

SUBALTERN CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE PLAYS OF VIJAY TENDULKAR

RATAN CHANDRA DAS

RESEARCH SCHOLAR DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH ASSAM UNIVERSITY
ASSAM, INDIA

EMAIL ID: r.chandradas@rediffmail.com

ABSTRACT

Literature is abundant with examples of subalternity - be it gender, class, caste, religion or otherwise. The condition of women as subaltern in Indian society is deplorable. Women are always looked down upon as 'second sex', 'inferior', 'other', 'weak' and so on and so forth. Whereas the religious books like *Vedas* and *Upanishads* depict women as 'goddess' and 'shakti', yet, she falls a prey to gender inequality, patriarchy, sexual abuses, harassments etc. Subaltern as a subject has always been enticing and controversial. Vijay Tendulkar, an eminent Indian theatre writer, journalist, along with several other female writers like Shobhaa De, Mahasweta Devi, Manju Kapur, Kamala Das, Arundhati Roy and Anita Desai deal with the issues of women subjugation. Even though Tendulkar does not claim himself to be a feminist nor he has viewed any thought of feminism, he has a soft corner for feminine world which can be witnessed from his delineation of female characters. Tendulkar portrayed a woman centric world in his plays and tried to expose the hypocrisy of male oriented society, which segregates the women as the 'other'. He created a few rebellious female characters like Benare, Sarita, Champa and Jyoti who hurled a posited resistance to break the shackle of male hegemony. This paper tends to delve deep into the world of subaltern sensibility of Vijay Tendulkar which is grounded upon casteism, class consciousness, gender biasness and patriarchal hegemony.

Keywords: Subaltern, Patriarchy, Women, Discrimination.

1. INTRODUCTION

Post-colonialism as a literary theory and discourse is by nature revolting, which interrogates the controversial Euro-centric mode of representations of the disenfranchised group of people. The history of colonialism is associated with imperialism and exploitation of the marginalized with a view to impose the dominant cultural hegemony on the voiceless people of the colonies. The colonizers' self proclaimed superiority is legitimized with the concepts like centre-margin, colonizer-colonized, master-slave and self-other. Post-colonialism interrogates such binary creations which push the colonized to the fringe of the society and thereby making them the 'inferior other'. The concept of 'other' constitutes the core of the post-colonial theory and discourse, by applying which theorists and critics like Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and many other thinkers tend to analyze the Euro-centric discourse which imposed grand narratives, hero worship and cultural hegemony on the non-western 'other', the 'subaltern'.

The word 'subaltern', literally means someone of 'inferior rank', who is denied access in the history and has often been misinterpreted. Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist first used the term subaltern in his *Prison Notebooks* (1929-1935) to denote any 'low rank' person and group who is denied the basic rights of participation in making of local history and culture as active citizens of his/her own country. Inspired by Gramsci's concept of subaltern, a group of scholars and academicians in India, under the leadership of Ranajit Guha formed the Subaltern Studies Project in 1982. It is an intervention in the writing of history from the perspectives of the disenfranchised group of people, who were devoid of their own history and were excluded in the histories of the elites – colonial and bourgeois nationalist elites. Inspired by the principles of Marx, the Subaltern Studies scholars tend to write 'history from below', following the model of British historiographers like Christopher Hill, E.P. Thompson, E.J. Hobsbawm and others. The core aim of the project is to rescue the silenced past of the subalterns so as to find a voice and identity for them.

In Indian context, the issues of subalternity is multifaceted, where the creation of 'other' is based on class, caste, religion, gender, patriarchy and so on and so forth. Scholars like Partha Chatterjee and Kancha Ilaiah touches the issues of caste subalternity in their essays 'Caste and Subaltern Consciousness' (1989) and 'Productive Labour Consciousness and History: The Dalitbahujan Alternative' (2005) respectively. Many social reformist and thinkers like Gandhi, Ambedkar, Vivekananda, Acharya Narendra Dev, Yusuf Meherali and others tried to free society from the clutches of casteism. The Subaltern Studies scholars tend to analyze the excluded narratives of the masses and tried to restore it at the centre so as to create an alternative discourse. But with the

passage of time the project seems to deviate from its motto of creating a history for the history less and some scholars has even criticized the project for being elitist and gender biased.

Post-colonialism is overloaded with the issues of subjugated males and women seem to occupy lesser importance in the discourse. In much the same way, feminism criticizes the subjugation and othering of women in the colonial and post-colonial enterprise. Simone De Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* (1972) illustrates the dehumanizing method of othering the women as inferior and weaker sex. Despite being her association with Subaltern Studies Project, Spivak, an eminent post-colonial theorist and critic vehemently attacks it for ignoring the case of female as a subaltern. She states in her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988) that the condition of female subaltern is shrouded in the hands of patriarchy and colonialism. Spivak is also critical about the First World feminists' self proclamation of representing the Third World women. She further states that the colonialism and patriarchy snatches the right of self-representation away from women.

With the view of situating the subaltern right at the centre of discourse, many post-colonial writers celebrate the subaltern consciousness in their writings. Of late, the issues of female subalternity draw the attention of many sensitive writers of different genres. Application and appropriation of subaltern themes are abundant in Indian literature – be it gender, class, caste, religion or otherwise. In Indian context be it literature or life, women are always looked down upon as 'second sex', 'inferior', 'other', 'weak' so on and so forth. The condition of women in Indian society is not pleasant. Whereas the religious books like *Vedas* and *Upanishads* depict women as 'goddess' and 'shakti', yet, she falls a prey to gender inequality, patriarchy, sexual abuses, harassments following vedic period down to the modern times. Literature has always been the medium to display the banal aspects of life and society in order to rectify and reform the society.

2. PROJECTION OF SUBALTERN CONSCIOUSNESS

Vijay Tendulkar, an eminent Indian theatre writer, journalist, along with several other female writers like Shobhaa De, Mahasweta Devi, Manju Kapur, Kamala Das, Arundhati Roy and Anita Desai deal with the issues of women subjugation. A thorough analysis of Tendulkar's plays brings the fact to the fore that all his plays are not overtly or covertly violent in nature. It is in some of his plays that he exhibits violence directly. In his plays *The Vultures*, *Silence! The court is in session*, *Sakharam Binder*, *Ghashiram Kotwal* and *Kanyadaan* violence is used as a tool to subjugate, harass, and legitimize the superiority of the dominant males over the other. To be in the mainstream or acquire a place in it, one needs to appropriate his/her hegemony over the other by stereotyping them as uncivilized, ignorant and inferior. The inferiority complex in the 'other' makes him/her internalize the lacks and compel them to ape their masters in order to get acceptance or recognition as Fanon states in his book *Black Skin White Masks* (1952). As the white masks do not make the blacks equal to the whites and hence they do not get access and acceptance in the dominant culture. The psychological trauma pushes them to accept their subjugated position of a subaltern.

Leela Benare in *Silence! The court is in session* suffers unfathomably at the hands of her male counterparts and her own kind when she is trapped in the mock trial organized by her co-actors. Her colleagues compelled her to act in a play and charged her with an imaginary crime of infanticide only to humiliate her physically and mentally by dissecting her private life in order to unleash their own frustration of failures in their lives. Even though she has been discriminated, humiliated, exploited by the stake holders of the patriarchal society and even her own kind who also acts as the stakeholder of patriarchy, she did not succumb to the deplorable condition she is pushed into. Her indomitable will power and invincible zeal for life breaks the barrier of all hurdles. She manages to secure a voice and a place in the inhospitable and hostile world of patriarchy. She fights back in the play and does not accept the verdict of mock law court which orders her to abort the foetus in her womb. On the basis of the imaginary allegation of adultery and the crime of destroying the unborn child in her womb begotten outside wedlock, she was compelled to resign from her teaching job, her only source of livelihood. By using the technique of 'play within a play', Tendulkar hurls a vehement attack on the judiciary for being prejudiced and gender biased. The mock law court let the professor go escort free albeit he was equally or even more guilty of engaging into an adulterous relation, even already been married. The law court passed its jaundiced judgement in order to protect the dignity of the professor but in the process the honour and dignity of Benare is sullied. Benare did not cow down in front of male hegemony, rather she refused to accept the judgement imposed upon her with a firm determination of giving birth to the unborn child in her womb. Her character resembles the quality of an emancipated New Subaltern who is fit to fight and pose a resistance in the midst of all those who constantly keep on pulling her down by their treacherous planning and plotting.

The play *Kamala* tries to expose the hypocrisy and corrupt world of journalism. Under the banner of journalism and success oriented male society, the playwright brings to the fore the unfathomable sufferings of women in the hands of their counter parts. Jaisingh Jadav, the journalist is neither interested in keeping Kamala – the tribal woman whom he bought from flesh market, in his house nor in shouldering responsibility for her rehabilitation. Sarita, the educated wife of Jaisingh gets no better treatment than his maid Kamala Bai and destitute Kamala. Jaisingh's action of rescuing Kamala from the inhumane trade of women can never be counted as an initiative towards women emancipation. In fact

Jaisingh is solely responsible for Kamala's dignity to be jeopardized in the public. Jaisingh's intention of organizing a press conference was only to get publicity and promotion in his career and not the redemption of Kamala. Jaisingh's hypocrisy is exposed in his thoughtless decision of discarding Kamala into an asylum as an object-used and thrown. Through Kamala's predicament, Tendulkar exposes the dismal aspect of flesh trade prevalent in our society which relegates destitute woman like Kamala to languish in the fringe of the society. Kamala as an uneducated tribal destitute woman suffered mutedly as a subaltern in the male centric society and was vanquished in ignominy. Jaisingh, the representative of success-oriented, egoistic chauvinists needs educated Sarita as a feather to his cap to show off in the society and needs a maid in the form of Sarita to do household chores. He neither treated her with respect and compassion nor did he give her the status of his wife in the truest sense of the term. The play shows Sarita's miserable plight but at the same time depicts her self-determination not to be cowed down by Jaisingh. Her decision of exposing the hypocrisy of her journalist husband by organizing a press conference is an evidence of her aggrieved self. At the same time, her sympathy for jobless Jaisingh at the end of the play and keeping off the press conference aside for time being, acts like a hindrance in the volcanic eruption of her grief. Ultimately she falls short at getting her revenge in the wake of her emotions for her husband. She muses how to uplift her position, but does not succeed in getting her revenge on her husband who humiliated her constantly, due to her ambivalent mindset. In this situation, she can aptly be designated as an Aggrieved Subaltern.

Through the play *Sakharam Binder*, Tendulkar hits hard on the institution of marriage and the social codes of our society. The eponymous hero Sakharam is a terrible womanizer who brings cast off women/wives his home and in the pretext of giving them refuge dominates them and makes slaves out of them. He eventually discards those women once he is bored of. Despite being Brahmin, Tendulkar projects his protagonist as a Brahmin, who defies all set rules of Brahmanism. Tendulkar came under the scanner of Censor Board and was his play under discussion was branded as vulgar sensationalism for hurting religious and moral sentiments of the society. As a dramatist, Tendulkar is a reformist who relentlessly depicts the follies and foibles' of the society in order to get it rectified. Through this play, Tendulkar exhibits how violence is used as a tool to dominate and subjugate women in the male oriented society, under the jurisdiction of marriage and outside. Laxmi and Champa are two of the many women, Sakharam exploits and tortures in the name of giving them shelter and rescuing them from the hands of their cruel husbands. Laxmi suffered pathetically in the hands of her husband before she arrives at Sakharam's place. She was cast off by her husband for not being able to produce a child. On the other hand, Champa runs away from her husband because of his indifferent attitude towards her. Her husband compels her to earn money by prostitution. Whereas Laxmi worships her husband as God and wishes to die in his arms, Champa wishes to escape from the clutches of her husband Faujdar Shinde. Laxmi accepts life as it comes and suffers silently and can be categorized as Old Subaltern. Unlike Laxmi, Champa is vocal towards the injustice inflicted upon her by her husband and Sakharam but she could not break the shackle of patriarchal dominance. She falls prey to the same situation from where she is trying to run away by falling prey to Sakharam as she has no security and shelter except Sakharam's refuge. She had to accept the inhuman, barbaric treatment meted towards her and aptly fits as a Situational Subaltern.

Through the play *Kanyadaan*, Tendulkar tends to unearth the deep rooted malaise of casteism and class division of our society. With the zeal of a reformist, Tendulkar intends to bridge the gulf between the upper and lower caste by advocating inter-caste marriages. Casteism is ingrained in the blood of the two castes so much so that neither of the 'Savarna' nor 'Shudra' accepts each other. Nath Devlalikar and his daughter Jyoti were influenced by the Gandhian ideology of casteless society and in order to bring reformation in the society Jyoti decided to marry a Dalit boy Arun. Jyoti assumed and believed that Arun will change into a better person keeping aside his vent against all the upper caste people who lashes out inhuman treatment upon Dalits from time immemorial. Jyoti inspired by her father's idealism, views the marriage with the dalit boy as an opportunity to be a catalyst in creating a casteless society. Like many reformists, Jyoti and her father were disillusioned by the ideology of casteless society by the end of the play. Her parents advised her to get divorce from her dalit husband. She is used as an instrument in her father's experiment of creating a casteless society and for her dalit husband Arun, she is the representative of all the upper caste people who had exploited and tortured his ancestors. Through the play, Tendulkar illustrates the fact that whatever may be the position of a woman, she is prone to violence and victimization. Jyoti's firmness on sticking to her decision and ideology to marry the dalit boy and be with him left nothing for her but remorse for lifetime. Despite being a Brahmin girl, she suffers unfathomably in the hands of her dalit husband. She became a victim of her own ideology and choice which creates such a situation that she cannot escape and suffers by being a Situational Subaltern.

3. CONCLUSION

An analysis of the selected plays of Vijay Tendulkar reveals that subaltern sensibility of Tendulkar is grounded upon casteism, class consciousness, gender discrimination, inequality which cripple the post independent Indian society. Tendulkar has left no stone unturned to bring to the fore the social inequalities, discrimination based on class consciousness and casteism and the atrocities inflicted upon women by patriarchy on the one hand and gender hegemony on the other through his plays. The readers get a sneak peek of his subaltern vision in his plays and it seems to be more attuned to the otherized condition of women in contemporary Indian society. It is precisely the reason why Tendulkar's dramatic corpus has no scope for representation of male subaltern at least in the plays under discussion. His silken sympathy for the helpless and otherized women of the contemporary society is poignantly expressed through the plight and sufferings of female characters such as Laxmi, Champa, Benare, Kamala, Sarita and Jyoti who can be critically acclaimed from the stand point of 'gendered subaltern'.

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