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CONTESTATIONAL SPACES: A STUDY OF *FOOTPRINTS IN THE BAJRA*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper is divided into two parts. The first part throws light on the issue of space and location in Postcolonial study of literature. It is the location of the subject in relation to space and time that defines its identity. The idea of contestational spaces articulates the antagonism of oppressor and oppressed which is visible in the minority discourses, Dalit writings and subaltern studies. In such a situation, there are the opposing forces at work in the form of marginalization and resistance. The second part discusses these contestational spaces in light of Nabina Das' novel *Footprints in the Bajra*. The novel highlights the exploitation and plight of rural agrarian society and its subsequent revolt in the form of the Naxalite struggle.

Keywords: Postcolonial, location, space, resistance, Naxalites.

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Post-Colonial theory, which has until recently engaged itself with the issues of power, domination, representation, identity and resistance has begun to be associated with the dynamics of space and location. Edward Soja in *Third space* is of the view that there has been a long standing and mutually rewarding relationship between postcolonial studies and the field of human geography that has gained momentum with the revival of the interest between space and space theory across humanities and disciplines of social science in the recent times. As a result it has opened up new vistas and challenges for the postcolonial scholarship. He further states that this spatial struggle is much above the 'struggle over geography' and is more about contending ideas, images and imagination as well as competition for land, territory, fundamental and egalitarian rights (IX-X).

'Location' in a broad sense is the setting of the literary work both spatially and temporally. It locates the creation of texts, what goes into its background and foreground, the contemporary social scenario in which the text has been created, the author's milieu, the hidden gaps deliberately left by the author and the age that it describes. Post-Colonial theorists study location in sense of space occupied by the text.

Studying the Post-Colonial phenomenon in a temporal sequence has been a recent affair and which has become "more significant and critically revealing than putting them beside or next to each other in a spatial configuration" (Soja 168). This hierarchy has slowly been challenged only in the latter half of the twentieth century. The second half of the twentieth century has witnessed a tremendous spatial revolution

recognizing the significance of location and space. Any study centering on space and spatiality is incomplete without the reference of Edward Said, particularly his "Imaginative Geography and its Representations: Orientalizing the Oriental" in *Orientalism* and his *Culture and Imperialism*. Said also encapsulates relationship between empire and geography in his essay 'Geography, Narrative, and Interpretation' where he argues that a postcolonial literary study must be rooted in the concrete geography of the work it defines. Theorists like J.K Noyes and Robert P. Marzec follow Said in their identification of the dynamics of space/place and a literary text in their work *Colonial Space: Spatiality in the Discourse of German South West Africa 1884-1915*(1992) and *An Ecological and Postcolonial Study of Literature: From Daniel Defoe to Salman Rushdie* (2007) respectively.

However, it is Homi K. Bhabha who carries Said's legacy ahead in his seminal work: - 'Third Space'. According to Bhabha, there has been a significant preoccupation with abstract spatiality in postcolonial criticism where the spatial concerns are often expressed through awareness of location. Place plays an important role in defining and shaping one's identity as well as how this identity is perceived and defined by others.

The term 'Third Space' was first used by Bhabha, referring to a space marked by a disruptive temporality and enunciation undermining the authority of dominant cultural signs. This space indicating hybridity and ambivalence is a threat to fixity of meaning. It is the text itself that subverses and renegotiates the hegemonic systems of power. Bhabha uses the notion of third space, and the elusive strategies of hybridity implicated in it, to theorize about colonial power and resistance. In *The Location of Culture* Bhabha describes the 'liminal' or 'interstitial' space that exists between diverging and competing cultural traditions, historical spaces and critical methodologies. It is this liminal space that is explored by the author in a text.

'Nation' has become a central figure of discussion on postcolonial identity where, "colonial manipulation of national boundaries and the subsequent challenge for postcolonial states in forming cohesive identities within the terms of these inherited boundaries" (Soja 21).

The study of location of texts and textuality revolves around the creation of identities at a more local level including homes, communities, neighbourhood, schools, cities, tribes and villages; thus encompassing a private and public space as well. The privileging of space and location in postcolonial studies also draws its credentials from Michel Foucault's spatialization of philosophy and his influential proclamation, "the present epoch will perhaps be above all else the epoch of space" (Foucault 1986:22). Foucault's 'heterotopias' articulates space containing hidden elements. According to him, these are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted. As against these heterotopias, utopias are imaginary, albeit and concealed places not real like the heterotopias (24). He further argues that heterotopias may be hidden and obscured locations, forbidden or sacred locations, locations with privileged sites or pockets of illegal and deviant activities. So, it can be inferred that the space indicating the location of texts may not be a uniform reality, rather it's a collage of disparate realities juxtaposed together in uncertain boundaries creating hybrid and composite space.

Literature can never be written in isolation as it is the author who manifests the power of literature to turn experience into life-narratives that will eventually give rise to a differentiated kind of social experience (Watson 201). Jacques Ranciere is of the view that today's artist doesn't merely create a piece of art for aesthetics alone, rather he wants to venture out of his museum "[...] and induce alterations in the space of everyday life, generating new forms of relations" (53) . Therefore, he further argues that:

[...] film, video art, photography, installation and all forms of art can rework the frame of our perceptions and the dynamism of our affects. As such, they can open up new passages towards new forms of political subjectivation. (Ranciere 82)

The text taken up for study, *Footprints in the Bajra* is written by Nabina Das and was published in 2010 and is located in the bajra belt of north Bihar. The contestational space and the region portrayed by the novelist is notorious for its badland topography. The fictional capital of the novel is Durjanpur village, which is few hundred kilometers from Patna city, in the remote interiors of the bajra belt. The novelist deliberately chose

the naxalite infested region as its fictional capital so as to project the cause of the insurgents. The naxalite struggle is basically between the landless and the land owners, which has also come to be associated with caste based struggles. In central India, there is a region which is often in the news for anti social activities known by the name of 'The Red Corridor'. The Red Corridor stretches from the Nepalese border in the north, moves down south covering parts of Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Andhra Pradesh. Bihar shares a border with Nepal that provides a base for the naxalite activities. The Naxalite movement as projected by Nabina Das is an ideological movement, not merely a law and order threat as popularly misunderstood. Nabina Das also discusses the flawed strategies followed by the administration to crack down the insurgent activities. The Hunting brigade as portrayed in the novel is the fictional representation of the 'Operation Green Hunt' of 2009. It was an unpublicized operation in which several innocent people fell prey to unaccounted torture in the name of cracking the insurgency. The novel also speaks for the displacement of the natives and tribals in which their land was forcibly taken away and handed over to multinationals in the name of development. The displaced people called the IDPs (internally displaced people) were not rehabilitated. In the novel, the IDPs are supported and given shelter at the camps set up by the rebels. They are provided food, clothing and shelter and are trained to hold the gun for claiming back their home and land. The novel talks of the Indian government's approach to handle the Maoist in the India of the 80s and 90s. The combing strategies using power, force and military is a complete no-no solution according to the author. In this strategy, more of the innocent people were at the loss than the real culprits. Nabina Das also discusses the cause of taking up the arms which is sometimes under compulsion or at times out of sheer desperation. The present offered no respite to the marginalized; therefore they sought to embrace naxalism which they misunderstood to give them a better future.

While writing a text like *Footprints in the Bajra*, the novelist has a clear picture of Bihar's cultural and social milieu. Belonging to Jharkhand, she paints a live portrait of the workings of a caste based hierarchy which can be seen in the following passage from the text:

...when the government comes hunting us out, they'll not appoint a Thakur, a Chaudhury, a Singh or a Sharma, but a Murmu, a Paswan, a Yadav, a Gonda. Those that never got a chance in the history. (Das 56)

Nabina Das' portrayal of familiar Bihari surnames and the locales have an aura of rural Bihar. She also features the local tribals (The Santhals) and *adivasis* in a vivid manner.

She writes about the source of inspiration for her novel in one of her interviews with R K Biswas as:

The events described in the book pertain to the Maoist insurgency in Bihar and the lives of individuals in the crossfire. I had a peep into some of that on my brief trip to southern Bihar as a student. I won't call it "witnessing", but as a theatre activist roaming the so-called badlands, I came tantalizingly close to incidents we normally read and see in daily newspapers and TV scoops. My take in the book is less on the political angle but more on the human story. (R.K Biswas)

Nabina Das' novel is about the Naxalite rebellion as seldom represented in the global media. Through her novel, she has portrayed a significant threat as well as its effectiveness and its level of popular support amongst the rural masses. According to a unanimous report, the naxals have an access to one third of India's territory and at several times and several places, they have also set up alternate governments. They project and represent India's poorest of the poor and the most exploited people who have resorted to violent means of recourse. It is because they are left with no other option. They have been exploited due to the wrongful policies of the government, severe poverty in the name of development. Siddarth Dube in *The Montreal Gazette*, talks of the rural poverty and violence as the only recourse when he says:

India's reality is that 80 per cent of the poor live in rural areas, where they are typically bereft of assets (particularly agricultural land), illiterate, malnourished and sick. And only scarcely less than in colonial India, they are deeply oppressed by the landed. The lowest castes remain the most impoverished; brutal violence and ritual discrimination are ubiquitous; and democracy is a fiction at the village level in all the major states. These myriad disabilities bar the poor from participating in

economic growth. They also ensure that the poor barely share in the gains of growth: little or nothing trickles down to them, too often not even higher wages for their labour. Moreover, these disabilities prevent them from translating universal suffrage and their massive numbers into political power. The record of the past half-century has proved all this beyond doubt. (199)

There has been enormous abuse of men and materials by the multinationals and theft of tribals and their rich culture, heritage and resources by the onslaught of development. In such a scenario, the victims of development consider the nation state as the perpetrator in their oppression. It is this oppression that goes into the shaping up of the naxalite ideology and its struggle for change.

The use of violence by the naxals in the novel is the reflection of the routine violence experienced by the multitudes in India due to extreme poverty and their economic exploitation. The novelist reflects the plight of bonded labour and child labour in factories which are the temples of modern development where their health is pawned upon. This availability of cheap labour and its marginalization is rampant in the rural areas of central India. Andrew Buncombe in his article "Who are the Naxalites and will they topple the Indian Government?" is of the view that the naxals claim to represent the interests of Adivasis and the Dalits (*The Independent*).

Das speaks for the Naxalite violence witnessed daily in the Red corridors of India in the form of guerrilla war fare, attack on police and para military convoys, landmine explosions and impoverished device. Rakesh K. Singh reports in *The Asian Age* about the police posts and the state infrastructures as the major targets of the Naxalites. Anuj Chopra talks of the Naxalite movement and their attacks on the Indian state using advanced weaponry. There are basically two Indias in which the novel is grounded, one- dazzling India of cafes and restaurants seen daily on the T V channels, also projected by our political leaders and the writings of state analysts. There is also another India; we rarely get a peep into. Buncombe writes of it as:

This is the India of grinding poverty, a victim of social exploitation of the worst kind, where the inhabitants – mainly tribals – are treated like chattels and domestic animals by the upper caste political leaders, landlords and forest contractors... It is this India coming out from under the carpet, which is flocking to the banners of the Maoist ideologues. (Buncombe)

In order to conclude it can be stated that a literary artefact is never independent of the times and place it is grounded in. When an author creates a work of art, there are always some external forces at work in the backdrop. *Footprints in the Bajra* is a discourse on the contestational spaces of Naxalism and insurgency.

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