

A Transnational Postcolonial Study of Subalterns: Natives of Canada and Dalits of India

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Abstract: *Postcolonial studies have given utmost importance to the concept of “subaltern”. Autobiography is one such tool which “[...] seeks to establish a secure homeground where the subject may reside without fear of displacement and humiliation” (Verna Heikkila). For the transnational study of subalterns of India and Canada, I have chosen the two autobiographies- Karukku and Halfbreed. The paper does a comparative study of the Natives of Canada and Dalits of India in the context of the term subaltern as defined by Gayatri Spivak in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” The paper begins with establishing the similarity between caste and race on the basis that in both race and caste, superiority of higher groups is inter generationally transmitted. It also explores the reason behind the origin of casteism in India and racism in Canada and finds economic interest as the common cause in both the cases because of which subalterns are never allowed to speak. Exploitation of subalterns in the name of God by the people of church is another issue dealt in detail within the paper. Towards the end, the paper shows that the two protagonists, Bama and Maria have effectively challenged the viewpoint that “Subaltern is a silent position”.*

Keywords: *Silent, Casteism, Racism, Subaltern.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial studies have given critical theory a new dimension, challenging its principles and its applicability outside the west. No critic better demonstrates this than Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak. According to Spivak, essentialism is the basis for exclusion and exploitation. This led her to introduce the concept of strategic essentialism which she has employed in describing the concept of subaltern in her most influential essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In this essay her main argument is that subalterns can never be heard unless they move into the dominant discourse, which is possible only when the subaltern renounces his own position and moves towards higher position in the society. According to Spivak, this shift is nearly impossible, hence the subaltern is a silent position. To prove her point she has given an example of the suicide of a young Bengali woman who failed to represent herself in a society dominated by patriarchal norms (Spivak 120-130).

1.1. Parallelism between Caste and Race

For Spivak, Subaltern is not “just a classy word for oppressed, for other, for somebody who’s not getting a piece of pie.” She points that in Gramsci’s original covert usage, it signified “proletarian”, whose voice could not be heard, being structurally written out of the capitalist bourgeois narrative. In postcolonial terms, “everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern- a space of difference. Now who would say that’s just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It’s not subaltern” (de Kock interview). Dalits of India and Natives of

Canada both fall within this category though both are prey to two different phenomena, that is, casteism and racism. However, covertly there is a similarity between the two in that inequality is “intergenerationally” transmitted in both.

Dr Ambrose Pinto said, “Prejudice and discrimination are both a part of caste and race. And what is worse is that such prejudice and discrimination are not merely personal but institutional, a part of the structure and process of the whole society. In both caste and race theories, the so-called higher or superior groups take the attitude that their culture is superior to all other cultures and that all the other groups should be judged according to their culture. What is the difference between the claims made by the White race in Europe and the upper castes in India?” (Kaur Naunidhi). On March 24, the House of Lords passed a law which empowers the British government to include “caste” within the definition of “race” (Mitta Manoj).

Thus, in much of South Asia and India in particular, caste has become coterminous with race in the definition and exclusion of distinct population groups because of their descent. Despite formal protection in law, discriminatory treatments remain endemic and discriminatory societal norms continue to be reinforced by government and private structures often through violent means (Narula Smita). According to Berreman, caste system, regardless of its characteristics in a particular society is based upon three primary dimensions: class, status and power which are expressed relatively as wealth, prestige and the ability to control the lives of people. It is currently no different than religion, gender, ethnic or race based discrimination and social stratification systems anywhere else in the world.

1.2. Difference between Caste and Race

As far as dalits are concerned casteism is both a religious phenomenon as well as a form of economic exploitation while in Canada ethnic discrimination is rooted more in economic exploitation. Traditionally, the caste system of stratification in India was legitimized through classical Hindu religious texts, especially as interpreted by Brahmans (Sekhon). The caste system was rationalized in ancient India on various grounds. One of them was the justification given by the Vedas. The Purushasukta hymn of Rigveda describes that castes came into existence from different parts of the Purusha, the cosmic soul- the Brahmins came out of his mouth, the Kshatriyas from his arms, the Vaishyas from his thighs, and the sudras from his feet. Another justification derives from the theory of Karma which says that caste is based on birth. It supports the argument that people of the lower castes have to blame themselves for their troubles and low status because of their bad karma in their past life. Since one of the main beliefs in Hinduism is that the consequences of your past actions determine your present state, reincarnation plays a huge role in the prevention of people revolting against the caste system. Reincarnation bolsters caste oppression in two ways. It justifies injustice and discourages hope for progress from this life to the next life. Reincarnation justifies high class birth of the Brahmans on the basis of the virtuous deeds done by them in their past lives while the Sudras and untouchables have earned their sufferings through sinful acts in their past lives. In order to avoid a low caste birth in their next life, Hindus who are born as Sudras or untouchables learned to support rather than oppose their own oppression (Deshpande S. Manali). However in Canada, discrimination against Halfbreeds is the result of history which includes the processes of conquest, colonialism, state building, migration and economic development, and the institutional racism which accompanied them. Noel Elizabeth Currie asserts, “Europeans constructed different ‘races’ they encountered in their colonialist and imperialist ventures as ‘inferior’ and ‘savage’ in order to exploit them economically; racism provided a justification, after the fact, for that exploitation” (Lundgren).

2. CONTENT

For the transnational postcolonial study of subalterns, I have taken two autobiographies-*Karukku* by Bama and *Half-breed* by Maria Campbell. The former is a dalit writer while the latter is a Metis author. Both Dalits of India and Metis or Half-breeds of Canada are underprivileged people. Bama and Maria have taken the help of autobiography to “mediate messages and experiences across cultural boundaries.” Both *Karukku* and *Half-breed* can be considered as classics of subaltern writing. They revolve around the main theme of oppression of subalterns within the Catholic Church as well as in the community and “subsequent recovery from a sense of shame due to social and institutional ostracization.” (Verna Heikkila)

2.1. Dalits: The Untouchables

Bama is a Tamil dalit woman from a Roman Catholic family whose autobiography “Karukku” manifests a paradigm shift from the notion of eternal truth that dalits are untouchable. The name Karukku chosen by Bama itself has a symbolic significance. It has two meanings- first; palmyra leaf, that, has serrated edges on both sides, and second; a felicitous pun which means embryo and seed, indicating freshness, newness (Bama xv). In the preface to the first edition, the author herself draws parallelism between the saw-edged palmyra karukku and her own life: “Not only did I pick up the scattered palmyra karukku in the days when I was sent out to gather fire-wood, scratching and tearing my skin as I played with them, but later they also became the embryo and symbol that grew into this book” (Bama xxii). Besides imparting the subjective meaning to the term “karukku”, the author has also tried to universalize the term by calling the “oppressed” as “double-edged” karukku, thus challenging their oppressor (Bama xxiii), and implicitly conveying the meaning that dalits are no longer silent. She has also described God as a two- edged sword, but he is the God of the rich because “it no longer stirs the hardened hearts of the many who have sought their happiness by enslaving and disempowering others (Bama xxii).

The word ‘Dalit’ itself suggests that they are considered inferior to the extent of untouchability. As Mini Krishnan pointed out in the editor’s note to the first edition that ‘Dalit’ is a Marathi word derived from Sanskrit ‘Dala’ which has several connotations- ‘ of the soil or the earth’ or ‘that which is rooted in the soil’ or that which has been ground down. In Bama’s village, the upper caste communities and the lower caste communities reside in different parts of the village. To the left of the stream live the Nadars who are toddy tappers and shopkeepers, while to the right, one after the other, live the Koravar who sweep streets, the leather working chakkiliyar, the Kusavar who make earthenware pots, the Palla settlement and the paraya settlement to which the author belongs. There were separate streets for the Naickers, the landowning caste. The upper caste people never went to their side or otherwise they would be polluted. The description of an elderly man holding the packet by its string without touching it and extending the packet to the Naicker, bowing low and cupping the hand that held the string with his other hand is one such example of untouchability. The incidence of bus is another instance. On being answered by Bama to a Naicker woman that she is from Cheri caste, the latter at once get up and move off to another seat. In such situations they would always prefer to stand up all the way rather than sit next to a low caste person. Bonded labour is another menace that Bama has highlighted in her work. Through it powerful groups tried to control the lives of less powerful groups by making them economically dependent. People of Paraya community worked for Naickers as bonded labourers. Bama’s patti worked as a servant with one such family. From there she brings home food to eat. She placed her vessel by the side of the drain. The Naicker woman leaned out from some distance and pour the leftovers. The water was poured out from a height of four feet. On being asked by Bama that she should not support such behavior, patti replied: These people are the maharaja’s who feed us our rice. Without them how will we survive? Haven’t they been upper caste from generation to generation and haven’t we been lower caste? Can we change this?”. This statement of patti shows that dalits themselves have accepted their ‘Other’ status as eternal truth which cannot be renounced.

2.2. Half-breeds: The Disenfranchised People

Unlike Dalits, in Half-breed, it is shown that aboriginals, who had lived there for years much before the White settlers immigrated, were not considered as the citizens of the country even by the government. Initially the Halfbreeds were living in Ontario and Manitoba from where they had to escape to areas south of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan and established settlements of Batoche, Duck Lake etc. because they did not want to become the victims of the prejudices of the White Protestant settlers and also due to their apprehension that their rights would not be respected by the Canadian government. Maria Campbell was born in 1946 at Saskatchewan. In 1860s, Saskatchewan was part of the Northwest Territories and a land free of towns, barbed wires and fences. However, after their defeat at Batoche in 1884, the Halfbreeds fled to Spring River, and settled there earning their livelihood from trapping and hunting. In 1920’s, again came the threat of immigrants when the government threw this land open for habitation and made an agreement that if the aboriginals were able to break ten acres of land in three years they would be granted ownership rights otherwise the land would be confiscated by land improvement

authorities and distributed amongst the immigrants. Due to depression and shortage of fur they did not have the money to buy implements and also the land was so much covered with rocks and muskeg that they felt impossible to do it and gave up the task. As a result the homesteads were reclaimed by the authorities rendering the forefathers of Maria Campbell homeless. Gradually the Halfbreeds built their cabins along the roads and came to be known as "Road Allowance people" (Campbell 13). This made them subject to poverty, drinking, gambling, drug addiction, prostitution, theft etc. with no hope for future.

However, it is noticed that discrimination to the extent of untouchability and bonded labour that prevail among the dalits of India is not found among the natives of Canada. A 'mixed school' for both Whites and Half-breeds was established in Maria's locality. Not only the kids quarreled but also played rugby with each other inspite of the fact that they stayed in two separate groups in the same class. Maria's marriage to a White man in a public ceremony and its acceptance by both the communities although reluctantly further proves that the system is not as rigid as in the case of dalits depicted in Bama's Karukku.

2.3. Church: A Symbol of Discrimination

In both the novels, church is shown as another entity which professes discrimination against the subalterns. The people of church have tried to create a terrible picture of Jesus/God in the minds of the innocent children. They scared them by telling the stories of "Devil wandering about with a pair of balances, with the sins we had committed in one pan weighed against the merit we had earned in the other (Bama 83). The very thought of devil shivered the children and they could never thought of disobeying their elders or doing something wrong. For example, in one of the confessions Bama says:

I praise the lord omnipotent. Bless me Saami, for I have sinned. It is a week since I made my last confession. I lied four times; I stole five times; I have not obeyed my elders; I was daydreaming in church. I repent these and those sins that I have forgotten, Saami. (Bama 84)

Similarly, in Half-breed churchmen are shown to exploit the natives in the name of God. The Father never allowed the children to take strawberries growing in the churchyard but he himself was seen many times stealing things from the "Indians Sundance Pole". Can God excuse the priest for stealing if not the native? Like dalits, the natives were also shown fearful of committing anything wrong. Maria's mother prayed for a week as a penance for laughing a lot on Father when children told the whole story about Father stealing things from the Sundance pole. The natives were also taught about making confessions so that in any case they should not raise their head. All these were tactics employed by the church to keep the natives suppressed.

2.4. Are Subalterns Uncivilized?

Both dalits and natives are called as uncivilized by the higher groups. But infact, it is the 'Other' status of subalterns that make them behave in the manner not permitted by society. Maria says that "The law will do many things to see that justice is done. Your poverty, your family, the circumstances, none of it matters. The important thing is that a man broke a law." (Campbell 55). Maria turned into an alcoholic, a prostitute and later a drug addict. She also attempted suicide. This was because with a newly born female child she was left alone to face the realities of the world and her struggle for existence was further weakened by the racist approach of the Whites towards her. Maria married Darrel, a white man in order to save her siblings from being taken away by relief men. Even after being badly beaten by Darrel, she returned home after giving birth to a baby because she feared that kids would be taken away by relief men if she tried to raise them herself. Her fear turned to reality when one day the welfare people took the kids away. The parents weren't even allowed to know where they were. The description of this whole episode given by Maria Campbell raises the question - Are natives of Canada immoral and mentally weak by birth or the circumstances have made them so? The name "relief man" itself is ironical. Do they provide relief to the natives by taking away their children to unknown foster homes? Later, Darrel told Maria that it was he who informed the welfare about the kids. But inspite of that Maria continued to live with Darrel till the time when Darrel himself had left her in the slums, penniless. Similarly, in Karukku, Dalits are considered by upper castes to have no moral discipline, no cleanliness and no culture. Infact all these factors are again the result of the circumstances in which Dalits are placed. As Bama says: "How did the upper castes become so elevated? How is it

that we have been denigrated? They possess money; we do not. If we were wealthy too, wouldn't we learn more, and make more progress than they do? [...] (Bama 27).

3. CONCLUSION

According to Spivak, "Subaltern is a silent position". Upward class mobility is harder for these people because of long standing patterns of prejudice. This viewpoint is quite evident in both the novels but at the same time it seems to me that this viewpoint has been effectively challenged by both Bama and Maria Campbell. Bama suffered throughout her life. She portrays the oppression she faced as a student and as teacher. Her life took a big turn, when at the age of 26, she took the vows to become a nun. But in the seminary and later in the convent, Bama realized the bitter truth that the condition of dalits will always be same. Thus, seven years later, in 1992, Bama walked out of the convent without any regret that she left all comforts and convenience, rather she was happy because for her that was a counterfeit existence. In 1995 she lost her younger sister and then one year later both her parents died. Despite difficulties, which beset a dalit woman living on her own Bama was quite satisfied because she says, "there are many opportunities for me to spend my life usefully, and especially, to work for the liberation of dalits"(Author's Afterword to the first edition). "The fact is both a consolation and an encouragement to me. It is for this reason that the urge grows greater day by day that I should carry quietly in my heart all the sorrows that followed one upon the other and to live a life that has meaning and dedication". Bama came across several people who helped her to identify her strengths, and made her put them to use for the liberation of dalits. She was also tried to be crushed by repressive measures directed towards dalits but her conviction stands firm that is ready to trample everything that hinders the creation of an egalitarian society.

Similarly, after prolonged suffering Maria also developed a sense of empowerment. She was inspired by her great-grandmother Cheechum who never accepted defeat at Batoche. She says, "Because they killed Riel they think they have killed us too, but some day, my girl, it will be different". She tells Maria that "our people never wanted to fight because that was not our way. We never wanted anything except to be left alone to live as we pleased". This account by Cheechum led Maria to direct her feelings of anger, shame, and frustration into her work as cultural and political activist (Verna Heikkila). Thus *Halfbreed* which "establishes Metis history as the contested ground of subjectivity derives from its reconstitution of that history a synecdochic conception of the self. *Halfbreed* thus culminates in an expansive vision of solidarity which in many ways recapitulates the political struggles of Riel". According to the synecdochic model of selfhood, the individual is a part of the unfolding narrative of people, and can thus be understood only in relation to the whole; where narration of personal history is more nearly marked by the individual's sense of himself in relation to collective social units and groupings one might speak of a synecdochic sense of self" (Spear K, Wayne).

Maria gave voice to the Metis perspective and made a dent into the blanket which they have been using for generations to cover their shame of being Metis. For the postcolonial autobiography, Browdy de Hernandez points out - "[...] autobiography is not just an exercise in recapturing the past, but a future oriented project that seeks to establish a secure homeground where the subject may reside without fear of displacement and humiliation." (Verna Heikkila) Through her autobiography, Campbell transforms the feelings of shame and humiliation from collectively debilitating and destructive feelings into sources of power and faith in the possibility and necessity of change. As the stories continue both Maria and Bama develop a growing sense of empowerment as they take the task to themselves to define Metisness and Dalitness as legitimate identity categories within the context of multiculturalism. The shame and anger resulting from the degrading, traumatic experiences are at the end not portrayed as debilitating feelings. Instead they are revealed as transformative forces that, when managed through the act of autobiographical storytelling, accommodate a desire to fight back, resulting in both individual and collective survival and the possibility of political change (Verna Heikkila).

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