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Breaking the Rules: Resistance and Subversion in *Yantrana* or (*Agony*)

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Abstract:

According to Branningan, “literary texts are vehicles of power which act as useful objects of study in that they contain the same potential for power and subversion as exist in society generally” (Brannigan, 1998, 6)

Subversion, thus, has been interpreted variously by different scholars. However, one thing that is common is the notion of ‘subjugation’, ‘domination’, ‘subaltern’ and that of ‘power’ which finds prominence while analysing any work of literature on subversion. Homi Bhabha, one of the leading post-colonial theorists states subaltern groups as “an oppressed minority groups whose presence was crucial to the self-definition of the majority groups. The subaltern social groups were also in a position to subvert the authority of those who had hegemonic power.” (1996:191). According to Gramsci, the term ‘subaltern classes’ are those groups ‘subordinated by hegemony and excluded from any meaningful role in a regime of power’ (Holden 2002: 202).

This paper is a humble attempt to provide a peek into the lives of the tea garden workers who were oppressed by the Whites, as portrayed in the Nepali novel *Yantrana* or (*Agony*). It maps the need for resistance which culminates into subversion later. It projects the reasons for the formation of a Trade Union by the simple rural folk via which they attempt to write back to the centre. In fact, they try to raise their voices which had been silenced by the colonial masters and had made them voiceless since generations.

Keywords: subversion, oppression, hegemony, subaltern, resistance, silenced.

The novel *Yantrana* (meaning ‘Agony’) written by Asit Rai, a doyen of Nepali literati from Darjeeling was published in 1979. His literary oeuvre consists of a large collection of works to his credit, some of which are Sahitya Akademi winners. It is a socio-realistic portrayal of the lives of the people of the tea garden. The plot revolves around the hardships endured by them in every sphere of life. Life has all along been the same for them since

generations. Unfortunately, these meek and docile people who have been subjugated for life fail to realize that they have been oppressed by the Imperial masters. The novel is woven through the fictional characters living in the colonial and neo-colonial period.

When the novel begins the following conversation is going on in the office of the Tea Garden. One Babu says, “Why yesterday, in heavy pruning many could not complete their daily quota of work. What should be done Bara babu?” [p- 1] Another one comments, “For those who could not do their daily share of work and fulfil the requirements, I think their wages need to be deducted or else the manager will be angry with us. They have asked us to increase the supply of tea leaves than last year.” [p- 1] Workers in the tea garden have a lot of grievances and it is for this reason that some of the representatives were going to meet the owner. However, there are some amongst them who discouraged others especially the office staff who think of nothing other than projecting themselves as the well-wishers of the owner and the likes. One person says, “What is the use of meeting the owner? People like us have to do our work, save our job and work accordingly. If we the office staff join the union it will come to the knowledge of the rest and everything will be leaked.” [p- 32]

Chandra Bahadur is the protagonist of the novel. He tries to make these simple folks understand that they have been bound by the chains of slavery and must break free from its shackles, through the unity of the labourers.

CB looked properly at the speaker who was Gurung babu. People like them allow themselves to have a blind faith in the system which is the reason for Hegemony. There was never a serious functioning of the Trade Union though it was formed earlier once due to the dissonance of its members. At one stage there were even several clashes that led to the re-organization and functioning of the union with a renewed interest.

Even after working for three years, Chandray, a garden worker was never made permanent. During this duration, three managers were transferred. Apart from personal grievances there were many reasons to revive the Trade Union so that the workers could voice their demands unanimously. In this novel every year the labourers were given holiday in ‘Chaitay Dasai’. Surprisingly on a particular year the owner refused to give a holiday, which caused a small spark to ignite into flames. The denial of a right which they had been getting every year had caused discontent to many. At the same time the union was becoming stronger day by day though it was in the nascent stage after renewal. The owner was worried seeing the activities of the Trade Union. The holiday during ‘Chaitay Dasai’ was a rightful

holiday and everybody felt it was a denial of their individual rights. Some representatives of the Union meet the manager who expressed his inability to do anything for the labourers and asked them to meet the plantation owner. The owner was rigid in his own reasoning and there was a heavy debate over the matter. The union gave threats of going on a strike. The owner on other hand said he would close the garden. Hence, the meeting could not yield any fruitful outcome.

When the union representatives reported the outcome of the meeting to the workers, they refused to accept it. They made plans to intensify their activities such as doing ‘gherao’ or ‘not reporting for work’ etc. to press for their demands. The first act of defiance of the Imperial order was not reporting for work. The next morning as the clock struck 7 nobody got ready whether it was men, women or chokra (meaning young boys).

Duncan Brown in *The Concise Companion to Postcolonial Literature* says that among the debates about postcolonial theory is its theorization of the silencing of the colonized “within the colonial encounter”. But he says that despite the attempt to “silence the other”, “the colonized have continued to speak, often in unofficial ways and from unofficial spaces, but also from the centers of their societies” (Chew and Richards 2010: 47). Thus, we find in the novel that in spite of trying to silence the demands of the workers by refusing them their denial of rights the workers instead of going to work they went towards the godown and assembled on the ground to make further plans and thus trying to speak of their rights and demands. According to Ashcroft, “The attempt to “marginalize” the colonized world directed the fight of the colonized people towards achieving plurality, multiplicity, and uncentered position, and so, marginality [...] became an unprecedented source of creative energy” (Ashcroft et al 2002: 12). Thus, we find in the novel that these marginalized workers have become united in their stance for a common goal of emancipation from their colonial masters.

The office staff asked them to get back to work or else the day’s wages would not be accounted. The workers ignored the order and insisted on getting leave on ‘Chaitay Dasai’. Spivak in her seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak” has stressed about the fact that when the Subaltern speaks, it no longer remains as subaltern, so subalterns are marginalised people who have no voice, people who find it difficult to speak. According to her, the subalterns are not people who can be represented by privileged people. They are subjects who should speak for themselves. They should be inventors and masters of their own voices. It is only when the subaltern speaks for themselves that they can cease to be subaltern subjects. What we find in

the novel is also the same that the workers who are the marginalized people suddenly find their own voice to revolt against their demands. The crowd started swelling slowly. Somebody mentioned to Chandra Bahadur that his mother was also present amidst the protesting workers. He should prevent her from being in that group or else it could come to the notice of others due to which he may lose his job.

Gurung babu, a sycophant says – “On getting some information in advance that there can be a gherao (or barrier made by people) today, I have kept people who were supposed to go for work, to their respective homes itself. Why should we get in-between the agitators and the owner? It can only project us in a negative light in the eyes of the owner. What can we get by going on strikes and doing gherao? It will harm us ultimately.” [p-35] Somebody amidst the crowd yelled, “just drag the Manager out.” Everybody agreed unanimously. The manager was aghast sensing the looming crisis and called the owner. The owner asked him to inform the police. Suddenly there was an outburst of slogans and people started chanting, “Labour Union Zindabad. We must be granted our demands.” [p-35]

The manager calls the representatives of the union and asks them to control the situation, disperse the crowd and make them go for work. It wasn't that easy to control the labour class people. The representatives express a desire to meet the owner and an appointment is fixed. A long procession marched towards the owner's bungalow. Before any untoward incident occurred the plantation owner himself appeared on the scene. His gestures show him to be a little mellowed down as he talks with folded hands.

After few days there was a verbal fight between the owner and the manager resulting in the Manager quitting his job. On that very evening the owner calls the staff one by one and gives them a threat saying – “Hope your condition doesn't become like that good for nothing Manager. I don't like staff that cannot control the labourers and maintain discipline in work place.” [p-37]

He also looked at Chandra Bahadur with rage and said, “Chandra Bahadur I believe your mother was also one the leaders in the last procession. Why is there a need for such activities? You explain this to your mother. You have a big role to play in the advancement of the unions' activities. This is the last warning.” [p- 37]

To a person like Chandra Bahadur this type of accusation and threat was unbearable. To lose self-respect and survive with slavish mentality was slowly becoming intolerable to him. The feeling that he could find a job and survive anywhere was coming over him. With

head held firm and looking straight into the eyes of the owner, he replies, “Now I have understood this malik (or owner) that without raising our voices and fighting for our cause nothing can be achieved. I have been working earnestly for many years anticipating your kindness and sympathy to be shown some day. Instead, you have always doubted my integrity and have been threatening me time and again. You know very well that I have been working here since the last four years. In spite of that I have never been made permanent in my job. This year I will be appearing for BA exams. Now I’m not afraid anymore, thinking what if I am removed from this job. I can work anywhere and get a better life. My love for this tea garden is the only reason that has kept me here. Or else I would have left this job of a paltry amount of 120/ rupees long ago.”

Chandra Bahadur was surprised at the reaction of the owner. Instead of showing an outrageous behaviour the owner gives him assurances of many things. In the meantime, Chandra Bahadur passes graduation. Soon he is made a permanent staff and his salary is raised to 150/ rupees a month. CB is offered a job of a teacher from a place within elsewhere. Yet, he stays in his hometown as he had a deep desire to serve the people of the garden where he was born. He wanted the rural folk to progress and raise their standard of living. Most important of all to liberate them from the chains of Imperial Governance which they were unaware of.

The Trade Union though in its nascent form remained steadfast. Sometimes the members visited him to take his suggestions and also for his signatures on papers. Yet, they always used to come secretly which surprised him very much. Therefore, Chandra Bahadur tells them, “You need not come secretly to meet me. Come without any fear. Who can do anything?” [p- 38] To this the union leaders often reply – “No, actually we think that such matters should not affect your job.” [p- 38]

Though CB was still a novice in the logistics of the trade union yet, he was candid in his work. He often ruminated deeply thinking that, “If the union leaders have this mentality, then what can be expected from the rest. If feelings of self-dignity, self-sustenance, equality of mankind, together with different types of struggles in life have to be instilled in the minds of the union leaders then what could be the mindset of the large masses of rural folks who follow them blindly.” [p- 38]

A lot of unity was already evident amongst the people of the garden. Following the footsteps of Chandra Bahadur many staffs of the tea garden had joined the union. The owner

did not have monopoly like before. He was trying his level best to destroy the union. He often gave money to some people who could betray the cause of the union and secretly give him information. Yet it wasn't possible for him to dismantle or break the union. The people of the garden were determined in getting their demands fulfilled and were ready to fight for it.

A worker is also a human being and should have a right to live in that manner. They should be provided with jobs according to their capabilities. They should be given proper housing as well as medical facilities. Along with a decent wage to survive, a worker should also be given winter allowance and hill allowance which is entitled to all other government servants.

Slowly these perceptions regarding their individual rights were beginning to be felt by every worker. At several points in the novel, we see the self-respecting workers making demands to feel that their world is not being unjustly side-lined. "Our work should not be of more than eight hours. If any work remains to be done after that, then it should be considered as overtime work and double wages should be given for it," (12) for instance, is a context. "Even after eight hours of work in case the required quantity of tea leaves could not be plucked the wages should not be deducted," the character continues. The workers also insist that "As granted by the Plantation Act, Quarters should be made."

Yet, there occur various types of exploitation in the plantation. The Union is weakened as strategies to break the unity among the workers are put to use.

The garden opens once again. After seven days Chandra Bahadur, two workers, two chowkidar, three labourers were issued a charge sheet for spreading unrest in the tea garden amounting to destruction of public property, and disrespecting the owner. On the discretion of the unanimous consent of the Central Committee they are thrown out of work.

The shrewd plan of the owner was beneficial in breaking the unity of the labourers. Everybody was shocked by it. More than half of the labourers joined hands and started begging for forgiveness. Chandra Bahadur gets the information that even the office workers had gone to meet the owner.

The next day Chandra Bahadur organises a meeting and gives a speech where he requests the people not to falter or give up. CB promised to expedite a change in their condition if all of them coalesced and had faith in the union, which would be instrumental in bringing about an anti-colonial movement. The Central Committee strongly condemned the

step taken by the Management against Chandra Bahadur and few others. They should immediately be reinstated back to work and the order for which should be given in writing. The union complains against the injustice done to them and launched a case in the Tribunal Court. Amidst this many workers go to the owner and ask forgiveness. Few even backed out from the union for the fear of losing their job. There was restlessness and bewilderment amongst the people.

The owner, capitalizing on this opportunity takes in writing from these helpless people saying, “Henceforth, I shall not keep any connection with the union. In case I make any mistake, which offends the owner he can go to the extent of terminating my service. Under such circumstances I shall not raise any objection to it.” [p- 51]

Such bargains were made to put people under duress and oppress them forever.

In between this the owner conjures another plan and that is to do ‘Hatta Bahar’ or (eviction from the garden) to Chandra Bahadur. He starts a signature campaign in which he is partially successful. However, the majority refuse to sign.

The case was going on in the Tribunal Court. The owner had thought that the representative of the labour union would not be able to employ a lawyer on its behalf to fight a case in the tribunal court which was far away from the garden. So, the case would go in favour of owner and one-sided decision would be taken. But later he gets to understand that the case was filed by the central committee in the Tribunal court for which they had their own lawyer. Side by side funds were raised for this case in the neighbouring gardens also. Apart from that the union members were pressurizing the high govt officials and making them sign some papers in their favour. They had MLAs also as some of their representatives. Time was flowing by. Yet, everybody had a strong faith that this case would go in favour of the labourers with the ‘power of their unity’.

Amidst this the town’s highest Tribunal court decides the case in favour of the labourers. Everybody would be getting back their lost wages and be reinstated to work. This came as a big victory for the union.

Conclusion

The ideology of power and subversion presupposes a form of legitimating actions. Edward Said admits in “Culture and Imperialism” that as there has always been colonial literature, a literature of opposition and decolonization started to appear reflecting opposition

to the empire in the center as well as nationalist resistance in the peripheral. He believes that “Here, too, culture is in advance of politics, military history, or economic process...Just as culture may predispose and actively prepare one society for the overseas domination of another, it may also prepare that society to relinquish or modify the idea of overseas domination” (As quoted in *The Empire Writes Back*, 200). Thus, the critical task of literature and humanity in general is to ask how we might free ourselves from the constraints of domination to engage more actively and freely in the creation of community which the novelist Asit Rai has been able to do in this Nepali novel, *Yantarana* or (*Agony*).

Note:

Chaite Dashain is a festival of the Nepalese community whether of Nepal or India. It falls in the month of Chaitra, of Bikram Sambat Calendar (which is the Nepali calendar). Its equivalent is March in the Gregorian calendar. Chaite Dashain is a celebration of the victory of good over evil.

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