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Mimicry of Hegemonic Discourses by Subalterns: Discourse Analysis of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

Balkar Singh

Abstract:

This paper explores the dark secrets of hegemony in Subalterns' conscious and subconscious. Every power structure relies on the subscribers of its ideology. As many subscribers affirm its authority as strong the power structures are. In Kiran Desai's novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, subalternity is treated with great delicacy. Its roots are revealed. The concept of class, position, and consciousness and its relation to subalterns' psyche are the major concerns explored in this paper. Mimicry of Colonial standards and its impact of Subalterns' mind and behaviour bring out Macaulay's prophecy to reality. By analysing discourse of subalterns and discourse of dominant hegemony this paper explores the reason why a Subaltern cannot speak?

Keywords: Subaltern, Class, Hegemony, Macaulay's prophesy, Ideology, subscriber, Discourse, Consciousness

Gayatri Spivak once remarked, "Class is the purest form of signifier" (163) and same statements echoes in Aijaz Ahmad's claim that "...blindness too is a matter of class.... What needs to justify itself is that other kinds of blindness, which refuses to see that most things are a matter of class. That refusal is itself very intimately a matter of class" (104). Subaltern groups or more precisely subalternity is also a matter of class- it refers to the conditioning so well structured that it makes the subject blind about his own place and predicament. Subaltern consciousness had always been a critical feature of subaltern studies. David Ludden comments on the scope of Subaltern's Studies-

The meaning of subalternity in Subaltern Studies shifted as the framework of study increasingly stressed the clash of unequal cultures under colonialism and the dominance of colonial modernity over India's resistant, indigenous culture. Subaltern in India becomes fragments of a nation; their identity and consciousness reflected India's colonial subjugation. (19)

Subaltern studies thus become a centre of "iconic residues of hidden identities, expressions of difference, and misunderstood mentalities" (Ludden 20). Autonomy is wanted in subaltern groups but neither given nor sought out by these groups. Unaware about their conditions and historiography of origins of their class, subalterns follow the hegemony of popular culture and it becomes centre of their identity and ultimately gets rooted into their psyche. These groups develop a common sense which works as nemesis for them. Common sense is a very strong foe without any whereabouts. Religion, politics, economy etc. work as tool of framing of this common sense which seems to be the only way of living and contrary to this is a path of self-annihilation. As Antonio Gramsci refers subalterns-

...are not result of any systematic educational activity on the part of an already conscious leading group but have been formed through everyday experience illuminated by common sense, i.e. by the traditional popular conception of the world (196-99).

Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* explores and presents to readers the inner world of subalterns' desire and subdued psyche. Major characters of the novel like Cook, Judge- Jemubhai Patel and Biju represent subaltern groups. Judge, Jemubhai Patel, is a curious case of degraded human, who lost his wife, family, identity, belief and his soul. What left in him is that "he envied the English. He loathed Indians. He worked at being English

with the passion of hatred and for what he would become; he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indian, both (Desai 119). The hegemonic discourses of colonial rule start shaping his psyche from the very outset of his life. Discourses as David refers “are primarily instrumental devices that can foster common perceptions and understanding for specific purposes, and the task of discourse analysis is to measure how effective they are in bringing about certain ends” (3). In case of the Judge these discourses are available around him as his father’s desire for his son to be a Civil Servant aspires in him love for British Customs and Culture. As Raymond Williams refers, “A lived hegemony is always a process.....It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits” (112). So in process of shaping Jemubhai’s understanding of the world the discourses about the superiority of colonial ruler become a permanent part of his life. This process starts with his crest with education. A simple portrait of Queen Elizabeth becomes a symbol of hegemony for Jemubhai-

In the entrance to the school building was a portrait of Queen Victoria in a dress like a flouncy certain, a fringed cape, and a peculiar hat with feathery arrows shooting out. Each morning as Jemubhai passed under, he found her froggy expression compelling and felt deeply impresses that a woman so plain could also have been so powerful. The more he pondered this oddity, the more his respect for her and the English grew. (Desai 58)

Sure about his own inferiority, Jemubhai starts growing estranged to himself. His loss of identity makes him a victim of ‘colonial mimicry’- a self made prison house. He starts living in this prison house and the existence of outer world never remains same for him. Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable ‘Other’, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite:

The discourse of mimicry is constructed around ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. Mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is thus sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also sign of inappropriate. (Bhabha 123)

By falling into the pray of mimicry the individual lost his own conscious and unconsciously desires for “other” and becomes a shadow of the “other”. Thus this process reduces him to a man without identity and the hegemony. He loses the vigour for reformation and need no outer agency to enslave him because “the dream of post enlightenment civility alienates its own language of liberty and produces knowledge of its norms” (Bhabha 123). It is from this area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double. What they all share is a discursive process by which the excess or slippage produced by the ambivalence of mimicry does not quite rupture the discourse, but become transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a partial presence. By partial I mean both ‘incomplete’ and ‘virtual’. Mimicry does not provide authentication to those characters but actually become “at once resemblance and menace” (Bhabha 123). Frantz Fanon observes this culture both present and mummified, it testified against its members. It defines them in fact without appeal. The oppressor deprives the oppressed from all material means which would enable him to undergo the process of individuation. The oppressor thus produces and perpetuates the misery which in his view increasingly makes the oppressed the kind of creature that deserves such a fate. As Sartre observes, “Terror and exploitation dehumanize, and the exploiter uses this dehumanization as a pretext to step up his exploitation” (Sarte 36). Oppression has its limits. The oppression must not lead to the negation of the colonized, to his physical annihilation, since such a state

of affairs would also imply the negation of the colonizer. There is neither good nor bad colonizers; their conduct is dictated to them by the function they occupy in the process of production. The higher the standard of living of the oppressor the higher will be the oppressed exploitation; the more deeply he breaths the more the other suffocates.

Jemubhai in the process of mimicking the dominant ideology starts growing “stranger to himself” (Desai 40). He hates himself. He finds his skin “odd colored” (Desai 40) and his “accent peculiar” (Desai 40). Ultimately he develops fear of sunlight and covers his face with powder. His degeneration is the height of effect generated by colonial mimicry-

He barely feel human at all, leaped when touched on the arm as if from an unbearable intimacy, dreaded and agonized over even a “How-do-you-do-lovely-day” with the fat woman dressed in friendly pinks who ran the corner store....He began to walk farther town to more anonymous shops, and when he bought a shaving brush and the shop girl said her husband owned the same item exactly, at the acknowledgement of their identical human needs, the intimacy of their connection, *shaving, husband*, he was overcome at the boldness of the suggestion. (Desai 40)

He starts hating Indians and worst of all he abhors the Indian in himself. The processes of standardization make him believe that he is lowest of the low in context of Colonial. The girl he finds beautiful in his young age soon starts looking ugly to him. Popular expression gives glimpse of psychology of subaltern. A girl’s beauty is gauged in context to English girls as Jemubhai’s father praised the girl by saying, “You could have mistaken her for a foreigner” (Desai 88) and after completing his education Jemubhai stops believing in the statement and retorts silently “An Indian girl never can be as beautiful as an English one” (Desai 168). According to Edward W. Said, “There is a vast standardization of taste in the region, symbolized not only by transistors, blue jeans, and coca cola but also by cultural images of the Orient supplied by American mass media and consumed unthinkingly by the mass television audience (Orientalism 324). Jemubhai without knowing the effects of these processes accept these standards blindly. The process of degradation does not end here. Aware of his own inferiority and by accepting the norms of hegemony Jemubhai starts hating ‘others’ who are happy to be Indian. His wife weakest of the weak becomes first victim of his inferiority complex. While making physical relationship with her, he “disguises his inexpertness, his crudity, with hatred and fury- this was a trick that would serve him well throughout his life in a variety of areas” (Desai 169). His loneliness and inhumanity makes him the worst possible husband as he avenges on her to “teach her the same lessons of loneliness and shame he had learned himself” (Desai 170).

This hegemonic structure establishes a hierarchy of exploitation levels. On all visible level of exploitation all faces are Indian. In this panoptic structures slaves are against the slave; they are unknowingly strengthen the system of their own exploitation. Colonial impacts do not end with Indian Independence. Love for English goods and attitudes of authority do not change that easily. Boss’s comments is very apt regarding this as he quips, “The man with the white curly wig and a dark face covered in powder, bringing down his hammer, always against the native, in a world that was still colonial” (Desai 205). All this suppression and maintenance and check on mind and action is never possible without the self check. A dream of free India makes Boss a piece of mockery. “In England they had a great good laugh, no doubt, but in India, too, everyone laughed with joy of seeing people like Bose cheated. There they had thought they were superior, putting on airs, and they were just the same” (Desai 205). Judge fails to find any affinity with the predicament of his country men. He feels he is different than other Indian. The judge and the cook had “lived together for

more years than they had with anyone else, practically in the same room, closer to each other than to any other human being and- nothing, zero, no understanding” (Desai 313). Trapped in their self made cobweb these slaves of mind forget how to speak about their freedom. Citizen of free nation has enslaved consciousness. Question loudly and reaffirm its existence -“Can the Subaltern Speak?” According to Gramsci:

One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousness: one that is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbs. (Gramsci 333)

Quest for truth and freedom was quenched a long time before. The signifiers are still there but signified are lost. Language is still there but parallel images in parole are lost. Subaltern needs to connect and “in order to be able to make a revolution, the working class from being a class in ‘itself’, aware of its own proper self existence; it must develop a class consciousness. Each one of its member must be conscious of his alienation and its underlying economic causes” (Zahar 5-6). Problem lies in subaltern’s conditioning; it is built on lies, superficial securities and insecurities and “when you build on lies, you build strong and solid. It was the truth that undid you. He couldn’t knock down the lies or else the past would crumble, and therefore the present” (Desai 210).

Simple habits and basic processes like language learning changes many things. It becomes barrier in communication and supplies reinforcement of hegemony. While communicating to Boss Judge feels this thing, as he observes, “Good night. Good bye. So long”- not Indian sentences, English sentence. Perhaps that’s why they had been so happy to learn a new tongue in the first place: the self conscious of it, the effort of it, the grammar of it, pulled you up; a new language provided distance and kept the heart intact” (Desai 208). With this continuous process of reinforcement, standardization and generalization “a human can be transformed into anything. It was possible to forget and sometimes essential to do so” (Desai 308). To maintain the hierarchy, where the lies down but above then their other country men and counterparts, these slaves do everything. According to Wodak, “Dominant structures stabilize conventions and naturalize them, that is, the effect of power and ideology in the production of meaning are obscured and acquire stable and natural forms: they are taken as given” (3).

Whereas, Jemubhai is a specimen of Colonial subjugation; Biju is a specimen of post colonial subjugation. He is a part of new India “where mind is not free”. Cook, his father, gives him false notion of colonial superiority in inheritance. Unaware of this conditioning and convinced of his inferiority Cook believes that he deserves his fate. When cook is blamed for robbery by the policemen, he supports them by saying, “Most of the time it is servant that steals” (Desai 19) and same notion echoes in neighbour’s discourse when they announces “It’s always the watchmen in the case of robbery” (Desai 43). According to Renate Zahar , “The oppressor thus produces and perpetuates the misery which in his view increasingly makes the oppressed the kind of creature that deserves such a fate” (20). Cook does not know how to fight for his freedom. How to make his position better? Author comments on his psyche that “his lines had been honed over centuries passed down through generations, for poor people needed certain lines; the script was always the same, and they had no option but to beg for mercy. The cook knew instinctively how to cry” (Desai 6), and his “these familiar lines allowed the boys to ease still further into their role, which he had handed to them like a gift” (Desai 6). It’s the role playing. Everybody’s character is well explained and every character is expected to behave “normally”. There is no aspiration and hope for these subalterns. They lost the authority over their own life. For hegemonic structure he was a “powerless man, barely enough learning to read and write, had worked like a donkey all his life, hoped only to avoid trouble, lived on only to see his son” (Desai 11). When he goes to

police station to complaint for the robbery of gun nobody was ready to pay him any attention, his complaint was lodged only because of his master. “As a servant, he was far beneath him, but the robbery of guns from a retired judiciary could not be ignored and they were forced to inform the superintendent” (Desai 11). Cook is exploited by his master, systemmand ultimately by revolutionary. He is blamed for every wrong doing even when the dog of Judge lost he is blamed for that and surprisingly he is convinced that he is the culprit. He passes his inheritance to his son too as he remarks, “his son was cooking English food. He (Biju) had a higher position than if he were cooking Indian” (Desai 17). He never thinks even about the freedom. His consciousness does not have words like this. Biju is an illegal diaspora and post colonial subaltern. He lives in abroad do different odd jobs and secures nothing. His father is very proud of him but his life is miserable. He believes in religion and traditions. Rules of ancestor are rooted in him deeply. He believes “one should not give up one’s religion, the principle of one’s parents and their parents before them” (Desai 136). He shocks when he find Indian are eating beefs. His naive finds fail to decipher it. Indian out of Indian hegemony in abroad barely cares about the beliefs which they believe in India. He is exploited by Indian master in abroad Harish- Harry like many other he works on low wages. He finds no way out of this labyrinth as “it was terribly, terribly hard. Million risked death, were humiliated, hatred, lost their families- yet there were so many here” (Desai 189). Only at the time of acute pain he realises his predicament he retorts, “Without us living like pigs”, said Biju, “what business would you have? This is how you make your money, paying us nothing because you know we can’t do anything, making us work day and night because we are illegal” (Desai 188). This does not open any door of salvation to Biju. Without collective consciousness and efforts there is no salvation. Any hegemony needs the subscriber to gets its place in the place. However there are too many but they are too scattered. Like many others he again falls in the tricks of fake benevolent master willingly. He joins back and while accepting Prasad from Harish- Harry “Biju knew not to expect anything else. It was a decoy, an old Indian trick of master to servant, the benevolent patriarch garnering the loyalty of staff; offering slave wages, but now and then a box of sweets, a lavish gift.....” (Desai 189). Name of his master symbolises the double facet nature of his master and exploitation. He returns to India at last and robbed by another subalterns. These subalterns claim to secure freedom for their brothers by robbing their own brothers.

Sai and Gyan are two polar characters. Sai is second generation subaltern. She breathes in free India (territorial) but she is “a Westernized Indian brought up by English nuns, an estranged Indian living in India. She is the zenith point of the “journey Judge had started so long ago had continued in his descendants” (Desai 210). She is the product of Macaulay education and outcomes of this education are, as its founder claims, “Indian in colour... and British in thinking”. She ridiculously believes that progress means making cheese. Her conversation with Gyan reveals the secrets roots of hegemony-

Sai- “Why don’t you make cheese”

Gyan- “We live in India, thank you very much. We don’t want any cheese and the last thing we need is chocolate cigars.”

Sai- “.....Civilization is important.”

Gyan- “That is not civilization, you fool. Schools and hospitals. That is.”

Sai- “.....”But you have to set the standard. Or else everything will be brought down at the same low level as you and your family.”

Gyan- “ I see, Swiss luxury set a standard, chocolates and watches set the standard....yes, soothe your guilty conscience, stupid little girl” (Desai 262).

All the characters suffer and are lost in their own self made labyrinths. They fail to secure freedom for themselves. As Harish- Harry said with a sense of loss, ““Every time one enters my shop I smile”- he showed his skeleton grin- “ ‘Hi. How ya doin,’ but all I want is to break

their necks. I can't, but may be my son will, and that is my great hope. One day Jayant-Jay will smile and gets his hands about their sons' necks and he will choke them dead" (Desai 149). Cook believes his son will become master of his life. Judge believes his distant relative Sai will get equal status to Britishers. All these desires neither get fulfilled nor there is any hope of fulfilment. According to Edward W. Said, "The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connection between them" (Orientalism, Xiii). These characters never narrate any discourse of subaltern freedom. To reach at the level of creating discourse of subaltern's freedom first of all they need to affirm their class rather than to the position. "*Capital* gives them this supplementary theoretical education in the form of objective explanations and proofs, which helps them to move from a proletarian class instinct to a (objective) proletarian class position" (Althusser, 65). And to set themselves free "mere education of their consciousness is not enough, nor a mere reading of *capital*. They must also make a real *rupture*, a real *revolution* in their consciousness, in order to move from their necessarily bourgeois class instinct to proletariat class position" (Althusser 66).

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