



Research Paper

Negotiating Marginal Space in Umakanta Sarma's *Ejak Manuh Ekhon Aranya*: A Subaltern Study

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Abstract: A subaltern is one who occupies a space on the margin or one relegated to the margin by those who exercise power either through a discourse or by other means. The voice of the subaltern is consumed by the hegemonic discourse of the dominant group(s) and, as a result, the subaltern is only spoken for, or represented, as exemplified by Spivak in his seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" The subaltern can be an individual or a community and these marginalized people are denied their subjectivity on multiple levels. The hegemonic historiography of the colonizer/neo-colonizer, which is the product of Eurocentric discourse, is deconstructed by a group of Indian historians, who are the pioneers of subaltern study in Indian, to rewrite history from the margin. They try to amplify the suppressed voice of the subaltern by allowing them to speak from the margin. Similar attempts have been made by the postcolonial Indian novelists, who allow the voice of their subaltern characters to come to the surface in a subversive language which is not necessarily the language of their masters. Umakanta Sarma's "Ejak Manuh Ekhon Aranya", winner of Assam Prakashan Parishad Award 1988, and Kolaguru Bishnu Prashad Rabha Award of Asom Sahitya Sabha 1990, is an example of such an endeavour. This paper is an attempt to explore Umakanta Sarma's treatment of the radical voices and activities of the subaltern classes, particularly the coolies of the Rupahijan Tea Estate of Assam, under the British rule. In order to do so, I would basically rely on bell hook's theory of marginal space in which she talks about "choosing the margin as a space of radical openness" for the survival of the subaltern classes. hook's idea of marginality that emphasizes the "definite distinction between the marginality which is imposed by oppressive structure and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance, as location of radical openness and possibility" (*Yearning* 151) can be helpful in exploring strategic positions taken by Sarma's characters in the process of remaking their home and subjectivity.

Keywords: Marginal Space, Subaltern, Postcolonial, Hegemonic Discourse, Resistance

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I. INTRODUCTION

Umakanta Sarma depicts the marginal space occupied by the subaltern characters in his novel "Ejak Manuh Ekhon Aranya" and foregrounds the radical voices and activities of the coolies of the Rupahijan Tea Estate of Assam, under the British rule. In order to explore this situation, we would basically rely on bell hook's theory of marginal space along with the critical theories of some key thinkers on space

II. CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

Introducing the concept of the margin as a 'space of radical openness' (*Yearning* 145-53), bell hooks argues that the margin and the centre are neither antithetical nor an indication of colonizer/colonized disconnection. Instead, she argues that racial, sexual, economic and social differences shape a response to, and therefore a connection with, existing cultural norms. This connection, as it is understood from the margins, is significantly oppositional as 'marginality [is] much more than a site of deprivation ... it is also the site of radical

possibility, a space of resistance' (*Yearning* 149). hooks thus stresses the interplay between margin-centre relations, suggesting that the subaltern's positionality informs political alternatives as it offers 'the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds' (150). For hooks, subaltern identity is shaped by processes of marginalization and it is within this marginal space that diverse subaltern identities are produced. hooks' construction of radical subaltern subjectivity pushes the process of identity formation beyond exclusionary struggles against those who dominate and on to a new terrain, a "space of radical openness" where the key question of 'who we can be and still be ourselves' can be politically re-imagined and practiced. hooks herself notes, "Assimilation, imitation, or assuming the role of rebellious exotic are not the only options and never have been" (*Yearning* 153). Soja epitomizes hooks' advocacy of marginality in the following words: ". . . she chooses a space that is simultaneously central and marginal (and purely neither at the same time), a difficult and risky place on the edge, filled with contradictions and ambiguities, with perils but also with new possibilities: a Thirdspace of political choice" (*Thirdspace* 97).

For hooks, spaces in the margin offer fluidity, multiplicity, and diversity which offer the possibility of moving beyond the colonial experience. This alternative spatiality, in contrast to the hegemonic spatiality, is filled with heterogeneous voices and diverse experiences that emphasize difference and subjectivity. In such spaces, oppression becomes transformed into resistance offering new radical perspectives, new sites of imagination and creativity, from which the colonial representation of the 'Other' can be expunged and, perhaps overcome. Referring to such spaces situated in the margin, Minh-ha notes: 'margins, our sites of survival, become our fighting grounds' (Cotton, 330). This fluid conceptual space is epitomized by Bhabha's concept of 'Third Space' (*Location* 38), his own sense, echoing hooks, of a marginal location which 'overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of translation: a place of hybridity' (*Location* 25), where the interrogation is not a matter of simple opposition between colonizer and colonized that leaves existing patterns of order intact, but instead replaces binary oppositions with a third alternative, a means of transcending the dialectic in favour of 'a political object that is new, neither the one nor the other' (*Location* 25). Margin here becomes a space of postcolonial plurality – a space where identity is cross-cultural rather than multicultural, 'the self-recognition of one civilization in the culture-bed of the other' (Bundy 38). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak faces directly, in her position as an exile, the challenges of choosing marginality and asserting the radical alterity of subaltern voices. Critiquing the continuous demand for accepting marginality as an exile, she advocates for herself a position in the centre: "In that kind of situation the only strategic thing to do is to absolutely present oneself at the centre" (*Post-colonial Critic* 105). This chaotic revisioning of postcolonial space is nowhere more evident than in the works of postmodern and poststructuralist geographers. For Soja, space hinges on his own particular notion of 'Thirdspace' which defies the absolute as it celebrates hybridity and difference, and refuses conventional identities created from opposition between the Firstspace and Secondspace in favour of those formed from complex processes in which numberless fusions occur. This complex space is, for Soja, neither inherently positive nor negative, but a chaotic experience that simply exists in space.

III. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Umakanta Sarma's *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* is an epic saga of the journey of 754 'coolies' from Northern parts of India - initially from their native places to Goalond by train occupying only four bogies with a single toilet in each one of them, and then from Goalond to Dhubri by water embarking on a small ship that has the capacity to carry only 200 passengers - to a tea garden in Assam and their subsequent placement in the margins of the tea garden where they face atrocities of the British officers as well as their subordinate Indian employees in the form of corporeal punishment and silencing of their voices, against which the 'coolies' put up a resistance, feeble and ineffective in many cases but always significant, staying in that marginal space.

During their temporary stay at the 'coolie depot' in Goalond station on their way to Assam, the 'coolies' discovered that some of their women were missing. They made a hue and cry and surrounding the 'Sardars' they demanded that the whereabouts of the women be revealed. Banha and Maghu were particularly vocal about this incident, and while Sardar No. 4 used foul words about Maghu's missing wife, he hit the Sardar with the piece of wood he was carrying. The Sardar immediately raised his 'lathi' to hit Maghu, but Banha stood between them and said, "You have been repeatedly telling us that you have no objection to our staying on here. But you too can't go. You think you can go away by leaving us here. Go, if you can, and I'll smash your bones to pieces" (*Ejak Manuh* 22). The Sardar was surprised at Banha's reaction as the latter never dared to raise his eyes to talk

to him. He called Banha a pig and used foul words regarding his elder daughter who was also missing. Some of the coolies leaving the 'depot' stopped and turned towards the Sardar. Banha's wife picked up a brick and threw it aiming at the head of the Sardar. It hit his nose making it bleed. Breathing heavily she said, "You rouge, you devil, the mouth with which you have spoken foul words about my daughter will be consumed by worms" (22). The Sardar hit her hard with his 'lathi' on her back making her fall down on the ground. Banha held him around his waist and Maghu held his two legs with his hands. Tulsi, Banha's son, started beating the Sardar with a branch of a tree. The Sardar kicked off Maghu, delivered a series of punches on Tulsi's chest and stomach and hit Banha on the head with his 'lathi'. Fearing that the other coolies might surround them, the rest of the Sardars sent away Sardar No. 4 escorted by a few 'coolies', and persuaded some other 'coolies' to carry the victims to the port. In their journey across the sea too there were attempts on the part of the colonizers (captain and other British crew members) to silence their coming to voice. Thus everywhere they went there were pressure to silence their voices, to co-opt and undermine them.

In Assam 'coolies' were made to live in the coolie lines situated in the margins of Rupahijan Tea Estate and the author presents different situations in which the colonizers punish the coolies in order to aggressively silence them. The readers also come to know about the censorship of the 'coolies' - they are not allowed to leave the 'coolie lines':

"Coolies are confined to the coolie lines of the garden. Their duties are hoeing and sawing in the day and sleeping in the huts of coolie lines at night. It's a crime to go out of the garden at night" (Ejak Manuh 52).

Thus the 'coolies' are made to live in a highly spatialized locale that appears to be fixed, absolute and controlled. The tea planters' right to territory is protected by the authority they give to their spatial divisions. The coolies are provided with huts which are not hygienic and appropriate for a decent living. The gap between the colonizer and the colonized, is made conspicuous by the disparity in their living conditions as well as in the exercising of authority. This spatial demarcation of territory is presented as natural, as all that it is built upon is obscured by the pervasiveness of the colonial concept. The labourers are made to respect this bounded territory as a legitimate entity and no local affiliations are allowed to undermine this authority.

In the preface to *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* hooks expresses the following thoughts on marginality: "To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body" (12). This statement is a key to the understanding of her complex notion of marginality. This reveals the complex interfaces between the centre and the margin deconstructing thereby colonizer/colonized binary to pave the way for a third alternative or what Soja calls 'trialectics of spatiality'.

In the Rupahijan Tea Estate 'coolie lines' were a daily reminder to their marginality. But across those lines were the Bungalows, and Babu Quarters, they could not enter, and people they could not look directly in the face. Across those lines was a world they could work in as maids, as servants, as long as it was in a service capacity. They could enter that world but they could not live or belong there. They had always to return to the margin, to the 'coolie lines'. But by living 'on the edge' they developed a particular way of seeing reality. For instance, the 'coolies' considered corporeal punishment as a simple and regular phenomenon to be faced with stoic resistance. They regarded themselves as an essential part of the world of Rupahijan Tea Estate and realized that without them the Tea Estate cannot survive. In the midst of so much restriction they could dream of a better future for them as manifested in Arjun's passing of Matric in First Division and his getting admitted in a Medical college. Thus they looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. They directed their focus both on the centre and on the margin. This mode of seeing enabled them to understand the importance of both in the existence of 'a whole universe'. Their survival strategy was "an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and centre and an ongoing private acknowledgement that they were a necessary, vital part of that whole" (*Yearning* 149).

This sense of wholeness, impressed upon their consciousness by the structure of their daily lives, provided them with an "oppositional world-view - a mode of seeing unknown to most of their oppressors that sustained them, aided them in their struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthen their sense of self and their solidarity" (*Yearning* 145). For instance, Mackenzie, the Assistant Manager, thought that he could silence the coolies coming to the Bungalow to avenge his rape of a coolie girl, by firing at them with his gun. But unable to withstand the pressure of growing number of coolies getting together with their traditional weapons in their hands and marching towards the Bungalow, he committed suicide by shooting himself with his own gun.

For hooks marginality is much more than a site of deprivation; it is for her also a site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. It was this marginality that she was naming as a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives. "It is not a marginality", says hooks, "one wishes to loose - to give up or surrender as part of moving into the centre - but rather a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist" (*Yearning* 149). It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, imagine alternatives, new worlds. According to hooks, this notion of marginality comes from lived experiences. Recollection of the lived experiences of the margin helps one to decolonize one's mind i.e. not allowing one's mind to surrender to colonial way of thinking and acting.

Referring to "Freedom Charter", a work which traces aspects of the movement against racial apartheid in South Africa, hooks highlights the following statement which is constantly repeated: "Our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting". What it refers to is the "need to create spaces where one is able to redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering, and triumph in ways that transform present reality" (*Yearning* 147). These spaces, for hooks, are situated in the margins where one can dream of radical possibilities without forgetting and by keeping alive legacies of lived experiences and thereby resisting blind assimilation and co-optation.

By situating oneself in the margin, the subaltern, unwilling to play the role of "exotic other", can create spaces within that culture of domination in order to survive whole, his/her soul intact. In *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* Tulsi was able to create such spaces. Tulsi emerged as the leader of the 'coolies' extracting their unanimous support and thus posed a threat to the authority of the Manager Finlay. When 'Maiki Babu' Cheniram's attempted rape on Tulsi's wife Kalindi got published, a group of 200 'coolies' under the leadership of Tulsi gathered in front of the Bungalow of the Manager. The author captures this radical act on the part of the 'coolies' violating the norms of the hegemonic colonial space in the following words:

"Such an incident never took place in Rupahijan Tea Estate. More than 200 coolies gathered in front of the Bungalow of the Manager Saheb. Both men and women came. Some sat on the grass, some others were standing. They were patiently waiting for the Saheb without making any noise" (*Ejak Manuh* 194).

Finlay, observing the 'coolies' from the veranda for sometimes, asked them to send five representatives to discuss the matter with him and ordered rest of them to leave the place. Vishnath said, "Your honour, let's wait here while the five of them come to you." (*Ejak Manuh* 194).

Finlay was gravely disturbed by the gross violation of his order which is an unprecedented incident in the Tea Estate. But as soon as Tulsi asked them to go, the coolies started leaving one by one. The state of mind of Finlay is beautifully captured by the author:

"The Saheb became apprehensive and felt awkward. Tulsi asked them to go and they left. But his words didn't have any impact on them. A bad sign indeed" (*Ejak Manuh* 194).

All these remind one of bell hooks observation: "We know that the forces that silence us, because they never want us to speak, differ from the forces that say speak, tell me your story. Only do not speak in a voice of resistance. Only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing. Only speak your pain" (*Yearning* 152).

The conflict between Finlay and Mechanize regarding the establishment of a primary school at the Rupahijan Tea Estate for the children of the 'coolies' is also in tune with this observation of hooks. Mechanize is against this proposal because for him 'coolie children' have nothing to do with schooling and they are only potential labour force to be used for production of more tea in the future. Finlay, on the other hand, supports the idea of establishing the school, not because he wants the 'coolie children' to get educated and aspire for white collar jobs in the garden, but because he realizes that it is not possible to keep the coolies illiterate forever. So he took initiatives himself in this regard and wanted to settle the matter much before such a demand comes from the 'coolies' themselves with resulting aggression. This attitude of Finlay, I believe, is also indicative of either his realization that the colonial appropriation of space is only a myth, or his movement towards a 'third spatial' turn where the colonizer/colonized dialectics give way to a 'trialectics of spatiality', a third possibility and, perhaps, beyond that.

Similarly, Arjun could also create such spaces by getting admitted in a high school where he always stood 2nd in the class while doing his allotted work in the garden living in the margin and participating in all the traditional activities of the 'coolie lines'. In spite of the fact that he was never regarded as one of them by his

classmates in the school, he singlehandedly saved the life of the son of their English teacher when the boy got injured on the head by a misdirected piece of brick intended for Arjun himself, while they were playing football in the school playground. This 'mode of seeing unknown to...oppressors' (*Yearning* 149) is possible only for someone living in the margin as hooks highlights the power of the margin, that "inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer" (*Yearning* 152).

The solidarity of the subaltern is grounded and consolidated in the marginal space, and here, in this novel, in the spaces of the 'coolie lines', where people like Ratan and Chitta from main stream Assamese community share their thoughts and feelings with the coolies. It is from these people that Tulsi, Maghu, Bhula Vishni, Kalindi, Timki etc. learn about the involvement of many people in 'Union activities', the 'Freedom Movement', and many more. hooks refers to this marginality as site of resistance: "Enter that space. Let us meet there. Enter that space. We greet you as liberators" (*Yearning* 152).

IV. CONCLUSION

The solidarity of the downtrodden is grounded and consolidated in the marginal space, and here, in this novel, in the spaces of the 'coolie lines', where people like Ratan and Chitta from main stream Assamese community share their thoughts and feelings with the coolies. It is from these people that Tulsi, Maghu, Bhula Vishni, Kalindi, Timki etc. learn about the involvement of many people in 'Union activities', the 'Freedom Movement', and many more. hooks refers to this marginality as site of resistance: "Enter that space. Let us meet there. Enter that space. We greet you as liberators" (*Yearning* 152).

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