

From Domestic Roles to Public Identity: A Liberal Feminist Perspective of Anuja Chauhan's *The House That BJ Built*

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Abstract

Anuja Chauhan's *The House That BJ Built* portrays women as they negotiate the expectations of family life while gradually stepping into visible social roles beyond the household. Liberal feminism promotes equal opportunities for women in education, employment, and legal rights to enable full participation in society. Anuja Chauhan's novel depicts the Thakur family at 16 Hailey Road, where the granddaughter, Bonita Singh Rajawat, transforms the upstairs space into a thriving tailoring unit called Vicky's Secret. The novel follows her daily management of members, including Parveen and the head tailor, Daulat Master, amid family pressures from step-cousin Samar Vir Singh's unexpected return after his Sparkler Awards scandal. Bonu's efforts to maintain economic stability contrast with the patriarch, Justice Laxmi Narayan Thakur's, declining health and the historical partition of the house among his daughters, Anjini, Binni, Chandralekha, Debjani, and Eshwari. These elements illustrate women shifting from confined household duties to independent professional roles while claiming a share in family assets. The novel also highlights Samar's interactions with Bonu and BJ during his stay downstairs, revealing tensions over access to the upstairs, which is locked. Such developments align with liberal feminist calls for removing barriers that limit women's contributions beyond the home. The novel thus portrays practical steps toward gender parity through business ownership and property rights without disrupting core family bonds.

Keywords: Liberal feminism, economic independence, property rights, family inheritance, professional women, Thakur family

Introduction

Anuja Chauhan's *The House That BJ Built* presents the Thakur household as a microcosm of evolving gender dynamics in contemporary Delhi. Bonita Singh Rajawat operates her garment fabrication workshop on the first floor of 16 Hailey Road while caring for her ailing grandfather, Justice Laxmi Narayan Thakur. Samar Vir Singh arrives unannounced after a public controversy involving Zeeshan Khan at the Sparkler Awards, where their recorded criticisms led to professional setbacks. The house itself carries the legacy of BJ's earlier division of property among his five daughters, ensuring fair shares for each of them.

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Bonu's daily routine includes supervising Parveen's embroidery work and confronting Daulat Master about paan stains on bust pads destined for Dubai. These incidents underscore the practical challenges women face when balancing commercial ventures with familial obligations. Liberal feminism advocates for systemic changes that grant women the same access to work and legal protections as men. The novel advances this vision by showing Bonu's success in replicating high-fashion designs from Bollywood films for affordable sale to local clients. Samar's presence disrupts the established order when he opens the front gate and scatters the consignment of padding across Hailey Road. Such moments expose lingering resistance to women's autonomous decisions within the family structure. The narrative builds toward greater recognition of female contributions in both private and public spheres.

Challenging Traditional Domestic Expectations: Bonu's Entrepreneurial Path

Bonu rejects the limited roles assigned to women in earlier generations by establishing Vicky's Secret inside the family home. She trains a team of women tailors to copy ensembles worn by stars like Deepika and Priyanka in record time. The workshop features eight Brother machines and twenty-five Dutta sewing machines arranged in a cheery yellow space scented with agarbatti. Parveen shares personal stories of her four daughters while stitching rosebuds on chiffon plackets during work hours. Daulat Master's unreliability forces Bonu to intervene directly when orange paan stains appear on all the poly-fill bust pads for the Dubai consignment. She instructs him to bleach the items and spread them on cotton sheets in the garden to dry quickly. The business thrives because Bonu studies new film releases on pirated DVDs and adjusts patterns for sizes from XS to XXL. Her late father Vikram Singh Rajawat's words echo in her mind as she pushes for self-reliance after the tragic road accident that claimed her parents and brother Monu. Samar later teases her about the "crystal meth cooking lab" (*THTBB* 27) upstairs, but acknowledges the operation's scale when he offers to inspect it after hours. Bonu firmly locks the double wooden doors to protect her workspace from outsiders, including the visiting director. These actions demonstrate how women can convert domestic spaces into productive enterprises that generate income and personal satisfaction. The episode with the wind-scattered padding reveals the vulnerability of such ventures yet also Bonu's quick recovery as she leads the chase in her black harem pants. Liberal feminism supports exactly this kind of practical assertion of capability through paid work rather than reliance on male providers.

Liberal feminism emphasises equal rights and opportunities for women in education, employment, and public participation. Anuja Chauhan explores these ideas through the story of a Delhi family in *The House That BJ Built*. Bonita Singh Rajawat runs a busy tailoring workshop from the first floor of 16 Hailey Road. She produces affordable copies of designer clothes for local clients and international buyers in Dubai. Bonu manages daily operations with skill and determination while caring for her grandfather, BJ. Mary Wollstonecraft wrote, "I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves." The novel shows Bonu claiming control over her work and future. Samar Vir Singh arrives from Mumbai after facing criticism at the Sparkler Awards. Bonu protects her business space during his visit. Her professional achievements highlight the core values of liberal feminism.

Bonu builds economic independence through her garment business. She equips the workshop with modern sewing machines and maintains high standards for every order. “You need balls to do business!” Bonu’s small, fiery father used to say over dinner every night (*THTBB* 16). This lesson inspires her to create a profitable venture in the family home. She explains her plan to her grandfather with a clear purpose. “I’m going to copy high fashion garments from the movies, you know, the ones designed by Manish Malhotra and Sabyasachi and Susan Adams which cost like five lakhs each? Those. I’m going to make them available to all the auntiejis of Hailey Road for a fraction of the price” (*THTBB* 17). When paan stains appear on the bust pads of the Dubai consignment, Bonu directs her head tailor, Daulat Master, to clean them immediately. The team works together to meet tight deadlines. John Stuart Mill observed that the legal subordination of one sex to the other remains one of the chief hindrances to human improvement. Bonu rejects old expectations by turning her mother Binni’s portion of the house into a successful enterprise.

Property division plays an important role of the family dynamics in the novel. Justice Laxmi Narayan Thakur partitioned the house among his five daughters many years ago. Bonu lives and works in her late mother’s share upstairs. Samar requests entry into the locked hissa, but Bonu delays him with practical excuses. After the gate opens and her padded garments fly onto Hailey Road, she confronts him directly. “Your sense of timing is perfect” (*THTBB* 22). Betty Friedan stressed that women must achieve full participation in public life to gain genuine equality. Bonu balances family responsibilities with her business goals. She keeps the workshop door bolted whenever Samar approaches. The house becomes both shelter and workplace for her ambitions.

Bonu grows stronger through her personal and professional experiences. She feels old emotions stir upon Samar’s return, but focuses on her independence. “It’s a state-of-the-art garment fabrication unit and it’s doing very well now” (*THTBB* 27). Bonu continues to manage her team and fulfil orders despite the new presence in the house. The story presents realistic challenges and steady progress for its female characters. Liberal feminism finds clear expression through Bonu’s journey from loss to achievement. Anuja Chauhan creates a narrative in which women claim equal space in both the family and society. The events at 16 Hailey Road show how equal opportunities lead to meaningful change.

Asserting Legal Equality in Family Property Matters: The Division of the House

BJ’s decision to partition the house on paper ten years earlier grants each daughter a defined interest that recognises their equal stake in the family legacy. Anjini and Binni receive the upstairs portion, while Chandralekha gets the annexe, and Debjani, along with Eshwari, shares the downstairs area. Bonu lives and works in her mother Binni’s allocated space, which she has converted into a successful workshop. Samar’s request to stay upstairs meets immediate resistance because Bonu claims the area is locked and filled with embroidery panels that cannot be disturbed. The Judge’s earlier actions stemmed from awareness of his mortality and a desire to prevent future disputes among the sisters. Chachiji Bhudevi Thakur gossips about property fights on Hailey Road, including the sambar-vada shooting at number 5 that leaves one brother dead. Bonu listens attentively yet steers the conversation back to practical matters, such as the Dubai consignment deadline. Samar’s presence revives discussions about selling the entire

house to divide proceeds equally and end ongoing bickering. Bonu's attachment to the property runs deeper because her business depends on the physical space she has adapted over the years of operation. The wind incident that sends bust pads flying through the open gate occurs precisely when Samar arrives, inadvertently triggering chaos in her carefully ordered world. These events highlight the ongoing negotiations required when women claim and defend their legal rights to inherited assets.

John Stuart Mill observed that society often raises women to accept submission as their natural role. He stated, "All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission and yielding to the control of others" (Mill 69). Bonu counters this pattern by insisting on her right to control the upstairs even when Samar presses for entry after years of absence. The Judge's partition document serves as a legal safeguard that liberal feminism endorses to ensure women receive fair treatment in inheritance matters. Samar's defensive explanation about his busy film career in Mumbai fails to sway Bonu, who prioritises her operational needs over familial sentiment. The downstairs bedroom where Samar sleeps once belonged to Debjani and Eshwari and carries memories of their shared past. Bonu's quick suggestion that he stays there instead of upstairs preserves her workspace without confrontation. Chachiji's stories about sibling rivalries over property reinforce the importance of clear legal divisions, such as the one BJ implemented. Bonu's management of the tailoring unit transforms inherited space into a source of ongoing economic strength. The novel shows that such assertions of property rights allow women to build stable futures rather than remain dependent on male relatives.

Navigating Public Recognition and Familial Ties: Samar and the Thakur Women

Samar's return after the Sparkler Awards fiasco forces the family to confront the intersection of public careers and private responsibilities. His viral video rant with Zeeshan Khan about industry sycophancy leads to professional isolation, driving him back to Hailey Road for refuge. Bonu greets him coolly while chasing scattered bust pads and reminds him of his three-year absence from BJ's side. The Judge recognises his step-grandson immediately and recites poetry with renewed energy during their extended dinner conversations. Samar mows the overgrown lawn in concentric circles the next morning, which impresses the crows but irritates Bonu, who sees it as insufficient compensation for past neglect. His casual kiss on Bonu's cheek and comment about her "pretty hair" after the shampoo commercial reveal lingering familiarity mixed with awkwardness. Bonu maintains professional distance by locking the tailoring unit doors and conducting her Dubai call on speakerphone in the kitchen. The Judge's request for Samar to make him a great-grandfather is met with a firm refusal, redirecting the conversation to safer topics. Samar's decision to lie low in Delhi aligns with the need for time to rebuild his directing career while reconnecting with family roots. Bonu's business continues uninterrupted despite the visitor because she enforces strict rules against outsiders entering the workspace on the first floor. These dynamics illustrate how women can sustain public-facing enterprises while managing unexpected male returns to the household.

Betty Friedan emphasised the necessity of meaningful work for personal fulfilment. She wrote, "The only way for a woman, as for a man, to find herself, to know herself as a

person, is by creative work of her own” (Friedan 63). Bonu lives this truth through her daily oversight of anarkali production and client negotiations that extend her influence beyond Hailey Road. Samar’s public identity as a director contrast with Bonu’s quieter yet steady commercial success that supports the entire household. The Judge’s improved lucidity during Samar’s visit shows how family presence can temporarily restore balance, yet Bonu remains the constant caretaker. Samar’s exploration of the property exposes the shabbiness that Bonu has managed single-handedly for years. Her turquoise pashmina shawl billows like a cape as she rushes to contain the wind-blown padding incident triggered by his gate-opening. The novel balances these public and private threads by showing both characters pursuing ambitions while honouring BJ’s legacy. Bonu’s refusal to let tailors be “bedazzled by Bollywood stardust” protects her team’s focus and her own authority. Samar’s eventual acceptance of downstairs accommodation respects the boundaries Bonu sets around her professional domain.

Several other women in the novel also demonstrate confidence and influence within the family environment. Anjini’s intelligence and organisational ability often guide important decisions. Eshwari’s calm presence commands respect among relatives. Debjani and Chandu represent different forms of adjustment within the social expectations surrounding marriage and family duty. Each of these women contributes to a broader picture of female resilience and adaptability. Their interactions with Samar, BJ, and other male characters reveal that gender roles within the household are gradually shifting. Liberal feminist ideas help illuminate these developments by highlighting the importance of equality in education, employment, and legal rights. Through the lives of these characters, Chauhan presents a narrative in which women step beyond inherited roles and begin to shape their own futures.

Conclusion

The House That BJ Built charts a clear movement from restricted domestic lives toward expanded public identities for its female characters. Bonita Singh Rajawat’s operation of Vicky’s Secret demonstrates how entrepreneurial initiative creates financial security within the family home at 16 Hailey Road. Samar Vir Singh’s temporary return after the Sparkler Awards scandal highlights the tensions that arise when public failures intersect with private obligations toward BJ. The patriarch’s earlier partition of the house among Anjini, Binni, Chandralekha, Debjani, and Eshwari establishes a foundation of legal equality that Bonu fiercely defends. Parveen’s embroidery contributions and Daulat Master’s mishaps add texture to the daily realities of sustaining a business amid familial scrutiny. These elements collectively affirm liberal feminism’s emphasis on equal access to work and property as pathways to fuller lives. The narrative closes on a note of cautious coexistence, in which women retain control over their domains while accommodating returning male relatives. Bonu’s continued vigilance over the locked upstairs ensures her workshop remains a space of autonomy. The Judge’s poetic exchanges with both Bonu and Samar bridge generations and genders in moments of clarity. Chauhan’s story thus offers a realistic portrayal of progress achieved through persistent effort rather than dramatic upheaval. Readers see that sustained professional engagement and fair inheritance practices enable women to shape their destinies alongside family commitments. The novel leaves open the possibility of further growth as Bonu and Samar navigate their respective paths in the years ahead.

Liberal feminist theory helps explain the significance of these developments. The movement has long argued that women deserve equal access to education, employment, and civic participation. Chauhan's novel translates those principles into everyday experience through humour, dialogue, and family conflict. Bonu's journey from an admired granddaughter to a determined entrepreneur symbolises the broader transition from private identity to public presence. By presenting women who speak openly, manage professional responsibilities, and participate in legal decisions, the novel reflects the realities of contemporary urban India. Chauhan, therefore, offers a narrative that celebrates resilience while acknowledging the challenges that accompany social change. The story ultimately affirms that the path from domestic roles to public identity begins with confidence, persistence, and the willingness to claim one's place in the wider world.

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