
Giving the Lie: Ingenuity in Subaltern Resistance in Premchand's Short Story 'The Shroud'

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Abstract

It is not always that the subaltern cannot speak, though their authentic representation is often more pronounced in the regional literatures, rather than in Indian Writings in English. The subaltern in Premchand's story 'The Shroud' not only resists the forces of exploitation, but subverts dominant social mores and traditions to gain an advantage over the master class, forcing them to shell out money which they wouldn't have otherwise in ordinary circumstances. This glory of victory is attenuated by the realization that the subaltern in turn is also an exploiter of the woman in the family, who in life and death is used for sustaining self-interests of the males of the family.

Lots of words have been spent on whether the subaltern can speak or whether his/her voice cannot be recovered without intervention from the postcolonial historian. To this I would like to add another question, can the subaltern be truly represented in the literatures in *english*? Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is of the opinion that the subaltern cannot speak and the postcolonial intellectual must represent it. She locates her subaltern in *sati* (Hindu widow burnt on her husband's pyre) and picks up the colonial debates on widow immolation to mark the widow's conspicuous absence as subject in all the discussions and discourses surrounding the issue. This absence, according to her goes to prove that 'there is no space from where the subaltern subject can speak'. This, I fear, is presumptuous. Subalterns had existed even before the postcolonial intellectuals perceived them as subalterns and felt the necessity to represent them. Subalterns are not unique to the post-colonial period only; neither are they homogenous categories, all with similar concerns and in need of representation in equal measures. Also it will be naïve to assume that there were no instances of labour, peasant, Dalit, minority or tribal movements in the pre-colonial, colonial and the post-colonial periods. Or to believe that the lower and oppressed classes and castes were never in a position to resist or rebel against the forces of oppression and exploitation. Powerless though they were in bringing a meaningful change to their status, they could always negotiate the cracks of dominant discourses. And for this they did not need the historians to represent

their cases. The masses resist, rebel and challenge not for anybody else, but to change their own lot. On the other hand, the desire of the intellectual to represent the subaltern has less to do with changing their reality, in fact 'the masses' in 20th Century, as Baudrillard remarked 'are the leitmotif of every discourse, they are the obsession of every social project'.

Spivak's choice of the Hindu widow as the perfect instance of subaltern silence is one of convenience. Ania Loomba has pointed out that Spivak's sati cannot be said to represent all satias of colonial India, as there were few who survived to tell their tale of agony. Sati was a practice prevalent since medieval days. But then why did Spivak choose to posit her sati in the colonial India? Secondly, her discourse on Sati was derived from the colonial debates, with British governments' legislations on the one hand and the native patriarchal narratives on the other. Were not both the choices influenced by the fact that Gayatri Spivak was writing for and within the first world academy. If she had ventured beyond the colonial debates to the documents and literatures available in the vernacular media, not unlikely that her subaltern would have spoken. Postcolonial critics and intellectuals are often accused of not being able to listen to the natives or let their voices be heard. They derive their theories from the field of post-structuralism, postmodernism and psychoanalysis and use literatures in English to be treated as texts for subaltern studies. My opinion is that, stories of subaltern experience and resistance can be better found in regional literature, and if such texts are inaccessible in their original, then in their translations.

Munshi Premchand (1880-1936) is one such writer we can rely upon for showcasing the whole gamut of subaltern experiences. Writing in the first three decades of the 20th Century he exposes the socio-economic deprivation of the dispossessed sections of colonial India, not by the colonial rulers but by feudal India itself. Yet his condemnation of the feudal and caste system of Indian society is not explicit or interventionist. His social realistic mode recreates the lived reality of the subalterns exposing pretensions and complacencies of dominant, feudal and patriarchal social mores. The story I want to discuss here is *The Shroud*, originally *Kafaan*, which was also made into a film by Mrinal Sen. Ghisu and his son Madhav belong to the chammar community, 'the lowest among the untouchable castes'. They sat at the door of their hut, beside a dead fire, digging out roasted potatoes, their only food since two days, while inside Madhav's wife

laboured in pain. Ghisu's wife had died long time back while Madhav married only the previous year. They could hear Budhia screaming and thrashing, yet refused to go inside, lest the other finished off the potatoes. The father and son were "probably waiting for her to die, so that they could go to sleep in peace and quiet." Potatoes finished, they went off to sleep in the same place leaving Budhia still moaning. As expected Budhia was found dead in the morning. Budhia's death stirred them to action. Old Ghisu was wise enough to know the inverted logic of civility. He says to Madhav, "The same people who now refuse to give us even one paisa, will call us tomorrow to give us rupees. I had none sons and there was never anything in the house, but each time God saw us through somehow or the other" (47). So they went begging around to arrange for a decent cremation of Budhia. Within an hour, they succeeded to collect five rupees and went to the market to buy a shroud (kafaan) for the deceased. Inside the market, they ditched the idea of buying a shroud, deeming it a useless luxury. They rather indulged themselves in a rare feast of choicest foods and drinks. Soon after, they broke into a dancing and singing bout, falling down eventually in a drunken stupor.

Premchand begins his story in a depreciatory tone castigating the father and son for their slothful nature. They are described from the upper caste point of view and branded as useless fellows. The upper caste is wont to extract free or cheap labour out of the lower castes. If someone from the lower caste is slothful or shirker of work or show defiance to authority, he is labelled as a useless or crooked fellow. His value in the society is measured in terms of his utility to the dominant class. As Premchand puts it, 'And these two had earned a particularly bad name for themselves in the entire village. Ghisu was notorious for working for one day and taking off for three days. Madhav was such a shirker that if he worked for half an hour, he would stop and smoke his pipe for an hour. So the two of them seldom found work. If they had even a handful of grain in the house, they would swear off work. A couple of days' starvation would induce Ghisu to climb a tree and break some twigs for firewood, which Madhav would sell in the market. After this the two would loiter about for as long as the money would last' (45). Looking at them from another point of view, Ghisu and his son were more intelligent than the rest of their kind.

'In a society where the lot of those who toiled day and night was little better than Ghisu's and where those who knew how to exploit the peasants were much richer, it is no wonder that Ghisu had such an outlook. One could say that Ghisu was more intelligent than the peasants, instead of joining the hordes of mindless toilers, he had gone over to the disreputable band of idle gossips, though he didn't have the will to follow the rules and regulations of diehard gossips. ...Anyhow, Ghisu for one, was happy that despite his rags, at least he didn't have to put in the back-breaking labour that the peasants had to and no one could possibly take undue advantage of his simplicity and innocence' (47). Ghisu and Madhav were victims of the worst kind of economic deprivation. In his life of sixty years he had only once eaten to his stomach's full, that too in a wedding some twenty years back. 'Their home could boast of no other worldly possession beside a pair of clay pots. They covered the nakedness of their bodies with a few tattered rags and went on with the business of living' (46).

Yet they worked when they needed and for none but themselves. They were free of all sorts of worldly cares and wants. Thus, Ghisu and Madhav were perceptively different from other subalterns, resisting all sorts of efforts at appropriation by the dominant forces of production. They were born in a world which denied them any advantage, let alone the minimum space to be themselves. They lived their lives within the gaze and expectancy of their master.

The story is a record also of the invisible violence inflicted by and the dehumanizing effect of poverty. While Madhav's wife, Budhia, was screaming and thrashing in pain, Ghisu and Madhav sat, inactive. They couldn't get medicine, neither a quack, for everything needs money and they were neck deep in debt already. Yet, they knew, the society which refused them money now would help, if a child was born or Budhia died. So they sat still waiting for either of the two to happen. With Budhia's death they rushed to the Zamindar for help for Budhia's cremation. Notwithstanding his detestation, the Zamindar couldn't but offer him a sum of two rupees, because 'he knew it was not the right moment for giving vent to his anger or meting out punishment' (50). Decorum of civility demanded that he helped a man in need for cremating his wife. Ghisu was shrewd enough to propagate this largesse showered on him by the Zamindar to

manipulate the rest of that class to extract money. The merchants and the moneylenders dared not refuse someone whom their Zamindar obliged. And Ghisu pretty soon collected a tidy sum of five rupees negotiating the hypocrisies and sentiments of a society which gave precedence to social pretensions and values like kindness, sympathy, donation etc over sharing resources in the real sense. Ghisu knew, the society didn't care how they buried their women, they were offered money not out of sympathy, but because of social obligations. So, if Ghisu and his son were victims of economic deprivation, the civil society was a victim of social mores too that can be negotiated. So, when Madhav heckled Ghisu for failing to provide Budhia a shroud even, Ghisu assured him: "I tell you, she will get the shroud. Why don't you believe me?"(53). "Hell, we'll say the money slipped and fell from our waist-bands. We searched all over but couldn't find it. They might not believe us but the same people will again give us the money" (52). This awareness gave Ghisu an upperhand over the upper caste and he succeeded in subverting the latter's superiority to his advantage. Such subaltern resistance and subversion is unique and rare though not impossible to find in real society. It inverts their position as the dispossessed. We see Ghisu and Madhav for the first time having a good time in life though not without any niggle of conscience. "She was a good woman, poor thing! Even in her death, she ensured us a hearty meal!" (52). Ghisu's philosophical justification of expedience in relation to Budhiya echoes the logic of domination often put forward by the upper castes vis a vis the lower castes. "If, because of her, our souls are gladdened, won't it bring her God's grace?" (52).

Even though Ghisu as a subaltern could resist the forces of exploitation, surprisingly and tragically Budhiya, the woman in the family, who had catapulted Ghisu and Madhav to a position of bargaining, even if for a day, had been left without a voice. She suffered silently her fate, her death. Yet she provided the locus on which the subaltern and the master, the exploited and the exploiter worked out their relations with each other. Ghisu and Madhav exploited Budhiya to earn the extra buck, even though it cost her life. We may say that economic deprivation had dehumanized both to an extent where human relations were meaningless to them. But that couldn't possibly act as a ruse for the exploitative relation between Ghisu/Madhav and Budhiya brought out explicitly in the following lines. 'Ever since his wife had entered their house, she had established

some kind of order in their disordered lives and strived to stoke the bellies of these two shameless wretches. With her arrival, the father and the son had become more slothful than ever, and cocky too, to boot' (46). This is significant as whatever precious little they worked to feed themselves before her arrival, had been stopped now; shifting the onus completely henceforth on Budhiya. And when she died, it was in her name that the money was raised, though consumed by the same people who exploited her while she was alive. Not unlike the ruling class, they too were never short of justifications. "Yes, son, she'll certainly go to heaven. She never hurt a fly, never bothered a soul all her life. Even in her death, she managed to fulfil our dearest wish. If she won't go to heaven, who will? These rich, fat slobs who fleece the poor and then, to wash away their sins, take a dip in the Ganga river or offer its holy water in the temples?" (54) The privileged has always justified exploitation to serve his self-interests, be it the feudal master or the patriarchal father. This is the nature of power and the logic of exploitation. Budhiya was crushed under the threesome forces of feudalism, patriarchy and poverty. The manipulation that Ghisu worked to wrest whatever little from the ruling class was absent in the case of Budhiya. Ghisu/Madhav could put up resistance, however manipulative and survived. Budhiya gave her everything and was vanquished. This story though exemplifies subaltern resistance, it nevertheless raises some more questions whose answers are absent in it. Whom do we identify as the real subaltern? Why is their relation not egalitarian? What will allow Budhiya to raise her voice against the exploitation she is subjected to? Which resistance is more urgent for a woman like Budhiya? Such questions need to be addressed to understand the multifariousness of subaltern exploitation and the complicity of peer groups in that racket.

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