

Subaltern Voice in Siddhartha Chowdhury's Story "The Leader of Men"

BHAVESH CHANDRA PANDEY

Abstract. Postcolonial poetics tries to assess and analyse the mechanism of marginalization caused due to colonialism. It also tries to focus on the features of the hegemonic superstructure that operates through oppression, suppression, dislocation, disaffiliation and disjunction. Postcolonialism also studies the effects of the colonial hangover in the psyche of the colonised people. The idea of the subaltern is an off-shoot of postcolonial poetics referring to the marginalized groups and those who are outside the hegemonic structure. The original concept of subalternity got expanded gradually and now it covers a wide range of issues concerning marginalisation. Siddhartha Chowdhury's story "The Leader of Men" is an interesting account of the conflict between the elite and the proletariat. In this story Roop Singh, the proletariat is humiliated by Mr. Kedia, the elite, and ultimately Roop Singh tries to register his violent protest by thrashing the lobby of the apartment that becomes the symbol of the hegemonic structure.

Keywords : Elite; hegemony; marginalization; postcolonialism; proletariat; subaltern.

"Heard melodies are sweet, those unheard are sweeter".

(John Keats)

Postcolonial poetics is essentially related to the voice of the marginalized, the subaltern and the unheard. In fact colonialism is not just a political, economic system but a hegemonic superstructure that operates through marginalization, exclusion, oppression, suppression, dislocation, disaffiliation etc. Postcolonialism is a response to this hegemonic structure.

The term 'subaltern', popularised by the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), is generally used to refer to the marginalized group and to those who are socially, politically and geographically outside the hegemonic structure. It represents broadly social, political, religious and economic hierarchies. It has come to symbolise disruption and distortion of indigenous history, value and polity in the wake of external conquest, colonization and prominence given to westernization at the expense of indigenous mores. Subaltern studies is an approach to study political coercion, economic exploitation and social marginalization or subordination. It is the study of the relation of the underclass or proletariat to the

elite. The subaltern is a political or economic class of the deprived having lack of access to the centre. It is the peripheral class. The subaltern symbolizes the force that protests dominance, colonialism, subservience, alienation, and self-identity through resistance, confrontation and transformation. The study of the subaltern has expanded to include investigations of social transformation and enquiries into how and why some groups develop into elite classes who control resources and perpetuate stereotypes, while other groups become subaltern community experiencing crisis and displacement. Subaltern studies argue in favour of constructing history from below and to present the viewpoint of the underclass.

Gayatri C. Spivak states, "everyone does not deserve to be a subaltern. Every one who fails to get a piece of the pie is not called a subaltern". (Spivak 1988 : 37) She is against broadening the base of the subaltern. The subaltern theory takes the perspective of the 'other' as one that has no voice because of race, class or gender. Her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" hones, "the historical and ideological factors that obstruct the possibility of being heard for those who inhabit the periphery". (Spivak 1988 : 217) This essay is a probing interrogation of what it means to have political subjectivity.

Spivak and Ranjit Guha focus on signifiers, "the signifiers constructed by the colonizers leaves no real voice to the colonized or oppressed"(Guha and Spivak 1988 : 44). Homi Bhabha believes that the ideas of the colonizers are expressed in the dominant discourse in which the oppressed and the colonized are not well versed, so they are not able to express their validity claims. Vinay Lal has raised the issue why studies of the subaltern constantly utilize western theories to comprehend eastern data rather than turning to oriental models to comprehend those who were and are subordinated ?

Siddhartha Chowdhury's story "The Leader of Men", taken from his story collection *Diksha at St. Martin's*(2002) is a tragic story of a poor man's hardships in a city life filled with social prejudices. This story shows the humiliation meted out to the poor by the rich and the resultant protest. Chowdhury has altogether four books to his credit. These are *Diksha at St. Martin's* (2002), *Patna Roughcut* (2005), *Day Scholar* (2010) and *The Patna Manual of Style* (2015). He expresses in his writings the complications in the social fabric and the growing ambitions of the new generation.

"The Leader of Men" describes the conflict between Mr Kedia and Roop Singh. Kedia is the President of the Owners' Association in Patna. He represents the rich class with all its mobility and pomp. He is a consummate consumer and is said to experience the pleasure of *nirvana* in buying things. If he does not get the latest model of car he finds something missing. His wealth is reflected in his stuck-up, haughty conduct. On the contrary, Roop Singh is a poor, landless man. His

Subaltern Voice in Siddhartha Chowdhury's Story "The Leader of Men"

ancestral land has been grabbed by some organization. He is an educated man with a refined taste. He is smart and disciplined and cleanliness loving. By nature he is stoic and melancholic. His poverty forces him to drop out from education and to look for a job. He tries his luck as a private school teacher, an assistant in a grocery shop and finally joins the job of a private security guard in an apartment. He has to take care of his brother, his wife and his child with his little income of the 'princely sum' of six hundred rupees a month. He lives in the servant's quarter of the apartment and manages to sustain himself on potato and boiled rice. Nevertheless he is not devoid of a sense of dignity. He is the most sincere and dutiful of all guards. He reads newspapers and shares his news and views with all guards and also finds time to read serious books of literature borrowed from the narrator.

The story describes the first encounter of Kedia in a very dramatic situation. According to the rule of the apartment, Roop Singh stops Mr Sharma, a friend of Mr Kedia from going upstairs without having his prior permission by talking on the intercom. As the friend of the President of the Owners' Association Mr Sharma regards this denial as an offence and insult. Mr Kedia also takes this matter very seriously. He starts shouting at Roop Singh in English, calling him a rascal. As a retort, much to the surprise of Kedia, Roop Singh also speaks in impeccable English and clarifies that he is simply doing his duty and that he means no offence to anyone. This retort in English becomes unbearable to Kedia as it amounts to trespass his elitist boundary. He complains Ritwik, the narrator, against the conduct of Roop Singh thinking that he will support him against the class enemy. However, Ritwik justifies what Roop Singh did. It was like an insult to injury and a thoroughly infuriated Kedia threatens Roop Singh to get him fired from the job. After this incident Roop Singh stops to salute Kedia as a token of protest and Kedia is on a look out for an opportunity to insult Roop Singh.

Kedia gets this opportunity on the 31st of December when there is a send-off party in the apartment. On that occasion a rich menu of delicious items is arranged. The residents of the apartment assemble in the party. But a huge quantity of food is left unused as people retire from the party without consuming it fully. Great heap of chicken and meat and biryani, and *paneer* and *kofta curry* and *gulabjamun* are left with no one to consume. One of the gentlemen, being a man full of 'the milk of human kindness' asked one of the guards to go downstairs and call the other guards to eat up the 'damn things'.

On being invited thus the guards gorged on the food so much so that two of them had upset stomachs the next day. Roop Singh was yet to take his food when Kedia rolled over to him and said loudly, 'So Mr Singh, I hope you are not hungry now. You probably haven't eaten such fabulous food ever in your life, so eat carefully, don't overdo it' (Chowdhury 2002 : 49) And he laughed and patted on his back 'patronisingly'. This was a deliberate insult of Roop Singh and a public

mockery of his poverty. Roop felt that someone had lit a long abandoned fuse inside his body and that it was snaking up slowly to his brain. He put down the plate and left without eating.

Roop Singh grows hopelessly melancholic and full of hurt and pain. In a depressed state he thinks of his loyal brother, his beautiful young looking wife and his beloved land that has been grabbed by people holding flags with hammer and sickle. At last he remembered his little son's face that made him lose the delicate balance of his mind. In this hot state of mind he ripped the lobby apart with his bare hands. He broke the glass revolving doors, the wooden bench, the plastic chairs and the intercom system. He was in such an agitated state that he could not be controlled by one guard. He was tied later on. His face was swollen, his hands were badly smashed so much so that he would not be able to work with it again, and his eyes were expressionless. Kedia didn't come to see him.

The story narrates the conflict between the rich and the poor, the haughtiness of the privileged class and the inferiority complex of the depressed class, and between the elitist ego and the poor man's self-respect. It shows a class conflict between the rich and the poor. Roop Singh belongs to the so called forward class and has got some education from the College of Commerce, Patna. He is a disciplined and sincere person. Even then he is humiliated because of his low status and perhaps his poverty. He is outside the hegemony of the privileged people. In this hegemony, power and authority decide what is right and what is wrong. In this construct, the rich is always right. About Kedia the writer says, "He had been rich and the rich are always right; according to him there could be no two ways to it". (72)

Kedia is hurt because Roop Singh shows the guts to stop his friend Mr Sharma. He is particularly more offended when he retorts him in English language. He treats English as an asset particularly of the elite. He is dumbstruck at the retort. He says in utter surprise, 'You talk English to me! How dare you talk?' His elitist pride is pricked and he puffs like a punctured balloon. In his blind vanity he never realized that he could have been wrong. He threatens, 'I will kick you out'. An offended Kedia complains against the conduct of Roop Singh to the narrator whom he regards an "ally" against the class enemy. With his hurt class snobbery he nurtures a prejudice against the guard and is on a look out for an opportunity to get him fired from his job.

Roop Singh represents the subaltern class outside the hegemony of the rich. He is poor and landless and under the compulsion to work as a private security guard for a trifling sum of six hundred rupees. With all his intellectual refinement, ancestral pride, efficiency and competence he is pathetically poor. He gets insulted for no guilt of his own but due to the class snobbery of the rich. If he stops Kedia's

Subaltern Voice in Siddhartha Chowdhury's Story "The Leader of Men"

friend from going up without talking to him on the intercom, he was doing what he had been told to do. Ordinarily he was doing his prescribed duty. The crime that he committed according to Kedia, was that he did not apply the sense of practical judgement that exempts the rich from following the rules.

Roop's reaction in the end is symbolic. When Kedia mocks at his poverty in the send-off party on 31st of December he does not speak anything. However, he is unable to bear the emotional hurt. The memory of his family and particularly his little son makes him restless. He thrashes the entire lobby as a show of protest as it becomes the symbol of the hegemonic structure that he wants to break. His helplessness, anger and frustration combine in his show of revolt. This is the revolt of the subaltern.

The class snobbery of the rich is evident in both the episodes of the story. In the first episode Kedia insults Roop Singh even though he is innocent and threatens to get him fired showing his arrogance. In the second episode the callous attitude of the rich people is shown when the poor are invited only when a large quantity of food is left unused. They are not invited beforehand. Adding insult to injury Kedia mockingly cautions Roop Singh. On the social ladder Roop Singh is a 'forward' as specified by the author only to suggest that he is not ordinarily a subject of humiliation on account of his caste. He belongs to the caste of people who were once 'leader of men'. His humiliation is subject to his low rank of job and above all his poverty. Roop's protest is not simply a protest of the poor against the rich; it is rather a protest of the hurt ancestral pride, sense of self-respect and desperation of poverty as Kedia treats him as a non-entity. It is a protest against the hegemonic superstructure and the class snobbery of the rich.

Although the West has a different model of the subaltern, Roop Singh is nonetheless a suitable example of the subaltern from Indian perspective of class difference and colonial psychology. The way Kedia reacts to a security guard's attempt to speak in English, the language of the elite in India, reflects the colonial psychology of the privileged class. In the present Techno-Capitalist system, the poor are a harassed and humiliated class. Roop Singh revolts against his humiliation in the end and voices his anguish without speaking, making his protest the voice of the subaltern.

Bhavesh Chandra Pandey

Associate Professor, Department of English
S.K.R. College, Barbigha, Sheikhpura (Bihar)

Works Cited

Chowdhury, Siddhartha. *Diksha at St. Martin's*. New Delhi : Shristi Publication, 2002.

Guha, Ranjit."On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India". *Selected Subaltern Studies*. (eds). Ranjit Guha and Gayatri C. Spivak. New York : OUP, 1988.

Spivak, Gayatri C. "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography". *Selected Subaltern Studies*. (eds) Ranjit Guha and Gayatri C. Spivak. New York: OUP, 1988.

Spivak, Gayatri C. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and Interpretation of Culture*. (eds.) Cary Nelson and Nelson Grossberg. Urbana : University Illinois Press, 1988.