

opposed to the more traditional stock markets of New York, London, Frankfurt, and Tokyo...(3)

This is the basic frame of reference for the study of postmodernism in Indian literature. But the postcolonial contexts should not be cut out of it. Different social institutions such as family, caste structures, methods of literary organizations, or educational models, immigration and diaspora mediation etc. are responsible for the transmission of the dominant culture. It is not an accident that these novelists, who hail from high elite varna/castes class, mediate former colonizer's culture, imperialism and postmodernism. Through alien forms and cultural structures they not only retain their traditional hegemony but also avoid such indigenous conflicting elements which resist the domination of alien cultures. As far Adiga's *The White Tiger* is concerned, there are very few postmodern structural elements than those found in profusion in novels of Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai. It can be labeled as a 'neo-dalit tourist fiction'. It is an illusion that our gramin (rural) and dalit literature translated into English is recognized as extraordinary original literature in the Western world. It is mere extension/expansion of "their" Western literature and they use it as sources for studies in Anthropology, Commerce, Sociology and Comparative cultural studies. For example, Brooks World Poverty Institute undertakes such Projects to study culture, poverty, etc. in the Third World. It is interesting to note its Director's views on *The White Tiger* as a primary source of study of Indian poverty. It is not a coincidence that prestigious Man Booker and Golden Globe awards travel to India in the same year. Even Big Bacchanji is upset by this international politics.

Once upon a time our cotton was sent to Manchester and India purchased their clothes. Now they publish our bestsellers and we buy their cultural products. Denis Rogers, the director of BWPI responded to the use/misuse of *The White Tiger* from the Western point of view:

"Bestsellers such as Indian writer Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and Indian-Canadian Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*," he said, "convey complex ideas in a most powerful way... We are not arguing that poets should replace finance Ministers." said BWPI Research Director, "But we are stressing that novelists make distinctive and important contribution to the broader store house of knowledge on the process, experience and consequences of 'development.'" (Times of India, Pune Mirror 8-11-08: 131)

It is good that politics of literature has re-entered into Indian literati. Whatever be the politics of global literary market, it is the fact that diaspora and rich elites will import postmodernism as modernism entered India with colonial history. Why anticolonialism has not taken roots at international or Euroamerican levels and survived only at the domestic-intra level is another serious problem. Our fiction is thematically a 'twice born' fiction, but its structure or form has remained Western. Western culture dominates its texture. All the four sample texts discussed

here show hardly any rich indigenous intertextuality or elements of mass-folk-low culture as such. If the gap widens too much, Indian regional literature(s) will be “appropriated” Hence post-colonialism and postmodernism need to be carefully co-opted in a different kind of Indian 'multiculturalism : It is not an American 'melting pot' at present. The crux of the matter lies with one contemporary dilemma: Will Indian literature and culture produce Talibani terrorist Osama Bin Laden or Utopian dreamer Barack Obama who wrote his Dreams from My Father (1995)?

The last paragraph of Ralph Cohen's “Introduction” to his anthology of essays titled *The Future of Literary Theory* (1989, xx) defends my position:

If I am asked why her essay begins this anthology, I reply that Cixous, novelist and dramatist and critic, writes theory out of a lyric sense of the place writing has in her life and how, despite the fact that writing has in her life and how, despite the fact that writing can create for her a paradise or hell, it makes survival possible. Theory is for her a personal public commitment to ethical and literary values. How better to begin a collection of essays on what literary theory can or ought to be?

Let me conclude this speech with Lewis Wolpert's (1929-) single sentence from *Unnatural Nature of Science* 1996; as in *Oxford Quotations and Proverbs*.

As one explores phenomena or ideas at the frontiers of scientific knowledge it is the unexpected that provides the clues to guide further work.

(The revised version of the Key Note Address delivered at the National Seminar at Shivaji College Akola, Vidarbha 26, and 27 Dec, 2008 and to appear in the book *Literary into Comparative Culture Criticism*, Ambala: Associate Publishers, 2010).

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Terror of Survival: A Reading of Homen Bargohain's *Subala*

- Jonali Sharma

Abstract

This paper intends to focus on the Assamese novel *Subala* (1960) by Homen Bargohain¹ as a treatise on the fear of survival as experienced by a young girl threatened in the arena of sexual politics. Here we are alternately familiarized to situations where sexuality simultaneously becomes a domain of fear, danger and repression as well as agency and expectation. *Subala* continually lives on the margin of familiarity and her world is always transient. Throughout her cataclysmic progression towards becoming a prostitute, *Subala* faces and chooses one perspective or the other at different points of her life. The threats of sexuality pale her pleasures and make her vulnerable to reprisal; never abetting her fear towards the domain of male privilege. In *Subala* I try to find a prototype of prostitutes who regardless of how they got into the trade, always remain targets of male sexual aggression and experience fear which may be physical, emotional, psychological and/ or material.

Keywords: Transgression, antagonism, cultural pre-suppositions, patriarchal hegemony

Given the efforts of learning sexuality through force or pressure or imposition; given the constant roulette of sexual violence; given the daily sexualization of every aspect of a woman's presence—for a woman to be sexualized means constant humiliation or threat of it, being invisible as human being and center stage as sex object, low pay and being a target of assault or being assaulted. Given that this is the situation of all women, that one never knows for sure that one is not next on the line of victims until the moment one dies (and then, who knows?), it does not seem exaggerated to say that women are sexual, meaning that women exist in a context of terror. (Catherine Mackinnon)

In *Subala*, the writer Homen Bargohain presents a stark narrative of despair and agony in first person and depicts how *Subala* the whore, comes to attain her present station. *Subala* and her mother are both victims of patriarchal injustice and their poverty makes them vulnerable to exploitation. Identified by gender and class the women in Bargohain's novel are destitute women of a remote villages and they live lives largely dictated by these factors. After the death of *Subala*'s father, the family reach an impoverished state and unable to tolerate the hunger stricken faces of her daughters, *Subala*'s mother goes to the village headman who is also the most influential man in the village to borrow some money in

exchange for her gold ring. This was the sole signifier of any possession that may be considered worthwhile in their poor, penniless household. To her utter dismay, the man pronounces the ring to be an imitation but he tells her that he is willing to lend her the money—more than what she had asked for—because she still has something that she can trade. It is her youth. Her pleas for compassion, reminding him that a little delay might even cause the death of her daughters because they were both ailing with high fever in addition to remaining starved for days at a stretch, only make him irritated. He retorts:

I have not kept you waiting. On the other hand, you have come to me and waylaid me as I was going out. Don't think of fooling me with your tears. Why are you so distressed thinking of your daughters' lives? You can give birth to more daughters if you wish. Quick! Tell me, do you need money or not? (35).²

His suggestive, lewd remarks shock her. He could well have been her father-- a man who must have lived some three scores of years. She was utterly helpless. Without any place to go and without any other source of help she ponders over her decision to remain virtuous. It was not that she had not looked for some work but her failing health, starvation and pregnancy did not permit her anymore. She tried begging for a few days but as she entered a household one day hoping for some kind of help, the lady taunted her with many jeering words. In those circumstances, with her famished daughters by her side, morality seems but a refined indulgence. A woman requires a great deal of courage and effort to overcome the moral bindings of society. One who transgresses boundaries of accepted cultural presuppositions is termed a deviant woman. So it is only under extreme conditions, when she is threatened by pangs of raw hunger and starvation, does she choose to sell herself. Otherwise, moral normative are far stronger in deciding her choice. Her economic reward is the compensation for loss of esteem in society. She acquires a whore status and in return fills her stomach and her dependents' as well. Morality then occupies a secondary position in this bartering of flesh and subsequent sustenance of life. So the next day Subala's mother trades her morality and brings home a hundred rupees to feed herself and her starving daughters.

In Assamese literature, there has been scattered and scant mention of the prostitute and hence Homen Bargohain's Subala can be said to be the first novel that deals with the life of a prostitute in desolately truthful terms. Bargohain admits that he was influenced by Alberto Moravia's *The Woman Of Rome* (1947) to write his very first novel on the life of a prostitute. "...Moravia awakened me to the fact that a novel can singly be about a prostitute ...Subala may have been influenced by this" (Barman:1995:82) It is an intense tale of distress and destitution that records the heroine Subala's sequential progression to desperate situations that validate her entry into a most deplorable profession. Their utter poverty relinquishes her mother's obedience to normative codes of

society and she barter her virtue for a hundred rupees. Their wretched existence later decides the fate of her very beautiful elder sister. She is sold by her mother to Arjun Singh, an old Punjabi truck driver who is blind in one eye, for a thousand rupees. Subala remembers how her mother had silenced her when she wanted to know about her sister's disappearance one night. "Listen Subala" spoke her mother sternly. "I married off your sister to Arjun Singh. Don't ask any further questions or else I will smash your face..." (16). Subala's relationship with her mother is one of aversion and antagonism. Love and concern between them are contingent on the fulfillment of other factors like hunger and shelter. Rejecting general assumptions of supportive solidarity between mothers and daughter the text here presents ambivalent relations countering situations where the dynamics of morality, virtue, compassion and even love erode quickly when balanced against the intense lust for life and fear of death. If Subala and her mother should live her sister has to be sold and Subala remains in constant dread that her mother would sell her the next time. Her fears aren't groundless and she realizes that the confines of her home are no longer secure for her. She must escape. She tries to convince her mother that to live virtuously is much more important and death is preferable to dishonour. Her rationalizing infuriates her mother and she comes out with the bitter truths of her life.

...To live in this world money is indispensable but men cannot live by eating money. One needs money to buy rice and dal, to buy clothes. I have half a rupee with me and I go around the shops to buy some rice but no body gives me any... Your idea of virtue, morals and right actions is also like this useless coin. It doesn't fill hungry stomachs... Just as money may sometimes be of no use, virtue and ethics can also be worthless when people do not value them in the market. I have not read these things in books, or heard from somebody. I have learned them from my own experiences in very painful situations..." (31-32)

Life is utterly cruel to Subala. Knowing that her own mother would not hesitate to trade her, she puts up stiff resistance but she knows that she will not succeed further in saving herself from the clutches of the man whom her mother has planned to sell her to. He is no less than a monster to her and 'To escape the certainty of embracing the life of a prostitute she leaves home with a mysterious woman to face an uncertain and dark future in a strange world'. (50) Subala's trust in the strange old woman who befriends her is strange. Bargohain must be trying to instill in the readers a realization that when the familiar expanses become tormenting enclaves one doesn't have any other recourse than to seek solace in unfamiliar spaces. Home is the place where we nurture our hopes and bury our doubts, where the dark nights bloom forth a sunny day and where we wear a secure armor of radiant courage to battle the world. But, for Subala, her home could not proffer either strength or sanctuary to face the scheming universe. Maggie O'Neill affirms that children who

experienced 'destructive interrelationships with adults' led lives marked by violence, sexual and emotional abuse and this often paved the way towards their involvement in the flesh trade (O'Neill:2001 :101) . Subala has horrific experiences at the old woman's home which she had supposed to be her safe recluse. It is in fact a brothel and the old woman herself, a procuress. She is forced to become a prostitute and Naren the lecherous scoundrel from her village is her first ravisher. He is the same person to whom she had feared that her mother would someday sell her. Battered and bruised by him, she loses all consciousness of feeling and touch as she is initiated to a hideous world of lust and violence. The writer describes vividly Subala's agony and how after a failed attempt to kill herself she embraces this life of shame. The old woman whom everyone knows as Burhimai³ relates to Subala her own tale of misery. To escape her lascivious brother in law she had run off with a man who promised to marry her and after a tragic sequence of events during which she was kept in prison, released and then raped and enjoyed by different men, she became a prostitute. It is the same story, she says:

A tuni⁴ came and took a grain, another tuni came and took another grain...and then another...and then what happened? Then another tuni came and took another grain... And thus I became a prostitute. A prostitute will always remain a prostitute. She cannot be anything else. (75-76)

At the beginning of the novel we are introduced to Subala the whore who still hears her mother's voice calling out to her. She wakes up at night and sits up but doesn't have the courage to return for she fears that she may have forgotten the way that leads to the familiar confines of her home. Her home has now become an imaginary space. It is a phantasmagoric illusion while the brothel, the dingy hotel rooms, the fields and all those dark corners where she entertains different men represent reality. Her mother's incorporeal presence represents the loss that Subala suffers. She had escaped her mother out of fear that she might make her a whore and now that she has become a whore she dares not reach out to her. This is the reality of realizing that she is spaced out from the world her mother inhabits and yet in some strange way it is her relation with her mother that lends an identity to her existence. The novel ends when Subala finally closes the door of her room one evening when two men decline to take her because she is no longer young and alluring. This is the end that she had fearfully anticipated and yet waited to embrace. As a prostitute she catered to male needs and gave in to male definitions of sexual attractiveness. As long as she was young her greatest power was her youth and sexuality but with age she becomes a passive subject depending on men's approval of her physical endowments. Her value as a woman lies in her capacity in being able to provoke and satisfy male lust. Subala accepts this rejection as inevitable and through her the writer dictates yet another policing of female sexualization and recycles the familiar dictum that sexual desirability determines a woman's appeal and potency. Burhimai's words echo a similar predicament for all prostitutes.

She tells Subala that they have no place to go when they grow old. Either they live off some young prostitute's income or they beg on the streets.

...by and by when her strength fails and she is unable to beg she will be turned out of the house for not paying the rent and then she will lie decaying on the streets or under some tree yelping like a dog festered with worms... swarms of flies, dogs and crows would hover round her body before it ceases to breath and without a drop of water on her parched lips she would leave this world for ever... (92)

From a stubborn insistence on virtue to being a reluctant accomplice in the trade, Subala progressively develops a nonchalance that resigns herself to her state and she starts viewing her body as an object to fulfill the desires of men. She loses all sense of shame and modesty and starts regarding herself as a commodity that can be traded. She descends to that depth of degradation where she now devises all means to entice and attract prospective customers to her and as the years slipped by money flowed in. In a world of sensuality, Subala keeps herself devoid of all senses. She lives in two different worlds. One her own—a dark numbing world where she is absolutely alone without any memories of the past, novelty of the present or dreams for the future. The other is the world of endless pretence where money dictates her performance. She regards her profession as a transaction where she indulges with her customer for their respective gains. Her body is a tool of the trade and she isolates her feelings from the realities of her situation.

A feminist perspective would assess the position of the prostitute in the labour market as subject to patriarchal hegemony. They are cast as stereotyped sexual victims that limit their occupational choices and they accept their oppressing service in full realisation of the discriminatory status granted to them. According to Thanh Dam Truong, the issue of prostitution is located at two levels, one in the double standards of sexual morality and the other in the discrimination of the wage labour market.(Truong:1990:49).When viewed as an occupation that in some way caters to male dominance, prostitution is degrading for a woman because in a patriarchal set up, the female role is defined by moral sexual conduct and this places prostitution in the context of the trend to stigmatize all sex stereotyped occupation. But a social structure that discriminates woman and their labour on grounds of unequal power relations naturally limits a woman's choice of occupation. Very often in the wage market women are relegated to low paying occupations that validate the basic assumptions about the female role as the weaker sexual minority. Scott says that a woman has the right to choose prostitution as a n occupation and the fact that she is choosing the worst form of economic slavery should not deprive her of basic human and legal rights'(in Mcleod:1982:qtd in Truong:1990:50).It may, however, not be a matter of free choice for all. A prostitute may have been coerced into this trade initially which in course of time becomes her occupation and this transforms her associations with its varied perspectives. At the same

time , she may not regard it to be a form of an expression of her private sexual self.

There is a gradual process in the life of a prostitute and a transformation of the social relations surrounding her work which cannot be discounted. Not all prostitutes succeed in emerging from coerced prostitution to 'free choice' prostitution (Truong:1990:50)

Whether she is a prostitute by choice or is coerced into selling herself, whether she is destitute or well off, prostitution in any form involves a great deal of stigmatization that takes the woman as the target. Stigmatization excludes them from the purview of societal rights and exposes them to physical, emotional and economic abuse. Society denies the necessity of this profession by castigating them and this double standard morality in sexual conduct places the prostitute at a disadvantageous position within the structures of domination.

After five long years of remaining a prostitute, Subala endures harassment, insecurity, hypocrisy, violence, hatred and still nurtures a dream of becoming a wife. Her greatest desire is for a home with a husband and children which would dissipate all her privations and miseries. Her love for the pimp Kanti and the allure of a home and a family makes her dream of the impossible and prompts her to leave her trade for a while but she fails to remain a wife for long because as burhimai tells her 'once a prostitute, always a prostitute'. Her relationship with Kanti is just an extension of the domineering heterosexual relationship between man and wife. She becomes his property, a property that he doesn't hesitate to trade. He exploits her emotionally and physically and lives off her money that she had saved earlier. It is a relationship built upon his dominance and power over her 'fallenness' and her submission serves to maintain his masculine identity. When he recreates her whore status, she abandons her dreams of married bliss and her life completes a full circle as she finds herself once again at the steps of the brothel.

Though sympathetic to Subala's victimization in a world of male sexual supremacy the writer reiterates that she is a fallen woman who can never be allowed to corrupt the pure and pristine domain of femininity that marks a woman as a wife and a mother. So he is keen to preclude Subala from the precincts of domestic life. It is a dream that she often treats herself to. Family bliss is for her a house with a husband and children. Homen Bargohain wrote this novel in the sixties and this idea of domestic bliss was a dominant strain in most social novels considering the socially sanctioned feminine identities of woman. I would not regard this to be an overtly patriarchal view of the author recognising the dialectic between gender and sexuality that negotiated a woman's identity in society during the early post war period. Burhimai destroys Subala's motherhood because a prostitute is nobody's wife and hence nobody's mother. According to Arendell 'motherhood ideology is entwined

with idealized notions of the family' (Arendell:2000 qtd in Dalla:190) Moreover prevailing societal attitudes that are prone to stigmatize a prostitute colours their and their children's lives. This basic assumption negates all possibilities of an identity that Subala nurtures and in a grotesque sequence of shocking details, Subala falls off her mothering stance despite savoring all pains of an impending motherhood. Society is always wary of any kind of independence in woman and hence a prostitute is conveniently marked as an outcaste and denied the sanctums of respectable femininity for being sexually deviant and ideologically independent. Subsequently they become victims of an overpowering patriarchy and never become free from that. Confronting the reality of their victimization they respond to the unspeakable humiliation of becoming an outcaste by asserting that it is their choice.

As a professional sexworker, Subala gradually builds up the right to determine the terms and conditions of her work and her earning power reduces its oppressive nature. From the deplorable stance of being an object of prey, she attains a subjective position. Nevertheless, it becomes clear from the narrative that she never derives pleasure from her work. It is only a supporting livelihood for her. Instead of commending her for making a good sale, we condemn her for honestly and openly exchanging sex for money. She is denigrated for entering an industry that commercializes sex while catering to male biological needs and denied the sanctums of respectable femininity. Subala's entry to this profession is the consequence of her identity as a male defined object of a subordinating sexuality that is reinforced by prevailing cultures and ideologies and made real by her sexual oppression in the form of rape and violence.

The groups of prostitutes described in Subala are colourful personalities and seem to have no qualms about their profession. The rough lessons of the sex trade have schooled them to a life of psychic and social adjustment in the face of rejection. This commercial exchange of sex may initially have been the result of coercion but faced with no other alternative; they accept their objectification and become dependent on men who are now imperative for their survival. They live up to their erotic image and subvert the negative connotation associated with their trade in the respectable sanctums. They consider it to be just another form of work that provides them their means of subsistence. Homen Bargohain seems to recognize the dehumanization of women that continues deceptively in the semblance of a woman's willingness and desire. If we accept that prostitution is just another form of work, we should also acquiesce to Kathleen Barry's assumption that sex is a male right whether it is 'bought, sold, seized in rape, or more subtly coerced as in sexual harassment' (Barry:1984:26). Considered thus, prostitution can never be a form of work because regardless of how they got into it, the prostitutes always remain degraded victims of male sexual supremacy as they become a source of fancy and pleasure for an economically