

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN 0976 - 8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

— 12th Year of Open Access —

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed
Open Access e-Journal

Vol. 12, Issue - 4 (August 2021)

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Societal Culture Facets on Gendered Subalternity: An Analysis of Tapan Basu's "Oorakali" and "Bayen"

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Article History: Submitted-31/07/2021, Revised-25/08/2021, Accepted-26/08/2021, Published-31/08/2021.

Abstract:

Human beings are born equal, man and woman play equal part in the evolutionary phenomenon of humankind yet the prevailed societal -cultural codes of patriarchy assign different roles to man and woman which further turn man to the position of the controller and woman to the position of the controlled one. Woman is considered the 'other' sex, inferior to man in physical, mental and decision- making capacity. Her very being is negated to the status of 'subaltern' just because of her 'gender'. Gender lies at the heart of all discriminations and indignities inflicted on woman which is an offence against the very spirit of humanity. She is subjected to dehumanizing repercussions and immense sufferings. Beauvoir's remark that "one is not born, rather becomes a woman" aptly highlights the oppressive apparatus of patriarchy and its perpetual state. The article portrays the complexities in case of gendered-subalternity which engulfs caste, class and creed bars along with the voices of resistance on the part of woman protagonists against the dehumanizing repercussions in Tapan Basu's translated short stories 'Oorakali' and 'Bayen' in his book "Translating Caste".

Keywords: subalternity, gender, subordination, societal -cultural facets, dehumanizing repercussions, resistance.

Introduction

The term 'subalternity' is an umbrella term which includes the history and genealogy of struggle and resistance of the subaltern groups in society. It is the quality, state or position of being 'subaltern'. "The term: 'subaltern' has been derived from Latin 'Subalternous' meaning 'Other'. It refers to a person holding a subordinate position or being inferior in respect to some quality or characteristic"(Webster,2273). In India, the term "subaltern" often refers to the members of the lower socio-economic classes, social castes and peasantry, as these are often the marginal, illiterate and dispossessed. The conditions of 'subalternity' have existed in various forms since time immemorial in our societies. In India evidences can be

traced back to the times of great epics i.e. "Mahabharata" and "Ramayana". The epic "Mahabharata" portrays the 'subaltern' lives of "Karna, Eklavya and Droupadi". Karna and Eklavya were denied education by Guru Dronacharya only because they belonged to the lower Strata of the society. Karna suffered immensely for being a "sutta puttra," throughout his entire life just because "Suttas" stand in the lowest of social hierarchy. Time and again "Droupadi" was objectified on the name of culture and set conventions of that time. She was staked by Yudhishthira in the game of chess played between Kauravas and Pandavas and loosened. She was, thus, trapped by Duryodhana in the game of chess and was made to suffer interminably when Dusashana attempted to denude her before the full assembly including her five- husbands, in -laws, Kauravas and others. Similarly, the portrayal of Sita in the "Ramayana" is indicative of gendered-subalternity inflicted upon her by the then prevalent collective ignoramus male consciousness. Even going through the ordeal of fire Sita's chastity was put into questions which ultimately leads her permanent banishment from Ayodhya into hostile forests. Pregnant Sita was made to suffer immensely alone in the forests in a time when she mostly needed the assistance from her near and dear ones. Prevalent socio- culture conventions ostracized her from the society because she failed the patriarchal parameters of the idealised notion of a woman of that society by being abducted by Ravana. She was reduced to the status of a subordinate one despite her royal birth and marriage. Thus, the subalternity in its forms such as class, caste and gender has existed in our society from the dawn of our civilization but the term 'subalternity' is of very recent usage.

The meaning of the term 'subaltern' is constantly shifting and is contingent upon differential power structures. The genre was started by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci who used it as a synonym with proletariat to include the workers and peasants who were oppressed and discriminated by the elite classes. The project was decisively shaped by its encounter with 'Subaltern Studies Group' in the 1980s who used it as a critique of elite historiographies, over the time the project has become interdisciplinary. The term 'subalternity' got momentum with Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?," here Spivak reconsidered the problems of subalternity within new historical developments as brought out by capitalistic politics of undermining revolutionary voice and divisions of labour in a globalized world. She also observed that if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, then the subaltern as a female is even more deeply in shadow.

“Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is double effaced. The question is not of female participation

in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labour, for both of which there is 'evidence'. It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant" (Spivak,287).

Spivak talks about the need for a revisionary feminist framework for understanding the ' new location of subalternity' within global capitalism. She stands for women as a differentiated gender because of the total exclusion of their participation in anti-colonial history.

Women have been subjected to patriarchal oppression for centuries the world over. "In India, the term 'subaltern' often refers to the members of the lower socio - economic classes, social castes and peasantry, as these are often the marginal, illiterate and dispossessed; though Social expectations of women allow for the presence of Subalternity of women in all classes"(Menon, Web). Subalternity is related to race, class and caste directly but it is particularly complex and severe in its relation with gender; because the oppression due to gender transcends race, class and caste barriers. Women form half of the world population, yet they are amongst the most oppressed, subjugated, silenced, marginalized and exploited groups of society. Social forces conspire together and result in the subalternity of women. They have been subjected to patriarchal oppression for centuries the world over. They have been relegated to back place and reduced to the status of 'other'. Beauvoir in her book "The Second Sex" argues that man is considered the default, while a woman is considered the "other". Thus, humanity is male and man defines woman not herself but as relative to him. Man is a human being and woman is a female (anatomy)- whenever she behaves as a human being, she is said to imitate the male. In short, women's widespread oppression is largely socially constructed. They have been treated unfairly since time immemorial. They need to be heard properly in the present scenario.

The stories 'Oorakali' and 'Bayen' analysed in this paper have been taken from "*Translating Caste*", edited by Tapan Basu. These stories have been analysed from the point of view of the streak of subalternity in the guise of caste and gender issues in them. *Translating Caste* is a collection of stories, essays and criticism. The collection is entirely contemporary since it addresses the situation of today. There are eight translated Indian short stories included in this collection, originally written in seven different modern Indian languages namely Asomiya, Bangla, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi and Tamil by the contemporary writers belonging to different regions of India. The stories 'Oorakli' and 'Bayen' unveil the dehumanizing repercussions of divisive and regressive forces in society.

They focus on culture, tradition, superstition, religion, marital relationships, hypocrisy, exploitation of innocents, inhumanity, and insensitivity. These stories demonstrate the status of subaltern women as marginalized, sexually-exploited and deprived beings due to gender discrimination. These stories also highlight the inevitable failure of resistance on the part of women protagonists due to the patriarchal social set-up.

Gendered Subalternity: A Socio-Cultural Construct

The constitution of India confers equality to all irrespective of their caste, class, and sex. But unfortunately, gender equality in India is still a faraway dream for us. Women are not allowed to enjoy the rights and opportunities because of oppressive traditions, superstitions, exploitation, and corruption. Spivak rightly observes in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?",

"If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow"(Spivak,271-313).

She points out that subaltern women are subjected to oppression more than subaltern men. They do not have proper representation, and therefore, are not able to voice their opinions or share their stories. Her statement: "White men are saving brown women from brown men" in this essay foregrounds the severest aspect of gendered subalternity. The essay in actuality refers to 'sati' and 'dowry' practices in Indian society and different degrees of subalternity devaluing all women. Sati and dowry systems are strictly culture oriented. Sati practices are prohibited completely, but dowry system still exists with extraordinary might and resilience in our society. It disgraces women and puts them in a position of inferiority to men.

In an eponymous short story, "**Oorakali**", originally written in Tamil by Hephzibah Israel and edited by Tapan Basu, 'Oorakali', the narrator, interprets the miserable plight of Thangatchi, the family daughter, who is sexually exploited by upper caste master which leads her to an untimely death. The story portrays "the elements of domination and subordination in the caste system in terms of economic control and power to exploit the labour of both men and women and the sexuality of the lower caste women"(Chakravarti,207). The social trend depicts that subalternity does not exist without the influence of the socially powerful. The story highlights the fact that those who hold higher social status systematically exploit the subaltern women. The story lays bare the hypocrisy of upper caste menfolk who, according to

Thangatchi's father, "will lie with their women" (7) but neither marry nor accept responsibility for their children procreated through the act of licentiousness.

"They said that Oorakali's daughter looked like a Brahmin girl. The village boys gossiped that she wasn't born to Mandayan. Chellathai (Thangatchi's mother) has lain with our Nattar (upper caste men)" (6).

Thangatchi is a beautiful and fair-complexioned girl. She is as beautiful as lotus that blooms in the lake. Thangatchi's mother die at her birth. So, she has been reared up by her father and brother very lovingly. She becomes the very life for Mandayan (her father) a dark-skinned oorakali and his son (the narrator). The father tenderly takes care of his children. He grazes the cattle of the entire village throughout the day in the sun and shower. Traditions state that oorakalis have to make their living on whatever they get from the villagers, whether that is sufficient or not. Cultural conventions have commodified subalterns since time immemorial. In the story 'Oorakali', as Thangatchi grows healthy and fair as a teenager, the lusting eyes of menfolk in the village begin to fall on her. And when technological advancements force her to work as a bonded labourer in the master's house, she is raped and reduced to the status of exploited subaltern on the pretext of cultural tradition:

"The women folk of the bonded labourer's family were supposed to look after the threshing floor. My sister began coming to my master's house as well. She had to clean the mud floor of the house and huge threshing floor of the house every day, and swab or sprinkle it with cow-dung" (6).

The story lays bare the hypocrisy of the upper classes, Thangatchi becomes pregnant while working at the master's house. No matter what the circumstances are a woman is always seen as an object of desire, a thing to win over. This heinous aspect of patriarchal oppression crushes the innocents and denies them the very right to live. Pavunamma (Thangatchi) is so innocent that she knows nothing about what is happening to her. When she becomes pregnant, her father moans and laments as if he is on fire. He asks,

"Pavunamma (Thangatchi), my child... What is ailing you, Kannu?"

Thangatchi only stared at him, blinking in confusion" (7).

Thangatchi's confusion is indicative of her innocence. She is made to pay heavily for what she even does not know. Thangatchi's pregnancy comes as a shock to her father who has borne all manner of humiliations including the sexual exploitation of his wife by the upper caste man. He seeks to 'assert' himself, for once, by insisting forcible abortion of his daughter. This highlights the brutal aspect of a Patriarchal society where an unmarried woman's getting pregnant and giving birth to a child is considered a disgrace to her family as

well as for society. Vannathi (midwife) forces her to abort the child brutally and unhygienically:

"The Vannathi tied a thin cotton cloth around a coconut reed, and dip it in the poisonous milk of the yerrakam plant kept in a coconut shell.... I was asked to hold her legs apart.... The Vannathi lifted her skirt.... The Vannathi pushed the wetted stick in deep enough to touch the wall of her uterus. Thangatchi shuddered" (8).

The unhygienic treatment leaves her bruised and convulsed, in the grip of fits and hallucinations. She screams, "leave me alone, Ayyah.... I'm scared, Ayyah" (8), only words Thangatchi utters in the narrative. The narrative reveals that the women of the family do not speak at all. Instead, they are spoken about. Perpetuate patriarchal norms have turned them into a meek, submissive and docile creature. Thangatchi is exploited sexually and patriarchal oppression leads to her death. She dies a tortured death. She is crushed under the double burden of patriarchy which is clear in her relationship with Ayyah (Master) who fathers her unborn child and at the same time her relation to Ayyah (father) or the man of her own family whose decision denies her the very right to live. Thangatchi holds no control over the course of her life. With the passage of time her screams echo in the streets of the village and she meets her untimely and tragic end.

Another story "Bayen" by Mahasweta Devi interprets the immediacy and horror of the plight of subaltern women. The story attempts to focus on the superstitious beliefs that rural people have and how it has affected the lives of many individuals in a severe manner. The story establishes many aspects of gendered subalternity as a socio-cultural construct .

In the story, Chandidasi Gangadasi, the protagonist of the story, is separated from her husband and son when she is accused of being a 'bayen'. The narrative demonstrates the transformation of a working-class woman into a public scapegoat, and ultimately, a subaltern woman with no agency.

Chandidasi Gangadasi belongs to the family of the ancient Kalu Dom, that had inherited "all the burning ghats of the world"(33) for their own from the ancient King Harishchandra. After the death of her father she adopted the profession of grave-digger in the absence of a male inheritor of her family:

"I'm Chandidasi Gangadasi. My father, the late Patitpaban Gangadhar. I bury dead children and guard the graves... Kalu Dome's my forefather" (33).

Chandidasi is fated to marry Malindar who is an employee in the mortuary. He is an insensitive man. After being a mother, Chandidasi suddenly feels that she just does not have the heart to execute the work of a grave digger anymore:

“This was a weakness that she had developed of late. Because of her own child, she felt a deep pain for every dead child. Her breasts ached with milk if she stayed too long in the graveyard” (34).

People of convention-ridden society consider the job of a grave-digger as horrific, somewhat mysterious beyond their understanding. Hence, the community of doms begins to become suspicious of her being a bayen, a witch. They consider the job of grave digger, an evil, so keep Chandidasi at an arm’s length. She is repeatedly reminded not set her eyes upon anyone in the village, as she supposedly has the “evil eyes.” Later when epidemic results in the death of many children including Chandi’s niece in the village, everyone blames Chandi for the death of the little girl especially because of the milk that spills out of her breast as she buries the little child. One night when Chandi is out in the graveyard warding off the jackals and covering the holes with a sickle in her hand, the villagers begin to accuse her of digging the grave of the child in order to breastfeed the dead child. She is branded as “Bayen”; excommunicated from the village; condemned to live in isolation; her survival needs reduced to meagre; denied the very status of being a human:

“You’re a Bayen! The villagers raised their chant in awe... Once a bayen, she’s no longer human... Every Saturday, a man... went to the tree with a weeks’ provision – half a kilo gram rice, a handful of pulses, oil, salt, and other food for the bayen” (37).

Since the villagers cannot kill a bayen, “because to kill a bayen means “death for your children”; so they banished Chandi “from the human world to the condemned world of the supernatural.” Malinder her own husband turns cold eyes towards Chandi. He is the representative of the typical modern men who is ready to abide by the male-defined social culture. When Chandi approaches him for food he chases away her:

“He picked up a handful of mud and stones...With an ugly oath Malinder threw the mud and stones at her... He shouted... beat the drum... declare that my wife is a bayen, a bayen!”(27)

The very brand of ‘Bayen’ makes her helpless to fulfill the role of a mother. She fears that “who had prayed for every child’s life, could actually spell disaster for her own son.” Her sense of internalized fear prevents her to talk with her son. She says, “Don’t talk to me. I am

a bayen. Even my shadow is evil." (39) Thus, the story demonstrates the subalterns' incapacity to resist and their convergent failure. In the end, Chandidasi dies in an attempt to save the lives of many people on the railway tracks by averting an enormous train disaster. The railway department announces a medal for her to be awarded posthumously to her closest survivors. It is this stray act that finally restores humanity to her, and it is her son's rejection of the bayen's stigma and the recuperation of motherhood that makes this possible. But of course, this situation comes too late to have any significance.

"But in death-and a heroic death-she exposes not just the selfish nature of the community at large, but leaves them with the option of having to pay for an additional sin, that of having persecuted her in life. Ironically the "witch" who had no intention of haunting them in life was now to return to haunt them in death"(Bose,138).

Conclusion

The interpretation of these stories demonstrates that subalternity is strictly a construct of society. Thangtachi and Chandidasi's life portrays the severe oppressive forces of patriarchal society. The following lines of the poem "Slave" by Hira Bansode, aptly state the 'subordinate' status of a woman in the patriarchal society:

“Where a woman's identity fades like nature's Blossoms
Where delicate jewels of emotion are trampled under a heel...
Where a woman in Her youth is dried up by tradition
She is confined all her life a stunted tree
She remains in the shadow of someone else's light
In that country, a woman is still a Slave”(Raj & Eleanor, 30-31).

These stories deal with women's subaltern entities and focus as on the way the protagonists are made to pay a heavy price for being a woman. Beauvoir aptly says that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” The narratives concentrate on the role of gender which is at the heart of all discrimination. Women protagonists are put to severe sufferings, negated as secondary, meek and inferior to men in a patriarchal system. Yet despite their sufferings, the protagonists of these stories do not accept their conditions docilely, but they passionately decry their oppressors. Thangtachi's resistance to abortion and Chandidasi's plea for mercy as she fervently denies that she is a bayen indicates the positive change which is imminent. Although subalternity may be inescapable in the present scenario but can certainly be resisted to lead to positive change. The struggle for self - assertion by the protagonists of these stories signal the freedom of women from the shackles of patriarchal ideology. To make

this dream true, a woman, as Beauvoir States, should work herself for her liberation and it is the "high time" that a woman "be left to take her own chances." It is rightly observed that "History is His history, to get a complete picture of the world, we also need Her story"(Bhasin,24). Let us not clip the wings and tie the feet of the gendered subaltern but recognize' the other', the subaltern and above all a woman as a free bird and human being first.

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