Subaltern Vision

Subaltern Vision:
A Study in Postcolonial Indian English Text

Edited by

Aparajita De, Amrita Ghosh and Ujjwal Jana

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FOREWORD

DEBJANI GANGULY

The idea of the 'subaltern' has undergone multiple recoding since its emergence in the 1980s in South Asian historiography. It is now well nigh impossible to tie the term down to its original conception as the figure of subordinated difference that unsettled both Marxist and Nationalist histories of the emergence of the modern Indian subject. In its early usage, it was conceptualized in three primary ways: *empirically* as the labouring peasant, *structurally* as a semiotic rupture in the prose of colonial counter-insurgency, and *deconstructively* as the abject figure of the gendered third world subject both inside and outside the circuits of social mobility. In the 90s the subaltern's narrative trajectory expanded as it gained global provenance in Latin American studies, African American studies, Indigenous studies and, most significantly, in the synthetic interdisciplinarity of feminist and postcolonial studies. For a concept that underwrote the impossibility of ethical representation of the abject - as seen in the phenomenal global currency of Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' - the subaltern has done stupendously well in making its presence felt.

The amplification of its conceptual and disciplinary range has had both salutary and deleterious consequences. Salutary in its provision of a vocabulary that helped capture the predicament of historical representation in colonial and capitalist modernity. Who is represented in whose version of history? How is such representation staged? In what narrative frame is it arranged? What constitutes responsible historical practice? What are the limits of capitalist lifeworlds? Deleterious in its translation into the idiom of identity politics and the hypostatization of myriad fragments of identification as political vantage points from which to beat a range of spectral elites. Spectral because it is often unsubstantiated by either empirical research or theoretical rigour. What remains of the philosophical force of radical alterity when almost any label of identity can be staged as 'subaltern' relative to what it is compared?

This is a question that hovers implicitly over this volume of literary critical representations of figures of subalternity in Indian literature. A commendable effort by a group of young scholars, *Subaltern Vision* stages both the possibilities and the risks of opening up the category 'subaltern' to encompass a range of minoritarian subject positions in postcolonial and diasporic India – dalit bandit women, silenced mothers and widows of Naxal rebels, untouchables, refugees, illegal Nepali immigrants, folk medicine practitioners, even Sikhs and Parsis. Under what conditions do Sikhs feel the burden of their minority status in India? Is sub-nationalism a sign of unmitigated oppression? And Parsis? They may be ghettoized and atomised in some Mumbai enclaves as Rohinton Mistry depicts in his novels. But are they subalterns? Figures that challenge the progressivist narrative of the modern Indian nation state in the way dalits and adivasis do? Or does the subaltern in the hands of some literary scholars now serve as an alibi for Hindu majoritarian persecution? What does it mean, this connotative shift from abjection, silence and semiotic rupture in colonial contexts to putative victimhood founded on religious difference in a majoritarian democracy? And what does one make of such representations in the light of much recent political analysis of the retreat of the Indian middle class from public and political spheres, and the increasing visibility of the subaltern populations in the domain of state and governmentality? These are questions that potentially animate this volume.

The focus on literary texts over social or historical documentation is advantageous on one level. Throughout its intellectual trajectory the 'subaltern' has been hard put to make an empirical case for her putative silence. Don't labourers, peasants, and dalit women speak out? Spivak was repeatedly asked by positivist historians and social scientists. All arguments about 'speaking' *as* institutional validation, not just physical voice that can be heard, have fallen on deaf ears. The idea of unrecoverable voices and accounted for silences appears to work better in the domain of texts, and especially for those scholars trained in close textual reading. For these latter are much more attuned to the limits of a normative transparency, to analysis that is sensitive to the lack of congruence between production of speech and its reception, between the subject of knowledge and its object.

Think of Ranajit Guha's 'Chandra's Death' which many scholars including myself have studied extensively. How meticulously and with what sensitivity does Guha recover the hapless Chandra's presence from an obscure deposition filed away in the rarely accessed volumes in one corner

of the Shantiniketan library! The stark bureaucratese of the documents and the almost total absence of the accused's voice are transformed by Guha into a narrative of love, betrayal, and female solidarity. Chandra, in his story, is not just a poor victim of a backstreet abortion gone wrong. She is the one time passionate, albeit, illicit lover of Magaram, who was cast out by him for falling pregnant. Her sister and mother are not just defendants. They are her carers who tried their best to save her from social opprobrium, from being the bearer of an illegitimate child in an impossibly hostile social milieu. Gayatri Spivak's 'A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: Mahasweta Devi's *Stanadayini*', published in the same volume of *Subaltern Studies* in which Guha's essay appeared, radically opened up the space for literary texts to enter into a theoretical conversation with the subaltern historians about the aporias of historical and cultural representation. It also catapulted a Bengali writer into global eminence often in ways that made the writer herself distinctively uncomfortable, as many of her interviews attest. What it did significantly, however, was to bring to the fore the politics of translatability between incommensurable lifeworlds. Since then, literary postcolonialism has become a fertile site for myriad iterations of subalternity.

This volume continues the trend, except that it does not deal directly with the issue of translated texts. With the exception of the essay on Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*, all others analyse literary works in English. Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Khushwant Singh and Kiran Desai feature as do narratives of the bandit queen made famous through Kapur's eponymous and controversial film on Phoolan Devi. Together, they offer a rich array of readings on the predicament of representational inadequacies of the subaltern.

INTRODUCTION

APARAJITA DE

Presumably, the mission for a volume on postcolonial scholarship is cut out. It will primarily work as an interventionist tactic and a critical practice engaging and interrogating contextual and historical consciousnesses that critique geopolitical and cultural conditions. These cultural conditions are symptomatic in informing and perpetuating unequal power relations in the world. As an extension of the postcolonial theoretical praxis, the objective of subaltern studies holds true to this interventionist zeal. Emerging with a view to interrogate and recover marginalized histories, identities, and modes of knowledge, subaltern studies also recontextualizes, links, and resists the boundaries of a divided, traditional, and hegemonic system. It sustains a continuous critique and rediscovery of colonial/imperial and hegemonic structures of power and ideology, within current articulations of identity. Its resistant and emancipatory potential makes subaltern studies a bridge between colonial legacies and the ways it shapes and impinges on the present. It is this contemporareity of subaltern studies as a postcolonial practice that recasts it from its origins—initially developed as a discourse on the fluid concepts of class and state in the writing of colonial Indian historiography—to its current avatar, where it is transformed into a system of topical, tactical, and current knowledge. So, how does this current volume of essays engage, expand, or recover this primary mission of postcoloniality? For contextualizing the relevance of this volume, it becomes necessary to revisit the early years of the history of subaltern discourse.

As a part of postcolonial area studies and exclusively envisioned as a clarificatory apparatus on the elitist bias in the writing of South Asian Studies, one of the early founders of Subaltern Studies, Ranajit Guha, defines the role of Subaltern Studies and Subaltern scholars thus, "[I]ndeed, it will be very much a part of our endeavour to make sure that our emphasis on the subaltern functions both as a measure of objective assessment of the role of the elite and as a critique of elitist interpretations of that role" ("Preface" vii). As the project evolved, its self-conscious and

revisionist reading of 'histories from below'—modified into a critique of post-Marxist stances. In 1989 there occurred a formal theoretical shift. The project of Subaltern theory was now reconceived as a theoretical agenda attempting to recast of Marxism in the cultural logics of late capitalism (Fredric Jameson).

From its origins in the Indian subcontinent in the early decade of the eighties, the subaltern studies school has had subsequent popularity in the British and US academe. With its arrival in the US, the project shifted to being a cultural discourse through text and analysis than its initial Marxist socio-economic focus on power and resistance. Furthermore, in the decade of the nineties and beyond, it was no longer solely seen as an English-language endeavor, nor did it remain focused only on critiquing colonial historiography. The premises of subaltern studies in India gradually expanded to include translations of essays from regional languages. Vinayak Chaturvedi's cogent synopsis of the project's status quo in current theory, contemporary politics, and in the contexts of transnational movements of labor, culture, and capital facilitates a review of how the redefinition and expansion of the scope of subaltern studies is intertwined with the current socio-cultural and economic contexts. Going beyond the socio-historical contexts of colonial India and the nationalist movement, Chaturvedi points out how the project addresses, "concerns of late-twentieth-century imperialism and the future of new international social movements" ("Introduction" xiii). Surely, the turn in contemporary politics informing issues of gender, class, caste, sexuality, religion, or race would play a seminal role in reshaping the locus of the field. In congruence to addressing these exigencies and intervening as a discourse to underscore its initial agenda to uncover agency, subject positions, and hegemony, the essays in this volume also recreate and reinvigorate the volume's intervention in the field of postcolonial discourse. Each essay thus works as a reminder that the concept of the postcolonial must also be (re)interrogated and (re)contextualized historically, geopolitically, and culturally. This reminder, I want to argue, necessarily relocates the project within postcolonial studies while continuing its subaltern focus. Taking cues from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's allusion to the "New Subaltern," this volume of essays similarly ponders on the more complicated relations between gender and feminist studies and Marxist theory in the current context of Subaltern studies (Chaturvedi 324). Understandably, we are not keen on projecting a novel and revolutionary alternative critique to hegemonic practices, and would like to remind our readers that the "New Subaltern"—who is invoked in the essays included, is always already

enmeshed in the political, cultural, and the economic, with the understanding that it now recontextualized in the current sphere of a decolonized socio-cultural matrix in the productions of knowledge and value. In its expansive and detoured mode from colonial historiography, the new subaltern, thus, also implicates an engagement with global feminist politics in the context of a reterritorialized cultural-global shift seen in the movement of labor and capital. Thus, explorations of translated texts in visual and literal media, coupled with investigating oral histories as unmediated narratives and as a means of legal utterance is part of the diverse ways in which the new subaltern has manifested itself as a postcolonial theoretical praxis. While, Chaturvedi's compilation of essays presumably "'maps the terrain' of the Subaltern Studies project of writings on South Asian history and society," it is primarily focused on unraveling the theoretical dimensions of the field since its inception in the 1980s ("Introduction" vii). A more critical-literal analysis of the category of the subaltern playing out in contemporary representations of the media and in recognition to an increasing number of texts which produce and recover the subaltern as a non-linear, heterogeneous discursive category either disturbing the center and the periphery, or reenacting the binaries within newer and complicated postcolonial and globalized realities, is where our volume necessarily intervenes and relocates the practice of subalternity.

This leads one to interrogate the Indian English literary focus of the volume. While it would be too ambitious to compile essays on the expanse of subalternity from the English speaking worlds to conditions in the non-English worlds, it is, perhaps, worth its while to explore its inflection in the context of where the movement and theoretical practice originated from in the newly reconfigured cartography of geohistorical and cultural politics. Thus, in the trajectory of exploring the subaltern consciousness in the field of contemporary Indian English writing, the editors select essays which underscore the reemergence of the subaltern condition due to global labor migration and its diverse and localized manifestation in visual media, literature, translation, and in the cultural politics of identity-formation. Since movements in labor and capital include the factors of spatial dimensions imbedding it in a postcolonial world system, the essays included in this volume also interestingly trace the external borders where colonial differences are still played out while they navigate the uneven terrain of an Indian subcontinent newly opened to the possibilities, politics, and limitations of the global marketplace. Furthermore, if the politics of location impinges on the heterogeneous and uneven qualities of the subaltern consciousness, then the sensibilities of location also make us

aware of our emotional and ideological foregrounding to our ethnic, environmental, cosmopolitan, nationalist, sexual, or classist inscriptions linking our bodies to one or several places. The mappings of these diverse coordinates and experiences often involve coercion and violence, but they do not erase the mutual inscription of the body to its geohistorical and cultural locations. If the body is inscribed with experiences and enacts a script due to its sensibilities of location, then I want to extend the analogy to the Indian English texts exemplifying contemporary subaltern conditions and consciousnesses. I want to argue that in this corpus, Indian English literary texts on subaltern studies do not represent the gamut of the dimension of the sensibility on geohistorical locations, they are simply particular configurations of it, that is to say that, the reading of subalternity as a manifestation within geocultural and political locations is not the only way in which this discourse is inflected, it is just one kind of dimension added to its already complicated matrix. It is within this contributory motive that the editors locate the relevance of this volume in the field of contemporary postcolonial studies.

Furthermore, and in tracing the intellectual genealogy of Subaltern Studies, scholars have argued about the restitution of subaltern studies within discourses of modernity (Mignolo, Chaturvedi, Prakash). For them, modernity can be critiqued in two fundamental ways—one stemming from the legacies of colonial histories—through the discourses of postcolonialism and Orientalism; and the other from postmodernity—originating from the borders of the hegemonic narrative histories of the West. The subaltern, as a necessary category of the postcolonial, is, therefore, always already enmeshed in a critique of modernity. By definition, it is both a re-presentation of the margins in colonial history and legacy, and is a result of the marginalization of other discourses *under* the hegemony of the West. The essayists in this modest anthology, seem to have diversely invested in this critique of modernity, through their understanding of the subaltern—exploring it either in relation to discourses of postcolonial representation (e.g., Roye, Duffus, and Devi), or through its relation as a result of a conversation with hegemonic narratives of the West (e.g., Damai, Gill, and Roy). In approaching the subaltern thus, the term is inflected and re-conceptualized from its initial representation by the subaltern studies school inspired by Guha, Spivak, and Dipesh Chakraborty.

As a postcolonial theoretical practice, the discourse of subalternity has a two fold promise. On the one hand, it is a tool which can responsibly

change our vistas on the functionality of colonial processes within our neocolonial realities. On the other, it challenges the foundations of the Western concepts of knowledge and understanding by establishing links between geocultural locations and concepts of theoretical and narrative production. By focusing on these spatial, ideological, and epistemic links, the discourse of subalternity expands its conceptual reach, and assumes a more responsible and realistic turn in its emphasis on the enactment of the enunciation of knowledge—borne through the open realm of historical circumstances and personal sensibilities. In its expansion thus, the discourse of subalternity *also* displaces the Western loci of knowledge and enunciation. Homi K. Bhabha celebrates this liberatory and deconstructionist discursive practice in *The Location of Culture* thus, "[D]riven by the subaltern history of the margins of modernity—rather than by the failures of logocentrism—I have tried, in some small measure, to revise the known, to rename the postmodern from the position of the postcolonial" (175). Envisioned as a revision of modernity, the editors have modestly incorporated a section where the practices of subaltern analysis locates it within an inextricable matrix of relationship equating the elements of ideology and experience to include a last section titled, "Mapping Subaltern Space through Subjectivity, Speech, and Silence." Each essay in this section aims at highlighting the expansiveness of the term in postcolonial discourses. In a Bhabhaesque attempt to articulate the enunciatory agencies of subaltern practices represented within (sub)/urban topography, Puspa Damai champions an alternative vision of the subaltern aesthetic in *A Fine Balance* arguing for its reconstructions and revisions within culture and its workings on the postmodern individual. Similarly, Rohini Punekar and Abhigyan Prasad work out the trappings of subaltern historiography and epistemology in Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* to explore the terms' reconfiguration within colonial history and science. In another essay by Cheryl Duffus, the very act of speech and articulation is revisited to reveal a politics of suppression and representation in India in the late 1980s portrayed in *The Inheritance of Loss*. If this section relocates the subaltern project geoculturally to trace the binary workings of a hegemonic global system of power, it also indicates the more contemporary categories of experiencing the production and (re)distribution of knowledge. Our next category reaffirms a comparable and continual engagement of subaltern studies' perspective along the axis of gender politics and in exploring the intermeshed questions of race, class, and ethnicity along an ideological one. Such a vision, I want to argue, metaphorically connects the two sections as they reenact the dimensions of an unequal world along the axes of identity.

Thus, in a section on "Gender and the Subaltern Crisis," the editors compile work which interrogates the subject and object of postcolonial theorizing through the lens of gender representation and articulation. Taking cues from the initial epistemological focus of Norma Alarcón in the field of gender studies and ethnicity which questioned the inclusion and representation of women in discourses of knowledge, the essayists in this section work the subaltern paradigm to question what is often repressed in empirical disciplines through the politics of gender, ethnicity, and class. Thus, Gayatri Devi explicates the saga of the Naxalite resistence in Bengal of the late 1960s and early 1970s, through the characters of Sujata and Nandini in Mahesweta Devi's *The Mother of 1084*. In a powerful exploration of Devi's own subjectivity voiced through the enunciatory agencies of her female protagonists, our essayist recovers and re-interrogates the theoretical terrain of women as subject and object of knowledge and politics in subaltern literature. Underscoring the play of postcolonial agency through her essay, Devi successfully opens up conversation on the potentially emancipatory space(s) of the subjects of subaltern history. This liberatory reading is coupled with Mantra Roy's timely exemplification on the marginalization of women, caste, and sexuality in mainstream culture and media's representations of the life of Phoolan Devi. Roy's essay focuses on how elitist representations dismantle and erase Phoolan's subjectivity, her voice and agency, cutting down on any essentialist and utopic celebrations on the potentials of the emancipatory space in the politics of subaltern representation.

As our volume seeks to start conversation and explore the new turn in subaltern studies in literatures produced in English from the Indian subcontinent, it is only pertinent that we include a section on the workings and composition of nation and nationalism in the uneven game field of contemporary and neocolonial politics. In this regard, Sara Suleri's early reminder relating the development of language and nationalism as a testament to the postcolonial conditions in India is especially relevant. In her *The Rhetoric of English India*, Suleri cogently points out that, "[I]f English India represents a discursive field that includes both colonial and postcolonial narratives, it further represents an alternative to the troubled chronology of nationalism in the Indian subcontinent" (3). It is this troubled and heterogeneous chronology that reverberates in the essays of the next section titled, "Building the Nation." Since the chronology of nationalism and nation building is integrally linked to the rearticulations of the colonial or postcolonial conditions in negotiations with empire, positionality, and writing in English, the essays in this section redirect

conversation on postcolonial and subaltern theoretical practices to ultimately provide a commentary on the articulation of caste and class identity as a symptom of that condition.

Thus, Susmita Roye and Jaspreet K.Gill recast internal colonialism as a critical and empirical category in the latent and ever-present colonial legacies informing the state and nation of postcolonial India. Taking Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and its exodus of indigenous people from Morichjhapi when the postindependent, and sovereign government of India marginalized the ethnic minority and the indigenous in the name of ecological protection, Roye's essay takes a close look at the gendered subaltern and the indigenous subaltern within the logic of nation-building. Exploring the postcolonial condition mainly through the lens of gender and patriarchal hierarchy, Roye brings out the intersections of gender and ethnicity as the crucible for articulating the relationship between internal colonialisms and subaltern studies. Interestingly maneuvering the Dalit and gendered subaltern Kusum's story re-told by the male and elite class representative Nirmal, Roye also shows the role and complexities of the language of subaltern representation. In this doubly refracted inquiry, Roye ponders on the complicated equation of the gendered subaltern and the subaltern-elite as they coalesce in a myriad project of re-writing the nation and her composition. Similarly exploring national and ethnic identity and questioning if one presupposes the other, Jaspreet K. Gill, evinces how the status of the Sikh identity is always already enmeshed in an exclusionary politics involving national and ethnic categories. In both essays, the writers use local histories and literary representations to compellingly bring together internal colonialism and subaltern studies. In their inflections of postpartition socio-cultural and political histories of India to that of contemporary times, these writers invoke the deep and violent memories of British colonialism which is recast and rearticulated in their newest avatar within the postcolonial and neocolonial world order, so much so that such inquiries, put into mind the recent corporate empires emerging out of the processes of operations of global and transnational firms.

Continuing the thread of discussion, the vision of the nation as an imagined community with her people brought into solidarity through the influence of print capitalism, our next section calls into section the significance of the media in exploring and showcasing subaltern moments. Thus, we explore the trajectory of subaltern representation in visual texts with the understanding that they have always already been unobtrusively

rich with glimpses and studies of subaltern identities, agencies, and politics. Our last section is attentive to contemporary performative arts as part of translated media and the ways it has inflected subaltern representations. Provocatively titled, "Subaltern in Motion: The Visual Media and Subalternity," this section discusses how the visual media has worked hand in hand with the literal one to be a tool—making possible the timely retrieval of what intends to be retrieved, even if, in representation. Read as a crucible for subaltern expression, the essays in this section give us a timely focus on the ways in which the media becomes a key player in highlighting and even leading to moments of subaltern resistance and activism.

Amit Baishya's essay, ""Counter me, Rape us": "Bare Life," Politics and the Sexed Subaltern Subject," focuses on the representation of the naked body of the sexed subaltern subject in two different contexts—one literary and the other "real." The first is Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" where the protagonist Draupadi Mejhen—an Adivasi woman who is captured, raped, and tortured by state forces—presents her battered, naked body before her persecutor, the army chief Senanayak and exhorts him to "counter me." The second, is the photographic archive of the "naked protest" by a group of twelve women who belonged to an organization named Apunba Lup in Imphal, the capital of the northeastern Indian state of Manipur. The group protested the brutal rape and murder of a Manipuri woman named Thangjam Manorama in 2003 by stripping themselves naked in front of the Indian army headquarters in Imphal and challenging the military forces by holding up a placard that said "RAPE US." Baishya studies the two speech acts ("counter me" and "rape us") and also the activity of baring the corporeal self before the sovereign entity to inquire into the forms of agency deployed by the sexed subaltern subject in these instances. Redefining agency as a temporal and relational field of action where multiple axes of time (past, present and future) intersect to engage with the social, he suggests that these acts that expose the "bare life" of the corporeal self evoke affective registers—such as shame, resentment and horror—that work towards exhorting subaltern forms of agency while liberating different imaginaries of the political.

In conclusion, this is a timely volume of essays which recognize the network of geography, culture, economy, and politics to emphasize how literature and the visual media successfully intervene and interrogate materially heterogeneous and unequal processes and connections. Each essay accounts for the dynamism in agency and identity formation, which

is constituted through subaltern political activity and consciousness. Each challenge and bring into conversation narratives that reiterate forms of resistance to hegemonic globalizing processes that revitalize the old unequal politics in a contemporary socio-cultural and political imaginary. In reviving these new forms of resistance and marginalization, the volume helps in the resonance of the concepts of subalternity along interesting, unexpected, and provocative ways. These routes carve out newer forms of political activity in a transnational and neoliberal world.

In compiling this volume of essays, I also hope that this is not the only work to come out on the field in a long time. I hope that our endeavors start a long line of volumes which explore texts from contemporary India and elsewhere to continue expanding on the role and possibility of the subaltern school of studies, and how it sustains its opacity and resistance with the potential for new, and as yet undiscovered histories of unequal meanings and politics.

I want to thank each of our contributors who were sincere, enthusiastic, and supportive of our endeavor. A special thanks to our foreword writer, Dr. Debjani Ganguly for her support and cooperation. I also want to thank our publishers, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, and all our fellow scholars whose faith and support through this compilation always kept us going and hopeful of the project's success.

Maryland, 2010

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PART I:

GENDER AND SUBALTERN CRISIS

RADICAL FAILURE:
MOTHER OF 1084 AS A SUBALTERN CRITIQUE

GAYATRI DEVI

1. Beneath the Nation

On March 1, 1976, in the wake of what has since come to be known in India as the "state of Emergency," a twenty one month period from 25 June 1975-21 March 1977, when the then President of independent India, Fakruddin Ali Ahmed, suspended elections and civil liberties and gave total power to "rule by decree" to then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. It was then that a final year Engineering student at the Calicut Regional Engineering College in North Kerala, Rajan, was taken away by the local police in the early hours of the morning from his college hostel. Even though his father made frantic attempts almost immediately to find his son, the young man was never heard from or seen again (Rajan's mother who suffered from mental illness never learned of her son's disappearance and death during her lifetime.) As issues relating to civil liberties could not be raised in court during the Emergency period, Rajan's father, Prof. Eachara Warrier had to wait until the end of the Emergency period, one year later, to file a *habeas corpus* petition in the Kerala High Court asking to find and produce his son or his son's body. Subsequent investigations revealed that Rajan was whisked away by the police, tortured and killed (and allegedly his body burned to suppress evidence) at the hands of six Kerala Crime Branch policemen at the Kakkayam police camp in Calicut. Rajan was killed under suspicion of alliance with the Naxalite groups in North Kerala that advocated armed and violent uprisings against both landlords and the state in order to secure peasant and tribal land rights. Subsequent investigations revealed that Rajan was not involved in the Naxalite movement but that as a budding actor in a college drama he had made fun of a Kerala cabinet minister. The then Chief Minister of Kerala K. Karunakaran (of the mainstream nationalist Congress party) resigned from political office at the end of the investigation. Almost all of the police officers charged in the crime were later acquitted for lack of evidence. The Kerala Crime Branch chief, Deputy Inspector General Jayaram Padikkal,

under whose orders Rajan was tortured and killed and who was given unchecked political mandate to end Naxalite uprising in the state by any means necessary was also acquitted; Padikkal later became the Director General of Police, the highest ranking police officer in the state of Kerala. He also received the President's Police Medal for bravery and honorable service. To this day, the "Rajan case," as it has gone down in Kerala history has had no closure; nobody has been charged with his disappearance or death. Rajan remains a cipher in Kerala's social and political history. The Naxalites themselves are considered "extremists" and "terrorists" with almost all states having a standing mandate to curb Naxalite "uprisings" by whatever means necessary, including state-sponsored tortures and murders.[1] Public outcry against police custodial killings and in judicial lock-ups take place in a space of their own, with little, if nothing, done to investigate them and bring those responsible to justice.

In many respects, Rajan's story reads like that of Brati Chatterjee, the young man who dies at the hands of the Police in a Police-Naxalite encounter in Mahasweta Devi's *Hajar Churashir Ma* or *Mother of 1084*. Like Rajan, Brati is in his early twenties, member of an educated, middle class family – a sensitive, intellectual young man by all accounts. Like Rajan, Brati is a victim of police brutality and murder. Symbolically, both Rajan and Brati represent the large number of young men and women from the relatively affluent Indian middle-class—often students— who signed on their solidarity with the Naxalite cause, whose base was initially drawn from the peasant and tribal clashes during the late 60s and through the 70s in many parts of India, notably Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. The movement was particularly strong and violent in these states, no doubt due to the predominantly agrarian economy of these regions and concomitant exploitation of the subsistence underclass by the feudal landowners and later the State itself, which has sided with the landowners in almost all land-disputes to date.

The Naxalite movement takes its name from an armed peasant uprising in Naxalbari, a small village in West Bengal, where in 1967, a tribal peasant attempting to plough his land was attacked by hired hands over a land dispute with the local landlord. Local peasants, organized under the early Naxalite leadership of Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal (CPI-ML) violently retaliated against the landowners, and the police that assisted them, killing a policeman in the course of the conflict. In retaliation, the state police with the help of the government opened fire on the tribal

village killing tribal men, women and children. Naxalites ever since have evolved to become marked enemies of the government, particularly, the police. The Naxalbari had sought to put an end to feudal rule in rural India to free the peasants oppressed by a particularly toxic collaboration of landowners, moneylenders, State officials and the State police who colluded with the first three classes. While armed peasant and tribal uprisings (even with intrinsic differences) have been documented extensively across India during the British colonial period, the political reception of these uprisings were radically different from the way these uprisings or revolts have come to be represented in popular consciousness in independent India. For instance, the Birsa Munda rebellion is framed as a nationalist uprising against the British Raj and Birsa Munda himself represented as a freedom-fighter. Under the changed structure of domination, however, peasant and tribal uprisings are "criminalized" and Naxalites are both criminals as well as saboteurs of the nation. The criminalization of tribes, in particular, is a vestige of the British Raj rule but the economic causes that underlay the harsh laws of the Raj have been augmented in independent India with criminal intent, thus effectively silencing any form of dissent or protest from the tribal classes as treason and anti-Indian. Within this historical backdrop, *Mother of 1084* is set in the urban-phase of the Naxalite movement in Bengal from 1971-4, years that saw violent and bloody infightings between CPI-M, CPI-ML, mainstream Congress party, and the police which led to the capture, sadistic torture and deaths of large numbers of urban young men who had joined the ranks of the Naxalite party. From its inception, the Naxalite movement advocated violent overthrow and complete non-collaboration with organized systems of government in order to unravel the hegemony of the dominant class through mobilization of the rural (and urban) disaffected and poor under the political promise of concrete social and economic reforms to alleviate poverty. While the Naxalite ideology has had parliamentary representation (CPI-ML or CPI-Mao), its rogue status propagandized and disseminated in the public through state and police media has made social reform secondary to the survival of the ideology itself, as evidenced by the Naxalite movement's inability to find the mass and populist endorsements it needed to earn such a political hegemony. The armed, guerilla uprisings practiced by the Naxalite party have created no visible ideological counter-force to the ruling mainstream parties or their Opposition and Naxalite tactics are perceived as little more than extremist and terrorist attacks, thus denying it the ideological value of an insurgency.

Mother of 1084 investigates the phenomenon of failed Naxalite insurgency in Bengal in the 1970s as symptomatic of the larger problem of the nation's suppression of any authentic form of subaltern insurgency. While the novel does not undertake a historical diagnosis regarding the failure of the insurgency, it nevertheless throws into sharp relief the figure of the "subaltern" as the casualty of the failed insurgency. In the nexus between India's emerging reputation as a regional power both at home and abroad (the Bangladesh war figures as a prominent metonymy for India's nationhood in *Mother of 1084*) and the Naxalite party's organizational disarray and inability to connect with its social base lies the subaltern mass, whose lives are animated and inscribed for us in the bodies of the assassinated Naxalite workers, such as Brati and Somu. In fundamentally radical ways *Mother of 1084* dares to answer the question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" which Gayatri Spivak asked in her definitive essay on subaltern studies. The question of course presupposes the subaltern as an always already defined entity. Is the "subaltern" a demographic position? Is it a class membership? Does it have a lineage? Does it engender a lineage? If the subaltern cannot speak, who may speak on the subaltern's behalf? And is this speaking on behalf of the subaltern an ethical act? Perhaps unintentionally Spivak herself supplies an answer to her caution when she draws a distinction between the "organic intellectual" as not a "concept of identity but rather of a focus on that part of the subject which focuses on the intellectual's function" ("Imaginary Maps" xxiii). This figure of an "organic intellectual" helps us to understand the interventionist discourse created by Devi herself, who has written extensively about the indigenous peoples of India and Spivak, who has translated her work, by extension for you and I as ethical readers of the stories of subaltern resistance. The young activists Brati and Somu, with the women protagonists Sujata and Nandini evolve to become organic intellectuals cognizant of the ethical and historical dilemmas surrounding the decolonization of the subaltern figure. One way in which this ethical dilemma is particularly fitting, in that Devi's instrument of subaltern agency is a woman—Sujata— a mother, motherhood being the most ethically persuasive mode of subordination in many patriarchal cultures. Paradoxically, Sujata's investigations into Brati's murder become a betrayal of her maternal responsibilities and duties. Devi uses the trope of "betrayal" to signify the collapse of the Naxalite insurgency as well as the disintegration of the Chatterjee family—the nation's betrayal of its subordinate poor is evidenced, for instance, in the repeated image of the city of Calcutta as a dangerous place for the youth of Bengal to traverse on a daily basis as shown to us through Sujata's eyes in her perambulations in

search of Brati's history in the city. Absences and corpses signify the subaltern, but Devi incisively documents the class warfare through her wry reportage of the lavish goings-on, both in city of Calcutta as well as the Chatterjee household. This paper explores Devi's emotionally charged investigation of the mechanism of collusion between the State and the Family, the two front tiers in class warfare against the subaltern poor in independent India.

I draw a direct parallel between the "Rajan case" in Kerala and Devi's *Mother of 1084* for two reasons, both related to the representational and discourse contexts of postcolonial novels. First, what is "post-" about postcolonial novels such as *Mother of 1084*? What features exemplify the "post"-ness of postcolonial fiction? Is it a chronological break? Is it an ideological change? Second, Devi has explicitly acknowledged her "commitment to my times, to mankind, and to myself . . . . I believe in the value of documentation" ("Imaginary Maps" xii). In other words, what is an ethical postcolonial story? A committed Marxist, Devi's position as a "committed" writer is reminiscent of yet another Marxist critic Frederic Jameson's controversial postulation that "in the third world situation the intellectual is always in one way or another a political individual" (74). The colonial and nationalist periods of postcolonial nations are represented in mainstream historical and literary discourses as a radical break with the past in the case of the former, and reparation of that break towards a systemically enriched, newly geo-politically realigned independent nation in the case of the latter— a nation whose self-definition brims with a kind of optimism controlled by the postcolonial future as contrasted with a pre-colonial past where an entity as subject-sure as a nation was at best catachrestic. The question of what constitutes national culture, then, in postcolonial societies has been answered by a conflation of these two representational streams serving as the "context" for national "texts." But as Gayatri Spivak has argued, the inscription of national hegemony through such cultural productions may itself be seen at best as catachrestic under close scrutiny (*Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 141) leading us to investigate whether the "subaltern" position is the only inexorable ethical position for a third world intellectual. In her discussion of Devi's "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha," as "the postcolonial performance of the construction of the constitutional subject of the new nation, in subalternity, rather than, as most often by renaming the colonial subject, as citizen," Gayatri Spivak observes that Devi's "work is by no means representative of contemporary Bengali (or Indian) fiction and therefore cannot serve as an example of Jamesonian "third world literature"

(Critique of Postcolonial Reason 141). While this caveat certainly attests to Devi's marginal position in canonical Indian literature, whether regional or national, it concurs on a fundamental and ideological level with Jameson's ethical, it seems to me, definition of a "third world intellectual." Spivak herself suggests such an ethical position vis a vis the "third world intellectual" in "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

> When we come to the concomitant question of the consciousness of the subaltern, the notion of what the work cannot say becomes important. In the semiosis of the social text, elaborations of insurgency stand in the place of 'the utterance.' The sender—'the peasant'—is marked only as a pointer to an irretrievable consciousness. As for the receiver, we must ask who is 'the real receiver' of an 'insurgency?' The historian, transforming 'insurgency' into 'text for knowledge,' is only one 'receiver' of any collectively intended social act. With no possibility of nostalgia for that lost origin, the historian must suspend (as far as possible) the clamor of his or her own consciousness… so that the elaboration of the insurgency, packaged with an insurgent-consciousness, does not freeze into an 'object of investigation,' or, worse yet, a model for imitation. The 'subject' implied by the texts of insurgency can only serve as a counterpossibility for the narrative sanctions granted to the colonial subjects in dominant groups. The postcolonial intellectuals learn that their privilege is their loss. In this they are the paradigm of the intellectuals. (*The Postcolonial Studies Reader* 28)

Mother of 1084 is a self-conscious reconfiguration of the third world intellectual as a subaltern, and a subaltern woman at that. Again, it is useful for us here to take to heart Spivak's caution that the "subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (Postcolonial Studies Reader 28). Devi's work even in the most general terms is a powerful answer to this loss, to embody the "shadow" and to give it voice. The insurgency in *Mother of 1084* is claimed by the male gender, to be sure, but it is narrated by a woman, Nandini, Brati's lover, and a woman closer in class to Sujata herself. To a lesser extent, Sujata's gradual disinvestment in her family's affairs, even thwarting them through her own rebellions complements the Naxalite uprising. The ideological complementing between the Naxalite insurgency and Sujata's gendered resistance to the bourgeois ethics of the Chatterjee household is reflected in a narratological device that privileges Sujata's perambulations from her house to Somu's mother's house to Nandini's house and back to her own house showing us the circuitous route from the center to the margin, and finally to the uncontained, insurgent eruptions on the body politic of the nation that dissolves the very binaries that mark what is not subaltern. In its formal dissolution of

dominant binaries, *Mother of 1084* reaches out towards what is subaltern, the only ethical position for a third world intellectual.

2. A Subaltern Critique

The frame narrative of *Mother of 1084* takes place over the duration of one day—17 January 1970, the birthday and second death anniversary of Brati, Sujata's son, who exists in police records as corpse #1084. Brati is 22 years old at the time of his death—born in 1948 one year into India's independence, two years prior to the drafting and adopting of the Indian Constitution on January 26, 1950 which declared India a sovereign, democratic, socialist, secular republic assuring its citizens justice, equality and liberty. Coincidentally enough, this is the day of Brati's sister Tuli's engagement party as well and we see the Chatterjee household in the throes of a celebratory get-together. Devi's detailed account of the willful optimism with which the Chatterjee household celebrates the engagement party on the death anniversary of one of its sons constitutes a special kind of lack, absence, or "meaning loss," reminiscent of the meaning loss that Jameson showed lies at the heart of modernist texts that seek to repress their imperial and colonial content (*Nationalism, Colonialism, Literature 51*). For Sujata, whose subjectivity is at the cusp of being inscribed within the subaltern state, this 'meaning loss' translates to a search for meaning outside the family, the city, and the country, a search that results ultimately in unraveling the fabric that covers nationhood. Indeed, *Mother of 1084* is a narrative exploration along the spatio-temporal axes of a country to locate the missing sons and daughters of the family and the nation, young men and women who cannot be localized in space or time, but can only be understood and comprehended as shadowy and rumored presences that do not belong in the recorded history or the narrated subjectivities of the nation. Devi's narrative, like most modernist texts, is structured into city-perambulations—a sort of purposeful yet manic traversal of space to expose its monstrous alienness. Devi's perambulatory narrative is reminiscent of Jameson's analysis of a unique and compelling stylistic choice of modernist texts, a choice forced into being by the singular experience of the "spatial disjunction" provoked by imperialism and colonialism which radically reworked the margins delineating center and peripheries:

> What is determined by the colonial system is now a rather different kind of meaning loss than this one: for colonialism means that a significant structural segment of the economic system as a whole is now located elsewhere, beyond the metropolis, outside of the daily life and existential

> experience of the home country . . . . To put it in other words, this last—daily life and existential experience in the metropolis—which is necessarily the very content of the national literature itself, can now no longer be grasped immanently; it no longer has its meaning, its deeper reason for being, within itself. As artistic content it will now henceforth always have something missing about it, but in the sense of a privation that can never be restored or made whole simply by adding back in the missing component: its lack is rather comparable to another dimension, an outside like the other face of a mirror, which it constitutively lacks, and which can never be made up or made good. (Jameson 51)

Mother of 1084 is a profound exploration of such a "constitutive lack"; a weary and worried testimonial to the utter callousness with which the Nation has murdered its own citizens for demanding basic human rights. The foreignness of the city that distresses Sujata is one narrative choice Devi employs to communicate the "existential experience" of a nation that has murdered its own citizens. That Naxalites, such as Brati and Somu, saw themselves in solidarity with subordinate people elsewhere, and not with the ideal of an Indian national citizenship—and thus outside the mechanisms that produce national culture altogether—lays the groundwork for Devi's critique of nationhood. Authorities decode Brati's allegiance to the Naxalite cause as a rejection of his rightful place as a citizen; in so far as he engages in rebellion against the State, State considers him a criminal. Ranajit Guha has written extensively about the distinct codes that govern the authorities' understanding and response to "common crime" versus "rebellion," or "insurgency."[2] Sujata uses the word "out of the ordinary," and "crime" to describe how authorities—both the State as well as her husband and Brati's father Dibyanath—frame and respond to Brati's death:

> There was no one in the family any more to do something out of the ordinary and provide an occasion for a sudden message on the telephone that would drag Sujata to Kantapukur to identify a dead body in the morgue. There was no one in the family any more to be such a fool as to send Jyoti and Jyoti's father running through the corridors of power while Sujata and Tuli were the only ones who could be spared to rush to Kantapukur.
>
> There was no one in the family any more to commit a crime that could leave him lying dead in Kantapukur. The dom, removing the heavy sheet. The O. C. asking—Do you identify your son?
>
> They were all prudent people, they lived by the laws of the land, they were good citizens. (Devi 7)

Guha theorizes that " insurgency soon extricates itself from the placenta of common crime in which it may be initially enmeshed and establishes its own identity as a violence which is *public, collective, destructive,* and *total* in its modalities" (109) But as we see in the above excerpt from *Mother of 1084*, political insurgency is conflated with common crime precisely to undermine and subvert its political force. Insubordination is decoded as unlawfulness in a tendentious inversion of the insurgent intent, thereby allowing the State to use any force necessary to quell the rebellion. With this ironic inversion, subaltern insurgency becomes the only paradigmatic challenge possible *within* a nation to the nation, but the very modalities that describe its power—public, collective, destructive and total—also render it vulnerable to ambiguous reception by the very public it seeks to reform and liberate.

The fundamental ambiguity that defines the subaltern insurgent—is he a criminal or a revolutionary? —appears to be tied to issues of class warfare, and Devi makes Sujata confront this ambiguity as a pre-requisite to her journey into the subjective consciousness of what it means to be a subaltern:

> Sujata had not been able to find a category of criminals to put Brati into.
>
> Even as they cried for the dead Brati, Jyoti and Dibyanath had tried to make her see that the killers in society, those who adulterated food, drugs and baby food, had every right to live. The leaders who led the people to face the guns of the police and found for themselves the safest shelters under police protection, had every right to live. But Brati was a worse criminal than them. Because he had lost faith in this society ruled by profit-made businessmen and leaders blinded by self-interest. Once this loss of faith assailed a boy, an adolescent, or a youth, it does not matter whether he is twelve, sixteen or twenty-two, death was his portion. (Devi 19)

Guha calls this ambiguous definition of a subaltern insurgent the result of a "clash between two theories"—"its terrible/it's fine," alluding to Mao's contradictory descriptions of the Hunan uprising of 1927 (108). To analogize perhaps takes away the singularity of the Indian Naxalite movement but Devi gives us a glimpse into the historical and ideological pedigree of urban Naxalities such as Brati:

> Brati had written posters with slogans. When the police had searched his room, Sujata had seen the texts of the slogans. They were all in Brati's handwriting: