

EXPERIENCES AND RESISTENCE OF SUBALTERNS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE STORIES OF SELECTED PAKISTANI BONDED LABOURERS

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Abstract

This paper presents a critical analysis of three selected life stories of bonded labourers namely Ali (a Hari), Gul (a brick maker) and Anwar (a carpet weaver). Being the representative of thousands of Pakistani downtrodden, the target workers become the victims of viciousness of their native kings (i.e., landlords and jamadars etc.). Here, this qualitative study applies the theoretical concept of subalternity on the chosen narratives of bonded labourers and aims to disclose the hegemonic ways of their oppressive masters. Following textual analysis together with critical insights of Subaltern Studies, the study focuses on the experiences and resistance of the selected labourers against the power-politics of their dominant masters. The findings show that, though bonded labourers attempt to bring improvement in their lives, yet their resistance and insurgency bring more troubles to them due to which their voices are dispersing in shadows. As these subalterns are ignored by the authorities, therefore there seems a great need for the implications of the laws of justice to bring prosperity for them in Pakistan.

Keywords:

Bonded labourers, subalterns, subaltern studies, insurgency.

Introduction

Bonded labour that can be called as modern slavery or human trafficking (Anti-Slavery International, 1996; Global Slavery Index (GSI), 2014), is one of the prevailing dilemmas of Pakistani society. Though bonded labour is prohibited by Law (See Abolition Act, 1992) yet the poor are forcibly enslaved. According to GSI (2014), among one hundred and sixty-seven (167) countries Pakistan is the third most effected country in which over two million people are suffering from bonded labour. While GSI (2020) estimates 6 million bonded labourers in Pakistan (Dawn, 20). This evil (i.e., bonded labour) gives birth to several forms of oppressions including sexual assault (Gold, Trautrim and Trodd, 2015; Malik, 2016). Keeping up this serious matter of bonded labour in Pakistan, this study analyses the narratives of three bonded labourers (namely Anwar, Gul, and Ali) and unveils the hegemony of the dominating forces behind this crime. As these target labourers are the representatives of the most of bonded labourers of Pakistan (See Malik, 2016), so the analysis of these stories is going to provide the readers a better understanding of experiences and resistance faced by such Pakistani subalterns.

This paper applies the theoretical concept of subalternity on the selected stories that are taken out from Human Rights Watch. All the scholars of Subaltern Studies (including Gramsci, 1971; Guha 1983: 1988; Spivak, 1988: 1990, Chatterjee, 1993: 2012, Sarkar 1989, Panday, 2006; Young, 2003 etc.) apply the concept of subaltern as a “weapon, tool, torch light and hitching post” to challenge authorities. They reconsider subalternity against the power-politics of dominant authorities. Following the trend of subaltern studies’ scholars, this study challenges the dominant power that enforced the labourers to be subaltern. This study answers the questions given below:

- How do some bonded labourers experience life while working with their masters?
- How do some bonded laborers react to their marginalization?

This paper applies text-based close reading method to explore the subalternity of the bonded labourers. It discusses experiences and resistance of the labourers against their marginalization. Now, the following section critically discusses the theoretical insights of subaltern studies’ scholars which frame the study systematically.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Subaltern is one of the debatable terms among postcolonial thinkers and scholars. Lexically the word, subaltern, is used for lower class or lower rank people (Webster English Dictionary, 2012). However, subaltern studies scholars (See Gramsci, 1971; Spivak, 1988; Young, 2003) use this term dynamically. They follow this theoretical concept variously as a challenging weapon (Ludden, 2012) to voice marginal subjects against central discourses (Biswas, 2009; Zaib, 2016; Zaib, 2017; Zaib, et al. 2017).

It was Antonio Gramsci who introduced an ambiguous concept of subaltern (Loui, 2012) in 1929. According to Green (2002), Gramscian thoughts of subalternity are interrelated with his philosophical, religious, economic, social, cultural and political ideologies (3). Due to this complex interrelation of the idea of subaltern with some other ideas, Gramsci never mentioned a last word about subaltern while he presented a fragmentary account of subalterns. Green (2002) states that, in Notebook 1 (1929-30), Gramsci called subalterns to the non-commissioned/junior military troops (p. 1). In Notebook 3 and 4, he

designated the word subaltern to the lower-class people of a society. In Notebook 25, he more clarified this notion by calling slaves, labourers, peasants and women as subaltern (cited by Green, 2002, p. 2-3). Finally, Smith (2010) summed up this debate of subalterns and stated that Gramscian subalterns are non-autonomous politically suppressed social groups (p. 39). These arguments claim that subalterns are the suppressed, downtrodden and browbeaten masses (Varghese, 2009; Mashori and Zaib, 2016) who are always at the margin.

Gramsci (1971) further talks about insurgency and resistance of subalterns and proposes a methodology to upgrade the social status of subalterns against their dominant authorities. At first, he argues that though all sorts of subaltern consciousness and insurgencies cannot liberate subalterns from the oppressions of ruling class because they are always their (ruling class') subjects of activity. Then, he argues that the liberty of subalterns lies in their permanent victory from oppression in the name of a new ethical state, i.e., the collective efforts of subalterns in the form of a group, or an organization (Zaib, 2017). By this, Gramsci propounds a concept of subaltern autonomy (Loui, 2012). This concept of subaltern autonomy through formation of an ethical/moral state is supposed meaningful to understand the nature of resistance of the selected bonded labourers.

Gramscian concepts inspired to several scholars who organized a research circle known as "Subaltern Studies." Ranajit Guha (1923-), the leading figure of Subaltern Studies Group, developed Gramscian thoughts with especial reference to South Asian subalterns. Guha (1982) provided a comprehensive definition of subalterns as the overall Indian population excluding elites. According to Ludden (2002) and Biswas (2009), Guha states that mostly subalterns suffer due to several demographic factors including class, caste, culture, and religion etc. Guha (1983) further describes insurgency as a rebellious act of subalterns against mainstream. He argues that through insurgency subalterns transform themselves into insurgent subalterns. All these insights of Guha (1982; 1983) also assist this study to explore the rebellious attitude or reaction of the selected bonded labourers to their marginalization.

Next, this study further undertakes the concepts of Gayatri Chackravorty Spivak (1942-) who makes the notion of subaltern much complicated and confused. Being critique of all the established conventions of subaltern and subalternity, she grounds her own theory of subalternity which challenges the voice of subalterns. She claims that subalterns are at the most degrading state wherefrom no body, no powerful authority attempt to listen them. They all ignore the rights of subalterns and due to the complete absence of subalterns from history and academia they (the subalterns) become the lost souls (Azad, 2014). By this, Spivak dismantles Gramscian (1971) concept of subaltern autonomy. Spivak (1988) asserts that subalterns are always subalterns. There is no space for their upgradation. Spivak (1988) further originates the concept of gendered subalternity and states that a black or brown woman cannot speak for her rights. Her voice disperses in shadows.

However, taking all these insights of subaltern studies' scholars this study analyses the narratives of bonded labourers to understand their life experiences and insurgency against their slavery. Now, the following section overviews methodology applied in this study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study critically analyses the lives of modern slaves restricted in bonded labour. We selected stories of three labourers from three different fields. Malik (2016) states that bonded labour is commonly found in agriculture, brick kiln industry, and carpet weaving factory. Relying on Malik's (2016) argument, we focused on these three fields and selected the narratives of Anwar, who is a carpenter, Gul, a kiln maker, and Ali, a Hari. Then, their narratives are analysed with the help of close reading method along with theoretical insights of subaltern studies' critics. We chose close reading method for analysis because it assists the researchers to sort out the exact data (Cuddon, 1999). Further, insights of subaltern studies approach helped us to unveil the cruel faces of their masters. Through this approach, we explored the narratives from a new perspective.

The results from this analysis are analysed and discussed in the following section.

DATA ANALYSIS

This section analyses the stories from subaltern perspective. These stories provide us a detailed account of the labourers' hardships and suffering. Moreover, these stories are further connected with the stories of many other people living with / around them. The narrative of Gul provides us an insight about sufferings of his family. Ali's story relates to the story of his wife Reema. Similarly, Anwar's narrative is interconnected with the narrative of his family. These narratives further explore hegemonic attitudes of dominant and powerful people who oblige the workers to surrender their lives to their diplomatic and hypocrite masters. In this way, these three stories assist us to understand the culture of bonded labour. However, to make the implicit explicit, the hidden seen, we divide this section into two sub-sections. At first the section discusses the experiences of bonded labourers. Next, it highlights their resistance. Experiences of the target victims do not merely provide knowledge about their day to day victimization but also brings light to the hegemonic attitudes of their masters. Their resistance clarifies the shortcomings of the authorities to respond to the rights of such downtrodden.

Experiences of Bonded Labourers

This section opens with the narrative of Anwar who appears as a class-based subaltern (Gramsci, 1971). He is from a lower-class family whose poverty and social status proclaims his subalternity through-out his life. He falls in troubles from his childhood as he found himself in debts. As Guha (1982) mentions that subalternity develops due to several factors including age, so Anwar, being an age bound subaltern or a subaltern child, bears much troubles than the old age subalterns. The dominant master of Anwar forced him to work from his age of schooling and kept him away from education. As education brings awareness in man and gives him inner strength so the act of Anwar's master may be interpreted as his hegemonic attitude to restrict Anwar from self-consciousness and self-awareness.

Further, his master enforces him to work for twelve to sixteen hours daily. The forceful implication of twelve to sixteen hours of labour per day to Anwar is another weapon of his cruel master. Though, working twelve hours or sixteen hours is the abolition of law (See Labour Law Act 5) but for Anwar and such other labourers of his field there is only one law that is the law made by their own masters. This hard-physical labour does not merely fatigue Anwar, but it also effects on his mentally health. Through, this act, his

master keeps control on Anwar's mind and body, both. Anwar finds himself bounded and controlled in all respects. From his birth to the present time he is suffering from psychological, emotional and physical abuse.

Further, the master never allowed his suppressor to come out from his debts. Whenever Anwar makes mistakes, his master increases the debt in punishment. The increasing of debt is the brutal act of the owner and this is the height of cruelty. In Spivakian (1988) terminology, it seems to be the most challenging situation for a marginalized who find rare space to come out from his degrading state. By this, Anwar seems to have unapproachability to power-politics of the dominant (Spivak, 1988).

Now, the narrative of Gul, a brick maker, brings light to some other experiences of subalterns. Gul is not merely from a poor family, he is also from minority, i.e., he is a Christian. In this case, Gul becomes a class-based subaltern (Gramsci, 1971) who surrenders his life to the high-class people. His social status keeps him away from all sorts of participation in any field of life. Most of his class members work as scavengers, school or house gate keepers or perform some other minor works (Varghese, 2009). These works keep them always subalterns (Spivak, 1988).

Struggling against his low-social status, Gul falls in more difficulties. He works with his family under the control of a kiln owner who conceives them as they are his life-long slaves. The owner mistreats with them in several ways. According to Labour Law Act 5, a labour should not work more than eight hours. The owner of the factory of Gul never cares about such laws while he enforces his labour to work for unlimited time. This case of Gul is somehow like Anwar who works for sixteen hours. Either, it is the night or day, they must work in brick kiln. Like Anwar, Gul also becomes mentally and physically ill. Moreover, Gul's wife becomes the object of lusty desire of his owner and his jamadar who sexually abuse her time to time. In this way, the wife of Gul becomes a silent figure who cannot speak for her rights (Spivak, 1988). She further becomes a double oppressed woman. At first, she subordinates to her husband, secondly when her domestic master, her husband, leaves her she becomes a target of lusty desires of Jamadar.

The act of Jamadar to abuse Gul's wife is a tool of powerful Jamadar to not merely surrender her for the satiation of her wishes but it also challenges the masculinity of Gul. According to Clifford (2008), rape or sexual assault is one of the most useful weapons to win in war-scene. Because this act does not merely harm to a single suffering woman but it also effects on her family, community and village etc. (p. 4). Therefore, following this useful weapon of sexual assault, Jamadar of Gul takes revenge from Gul's clan. When Gul finds his wife assaulted, his pain increases twice.

Furthermore, the owner of Gul does not provide him a good lump sum. This low salary seems the attempt of the owner to keep his workers economically weak. Due to the financial issues, Gul and his family lose their wishes to live a happy life. They feel that they have no rights to sleep well, earn well, and live well. They accept their subordination and have rare access to power-politics (Spivak, 1988).

Ali represents another personification of modern slave who is living a confined life from his childhood. His poverty together with illiteracy clarifies his everlasting subalternity. He works in a sugar cane field for the planation and cultivation. He has been like Gul and Anwar who are being away from education and so from any kind of self-consciousness and power. His marginalization increases when he gets marry

with a beautiful girl namely Reema. After his marriage he is forced to bring Reema to work as well. It is his landlord who compelled both to work unwillingly.

The couple starts working for the landlord and becomes the victim of landlord's daily beating and abusing words. The act of beating and abusing reminds the reader the colonial time when the African slaves were bitterly beaten by colonial masters. The colonial masters showed their hatred and superiority to the colonised in the form of beating and some other punishments. In the same way, the landlords use beating to suppress their workers in postcolonial Sindh.

Despite of hard working, Ali and Reema cannot afford the expense of their family therefore they often ask for loan to their landlord. Moreover, Reema does not merely works for the landlord's wealth, while she also becomes the target of sexual assault. As Gul's wife becomes the victim of the Jamadar's devilish wishes in the same way, Reema experiences this guilt. This case makes Reema and Gul's wife gendered subalterns (Spivak, 1988; Spivak, 1990). Reema unveils this secret of rape with her husband who advises her to be silent forever. This silence in terms of subalternity claims that subaltern cannot speak. The couple avoids speaking against the landlord for they fear that Police will charge Reema in the fake case of adultery. In that way, Reema and Gul's wife are enforced by the elite to work as their sex workers (See Zaib, 2017).

All these experiences of the selected participants clarify their utmost degrading state. Their voice seems to be unheard by the authority (Spivak, 1988) and there seems rare chances of optimism in the lives of the sufferers. Now, the following section discusses the insurgency of these subalterns.

Resistance of the Selected Bonded Labourers

Guha (1983) favours the insurgency of subalterns to upgrade or improve their status. Though Spivak (1988) mentions that subalterns remain subalterns yet Guha (1983) and Gramsci (1972) talk about the resistance and insurgency of subalterns. Keeping up their views, we analyse insurgency embodied in the narratives of the selected subalterns. We find Anwar as an insurgent subaltern (Guha, 1983) who attempts several times to liberate himself from the clutches of his master. He first chooses escaping from his working area. This attempt goes in vain because the power of his master pervades all over his land. Anwar is again captured and tortured by police and is forced to return to his work. Here, the police reconcile with the dominant and exercises power on such suppressed people. When, Anwar finds no way to escape from this suppression, so he chooses another way to release himself from his tiresome work. To take a break from work he uses to injure himself by cutting his own hand.

According to Abbu Lughod and Mitchell (1978: 95-96) and Chandra (2015: 564), resistance always coheres with power as "where there is power, there is resistance". The same case is with the story of Gul. Gul also appears as an insurgent. He stands for his rights. He urges to make his life better. As he knows that his single voice is useless for the demand of good wages and short labour time, so he decides to take favour of some other workers of his kiln factory. In that way, he organizes a team of labourers against the kiln owner. Through this act, he tries to build up an ethical state. Ethical state by Gramsci (1971) is an ideal state which is established by bourgeois or lower-class people to stand for equal rights (See Zaib, 2017). Gul's conscious state motivates him to liberate his bonded body from the bonded labour. But instead of getting liberty, he falls in more troubles. His attempt to lead his team is bitterly crushed by the

owner who in punishment puts him in a private jail for almost 5 years. Five-year long punishment is another form of hegemony of the owner to keep his slaves powerless.

As power and resistance runs together so Gul further plans to escape from his work. He dreams for a better life, but his all dreams get crushed when he is captured by another authoritative king, the police. Most of the Pakistani police is under the control of powerful politicians like waderas, landlords and jamadars. Police arrests Gul under the charge of theft. This act unveils the corrupt face of police. The police who works for the justice of men at lower level is playing here a role of native king. She is extremely responsible for the degradation of such innocent people. As the master beats Gul in the same way police officer beats him severely. Gul cannot get freedom from any authoritative power. Police again forces Gul to return to brick kiln. This act of police seems the collaboration of powerful authorities to build a nest to keep their slaves always powerless. Gul and Ali both suffers from the conspiracy of police.

Gul unwillingly returns to the brick kiln where he is further treated like an animal. The owner of the kiln announces 10,000 rupees debt on Gul without which he cannot get liberty. He has no money and thence no liberty. Now, Gul in his old age is working for the fulfilment of this fake loan.

CONCLUSION

This study critically analyses the life stories of three bonded labourers working in different fields of life. Anwar is a carpet weaver, Gul is a brick maker and Ali is a Hari. Their life stories represent the marginalization of these labourers. To further understand their experiences and resistance against their marginalization, this study applies theoretical insights of subaltern studies. Through this, the study aims to examine the subalternity of the labourers which in response conceals the hypocrisy of all the dominant masters including landlords, Kiln maker and Zamindar.

This study first focuses on the experiences of the subalterns and finds that Anwar, Gul and Ali all are kept away from education. Being illiterate and poor, they surrender themselves towards their masters. These class-based subalterns work hard for livelihood and give up their hopes for a better life. They experience hegemony in several forms including sexual assault of their wives (See Gul and Ali's story). Their masters make them weak at psychological, physical, social, cultural and economic level.

After, experiences this paper analyses resistance of the selected bonded labourers. Herein, Anwar shows his resistance by first escaping from his work area and then by giving harm to himself. Ali becomes silent which shows that subalterns have unapproachability to the language resources. While, Gul revolts by establishing an ethical state. All sorts of insurgencies go in vain which proves Spivak's argument that subalterns cannot speak. Though, they cannot speak themselves, yet I agree that they can be heard through this study.

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