CHAPTER-V

THE WORLD OF SUBALTERN

“Our joy was great – until my daughter was born”

Margaret Wilson: “A Mother”, 1919: 229

The term ‘Subaltern’ is originally used for subordinates in military hierarchies. It was first used in a nonmilitary sense by Marxist Antonio Gramsci¹, and is, literally, referred to any person or group of inferior rank and station because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion.

The term ‘subaltern’ is oft quoted in post-colonial theory. However, the exact meaning of the term in current philosophical and critical usage is disputed. In a general sense it refers to marginalized groups and the lower classes – a person rendered without agency by his or her social status. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak uses it in a more specific sense. In an interview she argues that

'subaltern' is not just a classy word for oppressed, for others, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie... In post-colonial 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...Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated – against a minority on the university campus, they don't need the word 'Subaltern...' They should see what the mechanics of discrimination are. They are within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of the pie and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern (de Kock, Leon 45-46).
Gayatri Spivak suggests that the subaltern is denied access to both mimetic and political forms of representation. It may also be pointed that in several essays, Homi Bhabha, a key-thinker within post-colonial thought, emphasizes the importance of social power relations in his working definition of 'Subaltern' groups as

oppressed minority groups whose presence was crucial to the self-definition of the majority group: Subaltern social groups were also in a position to subvert the authority of those who had hegemonic power. (Bhabha 191-207)

Bonaventura de Sousa Santos (2002) has come up with the term 'Subaltern Cosmopolitanism' in his book *Towards a New Legal Common Sense*. He refers to this term in the context of counter-hegemonic practices, movements, resistances and struggles against neo-liberal globalization, particularly the struggle against social exclusion. He also uses the term interchangeably with cosmopolitan legality as the diverse normative framework for an ‘equality of differences’. In fact, here, the term subaltern is used to denote marginalized and oppressed people(s) specifically struggling against hegemonic globalization.

To speak emphatically, subaltern is a term that commonly refers to the perspective of persons from regions and groups outside the hegemonic power structure. In fact, in the 1970s’ the term began to be used as a reference to colonized people in the South-Asian sub-continent. It provided a new perspective on the history of colonized place from the perspective of colonized rather than from the perspective of hegemonic power. In this context, Marxist historians had already begun to view colonial history from the perspective of the proletariat but this was unsatisfying as it was still a Euro-centric
way of viewing the globe. However, Subaltern is now regularly used as a term in history, anthropology, sociology and literature. (Gyan, Prakash 1476)

Subaltern studies began in the early 1980s’ as an intervention in South-Asian historiography. While it began as a model for the sub-continent, it quickly developed into a vigorous post-colonial critique. The term subaltern studies group (SSG) or subaltern studies collective (SSC) are a group of South Asian scholars interested in the post-colonial and post-imperial societies of South Asia in particular and the developing world in general. It may be pointed out that the term subaltern studies is sometimes also applied more broadly to others who share many of their views. In fact, their approach is one of history from below, focused more on what happens among the masses at the base levels of society than among the elite. It may be observed that the group associated with the subaltern studies arose in the 1980s, influenced by the scholarship of Eric Stokes, to attempt to formulate a new narrative of the history of India and South Asia. Undoubtedly, as stated before this narrative strategy most clearly inspired by the writings of Gramsci was explicated in the writings of the ‘mentor’ Ranajit Guha, most clearly in his ‘manifesto in Subaltern Studies I’ and also in his classic monograph The Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency although they are, in a sense, on the left, they are very critical of the traditional Marxist narrative of Indian history, in which semi-feudal India was colonized by the British, became politicized, and earned its independence. In particular, they are critical of the focus of this narrative on the political consciousness of elites, who in turn inspire the masses to resistance and rebellion against the British. Instead, they focus on non-elite subalterns as agents of political and social change. They,
in fact, have had a particular interest in the discourses and rhetoric of emerging political movements, as against only highly visible actions like demonstrations and uprisings.

From the above discourse it can be observed that the Subaltern studies started in the early 1980s as an intervention in South Asian Historiography and emerged as a model for the subcontinent which quickly developed into a vigorous post-colonial critique. So far as the formation of subaltern studies group is concerned it was founded by Ranajit Guha. It may be pointed out that in more recent time, some former members have become disillusioned with the post-modern turn that the group has taken (notably Sumit Sarkar who left the group). A galaxy of eminent scholars such as Ranajit Guha, David Hardiman, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gyan Pandey, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Susie Tharu, Gyan Prakash, Sudipta Kaviraj, Edward Said, David Arnold, Gautam Bhadra, Ajay Skaria, Qadri Ismail, Kamran Asdar Ali, Shail Mayaram, Sumit Sarkar (later dissented), Lata Mani, Aamir Mufti, M.S.S. Pandian, Shahid Amin are associated with Subaltern studies. The subaltern concept has become so prominent now a days that it is being regularly used in various disciplines such as literature, history, anthropology, sociology, etc.

I

In literature, subaltern is realized in forms of minority or gender representations which are profusely expressed in the writings of both Jhumpa Lahiri and Margaret Wilson. In Jhumpa Lahiri Subaltern concern runs through all her works in some or other forms. She presents subalternity at various levels: political, cultural, female, children, etc. The political subalternity is quite obvious from the fact that she juxtaposes migrants and
the locals which, apart from creating a sense of conflict, also creates an ambience of subordination. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, the story of Mr. Pirzada is a sheer case of political subordination. He is twice subordinated, first by Pakistani political system, and second by American political system.

Mr. Pirzada, an east Pakistani (Now Bangladeshi), lecturer of Botany at the University of Dacca, arrives in America – the first world – on a government scholarship to study the plants of New England. While staying in America, he is frequently perturbed by the thoughts of his wife and daughters at home and also by the thought of interacting with the new world. The clash of two worlds; the world he is in and the world which dominates his thoughts, constitutes the backbone of the story. Consequently, he has to accelerate his pace to adjust with the ever changing, dynamic world of America, yet, interestingly, he keeps his clock adjusted with the time of Dacca so that he could have at least the feel of his own place. As mentioned earlier, the subalternity in case of Mr. Pirzada is political which owes a lot to the contemporary globalized world where cultural and academic programmes are enthusiastically taken up by the academia which eventually leads to the emergence of a new class of population. This class proudly voices their experiences of the western world giving an impression that facilities in the native nation are not up to the mark and requires a lot of improvisation. Though this class appears to be quite enthusiastic about their foreign trips, their trips are often marked with pain of being subordinated in the western first world. In fact, the creation of Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) is the outcome of such academic and political subordination of scholars from the Third World.
The little girl Lilia, narrator of the story is the representative figure of Indians born abroad. It is from her eyes that much of the subaltern issues, though she can not understand, are conveyed. The divisions and subdivisions of the Indian subcontinent whet her curiosity about a world, which seems to be her own but is distanced from it both literally and metaphorically. The Mayflower, Declaration of Independence of America fail to dissuade Lilia’s inquisitiveness about a land called Pakistan and an oft-heard city called Dacca. The American society in which Lilia is brought up can not be considered seamless. With the Declaration of the Civil War, it was anticipated that America would be a land without divisions on any ground; that the slavery would cease whereby creating a glorious chapter not only in the annals of America but of the entire world. But, unfortunately, the divisive bent continued to exist deep inside the psyche of the Americans. The segregation of the students as Redcoats and colonies, though playfully, reveals the inherent divisive tendency of the American society. This segregation is well realized by the visiting South Asian scholars who deliberately seek for their national/cultural comrade.

Mr. Pirzada’s visit to the house of narrator (Lilia) might be determined by many factors, but she feels that her parents do every possible thing to make him at home with them. His visits and the conversation that follows thereafter reveal a lot about the plight of Indians in America and the situations at home. Their conversation basically centres on the realities of Southeast Asia. Mr. Pirzada’s book on deciduous trees of America appears merely as interlude in the discussion of South Asian politics interspersed by coffee, scrabble, and ridiculous chatter about the weird eating habits of the co-workers at the bank where the narrator’s mother works. The narrator is presented an array of
assortments by Mr. Pirzada and the empathy he establishes with her family astonishes her adolescent sensibility; uninvited visit even of neighbours is sometimes queer and absurd.

Mr. Pirzada visits the narrator’s house not just for having meals but for companionship that he finds and gets there. Far away removed from his own homeland, Mr. Pirzada gets a helping hand and consoling heart in the family of narrator whose roots lie in a nation which was once his own. However, all is not well with Mr. Pirzada. As the East Pakistani continues to migrate towards India and the war for independence of Bangladesh stretches further, the days of Mr. Pirzada turns more tensed and cumbersome. The very thought of becoming a refugee, surviving on the alms of others is awful for him and perturbed by the thought of his family who might also be the victim of fate of moving around streets as refugees and living a miserable life. In such anxiety of Mr. Pirzada the narrator and her parents offer a soothing consolation and create in him a positive thought for best thing to come out of the all pervading gloom.

. . . through the carpet I heard them as they drank more tea, and listened to cassettes of Kishore Kumar, and played scrabble on the coffee table, laughing and arguing long in to the night about the spellings of English words. I wanted to join them, wanted, above all, to console Mr. Pirzada somehow. But apart from eating a piece of candy for the sake of his family and praying for their safety, there was nothing I could do. They played scrabble until the eleven o’clock news, and then, sometime around midnight, Mr. Pirzada walked back to his dormitory. For this reason I never saw him leave, but each night as I drifted off to sleep I would hear them, anticipating the birth of a nation on the other side of the world.

(34)

In the fear of Mr. Pirzada, the imminent political subordination thanks to the political instability at home is quite obvious. His subordination in America somewhat lies in his
inability to assimilate as migrant. In fact, every migrant is a subaltern in America be it first generation or second generation. In case of first generation, the subalternity is established by their willing detachment from the host society and culture. Mr. Pirzada, Lilia’s parents, Mr. and Mrs. Sen are easily distinguishable for their typical Indian attire and hence become easy pray to subaltern treatment. A similar case is found in case of Ashoke and Ashima of The Namesake, the first generation protagonists. Wherever, Ashima goes, her typical Indian costume makes her centre of attraction and at the same time alien.

The subordination owes a lot to the otherization of migrants. Both the first and second generation migrants are forced to feel “Other” or intruder in the host land. Such feelings hinder them to mingle with “Self”. Much of the subaltern studies are made on the basis of “Self – Other” dichotomy. Even in case of the second generation migrants, born and brought up in America, could not escape from the label of Other despite their apparent Americanization.

The representation of the other in the west has always been a troublesome one. The stereotypes and caricature have long been a privilege of the powerful that defines one major dimension of the relationship between America and its other allies. The issue is complex and is inevitable in diasporic identity; the identity which is never a given, never a peaceful state of being and never a comfortable phase of growth in between two lands.

The common stereotype is one of the great clashes between East and West which also goes in the making of subordination of the Indian migrants. The conservative, traditional, family bound, austere Indian culture versus a divorce-ridden, materialistic,
morally loose America often interacts in juxtaposition than walking in same gondola.

Before Ashima accompanies her husband abroad in the novel *The Namesake* she is admonished not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off hair. Gogol’s American girlfriend, Maxine is astonished that his parents’ friends are Bengali, that they had an arranged marriage, that his mother cooks Indian food every day, that she wears saris and bindis (138). Gogol is aware of the gulf between his parents and Maxine’s parents, Gerald and Lydia,

. . . he (Gogol) is aware that a line has been drawn all the same. To him the terms of his parents’ marriage are something at once unthinkable and unremarkable; nearly all their friends and relatives had been married in the same way. But their lives bear no resemblance to that of Gerald and Lydia: expensive pieces of jewelry presented on Lydia’s birth day, flowers brought home for no reason at all, the two of them kissing openly, going for walks through the city, or to dinner, just as Gogol and Maxine do. Seeing the two of them curled up on the sofa in the evenings, Gerald’s head resting on Lydia’s shoulder, Gogol is reminded that all his life he has never witnessed a single moment of physical affection between his parents. Whatever love exists between them is an utterly private, uncelebrated thing. (138)

Maxine feels depressed to know such things about the parents of Gogol. However, she feels amused when Gogol tells her “that they will not be able to touch or kiss each other in front of his parents, that there will be no wine with lunch.” (145)

Gogol’s mother, Ashima is put off by the idea of Maxine as her daughter-in-law. She is startled when Maxine calls her ‘Ashima’ and her husband ‘Ashoke’. She refuses to admit before her Bengali friends that Gogol “has been dating her (Maxine) for over a year . . . sleeping under the same roof” (166). Such kind of difference between the locals
and migrants and the latter’s concealing of their children’s sexual inclination towards the former hinders assimilation and creates gulf between them; the gulf which eventually leads to the otherization of the migrants.

Devotion to family even among the second generation diaspora is what immediately sets them apart from the locals. Whenever Moushumi would go to her friend’s place she would always call her mother to inform about her whereabouts. The American mothers were at once charmed and perplexed at her sense of duty: “I’m at Anna’s house,” she would report to her mother in English, “I’m at Sue’s” (212). Devotion to family is trumpeted as a quintessentially Indian trait. When Gogol’s father dies, Gogol wants to be close to his mother and sister. His American girlfriend, Maxine, fails to understand this, and, consequently, they break up soon. Indians do in fact come from a family bound culture which helps them in buffeting the experience of immigration. But this also goes into creating a chasm between the migrants and the locals, as Indians often resort to contra-acculturation as seen in case of Gogol, leading to the subordination of the former.

The food that the Gangulis eat at home is enough alone to justify how different they are from their American neighbours: their unpronounceable names, Ashoke’s accent, Ashima always in saris. They seem to sponsor India abroad: they do not have to go to India, in their home India comes to them. But interestingly, India does not exist on the map of American identity during the time depicted in the novel (1960’s). As children, Gogol and Sonia accompany their parents to live in India for eight months, and when they return to America, their American friends “ask them nothing where they’ve been”
This speaks a lot about the condition of the children’s experience from which their sense of identity is built. India to the friends of Gogol does not mean anything, but his half hearted association to India through his parents deters his total association that accounts for much of his crises that he goes through while maintaining his relation with his American girl friends. As such, he is compelled to live two different sorts of lives; totally diametric to one another.

The subordination of the diasporic people in the host land is also due to their idiosyncratically different costumes and apparel which is the mark of their cultural identity. The first generation authentic Indian immigrants wore their ethnic identity like a protective cloak over the other, the American identity. These first generation immigrants carefully cultivated values of Indian culture which contrasted sharply with the western culture, which to their mind was a degenerate. The authentic immigrant sees the nationalistic values inherited from the homeland as vital to his survival in the host land. These atavistic interpretations of natal culture are then rigorously enforced and in doing so the parents, who consider themselves as guardians or upholders of the natal culture, expect their children to follow their footsteps. The diasporic parents’ urge to adhere to the natal culture, and their American born children’s apathy to it renders a dialectical image to the Indian diasporic community. A dialectical image is very much a juxtaposition of elements position to bring out the contradictions, the hidden hits and misses, silences and pronouncements. Without regard to a catalogue of progress, claims of unyielding, image generate provocative thought because it plays up the contradictions ignored by the narrative progress.
Indians find themselves in a dubious position of being exploited and privileged at the same time. They find themselves targeted for racial bias precisely because of their skin tone and general social success, both of which invite scorn and categorization in a society that seem to be egalitarian but lives by the old dictum of white superiority. The fear of the horde of non-white people sweeping in from Asia, stealing jobs and lands away from the hardworking European origin Americans and in the process transforming the United States into something alien from its mythic Anglo origin was the part of the American psyche throughout the twentieth century. In Pemberton road, Gogol discovers the golden letters in ‘Ganguli’ in the nameplate has been shortened to GANG, with the word GREEN scrawled in pencil following it. His ears burn at the sight, and he runs back into the house, sickened, certain of the insult his father will feel. Though it is his last name, too, something tells Gogol that the discretion is intended for his parents more than Sonia and him. For by now he is aware, in stores, of cashiers smirking at his parents’ accents, and of salesmen who prefer to direct their conversation to Gogol, as though his parents were either incompetent or deaf. But his father is unaffected at such moments, just as he is unaffected by the mailbox. (67-68)

The first generation diaspora, like Ashoke, has to bear such incident in a very frolic manner rather than voicing against it which might invite other such incident. But for the American born Gogol it is outrageous. Moreover, when during a school project where the young students are made to record the names etched on tombstones, Gogol realizes that he can never hope to find his family name on any of these among hordes of Smiths, Collins, and Woods or as his other classmates find theirs, he feels enraged at being
burdened with a useless, absurd identity. In fact, such incidents/feelings in the lives of diaspora reveal the uneasy outcome of multiculturalism.

Globalization might have eliminated geographical borders but it has set up psychological borders and quite often apathy for others. Moushumi severs her engagement with Graham when she realizes his disdain for her culture in his derogatory remarks for her family, country and culture. If America is truly egalitarian society, everyone’s place should be that of equal irrespective of caste, creed and colour. But the success of diasporic people turns them subaltern due to the envious eyes of the seeming egalitarian American society.

Significantly, Lahiri has concentrated much on gender subalternity in her works. Her stories “A Real Durwan” and “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” are imbued with the elements of gender subalternity. The story “A Real Durwan” is the story of Boori Ma, a caretaker-cum-doorwoman in an apartment building in post-independence, post-Partition Calcutta, a city all set to link up with modernity and growing material wealth. Sixty-four-year old Boori Ma ekes out a living by helping the residents with various chores of the kind that, it is pointed out, is normally “no job for a woman” (73). Yet Boori Ma, who had arrived as an East Bengali refugee in a humble cart, manages to clean and do odd jobs to the satisfaction of the residents and is therefore tolerated by them despite the somewhat peculiar stories she tells them about her past life as the wife of a well-to-do landowner. Her stories provoke their disbelief due to the glaring disparity between her present existence and what she alleges to be her past, for, alas, “What kind of landowner
ended up sweeping stairs?” (72). However, at the end she is chased out of the building with charge of pilfering the property of the inmates.

The dismissal of Boori Ma and the symbolic silencing of her voice express the allegorical weight she carries as a disempowered woman belonging to a no longer viable cultural past. Her voice is “brittle with sorrows, as tart as curds, and shrill enough to grate meat from a coconut” (70). Her expostulations, addressed to no one in particular, or perhaps to history itself, alternate with her tendency towards aggrandizement of this same history into almost pure legend. Unashamedly, she glosses over historical facts: “Why demand specifics? Why scrape lime from a betel leaf? Believe me, don’t believe me” (72). As a transitional figure she recedes into the shadows, marked by spectrality and myth which both signify the difficulties we experience in trying to establish with exactness of historical truth. This very ambiguity concerning the historical status of Indian women is rendered visible through Boori Ma’s story.

“The Treatment of Bibi Haldar”, the penultimate story of Lahiri’s collection is one of its two stories which are set in India. While shifting her tales between India and America, Lahiri has strived to sustain originality of events by adopting a narrative which does not seem to be that of an outsider or by taking help of books to describe the region she has never been to. She is equally at home in depicting scenes from India and the United States.

Bibi Haldar lives with her cousin who engages her in his cosmetic shop. For her work, she is not paid anything, but meals, and other provisions and apparels every
October during the festival. She has her own discontents and complaints, though not very appealing. She says,

I ask you: is it fair for a girl to sit out her years, pass neglected through her prime, listing labels and prices without promise of a future? . . . Is it wrong to envy you, all brides and mothers, busy with lives and cares? Wrong to want shade my eyes, scent my hair? To raise a child and teach him sweet from sour, good from bad?

Her private confession made to the women of the neighbourhood is no doubt pathetic, but what makes her centre of discussion is her queer ailment which always eludes treatment – allopathic, homeopathic, ayurvedic and the like. When all the possible medical treatment fails, visits to temples, churches, tombs and shrines of martyrs and saints are taken up. Even then the plight of Bibi Haldar remains the same with swooning without any forewarning. However, it is eventually suggested that marriage is the only remedy left for her, she gets a new lease of life, and her feminine impulse begins to enhance. Simultaneously, her longing to present herself appealingly also grows inside her, and to soothe her dejected and depressed heart, her cousin Haldar publishes an advertisement in a newspaper depicting her physical features in order to find a suitable match. However, his effort is that of a compulsion than a genuine concern; he somehow wants to get rid of her. The plight of Bibi turns worst when Haldar’s wife gets pregnant. She is subsided as an evil omen in the household. The habit of blaming a woman for any misfortune is common in India from which even the educated people are not free. The Haldar baby falls sick now and then and the blame is put on the disease of Bibi. As such, she is sent to the storage room to protect the baby from her ominous effect. The neighbours protest this
vehemently, and boycott Haldar’s shop which eventually forced Haldar to leave the locality.

After the departure of Bibi’s cousin from the locality, she is not frequently seen by the women and children who generally go to the roof. However, after a couple of months she is, to everyone’s shock, discovered to be four months pregnant. A male child is born to her and this imparts her a new lease of life as she reopens the shop of her cousin and leads a normal life. The child is no doubt illegitimate and elements of stigma in a conservative society like that of India, but, at the same time, it also imparts a legitimate right to lead a normal life. She is cured of her malaises and the entire locality is pleased; who fathers her child does not matter to any one. “Her resurgence is a victory over the forces that encourage the subjugation of an individual or even of a race.” (Gogoi 185).

The theme of “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar”, however, has much in common with the other stories of the plight and anxiety of the female subaltern as it follows the aftermaths of the globalization process in the life of a native Indian woman who is a victim of both destitution and homelessness. Bibi Haldar is a woman living in India, in her own homeland, but is more or less exposed to the Othering process. Interestingly enough, “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” and “Mrs. Sen’s” have two shared points: firstly, both women are in thirties. Secondly, Bibi Haldar’s neighbors are replications of those Indian neighbors who Mrs. Sen had longed for in America:

At home that is all you have to do. Not everybody has a telephone but just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighborhood
Reading the story in the light of female identity-formation process, one can come up with the view that “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” can be in fact read as a commentary on the constructedness of the Indian notion of femininity and its possible burden on the life of the marginalized female subaltern in Calcutta, India. While Mrs. Sen lives in America and the threats to her identity are coming from the Other culture of her host land, Bibi Haldar’s identity which is at odds with the culturally-constructed gender codes of her society is threatened by the Other cultural codes of her home land. The process of Othering takes place everywhere and at all times; identities, therefore, are always in the process of being made and remade. Bibi’s Otherness to the culture she has been shaped in, is emphasized from the very beginning of the story in the guise of her allegorical mental disease – a disease which becomes the source of her being Othered as it “confined her world to the unpainted four-story building” (173). The source of this disease then, seems to be nothing but a departure from an adherence to the ethnic cultural codes. Anyone not clinging to these codes is doomed to Otherness – even in her own homeland. Bibi’s disease is the result of her breaking of such codes both by her physical look; “She was not pretty. Her upper lip was thin, her teeth too small. Her gums protruded when she spoke” (174), and the things she could not do; “Bibi had never been taught to be a woman.” (178)

Bibi’s identity-crisis comes to surface when she wants to negotiate a new identity by embracing these gender codes of the Other. Despite the feminist community solidarity, this seems to be an impossible act as fitting into the ethnic cultural codes needs certain
essential characteristics which are missing in Bibi. So that, all her attempts to embrace such codes result in acts of mimicry when in order to practice, she is urged by the other women “to engage in small conversations with nearby men” (180). In such practices what is after all parodied and ridiculed is the very definition of the Self (The Self of Bibi’s Community). This, however, seemingly opens the way for formation of the final “hybrid” identity of Bibi Haldar which soon leads to the treatment of her disease. Bibi, through negotiating between the Self and Other, becomes a mother without being a wife – a half-state of both this and that. It is this hybrid nature of Bibi Haldar’s identity whose subversive dimension arms Spivak’s subaltern with an act of resistance – an act that melts the boundaries of Self/Other and initiates an act of negotiation between both. Such subaltern is also noticed in Margaret Wilson’s *Daughters of India*, where the plight of women and children creates sympathy in the hearts of readers.

II

Margaret Wilson seems to voice colonial subalternity in her works. Colonial subalternity is the darker side of European enlightenment which pledged to liberate human mind by diffusing rationality, but the geographical exploration that accelerated aftermath resulted in slavery of non-Europeans. In fact, colonial subalternity is the wider manifestation of East-West juxtaposition which can also be illustrated in terms of Self-Other as discussed before. Interestingly, Wilson presents a triangular relation of Self-Other: the colonizer (British) – The missionaries (American) – the colonized (Indians). That the relation between the colonizer and the colonized is tinged with acrimony and animosity is well known to every one. The pathetic plight of the colonized is deeply felt
and understood, and also documented by the missionaries. But they are also the victim of subaltern treatment because being white they are treated as colonizer by the Indians and at the same time they are looked down upon by the ruling whites for being sympathizer of the colonized.

The title of the novel, *Daughters of India*, itself is the suggestive of the writer’s deep concern for the Indian women’s predicament during the British Raj. The portrayal of women and their circumstances in the novel is not the story of Ainyinwala only, but that of the entire India. The character of Miss Bhose is representative of educated Indian class who has adopted Christianity for its liberal outlook. The enthusiasm that she shows towards the education of the girls is the outcome of the Christian light and European thoughts. When she sees the volume of Encyclopedia Britannica with Davida, her joys know no bounds due to its vastness of content, though she also feels sad for not being able to read all the volumes, “... Here I am, sixty-six years old, and there are twenty-nine volumes of books here, and thousand pages in every one of them! Look what I’ve missed” (8). However, when Davida tells Miss Bhose to keep the copy with her, she desires to take it to her school and show it to her girls so that they could have inspiration for learning. She says,

If I could show them all those books squeezed together this way, knowing more about the streets they walk down than they know themselves, and never saying a word about their learning! Wouldn’t you think that would put some ambition, some strength into their silliness? What hope is there of self-government when women never even see the binding of an ency _______. (9)

The last sentence of Miss Bhose is the critique of traditional image of Indian women who are often deprived of education and light of outer world, as they are confined within four
walls, on the name of culture. By the time this novel was written, there was all round clamour for home rule or self governance in Indian. For self governance, the nation must have educated citizen, particularly women as it is under their care that the new generation is shaped. It is such thought of Miss Bhose that might have inspired her to set up a girls’ school in Aiyanianwala.

On the day of Christmas, Miss Bhose displays the Encyclopedia Britannica to the audience of local women and in her speech emphasizes on the education of girls and discourages the child marriage:

She praised those noble mothers who sent their daughters to school up to their maturity, so that they know the whole earth, so that sitting there in England they write histories of the feet that walked past this door of our school before the baby Jesus was born. Marriages, too, are good, made in heaven, and sons and daughters born of righteousness are not unworthy of us. (This statement was a concession to Davida, of course). But we, we worthless natives, we marry off our young daughters in infancy, through the intrigues of barbers and priests not heavenly, so that women never learn, never get any further from ignorance and on and on, until the poor guests turned their palms upward in hopeless assent, and sighed aloud, murmuring: ‘The lust which is in the world! Our daughters unmarried would be ruined!’ (75)

Miss Bhose seems to imply that child marriage/early marriage is the first hindrance in the physical, mental and moral growth of woman. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, despite various commissions for women’s development such as Women’s Indian Association (1917), National Council for Women in India (1925) etc. for women’s upliftment, education was still a distant destination for them. This was more for the conservative mindset of the Indians than for the lackadaisical attitude of the reformers.
Here citing of a few speeches by some of the educated women of the 19th century will be pertinent to understand the plight of women (daughters of India) before independence.

Rashasundari Devi, born in 1809:

I was so immersed in the area of housework that I was not conscious of what I was going through day and night. After some time the desire to learn how to read properly grew very strong in me. I was angry with myself for wanting to read books. Girls did not read.

Sharda Meheta, born in 1882:

In a reformer’s family, higher education for a girl was tolerated. But in a middle class family, an unmarried girl taking education in a college in a class with boys around was just impossible. A person going against the norm has to be ready for all kinds of ridicule, comments and hurdles. In my class (in 1899) we were only two girls, one Parsi and myself. Though it was a completely new experience, I was feeling hesitant. But I had tremendous desire to learn.

(quoted in Desai and Thakkar 46)

The feelings of Rashasundari Devi and Sharda Meheta corroborate the thoughts of Miss Bhose regarding the education of girls in the then India.

The character of Begum, the wife of Jalal, represents the downtrodden Indian women of 19th and 20th centuries who had received education through the Christian missionaries, but were not able to go ahead due to their filial burden and poverty. In fact, her plight reveals the lack of medical facility during the British Raj. She suffers from an acute earache and has not adequate money to seek medical assistance. Davida often shows concern over Begum’s suffering. Wilson writes,
Every day she had wish that she was a doctor – though she knew she would have made the worst possible doctor. For the distressing and recurrent pain of Begum’s ear she knew no further remedy but a trip to a distant Mission hospital. And she was fond of Begum. (12)

It is Davida’s attachment with Begum that she has given her only pillow to soothe her aching ear.

Davida is, in fact, at pain for the suffering of entire Pariah of Flowery Basti where Jalal and Begum run their missionary school. It is tough time for the missionary workers to teach them and make them come out of the shackles of their traditional dirty work. Wilson writes,

... at the Flowery Basti these low caste Christian women were still going, morning by morning, to remove the night soil from the houses of that village, to sweep their floors and courtyards, and to do any other dirty work that might be awaiting them. Now the floors of the rooms and courtyards were of clay, and the brooms which they used to sweep them had no handles – at least the shortest possible excuse for handles – so that the women bent over with their faces in the dust as they stirred it up. And that dust, and the tropical sun, and the flies and the diseases about, had inflamed their eyes and narrowed them, till their very babies seemed to be born with eyes half shut in self defense. (25-26)

The quotation deflates the missionaries’ effort to purify the Pariah community of Flowery Basti, and the novelist painfully observes that they (the Pariah women) “gathered the dusty, ill-smelling, sweepings into baskets which they carried away on their heads to dump where the flies live” (26). The American missionaries had done a lot for the welfare of these low caste Pariahs. They had even fought for their legal rights to be socially equal. Despite all these, the Pariahs were not redeemed from “the broom and the
basket” (26). In fact, even after independence their plight continued to be same till recently.

The portrayal of the characters of Taj and Davida reveals a lot about the subaltern concerns of Margaret Wilson. Taj is a young but widow Persian teacher in the school of Miss Bhose. She has been missing for long which creates a rumour of her elopement in the locality. Such act on the part of a teacher is considered to be quite unbecoming. However, as regard to her class management and performance, she is regarded as the most efficient teacher. Her ability to motivate the young mind is well acknowledged by Miss Bhose. Taj represents the reformed women, thanks to the Christian enlightenment. Her being a child widow does not hold anything to her. She is quite romantic in her approach towards life. When she returns towards the end of the novel married with a man, Davida is shocked to see that Taj had no remorse for her deed. Rather she is quite content and said ‘A woman’s place … is in her home,” (162) i.e. with her husband.

While portraying Taj, Wilson hints at the emancipation and empowerment of women which is necessary to achieve any sort of substance in life. But poverty and exploitation comes in the way of such achievement. The life of two other women in the novel: Begum and the dying sister, is an apt ingredient of subaltern in the novel. Begum’s life is ruined by poverty and lack of medical facility. She acutely suffers from ear-ache but she does not have proper medical treatment. Davida somehow tries to soothe her pain in her own way, but when it deteriorates she gives her only pillow to her to keep her head while sleeping so that her ear rests in comfort. Begum’s life, in fact all the women’s life
in Flowery Basti, is constrained to cooking and caring of children and so they do not get any opportunity to think beyond their traditionally assigned duty.

However, the most painful subalternity is witnessed in case of the dying sister. Wilson writes that

In her childhood she (the dying sister) had been given unseen to someone in marriage, of her own inferior Hindu caste – she couldn’t tell how old she had been then – when he lifted her veil and saw her dark, unlovely face and that hand of hers which was deformed, he had cried out that he had been cheated in the bargain and had struck her such a blow that she fell down. And presently he had passed her on, unseen, to a man to whom he owed money. And that man, seeing her, had kicked her into a corner, but kept awhile. He was a gambler and, having lost all that he had, he staked her, at length, in a game of dice. And the winner had sold her to a man who put her into an inspected house of prostitution in a great cantonment. And when she had become too diseased to serve longer their, they had sent her to a government hospital to die. (41)

All possible exploitation of women has been done to the dying sister: child marriage, domestic violence, sexual assault, physical assault, selling and prostitution. Her treatment as a mere object of consumption is a gross violation of human/women rights. This leads the writer to comment, “This (India) is a rotten, loathsome, dirty nation”. (55)

Wilson’s Tales of a Polygamous City is imbued with subaltern subjects. In fact all the stories in the collection reflect subalternity in their own way. However, subalternity in Wilson is not due to any subjugation of migrants. Rather a migrant narrator reflects on the prevailing gender bias and gender atrocity in the then Indian society. Child marriage and child widowhood, a gross violation of a woman’s fundamental rights, are well
conveyed through the story “A Mother”. The widow child, Aziz is deprived of all the joys of life, though she craves for it. Her craving for a normal life leads to her tragic end.

Similarly, in the story “Waste”, Ayshan is married to an elderly married person having already a son-in-law at a very tender age. She is not even old enough to understand the meaning of marriage and husband. When she attains sixteen, realizing the futility of her marriage, and also imminent sexual depression, she is seen in the arms of her own step son-in-law. Ayshan’s attitude shocks the narrator, but it also signals the dire consequences of childhood marriage, and its subsequent incest relation.

The treatment of subalternity in both Lahiri and Wilson is marked by a sense of humanity. Both the writers seem to clamour for some sort of change in our attitude towards the concern of those who are subordinated due to circumstances.

Notes:

1. In The Modern Prince and The Prison Notebooks Gramsci describes the subaltern classes as those subordinated by hegemony excluded from any meaningful role in a regime of power. Gramsci himself has workers in mind, but the term has also been used to describe other groups who are excluded and do not have a position from which to speak--for example peasants women. Gramsci further notes that "the subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a 'State'".

2. Santos here voices in favour of practicing equality while recognizing the racial differences.

4. *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* by Ranajit Guha. Publisher: Duke University Press, 1999. This classic work in subaltern studies explores the common elements present in rebel consciousness during the Indian colonial period. Ranajit Guha—intellectual founder of the groundbreaking and influential Subaltern Studies Group—describes from the peasants’ viewpoint the relations of dominance and subordination in rural India from 1783 to 1900.

Works Cited


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