



The Gloom and a Gleam Beyond: Problematising Violence in Mitra Phukan’s *The Collector’s Wife* & Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

Subaltern study has been an important derivative of the postcolonial discourse of ‘writing back’ to the ‘grand narratives’ of the colonial West and some of the modern fictions by Indian English writers tackle among other themes, the disturbing issues such as the condition of *dalits* writhing under the burden of double colonialism and a resultant eruption of ethnic insurgency. The fictional representation of ethnic violence serves a twin purpose for the Indian English writer in so far as, it helps him/her not only to situate human experience in the matrix of veritable socio-political forces that actuates the nature of existence at a particular period of time in the context of the story told, but also to historicize the perspective used in analyzing how far the issues of contention are related to colonial experience of the state. This paper concentrates on how the writers of *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) and *The Collector’s Wife* (2005) have tackled the issue of ethnic insurgency with their respective strategic stances of recovery and resilience and interestingly, in both the novels, the issue of violence acquires a discursive character from the feminist viewpoint. The predicaments of both Sai and Rukmini, the protagonists of *The Inheritance of Loss* and *The Collector’s Wife* respectively, experience how terror and violence trammel up their private and public spaces to make them feel the anxiety of being alienated at home. A comparative study of these novels throws into focus the strategic differences in response to the issue of ethnic insurgency from Indian English writers.

Keywords

ethnic, insurgency, violence, anxiety, alienated

The presentation of ethnic insurgency in an aesthetic self-distancing mode has ever been an essential part of every literature right from the age of Beowulf to that of Virginia Woolf. In Indian English fiction and in North Eastern fiction in English in specific, the issue of ethnic insurgency and violence enlists writerly attention as a major theme of discourse where the writer is seen plumbing the depths of experience in a situation where the political and the personal spaces of characters undergo a crisscross relation so as to breed an anxiety of being in them who find their familiar spaces assuming an unpredictable character of violence and uncertainty for reasons not exactly clear to themselves. In such conditions, the resultant sensibility of feeling alienated at home or *swagrihe parabasi* state facing the character[s], lends an edge to the narrative. This paper concentrates on a comparative study of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) and Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* (2005). In both the novels, the lives of the protagonists, Sai and Rukmini respectively, are thwarted by a sporadic violence and atrocity in the name of ethnic insurgency. Though Kiran's fiction features the seamy aspects of the Gorkhaland movement in the North-Eastern part of the Himalayas during 1980s in the spectrum of the experiences of Sai who finds 'loss' of the original *métier* of existence as her only possible inheritance; the narrative nevertheless gestures to a note of multiculturalism as a prescribed remedy for the malady. On the other hand, Phukan's treatment of the issue is marked however by an unedifying compromise with the challenge on the part of the writer notwithstanding a faint possibility of a forced reconciliation and prospective recuperation in the personal space of the protagonist. A comparative study of these novels throws into focus the strategic differences in response to the issue of ethnic insurgency from Indian English writers.

In *The Collector's Wife*, Phukan exclusively focuses on Rukmini and her private space as per her designated position of the Deputy Collector's wife amidst the disturbing ambience in Parbatpuri, a fictional locale in Assam, a desolate place plagued by terrorist activities where abduction, pilferage, extortion, and political instability pose as the order of the day. The writer has mentioned: "Every week, reports of fresh incidents of extortion or looting, or of gunning down unarmed citizenry, appeared in papers" (Phukan 81). Right from the inception, the narrative underscores the bleak presence of terror and despair to strategically highlight Rukmini's loneliness as a wife and an individual being since her husband Siddharth distances himself from Rukmini owing to work pressure in negotiating violence and fails to provide her with company and peace. Her social life too is constrained within the circle of the high class officers' wives with whom she, being the spouse of a top official, hardly finds anything in common to share and this further leads to her frustration.

The failure of her marital relationship in so far as it lacks mutual reciprocity of interests and moreover the loss of the original sanctity of 'home' (that turns into a make-shift office run by a battalion of official staff under the noose of a tight security arrangement owing to the threat of violence) wears out Rukmini's spirits further and her decision to join the local college as a lecturer can be viewed as a reparative urge towards the acquisition of an individual identity. But here too, the tensed discussions among her colleagues about the sporadic violence around, neither elicit any feeling response from her, nor evokes any emotional identification in her and she feels pathetically marginalized in such a space where violence and terror define the codes of dealing and discourse. Through the protagonist's frustrating experience of the students' involvement of full-fledged violence against cross-border infiltration, Phukan has portrayed the aftermath of the Assam students' agitation of the 1970s and 1980s resulting in the injury of many innocent people like Rukmini herself.

Rukmini's chance acquaintance and growing intimacy with Manoj, a sales executive, who suddenly drops in her life, comes as a temporary respite from her loneliness in the forms of fun, friendship, camaraderie and physical intimacy – all that she inwardly craved for. Yet, her shocking discovery of Siddharth's physical intimacy with an office staff (who happened to be a close friend to Rukmini) and more than that, of her own pregnancy as a result of her one night stay with Manoj – are theoretically speaking, only emblematic of the emptiness that Rukmini feels from within and without as she voyages her journey of life in a space where the personal and the political tensions have created a void beyond repair and thereby leaving the individual existence meaningless.

Phukan has presented the grips of violence and terror as touching even the topmost layer in the bureaucratic ladder. With a great extent of security measures reserved for the DC and his family, it is ironical that the personal driver of Rukmini is discovered to belong to MOFEH, a secret militant group. The inability of even the D.C to get hold of the driver; the attack on the Police Superintendent and his instant death – infallibly shows the extent of terrorism in Parbatpuri where even the higher-ups in the law and order meant for state surveillance are not immune from the clutches of violence and threat. Now, if the attack on the SP shows the organized and planned terrorist activities aimed at intimidating the government, the kidnapping of innocent people like Manoj, a mere sales executive, portrays the meaninglessness behind the hegemonic practice of terror by the militant group MOFEH.

The final collapse of the personal and the political spaces in Rukmini's life emerges in the form of a horrifying denouement with the death of both Manoj and Siddharth in an encounter with the terrorists. The catastrophic end nevertheless signals an authentic and

logical conclusion to such an impossible situation, where the personal is so intricately interwoven with the political. Rukmini's urge to remake herself into a writer out of the ruins of personal trauma seems to be aborted *in medias res*.

On the other hand, Desai's novel acquires a polyphonic character as she has presented her discourse on ethnicity *vis-a-vis* a graphic presentation of the cultural amnesia and rootlessness in the anglicized Upper middle class consisting of retired judge Jemubhai Patel, his granddaughter Sai, an orphaned girl (born of a Zoroastrian father and a Gujarati mother both of whom die in a street accident) who is reared in a British-styled boarding school in India before she comes to stay with her grandfather Jemubhai. Two other major women characters who contribute to Desai's discourse on violence in the novel are the two Calcutta-based Bengali sisters Lola (Lolita) and Noni (Nonita) Banerjee, who live in a French-styled house in Kalimpong. The poor and subaltern group or the so-called, "shadow class" in the narrative that bear a comparatively more strategic proximity to the ethnic question consists of Jemubhai's nameless cook, his son Biju, Sai's Mathematics tutor cum suitor Gyan, and the Nepali *sherpas* like Budhoo, Kesang and others.

The chief protagonist of the novel is Sai, and the plot of the novel veritably bears a complex structure of interweaving diverse themes like those of feminism and the subaltern study. This feature is apparent in the love relation between anglicized Sai and her tutor Gyan who is a typical Indian subaltern as a descendant of a Nepali Gorkha community. It is only natural that such a relationship with an utter incompatibility in cultural background, outlook and a mounting mutual recrimination for each other ultimately snaps. Gyan is easily lured by ethnic Nepali insurgency in favour of a separate Gorkhland and eventually recoils from Sai. The writer traces how the 'masculinity' of the atmosphere, consisting of flags, festoons and placards demanding separate Gorkhland filtered into the consciousness of Gyan 'through the intoxication of liquor' and the new bred jingoism in him gives birth to his hatred for the vile and upstart upper middle-class anglophiles such as Sai and her family who have emerged by now, in Gyan's jaundiced view, only as superfluous relics of the rootless aristocracy, a pampered sect that has played an instrumental role in the nation's policy for disowning the *dalits* like the Gorkhas/Nepalees of their due social status in their own land and making them, so to say, doubly colonized in the process. Trying to rationalize his point, he says to Sai: "You are like slaves, that's what you are, running after the West, embarrassing yourself. It's because of people like you we never get anywhere" (Desai 163).

Right from the beginning of the narrative, this jaundiced view is justified in the insurgents' taxation over the elite class such as their raid in Jemubhai's bungalow, and before

they scale with his licensed hunting gun and even items like rice, biscuits, sugar, tea, oil etc., they make the intimidated family swear a pledge of support for a separate Gorkhaland. In a later stage of the narrative, Gyan, who feels himself being galvanized into the 'hero for the homeland' through his frenzied actions like filling up the jeep in the petrol pump and driving off without paying, or planning to burn the circuit house, is convinced that 'he owed much to the rejection of Sai' (Desai 260).

The polyphonic character of the novel is further manifest in Desai's multiplex approach to the issue of ethnicity. For example, Desai has apparently rationalized the basic cause behind this Nepalese insurgency in the very first chapter of her novel thus: "It was the Indian Nepalese this time, fed up with being treated like minority in a place where they were the majority. They wanted their own country, or at least their own state, in which to manage their own affairs" (Desai 9). The novel also bears mention of the Nepalees' observance of April 13, 1986 as Black Flag Day, a 72 hours' strike in May and the boycott of national celebrations such as Independence Day, Republic Day and Gandhi Birthday in the same year in a way of documentation of ethnic insurgency.

Desai's treatment of ethnicity treated in the mode of feminist concern in the novel offers yet another case-study in the presentation of Lola and Noni Banerjee, who live in the neighbourhood of Jemubhai. From the Banerjee sisters, the change caused by socio-political/ethnic issues in the Himalayas evokes mixed responses though all of which collectively gesture towards some uncertainty, some loss of sustenance. For Lola Banerjee, a widowed aristocrat (who is convinced that "Gorkhas are mercenaries, that's what they are" p.246), things have shocking repercussions and the writer has traced Lola's revelation after her humiliating experiences in the Pradhan's office at Kalimpong while she was making a futile effort to extricate a portion of her French-styled residence *Mon Ami* from encroachment by some local GNLFF rowdies. Her consciousness of an abrupt change in her familiar space is beautifully traced by the writer: "Just when Lola had thought it would continue, a hundred years like the one past - Trollope, BBC, a burst of hilarity at Christmas - all of a sudden, all that they had claimed innocent, fun, funny, not really to matter, was proven wrong" (Desai 241-42). On the other hand, Noni, equally traumatized by the sudden change in the atmosphere that poses a threat to individual dignity, however cannot disown such a feeling that "there is some truth to what they are saying. Gorkhas have been used" (Desai 246). She nevertheless detects a practice of double standard that fails to cope with the fluidity, the unauthenticated space for their living and likewise she is forced to believe that "in any such situation the atrocities are committed under the cover of a legitimate cause"

(Desai 246). The experiences of these two women are interestingly poised against those of Mrs. Sen, their neighbour whose idea of a ‘nation’ as something like a fancy, corroborates to Anderson’s celebrated idea of nation as an “imagined community.”

The experiences of these women have a close parallel again, with that of Jemubhai’s nameless cook, who lives a life of menial indignity in his master’s bungalow and passes his days by dreaming solely of the well-being of Biju, his son, who moves from one restaurant kitchen to another in the States and ambles his days in hope of a green card. Desai’s cunning presentation of Jemubhai’s cook without a name marks him out as a typical subaltern and like the Banerjee sisters; he too originally belongs to a different state but is now domiciled in Kalimpong. In spite of living in the hills for a number of years, he too like Lola and Noni fails to negotiate the abrupt changes in his familiar space as he experiences the July 27 Uprising for Gorkhaland in 1986. The Cook’s experiences (while crawling his way back to Cho Oyu, hiding in the bushes in fear of the patrolling army) serve as yet another pointer to the paralytic effect of ethnic insurgency on the usual go of life, the destabilizing effect of modern socio-political movements upon the poor, simple and unsophisticated souls who face an identity-crisis that operates both at the level of community consciousness and blood-relation:

This place, the market where he had bargained contentedly over potatoes and insulted, yes insulted the *fruitwallah* with happy impunity, [...] was showing him now that he had been wrong. He wasn’t wanted at Kalimpong and he did not belong. At this moment, a fear overtook him that he might never see his son again [...]. The letters that had come all these years were only his own hope writing to him. Biju was just a habit of thought. He didn’t exist. Could he? (Desai 278)

It is natural that Gyan’s involvement in the movement makes no sense to Sai and being infuriated by Gyan’s growing indifference to her, she blurts out in a poignant moment in their traumatic last meeting: “You hate me ... for reasons that have nothing to do to me” (Desai, 260). Sai’s pathetic *anagnorisis* of the emotional inanity of her existence (‘What will happen to me?!’p.265) is illumined by Desai’s touching analysis of two alternate spaces, familial and personal, in Sai’s predicament that seem to offer no space for fruitful reciprocity:

Gyan would find adulthood and purity in a quest for a homeland and she would be left for ever adolescent, trapped in shameful dramatics. This was the history that sustained her: the family that never cared, the lover who forgot [...]. (Desai 265)

Likewise, Gyan too detects later his fanaticism only as a façade covering his cowardice and he can't resist a streak of compunction of "turning the wheels of a simple life' and doing 'harm to some other's life (Desai 273).'

If the predicament of Gyan, or collectively speaking, of the Gorkhas in the hills situates the writer's concern for the subaltern at home, the theme of subalternity receives a complementary version in the projection of the trauma of migration in the experiences of Biju in the sub plot of the novel. Biju's return to his country is not an edifying prospect either, since he is immediately gripped by the local eruptions of rage, fits of corruptions and frustration in the land grueling under the pledge of self-status – by such repercussions that he was physically unacquainted with in U.S.A. Though a critic named Satis Shroff detects Kiran's use of a 'terrific metaphor' in communicating 'the emotional and historical patterns' in the lives of migrants in the form of Biju's experiences; he however questions the authenticity of Desai's presentation of the ethnic question on the basis of her being herself an immigrant like Biju in search of a green card:

What is missing in her writing is the intercultural competence. Instead of taking the trouble to learn Nepali and acquiring background knowledge about the tradition, religion, norms and values, culture and living style of the Gorkhalis in Darjeeling and the Nepalese in Nepal, and comparing it with her own Indian culture, and trying to seek what is common between the two cultures and moving towards peace, tolerance, reconciliation – she just remains adamant, like her protagonist Sai. She does not make an ethnic reflection, but goes on and on, with a jaundiced view, till the bitter end.
(para 14)

However, Desai's treatment of violence sounds convincing and conforms much to reality and it is the central problematic in the narrative – 'the anxiety of being a foreigner' in the characters which perhaps dissolves all binaries related to the themes including a discourse of the subaltern and the problem of ethnicity in the novel and serves the purpose of, to quote from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a 'strategic essentialism' which retains its diversity and voices to endorse the essential elements of the groups engaged in the meaning-making venture out of the lived experiences.

Notwithstanding an exclusive focus on the theme of terrorism, and occasionally superb psychological touches in the narrative as when Rukmini views the cremation ground below from her hill-top bungalow and feels how it mocks the tight security of the higher-ups with a recurrent cremation of ordinary victims of terrorism, Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*

however ends as a tale of personal trauma giving credence to critic Anindya Guha's detection of "a glut of interest in the remaining parts of the country" as a result of the 'new' ontology and cult of violence" (para 2) in North East Literature.

On the other hand, Desai's *Inheritance* concludes on a different note. Though the reunion scene between a demented father and a dispossessed, America-returned son in the closing lines of the book offers a streak of hope, a resemblance of some possibility; "The five peaks of Kanchenjanga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent" (Desai 324). The writer's valedictory statement - "All you needed to do was to reach out and pluck it" - is equally imbued with a sense of inexorability of experience in this globalized, multiplex form of cultural identity (signified by 'five peaks') in this modern, post-colonial world where individual choice and mind-set of the common man with rooted sensibilities offer too weak an armour to encounter the disruptive and contentious whirls of change.

In the final analysis, if Phukan's novel presents an insider's story of violence, Desai's fiction projects an outsider's tale of insurgency. If the former is overall local in discourse, the latter offers a global remedy for the malady. Taken together, both these novels tend to offer, a "glocalised" version of ethnic insurgency combining both the global and local, to imagine sweet and sour.

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