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The Subaltern Speak

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ABSTRACT

Post colonial literature in India has close connection with subalternity and ecofeminist questions. Memory novels help us in revisiting the past which will yield positive results. Colonization has witnessed cultural transgression and this has ultimately brought about losses, culminating in the question of identity. Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai are Booker prize winning female fictionists who have tried to map the post coloniality that exists in our country. They track all traces of despair in the society and reach the conclusion that it is a big mistake to infer that the subaltern cannot speak.

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Introduction

“The God of Small Things” and “The Inheritance of Loss” are novels that have brought glory to Indian English fiction through international recognition and it is striking that the novels have been authored by female writers. The experiences are expressed with an honest female sensibility which scan incidents of subjugation to finally arrive at a voice for the unfortunate victim. The stories sit perfectly into the post colonial literary pattern, like a film lyric that is composed to suit the prescored music, though the stories hardly smack of artificiality. The Man Booker prize winning novels, “The God of Small Things” authored by Arundhati Roy and “The Inheritance of Loss” penned by Kiran Desai after her “Hullabaloo” have similarities galore than the obvious fact that these female fictionists got recognized in the budding stages of their burgeoning careers.

Theoretical framework

The novels which adhere to post colonial traits in a copy book manner can be analyzed only within the framework of post colonialism. Domination of this sort always has nature and women as their victims, and ecofeminist theory finds a meaningful space in such literary evaluation. The similarities range from the seemingly innocuous coincidence of both the novels pausing by pet animals, wild animals, blue bottles and giant squids as they progress steadily towards a climax where the eco structure is precariously on the verge of a precipice; to the concern of both the writers for specific historical material and cultural contexts. Mutt, the dog, is the lone solace for the Judge in “The Inheritance of Loss” who has suffered a canine existence in London and Khubchand is the seventeen year old mongrel for whom Estha (The God of Small Things) has devoted his entire attention during the prime years of his sojourn in Calcutta after being forcibly parted from his twin sister. He nurses Khubchand and starts his routine long walks after the death of the dog.

Roy and Desai seem to be locked in a close race as to who better arrests the attention of the discerning reader and goods

him to behold the variety the creator has dished out for him to relish. Houseflies to majestic elephants to breeding scorpions and frogs, the amazing menagerie could indeed make the novels zoological ones. Nature it seems has a lesson for the votaries of monoculturalism. Humans have unfortunately lost the grasp of his place in this natural harmony due to greed and exploitative urge and we wonder whether this is going to constitute the “other” sin that may leave him pathetically beyond redemption. But then the violation of mother earth has always remained the harshest selfish trait ever to be exhibited by the suicidal man for whom this delinquency might have got aggravated during the forgettable days of colonial humiliation.

While the eco fabric lies in shambles, we have both the authors spanning the history of three or more centuries of yore with special focus on cultural contexts. They aver that cultural differences can be understood in a civilized manner. This realization which should have been the corner stone of the greatest human inheritance got subverted and sabotaged by imperialistic idiocy that deprived the West and the rest of accumulated collective human wisdom with the banishment of certain knowledge sources as “other” and secondary. Postcoloniality is the condition that both the writers foreground and both the novels can be rightly called memory novels.

The losses the people of erstwhile colonies have suffered are innumerable and perhaps not retrievable and the humiliation that accompany forces them to suppress the tormenting past into their unconscious. Both Roy and Desai have created characters who suffer irredeemable losses and a close scrutiny brings to light the fact that they have lost even the purity of their mother tongue. They don’t have even a language of their own. The cultural transgression that has accompanied colonization has wilfully made us think that to speak in a desirable way is to speak against oneself. Both the authors make an attempt to evaluate the general attribute of subordination which has loss as an essential feature. The Judge in “The Inheritance of Loss” loses his wife and soul, Sai loses her parents, the cook loses his son, the lover is lost, the dog is gone and “The Inheritance of

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Loss” turns out to be a tale that deals with losses and the ensuing despair it has placed us in.

The God of Arundhathi Roy’s novel is described as the God of loss and the novel has its share of characters who suffer loss after loss in a pattern of intolerable monotony. The loss of innocence suffered by our foremost predecessor seems to get perpetuated right into this present day and whether any attempt can be made to stem the rot remains to be seen. Ammu loses her love, Velutha his life, Rahel and Estha their childhood and veliyappan his eye. Fr Mulligan loses his faith and there is not even a single character who does not suffer a loss of some kind or other. We have infact lost our cultural identity.

Deliberately remembering the past is the lone medicine for curing post colonial amnesia and Homi Bhabha announces that memory is a necessary and hazardous bridge between colonialism and the question of cultural identity.(Homi Baba 1994, p.63). Both the novels highlight the burden of colonial inheritance. Mahatma Gandhi had lamented the Indian” Moha” for the superficial glitter of the western world. He fought tooth and nail against cultural colonialism and in this context it is worth to remember that the resistance to colonialism began even before the end of colonialism. Resistance continues loud and clear with the kind of characters created by Roy, Desai and a host of other Indian writers. Arundhathi Roy and Kiran Desai have created these characters perhaps with the well thought out design to revisit the past that will provide a therapeutic value.

The “History house” in “The God of Small Things” and the relapses of the Judge in “The Inheritance of Loss” are the imperatives of the decolonizing process. It is a matter of extreme interest that whoever revisits his past in both the stories goes through severe trauma and hopefully stands a chance to get atleast partial relief. This indeed may open the floodgates of the past and the forced psychological reticence can get washed away. Estha who turns dumb is the representative of a whole lot who have been subjugated and who wish to remain oblivious of the torturous past. Nimi in “The Inheritance of Loss” suffers double marginalization on account of being a woman. There was a period when writers were revered as prophets. Here we have a pair of female fictionists who perhaps can don the label of physicians. The blocks that deter you from expressing the festering emotions are removed one after the other which will help the victim to atleast make a loud lamentation.

Both the novels abound in hybridity. It is the historical condition marked by the visible apparatus of freedom coexisting with persistence of unfreedom. (Memmi 1968, p.88). There is reciprocal antagonism and desire between the master (colonizer) and the slave (colonized). Valiyappan who is insulted and abused by Mammachi in “The God of Small Things” has a masochist frame of mind and he desires to get bashed by the mistress. The decolonization process shall become meaningful only if we start liberating our minds of the colonial burden. The servant (cook) in “The Inheritance of Loss” similarly shows slavish loyalty towards his master, the Judge who tries to ape the colonizer. The Judge himself is a victim of unjust treatment at the hands of the English in their country. Actually it was his inability to voice his emotions that forced him to take refuge in studies that placed him in the saddle of a Judge years later. Unless he disinherits the colonial attitude it won’t be possible for him to find a truthful tongue.

We have several characters in both the novels who are diehard Anglophiles. The Oxford educated Chacko leads the pack in Roy’s novel where any Tom, Dick and Harry can try their hand in teaching English. Lola, Noni, Jemubhai are some

of the many characters in “The Inheritance of Loss” who love England and English for all the wrong reasons. The unnecessary prestige associated with the “Queen’s tongue” needs to be shed and the language learnt for its linguistic features. Roy’s character comrade Pillai is a Marxist who gloats over his daughter’s ability to recite an English poem. There is further sarcasm on party politics and the derision has been construed by some as an attack on Marxist party politics in India. This perhaps underscores the inner contradictions post colonial literature inheres.

Colonization has been often compared to rape and we have in both the novels husbands who rape their wives. The judge after returning from England repeatedly rapes his wife and there is insinuation that rapists fear exposure of their sexual inadequacy. Pappachi abuses mammachi in “The God of Small Things” and she happens to be seventeen years younger to him. External immigrancy and internal immigrancy are discussed in detail in both the novels and Rahel learns that the white American is equally barbaric as the black non Americans elsewhere. The lessons her mother had learnt from the English man Mr. Holick had also been not different. The external immigrants have a raw deal abroad and the worst part is the sufferings of natives who are treated as foreigners in their own country. Indian Nepalis have rendered yeoman service towards the nation and still they have to run from pillar to post to announce that they are patriotic sons of India. Religious superiority is another sham belief that prompts to rate certain faith systems as primitive and secondary. This state of mind is cleverly dissected in both the novels. “The God of Small Things” and “The Inheritance of Loss” clearly exhibit most of the traits of post colonial literature in a copybook manner.

It was Gayathri Spivak who doubted as to whether the subaltern can speak. (Spivak, 1985). If Spivak’s conclusion was in the negative, we have characters in both the novels who speak with scorching heat and touch the consciousness of the marginalized. “The God of Small Things” is about Estha’s silence (A saga of lost dreams) as K V Surendran records and silence was a tranquiliser on his past. He when young, had the audacity to correct his tutor Miss Mitten for having mistaken Malayalam as Keralase. As a child he was abused in a cinema theatre and his childhood was full of torturous events. He led a dog life which might have prompted him to nurse the old mongrel, Khubchand in Calcutta. Rahel, though physically dissimilar was identical in all other aspects and she shared his pleasures and pains. Though she had been spared the ordeal of having to betray their beloved Velutha, she felt Estha’s agony within her. We live in a strange society which will instruct you as to whom, how and to what extend you should love. Ammu tried to voice against this injustice but failed miserably. She, a divorcee loved a paravan and her physical relationship with him served only to bring a torturous end for him. Velutha also dared the “monster” knowing fully well that death and disaster awaited him. What was left undone by Ammu and Velutha gets completed by Estha and Rahel. There are indications that they had incestuous relationship. The tyrannical rules are challenged and ethical considerations take a back seat. Here we have a truly diabolic approach posited by monoculturalism demolished. We listen to the subaltern voice and realize that they can speak tough. Spivak had raised the question as to whether the intellectual should abstain from representation.(Spivak,1988. P.285). Arundathi Roy narrates the story from the point of view of the twins so that this question can be safely negotiated. Where Ammu and Velutha failed the twins succeeded but

unfortunately had to sacrifice their souls in the process. Roy's slap has hopefully shaken us out of the colonial stupor.

Desai too does it by giving a tongue to the subaltern through the acid language of insurgency. The pathetic situation of having to live like slaves in one's own country will drive people to extremism. At Kalimpong GNLFF boys burnt everything, transforming the place to a ghost town. Biju's return and the loss of Mutt have been designed by the author with the intention of liberating colonized thoughts. The Judge got down on his knees and prayed to God that he would acknowledge her in public and never deny her again. Insurgency expresses the apprehension that globalization has failed to address the question of extremism adequately. The question of representation and representability shall become irrelevant when

the subjects themselves feel the urge to speak out loudly and clearly.

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