

Dialectics of Subaltern voices in Barbara Nimri Aziz's *Heir to a silent song.*

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"All literature is protest. You can't name a single literary work that isn't protest." -Richard Wright

Abstract

Heir to a Silent Song is a prose work by an American writer, anthropologist, critic and a vibrant researcher Barbara Nimri Aziz. Beside the delineation of her travel record and the rustic life of common people living in the eastern hills, the prose echoes the subaltern voices as a protest against evils and aberrations existing in the social system. As an epitome of the voices of the voiceless, it depicts the plight, the grievances and the pathos of basically two female rebels from the eastern hills of Nepal: Yogmaya and Durgadevi.

Subaltern studies are the study of social protest, and the social exclusion and exploitation. Since subaltern refers to the group of oppressed, suppressed and marginalized people, Aziz ventures to portray them as the messiahs of subaltern people in her work. This paper strives to explore how Aziz delineates them as the representative figures of subaltern aesthetics. It attempts to answer the questions: "How do Yogmaya and Durga Devi represent subaltern voices? and what do they combat for ? " This research study conceptualizes the theoretical frameworks of subaltern theories to invigorate the study. Aziz presents how two women combat for female rights and justice for the poor and low class people in the contemporary society during Rana regime. The desperate struggle of two subaltern females against social evils like caste and gender discriminations, corruption, exploitation, fraudulent activities etc. is a striking thrust of the prose work.

Key words: Subaltern, messiah, Pathos, aberrations, social evils, oppression, crusade, Marginalized, gender etc.

Subaltern Aesthetics

Subaltern studies represent the voices of the voiceless. It renders strong protest against social evils and aberration. Aziz's *Heir to Silent Song* echoes the voices of the voiceless represented by Yogmaya and Durgadevi . It is an allusion to the work of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci which alludes to any person or group of inferior rank whether because

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of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion. Subaltern studies began in 1982, when a collective of South Asian scholars in Britain, including Dipesh Chakrabarty and Partha Chatterjee, began publication of a book-length journal titled *Subaltern Studies*, edited by Ranajit Guha. Subalterns, as agents of political and social change, have had a particular interest in the discourses and rhetoric of emerging political and social movements. It analyzes and advocates for the bottom layer of society by challenging capitalist logic. Gyan Prakash remarks that subaltern studies refer to subordination in terms of class, caste and gender :

The establishment of subaltern studies was aimed to promote, as the preface by Guha to the first volume declared, the study and discussion of subalternist themes in south Asian studies. The term subaltern drawn from Antonio Gramsci's writings refers to subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language and culture and was used to signify the centrality of dominant/ dominated relationships in history. . . ., its aim was to rectify the elitist characteristic of much research and academic work in south Asian Studies. (1477)

Subaltern writers view its consciousness broadly in the traditional Marxian sense as a manner of thought determined by one's place in the production system. *Subaltern Studies* as a collective enterprise represents the most significant achievement of South Asian cultural studies. Subaltern studies is a broadly influential academic movement whose goal is to refocus history on the unique role of subaltern or marginalized people in bringing about large scale transformations in society. The implications of subaltern studies for geography are especially apparent in the group's exploration of specialized categories of class, ancestry, and religion. Edward said regards subaltern as a discourse :

As an alternative discourse, the work of subaltern scholars can be seen as an analogue of all those recent attempts in the west and throughout the rest of the world to articulate the hidden or suppressed accounts of numerous groups, women minorities, disadvantaged or disposed groups, refugees, exiles etc. Subaltern studies represent a crossing of boundaries, a smuggling of ideas across lines, a stirring up of intellectual and always political complacency. (Foreword vi-vii)

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak views that subaltern is simply a strategic essentialism, a type of necessary evil used to make practical advances. Thus, subaltern studies face four challenges. First, textual records contain few references to subaltern voices. Second, the references that do exist were often written by those in power. Third, even where their words are recorded, subalterns often speak in extremely imbalanced circumstances of the type they face throughout their lives. Fourth, the division of people into elites and subalterns is itself the result of colonial oppression. Despite such obstacles, however, subaltern studies remains a vibrant movement (as a social protest) whose scholars continue to use creative and alternative forms of knowledge to overcome the legacies of injustice and social exclusion. Spivak projects subaltern studies as a conscious movement:

To investigate, discover and establish a subaltern or peasant consciousness seems at first to be a positivistic project – a project which assumes that, if properly prosecuted, it will lead to firm ground, to something that can be disclosed. This is all the more significant in the case of recovering a consciousness because within the post- enlightenment tradition that the collective participates in as interventionist historians, consciousness is the ground that makes all disclosures possible. (10)

Spivak regards subaltern as the ground of human consciousness which works as a positivistic project. He views that it works as a conscious movement for social revolution and change. It becomes the platform of raising human consciousness against injustice, social discriminations and exclusions.

Repressions of Silent songs: Yogmaya and Durga Devi

In the inception of the prose work, Aziz describes her journey to the eastern hills of Sankhuwasabha and Bhojpur districts of Nepal, where she happens to hear about Yogmaya and Durgadevi as the dissidents of the contemporary social systems. Through the mouth of a Saint woman i.e. a Bhaktini Mana Maya, Aziz hears the enchanting lyrical verses of Yogamaya, which inspire her a lot for the research study. Then, she begins to learn about Yogmaya and her lyrical verses of Sarvartha Yogavani which she calls *Hajurbani* massively with the help of some Nepali people. After a long time study and research, she produces the Prose work *Heir to a Silent Song*.

In the preliminary part of her book, Aziz discusses about Yogmaya portraying her as a poet, Teacher and insurgent. She talks about how Yogmaya fights against Rana regime and so called high class Brahmins for the justice, good governance and equality, and how Yogmaya attempts to weed out social evils persistent in the contemporary society, “Yogmaya employed religious ideals in a non-violent challenge to Nepal’s Brahmanic patriarchy and the elitist structure the high caste Hindus established across Nepal. She advocated social reforms for equality for equality (xxvi)”. The voices Yogmaya raises represent the voices of the marginalized, oppressed people i.e. subaltern group. Aziz remarks:

Her words are a tender reminder of the sensitivity of all of us. We have common needs, joys and suffering. Perhaps the tears Yogmaya speaks of here are the laments of men and women, bound against their will by society’s caste rules. Those laws destined some to be lower, and poorer, and to thereby suffer many deprivations. (36)

Aziz talks about how Yogmaya reflects the laments of low caste people in her lyrical verses representing the voices of the voiceless, “अधि मेरो जात थियो ब्राम्हण कुलैमा/अहिले मेरो जात छैन राख चुलैमा ॥ [Before I owned a caste, belonging to Brahmin clan/now I have no caste, chuck it there in the hearth] (qtd. in Aziz,60). Yogmaya addresses a complex problem in the form of untouchability rampant in Hindu society. Ravidas writes against caste system: “All

people are involved in the cycle of caste system. This disease of caste system is harmful for the human society. This sin of caste system, one day, will eat up the whole humanity” (Shalok-121).

Her verses make a realistic portrayal of the sufferings of the masses – subaltern groups making strong protest against caste-based, class-based, racial and economic deceptions. Her awareness regarding social exclusion of the lower dregs of the society reflect her wish for excluders to mend them in human ways and to change their social behavior. For that, she uses her verses as a tool as it is not only the representation of social reality but also a necessary functional part of social control. Yogmaya attacks the money lenders for their trickery and deception :

दौलथिया हँनुभयो त्यही निर्धा बाटे ।	You got wealthy from the poor by trickery
आसामीले कर्जा तिर्यो तमसुक छ ठाडै ॥	You say the debt still stands even if paid
छोरो थियो वालक बाबु मरेछ ।	The son was a child when father died
लोभी साहु मान्न गयो तिर्नु परेछ ॥ (योगवाणी, २७)	He had to pay the debt again. (My trans.)

Yogmaya raises vibrant issues of the contemporary society with a view to alleviating them, and thereby establishing *Dharma Rajjya* in the country. She does not yield to any social and political agents and compromise with them at the risk of social reformation. Her *Sarvartha Yogavani* becomes a platform through which she advocates social revolution. She intensifies her campaign with her staunch assault against the people indulged in blackmailing and cheating. She attacks the agents involved in food adulteration too. In the connection of deception, she utters:

कोही प्राणीले मख्खन् बेचे कपट मिलाए ।	What swindlers sell as butter
कोही प्राणीले मख्खन् किने त्यो धुप चलाए ॥	Others burn for incense
धुपको वासन् छैन एउटा कपट् गनाए ।	Whose odious smell.....is greed .
लोक भो भुङ्गे देबहरु बिन्ती चढाए ॥ (योगवानी, १०७)	How horrified the Gods! they plead (Aziz)

Yogmaya highlights her view of deception through her *Yogbani* with an insight to reforming her society. People of higher caste commit food adulteration and even misuse *Mana* and *Pathi* [a type of measurement] for their benefit. They sell crops with small *Mana* and *Pathi* whereas they use bigger ones while purchasing crops from others. Yogmaya considers the misuse of *Mana* and *Pathi* as an evil act:

जन्म नर अन्न पचिसा लायो ।	Throughout life, You keep crops on <i>Pachchisa</i> ,
साना ठुला पाथीहरु चलायो ॥	Using smaller and bigger <i>Mana</i> and <i>Pathi</i>
लिनु ठुला दिनु पर्दा त्यो सानो ।	You use smaller while selling but bigger while buying
अधम् त्योहो कुम्भीपाक बास जानु ॥	Doing so, you reach the hell. (My trans.)
(योगवानी, ३०)	

Yogmaya's verses ventilate grievances and bitter realities of the marginalized class of society in which social protest is embedded overtly or covertly. They create a creative political, social and intellectual space for the oppressed sections of society to amplify their voices. It inspires them to seek their lost identity where they are systematically silenced, misplaced and misrepresented within the historical, economic as well as socio political processes. The current forms of exploitations based on caste, class, gender etc are too discussed in Aziz's work. Yogmaya voices against gender discrimination too. She herself becomes aware of male chauvinism propagated by Brhamin priests. She unites the people from all walks of life and forms the first *nari samiti* so as to fight Rana's atrocity and the oppression of higher caste people. She refers to gender discrimination:

अठार पुराण नौ ब्याकरण ।	Eighteen Puranas, nine vyakarnas
यही सचेत् जीवको सबै चाकर ॥	He who knows these is well served
ब्राम्हणको छोरो बेद पढ्छ ।	Sons of Brahmins read the Vedas
म थाङ्गनेलाई भेद गर्छ ॥ (योगबानी, २२७)	For us ragged ones, they discriminate.(My trans.)

Yogmaya strongly opposes gender inequality as she thinks that it hinders women from mainstreams of social life. Ironically, Brahmins of her time, though they read the vedas, enslave the women by making their rules out of their reason and getting them confined to the four walls of domestic chores. Brahmins claiming themselves superior to other castes oppress the women at large. She attacks them for their discriminating behavior through her verses. She challenges Rana rulers not to be unjust and brutal towards the common folk. She foretells that their rein ends soon due to their inhumanity and shortsightedness. She frequently implores then rulers to reform the social status and govern the country by justice. But her efforts remain vain. No change takes place at all even if she makes her strenuous efforts. Instead, suppression and oppression proceeds further and deeper. In a verse, Yogmaya attacks the rulers for their corrupted nature:

अन्त्य कालमा त्यो घुसले फटाउला धाँदा ।	Fat bellies burst out
बडो कष्ट मिली जाला त्यो घुस निस्की जाँदा ॥	And those bribes ooze out
अहिले मात्र पचेको छ भरे पच्चे छैन ।	To poison you
	So savior your riches-while you can (Aziz)

Yogmaya mocks at *Rana* rulers who are corrupted in nature saying that their bribes ooze out in the long run and it cannot be digested. Their corruption will poison themselves in future. People think that they should be rich by hook or by crook, by fair means or foul. They have no farsightedness. Thus, Aziz incorporates many verses related to subaltern issues raised by Yogmaya in her prose work.

The second woman she talks about in her prose work is Durga Devi from Falikot village, Sadananda municipality, Bhojpur. Aziz also depicts her as a messiah of the voiceless and the oppressed folks living in her society. Aziz remarks: “She pursued court cases, and waged a campaign against corrupt and indolent bureaucrats in local districts. Petitioners regularly trudged to Durga’s house seeking help, but she had no community of followers” (xxvi). Durga basically raises her voices concerning land inheritance, abuse of power, laziness of officials, rape and abuse, debt trickery and extortion. Her voices also represent the grievances of low class marginalized people. Aziz remarks:

Durga’s goal was that government officials observe the law, that police apply the law, and that courts be fair. She appealed to the courts to keep her share of land after her husband died; she helped people who were cheated to name the culprits and demand justice from the police; she came to the defense of a violated child; she helped women who were abused; she badgered government clerk until they did their job. (88)

Though Durga was a child widow, and childless, she had a property rights from her husband’s family. Since women cannot challenge their husband or husband’s family for property, they often remain silent. But Durga is different from others as she daringly fights for her property right against her- in- laws after her husband’s demise. She struggles for eight years filing a series of cases in the court for the possession of her land. She continues her battle until she gets her victory. Though the police, clerks and merchants disdain the confrontational style of Durga, she never surrenders before them. Since Durga’s actions are against the existing culture of the contemporary society, they even misplace her files and even harass her at every turn. She continues her battle for her right as mentioned in the general law of the nation called Muluki Yen. She launches her crusade for her rights representing the silent voices of the subaltern group. Aziz further refers to another adventure she undertakes in her in court:

Durga had one more adventure in court, a final battle. She would fight for her own brother’s land, the property which passed to his widow (the buhari, or daughter-in-law) when Sher Bahadur and her mother died. Like, Durga, she was a widow from childhood and thus had no children. Since Durga had no other brothers, this woman found herself the sole heir to Sher’s Bahadur’S estate. (107)

Durga does not only fight for her rights but also for her Buhari’s (daughter-in-law) right to dispose of her lands as she wishes. She also stands against the rape cases taken place in her community. Durga, thus, becomes the messiah of the oppressed and the suppressed raising the voices for their justice and equality. Tara Lal Shrestha asserts: “Subaltern studies is a strong intrusion against the norms and the values of writing history from the top level. It aims at writing about the history of subaltern people from the lower level. It has become an intellectual discourse emerged from the southern Asia against bourgeois national history (19)”.

Aziz's prose work becomes a kind of historical record of the subaltern group represented by Yogmaya and Durgadevi. Their persistent struggle against higher class agents and government officials for the sake of human rights and justice are vividly and graphically depicted in her work. The subaltern aesthetics inherent in her work is worth mentioning and worth researching all through time.

Conclusion

Aziz's prose work *Heir to a Silent Song* ventilates the heartfelt agony, woes and cries of the oppressed people represented by two female rebels of Nepal- Yogmaya and Durga Devi. Since subaltern studies concentrates its concern on the unheard voices of the voiceless – the marginalized and the oppressed, Aziz's representation of two female rebels in her book marks the beginning of unfolding the hidden history of Nepal. Some historical events and facts are intentionally suppressed by the so called autocratic rulers and higher class people since they may not be in their favour. Those events which match the favor of the ruling or elite class, they are highlighted and brought into the lime light. Those events which do not match their interest or favor will not be recognized, honored and even recorded in the historical domain. When the historical record falls upon the hands of lunatic rulers, there might be the question upon the originality of the events recorded in the history. Michael Foucault says, "All the events of history are yet to be rewritten as it is power centered history of any time (qtd. in Shrestha,18)." The historical record of some minor events related to the lower class people really lays a significant impact upon the development of human civilization.

The subaltern voices are the voices of the voiceless. Should subaltern voices get listened and recognized, there will be a true respect and honour to the norms and values of democracy. Otherwise, it will be the autocratic system of the government and social agents. In order to preserve the true spirit of democracy, subaltern voices like those of Yogmaya and Durga Devi should be materialized without much delay. The crusade of subaltern group for their rights and justice really shows the path to the concerned. It also contributes a lot for further research activities in the days to come.

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