

Fiction from Below: Subversive Histories in Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*
and P. Sachidanandan's *Govardhan's Travels*

Abstract: This paper attempts to understand marginality and its implications on the construction of the gendered subject within postcolonial texts. The paper tries to probe whether the representation of the gendered subject within postcolonial texts offers them the agency of speech, which would enable it resist the implicit undercurrents of patriarchy in the texts. The paper through the textual analysis of two postcolonial texts :Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995) and P Sachidanandan (Anand) 's *Govardhan's Travels* (originally written as *Govardhante Yatrakal* in 1995 and translated as *Govardhan's Travels* in 2006) focuses on how the texts through the portrayal of two marginal characters: Begum Sumroo and Umrao Jan respectively voice the issues faced by the gendered subject. The paper argues that it is the marginalized position of the characters (both through gender and society), which enable them to voice and analyze their marginalized position in the dominant patriarchal society, that they live in.

Keywords: Margins, gendered subject, postcolonial texts.

In her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern speak" (1988) Gayatri Spivak (1942) argues that the western notions of subjectivity as argued by Michel Foucault for example have conveniently overlooked the violence that was present in immediate social contexts of these critics. Further she argues that it is this "sanctioned ignorance" which implicitly prioritizes the inequalities and oppressions and in the process silences subaltern voices and creates margins in the society. The process of marginalization becomes all the more acute for the gendered subject who is silenced by the patriarchal society. In the essay, Spivak through the example of Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri's suicide, argues that the misrepresentation of the subaltern woman is aided through the complex construction of the legally displaced female subject within Hindu religious codes and the British constitution of the widow as a passive victim of patriarchal violence both of which each ignore the social and political agency of the subaltern woman (Spivak, 307).

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization (Spivak, 306)

Through the analysis of Vikram Chandra's first novel *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995) and P Sachidanandan(Anand)'s *Govardhan's Travels* (published in Malayalam in 1995 and translated in 2006), this paper argues that while the narrative utilize myths and historical characters to question narratives which subdue voices from the margins, the voicing of the marginal 'gendered' subject has been voiced through the presence of two marginal characters themselves, who utilize their position to represent their presence within the texts .In *Women Writing in India* (1991) Susie Tharu and K Lalitha argue :

Women articulate and respond to ideologies from complexly constituted and decentered positions within them. Familial ideologies, for instance, clearly constitute male and female subjectivities in different ways, as do ideologies of nation or of empire .Further, ideologies are

not experienced – or contested-in the same way from different subject positions.... we might indeed learn to read them not for the moments in which they collude with or reinforce dominant ideologies of gender, class, nation or empire, but for the gestures of defiance and subversion implicit in them. (Lalitha and Tharu, 35)

This paper attempts to show how the characters Begum Sumroo and Umrao Jan of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* and Govardhan's *Travels* respectively, respond to the dominant patriarchal discourses from within the decentered positions in the text.

To begin with Vikram Chandra (1961-)’s first novel *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995) utilizes mythical characters such as Ganesh, Yama to weave a narrative which travels through the pre-colonial to the postmodern era. The novel begins when Abhay, in a fit of rage fatally wounds a monkey, which had stolen his pants. The near death experience restores the memory of the monkey who recounts his former life to the twentieth century audience as Sanjay, the nineteenth century poet and renegade warrior. Sanjay’s narrative becomes a recreation of the past which transcends time and space. The talking monkey, Sanjay’s narrative becomes a recreation of the past, which can be seen as an alternate narrative to the dominant historical narratives. The novel, experiments with the temporal-spatial dimensions and utilizes analeptic and proleptic narratives strategies to move back and forth in time.

At the outset, the narrative predominantly focuses on the exploits of men: Sanjay and Sikander from the past and Abhay in the present. Even the gods that are a part of the narrative are men. However, the novel attempts to weave different perspectives of the characters within the novel. The character of Begum Sumroo has to be seen in the light of the arguments made. In *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, in the ‘Book of War and Ancestors’, Begum Sumroo is described as :

A witch,“Uday said.”zeb-ul-nissa,witch of sardhana. Daughter of a dancing woman. Married a general named Vassoult, who died. Now she rules his estate with spells and terrors and a hand of steel. (Chandra, 86-87)

While, the novel attempts to codify her as a witch and a seductress, the narrative describes her as a strong willed woman who defies the codes that patriarchy attempts to impose on her. This is seen when she refuses to marry Thomas, with whom she had a sexual relationship. When he warns her that her widowhood might attract unwanted attention, she agrees for the sake of political gains.

Perhaps you’re right; it might hold them off, and why ask for trouble? Who shall it be? A firangi, for survival sake, because I know the thing that moves at our doors, I alone. ... Who else? You’ll do for a lover, but if I must have a foreign king, let it be him. (Chandra, 130)

Further, in the chapter titled “Sikander learns the art of war”, the narrative describes Begum Sumroo through the description of Sanjay, when they meet her for the first time. Sanjay describes his encounter with Begum Sumroo as:

The Begum although elegant, was not a woman for coddling guests, young ones in particular; Inspite of her love for travelling incognito, her taste for intrigue, her reputation for poison-use and seductions that followed her around the country (the wicked Begum Sumroo), she was

80 obviously a woman who knew what she was; it was her comfortableness that impressed Sanjay,
81 her certainty that whatever she did was right.(Chandra , 459)

82 Both the quotations mentioned above, enunciate how the gendered subject utilizes her marginal
83 position to represent her identity within the larger narrative of the novel. It is worthy to note that
84 the quote mentioned above and the one that described her as a witch, are streamlined through the
85 male gaze, whose vision codify her as a gendered subject: strong yet gentle. However, her
86 agency as the gendered subject is seen when she asserts her will to marry for political leverage.
87 This is also seen in the chapter titled “Sikander learns the art of war”, when she asks Sanjay to
88 burn the Englishman’s books as a ritual (517) ,which would grant him power to fight the
89 imperial army. Her advice to destroy the books, metaphorically hinted at the role that print
90 capitalism played in the struggle for independence. Her cryptic message coded within a magic
91 ritual, (which within the context of the novel allows Sanjay to win) allows her the agency to be a
92 part of the male dominated struggle for independence.

93 In P.Sachidanandan (Anand) (1936)’ s *Govardhan’s Travels* (published in Malayalam in 1995
94 and translated in 2006) the dramatist Bharatendu Harishchandra releases Govardhan, a character
95 fated to die in his play Andheri Nageri ka Chaupat Raja from the confines of the text, to save him
96 from repetitive death. The novel pivots the ill-fated journey of Govardhan through the
97 politicalscape of Darashouk, Aurangzeb and other nineteenth century figures to eventually raises
98 questions on whether the fate of Govardhan within the confines of the play was better than what
99 he faced outside it . *Govardhan’s Travels* as argued above offers a scathing criticism of the
100 helplessness of the citizen whose fate is inextricably bound to the larger socio-judicial systems.
101 The novel also argues that Govardhan utilizes his new found freedom to journey as a fugitive
102 through the war torn landscape and raise questions about freedom, injustice and victimization
103 and receive no answers in return. In other words, the novel is not just about Govardhan, it depicts
104 the life of an entire section of the society, which has been marginalized and victimized by the
105 dominant section of the society and the state machinery. The novel seems to argue how the
106 marginality of the gender subject, induced through their societal position is actually their strength
107 in disguise, which allows them to question the injustice meted on women by the patriarchy. This
108 is seen in the brief conversation between Ramchander and a prostitute in Chapter 65 of the novel.

109 She gave Ramchander food to eat. While he devoured it hungrily, she said:

110 Do you know why my path always lies open? No one ever stones a prostitute to death. Nor is she
111 ever burned on a pyre with a man, or locked up in a harem. A prostitute is beyond all laws. (
112 Anand, 236)

113 In other words, it is the stigma of being a courtesan, which allows her and women like her to
114 question the unjust rituals that patriarchy has created to subdue women and the violence meted
115 on women. It is in this context that the character of Umrao Jan must be foregrounded. Umrao Jan
116 has been portrayed as the marginalized gendered subject, who is aware of her societal position
117 and her identity as a woman. When Begum Sumroo has been described as a woman, who knew
118 who she was, Umrao Jan furthers this by refusing to be a part of the narratives of men. This is

119 seen in chapter 23 of the novel, when she corrects a couplet composed by Ruswa (who is
120 depicted as her biographer). Anand states:

121 ‘I went to Kabba on a pilgrimage, but in vain My sinful feet found the path of human love
122 again’ ‘I certainly did,’ said Ruswa, ‘ but you changed it to: I turned my back on Kabba with
123 great disdain Gave up my faith, took the path of human love again (Anand, 91)

124 The original and corrected couplet, reaffirms Umrao Jan’s conviction in her identity. The couplet
125 composed by Ruswa (the male agency), implicitly codes Umrao as a fallen woman, who lacks
126 the purity to receive the grace of god, which forces her to return to her ways. This can be seen in
127 the use of the word “sinful feet”. However, Umrao’s corrected version shows the affirmation of
128 her agency, which does not stereotype her as a courtesan. The words “turned my back with great
129 disdain” and “gave up my faith” validates her subject position, where she asserts her agency and
130 foregrounds her individuality. This is also seen when she frees Ruswa from her services by
131 informing that she does not need redemption through literature and is content with her life
132 (Anand, 91)

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134 The relegation of the gendered subject beyond the blinds of chastity and purity allows them the
135 freedom and agency to voice their resistance and questions injustice meted by the imperialist and
136 patriarchal systems. This is seen when Umrao Jan reverses the stigma of her having earned a bad
137 name, by asserting that it is her fortune and she accepts it unconditionally (Anand,93). Further,
138 the novel portrays Umrao Jan as a thinking subject who accepts her subject position and utilizes
139 it to voice herself from within the patriarchal systems. Her conversation with Govardhan (the
140 central and titular character of the novel) in chapter 60 reaffirms the argument made above. Her
141 conversation with Govardhan attempts to problematize the issues of justice and retribution.

142 When Govardhan mentions his predicament, Umrao Jan too details her journey, of how she was
143 abducted and sold in the market as a courtesan. The description of her journey, which was no
144 less perilous than Govradhan’s also foregrounds issues of justice and freedom from the position
145 of the gendered subject. This is also exemplified by her forgiving her abductor named Dilawar
146 Khan (217) and the meeting with Tyagaraja in Chapter 96. Anand argues:

147 ‘Have you come to learn music? This woman too has been earning a living with music, though in
148 a different way,” she said with great humility. „If it will not offend the swami to hear it, this
149 woman too sang about love. Not love for god, but love for men. You do not know swami, I am a
150 fallen woman, a prostitute. Umrao’s voice trembled. But her eyes stared boldly at Tyagaraja.
151 (Anand, 359)

152 Umrao Jan’s conversations with Govardhan and Tyagaraja foreground her agency as the
153 ‘speaking’ gendered subject. Both the conversations resist the undercurrents of patriarchy which
154 are inherent in the narrative of the novel. Through the conversation with Govardhan, Umrao Jan
155 posits an alternative narrative of suffering and victimization from the perspective of the gendered
156 subject. Conversely, through her discussion on music with Tyagaraja, who focuses on
157 worshipping god as the only use of music , Umrao Jan shows that the songs of love, which she
158 sung of had the same aesthetic feel and was also considered as music. In other words, the

discussion on music and love attempts juxtaposing of two contestable discourses, one which belonged to a pristine tradition of bhakti and the other which bordered on love for men.

To conclude, this paper began by detailing Gayatri Spivak's views on 'margins'. In her essay titled "Explanation and Culture: Marginalia" published in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (1988) she defines marginality as "a suspicion that what is at the centre often hides a repression" (Spivak, 105). Begum Sumroo of Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* and Umrao Jan of Anand's *Govardhan's Travels* are depicted as characters who were caught in the double bind of marginality due to their gender and societal status. The implicit patriarchal discourses code these gendered subjects as objects of desire and simultaneously ostracize them due to their non-normative position in the society. In other words, both the characters are part of the margins, due to their non-conformity to the codes of chastity as defined by the patriarchal society. This characteristic, however, has been imposed on them. Their awareness of their current marginal position, which emerges from a repression, forms the basis for resistance, which is conspicuous in their narratives. In other words, the analysis of the characters in these novels and the representation of their voices questions and criticizes the repression, which is implicit in their marginal positions.

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