COUNTERING THE DOMINANT NARRATIVES: ANITA DIAMANT'S THE RED TENT AND JO BAKER'S LONGBOURN

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ABSTRACT

Majority of the narratives that are handed down to us orally or in written literatures have been written from the perspectives of power, whether they be the patriarchal, religious or authoritarian dominance. Most of these literatures fail to take into account the perspectives and positions of minorities, suppressed or subaltern individuals, groups or communities. In the postmodern and postcolonial literatures sometimes, we see an attempt at making an alternative reading of these discourses and presenting a point of view that was so far unheard of or unrecognized. Dipesh Chakravarty in his essay 'Minority Histories and Subaltern Past' talks about the impossibility of having a single narratorial voice about incidents and contends multiplicity of voices of recording history or past. Linda Hutcheon too in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism* talks about the possibility of multiplicity of voices and interpretations regarding historical narratives. A section on Genesis in the Old Testament of the Bible, puts on record the story of rape of Dinah and resultant bloodshed. Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent* presents the story from the perspective of Dinah who calls it a consensual act between two lovers belonging to warring factions and unacceptability of this liaison. Similarly, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* narrates the events from the perspective of the Bennets, a middleclass family. A counter narrative by Jo Baker 's *Longbourn* looks at the events through the eyes of a house maid and alters the narrative. This paper makes an attempt to look at these two counter-narratives vis a vis the popular works that we are habitual of studying giving voice to subaltern minority characters in the main narratives.

Key Words: minority literature, counter narratives, subaltern voices, Anita Diamant, Jo Baker Majority of the narratives that are handed down to us orally or

in written literatures have been written from the perspectives of power, whether they be the patriarchal, social, financial, religious or authoritarian dominance. The ruling or the affluent classes and men in these classes play a dominant role in the narratives, being the protagonists or the driving forces of the action and consequently, the narrative. Most of these literatures fail to take into account the perspectives and positions of minorities, suppressed or subaltern individuals, groups or communities.

In the postmodern and postcolonial literatures sometimes, we see an attempt at making an alternative reading of these discourses and presenting a point of view that was so far unheard of or unrecognized. A section on Genesis in the Old Testament of *the Bible*, puts on record the story of rape of Dinah and resultant bloodshed. *The Bible* has been presented from a male perspective with leading male characters. Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent* presents the story from the perspective of Dinah who calls it a consensual act between two lovers belonging to warring factions and unacceptability of this liaison.

Similarly, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* narrates the events from the perspective of the Bennets, an upper middle class family seeking to retain its position in the society through marriages of its daughters into affluent families in the neighbourhood. A counter narrative by Jo Baker's *Longbourn* looks at the events through the eyes of a house maid and alters the narrative. This paper makes an attempt to look at these two counter-narratives vis-a-vis the popular works that we are habitual of studying giving voice to subaltern minority characters in the main narratives. Whether these characters are females or belong to the lower classes in the society or both, they have to offer a view through a different lens. Linda Hutcheon too in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism* talks about the possibility of multiplicity of voices and interpretations regarding historical narratives. She comments on the possibility and probability of all these multiple voices from which the narratives could be explored as being partial truths and none being the whole or the absolute truth. . "...there are only truths in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness per se, just others' truth" (Hutcheon 110).

Dipesh Chakravarty in his essay 'Minority Histories and Subaltern Pasts' too talks about the impossibility of having a single narratorial voice about incidents and contends multiplicity of voices of recording history or past (76).

In his essay, *Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts*, the writer talks about including histories and narratives of the group that have been initially been excluded from voicing out their part of experiences. He argued that 'nation cannot have just one standardized narrative, that the nation is always a contingent result of many contesting narratives' (74). If we look at the minority history in this way, most of the times it is oppositional to the mainstream historical narrative.

Chakrabarty takes the case of British social democratic history which was also called 'History from below'. The course of history changed after Hobsbawn and Thompson made the working class the major actors in society and the feminist historians consolidated the importance of relations of the two sexes and the contribution of the female sex to critical social processes. Such incorporations change the nature of the discourse itself.

Then Chakrabarty further tries to explain the difference between the concepts of 'majority' and 'minority'. He tries to explain them beyond their statistical concept which, involves the numeric value. He says that the numerical advantage by itself is no guarantor of a majority/minority status. The minor histories can be called subordinated or "subaltern" pasts. They may not be marginalised intentionally. He argues that "subaltern pasts" do not necessarily revolve around the subordinate or subaltern group or the minority (74). The fact that they are socially or economically not so influential, relegates them and their voice to the margins and the shadows and do not find representation in the mainstream literatures.

The Red Tent is about a minor character, Dinah mentioned in the *Old Testament* of the *Bible* in the *Genesis*. Dinah is first mentioned in Genesis 30:21 as the daughter of Leah and Jacob, having six elder brothers. In Genesis 34, Dinah went out to visit the women of Shechem, where her tribe led by her father had purchased land and pitched tents. The son of Hamor and the prince of the land, Shechem was attracted to Dinah, they slept together and fell in love "took her and lay with her and humbled

her. And his soul was drawn to Dinah ... he loved the maiden and spoke tenderly to her". When Hamor came to Jacob with a marriage proposal of his son for Dinah and offered any bride-price and wide ranging matrimonial alliances to strengthen ties between the two tribes, Jacob's sons agreed to accept the offer on the condition that Hamor's men would get circumcised. But they had deceit in their hearts and on the third day after circumcision, they attacked and killed Hamor, Shechem and other men folk of the tribe and took Dinah away. When Jacob confronted his sons, Simeon and Levi on this betrayal, they said, 'Should he treat our sister as a harlot?' (Genesis 34:31).

The *Bible* portrays Dinah as the victim of her circumstances and is a marginalised figure in a very staunch patriarchal society. The killing of the Shechemites by the sons of Jacob is shown as seeking a revenge for defiling the honour of their sister. After the rape and the murder of Shechemites there is no mention of Dinah ever.

In this narrative, we notice that Dinah is only a catalyst for all the actions that are decided upon and performed by males in the patriarchal society of the times. Dinah has neither a say nor any control over the actions or their repercussions. She is just the cite around which all incidents occur and her voice on these events is insignificant to be recorded.

However, the novel *The Red Tent*, by Anita Diamant not only revolves around Dinah, the daughter of Jacob and sister of Joseph but presents her take on the events. In the *Genesis* there is only a mention about her rape but the novel by Diamant gives it an altogether new perspective and shows that what was termed as a rape by the patriarchal society back then, was a bond of love and the sexual engagement was consensual. The plot of the novel too is not parallel to that of the Bible. What occupied a small part in the Genesis has now occupied the entire 380 page novel. All that Bible tells about Dinah is her rape which was followed by a lot of bloodshed that was done on the pretext to avenge the wrong doing that was meted out to her. Diamant, on the other hand, gives minute details about her protagonist Dinah and that too from her own perspective, written in the first person narrative!

In the Red Tent we see that Dinah is not intentionally marginalised like Dipesh Chakravarty talks about in his essay, but gets marginalised. It seems this happens mainly due to two reasons: one being there very little mention of her and her story in the *Genesis* and the other her being a woman in the male dominant patriarchal society, she being an only daughter among twelve sons of Jacob.

In the novel we can see that maximum action of the plot has women involved in it. The entire first part of the novel talks about the four mothers of Dinah. The story of Dinah begins from the second part. We also see that women in Dinah's family worship their female goddess unlike the male god of Jacob. The red tent is exclusively a tent made for woman to seek solace and comfort at the time of their menstruation and child birth. There is no mention of the red tent in the bible but the novel provides a place for women to not only rest during their child birth and menstruation but a place where they cherish each other's company, find mutual support and shared wisdom from the other women in the tribe. The red tent becomes symbolic of the red colour of the blood and the women remaining in the red tent during their menstrual cycle and childbirth further hints at the colour of the blood and that of the tent.

Unlike in the *Bible*, the novel depicts that her sexual engagement with the Shechemite prince was consensual and not a rape. That is where Dinah gets her voice to express her side of the story. She wasn't disgraced by Shalem or taken in by force. Before her sexual encounter we see a scene when she sees Shalem for the first time and for the first time she feels her heart and body yearn for a man. She desired him to follow her and ask for her hand from her father. It can be seen here that giving voice to the minority and looking at history/ narrative from her point of view is changing the course of the mainstream narrative as mentioned in the essay *Minority History, Subaltern Pasts*.

What Bible doesn't show is Dinah as a person with her own strengths and weaknesses beyond the incident of her consensual sexual engagement/rape. In the prologue to *The Red Tent*, Dinah complains, "No one recalled my skill as a midwife, or the songs I sang, or the bread I baked for my insatiable brothers" (7). She further

complaints of how she is marginalised in the *Bible* by saying, “ I became a footnote, my father, Jacob, and the celebrated chronicle of Joseph, my brother. On those rare occasions when I was remembered , it was as a victim. Near the beginning of your holy book, there is passage that seems to say I was raped and continues with the bloody tale of how my honor was avenged”(7).

There is a mention of a son born to Dinah who aspires to serve the king of Egypt and further in the novel we see that Dinah who then identified herself with Denner married again with the carpenter named Benia and both her weddings were consensual and nowhere was she victimised as depicted in the bible. We see that wherever Dinah goes she becomes known for her skills at being an experienced midwife, the knowledge she gained from one her mother Rachel. In fact it was while assisting Rachel as midwife that she first went to Shechem and met Shalem there. It was the plan of both Shalem’s mother Renefer and Rachel to acknowledge the feelings of Dinah and Shalem for each other and get them together. While their first week in the chamber as husband and wife, we see that Dinah is very happy and contended with Shalem. These details given by the once marginalised character of Dinah play the role of ‘enriching’ the dry narration of her rape in the *Genesis*.

It can be seen that Diamant attempts to give voice to one of the subaltern characters from Bible and revolves her entire plot around her. Her work brings about an altogether new perspective of the mainstream narrative. It almost reverses the plot of the mainstream narrative and questions the truth of patriarchal narrative about the woman.

Another text, Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* is written from the point of view of an omniscient narrator, and the story is mostly told through the character of Elizabeth who was a member of the upper middle class family. The novel, *Pride and Prejudice* basically revolves around her family- the Bennet family and the love affairs of the daughters of the Bennet Household. The story is mainly set in and around “Longbourn” which is the name of the house or family estate in which the Bennet Family lives.

Longbourn is a counter narrative of the *Pride and Prejudice* and is majorly from the point of view of a housemaid called Sarah. The novel gives us an insight in the lives of people who work day and night to provide smallest of comforts to the people living in the Longbourn household. The novel gives names to the unnamed, it kind of gives a voice to the subalterns or the minorities. The plot of the novel runs parallel with that of the *Pride and Prejudice*.

Longbourn is also narrated from the point of view of an omniscient narrator but is mainly told through the character of Sarah who was an orphan maid in the Bennet household. She doesn't hold an upper middle class status like that of Elizabeth Bennet.

The title of the novel *Longbourn*, which is also the name of the family estate of the Bennet family, becomes a symbol in the novel. It is basically all the efforts and hard work of the people living not only in the lower compartments of the household but also in the lower compartments of the society, who make Longbourn a place as it is with its beauty and glamour intact. They are the housekeepers, housemaids, the family footman and the butler.

Baker notes that the main characters in *Longbourn* "exist to serve the family and run the story" and are merely ghostly presences in the novel, *Pride and Prejudice*. They drive carriages, deliver note, run errands in adverse weather conditions and procure rare things (shoe roses for Netherfield Ball). But they are ultimately people too as Baker says. This hints at the concept of 'multiculturalism' that led to the development of and inclusion of the minority history that Dipesh Chakravarty talks about in his essay *Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts*. These lines from the author clearly depict the difference between the majority group and the minority group.

The characters in the *Longbourn* are clearly the subalterns in the *Pride and Prejudice*. Here, we see that the narrative of *Pride and Prejudice*, is being multivocal as discussed by Dipesh Chakravarty in his essay, where he says that in a multivocal history, we hear the voices of the 'subaltern' more clearly than before.

In Austen's novel we see a range of suitors coming for the daughters of the Bennet household and their romance. Down there in Baker's *Longbourn* Sarah is also presented with two suitors and her romance is shown both outside the ball at Netherfield with the black manservant Ptolemy Bingley and in the household with James Smith. Just like there is a possibility for the upper middle class girls to find their beloved at any place they visit, we are shown that even the overlooked minority characters have the chance of finding their love anywhere, it's just that the 'mainstream' narrative only includes the story of the affluent of the society but does not give us an insight into the lives of the minorities. As Chakravarty mentions in his essay, such instances serve the purpose of 'enriching' the mainstream of historical discourse.

Just like Lydia elopes with Wickham to marry him, Sarah also leaves the household of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy to find her beloved James and be with him. George Wickham who was manipulative enough to create ripples in the Bennet household left no chance to meddle with the characters of *Longbourn* to the extent that his implicit actions brought about a huge shift in the plot of Baker's novel. Sarah, Baker's protagonist almost lost the love of her life and Mrs. Hill the housekeeper and Mr. Bennet lost their son. Arrival of the military that was only seen as a scope for flirtation and finding a match for the young girls in *Pride and Prejudice*, in *Longbourn*, serve as a reminder of the terror of the Napoleonic Wars.

Longbourn seemed to carry dark secret from *Pride and Prejudice*. Mr Bennet had an illicit love affair with the house keeper Mrs Hill. Mr Bennet could not express his need to have comfort from his more substantial mistress, Mrs Hill in Austen's novel as it was a piece of aristocracy but Baker provides him the space to express his need for comfort from Mrs. Hill. He also manages to hire his illegitimate son at his household as a footman to ensure the peace of mind for his onetime beloved Mrs Hill. Looked at in this sense, Mr Bennet can also be called a minor character as he doesn't get a voice to himself in *Pride and Prejudice*. He is usually a presence hid behind the newspapers and offering rare sarcastic comments to his wife or a few words of seasoned advice to her daughters. He can be called a minor character from the point of view provided by Chakrabarty in his above mentioned essay. Here we

see that despite belonging to the majority group because of his social status, giving an insight into Mr. Bennet's feelings is more like giving insight into the heart of the minority character.

Chakravarty in his essay *Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts*, argues that marginal characters are not always marginalised intentionally but get marginalised in the sense of their relationship with the larger narrative, here the larger narrative would be the story of Elizabeth in the *Pride and Prejudice*. But it is in the counter narrative of Jo Baker that Mr Bennet gets to voice his feelings in his library where he cherishes the benign presence of Mrs Hill.

Baker in the author's note aptly writes "When a meal is served in *Pride and Prejudice*, it has been prepared in *Longbourn*. When the Bennet girls enter a ball in Austen's novel, they leave the carriage waiting in this one". She gives names and voice to the 'other' in Austen's novel who have worked day and night to provide smallest of comforts to characters of the *Pride and Prejudice*.

The two works chosen for study in this paper, Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent* and Jo Baker's *Longbourn* both stand a testimony to the fact that a female participant perspective and that of a female lower class observer's perception, throw a different light on the events from what we are accustomed to look at. Their viewpoint may add, alter or even contest the dominant narrative as we could see in the preceding analysis. In their attempt to write narratives from the point of view of subalterns, the two writers, Diamant and Baker have not only enriched the mainstream literature but have also somewhere changed the course of the narrative and given it a different perspective.

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