

Sea of Poppies : Caste Dynamics

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The voice of subalterns, their struggle and sacrifices which we unnoticed in the annals of the history began to get a prominent voice in the fictions of Amitav Ghosh in a different way. Through his writings he provided subalterns centre stage by making them as the pivotal character of his fiction so that they can raise voice against the oppressive forces of their society. This paper is to analyze cast dynamics in his novel *Sea of Poppies*. In this novel he has attempted to provide voice to those untouchables/subalterns/lower class people hoping to elevate their status by portraying the untouchables' terrible struggle to survive in this world with dignity.

I refuse to be a loser. By the same token, I hate to be a victim...More importantly; I wanted to say that the weak and losers can write their history, too. That the strong can write history is sheer fallacy. They can write it in an official manner, but at the textual level, it is the victims who write their history. This is prejudice to the victim and its right to write its own history. (Darwish, 18-19)

Abdul-Fattah Jabr cites a statement by Darwish in *Innovation in Palestinian Literature*, where he refuses the western perspective that only the strong nations can write their history and preserve their cultures and traditions.

Darwish's voice is, consequently, heard locally and globally to prove to everyone that the subalterns can understand their situation and are able to speak for themselves and define

themselves whatever the social or economic rank they belong to.

This statement seems to contradict with the views of Spivak who declares:

The subaltern cannot speak' and clarifies the state of the women especially in India and illuminates 'the subaltern has not right to talk. (1988, 104)

But the hegemony of the imperial powers of the world was severely challenged, and successfully too. The postcolonial revisiting and revision of history started since the time when the colonized subject, silenced and marginalized, started asserting his own identity instead of one that was purely constructed by his colonial masters, during the process of decolonization or at the end of the socio-political decolonization when, intellectually, their nation was still in the clutches of the intellectual and cultural hegemony of their erstwhile rulers. The postcolonial writers of fiction wove their narratives intricately, patterned with the themes that appealed to or were infused into them. Their work took roots in the land that had been liberated recently from the pernicious foreign control. They reacted against exploitation of the powerless- theirs and, in general, anybody's. Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* is a narrative woven with the warp of individual stories and woof of general history. Great historical events are shown being shaped by individual agents, and vice-versa.

Amitav Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* draws the position of untouchables in Indian society. Kalua,

one of the leading protagonists of the novel is the victim of the society. He being of the untouchable caste is not permitted the same privileges as those of higher castes. But the life story of Kalua carves his rout from subjugation to liberation.

Caste discrimination is a blot in Indian society which is responsible to produce subalterns. Nicholas Drinks in his introduction to Colonialism a culture remarks,

... Culture in India seems to have principally defined by caste. Caste has always been seen as central in Indian history and as one of the major reasons why India has no history, no sense of history. Caste defines the core of Indian tradition, and caste is today – as it was throughout the colonial era- the major threat to Indian modernity. (8)

The caste system was a brutal oppressive mechanism that branded an unfortunate section of the society as untouchables and thrust them to the periphery of India, not only for its religious and economical hierarchy but also for its cruelty to suppress the subalterns as well as the lower caste people in both ancient and modern Indian society. At the very beginning, the concept of untouchability began with the religion of Hinduism and later it has spread into the root of the Hindu societies in India. Most of the times, the upper class people, who are known as Brahmins, use the religion to defend a strongly defined hierarchical structure to dominate the economically lower class people. The hierarchical structure introduces caste system which has been determined by one's profession inherited by birth. The concept of untouchability is implemented mainly on the lower caste as well as lower class people. They are the prime sufferers. As they do not have the economic

and political power to fight back the upper class people's domination, they accept subjugation. They do not have the voice to speak out the condition and portray themselves before the world. They are named subalterns. The notion subaltern covers not only the untouchables but also all the poor, unprivileged and marginalized groups of people. These subalterns have very few opportunities to alter their fate because the society, which is controlled by the elite class, closes the options like education, awareness and equal rights to elevate their position. Literature always sketches the vulnerability and struggle of subjugated human beings. Like literatures from different locations of the world, Indian English writers have marked those issues with special attention in their works.

Among the Indian English writers, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan played a crucial role to bring India's controversial inner issues in front of the world in the first half of the twentieth century. Those issues can be considered local issues of the Indian sub-continent but those have a universal appeal. We also observe that the other Indian writers from the present time have continued the trend of representing the struggle of the subalterns at various phases of life. Among those writers of the present time, Adigga, Amitav Ghosh, Vikas Swaroop and Rohinton Mistry are remarkable writers for their creative and in-depth perspectives. For several millennia caste constituted the core of social life in India. It dictated the occupations and the social interaction of a person. As Kamala Visweswaran in *Un/common Cultures: Racism and the Rearticulation of Cultural Difference* remarks:

In India castes are not merely non-social but anti-social. The Hindus will not allow the Untouchables to take water from a well. The Hindus will not allow Untouchables entry in schools. The Hindus will not allow the Untouchables to travel in buses. The Hindus will not allow the Untouchables to travel in the same railway compartment. The Hindus will not allow Untouchables to wear clean clothes. The Hindus will not allow Untouchables to wear jewellery. The Hindus will not allow Untouchables to put tiles on their houses. The Hindus will not tolerate Untouchables to own land. The Hindus will not allow Untouchables to keep cattle. The Hindus will not allow an Untouchable to sit when a Hindu is standing. (Quoted, 158)

Similarly, Johnson and Karlberg opine Caste is 'a system of stratification in which the status of the individual is determined by his birth and ritual purity' (3). Within the Indian caste system, 'both power and authority were traditionally determined by the position of one's caste within the caste hierarchy' (6). The high caste always has the privilege over the low caste.

The record of the afflictions and humiliations to which Kalua is subjected speaks of the pathos of an untouchable's existence in pre-independent India. Kalua the ox-cart driver was of the leather-worker caste and so was considered an untouchable. Hukam Singh as a high-caste Rajput believed that the very sight of a person of low-caste would augur bad tidings. "Climbing on to the back of the cart, the former sepoy sat facing to the rear with his bundle balanced on his lap, to prevent its coming into direct contact with any of the driver's belongings" (4).

They travelled conversing amicably but were careful not to exchange glances. The wretched living conditions of the out-caste and the sub human treatment they were subjected to be truthfully portrayed through the life of Kalua. The untouchables were not allowed to have their dwelling in the precincts of the village. Kalua lived in the chamar- basti a group of huts inhabited only by the chamars. It was a social taboo for the high-caste people to enter the hamlet occupied by these out-castes. His dwelling place had no door and it looked more like a cattle-pen than a hut. The door way was so dark and low that Kalua had to stoop low to make his way out. As if to confirm that he lived in a cattle-pen the two oxen that pulled his cart also lived with him in the hut. Disgraceful behavior by a caste Hindu meant degradation to the position of an outcaste.

Kalua's life and his social status remind the life of Bhakha an untouchable, a latrine cleaner in Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable*. It is obvious that the portrayal of the character of Bakha is a unique creation in the realm of Indian English literature. Although a lot of characters like Kalua and Bhakha are available in reality, they are rarely depicted literature. Anand brings Bakha or a subaltern to the lime light. He gives Bakha a voice. He shows the reader how Bakha, an eighteen year old strong man, faces obstacles while he goes out from the sequestered slum (village) in which he lives to the city. The unkind and humiliating attitude of Brahmins, priest of the temple and all other upper class people torments his innocent mind. Although the story is about one journey, psychic violence in Bakha is shown intensively. The psychological torment and the physical disgrace to which Bakha is subjected to Baha are portrayed in realistic

manner. The evidence of realism can be identified from the reaction of E. M. Forster:

The sweeper is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound for ever, born into a state from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolations of his - religion (Anand, vi).

The analysis of the character of Bakha shows that the life of a lower caste Hindu is more painful than the life of a slave. What Forster argues is true in a sense because a slave is always bound to his/her master. S/he can earn his/her freedom by satisfying the master. But there is no escape from the curse of untouchability for the lower caste Hindus. The cause is that the whole Hindu society internalizes the ideology of untouchability in society's grand narrative and gives it a view of institutionalized concept. The untouchability cages the lower caste Hindus with iron chains from where it is very difficult to come out.

The binary opposition of High caste/ Low caste is presented in the relationship between land-owning families (representing the high caste) and Kalua (representing the low caste). High caste people are the landowners and the people doing leather works belong to the Chamar caste.

Kalua is a man of unusual height and powerful build. As a child, Kalua had a craving for the meat and his family satisfied this by "feeding him carrion; being leathersmiths, it was their trade to collect the remains of dead cows and oxen—it was on the meat of these salvaged carcasses that Kalua's gigantic frame was said to have been nourished". (54)

Though gigantic in structure, he has been the holder of a weak-mind. His mind has been such that he has not been able to absorb everything readily. He has been the possessor of slow processing mind and has been so "simple and trusting, so that even small children were able to take advantages of him" (54).

Even his brothers duped him of all property left by their parents. As he grows up, three "young scions", thakur-sahibs, belonging to the landowning families hires Kalua after knowing about Kalua's "physical prowess". These three thakur-sahib's have been addicted to gambling and wrestling is their favorite pastime. Thus Kalua starts wrestling with whoever these thakurs wanted in order to get ox-cart as a reward from them. The fights of Kalua earned Thakurs a great profit and they give him the ox-cart that they promised. But after getting the oxcart, "Kalua showed no further inclination to fight" (54).

When the Thakurs arrange the fight with the fighters of His Highness, the Maharaja of Benares, Kalua shows reluctance. The Thakurs threatens to confiscate his cart and oxen and hence he is forced to fight with "the champions of his [Maharaja's] court" (55). The fight results in Kalua's defeat. Stories and rumors about the reasons of Kalua's defeat start emerging. People start discussing that the Thakurs would have decided that "it would be excellent sport to couple Kalua with a woman. They had invited some friends and taken bets: could a woman be found who would bed this giant of a man, this two-legged beast?" (55). The Thakurs hire a baiji, Hirabai, to find a match. After watching Kalua she remarks, "This animal should be mated with a horse, not a woman..." (55). These words shake Kalua and are

the reason of his defeat. The Thakurs humiliate and torture him after his defeat. They take Kalua to a field in order to harass him. Kalua begs for forgiveness: "Mai-bap, hamke maf karelu...forgive me, master" (56) but it falls on their deaf ears. The powerful and merciless Thakurs kick and curse him:

... You lost on purpose, didn't you, dogla bastard? ... Do you know how much it cost us...? ... Now let's see you do what Hirabai said.... (56)

They try to mate Kalua with the horse. A horrifying and humiliating scene in the following way:

By pulling on his halter, the men forced Kalua to his feet and pushed him stumbling towards the mare's swishing tail. One of them stuck his whip into the fold of Kalua's cotton langot and whisked it off with a flick of his wrist. Then, while one of them held the horse steady, the others whipped Kalua's naked back until his goin was pressed hard against the animal's rear. Kalua uttered a cry that was almost indistinguishable in tone from the whinnying of the horse. This amused the landlords: ... See, the b'henchod even sounds like a horse... ... Tatva daba de... wrings his balls.... (57)

Thus the Thakurs exercise their power. Weber asserts that power is

The chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action. (qtd. in Rossides, 186)

Caste system results in power which is discriminating, full of violence and inequality. This whole incident leaves Kalua shaken. The caste of binarism was creating hell in that prevailing society. In pre independent India people of India were divided into caste and hierarchies, and it was

almost impossible for them to come out of those social evils and was forced to live the miserable life and become the subaltern in the society. Further in the novel Kalua have shown the rebellious approach and leave behind his identity in terms of caste, religion etc. and adopt a new identity of the oppressed – a new community takes birth. In this context of binaries Saumini writes:

Amitav Ghosh within the Text *Sea of Poppies* has been successful in exposing the crude reality of caste binarism existing within the social structure. The distinction of Ghosh's vision lies in investigating the full humanity of the dehumanized subalterns and he finally takes the ground to construct their identity that can enable them to make spaces in the main stream of caste based oppressive mechanism of social order. (110)

The character of Kalua, in the novel, is most apt in exposing subaltern reality in the name of a true victim of cultural construct of caste. In the very beginning of the novel, his position has been clearly highlighted. He was beaten dreadfully once again on the ship by the other Indians for getting married and spoiling a high caste woman. The torturous behavior of those of high caste person in Ghazipur is also an example. This also speaks for the unwritten stories of doubly subaltern people – people who were lower in rank within a colonized society. Kalua has been represented with all the muteness and traumatized identity that bears the twinges of casteism, often the predicament of a subaltern. But in the novel, Kalua after humiliation also becomes the representative of subaltern consciousness. Kalua protected Deeti from the pyre. He also protected Munia. Though being related to subaltern he used his power to fight

against the dominant group for helping others. With this the subaltern consciousness can be judged through the character of Kalua. Similarly like Bhakha the main protagonist of *Untouchable*, he like Kalua in *Sea of Poppies* has also fallen into the same vicious cycle of untouchability. But he wants to escape from this condition and unconsciously he is attracted to the English soldiers and their life style in the army barrack.

... Bakha was a child of modern India. The clear cut styles of European dress had impressed his naïve mind. (2)

Apparently he imitates the English because of the impression of feeling good but in his mind there is an intense desire to become superior so that he can turn into the dominator from the dominated. The mimicry of Bakha can be seen from two perspectives. One is from the larger point of view in which he stands between the British colonizer and the Indian colonized. The other angle is from within the Indians who view him as a creature between the upper class Hindus and the lower class Hindus (Muslims and Christians are also seen as the lower class in the eyes of the upper class Hindus). Here Bakha's desire to be an English man is going straight to the position and power of the English colonizers, who are superior, compared to the Hindu upper class people. This unconscious desire to elevate his position and power confront the two dominating forces.

Sea of Poppies not only elaborates the characters as subjugated or subaltern, but also reveals their revolutionary manners to change their subjugated life. Kalua's physical strength as revolutionary factor revolutionary attitude led him to make a life of his own, an independent life. When Kalua manage to save Deeti from funeral

pyre for sati they lost in the dark of night for new light of new day.

Kalua helps her board a ship that transports slaves from Mareech to Mauritius. Kalua begin a new life after they board the ship. Hiding his real identity, he changes his name. Kalua becomes Maddow Colver. Kaula, escape the clutches of so-called culture and tradition to create his own life.

Ghosh has drawn Kalua's Character with an eye of a researcher and presented the minute details with all his repressed desires and bondage to unreasonable tradition and as a victim of cultural constructs of caste. His character has been drawn by Ghosh with all the meekness, silence, helplessness that is often the predicament of a subaltern. Amitav Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* has been successful in exposing the crude reality of caste binarism existing within the social structure. The distinction of Ghosh's vision lies in investigating the full humanity of the dehumanized subalterns and he finally takes the ground to construct their identity that can enable them to make spaces in the main stream of caste and class based oppressive mechanism of social order.

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