

The Politics of Subversion: A Reading of *Yantrana* or (Agony)

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Abstract

Subversion is traditionally associated with the challenging of a dominant worldview; the act of trespassing against accepted social and organizational mores. According to Gramsci, the term ‘subaltern classes’ are those groups ‘subordinated by hegemony and excluded from any meaningful role in a regime of power’ (Holden 2002: 202). Gramsci reiterates that in order for a specific social group to gain and uphold power they must create ‘a form of social and political “control” which combines physical force or coercion with intellectual, moral and cultural persuasion or consent’ (Ransome 1992:135).

According to Brannigan, “literary texts are vehicles of power which act as useful objects of study in that they contain the same potential for power and subversion as exist in society generally” (Brannigan, 1998, 6)

Subversion, thus, has been interpreted variously by different scholars. However, one thing common in them is the notion of ‘subjugation’, ‘domination’, ‘subaltern’ and that of ‘power’ which finds prominence while analysing any work of literature on subversion. Homi Bhabha, one of the leading post-colonial theorists states subaltern groups as “an oppressed minority groups whose presence was crucial to the self-definition of the majority groups. The subaltern social groups were also in a position to subvert the authority of those who had hegemonic power.” (1996:19)

This paper is a modest attempt to provide an insight into the lives of the tea garden workers of Darjeeling, as portrayed in the Nepali novel *Yantrana* meaning (Agony). Many factors impinge upon the reason for subversion, most important of it being lack of proper housing facilities, medical facilities, schools, drinking water and individual rights of the workers like bonus, winter allowances etc. It throws light on how the oppressed class of people are able to subvert the Imperial governance through self-awareness and unity of the workers brought about by conscious citizens and the Trade Union.

Key Words: Subversion, Subaltern, Hegemony, Subjugation, Imperial, Power, Post-colonial

Main Body

The novel *Yantrana* (meaning ‘Agony’) written by Asit Rai, a doyen of Nepali literati from Darjeeling was published in 1979. His literary oeuvre consists of a large collection of works to his credit, some of which are Sahitya Akademi winners. It is a socio-realistic portrayal of the lives of the people of the tea garden. The plot revolves around the hardships endured by them in every sphere of life. Life has all along been the same for them since generations. However, these simplistic rural folks fail to understand that they have been oppressed by the colonial masters. The novel *Yantrana* (meaning ‘Agony’) is the story of the agony of the people who are subjugated and suppressed by those in power. They are compelled to bear the

injustice meted out to them and remain silent, to the extent of making them voiceless for centuries. The novel is woven through the fictional characters living during the colonial and neo-colonial era.

It highlights the reasons for the formation of the Trade Union. With the coming of the trade union, slowly they begin to understand the Individual Rights of the workers. The myth that the owner is equivalent to God – someone whom they had looked upon as their benefactor is broken. In course of time, they put forward various demands to survive and reclaim their dignity of living as human beings. Deprived of basic needs like hospitals and doctors, many incidents take place which furthers the cause to make their reclamation. Debates and discussions between the labourers and owner as well as the management are perspicuous. When their demands are not met protest and agitations start in the tea garden. They go on a strike in the factories which lead to the imprisonment of union leaders. This calls for a mass movement for the release of the leaders. As the movement reaches its peak the workers are conscious enough to realize that they are bound by the chains of slavery which need to be broken. Finally dissent, disagreement and agitation lead to subversion of those in power.

The protagonist in the novel is a youth named Chandra Bahadur also referred to as CB by many people. He was born and brought up in the tea garden and so did his forefathers. The love for the garden made him work there though he was offered the job of a teacher elsewhere. Yet, he stays in his hometown as he had a deep desire to serve the people. He wanted the rural folk to progress and raise their standard of living. Most important of all to liberate them from the chains of Imperial Governance which they were unaware of. Under his painstaking effort the Trade Union was revived though it had existed earlier. However, it was closed due to the dissonance among its members. He was an active member of the Trade Union; in fact he was the Secretary.

The Trade Union though in its nascent form remained steadfast. Though CB was still a novice in the logistics of the trade union yet, he was candid in his work. A lot of unity was already evident amongst the people of the garden. He tried to instil a feeling of self awareness among the people and not to have a blind faith in the system, which is the reason for 'hegemony'.

Following the footsteps of Chandra Bahadur many staffs of the tea garden had joined the union. The owner did not have monopoly like before. He was trying his level best to destroy the union. He often gave money to some people who could betray the cause of the union and secretly give him information. Yet, it wasn't possible for him to dismantle or break the union. The people of the garden were determined in getting their demands fulfilled and were ready to fight for it.

A worker is also a human being and should have a right to live in that manner. They should be provided with jobs according to their capabilities. They should be given proper housing as well as medical facilities. Along with a decent wage to survive, a worker should also be given winter allowance and hill allowance which is entitled to all other government servants.

Slowly these perceptions regarding their individual rights were beginning to be felt by every worker. Now Chandra Bahadur has got to understand why his grandfather in spite of giving

all his youthful energies, sweat and blood lived in hellish circumstances. Why his mother gave birth to him under a tea bush. What his father Man Bahadur got after falling from a cliff and being buried under the debris? What had the owner done for the family of a person who gave life for such a cause? Who had created this situation where a mother while raising a son and educating him often survived on half square meals a day.

Chandra Bahadur had got to know from the elders that after his father's death, the plantation owner had given their family Rs 100/ to do the last rites. In fact, for the owner a person's life had the value of Rs. 100/ only. Many thoughts often came in his mind, "What is my actual service to my brethren. Should I give importance to attaining sole benefits in life or should I strive hard so that the same comfort and benefit be given to everybody." [p- 40]

While this was going on a big tragic incident occurs which portrays the trivial value of a worker's life. This later becomes one of the reasons for subversion. One day Chandra Bahadur was on leave. On that fateful day an accident happens in the factory. A labourer's coat was pulled by the tea leaves crushing machine. Along with the coat his hand was pulled also. Loud shrieks poured in saying, "Somebody is killed! Hurry up, hurry up and save him." [p- 45] as blood was oozing from it. Amidst this somebody remembered to run up and switch off the machine. By that time a big injury had already been done.

The news was rife and every family was worried thinking what if 'he' was their own kin. Everybody was running hither and thither towards the factory to know who was injured. In the meantime, the family of the injured worker consisting of his wife and daughter come rushing to the spot. Seeing his condition, the wife nearly collapses. The manager was called but he was nowhere in the scene. On seeing the helplessness of the state of the worker many requested Chandra Bahadur to take the injured person to the hospital as his condition was worsening, "Secretary Saab, (Sir) please do something from your side. At least call one vehicle and take the injured to the hospital. When this worker was working the edge of the sleeve of his coat was pulled by the machine, dragging him also. Thankfully someone remembered to switch off the machine. Or else he would have been in pieces now." [p- 45]

Chandra Bahadur knew the truth that the owner and the manager both had gone to see a flower show. So he called a taxi and with three or four workers holding the injured person in a stretcher waited for it. After much waiting the taxi arrived. Putting the injured person, the taxi sped through the rough winding roads of the tea garden, taking him to the Government hospital. There were three or more people in it. By the time the patient was taken inside he was already cold. On examination the doctor pronounced him dead. He further said that the patient was brought too late to the hospital and by that time a lot of blood loss had taken place. Had he been given some medical aid on time he could have been saved. The body was taken for post mortem. Completing other formalities, it was finally brought to his house in the garden at 6 pm. The statement given by the doctor in the hospital 'had he been given treatment on time he could have been saved' created a furore in the Tea garden. Even Urmi, (an active member of the Trade union and later CB's wife) rushed to the hospital and was present when the declaration was made by the doctor.

This incident unleashed a storm of protest in the tea garden. An urgent meeting of the executive committee members was called to make a strategy of what plan of action should follow. The following day a procession was to start holding a big flag showing their

discontent on the callousness of the management causing death of a worker in an inhuman way. The oppressive atmosphere in which they had been serving for years altogether was beyond their endurance any more.

According to Ashcroft et al., “Bhabha has similarly asserted that the colonized is constructed within a disabling master discourse of colonialism which specifies a degenerate native population to justify its conquest and subsequent rule. Unlike Spivak, though, Bhabha has asserted that the ‘subaltern’ people can speak, and that a native voice can be recovered. His introduction of the ideas of mimicry and parody as both a strategy of colonial subjection through ‘reform, regulation and discipline, which “appropriates” the Other’, and the native’s inappropriate imitations of this discourse, which has the effect of menacing colonial authority replacing theory (Bhabha 1984b: 126–7) suggests that the subaltern has, in fact, spoken, and that properly symptomatic readings of the colonialist text can and do ‘recover a native voice’.” (as quoted in *The Empire Writes Back*, p- 29). Similarly, as requisite of a postcolonial and subversive novel, we find in this novel that the people in the procession would demand a hospital with good doctors immediately to save the lives of the rest. Besides they would also make a claim that the family of the deceased worker should be given compensation, along with some security for the future of the family. The whole night Chandra Bahadur, Urmi and few others move around the garden explaining the agenda, as well as the programme schedule.

The next day all the people who had left home do not go for work. Instead, they assemble in the ground. The mass gathering unabated and within an hour the whole village was empty. Starting from the elderly people to small infants in the cradle, hung by the straps on their mother’s head was a part of this procession for the first time. At the beginning of the cortege was the dead body of Dhanbir who was now considered the first martyr in this fight against oppression? Seeing the swelling crowds and the excitement portraying the unity among the labourers, the manager and owner had gone to a safer haven.

The raging mob chanted slogans saying –

“Sahid Dhanbir, Zindabad.”

“Injustice must come to an end.”

“Mazdoor Union, Zindabad.”

“We workers are human beings, Zindabad.”

“We Demand Safety of Our Lives, Zindabad.”

“We demand a hospital and doctors, Zindabad.”

“Owner Bhimay Rana shall be toppled down, Zindabad.”

“We shall take life for a life, Zindabad.” [p- 47]

The procession proceeded towards the owner’s bungalow. The agitation and excitement doubled as it reached nearer. Some went to the extent of saying – ‘Malik’s kothi (or owner’s bungalow) shall be burnt. Yes, it has to be burnt.’

Chandra Bahadur started explaining the frenzied crowd that the bungalow, godown, factory and tea bushes were their own property and should not be destroyed. In spite of his sayings the uncontrollable youths in a fiery rage started pelting stones and breaking the window panes, bulbs in electric poles, rampaged and marred the flowers in the garden and broke the gate. In the meantime, the police vehicle arrived. They did not stop the procession. Instead, they barricaded the bungalow to prevent further damage.

Duncan Brown in *The Concise Companion to Postcolonial Literature* says that among the debates about postcolonial theory is its theorization of the silencing of the colonized “within the colonial encounter”. But he says that despite the attempt to “silence the other, “the colonized have continued to speak, often in unofficial ways and from unofficial spaces, but also from the centers of their societies” (Chew and Richards 2010: 4)

Urmi gives a speech followed by others. The labourers demand that the owner and the management accept their callousness. Until all their demands are fulfilled, they would not go back to work. The garden would go on a strike. The president of the Union Hem Pokhrel, the MLA, seconded Chandra Bahadur’s proposal of holding a strike in the tea garden. He even gives an interesting speech as to why they should now come forward to take a step to dismantle the hegemonic rule. The strike would start from the very next day was given in writing. It was signed by the President, Secretary and circulated in the garden.

It was the month of July and the peak season for the plucking of tea leaves. A strike during these times would cause a huge loss to the owner. In the evening of the strike Chandra Bahadur along with the local President and three, four members were arrested. Six of them were taken to Darjeeling Thana. Luckily Urmi was not at home or else she would have been arrested also. A warrant was issued in her name.

Chandra Bahadur’s arrest did not dampen the spirit of the agitation that was going on. Urmi was working in an even more active manner that too hiding from Management and Police both.

The next day another big procession marched towards the Thana- saying, “Release our Leader.”

Another one shouted “Injustice has to be removed from the tea garden.” Someone added, “Our demands have to be granted.” [p- 48]

The strike continued for many days. In the tea garden the tea leaves had grown in bountiful waiting for the first flush to be plucked. In the meantime, the machinery parts in the factory had begun to rust. Finally, the owner had to yield and be subdued due to the labourers’ unity. He had to send a message for a compromise.

On the fourth day of the strike there was a tripartite meeting between owner, labourer and the government. There was a heated discussion in the table talk between the owner and the representatives of the union. An assurance was given of constructing a hospital within a year and taking care of the health of the labourers. Apart from it a sum of Rs 5000/- was given as an indemnity to the family of the deceased worker. Other than that, the expenses for the education of his eight-year-old son would be borne by the Management for the next ten years. The owner accepted his fault in overlooking the safety and health of the workers. Six people who were arrested were released and the two warrant orders also taken back.

Conclusion

The ideology of power and subversion presupposes a form of legitimating actions. Edward Said admits in “Culture and Imperialism” that as there has always been colonial literature, a literature of opposition and decolonization started to appear reflecting opposition to the empire in the center as well as nationalist resistance in the peripheral. He believes that “Here, too, culture is in advance of politics, military history, or economic process...Just as culture may predispose and actively prepare one society for the overseas domination of another, it may also prepare that society to relinquish or modify the idea of overseas domination” (As quoted in *The Empire Writes Back*, 200). Thus, the critical task of literature and humanity in general is to ask how we might free ourselves from the constraints of domination to engage more actively and freely in the creation of community which the novelist Asit Rai has been able to do in this Nepali novel, *Yantarana* or (*Agony*).

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