

Voicing the Subaltern in the works of Margaret Wilson

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Abstract: The term 'subaltern', oft-quoted in post-colonial theory, is, literally, referred to any person or group of inferior rank and station because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion. However, the exact meaning of the term in current philosophical and critical usage is disputed. Mostly the thrust of subaltern is on the marginalized groups and the lower classes – a person rendered without agency by his or her social status. I have discussed subaltern in this sense in the works of Margaret Wilson which are based on her experiences in India as a missionary. The main thrust of the paper is colonial subalternity and its impact on the life of subjugated Indians under British Raj.

Keywords: Colonial subalternity, Margaret Wilson, *Daughters of India*, *Tales of a Polygamous City*. Voicing the subaltern in the works of Margaret Wilson

“Our joy was great – until my daughter was born”

(Margaret Wilson: “A Mother”, 1919: 229)

Margaret Wilson (1882–1973) was a missionary in the service of the United Presbyterian Church of North America. When she was assigned to the Panjab region of India in 1904, she worked at a girl's school and at a hospital. Her experience in India has been very crucial in shaping her literary career as it inspired her to write about Indian life and condition. Her important works are *The Able McLaughlins* (1923, 1924 Pulitzer Prize winner), *The Kenworthys* (1925), *The Painted Room* (1926), sequel to *The Kenworthys*, *Daughters of India* (1928), *Trousers of Taffeta* (1929), *The Valiant Wife* (1933), *Law and the McLaughlins* (1937), and the collection of short stories entitled *The Tales of a Polygamous City*. No doubt, Margaret Wilson has a sizeable contribution to the English literature, but in this paper only her *Daughters of India* and the collection of short stories entitled *Tales of a Polygamous City* have been extensively treated for they focus on the subaltern issues. *Tales of a Polygamous City* is consisted of eight stories; six were published in *Atlantic Monthly* under the pseudonym An Elderly Spinster between 1917 and 1921, and two were published under her real name in *Asia* in 1921. The eight stories are “Taffeta Trousers”, “A Woman of Recourse”, “God's Little Joke”, “The Story of Sapphire”, “A Mother”, “Waste: The Story of a Sweet Little Girl”, “Speaking of Careers”, and “The Gift of God”. “Taffeta Trousers” is about the life of an American woman who is in India for missionary work. Despite living all her life in India, and being accustomed to Indian surrounding, it is interesting to note that she longs for her home in America. “A Woman of Recourse” presents a picture of the colonial Indian woman. Their concerns are well conveyed through the Pardah

party hosted by the narrator. "God's Little Joke" is a poignant narration of the suffering of Furkhanda who voluntarily opts for asceticism for the expiation of her sin caused by the suicide of her brother. "Waste: The Story of a Sweet Little Girl" is a study of woman sexuality presented through the character of a sweet little girl Ayshan, married to an elderly married man; she is seen sexually engaged with her married step-son without fear and regret. "A Mother" is again a pathetic narration of the woman subalternity which presents a woeful life of Aziz, a fifteen years widow. Her mother's comment sums up the essence of the story, "Our joy was great – until my daughter was born". (229) "The Story of Sapphire" is also a touching story of a young woman Sapphire, who sacrifices her conjugal life for the bliss of her little sister Flower. All the stories deal with female protagonists and their experiences are presented through an American woman eye, however, the narrator also makes comparison between America and India time and again. *Daughters of India* is republished by OUP India in a series of 'forgotten novels' (Atlantic) edited by Australian academic Ralph Crane. It is set in India and draws on Wilson's own experiences as a missionary in Punjab between 1904 and 1910. The novel defies any fixed genre categorization and invites different level of interpretations. One can easily find elements of history, politics, sociology, religion, romance, colonialism, subalternity, etc.

Margaret Wilson seems to voice colonial subalternity in her works. Colonial subalternity is the darker side of European enlightenment which pledged to liberate human mind by diffusing rationality, but the geographical exploration that accelerated aftermath resulted in slavery of non-Europeans. In fact, colonial subalternity is the wider manifestation of East-West juxtaposition which can also be illustrated in terms of Self-Other dichotomy. Interestingly, Wilson presents a triangular relation of Self-Other: the colonizer (British)–The missionaries (American)–the colonized (Indians). That the relation between the colonizer and the colonized is tinged with acrimony and animosity is well known to every one. The pathetic plight of the colonized is deeply felt and understood, and also documented by the missionaries. But they are also the victim of subaltern treatment because being white they are treated as colonizer by the Indians and at the same time they are looked down upon by the ruling whites for being sympathizer of the colonized. The title of the novel, *Daughters of India*, itself is the suggestive of the writer's deep concern for the Indian women's predicament during the British Raj. The portrayal of women and their circumstances in the novel is not the story of Ainyanwala only, but that of the entire India. The character of Miss Bhowe is representative of educated Indian class who has adopted Christianity for its liberal outlook. The enthusiasm that she shows towards the education of the girls is the outcome of the Christian light and European thoughts. When she sees the volume of Encyclopedia Britannica with Davida, her joys know no bounds due to its vastness of content, though she also feels sad for not being able to read all the volumes, "... Here I am, sixty-six years old, and there are twenty-nine volumes of books here, and thousand pages in every one of them! Look what I've missed" (8). However, when Davida tells Miss Bhowe to keep

the copy with her, she desires to take it to her school and show it to her girls so that they could have inspiration for learning. She says,

If I could show them all those books squeezed together this way, knowing more about the streets they walk down than they know themselves, and never saying a word about their learning! Wouldn't you think that would put some ambition, some strength into their silliness? What hope is there of self-government when women never even see the binding of an ency _____. (9)

The last sentence of Miss Bhose is the critique of traditional image of Indian women who are often deprived of education and light of outer world, as they are confined within four walls, on the name of culture. By the time this novel was written, there was all round clamour for home rule or self governance in Indian. For self governance, the nation must have educated citizen, particularly women as it is under their care that the new generation is shaped. It is such thought of Miss Bhose that might have inspired her to set up a girls' school in Aiyanianwala. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, despite various commissions for women's development such as Women's Indian Association (1917), National Council for Women in India (1925) etc. for women's upliftment, education was still a distant destination for them. This was more for the conservative mindset of the Indians than for the lackadaisical attitude of the reformers. Here citing of a few speeches by some of the educated women of the 19th century will be pertinent to understand the plight of women (daughters of India) before independence. Rashasundari Devi, born in 1809:

I was so immersed in the area of housework that I was not conscious of what I was going through day and night. After some time the desire to learn how to read properly grew very strong in me. I was angry with myself for wanting to read books. Girls did not read.

The character of Begum, the wife of Jalal, represents the downtrodden Indian women of 19th and 20th centuries who had received education through the Christian missionaries, but were not able to go ahead due to their filial burden and poverty. In fact, her plight reveals the lack of medical facility during the British Raj. She suffers from an acute earache and has not adequate money to seek medical assistance. Davida often shows concern over Begum's suffering. Wilson writes,

Every day she had wish that she was a doctor – though she knew she would have made the worst possible doctor. For the distressing and recurrent pain of Begum's ear she knew no further remedy but a trip to a distant Mission hospital. And she was fond of Begum. (12)

It is Davida's attachment with Begum that she has given her only pillow to soothe her aching ear. Davida is, in fact, at pain for the suffering of entire Pariah of Flowery Basti where Jalal and Begum run their missionary school. It is tough time for the missionary workers to teach them and make them come out of the shackles of their traditional dirty work. In fact, even after independence their plight continued to be same till recently. The portrayal of the characters of Taj and Davida reveals a lot about the subaltern concerns of Margaret Wilson. Taj is a young but widow Persian teacher in the school of Miss Bhose. She has been missing for long which creates a rumour of her elopement in the locality. Such act

on the part of a teacher is considered to be quite unbecoming. However, as regard to her class management and performance, she is regarded as the most efficient teacher. Her ability to motivate the young mind is well acknowledged by Miss Bhose. Taj represents the reformed women, thanks to the Christian enlightenment. Her being a child widow does not hold anything to her. She is quite romantic in her approach towards life. When she returns towards the end of the novel married with a man, Davida is shocked to see that Taj had no remorse for her deed. Rather she is quite content and said 'A woman's place ... is in her home,' (162) i.e. with her husband. While portraying Taj, Wilson hints at the emancipation and empowerment of women which is necessary to achieve any sort of substance in life. But poverty and exploitation comes in the way of such achievement. The life of two other women in the novel: Begum and the dying sister, is an apt ingredient of subaltern in the novel. Begum's life is ruined by poverty and lack of medical facility. She acutely suffers from ear-ache but she does not have proper medical treatment. Davida somehow tries to soothe her pain in her own way, but when it deteriorates she gives her only pillow to her to keep her head while sleeping so that her ear rests in comfort. Begum's life, in fact all the women's life in Flowery Basti, is constrained to cooking and caring of children and so they do not get any opportunity to think beyond their traditionally assigned duty. However, the most painful subalternity is witnessed in case of the dying sister. Wilson writes that,

In her childhood she (the dying sister) had been given unseen to someone in marriage, of her own inferior Hindu caste – she couldn't tell how old she had been then – when he lifted her veil and saw her dark, unlovely face and that hand of hers which was deformed, he had cried out that he had been cheated in the bargain and had struck her such a blow that she fell down. And presently he had passed her on, unseen, to a man to whom he owed money. And that man, seeing her, had kicked her into a corner, but kept awhile. He was a gambler and, having lost all that he had, he staked her, at length, in a game of dice. And the winner had sold her to a man who put her into an inspected house of prostitution in a great cantonment. And when she had become too diseased to serve longer their, they had sent her to a government hospital to die. (41)

All possible exploitation of women has been done to the dying sister: child marriage, domestic violence, sexual assault, physical assault, selling and prostitution. Her treatment as a mere object of consumption is a gross violation of human/women rights. This leads the writer to comment, "This (India) is a rotten, loathsome, dirty nation". (55) Wilson's *Tales of a Polygamous City* is imbued with subaltern subjects. In fact all the stories in the collection reflect subalternity in their own way. However, subalternity in Wilson is not due to any subjugation of migrants. Rather a migrant narrator reflects on the prevailing gender bias and gender atrocity in the then Indian society. Child marriage and child widowhood, a gross violation of a woman's fundamental rights, are well conveyed through the story "A Mother". The widow child, Aziz is deprived of all the joys of life, though she craves for it. Her craving for a normal life leads to her tragic end. Similarly, in the story "Waste",

Ayshan is married to an elderly married person having already a son-in-law at a very tender age. She is not even old enough to understand the meaning of marriage and husband. When she attains sixteen, realizing the futility of her marriage, and also imminent sexual depression, she is seen in the arms of her own step son-in-law. Ayshan's attitude shocks the narrator, but it also signals the dire consequences of childhood marriage, and its subsequent incest relation. The treatment of subalternity in Wilson is marked by a sense of humanity. she seems to clamour for some sort of change in our attitude towards the concern of those who are subordinated due to circumstances.

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