.

vii. *There were two big bullies at the door, door, door,
They caught him by the collar,
And they made him pay a dollar,
And he didn't go to OB anymore, more more. (Hasan, 2010, p.43)*

The general bullying of the outsiders on the basis of their ethnic identities is mentioned in this rhyme and it also talks about how the bullies would be freed if they paid them enough money.

viii. *One misty-moisty evening
When cloudy was the weather
There I met an old man
Dressed all in leather.
He began to compliment*



*And I began to grin
How-do-you-do, how-do-you-do
And how-do-you-do again? (Hasan, 2010, p.220)*

This rhyme refers to the home coming of the narrator Di who finds the same weather back in Shillong when she comes back after years, which further reminds her of the rhyme she used when she was a child on day with similar weather. The nostalgic visit of the narrator brings back all her memories and how similar and unchanged things were while there was such an upheaval of changes in her own life.

*ix. I'm not a bus or a cat or a rat
I'm a mole and I live in a hole.*

Kulay, who until he was put in prison had the patriotic commitment of saving his motherland from the outsiders, the outcastes, but as he starts feeling the pangs of violence inside the prison, he realizes that he is not meant to be as courageous and as brave he thought himself to be. He realizes that he is no different from 'a mole' that 'live in hole'. The comparison that is drawn between Kulay and the mole show the contrast between the patriotic ideals of Kulay unless he is jailed and tortured.

c. The intertextuality of the text

*x. Politics is a scramble...
I am William Tell...
And you go to Hell... (Hasan, 2010, p.44)*

The intertextuality of the text is inevitable here where the author pens down the contemporary political scenario of Shillong by saying that politics is 'scramble' and then mentions 'William Tell' who is known to have assassinated the tyrannical reeve of the Austrian Dukes of the House of Habsburg who was situated in Aldorf in the canton of Uri, concluding that every tyrannical rule would bring up a 'William Tell' who would send the tyrant to hell.

*xi. And he stood there in his Levis imitations,
And he stood there in his hat
And he stood there in the setting sun
And he said, 'I'm a kinda wild cat.' (Hasan, 2010, p.43)*

Another instance of intertextuality is visible where the author mentions the 'Levis imitations' which refer to the ongoing popularization of the consumerist society in Shillong in the midst of the political chaos.

*xii. Elizabeth Ann
Had a wonderful plan
She would run round the world till she found a man
Who knew exactly how God began. (Hasan, 2010, p.33)*

The author here refers to Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton who was the first person from the United States to be canonized by the Roman Catholic Church. She was also the founder of the American congregation of the sisters of Charity. This rhyme is in a way a mockery to the orthodox religious institutions which are always controlled by men. The author sarcastically says that 'She would run around till she found a man who knew exactly how God began'.

*xiii. Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Hang down your head and cry
Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Poor boy you're bound to die. (Hasan, 2010, p.211)*

The author further makes a reference to the song Tom Dooley by the Kingston Trio. Like the folk song that revolves around the murder of a woman in the Wilkes Country this song too is referred after the murder of the pregnant woman in the riots drawing a parallel between both the incidents.

The sense of belongingness that prevails in the novel is evident when someone during the riots shout saying that, 'The Punjabis have Punjab, the Bengalis have Bengal but we only have this little land'.



4. 3 Social Analysis (Explanation)

i. The novel, as it has been explored is clearly in relation to ideology and power. The hegemonic struggle between the outsider 'dhkars' and the supporters of the locals is observed throughout in the text. The ideological dichotomy not just divides the population but also brings turmoil in the lives of the characters of the novel.

ii. The narrator clearly belongs to the powerless strata of the society due to her economic as well as ethnic status and being a woman member of the otherized section of the society and therefore becomes a victim of assault. The narrator is also accused to be voiceless as she never gathers the courage to allege against her assaulter or talk about it although she liberates and emancipates herself at the end of the novel.

iii. The ideology behind the text is the ethnic disagreements and nationalistic political movements that take place in order to restore the privileges of the local residents who are supposedly the 'blue blooded...cleaner...clearer' populace unlike the outsiders.

iv. The intention behind the text is to delve into the memory and history of the ethnic conflicts that changed the lives of thousands of people. The author possibly intends to voice out the narrative of the outsiders who were otherized, and looked down upon, because of their ethnic identities.

v. The text is also about the self realizations of the characters and the explorations of their true identities. Although the narrative begins on a note of ethnic conflicts with certain characters powerful that the others yet each of them explore their true identity at the end resulting in self actualization of each of the characters and liberating themselves. Therefore, we find Kulay being killed by his own people whom he thought was his clan, his kinsmen with whom he fought side by side, because they thought him to be a traitor as well because he was a 'half-Khasi' who did not belong with them. In this process Kulay too is set free from the turmoil that goes on in his mind and heart.

5. Conclusion

Therefore, to conclude, a CDA of Daisy Hasan's *The To-Let House* assert the fact that the novel is manifests the identity constructions and its eventual evolution. The struggles that the characters undergo forge a sense of identity establishing the self-identity of the characters, who at the end reconcile with themselves amidst the external and internal struggles. Daisy Hasan's *The To-Let House* lends itself to be explored and read as a discourse that highlights the struggles, identity crisis, gendered complexities and the nuances of 'belongingness.'

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