

Stigmatization of Disability and Its Resistance: A Re-reading of Humayun Ahmed's *In Blissful Hell*

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Abstract

Stigmatization is a process of exercising power upon the target individual or individuals by a more powerful group of individuals. It goes with the act of ostracizing with a view to giving the victims a sense of shame, helplessness and alienation. It inhumanly leads the victims to a situation where they experience negligence, lack of understanding by the family, near ones and the society. It emanates from power relations and assumes the repressive role of a discursive force and works as an apparatus to marginalize the target subject. People with mental disability in a typical society usually fall victim to this inhuman practice of stigmatization. But as this practice is closely related to the exercise of power it possesses an innate disposition of creating resistance that ultimately challenges this power as a counter discourse. Humayun Ahmed's *In Blissful Hell* will remain in the focus of this paper. I will borrow Michel Foucault's concept of power as theoretical framework to demonstrate with reference to Humayun Ahmed's *In Blissful Hell* how the process of stigmatization encounters a counter discourse as a form of resistance.

Keywords: Power, Discourse, Resistance, Hegemony, Stigmatization

Human body is a site of politics and it is "a verbal signifier that encodes movement iconographically as a condition of culture" (McDougall 336). Mental ability and disability control the movements of the body which receives response from the surrounding environment as per its capacity for interaction. This interaction, usually termed as language, has got a subtle link with unconscious as Lacan claims that it is "structured like a language" (Barry 107). Like language unconscious is slippery and arbitrary. But it is directed and controlled by culture which does not always facilitate it. Gestures, sounds, facial expressions, sexual behavior are mostly controlled by the power structure which is constituted by a handful of ingredients, and culture is of one of the most potential of them. Though "classical Freudian theory emphasizes the role of the individual's sexuality in making of an unconscious" Foucault terms the body as a political field in terms of power relations (Nayar 64). Foucauldian interpretation terms body as a site which is

... directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. This political investment of the

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body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination... (Foucault 465)

Thus, body is a site in which power is exercised. But every task of exercising power produces resistance and Humayyūn Ahmed's *In Blissful Hell* appears to be based on this maxim found in the above quoted excerpt.

The oxymoron employed in the title of the novel; originally published in Bengali with the title *Nandita Narake* in 1972, and subsequently translated by Nurul Huda as *In Blissful Hell* evokes the archetypal dichotomy of human society as well as human psyche. Actually, dichotomy inherent in the existing power-structure divides the society into centre and margin. Patriarchy places men in the center and women, on the other hand, in the margin. This hegemonic center develops a discourse, and being fortified and supported by the other ideological state apparatuses tends to exercise hegemony upon the margin. But if the margin aptly can locate its home as a site of resistance, then it can construct a counter-discourse and challenge the hegemony of the centre. For the construction of the site of such resistance, the margin requires the development of consciousness that will help it define itself not as object, but as subject. This consciousness is always deliberately denied a place by the centre or the existing power-structure. The strife organized by the margin to restore its dignity, autonomous cultural location and recognition as subject is very often defined as violence and then the existing power-structure curbs it with the state apparatuses. Actually, this dichotomy between the margin and the centre finds its thought-provoking asylum in the canvass of Humayyūn Ahmed's *In Blissful Hell*.

Humayun Ahmed has projected the manifestation of the theme of resistance through the character of Mantu who, as a representative, is capable of sharing common anguish of a class of people marginalized in the site of passivity and speechlessness. Mantu, step brother of Khoka, Rabeya and Runu, lives in the family just like a stranger and shares a room with Master Chacha (Master Uncle) who is an outsider in the family. He lost his mother while he was eleven and was left with a permanent disposition of passivity and despondency along with an inherent spirit of protest. Once a neighbor, a government employee, came with a love letter at his hand written by an anonymous person addressing his daughter and began to shout at Khoka, the eldest son of the family, suspecting that he wrote it with a view to seducing his daughter. Then Mantu rushed out of his room; caught hold of him by the collar of his shirt and asked him to leave their house quietly and immediately or else he would have to face the music for humiliating a prestigious lower middle class family.

But Mantu transcends his subjectivity and attains the objectivity of his resistance while towards the end of the novel, he kills Master Chacha for sexually violating the handicapped girl Rabeya and leading her to death caused by the complications related to the subsequent pregnancy and abortion effort with a view to escaping shame and indignity. He stands against the patriarchy or masculine power-structure that plays the role of an oppressive hegemony upon women, representing margin of the society. Rabeya's inability to disclose the miscreant's identity metaphorically interprets the usual role of passivity of the margin. Rabeya cannot challenge patriarchy in public because of its millennia-old masculine norm "...that a woman's body is reserved for her man, thus alienating women from her own selves (Espallardo 54). But her death itself serves as a protest fortified with resentment and it has been manifested in the character of Mantu through the spirit of vengeance and resistance. Thus, she is also a part of the counter discourse against the centre which represents masculinity. Master Chacha is a member of the patriarchy and with this tool the center exercises hegemony upon the margin. Besides, even in the court, Mantu's refusal of disclosing the cause why he kills Master Chacha, can be interpreted as the liberation of self-will which transforms silence into a bang of protest against the repression of the centre. Also, it marks the futility of resistance against the powerful patriarchal norm that a man has the right upon the body of a woman. The reflection of this norm is found in the rampant incidents of sexual violence, dowry related harassments and even murdering of women by their husbands in Bangladesh and many other parts of the subcontinent today.

'Will to power' is an archetypal driving impetus of human psyche and it is shared by both the centre and the margin. But, as the levels and relevant realities vary in terms of the locations of both the parties, this force works in different ways upon them. Exercise of power upon the margin is often associated with cruelty which is made pleasurable by this force. On the other hand, margin is also driven by the same force of 'will to power' and tends to occupy the center. Then the latter outdoes the margin by branding its resistance as a rebellion and violence and thus castrates it. It is possible for the center to make the people believe what they say because all the ideological state apparatuses are controlled and manipulated by them. Then, by using these apparatuses the centre foils the resistance of the margin. In *In Blissful Hell* Mantu's resistance against the patriarchal violence upon women, especially Rabeya, is defined as a crime by the judiciary of the country which serves as one of the major state apparatuses. Mantu's unwillingness to disclose to the court why he kills Master Chacha may be interpreted as his realization of the triviality of his blow against the authority of the centre. Readers may think that he does not open his lips to save the dignity of his family. But it is undeniable that in the capitalistic socio-economic framework even individual dignity relies on the recognition of the center of the power

structure. In the trial scene while the lawyer interrogates Mantu whether he kills Master Chacha in cool headed or not, he replies that he does not regret for killing the man and he has killed him in cold blood. The conversation goes as below:

"Did you kill him deliberately?"

"No, Not deliberately."

"I suppose you are very much repentant.

Did you think before killing him?"

"No, it was sudden."

"What sort of a man was he?"

"A good man. He was very learned."

"What kind of relationship did you all have with him?"

"Good. He loved us all."

"Was it necessary to kill him?"

"I don't know. I am very hot tempered." (62)

Again while the Police Inspector asked him whether Master Chacha had any scandalous relationship with the family, Mantu declared unhesitatingly that he never had bad relationship with the family and again while the Police Inspector charged him that he was telling a lie, Mantu affirmed with conviction, "I never lie" (62). Mantu's straightforward declaration of his stance in support of truth may also be metaphorically interpreted as a resistance against the deliberate design of the center of the power-structure to brand an individual as mad and alienate him from the society and brand the act of resistance as a rebellion, not as resistance and revolution. In *Madness and Civilization* (1961) while analyzing the historical method and the idea of history in relation to the powerful social structure, Foucault puts that 'madness' is a method of Othering an individual and escaping undesirables for the society. According to Jill Didur:

Ideas about madness are seen by Foucault out as representative of any objective or scientific knowledge of mental illness but rather as categories used to marginalize individuals and groups that do not conform to the dominant political interests of the time. (186)

But Mantu's killing of Master Chacha is a fatal blow on the patriarchal authority or the power-structure that controls the society. If he can be branded as mad publicly then the intensity of the blow lessens or can be misinterpreted as an outcome of insanity which cannot produce a counter discourse against the hegemony of the center. So, the lawyer's queries whether Mantu is mentally sick or not can be interpreted as an attempt of the power-structure to turn Mantu into an insurgent and his attempt of resistance as an act of insanity. But Mantu's boldness opposes the

authority of the hegemonic and monolithic power-structure.

Again, Rabeya's role is essentially instrumental in the novel. Through this character the author has opened up various corners and dimensions of the center of the existing power-structure of the society. Readers may have an opportunity to peep into the indoor of the upper class society which is represented by a rich family living in the neighborhood. Harun belongs to that upper class family and is preparing to go abroad for higher education. He also proposes to marry Rabeya. This proposal is nothing but next to a mockery at the lower middle class family. Harun's mother insults Rabeya's mother and warns her not to set Rabeya upon her son Harun. But Rabeya does not have the intellectual capability to understand why her mother forbids her rudely to visit the family in the neighborhoods. Through this incident it is clarified that gender identity, sexuality and gender status are determined by the economic status of an individual. Gender and sexual relationship are only the conditions which are shaped and defined by the economic status of a community. Metaphorically interpreted, Rabeya's character invites the readers to peep into the class conflict or the usual conflict between the center and the margin, haves and have-nots in the existing socio-economic framework. Besides, through this character the author reveals the repression of patriarchy upon women or masculine violence upon women. Her final catastrophe, that is, her becoming a victim of the sexual oppression invites the readers to look into the male supremacist ideology which usually tends to distort women into nowhere and non-entity in the male dominated society. In this connection, bell hooks appears very relevant when she asserts:

Women are the group most victimized by sexist oppression. As with other forms of group oppression, sexism is perpetuated by institutional and social structures; by the individuals who dominate, exploit, or oppress; and by the victims themselves who are socialized to behave in ways that make them act in complicity with the status quo. (43)

Sexual violence is essentially a hegemonic tool of the institutional and social authority which places men over women in the political and economic activities of a community. The male dominated power-structure does not tend to allow sufficient space where a woman can voice her ideas, likings and self-will. It does not admit gender equality which "... does not necessarily mean equal numbers of men and women or girls and boys in all activities, nor does it mean treating them in the same way. It means equality of opportunity and a society in which women and men are able to lead equally fulfilling lives" (Momsen 8). It is true that absence of gender equality is found in the patriarchal society which never allows women to be the equal sharers or partners. It rather creates a congenial atmosphere for men and ensures masculine domination and feminine subjugation. This patriarchal pow

er-structure does not encourage the voice of women and “works to keep women and men in traditional gender roles and thereby maintain male dominance” (Tyson 91). Such atmosphere does never listen to a woman let alone a woman with mental disability. In the same vein, Rabeya’s inability to disclose the name of the man who forces her to sexual indulgence is the projection of this structure. What would the society do if she could have disclosed the name? Probably, the existing power-structure would not accommodate her objection against a man. The attempts made by Rabeya’s family to hide the incident from the eyes of the society are the embodiment of the institutional and social structures which have imposed taboos on millions of Rabeyas of the patriarchal society. These taboos also include the pregnancy in non-marital relationship in its trajectory. Khoka’s elder Auntie’s daughter Nina feels delighted at her pregnancy and she even decides the name of her would-be child. Her family is in festive mood for the impending birth of the would-be child. On the other hand, Rabeya has brought anxiety, agony and shame to her parents who out of embarrassment and shame desperately try to hide the incident. It is only because the child that she is carrying in her womb is, according to the existing patriarchal power-structure, illegitimate though she is not to be blamed for this stigma. But, patriarchy that has the authority to acknowledge an incident whether it is illegitimate or legitimate does not stand by those who are victimized. It seems that stigma is only for the woman, not for the man who indulges in the extra-marital sexual activity. Such stigma turns into a torturous weapon and ostracize the victim and in such an atmosphere thanatos, that is, love for death is likely to overcome the victims.

Passivity and voicelessness of women in the patriarchal framework can be interpreted through the death scene of Rabeya. Immediately before her death, while gasping for life, Rabeya repeatedly searches for Paula, her pet dog which has been missing for many days. This voiceless animal which in many ways serves as an embodiment of passivity and repressed self of Rabeya, was the only company while she used to go for a hangout in the neighborhood. This speechless animal runs parallel with the subjugated self of Rabeya. The author depicts the death scene in the words of the narrator Khoka:

I stood beside Rabeya. Covered in a blue colour sheet, Rabeya’s body lay motionless. A fly is buzzing close to her nose. Rabeya uttered suddenly, Where is Paula? I don’t find him anywhere. O Khoka, where’s Paula?” She anxiously looked around for Paula.

And how strangely Rabeya died quietly at nine O’clock. It was then a radiant winter morning. (56)

But Rabeya’s silence is itself a language, a protest and it is metamorphosed into a form of violence through the action of Mantu, another marginalized character.

He slices Master Chacha to death with a weapon specially used for cutting fish and thus does what Rabeya was to do for the vindication of her being a member of the society. Mantu kills the snake, a popular symbol of sexuality in literature, a repressive tool of exercising male supremacy upon women in the trajectory of patriarchal power-structure. This power-structure constructs gender which constructs merely a notion of masculinity and femininity by which men and women are identified. But the conception of gender is variable. For example, in "Polynesia gender identities are often flexible. In families without daughters, one son is selected when very young to be raised as a girl to fulfil the family's needs for someone to undertake a daughter's roles, such as care of siblings and housework" (Momsen 2). A man's identity in the society is coined by the conception of gender, sexuality and culture. Even gender identity takes its shape from the sexual and gender hierarchy in a particular culture. So, Mantu's initiative of replacing Rabeya with his own self in the act of revenge emanates from the cultural realities. Thus, Mantu takes up the role of Rabeya who is to challenge the autonomy of the patriarchal hegemony which overtly attempts to transform women into Others.

Now, in this connection, the term 'resistance' by definition evokes some questions regarding its location in comparison with power. The locus of resistance lies in the act of exercising power and it emerges out of the response of the marginalized or the subalterns towards the authority of different institutions that form and formulate the power-structure. According to Johansson and Lilja, resistance is "a response to power from "below"; a subaltern practice that can challenge, negotiate, and undermine power" (269). But to pose an effective resistance against power or Centre, the margin or the subalterns should develop a strong sense of community the lack of which inevitably weakens this act of resistance. But in the case of Rabeya, it is found that she is segregated or alienated from her community. Her mother is anxious if Rabeya's illegitimate pregnancy gets exposed to the society. Even her father joins her mother in this attempt to evade embarrassing situation caused by the gender biased society. True, in such a precarious situation, an individual cannot stand against an institution. Patriarchy is not only a discursive ideology but also an institution for its indulgence in all other issues of the society. So, it is quite impossible for Rabeya as an individual and even for Mantu to form a potent resistance against the pervading power-structure. Metaphorically interpreted, Rabeya's passivity is a kind of helplessness emerging out of the absence of a unified sense of community. Even after the trial Mantu's final hanging metaphorically interprets the forfeiture of the resistance as a discursive voice of the subalterns or the margin against the center. Again, Khoka, the narrator of the novel, cannot create an aura of optimism in the process of formulating resistance that Mantu initiates to posit. It is another example of the absence of the sense of community among the subalterns. Actually, identity, nationalism, fraternity and sense of oneness come out of the sense of community, the

absence of which segregates and weakens the attempt of integrated resistance. Khoka's dream of a solvent future life with a job and handsome pay implicates the inherent weakness of the resistance on the part of the subalterns. This bourgeois disposition among the subalterns weakens the impetus of resistance posed by them.

Now, relevantly a question provokes further investigation- why does a girl fall victim to the ferocity and violence from a man? The answer to this question lies in the definition of relationship between these two dichotomous sexes. Perception of the society about women emanates from the existing power-structure whose center is occupied by men. Centre never wants that the margin should oust it and occupy its place. But it requires recognition from the margin for its dominating location. While the margin declines to offer acknowledgement the center, out of anxiety of being displaced, exercises coercion upon the margin and ensure its own hegemonic position. This process of deployment of coercion goes on through negotiation. It ensures subjugation of the margin with various tools or apparatuses, and patriarchal disposition towards women is one of these potent means to implement the 'will to power' of transforming women into Other. Such disposition promulgates that a woman can never be equal to men. But receiving education and participating in the income-generating activities women may have the obvious chances to share the equal status of men. This likelihood of presenting themselves as contestants poses apprehension in the psyche of men. Hence, from this apprehension of losing the authority men tend to repress the uprising of women. Violence, specially, sexual violence is one of the means of repression of women. This violence cannot be interpreted as only a distorted biological desire but also as a weapon to suppress the women who are posing threat to the center of the patriarchal power-structure by receiving education and participating in income-generating activities. They are also creating a counter-discourse of masculinity in their own language and voice. Patriarchy maintains a belief that a woman does not have, or even should not have a language because it is one of the coercive means of protest. So, women devoid of language or voice of protest are preferred as a site of exercising atrocity and violence. In the same vein, in the novel *In Blissful Hell* Rabeya's inability to construct sensible language creates a space in which patriarchy, manifested through the character of Master Chacha gives vent to its practice of repression.

Actually, Humayun Ahmed, through the portrayal of the predicament of Rabeya, has depicted a vulnerable condition of the women of the global South like ours where they have to wrestle against not only political inequality but also local myths, ideologies, folklore and indigenous discourses stereotyped by the colonial framework. It is a very common perception of the masculine society that if a woman is sexually harassed, all the humiliation and responsibilities fall upon her. She is stigmatized and even ostracized. To save herself from social humiliation sometimes

it so happens that she commits suicide. In such an unexpected case, her parents are also socially ostracized. Even local myths and belief-system work to impose the stigma of insinuation upon the victim and her family. It is really difficult for a woman to challenge all these systems of the society. Even colonial and nationalist discourses work vehemently against the women of this Subcontinent. In this connection, Uma Narayan sounds very relevant:

Many of these “cultural” conflicts between Western colonizing cultures and colonized indigenous cultures involved issues pertaining to women’s roles and female sexuality, rendering the figure of the “Colonized Woman” and important site of the political struggles between “Western Culture” and the “Culture” of the colony. (17)

Stereotypically, colonial literature constructs the image of the indigenous women with distortion shaped in bigotry, illiteracy, backwardness, passivity and even savagery. For example, Othello’s mother’s image projected through Othello’s ideology symbolized by the handkerchief that he inherited from his mother, portrays her as a superstitious, backward and illiterate woman believing in exercising enchantment upon her husband to possess him. Caliban’s mother in *The Tempest* is depicted as a witch, posing threat to the hegemony of Prospero. In *A Passage to India*, Indian women don’t have any voice. Their voice is silenced by the male-dominated discourse fortified by colonial discourse. Borrowing such distorted projection of women of the colonies, men in the colonies construct the traditional system and epistemology to practice patriarchal domination upon women. In this connection, Uma Narayan asserts:

Male-dominated Third World elites often responded by constructing these very practices as sacred and longstanding traditions that were constructive of their values and world views, and as practices that were tied to the spiritual place of, and respect for, women in their cultures. (17)

Thus, in a developing country like Bangladesh a woman has to fight against not only physical violence but also the violence and repressive roles of the male dominated ideology, myths, folktales, belief-system and many other social, political, ethnological, mythological and religious apparatuses always active in transforming a woman into a passive, subordinate and inferior Other. Women’s bodies concern location where powers and creativity reside, and “they are endowed with extra ordinary powers; they act as an agency of creativity, of performative and transformative powers...” (Veit-Wild xiii). Even the violated bodies of women generate powers that accumulate into a counter discourse. Women being victimized by war or rape write about their trauma and produce a body of discourse that

challenges the masculine discourse and ensures a place of their own. In this novel *In Blissful Hell*, Rabeya, a victim of sexual violence, dies but her passivity inspires Mantu, another peripheral character, to challenge the patriarchal repression violently. Humayun Ahmed just like an anthropologist has explored the location of women in the patriarchal framework of the society and depicted how ceaselessly the women of the global South have to struggle to transform their site of marginality into a location of resistance.

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