

‘The Subaltern Surely Speaks’: S.R. Harnot’s Epical Vision of Women in “The Slur” and “Daarosh”

Khem Raj Sharma

Assistant Professor of English, Central University of Himachal Pradesh

In contemporary world, feminists have gone beyond the idea of discrimination, exploitation and marginalization of women; they are rather working towards their emancipation and liberation from all forms of oppression by the state, society and men. Feminism, therefore, now includes the struggle against women’s subordination to the male within the home; against their exploitation by the family; and against their continuing low status at work, in society and in the culture and religion of the country. Consequently, they seek a just and equitable society for all, thereby achieving a dignity for women. In the Indian society, the seeds of feminism are in every woman. To become a feminist, one doesn’t need to know the words, or the jargon, nor be equipped with theory. All that is needed is a recognition of patriarchy and the courage to put an end to injustice, male discrimination and double standards. Also, these subalterns couldn’t remain silent for a long time. If the silence could prove as a ploy for resistance, then they would remain silent, otherwise, violence, verbal as well as non-verbal, may come up to cope up the situation.

Based on this hypothesis, this paper critiques the rise of female consciousness in S. R. Harnot’s short stories “Daarosh” and “The Slur”. Situated in the backdrop of Himachal, Harnot has articulated the silence of the Pahari women to position them against any patriarchal domination prevalent in the state. The fight of an educated village girl against an unusual tradition in “Daarosh” voices the long silence of women of a particular area. The paper also evaluates how Shama, a widow, in “The Slur” articulates against the awful patriarchy prevalent in her home, village, panchayat and the vicinity.

The earlier propositions by various theorists that the subalterns cannot speak either for themselves or for others, and even others cannot speak for them have been proving wrong. Looking at various literatures of the world over, it seems that the subalterns have surely spoken, however, their denigration, exploitation, and victimization remains at the backdrop of their voicing, transgression and resisting. B. R. Ambedkar has argued that “unlike a drop of water which loses its identity when it joins the ocean, man does not lose his being in the society in which he lives [...] Man is born not for the development of the society alone, but for the development of his self.” (n.pag.) He writes this because he knows that this nation need not necessarily represent the ‘self’ of the subalterns collectively. As they have been the worst victims of the social stratification, so, for the assertion of their identity, they surely come to the fore by transgressing those social codes that had been demeaning them for long. Everywhere, the subalterns are made to believe that the justice will eventually prevail; however, this notion of prevalence is a continuing saga in the statute culture of the civilized world. So, the subalterns will never accept the premise that this farcical exercise will help emancipate them.

For Sartre, the most fundamental concern of postcolonial studies was the ability of the oppressed to speak for themselves. Even Spivak's rejection of the possibility for subaltern self-expression constitutes the very act of representation of the subaltern which is fundamental to the power structures that inform their continued inability to speak. In denying them the agency of speech, Spivak speaks on their behalf and thus opens up a discourse of their voicing. However, she raises a number of compelling issues surrounding the politics of who can speak and in what ways, and about the politics of how such voices are and are not heard. She has exemplified the Sati, the Hindu woman who dies on her husband's funeral pyre, as subaltern. But, there are thousands of other Hindu woman categories who have been victimized for centuries. Therefore, Spivak forces us to grapple with the complexities of representing the subaltern and what circumscribes their speech and reception. Concerning this, Rosalind Morris (2010) explains:

At no point does Spivak ever express a normative goal of transparency; ... indeed all her writing, testifies to the impossibility of such transparency, not because representation is always already inadequate to the real that it seeks to inscribe ... but because the subaltern (as woman) describes a relation between subject and object status (under imperialism and then globalization) that is not one of silence — to be overcome by representational heroism — but aporia. The one cannot be “brought” into the other. (13)

The subalterns surely speak but let them speak first. Escobar clearly states that “. . . subalterns do in fact speak . . . (Escobar 223). It is because of the fact that their lives are at stake. In actuality, it is the cultural solidarity amongst the silenced voices of the incredibly diverse peoples that emphatically leads to their voicing. It is a decolonial thought that is making them to speak. As for a text to get translated, it is the translatability inherent in it that makes the translation possible. Similarly, for a person who has been exploited, subjected and subjugated, it is the subalternity inherent in that subjection that surely propels/ compels her/ him to speak out. Here I am reminded of James Scott's classic book, derived from a localised Southeast Asian rural backdrop: *Weapons of the Weak*. It outlines the varieties of forms of resistance to authority in the sense that the subalterns do have a profound agency. If they could not muster the material power, they still rely on moral or normative agency. It is that “politically correct” weapon in their hands to transgress the entire discourse of hegemony, supremacy, and violence, to debunk and subvert the entire stereotyped discourse to carve a niche for themselves. Their subaltern perspective connects them to Gramsci's cultural Marxism.

S. R. Harnot is a seminal figure among the contemporary writers from Himachal Pradesh. He occupies a coveted place in the zenith of Hindi literary circle of the state and has emerged as one of the foremost writers of short stories and novels from the land of gods. As a storyteller, his creative genius has pervaded for four decades. He has written seven short story collections viz. *Panja*; *Aakashbel*; *Peeth par Pahad*; *Daarosh*; *Jeenkathi aur Anya Kahaniyan*; *Mitti ke Log*; *Lytton Block Gir Raha Hai*. Harnot has also written a novel titled *Hidimb* which has received accolades from critics. In addition to this, he has also written four important books concerning the culture and life of Himachal Pradesh viz. *Himachal Pradesh: Mandir aur Lokshrutiyan*; *Himachal se Jan Pehchaan*; *Himachal at a Glance*; and a travelogue titled *Yatra: Kinnaur, Spiti, Lahaul aur Mani Mahesh*. His stories get their oxygen from the beauteous snow-clad mountains, promontory rivers, gullible people, and bounteous ecology of the state. Written in dialectal Hindi, “his writings bring to life the pulse of the people, and have often been placed in the tradition of great story tellers like Munshi Premchand.” (Paul 6) Mostly, his stories depict the life of the rural folk of Himachal. Harnot is well-known for his evocative and keen powers of description and his dispassionate gaze at the deeply rooted social and religious customs. His narratives are a critique

on certain appalling traditions prevailing in the society, and bring out the subtle textures and complexities of such practices which are still observed in parts of Himachal. His tales assimilate in their limited text the social, political, religious and cultural anomalies thereby speculating a healthy society. However, written in the backdrop of Pahari life, his stories are not limited to the local readers, but are universal in nature as well.

"Daarosh" is a fine and subtle delineation of an atypical custom of a tribal area of Himachal Pradesh. Published in the short story collection *Daarosh*, the story has been translated into English by the researcher. *Daarosh* is a typical tribal word which means 'by force'. One ritual of that particular area is called "Daarosh dublove" which means 'marriage by force'. The story is about an assertive resistance by an educated village girl, Kanam against the patriarchal and the political set up of the area, which tend to victimize the women through fallacious practices. However, her family is even undecided about her action against these offenders except her mother. In such blindly followed traditions, even people don't consider such an act a rape. Harnot's depiction of the custom is to posit a counter discourse to the hegemonic forces prevailing in the Pahari state that tend to persecute and offend the weaker section of the society. Also, through the story, the writer has enlivened the universal human rights that advocate equality amongst humans. For the protection of the self-respect of women, Harnot has questioned traditions like Daarosh.

Despite the fact that modern age is assumed to be an age of feminism/women empowerment; the ground reality for an average woman in contemporary Indian scenario especially Himachal, remains one characterized by invisibility, disempowerment and oppression. The story revolves around its protagonist, Kanam, who takes the lead in subverting the patriarchal tradition of 'Daarosh' that has been humiliating the women of that area in the name of a certain weird custom. In addition to the entire women folk of the area, Kanam's sister has also been the victim of that tradition and has been suffering from the trauma of that incident:

Two youngsters of the tehsil, with the help of some of their friends, forcibly kidnapped a girl of the village who, with her friend, had been going to see the tournament in a nearby school. They took her to the nearby cave. Although all other youngsters left, but the one who wanted to marry her, stayed there and had sexual intercourse without her will. (1)

Kanam has been a witness to the entire trauma through which her sister undergoes. The memories of her sister, Chhoti would always terrify her. She listens to her cries time and again: "Didi! Didi! Please save me." (2) The pain of that incident would aggrieve Chhoti the same way even today, and would even sting her within. She could not sleep well and talk freely to anybody, as if she had become a moving dead body. She had been dragging her short life like a mountain. She would get up at midnight and starts crying. And then she is married to the same boy who had raped her. For the entire men folk, it is a matter of pride as they had been successfully adhering to their age-old tradition. Even the village deity has given its consent for all this. But the trauma through which the girl and her mother, sister and other women relatives undergo is just unimaginable. Ma's silence and tears had the lasting influence on Kanam. This heartrending incident had shaken her to the core. When she returns to the village after the completion of her education in the city, she also becomes the target of the same tradition. The boys of the vicinity try to kidnap and assault her, but she beats them as he has been duly skilled in Marshal Arts. However, all this happens on the nod of her own father who had been planning to get her married to the local MLA's son. Sensing the entire situation, Kanam even files the nomination to fight against her father in the Panchayat elections. She is surely going to win as she had the blessings of

her Ma, and Devi Chandika, who had killed many demons and ruled there. The entire women folk congregates there to celebrate her victory over her perpetrators.

Kanam also provides courage to that girl of her village who had filed a suit in the court against that tradition. Moreover, the family of the girl had been evicted from the brotherhood. The society has not even been considering her marriage proposal and she is doomed to remain in seclusion. But, it is due to the continuous support extended by Kanam that the tradition gets challenged for the first time in the court and they win the case. The court in its verdict says:

The court while stating this incident as one against the dignity of woman and law, has ordered punishment to both the youngsters for the charge of raping the girl. Having found them guilty under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) sections 366, 368 and 376, this historical judgment has been pronounced. The one who had sexual intercourse with the girl has been given four years imprisonment along with a penalty of three thousand rupees; while his friends have been given three years imprisonment with a penalty of fifteen hundred. However, in its judgment, the court also added that this case of marrying a girl forcibly after kidnapping her is quite unfortunate. Such traditions are a stigma on society in which girls and women are being insulted and treated like animals. The court asked the state government to realize the seriousness of this problem and take necessary steps to end this social evil. (5)

Therefore, Kanam epitomizes the concept of the new woman who is aware, confident and conscious of her rights as well as her being as a woman. Her actions against the perpetrators are the result of the inherent power amongst the women as 'Devi', 'Chandika' and 'Kali', who can even kill the wrongdoers if need be. Harnot has portrayed her as much ahead of her times by volitionally empowering her. Hence, Kanam's resistance and voicing against the age-old tradition of 'Daarosh' in the story becomes a symbol of the transformative stage as she represents all the females of her area as well as of the world.

In Indian society, the prevalence of caste system and the consequent untouchability is the major reason for the violation of Human Rights. In addition, the patriarchy unnerves the dalit women to an extent that they had to enthrall themselves out of their ensconced beings to the one that literally resists these denigrating customs and traditions. While in casteism, one category of people is discriminated on the basis of their caste and deprived of all basic facilities; women are simply reduced to objects. They are twice cursed, as women and as dalits. These women are not only oppressed by upper caste men, but men of their own caste as well. Many of Harnot's stories deal with socially boycotted, economically weak, and with the tragedy and sorrow of the lives of those people who have been persecuted by elites. Through "The Slur", the writer has expressed his concern for the protection of rights of dalit women in a planned manner.

Originally published as "Kaalikh" in *Jeenkathi Aur Anya Kahania*, "The Slur" is a unique and bold story of the life of a dalit woman, who is also a single parent of her son, Manu. She is married soon after she completes her fifth class, which proved a curse for her. Excluding the first few years, her entire married life has been full of optimum subjugation. Her husband, who had been a drunkard and a practitioner of tantric activities, dies while trying to accomplish something. Shama's "dreams of everything that a newly wedded bride aspires for" dashed to the ground. She goes back to her paternal house, but soon musters strength to face the tortures of her in-laws. She works in the houses of others for their living. However, the Panchayat Pradhan with the recommendations of the shopkeeper, grants her widow pension as well as the financial assistance for the construction of a house. They even get her ration card made. It is because of these favours that she had to visit their houses almost every day.

One day even the temple priest along with the Pradhan also visits Shama's house. She remains astonished as she says: "Is he the same person, who would bathe at least twice if at all he touches an outcaste by chance? In the house of a Dalit widow like Shama ... ?" (10) She begins to understand that there is something fishy about all this.

Everyone's mind is full of improbity. Be it of a politician's, or Pradhan's; a Pandit's or Thakur's; a Master's or of a Patwari. Leave aside all amongst her own relatives. All relations are merely a quirk splash. No one is truly related to anyone. . . . If at all they find a woman, they would neither fear the deity nor have any consideration for the religion; Neither caste nor untouchability. Even the old hags having eight daughters and daughters-in-laws could be seen coquetting like dogs anywhere after consuming liquor and cannabis. (11)

Manu has been born to her after some years of her husband's death, and hence considered a bastard. She takes all pains and goes against all odds to give birth to her son. But, the father-in-law questions the legitimacy of her son as he doesn't want to provide her a share in the ancestral property. He files a complaint against her in the village panchayat where everybody from the vicinity had gathered, be it patwari, Pradhan, master, Shopkeeper, the temple-priest and her father-in-law.

Shama has been called time and again by one or the other members as they would like to witness a great drama of her humiliation by all officials viz. governmental and non-governmental. However, Shama comes there with the *darat* (sickle) in her hand. As the Pradhan asks her to tell them the name of the father, she starts questioning each and everyone who had regularly been visiting her to exploit her physically. Starting from the pradhan, she questions the school master, the village shopkeeper, the temple priest, the patwari and last, but not least, her father-in-law to tell the real name of the father of the boy. Hence, Shama exposes her perpetrators thereby voicing against the hegemony of the social, political, and cultural set up prevalent in her society. Her voicing is ultimately due to her extreme exploitation and denigration by hegemonic structures, that becomes her agency and that agency has spoken out. However, the author intervenes in the end and rightly so to dictate the Headmaster about writing the name of the mother in place of father's name. This, of course, has become a contemporary practice now.

Harnot writes in a very simple and lucid language. The aroma of the indigenoussness of Pahari vicinity could be seen in the language of his stories. The local words and phrases prevalent in the mountains of Himachal provide a special colour to the language in his stories. The words like "*Dhaank, mekh, kilta, charand, goor, bowdi, gounch*" etc. takes the reader quite close to the cultural milieu of Himachal. The events in his stories are almost cinematic and nature's vignettes draw on the painter's palette. However, it is in the delineation of character that Harnot displays mastery. The rich layering of the text, matched with the simplicity of narration makes his stories a delight as well as a challenge for the translators. His short stories have been translated into various languages, including English. Successful translations of Harnot's short stories have already been published to eager response.

To sum up, it is reiterated that Harnot's characters have a tendency to voice when they reach to the threshold of their subjugation and exploitation. The voicing of Kanam and Shama in their respective stories connotes that the subalterns can most surely speak provided their subalterneity comes to the fore. Theirs' is a decolonial feminism that subverts the entire hegemonic discourse. They unveil the patriarchal constructions of womanhood harbored within appeals to tradition and cultural difference. In these stories, the author has been articulating the

gender perspectives in order to create a more valid space for his protagonists. This is the postmodernist tendency regarding the marginalized. Harnot's subalterns not only can but also have been made to speak. Their subalterneity becomes their power that in turn happens to be their agency with which they speak to the possibility of constructing a regional and global order.

Also, we see that the caste, gender and class oppressions are social realities, but using the lenses of victimhood all the time to read literature and art under the label of critical theory has not only become clichéd banal and repetitive but are extremely restrictive. Therefore there can be more exciting and expensive ways of looking at art and literature and also at life in general. The very purpose of literature is to open up the horizons of mind. The researchers need to look at the alternative ways of reading a text irrespective of any hegemony, and homogeneity.

Works Cited

- Escobar, Arturo. *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995. Print.
- Harnot, S. R. "Darosh." Trans. Khem Raj Sharma, as "Daarosh" (unpublished). *Daarosh Tatha Anya Kahaniyan*. Panchkula: Aadhar Prakashan, 2001. 106-21. Print.
- . "Kaalikh." Trans. Khem Raj Sharma, as "The Slur" (unpublished). *Jeenkathi Tatha Anya Kahaniyan*. Panchkula: Aadhar Prakashan, 2008. 95-112. Print.
- Morris, Rosalind C. ed. *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*. New York: Columbia UP, 2010. PDF.
- Paul, Meenakshi F. Trans. *Short Stories of Himachal Pradesh*. Delhi: Indus, 2007. Print.
- Scott, James C. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. Connecticut: Yale UP, 1986. Print.
- Wikiquote Contributors. "Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar." *Wikiquote*. 16 August 2017. Web. <https://en.wikiquote.org/w/index.php?title=Bhimrao_Ramji_Ambedkar&oldid=2282270>