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Unheard Voices: Exploring the Subaltern Voices in Selected Women's Texts

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Abstract

Edward Said in his *Orientalism* has demonstrated how the “West”, owing to colonial attitudes, has constructed a reality for the “East”. He terms the “East” as the ‘Orient’ and finds that several stereotypes and false truths that have been imposed upon the Orient by the “West”. The “East” is always the ‘Other’, and hence is dependent on the ‘centre’ for its identity. This constructed identity can be further understood by referring to Gramsci’s notion of the ‘Subaltern’. He advocated that these marginalized people be examined within their ‘own cultural and social prisons’. As women are denied their semantic space in majority of women’s writing in India, the very act of writing creates the possibility for a critique of language as well as patriarchal discourse. It is through writing that women endeavour to fetch their position and identity in the society. Gayatri Spivak in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* expands the original definition of the subaltern and the sub-proletariat, developed by Ranjit Guha and others to include the struggles and experiences of women. Taking all these into consideration, this paper will make an attempt to analyze and deal with the unheard voices, the subaltern subjectivity and resistance as exhibited in the works of Bama Faustina’s *Karukku*, Mamang Dai’s *The Legend of Pensam* and Temsula Ao’s *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*.

Key words: *Orientalism, Subaltern, Self-other, Feminism, Marginalization*

Edward Said is perhaps best known as the author of *Orientalism* (1978), a book which changed the face of critical theory and shaped the emerging field of post-colonial studies. In his book he has demonstrated how the “West”, owing to colonial attitudes, has constructed a reality for the “East”. He terms the “East” as the ‘Orient’ and finds that several stereotypes and false truths that have been imposed upon the ‘Orient’ by the “West”. The “East” is always the ‘Other’, and hence is dependent on the ‘centre’ for its identity. Consequently the East is always pushed into the periphery of the power structure. The marginalized are considered inferior, of impoverished cultural background, and their art, culture and traditions highly mediocre. This constructed identity can be further understood by referring to Gramsci’s notion of the ‘Subaltern’. For Gramsci, the term included anyone or any group of inferior social, economic or political rank. He advocated that these marginalized people be examined within their ‘own cultural and social prisons’. The ‘Orient’ can thus be understood as a subaltern group, thriving at the margins of the social hierarchy. By being the subaltern class, the ‘Orient’ loses its autonomy and is dependent on the “West” for its identity. As Gayatri Spivak has rightly pointed out that, “the study of colonial discourse, directly released by work such as Said’s has [...] blossomed into a garden where the marginal can speak and be spoken, even spoken for. It is an important discipline now.” (1993:56).

“Othering” is a term, advocated and popularized by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* which refers to the act of emphasizing the perceived weaknesses of marginalized groups as a way of stressing the alleged strength of those in positions of power. Edward Said

quotes the following from Nietzsche, saying “what is the truth of language but a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms — in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are”. Simone de Beauvoir argued in her most famous work, *The Second Sex* (1949), that men are able to mystify women. This mystification and stereotyping, she argued, was instrumental in creating patriarchy. She argued that women, in turn, accepted this stereotype, and were thus instruments of their own oppressions. Men and Women are, therefore, constantly engaged in this Subject-Other relation where the Man is the Subject and the Woman the Other. It is based on this myth of the woman as inferior Other that gender inequalities are perpetuated in the society. De Beauvoir’s major insight was that there is no ‘essence’ of a woman; a woman is constructed as such by men and society. As she puts it: ‘One is not born a woman but becomes one’ (1984: 267). Her main argument is that biological sex and social gender are not accidental: Patriarchy makes use of sexual difference so as to maintain equality between men and women.

De Beauvoir argues that while sexual difference is real and unalterable, it cannot be the grounds for injustice and inequality. She proposed that women must take charge of their own choice and be Subjects in their own right. Sarojini Sahoo, an Indian feminist writer, agrees with De Beauvoir and says that women can only free themselves by “*thinking, taking action, working, creating, on the same terms as men; instead of seeking to disparage them, she declares herself their equal.*” She disagrees, however, that though women have the same status to men as human beings, they have their own identity and they are different from men. They are “others” in real definition, but this is not in context with Hegelian definition of “other”. It is not always due to man’s “active” and “subjective” demands. They are the others, unknowingly accepting the subjugation as a part of “subjectivity”. Sahoo however contends that whilst the women identity is certainly constitutionally different from that of men, men and women still share a basic human equality. Thus the harmful asymmetric sex/gender “Othering” arises accidentally and passively from natural, unavoidable intersubjectivity.

This particular repression of the “other” is what is explored in majority of women’s writing. As women are denied of their semantic space, the very act of writing creates the possibility for a critique of language as well as patriarchal discourse. It is through writing that women can locate their position and identity. This brings out to another facet of writing in general as to if writing is linguistically or semantically or unknowingly gendered? The French Feminist theorists like Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva argue that women’s language and writing are different textually, psychologically, linguistically and stylistically. For Woolf, the style of writing is different in men and women; whereas the ‘male’ sentences exude authority and certitude; the ‘female’ sentences have in their essence, flexibility and acceptance.

“A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction”

“Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant, she pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history”

(Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*)

A Room of One’s Own, by Virginia Woolf, is a mighty proposition for women’s independence in creative endeavour, best seen through the cultural and historical lens of

1929. “Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind.” Woolf challenges the patriarchal system that allows a man to choose any livelihood he desires, but often requires a woman to live her life in full support of his enterprise instead of deciding upon her own path.

“Censor the body and you censor breathe and speech at the same time. Write yourself. Your body must be heard” (Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*). Why have women’s voices been so historically absent in a rich tradition of rhetoric that spans over two thousand years? Is it simply a matter of women being forbidden the education that would allow them into the discourse community? Or, is there actually a distinct woman’s way of thinking, speaking, and interacting, a women’s rhetoric if you will, that has made it difficult for women to communicate in these forums? These are some of the questions that modern feminists like Cixous and Kristeva attempts to answer in their writings. Cixous’ believes that in order to escape the discourse of mastery we must begin to write the body. To Cixous, our sexuality and the language in which we communicate are inextricably linked. To free one means freedom for the other. To write from one’s body is to flee reality, “to escape hierarchical bonds and thereby come closer to what Cixous calls *joissance*, which can be defined as a virtually metaphysical fulfilment of desire that goes far beyond [mere] satisfaction... [It is a] fusion of the erotic, the mystical, and the political” (Gilbert 17).

Feminism tries to radically interrogate the phallogocentric order of knowledge and its glorified impersonal modes of interpretation. It undertakes particularity, to explore the possibilities of women’s autonomy, subjectivity, difference, language and identity. In short, feminism deconstructs the andocentric assumptions and constructs a new plane of expression in the form of discourse for women to articulate and denormalize prevailing conditions. This particular articulation by the female has been debated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her seminal essay “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*” and the point has been debated whether the western feminism’s tendency to speak on behalf of “Third World” woman actually silences their voices in their representation. In this essay, Spivak expands the original definition of the subaltern and the sub-proletariat, developed by Ranjit Guha and others to include the struggles and experiences of women where she encouraged as well as criticized the direction taken by the Subaltern Studies in India. For her, it addresses deeper issues like the dependence upon western intellectuals to speak for the subaltern condition rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. Subaltern studies try to uncover voices buried by the historical narratives given by the West by deconstructing the social meanings hidden in the texts written by the elites.

Spivak’s discussions of disempowered subaltern women serve to highlight the limitations of applying European theories of representation to the lives and histories of disempowered women in the “Third world”. Political representation may seem like an obvious goal for subaltern groups to escape from exploitation. Yet, the historical and structural conditions of political representation do not guarantee that the interests of particular subaltern groups will be recognized or that their voices will be heard. According to Guha, the subaltern consciousness is autonomous and existed independent of the elite. Spivak has stated that it is because of the autonomous entity of the subaltern consciousness that it has always remained beyond the reach of the discursive regimes that produced colonial subjects. Spivak in her famous essay has answered the title question in the negative and she has also said that the subaltern can only be spoken for. But Harish Trivedi has stated that the subaltern can speak and has always spoken in his/her own modes of expression, which was difficult for the elite, Eurocentric, bourgeois intellectual to grasp. Pramod K. Nayar, in his book *Literary Theory Today*, says: “Harish Trivedi addresses a similar issue in his response to Spivak’s

question, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Trivedi argues that the subaltern has always spoken, although in a native tongue. The issue is not whether the subaltern can speak, rather it is whether the subaltern can speak the language of a metropolitan centre, that is English and the language of high theory.”

Women’s writing as a distinctive category of scholarly interest came into serious consideration relatively recently. Writing has traditionally been the prerogative of men; women were never regarded as the producers of textual knowledge. They were always denied the opportunity to write and create. Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* revolutionized the feminist inquiry in questioning the biased representation of women in mainstream literature. The book initiated feminist approach to literary interpretation in order to uncover what is called ‘literature of their own’. Women’s writing cannot be treated as a monolithic structure and all women’s writing need not be necessarily feminist. But women when they write “think back through their mothers” (Woolf 93) and their writing has its own characteristics and qualities. At another level women’s writing is the literature of silence. Its meaning lies enclosed and camouflaged, for it seeks to express that which has been submerged and suppressed. Writing in itself, has always been an act of courage and women have often resorted to different strategies to say put across their message. The act of writing has enabled them to move outside the narrow role of man’s helpmeet, outside the role of the seductress, the angel or the witch.

“Dalit” means “ground”, “crushed” or “broken into pieces”, and is a Marathi word with a Sanskrit root. The term may have been used for the first time in this manner by Jotiba Phule in the nineteenth century, but its more famous use was by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. It was in his journal, *Bahishkrut Bharat*, that Ambedkar first defined dalithood as “life conditions which characterize the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of Dalits by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper castes Brahminical ideology”. Dalit literature can be assessed only in the context of a complex web of social, political and economic relationships. Dalit literature as a corpus grows out of the Dalit movement and that is an ongoing process that influences the contours of literary production. Ambedkar’s world-view, philosophy and life has shaped the modern Dalit consciousness and consequently, made its literature possible. Critics like Limbale and Valmiki have helped to proclaim what may be called a theory of Dalit aesthetics which articulates the ideological position of the Dalit writer and defines its basic credo.

Bama, pen name of Faustina Mary Fatima Rani, is perhaps the most prominent of Tamil Dalit writers who shot to fame with her autobiography novel *Karukku* (1992). Translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom, *Karukku* explores the various facets of exploitation of Dalits, specifically of Paraiyars in Tamil Nadu, even within and by the Church. Bama compares ‘Karukku’ (meaning Palmyra leaves, whose serrated edges make them like double-edged swords) to her own life and feels that Dalits must speak up now, function as God’s word, and pierce the hearts of the oppressors. Bama says that “even though there are a thousand difficulties which beset a Dalit woman living on her own, yet the truth is that in my position as an independent woman, there are many opportunities for me to spend my life usefully, and especially, to work for the liberation of Dalits” (105). It is the patriarchal division that defines woman as a marginalized creature. As Simon de Beauvoir states “It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine”.

Karukku is a very different kind of book in which Bama groups the events in her life “under different themes”. It talks about the hypocrisies and double standards of the Catholic Church and caste discrimination within it. *Karukku* is the story of a Christian Dalit woman who realises that her identity as a Christian is heavily mediated by her identity as a Dalit, and that she must fight the discriminatory practises both within the Church and outside. In her book, Bama beautifully portrays her experiences and reactions through discrimination, suppression and violence meted out towards the Dalits where she also talks about the exploitation by the Naicker employers and the Nadar tradesmen. She also discusses about ‘untouchability’ as a set of rules she had learnt to observe – “All the time I went to work for the Naickers, I knew I should not touch their goods or chattels; I should never come close to where they were, I should always stand away to one side.” (p. 46). *Karukku* is the narration of painful and bitter memories, of despair, disillusionment and the pathetic conditions of the life and culture of people where women are subjected to sexual harassment and physical assault. Incidents are narrated, re-narrated and reinterpreted each time to express the oppression of dalits. Bama’s rewriting of self is thus the rewriting of dalit history. Thus we can say that *Karukku* is a path-breaking novel that addresses various issues of suppression and exploitation where neither religion, nor legal constitutional interventions seem to provide any answers to the Dalits. “*Karukku*” meaning searing edges of a Palmyra leaves, is indeed a double edged sword directed towards the reader which highlights the atrocities caused by gender discrimination, oppression and class/caste divide.

In an interview with Suchetra Behal in *The Hindu* (March 6, 2003), Bama said that she began to write in 1992, the year she left the convent, because she felt “a sense of total alienation from society because for seven years I was within the convent premises and the lifestyle was different” and she said that when she came out she was not “able to fit into the society”. She added that those “were terribly painful moments for me and even for the next day it was a question of how I am going to live” She felt that there “was no hope of a future”. According to Sharankumar Limbale, Marathi Dalit writer, critic and historian, Dalit literature is characterized by the “three values of life—equality, freedom and solidarity” and these values can be regarded as constituting the essence of beauty in Dalit literature. The literature of the oppressed is always a literature with a cause. As Bama says, the main aim of her writing is “to share with my people my experiences. I use writing as one of the weapons to fight for the rights of the underprivileged”. This is done in the language of the oppressed people, and in the language of the oral narrative.

Northeast India has always been in mainstream consciousness mostly for the wrong reasons. The land mass that is designated as India’s northeast is not the same to the people who inhabit this geographical area that has existed for centuries through its ecology, myths, legends, stories, poetry, dances, arts and crafts, its conflicting history and moribund politics. This territory has many facets; it is not just a map; it is a cultural and linguistic geography -- diverse, vibrant and variegated. In Northeast India, there amalgamates diverse ethnic and religious groups having different beliefs and customs. However, this land has been plagued by problems like unchecked militancy, insurgency, ethnic riots and killings etc. These rapidly suffusing violence has disrupted and paralyzed normal life. This region has been, for generations, the battleground for sub-national identities confronting insensitive nation-states and their bureaucracies as well as for various internecine strife. It is a battle of ideas and arms, of new concepts and old traditions and of bitterness and compassion. This imposed nomenclature and constructed identity of Northeast generates a site for encounter; and therefore, within the region there are evidences of fractures: ‘things fall apart’ and ‘the centre cannot hold’; marginalization engenders further marginalization.

Kailash C. Baral in “*Articulating Marginality: Emerging Literatures from Northeast India*” says the emerging literatures from Northeast are variously critiqued as ethnic writing, lacking in history and tradition, and often subjected to the virulent diatribe that it lacks in aesthetic virtuosity. These critical opinions are at best paternalistic and at worst, smack of ignorance in understanding the societies and cultures of the Northeast. Contemporary writers from this region aspire towards a vision beyond the narrow ethnic groove and represent a shared history. In these writings, the cultural memory is reprocessed in that the intensity of feeling overflows the labour of technique and craft. Tilottama Misra says that, “[s]ignificantly, for mainland India, the region known as the ‘North-East’ has never had the privilege of being at the centre of epistemic enunciation... the imagination of the ‘mainland’ has even today not overgrown those constructs of the mysterious ‘other.’” Temsula Ao, says that the ‘otherness’ has helped them to overcome their isolation once their thoughts and feelings are textualized; yet the uniqueness of their cultural difference has not disappeared. In spite of this assertion, marginality defines the essence of that ‘otherness.’ It becomes a defining trope that signifies this literature’s location as well as its reception by mainstream critics. However, literary marginality contests and problematizes some of the universalistic assumptions of literature while factoring in and often valorizing the unique ethnic and cultural experience that needs to be critically evaluated.

Mamang Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) is an intricate web of stories that explore the hidden facts of life and is a delightful mixture of myth, history, tribal beliefs and customs of the Adis, literally called “hill-people”. It has, indeed, wide range of themes ranging from tribal practices, superstitious beliefs, human and the spirit world, tradition and modernity, memory and reality and the essence of orality. Through these stories the author tries to give voice to the ‘peripheral people’ who are often marginalized. Surviving in the heat and humidity of the Siang valley, the Adis accept things unquestioningly. They still practice an animistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world. In the book, Mamang says, “In our language, the word ‘Pensam’ means ‘in-between’ which suggests the middle-ground. It is the small world where anything can happen and everything can be lived.” Recounting the various legends that influence the lives of the hill people, this book is a lyrical and moving tribute to the human spirit. It also reflects upon the lost history and the cultural dynamics of the Adis.

The book recounts the historical developments in the tribal areas with the advent of the Britishers. Rakut’s father, Lutor, and many others worked under the Migluns. The elders were brainwashed and dominated by the Migluns into considering themselves inferior and were forced to stifle their energy and determination. The early decades of the twentieth century were times of great upheaval, where the killing of Noel Williamson in 1911 by an angry Adi suggested that there existed a communication gap between them. Many people were killed and since the Abor expedition of 1912, the whole of the Siang valley had been under the control of the British administration. Images of violence and brutal killings also find a place in the narrative. We see how an elderly man from the Migu clan slaughtered two women and how Kamur kills his own children as if he had been under a spell. In ‘Daughters of the Village’, Arsi says, “In my next life I shall be born a bird”. She longs to break free from the routine rustic life and to enjoy life to its fullest.

The love relationship between Nenem and Captain David Ferguson takes us to a different plane altogether. It is an enigma how, despite all their differences, the two strangers were drawn to each other in the forlorn hills. When they parted, Nenem said to herself. ‘No one dies of love. I loved him, and now I am enough of my own.’ Years later, when she resigns to her fate and gets married to Kao, things have changed. She had dreamt of raising

up her family and living amidst her own people. But few years later, after the disastrous earthquake had claimed numerous lives and property, she faints one day and passes away. In the later part of the narrative, conflict goes on between tradition and modernity. With modernity, came issues of burglaries and murder. Their houses were not safe anymore. Electric poles and land were stolen. Forests were being cut and logs floated away down the river. New fences marked old territories and it seemed a curtain had fallen over the old villagers. What was once sacred, the old sense of joy was being lost. Towards the end, Raket says, 'We are peripheral people. Everywhere, people like us, we turned with the world. Our lives turned, and in the circle who could tell where was the beginning and where the end? We are just peripheral people, thinking out our thoughts!' Thus, Mamang Dai, in her novel historicizes the cultural context of the people and attempts to give them a voice which would transcend across boundaries.

Temsula Ao in *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) says 'Memory is a tricky thing: it picks and chooses what to preserve and what to discard. Sometimes it is the trivial that triggers the process of remembering a great loss.' Many of the stories in this collection have their genesis in the ethnic turbulence, bloodshed and tears that make up the history of the Nagas in course of their demand for an independent state. While the actual struggle remains a backdrop, the thrust of the narratives probe how the events of that era have re-structured or even revolutionized the Naga psyche. It is as though in course of the quest for their legitimate identity, great cataclysmic realities have unleashed many realities for the Nagas. Evidently, these realities are yet to sink in and the Naga communities are still struggling with them. The stories try to give voices to the many injustices, sufferings and inhumane treatment meted out towards women and children. They describe how ordinary people cope with the pervading violence and continue to enjoy amidst the terror and threat they face from the underground forces.

These stories depict numerous instances of women being tortured and molested by security forces. In 'The Last Song' we see how the young singer, Apenyo and her widowed mother Libeni were raped to death by a young army captain and his soldiers in an orgy of violence. The brutal, ghastly, inhumane and yet veracious details astonishes readers to the point of depressing them. What is even more poignant and saddening is that the savage atrocities are inflicted upon the fairer sex by their own people. The soldiers shooting the innocent and helpless villagers leave us fuming and compel us to ponder over the question 'what man has done to man?' In the later part of the story, yet again we witness women being humiliated, harassed and physically abused during curfews and blackouts. Minor girls were impregnated, tortured and left behind fatherless. One such incident is that of Imnala. She was assured marriage, but once the lust of the man who promised to marry her was satiated, he abandoned her, leaving her in a state of total hopelessness and helplessness and an unwanted and illegitimate pregnancy. If that wasn't enough, she was subjected to the exploitation of Repalemba. For the second time, Imnala conceived a child out of wedlock. This brought shame not only to Imnala but to her entire family. What is interesting is the fact despite the trauma and injustice she had to undergo, she was silenced by her own family members as she attempted to seek justice. Powerless and unaided, she could only weep at her fate. Though Imnala's life would never be the same again; she would have to fend for herself and her two 'illegitimate' children as best as she could. She would have to bear the stigma associated with being an unwed mother all her life. Through her stories, Ao tries to give voice to these muted beings that are deprived of hope and assistance.

Coming to the question of identity, The Naga Separatist Movement sought to assert, as Zapu Phizo puts it, the Naga identity in separation from pan-Indian nationalism: “Nagas are not Indian, and were never part of India. Nagaland, a British conquest, could not become an Indian legacy” (Verghese, pg. 86). This brings to the forefront the question of ‘self vs. other’. Most of the stories in these collection deal with Naga insurgency and its consequences. They throw light on how ordinary people have dealt with extraordinary situations. The story ‘Shadow’ matches ‘The Last Song’ in its gory detail in which Hoito, an underground commander kills Imli, the innocent young recruit. Ao makes a point that acts that are unethical and inhuman would always invite retributive justice. Both Hoito and the army captain became insane. To her, if the Indian army in most cases used raw force and was ruthless, the underground outfit was not free from atrocities on its own people either. In spite of the discipline, the members of the underground are also vulnerable to human weakness such as jealousy, hatred and greed. On both sides we have manipulators and dreamers; in such conflicts, there are no winners, only victims. For the victims the trauma goes beyond the realm of just the physical maiming and loss of life- their very humanity is assaulted and violated, and the onslaught leaves the survivors scarred both in mind and soul.

Women’s historiography has always been a contested domain and these writers try to recover women’s voices and their subjectivities in reproducing an alternative history and challenge the very notion that “history is male and women are outside it”, to which Gerda Lerner forcefully argues that “women have a history; women are in history” (1979:169). Women’s space becomes a significant area that emerges from these narratives. They acquire a space that has been denied to them in their family and society. These novels portray this shift in their own experience and also display the ambivalent status that they have had over the years. The paper tries to bring to the forefront, the fact that these women writers, could to a certain extent, transcend their subjected self through their literary activity thereby (re)discovering their subjectivity and laying the base of a feminine consciousness. They have succeeded, to a great extent, in discovering their voices and identity as women and gendered subjects.

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