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Undergraduate

Empowerment through Empathy

A Literary Analysis of Subaltern Studies

By Anna Lovelace

Abstract

The field of subaltern studies emerges from the progression of historical studies and an integration of indigenous literature and research into the formally recognized academic scope of history. This integration is the beginning of a greater movement towards better understanding the peripheral sides of history, the stories of the marginalized. In this paper, I analyze the impact of post-colonial literature from the side of marginalized and its effect on our greater understanding of the universality of the human condition. I find that through balancing an understanding of the relationship between “center” and “periphery”, a strong sense of empathy emerges, stemming from the ultimate transcendence between these two worlds through breaking down cultural and historical barriers and creating room for the voices that never had a chance to be heard but carry the heaviest impact in harboring global unity.

Introduction

In an age of growing globalization, an increasing amount of literature contests the so-called “official” history. These narratives expose the brutality and injustices that the marginalized have endured for so long. History has traditionally been told from the victor’s side. However, with improvements in technology creating a much faster, more efficient spread of information from all parts of the globe, a relatively new field of study has emerged exploring the vilification and oppression of the periphery called subaltern studies. The subaltern is defined as “the lower or colonized classes who have little access to their own means of expression and are thus dependent upon the language and methods of the ruling class to express themselves”, encompassing the grander scheme of the colonized relative to the west. Allowing non-Western countries to slip into the periphery becomes easy in our westernized world. We lack a connection

with the marginalized that deprives us of a greater understanding of the human condition. As westerners, our task is not to be the voice for the subaltern but rather make room for the subaltern to find its own voice.

Post-colonial theory explores the complex dynamic between the colonizer and the colonized before and after decolonization. This exploration provides the opportunity to illuminate the reality of the colonial aftermath, a narrative which has historically been obscured. The ambivalence that the colonized feel towards the colonizers encompasses the hybridity that arises from the inevitable cross-cultural exchange. Colonization created highly intransient social borders between colonizers and colonized, harboring a complex relationship of both envy and antagonism. Gyan Prakash examines the concept that “The postcolonial exists as an aftermath, as an after-after being worked over by colonialism”, emphasizing the upheaval produced by decolonization. Post-colonial theory deals with the dichotomy of the western and non-western versions of history, evaluating the extent to which the subaltern must be elevated in order to contest “traditional histories”.

Within the field of post-colonial theory, subaltern studies has emerged as an examination of history from below – a people’s history. Though not necessarily from post-colonial nations them self, the subaltern identifies with those who have been oppressed by a force greater than them, stripped of their voice and afraid to advocate for rights for fear of backlash from the government. Gayatri Spivak’s *Can the Subaltern Speak?* explores the degree to which individuals can classify as subalterns. I use Spivak’s subaltern theory to frame the post-colonial works of author Abdourahman Waberi and poet June Jordan by creating a dialogue of understanding and empathy towards the subaltern. The disambiguation of marginalized individuals through the personalized narratives of Abdourahman Waberi’s *Transit*, and the empathy created by the poetry of June Jordan lend a voice to the subaltern by providing access to

means of expression. Waberi and Jordan's works present the full spectrum of subalternity and the connectedness of the human experience.

In her theoretical work "Can the Subaltern Speak", Gayatri Spivak recognizes that "to render thought or the thinking subject transparent or invisible seems, by contrast, to hide the relentless recognition of the Other by assimilation" (Spivak, 89). Her recognition of colonial stripping of the subaltern voice highlights the barriers that the marginalized face when attempting to speak out. Not only are they considered the "Other", but the "exotification" of the subaltern further renders them voiceless, presenting their works as primitive rather than elevating them to the level of western works. The transparency which is imposed upon non-western works of literature degrades the quality of the work, making a spectacle rather than a respectable endeavor. Works like Waberi's *Transit* elevate non-western literature by giving the narrators a face and an individualized story, making it more difficult for western audiences to dismiss the work as a spectacle because of the personal nature of the narrative. The depth to which the two narratives within *Transit* delve into the complexities of the characters' lives creates a personal connection between reader and narrator, harboring an emotional attachment to the characters and restoring the humanity to these non-western histories. June Jordan's poetry, on the other hand, provides a westernized parallel to the empathy that Waberi's novel encourages. Jordan expresses her own hardships as a minority woman in the United States, recalling her own African roots and evoking a greater understanding within the reader of the universality of oppression and a contestation of established power structures within the post-colonial international system.

In the hegemonic discourse of decolonization, the continent of Africa was set ablaze with tribal warfare, civil strife, and a vulnerability to capitalist exploitation. In his novel *Transit*, Abdourahman Waberi explores the constant struggle and unimaginable reality that the citizens of Djibouti face on a daily basis. In his critical analysis of *Transit*, Corbin Treacy argues that "the

subaltern protagonist of *Transit* functions as a ‘border artist’ who subverts the regulatory machinery of the neocolonial nation state through acts...that unsettle statist border structures while simultaneously and paradoxically rearticulating them” (Treacy, 63). Here, Treacy presents the argument that the subalternity of the characters within *Transit* represents the hybridity of post-colonial citizens who challenge capitalist neocolonialism through “unsettling statist border structures”, meaning a reevaluation and contestation of the classifications that have been imposed on them by neocolonial authorities. Categorizing the protagonist as a “border artist” further empowers him by not only providing him the ability to translate across cultural and political borders but also quantifying this ability as an art, elevating his hybridity as a result of both post-colonialism and self-empowerment. This contestation to colonial classification and creation of borders reflects the globalizing nature of our rapidly expanding world. Once vital and intransient borders become blurred by cross-cultural exchange and the depolarization of hybridity or multi-cultural backgrounds.

The novel centers around two primary narratives, Harbi and Bashir Binladen, who Treacy calls “hoarder[s] of hyphens” (Treacy, 64). The two narratives both begin in the Roissy airport in France, setting the stage for the transient nature of the novel, highlighting the importance of French colonialism in Djibouti, the last stronghold of colonialism in Africa. Harbi is an educated Djiboutian who married Alice, a young and adventurous French woman. Their child, Abdo Julien is “the hyphen between two worlds”, connecting the colonizer –France- to the colonized – Djibouti (Waberi, 35). The family represents the effects of globalization in a post-colonial world. The stitched-together narrative quality of *Transit* reflects the innumerable voices wanting to be heard. The role of the Harbi family is to act as a reflection of “globalization and the trace memory of colonialism through transgressive acts of linguistics and literary migration” (Treacy, 65). The role of each family member represents the dislocation that is attributed to post-

colonialism. Alice performs a unique and thought-provoking role in the novel, representing the dichotomous relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Her “Frenchness” is a definitive quality by which Harbi’s friends and family of his home country judge her on. She reminisces to her son, “I felt terrible when they associated me with the last little bunch of colonists just because I was French. In fact, I was a walking disgrace; maybe you’ll understand that someday” (Waberi, 74). To the Djiboutian population, Alice is the colonizer. They cannot differentiate between her, a French woman married to a Djiboutian man, and a French insurgency wishing to regain political and territorial control over the nation. Alice represents “a contestatory replacement as well as appropriation of something that is ‘artificial’ to begin with” (Spivak, 72). To Djibouti, she is just as colonial as her nationality, representing the ideals of colonial France, an intruder on their soil and an “artificial” agent. However, her personal autonomy empowers her even in her state of dislocation because she has a voice that can be heard and understood. Her voice resonates from the periphery, calling for empathy for the subalterns that surround her, who do not have the chance or luxury of a voice of their own. Waberi utilizes Alice’s character to highlight the underlying need for non-periphery (i.e. “central” or “western”) voices to impress upon the rest of the world the extent of subaltern suffering.

Waberi’s multiple narrative novel provides a chance for those who classify as subaltern to have their voice heard, as well. Bashir Binladen, a former soldier of the 1990’s Djibouti civil war, represents the true, unadulterated subaltern: an individual who falls under the hegemonic umbrella and seems to have no access to upward mobility nor a voice with which to advocate for post-colonial representation (Spivak, 72). Even the name itself, “Binladen”, is highly polarized in the context it was written. He reveals his reasoning behind it, explaining “I like that, you say Binladen and everybody drop dead with panic like I’m real kamikaze...Binladen, dunno who he

was before but anyways he look great” (Waberi, 4). Bashir’s ineloquence and lack of linguistic proficiency demonstrates that he has clearly had no formal education and knows nothing more than the guerilla soldier life he has led. His raw language reflects the strife he has faced and the negligence that has followed him throughout his life. He tells the reader, “I’m not afraid of nothing, not even foreigners (oh no! am I off my rocker or what? The foreigners that’s us now, the natives here, it’s them). That’s what we learned in the school of the streets cause real school way-way past” (Waberi, 9). Bashir unintentionally reveals the severity of his ignorance of his role in the world but also haphazardly comments on the lingering colonialism attributed to his home country. He is a foreigner and “they” are the natives. Spivak claims that “class consciousness remains with the feeling of community that belongs to national links and political organizations, not to that other feeling of community whose structural model is the family” (Spivak, 72). Bashir does not experience an awareness of class consciousness because he lacks the structural norms that Spivak delegates as necessary for this understanding. He is the result of the removal of colonialist structure and the inherent chaos that follows. The ultimate subaltern is not aware of their subalternity but rather finds solace in simple, satisfying tasks. Bashir feels a misguided fulfillment and satisfaction from his life as a guerilla soldier, raping women and pillaging villages simply because of the lawlessness of Djibouti. However, by giving Bashir a powerful narrative presence, Waberi empowers him with voice. Hearing the narrative of Bashir is meant to shock the reader into a greater understanding of the extent of his subalternity. We are to take the shock value of his unfiltered thoughts and recalibrate our perceptions of marginalized individuals within post-colonial, developing nations. He knows nothing more than the life that has been presented to him and has simply figured out that survival entails the utilization of immoral actions to empower him in the peripheral hierarchy. Paradoxically, Bashir feels empowered by his atrocities which, in turn, further solidify his role as a subaltern individual – no

class consciousness, no education, and no greater understanding of his global citizenship. Bashir functions as a representative of the extreme subaltern, reflecting the impact of neocolonialism and the floundering of the developing world.

Attention cannot be drawn to the periphery without an invocation from the West. Though this seems unjust, it is justified through the fact that the concentration of power lies in the West because of the way history has played out and the injustices that have been served to colonized nations. June Jordan presents herself as a prominent voice advocating for awareness of the degree of subalternity in places like Africa. Jordan, an African American woman, provides a voice to those who do not have the power to speak out for themselves. Through her poetry she gives a voice to the voiceless. Her poem "Moving towards Home" utilizes nostalgia for pre-colonial Africa and restores a long lost dignity to the continent of her roots. She cries, "of the people who refuse to be purified/ those are the ones from whom we must redeem/ the words of our beginning because I need to speak about home" (Heath, 2983). Jordan addresses her deeply rooted need to speak about her home in a way that does not threaten or terrify but rather acknowledges the dignity and sovereignty of "home". She empathizes with other subalterns globally when she says "I was born a Black woman/ and now/ I am become a Palestinian/ against the relentless laughter of evil" (Heath, 2984). Her empathy for these subalterns stems from her own violent and difficult life and the obstacles that she has overcome to reach the clarity and empowerment needed to advocate for those who cannot advocate for themselves. In his seminal work, *The Removal of Agency from Africa*, Owen Alik Shahadah explains that "the Eurocentric discourse on Africa is in error, because those foundational paradigms, which inspired the study in the first place, were rooted in the denial of African agency; political intellectualism bent on its own self-affirmation, rather than objective study". Jordan acknowledges these erroneous foundational paradigms and redeems Africa's agency through a restoration of its dignity.

“Moving towards Home” is a nostalgic outcry for a pre-colonial, untainted Africa. Jordan does “not wish to speak about the bulldozer and the/ red dirt/ not quite covering all of the arms and legs/ because [she does] not wish to speak about unspeakable events” (Heath 2983). She does not hide her indignation but rather acknowledges that “postcolonial critics and intellectuals can attempt to displace their own production only by presupposing that text-inscribed blankness. To render thought or the thinking subject transparent or invisible seems, by contrast, to hide the relentless recognition of the Other by assimilation” (Spivak, 89). Through this, Spivak and Jordan dialogue by addressing the blatant need for representation and recognition of the “other” as a thinking entity. The “other” should not be assimilated but rather elevated and recognized as unique, autonomous, and powerful, both literarily and politically. Jordan’s poem advocates the beauty and untainted dignity of Africa and negates the discussion of the destruction and devastation that colonialism brought.

Waberi and Jordan respectively demonstrate Spivak’s theory of “representation” and “re-presentation”. *Transit* directly represents the voices of the subaltern, moving towards the elevation of marginalized voices within notable literature. The direct representation derives from the voices of the characters themselves, each of whom play a unique and vital role in conveying the overall message of the novel. The purpose of the novel is to contextualize the extent of subalternity specifically in Djibouti but as a proxy representative of the periphery as a whole. The novel presents the concepts of displacement and colonial resentment, dealing with issues of cross-cultural exchange and identity ambiguity of cultural hybridity. Jordan’s poetry re-presents the voices of the marginalized. This means, in the context of her poetry, she acts as a representative of the subaltern, providing a voice for those who have no access to personal empowerment or global upward mobility. Her poem, “Moving towards Home”, represents the voices of the Africa people who no longer wish to speak of their home as deprecated and

depleted but rather wish to exalt it, embrace their roots and restore a dignity to their Africa, not the colonial, post-colonial Africa. Waberi and Jordan complement each other in the endeavor to elevate the periphery out of subalternity. The post-colonial age of literature expands the spectrum of literature beyond the “official history”. Literature functions as a representation of the voices that need to be heard, the voices that did not have a chance in y\traditional history, and the voices that have the most impact.

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Biography

Anna Lovelace



Anna Lovelace is currently a third year Political Science major with a double minor in Literature and Spanish. As such, she has learned a great deal in her three years at UC Merced about the intricate nature and interconnectedness of the world.

She is currently an intern at the Office of Congressman Jim Costa, holds a position as a Senator At-Large for ASUCM, is Internal Vice President of the Young Democrats Club, and is the newly elected Director of Rituals for Delta Gamma Women's Fraternity.

She aspires to attend law school after graduating to study International Environmental Law in the hopes of working for a non-governmental Organization, like Green Peace. She highly values the numerous opportunities UC Merced has offered and appreciates the professors who have motivated and inspired her to follow her passions, who challenge hers, and who have cultivated her awareness of global citizenship.