

---

# NEGOTIATION OF SUBJECTIVITY: SUBJECT ON TRIAL IN JUDITH THOMPSON'S THE CRACKWALKER

*Shankar Subedi\**

---

## **Abstract**

*This paper tries to explore the notion of 'subject on trial' in Judith Thompson's play The Crack Walker. This kind of subject is always in process and never fully formed. The semiotic language used by the subject creates a flow and fluidity that is all the time mobile and dynamic. The play uses unusual signifying systems which lend themselves to the study of the fluid psychology of the characters in the play. This kind of psychology operates through unusual signifying codes based on disease, sexuality and body functions. The elements like alliterations, ellipsis and distorted syntax make the language poetic which helps to vocalize the fears, instincts and desires of the characters. This kind of language is appropriate to express the subjectivity that is constantly in movement. It helps to destabilize the notion of fixed and stable identity and subjectivity. Julia Kristeva's concept of semiotic language is used as a tool for analysing the fluid subjectivity of Theresa, the central character in the play. It is however, the interaction between the language of the father (symbolic) and the language of the mother (semiotic) that helps to create a subjectivity that can function meaningfully in the public arena.*

**Key words:** *subject on trial, semiotic, symbolic, signifying system, instinctual drives, fluidity, negotiation*

---

## **Introduction**

This article analyses Judith Thompson's play *The Crackwalker* with insights from Julia Kristeva's essay "Revolution in Poetic Language". This type of semiotic language is appropriate to study both the subjectivity of a child before 18 months and the identity of a woman whose bodily energies and instinctual drives can justly be analyzed through the poetic language of the semiotic chora. This kind of language is marked by ambivalence, heterogeneity and fluidity. This theory of language helps to question the notion of stable, unified subject. These drives don't make sense on their own and it is their negotiation with the symbolic that it can make itself understood to the public. This oscillating subject is Kristeva's subject on trial. In this way, subjectivity becomes a process in constant movement between the semiotic and the symbolic. Too much emphasis on either of these is dangerous. If we depend too much on the semiotic it leads to chaos and delirium as the Indian man in the play. Too much of emphasis on the symbolic leads one to a discourse that is shallow and empty. The alliterations, the powerful images and the monologues of the characters help to create a kind of fluid music and it reveals the semiotic core of characters' subjectivity. On

---

\* Visiting Lecturer of Saraswati Multiple Campus/Lecturer of Central Department of English University Campus, TU., Kirtipur, Nepal.

the other hand, much of the language used by Sandy and Joe symbolizes the logic and coherence of the public discourse that represents the symbolic order of the father's language. It is through a blending of these two signifying systems that characters in the play negotiate their subjectivity which is a subject on the trail.

## Analysis of the Text

Judith Thompson's characters in *The Crackwalker* are good examples of the subject on trial as they are all the time trying to strike a balance between the semiotic and the symbolic languages. In order to operate successfully in society, these characters balance the flow of semiotic energy with the logic and coherence of the symbolic. No character is fully separated from the influence of the semiotic chora and no one has necessarily a unified identity as per the expectations of society. The semiotic is the language of the mother and a child and it can capture the constant flow of instinctual drives and bodily energies that challenge the order and coherence which the symbolic tries to impose on it. The following monologue by the main character Theresa is an evidence of how the mainstream society can't hear and understand the inner voice of an individual living on the margins of society. That she is speaking into a dead phone clearly shows how she lacks the ability to communicate to the public or how her language doesn't help in it.

Hi Janus won't be doing reading writing today. Something happen. Just something. The baby die. The baby die. Up at Sanny's. Okay Okay I waitin . . . Ron Harton still living up at shuter's? [hangs up the phone, and picks it up immediately] C', speak to Ron Please? Hi Ron its Trese s'okay if start going together. I love ya. Okay see ya Tuesday. (1190)

In fact, she is talking to herself because it is a dead phone and nobody will hear. In many places the language is highly rhythmic and musical and helps to capture the fluidity of her feelings and emotions which the language of the father can't express. However, it is the very symbolic language which is necessary to give clarity to the chaos and ambivalence represented by the semiotic. This kind of language helps to create the music of the unconscious. Thompson's characters are in subjective turmoil because the identity they assume is opposed to what is socially acceptable.

Thompson presents the subject in crisis through unusual signifying codes. Alan and Theresa use language codes based on disease, body, sexuality, mental disorder. It is a code that reflects the energy and ambiguity of Kristeva's semiotic. Alan's remark, "Jeez y'know I don't know what goes on inside that girl but it ain't what's goin on inside the rest of us" (1179) clearly indicates that the mainstream society cannot understand what goes on inside the mind of a character like Theresa. What takes place in that mind is different from what goes on inside the mind of other so called normal people of the mainstream society. The semiotic signifying code of her speech ruptures the coherence of the symbolic and she speaks to herself to find relief from the pain resulting from a lack of ability to express herself. We can oppose this language to the more socially acceptable language of Joe and Sandy. The socially alienated Indian man communicates wholly through instinctual rhythms and movements of his semiotic chora. However, without the presence of the symbolic language the semiotic cannot mean much.

The play presents the unstable and violent lives of Joe, Sandy, Alan and Theresa. All of these characters try to struggle for surviving on the margins of society. The better life of the mainstream

society which they struggle to secure always eludes them. They are silenced by mainstream society, and their oppression is a result of their inability to manipulate the existing language codes of the social system. They find it difficult to communicate with others. The characters of *The Crackwalker* use sign and codes that go beyond what is normally considered acceptable social language. Theresa's disgust, "I don't like reading no stupid Bible! Ya get a stomach ache doin that ya do!" (1150) is a rejection of the rule of the father which is made clear when she reacts with physical disgust towards reading bible which represents the law of the father and the epitome of patriarchal social codes.

The fractured and expressive code mirrors the rupturing and chaotic language of the characters. The play presents a glaring example of the human condition on the brink of survival. The play juxtaposes shockingly realistic scenes with surreal and dreamlike episodes. The surrealistic scenes involving Alan and the Indian man, the raw poetic language used by Alan serve to portray the fractured human psyche through the force of the semiotic.

Alan and Theresa are the two main characters in the play. Theresa is a semi-retarded native woman who makes a living "blowing queers off down at the libido for five bucks" (1124). Her passion for sex lands her into trouble and she needs the help of other characters to help her find a socially acceptable lifestyle. To prevent the semiotic from collapsing into total disorder, it needs to embrace the symbolic to make itself understandable to the public. Theresa's fluid psyche is temporarily arrested and finds meaning by the symbolic represented by more sane characters like Joe and Sandy. Alan is a character who, unable to fit into the socially acceptable role of father and husband, strangles his own son in desperation. The monologues used by the characters in the play demonstrate the uncensored stream of consciousness which is poetry of the voiceless and the underprivileged. These monologues can be seen as representations of subjective fragmentation. The poetic language of the monologues provides a window on the character's unconscious thoughts and desires. The reliance on bodily function suggested by Theresa's, "who farted" (1163) and the giggles and the rhythmic language implied by the Indian man's, "pleeease" (1177) reflect Kristeva's view that, "Drives involve pre-oedipal semiotic functions and energy discharges that connect and orient the body to the mother" (2172). The semiotic language of the Indian man and Theresa defies the tyranny of the symbolic and expresses itself through music of the drives and the giggles. Unfortunately, it is that very symbolic language which gives meaning and clarity to the chaos of the semiotic for the creation of socially functioning subjectivity.

The character's language in the play contains signifying systems which show the instincts and drives collected in the semiotic cora.. Signs related to bodily functions, hunger and defecation help to rupture the socially acceptable language. The symbolic order tries to place constraints on the free flow of emotions and drives but the semiotic fractures the authority of the symbolic and forces itself on the audience. However, it is only by merging with the symbolic that the semiotic can be understood. The monologues of the characters contain secrets and desires but it can only be communicated through dialogue with the other characters. In this regard Kristeva observes, "In this way the drives, which are 'energy' charges as well as 'psychical' marks, articulate what we call a cora" (The Kristeva Reader, 93). The cora which is a storehouse of bodily energies and other instinctual drives is given expression by the semiotic language of the feminine. In the play the language used by Theresa and Alan closely resembles this kind of fluid language. The open-ended structure of the play highlights the uncertainty and ambivalence of subjectivity of the main characters. This kind of subjectivity is associated with a mother and a child before the age of

eighteen months. Instinctual drives and energy flows of the body go into the making of this subjectivity. Helen Cixous's, "Infinite and mobile complexity" (543) of the semiotic defies the logic of public language and it responds through bodily functions and energy flows. The very fluidity of this language renders it immeasurable and infinitely complex. This is the signifying code of femininity as well. It can make itself understood only when it relies on the symbolic which is the language of the father and represents logic and coherence.

The poetic language of the characters reveals their own inner selves whereas the hegemonic discourse of the mainstream society cannot fully reflect the inner desires or drives experienced by Thompson's characters. Iris Marion Young's view about, "observable and rather ordinary ways in which women in our society typically comfort themselves and move differently from the ways that men do" (164) refers to the flexibility of the women's body that has its own music and rhythm. It applies well to how Theresa's body moves and functions in the play. Society's language cannot give an expression to the fluctuating subject positions of these characters. This language lacks the flexibility required to accommodate the desires of their unconscious. It results in split subjectivity which is more of character's true self than a weakness. It is revelation of their reality through surrealistic and expressionistic dramatic techniques. These marginalized characters are outcasts who lack mental abilities to express themselves in the vocabulary of the dominant discourse. However, it is by resorting to the very same symbolic order now and then that they reveal the truth of their precarious existence.

## Conclusion

The characters in Judith Thompson's *The Crackwalker* use both the semiotic and symbolic signifying systems to produce a negotiated identity that results from a mutual blending of these two codes. The semiotic is the code that can give expression to the inner desires and dreams of the characters and helps to voice the cries of the fractured psyche. The semiotic cannot make itself publicly heard without relying on the logic and coherence of the symbolic which represents order, clarity and communicability. The language of Theresa, the Indian man and that of Alan is more predominantly inclined towards the semiotic and the language of Sandy and Joe is more oriented towards the symbolic. We cannot easily understand the fluid language of Theresa because she tries to express herself through bodily functions of farting, urinating and defecation as well as through shrieks and screams. However, we can understand her as she converses with other characters whose language of logic and coherence gives meaning to the chaotic codes used by both Alan and Theresa.

### Works Cited

- Cixous, Helen. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *The Theory of Criticism from Plato to the Present*, edited by Raman Selden, Longman, 1976, pp. 541-43.
- Kristeva, Julia, "The Revolution in Poetic Language." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Edited by Peter Simon, W.W. Norton and Company Inc., 2001, pp. 2165-2179.
- The Kristeva Reader. Edited by Toril Moi, Columbia UP, 1986. pp. 88-97.
- Thomson, Judith. "The Crackwalker." *The Norton Anthology of Drama*. Edited by Jellen Gainor, Stautors B. Garner, Martin Puncher, Norton Play, 2009, Pp. 1152-1193.
- Young, Marion. "Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body, Comportment, Motility and Spatiality." *Identities*. Edited by Linda Martin Alcoff and Eduardo Mendeita, Blackwell Publishers, 2003, Pp. 16174.