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Hegemonic Historiography vis-a-vis Subversive Politics: A Comparative Study of Heroic Uprising in India and Africa

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***Abstract*:**

This paper investigates hegemonic historiography and subaltern consciousness to bring out a comparative understanding of heroic uprising vis-a-vis subversive politics in India and Africa. Subaltern resistance and subversive stance of Kenyan literary giant Ngugi was' Thiongo and his Indian counterpart, Mahashweta Devi concerns our attention here, as both these writers as activists and as the champions of 'history from below' carry forward their counter-discourse against elitist discourse in order to prove that indigenous resistance to oppressive power in all its elite and colonial manifestations strikes at the roots of hegemonic historiography. While engaging in the problematics of historiography, Ngugi wa' Thiongo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) and Mahashweta Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar* (1977) have been examined to unravel how hegemonic historiography, both in Indian and African context, is re-appropriated through Subaltern historiography, which seeks to re-establish the balance of knowledge by establishing that 'inferior' is made so through discourses of power and politics. Both the texts bring about a paradigmatic shift in mainstream historiography, which is largely elite and expediently concealed the local uprisings and struggles of the subalterns and highlights the subversive stance of respective writers in their cause to excavate heroic figures, who were never the docile victims of the hegemonic forces, but resisted the dominant system that sought to victimize them.

***Keywords*:** hegemonic historiography, subaltern consciousness, subversion, uprising

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This paper is theoretical, critical and textual which investigates hegemonic historiography and subaltern consciousness to bring out a comparative understanding of heroic uprising vis-a-vis subversive politics in India and Africa. And in engaging in this enterprise, subaltern resistance which finds a vehement expression in Ngugi wa' Thiongo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) and Mahashweta Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar* (1977) have been examined to unravel how hegemonic historiography, both in Indian and African context, is re-appropriated through Subaltern historiography, which seeks to re-establish the balance of knowledge by establishing that 'inferior' is made so through discourses of power and politics.

The historical experience of European colonization juxtaposes India and Africa on social and political landscape of the world, wherein Indians and Africans share the same colonial destiny, consciousness, memory and imagination. Therefore, modern literature in India and Africa has grown against the gory background of European imperialism and its changing manifestations: slavery, colonialism, and Neo-colonialism. The convergence of postcolonial discourse initiated by Said, Spivak and Bhabha with subaltern studies empowered the colonial subjects by re-visiting and re-documenting their past is aptly enunciated by David Ludden when he writes, "Subaltern historians and postcolonial critics stand together against colonial modernity to secure a better future for subaltern people, learning to hear them, allowing them to speak, talking back to powers that marginalize them, documenting their past" (Reading 20). Hence, both Post colonialism and Subaltern Studies intend to expose the epistemic stratagems which justify elitism. Therefore, in the Indian context, if racism has been propagating discrimination, Subaltern Studies investigates the social malaise of caste to comprehend the inverse relationship between high caste and knowledge production. Further, Subaltern Studies or subaltern historiography began to delve into the arena of --- "religious minorities, caste and gender" in order to destabilise the institutions of power and highlight how they have and continue to relegate the subaltern to the fringes (Empire 239).

As an outcome, the politico-historical phenomenon engaged literary discourse in subversive politics which later became the cardinal rule of writing a historiography. Subaltern criticism spearheaded by Ranjit Guha delves into "the contribution made by the people on their own, that is, independently of the elite—hegemonic groups whether foreign or

indigenous who monopolized the hitherto historiography of the Indian nationalist movement" (Guha 39). Thus, at the core of subaltern historiography is the autonomy of subaltern consciousness—autonomy meaning that subalterns acted in history on their own, independently of the elite—and these policies constituted an autonomous domain that neither originated from elite policies nor depended on them.

Guided by the assumption that a comparative study is confined to the comparative imaginative temper, so to say, and the comparative denominators or relationships between the Indian and African, heroic figures and their subversive deeds engage our attention here. The ideas of comparative imagination imply the discovery of sameness in dissimilar works, of shared imagination and denominators in works by writers from unlike cultures and traditions. Ostensibly, it suggests oneness in all literatures of colonized peoples and consider it a part of one literary experience and culture. Nevertheless, the implication of such juxtaposition must not be limiting the scope of comparative study; it rather augments our understanding as elucidated by Izevbaye:

> The central purpose of comparative literature is a simple unambiguous one. It is to establish a relationship among a variety of writers and literatures, and help enhance our understanding of literature as a human activity with similar aesthetic and social functions in different cultures. (2)

Taking Izevbaye's stance as the point of departure, the paper juxtaposes the tribal uprising, Ulgulan started by the Indian tribal hero Birsa Munda and Mau Mau uprising spearheaded by his Kenyan counterpart Dedan Kimathi to investigate how hegemonic historiography has been undermining such uprisings. Guha's observation that the subaltern is the " maker of his own destiny" brought into sharp focus the question of the relationship between texts and power. Given this context, writers like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Mahasweta Devi emerge as authentic voices of the oppressed through their subversive writing.

The two texts share a subversive stance because both Ngugi and Devi, as the champions of 'history from below' carry forward their counter-discourse against elitist discourse in order to prove that indigenous resistance to oppressive power in all its elite and colonial manifestations strikes at the roots of hegemonic historiography. Since mainstream historiography, which is largely elite, expediently concealed the local uprisings and struggles of the subalterns, in the two texts *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and *Aranyer Adhikar(Right to*

Forest), the respective writers excavate heroic figures from two diverse parts of the world, who were never the docile victims of the hegemonic forces, but resisted the dominant systems that sought to victimize them.

The rise of anti colonial nationalist movements in the twentieth century was a response to the desire for self representation of the marginalized people who rallied under the banner of common culture, language or history. The combative political methods of 1950s gave way to a more militant phase in the decolonization process in the year 1952 when the first incidents of the Mau Mau or Land and Freedom Revolt in Kenya took anti colonial struggle into the arena of armed resistance. Mau Mau was a moment of protest in which one people, the Gikuyu, protested in a peasant's revolt against an unequal economic structure supported by discriminatory laws and institutions. Landlessness was the main cause of Mau Mau revolt as the title 'Land and Freedom Army' indicates.

Dedan Kimathi led this most militant phase of the independent struggle and provided political and ideological legitimacy for the movement. He responded vigorously to the colonialist interpretation of Mau Mau as 'savage' and 'primitive'. To establish Mau Mau as a national liberation movement, Kimathi conceptualized Mau Mau as similar to movements in other colonized countries. Kimathi was captured in 1956 after a long man hunt and was charged with unlawful possession of a revolver and ammunitions. During his trial, all his appeals were dismissed and in 1957, he was hanged and his body was buried in Kamiti prison. But such was the power of this legend that many people refused to believe that he had been hanged. His death saw the end of Mau Mau resistance but he had been a crucial factor enforcing British Government to step up the pace of constitutional change in Kenya. Kimathi's war became the most vivid real life demonstration to the world that the British, severely debilitated by World War II, no longer had either the will or the resources to impose colonialism in Kenya or elsewhere in Africa through the barrel of a gun.

Mau Mau, one of the most radical and politico-historical phenomenon caught the attention of writers from two contrasting perspectives – one set of writers including M. Cornish, V. S. Reid, and G. R. Fazakerley, who had been critical of colonial rule in Kenya, remain hostile to Mau Mau and its political objective by viewing it as a savage and brutal form of extreme nationalism. Another set of writers comprising Meja Mwangi's, G. Wachira's and Charles Mangua's, viewed Mau Mau as reflecting a time in Kenya when the

neocolonial bourgeoisie consolidated its power. Given this context, the intervention of Ngugi wa Thiong'o in Mau Mau fiction writing is exemplary due to its subversive stance.

While speaking about the Mau Mau Uprising and Kimathi's contribution thereof, in July 1990 Nelson Mandela in a speech at the Moi International Sports Complex at Kasarani, Nairobi, declared, "In my 27 years of imprisonment, I always saw the image of fighters such as Kimathi..., and others as candles in my long and hard war against injustice." He added, "it is an honor for any freedom fighter to pay respect to such heroes" (The Weekly Review, July 20, 1900). These words of Mandela reflect the undying potential of the narrative set forth by heroes like Kimathi, who created a ripple effect through their struggle and resistance.

In *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, Ngugi reconstructs the history of the freedom struggle from the point of view of the oppressed masses. True to Ngugi's literary agenda, the main impulse behind this literary reconstruction of history is to decolonize the minds of people and to lead them to their cultural freedom. This, he does by exposing the falsehood of the colonial discourse and textuality propagated through its weapons of propaganda such as radio, newspaper education. These, in Kimathi's words, in the play, work to "enfeeble minds,/make them slaves, apes, parrots" and implant "inferiority… in our minds by centuries of oppression" (*The Trial* 68-69).

The play is an imaginative reconstruction of Kenyan history and resurrects the revolutionary hero to inspire the masses. The play is divided into three movements - the first movement portrays the dreadful reality of colonial times when hunger is prevalent all over Kenya and boys and girls are forced to beg and rummage through dustbins. Natives dread the white masters as well as betrayers and the only hope for the people of Kenya lies in their struggle and faith in the leadership of heroes like Kimathi. The second movement depicts the four trials of Kimathi in his cell where the white master employs systematic mechanisms to appropriate the revolutionary opponent. When false charges are levelled against him and he is coaxed to surrender, Kimathi is disgusted to see what colonialism has done to his own people and laments, "Cursed minds! What revolution will unchain these minds! Out. Out. Neo-slaves" (*The Trial* 47).

In the last movement, Kimathi emerges as a loving teacher of the Kenyan masses. He explains to them the politics of imperialism and inspires them to fight. The final scene in the

Courtroom builds up excitement with the woman breaking into a triumphant singing of the freedom song and Kimathi emphatically declaring,

> There has never and will never be
>
> Justice for the people
>
> Under imperialism.
>
> Justice is created
>
> Through a revolutionary struggle
>
> Against all the forces of imperialism. (82)

The ending of the play when Boy and Girl are singing a freedom song at the centre of a tumultuous crowd of peasants and workers and when Kimathi is not depicted as dead is intentionally ambivalent. There is no closure and one is left wondering whether Kimathi is dead or has escaped with the help of boy and girl who hold the gun and declare "not dead". This ploy by the writer lends Kimathi an air of immortality as the Woman tells a Boy earlier in the play that no bullet can kill Kimathi because the Kenyan struggle continues and so does the hard war against the oppressor.

Indigenous resistance to oppressive power in all its colonial and neocolonial manifestations is Ngugi's major theme and he uses drama as an avenue for consciousness raising. The play highlights the undying spirit of a hero, who is recorded in Kenyan history as a barbaric and cannibalistic evildoer. In writing the play, the writer was motivated by his conviction that "imperialism was the enemy of all working peoples" when he said:

> We agreed that the most important thing was for us to reconstruct imaginatively our history, envisioning the world of the Mau Mau and Kimathi in terms of the peasants' and workers' struggle before and after constitutional independence. (Thiong'o and Mugo viii)

In a similar vein, Birsa Munda, a tribal heroic figure, led one of the prominent 19th century rebellions in the Indian subcontinent known as Munda Rebellion. Named as Ulgulan meaning 'Great Tumult', this movement took place in Ranchi in 1899 -1900 and aimed at establishing Munda Raj and independence. Munda's prime objective was to empower his Munda community socially, politically and economically. Devoted to the cause, he worked to put an

end to the oppression of the dikus and to drive the British out of their territory. Therefore, he defiantly declared the establishment of the Birsa Raj, in which nobody but only Birsa could be obeyed. He exhorted the Mundas not to pay rent. The government decided to arrest Birsa on 22 August 1895. Birsa was convicted along with others on 19 November 1895 on the charge of rioting and 482 more cases were filed against him. As a result, he was imprisoned and later died in captivity in June 1900 at the age of 25. The British, nevertheless, declared that he had died of Cholera. But the cause of the hero did not die and made him emerge in a new incarnation as a national and as a regional hero, who became a symbol of the anti-feudal and anti-colonial struggle of thr early twentieth century.

Mahasweta Devi was an indomitable advocate of reclaiming the past of the tribals and low castes of India. As an activist and a writer committed to empowering the subaltern communities of India, Devi questions the power structure and re-visits the polemics of official history in her oeuvre as she vehemently declares:

> I have always been driven by a strong sense of history… (and) In all my writings I have tried to present the subaltern point of view. (*The Queen of Jhansi* 321)

Aranyer Adhikar (Right to the Forest) is Devi's authentic account of the Munda uprising where she gives a vivid glimpse of the Birsa movement, which is deeply rooted in the tribal struggle and as a historian she goes beyond history to document facts about the tribal uprising which started from the latter half of nineteenth century up to its closing years. *Aranyer Adhikar* is Devi's first novel with which she commences her journey as a historian. Through meticulous research and firsthand experience with the tribals as an activist, she has taken some liberties with the historical facts, without fictionalizing them. With the objective of presenting an authentic document, she goes into the origin of systematic oppression by showing the influx of the non-tribals into the tribal areas in Chottanagpur during the colonial period. The text shows how colonialism, in connivance with the semi-feudal system in India accelerated the process of detribalization and acculturation in various ways. Ranajit Guha calls this doubly articulated colonialism in India when he avers,

> Dominance in colonial India was doubly articulated. It stood on the one hand for Britain's power to rule over its South Asian subjects, and on the other, for the power exercised by the indigenous elite over the subaltern amongst the subject exploitation

> itself…the alien moment of colonist dominance was matched thus by an indigenous moment within the general configuration of power..(*Dominance without Hegemony* 100)

The narrative flows in the form of memories of a veteran rebel, Dhani Munda, who recounts episodes of Birsa's life by connecting it with the history of their community. Dhani's narration reveals that tribal society was peaceful and progressive living in communion with nature before colonialism, "They were happier then. They used to go to the forest for hunting. They made fields for farming. They had their own god -- Singbhonga"(26). Dhani's oral narration of Munda history to his fellow prisoners in Ranchi jail gives us a veritable account of the ruthless exploitation of the Mundas, the disintegration of their indigenous social order, which was predominantly agrarian, and their militant struggle against the intruders, both foreign and native, under Birsa's leadership.

Mahashweta Devi's subversive stance as a writer lies in historicizing Birsa rebellion which had germinated even before the birth of Birsa Munda in the form of resistance against landlordism and colonial laws. Birsa's father Sugana Munda's extreme poverty after losing his land to money lenders and struggle for sustenance explicates the drudgery Mundas were subjected to. Despite having a hard childhood, doing odd jobs like leaves collection and grazing the cattle, Birsa's instinctive affinity with the forest is reflected in his early years when he roams through the virgin forests and strongly feels that forest goddess is stretching her both arms and telling him, "[A]ll this land is ours" (36). It is this inborn love for the forest, which the veteran rebel, Dhani recognizes to infuse revolutionary spirit in young Birsa. Later, the brutal suppression of the rebellion of sardars by British and the violation of human rights accentuates the anti-colonial spirit in Birsa.

The narration of oral history which is characteristic of Mahasweta's subaltern novels is apparent in Dhani's narration of the Munda history to his fellow prisoners in Ranchi jail. He told them about the independent and happy life in the past and how it came to be disturbed with the incursion of the dikhus, the intruders. Reiteration, a device essential to oral story telling, is deployed by Dhani. By deploying this narrative strategy, Mahasweta has placed the individual experience of Birsa at the intersection of tribal history, thereby seeking to narrate and contextualize the formation of his subjectivity along with the social forces

shaping it. The author has painstakingly explored oral sources with an ethical integrity as declared by her:

> I have always believed the real history is made by ordinary people… in various forms of folklore, ballads, myths and legends, carried by ordinary people…the endless source of ingredients for writing is in these amazingly noble, suffering human veins…my writing is really their doing …(*Of Women, Outcastes, Peasants, and Rebels* 24)

This quotation clearly illustrates Devi's activism as a writer and the same is reflected in the novel, which shows Birsa's metamorphosis from a precocious child to a rebel leader. Interestingly, this transformation takes place through his encounter with the colonial way of life. His keenness to read and write makes him join the German mission at Burju where he receives primary education. Thereafter, his experiences at Chaibasa Mission and later at Catholic Mission bring a turning point in his life when he sees the ruthless of authorities and suppression of his own people. Dhani's tone of urgency when he tells him about white men's opinion about Mundas as "naked", "barbarians" and "muggers" jolts him. This is further aggravated with Father Notrit's racial prejudice against the Mundas which surfaced in his presumptuous words: "[T]hese sardars are robbers, plunders and frauds. One must not make company with them." (75)

Birsa's rejection of both Christianity and Hinduism, which provide neither succor or solace to him initiates his evolution as a rebel. Ngugi's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* also presents similar kind of oppression perpetrated by Christianity. Both Devi and Ngugi suggest here that Christianity, whose basic doctrine was love and equality between men, was distorted to spread inequality and hatred. The Priest in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and Father Notrit in *Aranyer Adhikar* (Right to Forest) represent the insidious power of religion to mask the true nature of oppression by distorting the sayings of Bible.

Infuriated at his community's plight, Birsa roams in the forest and his imaginary dialogue with the aranyajanani, when he feels that Mother Forest is urging him to save her from the exploiters stirs. The imaginary dialogue between Mother forest and Birsa reflects the mother-son relationship between tribal and forest, which when shaken, causes cataclysm:

> Today, I have become impure my son. I will make you pure and chaste, mother These landlords and foreigners made me polluted my son.I will save you mother. My sons are made homeless. I will get back the homes for them (88)

The resultant catastrophe is Birsa's rebellion against the government, Mission and local landlordism. The rebellion was seen as a civic disobedience and later turned into armed rebellion. The text is a poignant description of hegemonic forces joining hands to subjugate tribal people, particularly Birsa's imprisonment without trial and ill-treatment in the jail by Jail Superintendent Anderson, who gives him poison in his food. To dispel the divine aura of Birsa, Anderson cremates Birsa's body by going against their tradition. Nevertheless, this ploy of thevcolonial master had a reverse impact upon the Mundas. When Sally came to collect the ashes from the pyre of Birsa she tells the jail sweeper who was assigned the duty of burning the body of Birsa: **"**Ulgulan has no end. Bagvan has no death." (21) This catchphrase is reiterated throughout the text.

Both the revolutionary heroes, Kimathi and Birsa, possess an intense passion to unite and drive out the enemy. This is explicit in Birsa's musing over the dire destitution of his people at the Ranchi prison. His mind is preoccupied with the thoughts of the survival of his people: "he sees everything in front of his eyes, as if in a picture. In the life of Mundas, rice is only a dream. Their food is another thing - ghato, the gruel made of china grass. It has become a dream for them". Birsa always fought for rice. His slogan too was not different: why should the Munda keep on living by drinking the gruel made of grass? Why can't they eat rice like others?" (5). Likewise, Kimathi is pained to see the injustice suffered by the poor who labour on farms owned by the rich landowners, "cattle and sheep ---by the thousands" " acres of maize and wheat", only to see the fruits of their sweat taken away by their rich and powerful masters; working as ayahs, houseboys and rickshaw pullers, " loyal, meek, submissive". Ostensibly, Ngugi and Devi address the issue of survival here - both at physical and cultural level - which instigates Kimathi and Birsa to take up cudgels on behalf of their community leading animal-like existence.

The atmosphere of both the texts under analysis here, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and *Aranyer Adhikar* (Right to Forest) is charged with unrelieved tension between the charged revolutionary spirit of the natives and tyrannical oppression of the colonial soldiers. The inner solidarity and courage of the people upsets the colonialists. Where on the one hand there is

the reiteration of a catchphrase, *Ulgulan* has no end…" throughout *Aranyer Adhikar,* the "thunderous freedom song" both in the beginning and ending of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and a declaration by Boy and Girl jointly: " Not dead" impart immortality to the undaunting spirit of Birsa and Kimathi.

The concern of the comparativist here is the satisfaction derived from juxtaposition of these two heroes who are from disparate socio-cultural matrices but the raison de etre of their life, their unflinching faith in their individual commitment to an egalitarian society bring them on a parallel move. The two revolutionary figures examined here possessed exemplary patriotism, and land alienation turned them into nationalist insurgents infused with valour and intellect, who provided political and ideological legitimacy to insurgency in their respective country by resistiing feudal landlordism, exploitative practices of rulers, colonial rule and neocolonial bourgeoisie. Further, the organic intellectual sensibilities of Ngugi and Devi are exhibited in championing the cause of re-visiting hegemonic historiography in order to resurrect the subaltern heroes.

Fanon underscores self-assertion and violence while elucidating the logic of the process of decolonization which, according to him, "never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history's floodlights upon them." (*The Wretched of the Earth* 28). In this way, Ulgulan and Mau Mau chart a drastic digression in the routines of the tribal and colonized people.

The Indian and African heroes who have been the spirit behind significant uprisings, which engage our attention here from the perspective of a comparativist, establish the autonomy of the subaltern consciousness which is the core of subaltern historiography. Kimathi and Munda are celebrated as subaltern historic figures who subverted domination by inversion of the symbols of authority. Whether it was Kimathi who declared himself as " king of the British Empire as well as President of Colonial Parliament" or Munda who declared himself God and began to awaken masses against the landlord-British combine, both these heroes, although demonized in history, have been re-constructed by writers. Their sacrifice served like a springboard for further revolution with a stronger impact. Barrsitor Jacob's admission rings poignantly true, "His body is perished. But his ideals are very much alive in the minds of Mundas".

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