

Ideology as Articulating Identity: The Politics of Resistance in *Mother Forest*

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The narrative, *Mother Forest*¹, is the translation of the transliteration of an oral text. It was orally narrated by C.K. Janu to Bhaskaran who transcribed and edited the text, Ravi Shankar translated this text into English. Thus, Janu's narrative underwent two kinds of mediation in the course of its evolution to the English text: it survives editing and overcomes untranslatability

Mother Forest is a specimen of native writing. It is, therefore, a native text which resists both external colonization and internal colonization. It resists both intercultural and intracultural invasion. As a resistance text, it eludes academic theories. It always survives the onslaught of academic interpretation and attempts at showcasing the text as a specimen of tribal writing.

The most remarkable feature of the text is the explicitly first person plural narrative voice: the autobiographical "we." This makes the text a self-referential narrative. It reflects the assertion of an articulating tribal identity. Janu is at the vanguard of the Kerala tribals' struggle to retrieve their lost land. In this context, the text is an assertion of identity which is an inevitable consequence of struggle. This articulating identity is a paradigm of their ideological struggle which is part of their racial unconscious. But this plural narrative voice erases the margins between the public/private domains of action and articulation. The narrative merges the domains

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into a single space of resistance. It is, therefore, difficult to differentiate between the narrator's personal identity and the collective identity of the community.

As a representative of the tribal community, the narrator belongs to a subculture. She turns out to be a primitive rebel, as Stuart Hall observes, to deconstruct the popular through the articulation of their cultural identity². This cultural identity, which withstands the onslaught of political nationality, is symbolic of their cultural distinctiveness. But, this cultural identity creates a kind of embryonic nationalism in the community. Their identity evolves out of the cultural difference not only from the mainstream society but also from analogous tribes. One of the themes of the text is the distinctiveness of the Adiyar tribe to which Janu belongs and their lives. The articulation of the identity is essential for the survival of the community of narrator(s). Articulation is, therefore, an art of necessity. Literary articulation consequently creates a literary text. In the case of subalterns, especially female subalterns, the constructed literary text is always loaded with protest and resentment towards perpetual state of oppression. This kind of literature that reflects their predicament of subordination and struggle is the literature of necessity, as J. Saunders Redding phrases about Black literature³. It is an imaginative realm of freedom and dignity.

Though the first person plural narrative voice

is ambiguous of gender, it is obvious from the text that the narrators belong to a community of tribal women. In this context, the text is a communally articulated cultural construct. The community of narrators, as a collectivity of tribal women, is the object of multiple oppressions of race, gender and class. In this regard, the tribal female identity is analogous to the Black female identity, which is constructed from an interlocking system of triple marginalization. Race, gender and class are, in fact, cultural constructs appropriated by the political power structures to deny equity and justice to certain groups of people classified differently as, for instance, tribals, women and workers.

The first two themes of the text are Adiyars' strong link to land and Adiyar women's dependence on land for survival. Land is emblematic of their culture; it is the visual symbol of their culture, history and identity. As the male folk of their community are evasive, exploitative and oppressive, the females depend on land for the survival of their community as well as themselves. In this context, the collective cultural identity of tribal women is a site of struggle and survival. Their identity is articulated as a self-referencing landscape. For the tribals, land is not merely a metaphor of survival; it is the symbol of their culture well-engraved in their racial unconscious. So the loss of the land, mainly forest land, is a symbolic loss of their culture: its retrieval is the retrieval of the lost culture. The tribals' struggle for lost land has a cultural significance which is incomprehensible to politicians. From the perspective of the tribals, the land is a structural paradigm of culture. The quest for the lost land is a quest for a culture invaded and vandalized; it is a quest to retrieve the cultural identity. This quest finds a manifest form in the landscaping of resistance the narrative voice attempts.

Ideology, according to Louis Althusser, is a set of ideas in the unconscious that makes

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one represent a reality in a particular way⁴. Ideology is assimilated unconsciously by the society. But Michel Foucault thinks that ideology is reflected in the ways in which the society is organized and is evident in the power relations of that organization⁵. It is related to a set of values and the strategies involved in strengthening them. In *Mother Forest*, the identity of the narrative voice is an amalgam of racial, gendered and cultural identity. The ideology of the narrative voice is unambiguously expressed in the explicit statement of the dominant themes of the text. The narrative voice makes an attempt to articulate the identity which is in polysemic phase with the ideology.

Ideological construction of gendered subjectivity, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak observes, leads to male dominance and consequently fortifies patriarchy⁶. Colonial representation of women is an aesthetic problematic. As racism or sexism is an internal form of colonization, the gendered subjectivity is often represented through absence and silence: woman, as a subaltern, is represented in terms of paradigmatic elements and associative relationships. Subalterns have no history or language of their own; female subaltern or gendered subaltern, as Spivak remarks, is just a shadow. Caught between the power structures of patriarchy and imperialism, the third world subaltern woman confronts a

violent exit.⁷ The voice of the tribal woman, though borrowed from patriarchal and colonialist powers, is stifled by the dominant power structures of race, gender and class. So the text is full of voids and silences: what is left unspoken is more significant than what is spoken.

The meditations which *Mother Forest* undergoes as a text are fatal to the identity of the narrative voice: a community of tribal women. The oral narrative of Janu is a phonocentric text. Bhaskaran has graphocentricized the oral narrative of Janu. A female-constructed oral narrative is thus transformed into a male-constructed written narrative. The symbolic order of the male-centred language, according to Jacques Lacan, is represented by the presence of phallus. So Bhaskaran has also phallogocentricized the written text.⁸ Thus, Janu's oral text is at once graphocentricized and phallogocentricized by Bhaskaran while he rendered the oral narrative into the written form. The graphocentric text brings in the complexities of semiotics. It problematizes the process of signification. Linguistic problems like ambiguity and polysemy exist only in graphocentric text. Semantic problems like ambivalence can be detected in graphocentric text. As phonocentric text has no visual structure, the oral narrative evades deconstruction. It is in this context that Derrida comments that speech is logocentric and hence orality of text is also logocentric in nature.⁹ For, orality is logocentricity and orality is authenticity. What Bhaskaran has done is to provide a graphic mould to a phonic text. It is a process of providing a new set of linguistic signs to the unconscious of the readers. This is an attempt to devoice or negate the articulating identity of the text. Thus, the first mediation counters the resistance to the literary text in the form of active articulation. So the first mediation is an attempt to distort the identity of the narrative voice.

The English rendering, *Mother Forest*, is a

bad or mediocre translation. It is true that the linguistic obstacle of cultural untranslatability is negotiated and reconciled. But translation is a homogenization of medium and unification of content. Translation is, as Stephen Duncombe observes, a form of "politics that does not look like politics."¹⁰ Any attempt at homogenization or unification is an attempt to depoliticize the ideological content of the text. so the translation of the written text into English is an attempt to depoliticize and overlook the political issues articulated in the text. It is an attempt to neutralize the ideology of the text and consequently to distort the identity of the narrative voice.

As language is the medium of representation and as the target audience of each language varies, the selection of language is a political choice. *Mother Forest* as a representation of ethnic and racial culture betrays an obsession with the native. It is an instance of the native on the shelf which signifies the process of comprehending the native. As a colonialist discourse English has an inherent quality to fortify imperialism or cononialism vicariously through distorted imagery of the colonized and similar politics extended by other means. As consciousness is mediated through language, the choice of language forced on the articulating voice can impede the spontaneous representation of the unconscious. A translated text becomes a marketable commodity, as market is a space to appropriate any subordinate culture by the dominant culture. Contemporary native writing is a construct of oppression. In this sense any narrative in native/tribal language is a specimen of polemic literature. The conflict between the native and non-native languages offers a kind of resistance to the natives/tribals to preserve their culture and identity through the medium of the text.

Being the community of tribal women, the narrative voice is the subaltern women with

no language or historical space. Rendering the articulated narrative voice into English not only depoliticizes the ideological content but also distorts the identity which is a cultural construct. Englishing the native woman is fatal to the emancipating strategy of the community of women. Thus, the articulation of the native woman is an art; it is an art expressed in a borrowed language. At its best, it must be an unedited audio-visual text which can be transmitted orally from generation to generaiton, as was followed in the case of folk ballads. An unedited audio-visual text can resist subversive forces like mainstream media and social hierarchies. Thus, logocentrism can offer a linguistic guard to native female articulation.

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