

Problematizing Canon Literature with Subaltern Consciousness – A Study

Ayon Halder

Liberal humanism which is an integral part of Western canonical texts makes room for 'transcendent subject' which transcends 'the forces of society, experience and language'. This essentialist assumption that is imbued in liberal humanist approach denies any radical change on the part of human nature. There is absolutely no need for any socio-cultural or political context in essentialist texts that only 'transmit moral values'. Harold Bloom in the last decade of twentieth century defends the Western canon and in his 'cultivation of aesthetic values' retains the notion of liberal humanism. He maintains that post-structuralist theories which are involved with social concerns should be kept out of the humanities. He has the strong conviction that the Western canon with its aesthetic values would remain uncontaminated by 'the School of Resentment'. He was disappointed with the 'academic-journalistic network', which 'wish(s) to overthrow the canon in order to advance their support (and non-existent) programmes for social change'. The group, which he named as 'The School of resentment' attempts to figure out the loopholes of grand narratives. Bloom emphasises on the impossibility to think of Western canon of literature without Shakespeare because he thinks that the universality of Shakespearean texts is above and beyond any race or class distinction. Shakespeare, as Bloom is quoted as saying, 'for millions who are not white Europeans is a signifier for their own pathos, their own sense of identity with the characters that Shakespeare flashed out by his language'. When in *Othello* the protagonist is labelled as 'an abuser of the world' by Brabantio a reader may find it quite difficult for a racially discriminated person to identify himself with such an 'abused' ethnic identity. The phrase 'an abuser of the world' is interpreted as the 'corrupter of society' by Cambridge companion to Shakespeare. If Othello is a corrupter because of the exotic culture to which he belongs Shylock is ridiculed for being a Jew as Antonio comments: "Hie thee, gentle Jew/ The Hebrew will turn Christian: he grows kind". Thus the naive canon suddenly turns into a space where binary oppositions start playing. Forster's *A Passage to India* also incorporates this kind of scathing racial attacks. Mrs. Turton in Forster's novel makes an attempt to convince Adela that they are superior to the Indians in every direction. The typical racist attitude is quite evident when Turton tells Adela, "You're superior to them, anyway. Don't forget that. You're superior to everyone in India except one or two of the Ranis, and they're on an equality".

The Enlightenment project in the 18th century propagates the progressive development from the state of irrationality to a position of superiority through the exercise of the faculty of reason. This is the period of emancipation of human consciousness by the advancement of intellectual introspection. It results in the shaping of the hierarchical structure that widens the gap between the enlightened state of being and the primitive and

exotic existence. The Enlightenment rationality with its steady process of improvement thus gives birth to contempt towards non-West ethnic cultural values. In the era after decolonization Said draws attention to what he refers to as 'Orientalism', that is a discursive construct of the post-Enlightened West. The cultural production of 'Third World Literature' attempts to recuperate their ethnic identity in their literature, which is reductively categorized as 'national allegories'. Though James is somewhat disappointed with the 'projections' of "private subjectivity" in western culture he stresses upon the fact that Third world Literature is "locked in a life-in-death struggle with first-world cultural imperialism". Jameson reaffirms that "individual story and individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laboriously telling of the experience of the collectivity itself". This homogenous categorization of Third World Literature is oversimplification of an otherwise coterminous group which engages itself in strenuously recovering its self-identity. The west maintains its domination over colonized nations through indirect economic, political and cultural control. In this way it becomes difficult for Third World nations to overcome the hegemonic control of post-Enlightened West. The introduction of English in India got the official nod when Macaulay proposed to form a class of native people with an inherent Englishness. The English language gradually becomes the official language of Indian bureaucracy. Lord Bentinck felt the urgent need for imparting lessons on English literature and science through the medium of English language to native population of colonial India. Ngugi Wa Thiongo began his career as a successful writer in English but eventually took recourse of his mother tongue Gikuyu and urged African writers to hold on to their native tongues in their literary art. Achebe kept on writing in English because he thought that it had a ready access to the native African people and the vast English speaking readers outside. Achebe is, as John Marx points out, "added to European literary history as an author more or less on par with writers ranging from Milton and Shakespeare to Jane Austen and Joseph Conrad". Achebe's supposed inclusion in the western canon is somehow because of the re-enactment of the same narrative of western literary history in his fictions regarding national history of the Igbo people. His "*Arrow of God* provides a window onto the Igbo world and treats its writer as a native informant" because he turns out to be a reliable source to get a glimpse of Igbo culture. Spivak vigorously slams the "foreclosure of the native informant" in European discursive construction. The figure of the native informant, for Spivak, is "a name for that mark of expulsion from the name of Man' and also is "a blank, though generative of a text of cultural identity that only the West...could inscribe". The native informant is needed and foreclosed as Spivak argues, to 'set off the autonomy of the reflexive judgment" in Kant's philosophical text. The autonomy of reflexive judgment in Kant transforms Australian Aborigine like New Hollander or the man from Tierra del Fuego into "the subject of speech or judgment" by denying their own speech.

Subaltern Studies emerged in the last two decades of the 20th century is a reaction towards 'the sanctioned ignorance' of the elite historiography. The goal of the Subaltern Studies which was to look for the 'subaltern autonomy' shifts to the 'discursive displacements by rethinking

the discipline of history'. The 'history from below' approach which the subaltern studies group adopts entails the engagement with the archives of colonial administrators and the official historical records for rewriting the colonial history of India in order to find out the denied agency especially of peasant class. The rereading of the narratives of historiography employs itself in making "a functional change in sign-system" happen. But the archival documentations of peasant movements in the colonial period in India is not an objective representation of the subaltern class because "Indian peasant had left no sources, no documents from which their own 'voice' could be retrieved". And this points to the fact that the subaltern consciousness can never be fully recoverable. The subalterns are included as a part of the nation but kept outside it. The occasional peasant violence in the history of Indian National Movement is not 'endorsed' as 'national activity' though the peasant 'criminals' are acknowledged as indispensable parts of the nation. But searching for the supposed autonomy of the subaltern class is also doubtful proposition as Foucauldian theorisation is uncertain about the possibility of the autonomy of the subject. Also the "space for sensitive studies of movements for women's rights, or of lower caste protest" are not much to be seen as a concern in Subaltern studies. Out of the few literary figures of Indian literature dealing with the lower class people Mahasweta Devi is a leading woman activist who champions the causes of the tribal people. The Shabar people who were declared 'crime prone' by the Criminal Tribal Act, 1871 are subjects of her fiction, *The book of the Hunter*. The title of the book owes its origin to 'Byadhkhanda', the first part of the eminent Bengali poet Mukundaram Chakrabarti's epic *Abhyamangala*. Mahasweta Devi admits that Mukundaram who himself was of Brahminical descent purges the sin of the society by writing 'Byadhkhanda' which includes a kind of sociological survey of that tribe. With the employment of fact, fiction and myth Mahasweta Devi searches for the social recognition of that marginal tribe. Spivak also points out that Mahasweta Devi's works which are replete with "celebration of the organic intellectual" reveal internalisation of gendered female subjectivity in the phallogocentric society. In her novel *Titu Mir*, Mahasweta Devi portrays the character of peasant leader Titu Mir to reveal the realities of Bengal peasantry of the 19th century. It looks very evident in the excerpts from *Titu Mir*: "The year 1770 saw the famine; in 1771 the tax collected was even higher.. .. first priority (of Warren Hastings) was to put the Company and its revenues on a firm footing and for that, even as the famine of 1770 reduced Bengal to a charnel ground, Hastings squeezed the people into yielding yet more revenue." And also religious movements during the colonial period has been exposed in this text as performing two fold duties, which are firstly to diminish internal rifts and then fight against the oppression of the East India Company, Zaminders, moneylenders and indigo planters. Third World literature appropriates literary genres of the West like bildungsroman or epic to unwrite the canon of western literature. Rushdie renounces the way Forster engages himself writing novel with the gust of Eurocentric disposition and adopts fragmentation, non-linearity, creolisation and magic realism as a strategy in order to be non-symmetric with the Continental structure of novel writing. The words of bell hooks are very much relevant regarding the third world literature as she says, "Marginality is the site of

resistance – a location of radical openness and possibility”. Whether it is the research novels of Amitav Ghosh or self-reflexivity of Rushdie or the English translations of novels of Mahasweta Devi on the ‘organic intellectual’ the texts of Indian Literature in English should not be categorised only as ‘national allegories’ because it will be epistemologically crippling. Third world literature recovers itself from hegemonic discourse of power knowledge of post-Enlightened West and distances itself from the European literary history by either sometimes rewriting the texts of Western canon like *Jane Eyre* and *Robinson Crusoe* or by falling back on the colonial history for its resource. In the later case, as Spivak proposes, it is proved to be advantageous to adopt ‘strategic essentialism’ to rise above the heterogeneity of race, caste and ethnicity. The exposure of bond-slavery in India in *Doulati the Bountiful* or the representation of a destitute tribal community in *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay* and *Pirtha* of Mahasweta Devi run counter to the Western canon and its hegemonic homogeneity regarding Third World literature through a faithful and first-hand documentation of subaltern consciousness without commodifying the subaltern identity. There is always a kind of tendency towards the commodification of knowledge and discourse at the stake of cultural practice where the subalternity is subsumed by discursive commodification that only looks for knowledge dissemination on a global scale. However, in the context of First World’s map-making and appropriation of the ecology of the Fourth World, which is for Spivak the world of the aboriginal people or a complicity between the bourgeoisie of the Third World and the and the migrants in the First World the texts like *Pterodactyl* of Mahasweta Devi engage themselves in searching for the structure of an impossible social justice without romanticization of tribal identity and also, as Spivak alludes to, “building up a conviction of the ‘sacredness’ of human life”, that is not contained within the ‘sovereign’ and ‘tyrannical universality’ of the principle of ‘post-Enlightenment’ reason.

WORKS CITED

- Woods, Tim. *Beginning Postmodernism* (ISBN: 0-7190-5211-4)
- Shakespeare, William. *Othello* (Act 1, Sc. 2)
- Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice* (Act 1, Sc 3)
- Forster, E. M. *A Passage to India*.
- Jameson, Frederic. *Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism* Social Text, no. 15 (Autumn 1986) pp 65-88.
- Marx, John. *Postcolonial Literature and the Western literary canon*, The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Subaltern studies: Deconstructing Historiography*, ‘Selected Subaltern Studies’, ed. By Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak , Oxford University Press ,1988.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present*, Seagull 1999.
- Devi, Mahasweta. *Titu Mir* Translated by Rimi B. Chatterjee , Seagull Books.

Sarkar, Sumit. *The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies*, Reading Subaltern Studies, ed. By David Ludden.

Mr. Ayon Halder, M.A., B.Ed
Assistant Teacher in English
Balainagar Junior High School
Chakdaha, West Bengal, INDIA