



(Re)synchronizing Spatio-temporality in Narrative: Interrogating the Grand and Petit Recit

Himanshu Parmar
Assistant Professor
Dept. of English
BPS Mahila Vishwavidyalaya

Main wo kis tarah se karoon bayaan (How do I state)

jo kiye gaye hain sitam yahaan (The atrocities committed here)

sune kon meri ye daastan (Who shall listen to my tale)

koi hamnasheen hai na raazdaan (I have neither playmate nor sharer of secrets)

A statement during an interview, “Every text has spatio-temporality and if the exploited is mentioned in it, he has space in the text” brought the aforementioned lines from a song to mind. The idea of Spatio-temporality, the theoretical manifestation of a relatively simple idea, is the ambience of and in a text, its “area”. It is the time frame of the narrative and the space, physical and characterial, in the narrative. This, then, is the delimiting factor of a text in particular, before it spreads into a discourse subsuming the extra-textual references into its foray.

History and Literature are two great representatives of life. While literature is a reflection of life through imagination, the former is, as Bhyrappa says, “...seeking out the truths about our past events...”. However, critics like Greenblatt and Foucault have questioned the “factual legitimacy” of history, relying more on their being constructs of the human mind. As Callagher and Greenblatt opine, “...historians have generally been more interested in making an epistemological break with the past...” (49). What governs the human mind, in turn, is the social order which is a product of the victor’s “narratorial” frame, as South African writer Zakes Mda asserts in his Keynote address at the Sunday Times Literary Awards Night, “History is the story of the victor...”. The two, then, emerge as two types of narratives itself, with literature, much like history, belonging, traditionally, to the victor.

The socially vanquished and the spatio-temporal deviations potentially ensuing from their presence are negated in favour of a uni-dimensional structure of the victors. Their life and story remains unsung in the dominant space as it finds no medium of expression and no acceptance. The plight of the peripherals and marginals, thence, becomes double-fold: first, no rights are offered in social life and the act is ‘divinely’ justified; and secondly, no literary

representation either, neither in history nor in literature. The emergent negation reiterates the dominant ideology of homogeneity in the social order, or at the most, the ‘problem’ of heterogeneity as being temporal and ephemeral. It also, in its train, rids of adequate historical and literary referents in narratives, as Aijaz Ahmed opines, “It is always convenient for the bourgeoisie that the worker forgets the history of how capital is accumulated and looks at the current capitalist simply as the provider of jobs, and it is always convenient for the upper-class Indian to deny that the caste conflicts of today are, generally speaking, conflicts between the beneficiaries and the victims of the caste structure” (15).

What makes the entire paradigm invincible is the comfort zone in which the reader is placed in, in the wake of such narratives: the idea of multiple interpretations and “voices” becomes confusing. The citizens are accustomed to the representation by and of the dominant in history and literature and any deviational narratives are not accepted owing to their ‘discrepancial nature’ and are categorized as aberrations and blasphemy.

The struggle of the peripherals and the marginals is two-fold: social and literary. The two aspects are inter-related as much as they are inter-dependent and much as their life, their struggle too, deserves space in the narrative paradigm. Life at the peripheries survived: the vanquished did not vanish but stayed put through social ostracization in life and a heart-wrenching ordeal in narratives. Their presence, at the social level was marked with the attempts of the victors to merge them with them, albeit, as the “other”; while in literature and history they found place through, what Callagher and Greenblatt opine, anecdotes. The term is variously defined with the most acceptable one being that it is a short amusing or interesting story. The term, however, also denotes, more so in New Historicism, an account that is unreliable or hearsay. These anecdotes, by their presence, rupture the apparent homogeneous spatio-temporality of traditional literature and history. In Indian mythologies, the stories of *Shambuk* and *Eklavya* are classic examples of such anecdotes.

Such anecdotes, though they modified spatio-temporality of narratives, yet could not invoke a paradigmatic diversion. The marginals remained a reflection of the masters’ mind, representative, not of what they are in the social order, but as perceived by mainstream: an object of sympathy and pity. The spatio-temporality, then, emerged as one distorted social picture. The ‘truth’ created in the spatio-temporality of the text stayed within the mainstream ideology and hence, was one-dimensional only. In the literary world, the marginal then, though having ‘space’, still remains alienated, isolated and unrepresented.

What is eventually generated, in narrative, is a foregrounding of the “self” as the norm and the “other” as aberration. This outlook over-powers and over-shadows the entire paradigm of history and literature. The entire spatio-temporality of a text is ballooned by characters and point-of-view from the “dominant space”. The marginal, on the other hand is reduced to negligible or flawed presence, as Achebe opined in an Interview to U.R. Ananthamurthy, “What happened was that people were wrenched from their history and put into somebody else's history where they became a kind of footnote”.

jo tha jhoot wo bana sach yahaan (Lies were promoted as the truth here)

nahi kholi maine magar zubaan (However, I did not speak)

ye akelapan, ye udaasiyaan (The loneliness and the sadness)

meri zindagi ki hain tarjumaan (Is the rendition of my life)

Meri Zaat Zarra-e-Benishan (My existence is negligible)

These ruptures, though exceptional and rare, serve a significant purpose in the spatio-temporality of narratives: acknowledging the presences of heterogeneities, which, in turn interrogate the homogeneity and one-size-fits-all ideology of the mainstream. This heterogeneity is highlighted by the likes of Ilaiah in the Indian context. Ilaiah, in the “Introduction” to *Why I am Not a Hindu* vociferously documents that “The question is what do we, the lower Sudras and Ati-Sudras (whom I also call Dalitbahujans), have to do with Hinduism or with Hindutva itself? I, indeed not only I, but all of us, the Dalitbahujans of India, have never heard the word 'Hindu'—not as a word, nor as the name of a culture, nor as the name of a religion in our early childhood days” (xi). This distinction, at the global stage, is highlighted by Spivak when she says in “Can the Subaltern Speak”, “...the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous” (26). The evident multiplicity, in the Indian context, is suppressed under the homogeneous belief system where the marginal is the lower in the Hindu Order itself.

These gaps, generated on the narrative act as the *petit recit* on the homogeneous fabric of *grand recit* and are representative of an existing living order that traces its anthropology, etymology and ontology to an entirely different set of literary and historical discourses. In other words, the histories, myths and literatures and the peoples involved do not overlap with that of the dominant. Chinua Achebe, in “The Role of the Writer in a New Nation” asserts, “African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans...There societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty” (Qtd. in Ojaide 171)

It's most significant expression lies in the orality of their narratives, which are, more often than not, rejected and negated by the mainstream in favour of their ‘factual’ history as the former are binary constructions to the documentation of and by the mainstream. Mda opines:

The colonialist dismissed as fanciful oral traditions that located ancient kingdoms and empires in the region dating hundreds of years before colonisation. When the coloniser's own ethno-archeologists excavated towns and settlements dating more than a thousand years ago, the proponents of ‘vast empty lands’ created alternative narratives attributing them to alien civilisations—sometimes even from outer space. They were the victors and could therefore recreate the past in their own image.

The question that should emerge, as an axiomatic consequence, is: who, then, shall bring to the fore, this unknown facet of the *petit recit*? In other words, who can generate narratorial space for the erstwhile non-existent culture of the “tribal”? Could a “non-tribal” provide such space to a “tribal”? The pre-requisite towards such a space is a paradigm shift from locating them merely through dominant ideologies to acknowledging them through their ideologies and “original cultural registers”.

This shift may be initiated by a non-tribal as well, but the non-tribal has to abandon the centralizing idea of his culture's hierarchy. Dr Radhakrishnan, in *The Hindu View of Life*, falls prey to exactly the same chasm as he describes the individuality of the non-Aryan sects: "The Hindu method of reform enables every group to retain its past associations and preserve its individuality and interest...but [Hindus] should do our best to raise the tone of each college, improve its standards and refine its ideals..." (29). He says at another place, "...Hinduism developed an attitude of comprehensive charity...It accepted the multiplicity of aboriginal gods..." (21) thereby magnanimously accepting the "crude objects" (23) worshipped by the non-Aryans. The entire discourse, though, offers a plentitude of space to the non-tribal, yet, on practical grounds offers little. The expurgation of the non-tribal as being "crude" and referring to them as "savage" (25) though with "morality" (25), takes away the unbiasedness, an absolute prerequisite towards sharing narratorial space.

A tribal, on the other hand, may be more inclined towards creating a narratorial space, though there is a possibility of it getting interpellated with a scathing ideology critique against the non-tribal. To place the idea in perspective, it is not the marginal and non-marginal binary in ascertaining whose representation of the marginal space shall be genuine. The locus, rather, is different and Dr Ambedkar, in the "Preface" to *Who were the Shudras*, refers to the kinds of Hindus who can understand the issue of caste and he states, "The...Hindus are those who are rationalists and who regard social reforms as of primary importance, even more important than Swaraj...The only class of Hindus, who are likely to welcome the book are those who believe in the necessity and urgency of social reform... I am glad to know that such a class of Hindus exists. Small though they be, they are my mainstay and it is to them that I have addressed my argument" (10-14). A liberal and unbiased mindset, irrespective of caste affiliations, can bring about this paradigmatic shift in life.

This has to be, then, implemented into literary discourses, offering complete space and voice to the marginal and the peripheral. Much like in social life, while there is a line of thought that opines that even a non-marginal can provide space to a marginal character, it also remains that marginal experience may find a better representation through a marginal himself, more so, with the advent of education amongst them. Hence, just like for Ambedkar it is not the caste but the intention that is paramount, similarly, the intention of the author, rather than his affiliation, is what shall determine if the spatio-temporality of a narrative offer unbiased space to the marginal voice. It also needs to be asserted that this space in the spatio-temporality of narratives, historic and literary, has to be devoid of sympathy and complaining, the former from the dominant while the latter from the marginals; or discourses shall be reduced to mere fusillade of vituperation:

magar aik pal hai umeed ka (There is a ray of hope)

hai mujhe Khuda ka jo aasra (The support of God that I have)

na hi maine koi gila kiya (I did not express any regrets)

na hi maine di hain duhaaiyaan (I did not plead for anything)

Primarily, the representations have to paradigmatically deviate from the ‘norm’ of homogeneity as a principle and acknowledge disparate presences in the social order, spatially as well as temporally. There has to be an unbiased representation of the marginals, as far as tenable, by the “tribals” themselves. It implies that the marginal character in the narrative spatio-temporality is offered the freedom and space to express and speak for himself, much like Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony of independent voices in a text.

This alternative order, much like the mainstream, needs and deserves an adequate and unbiased space in the spatio-temporality of literature and history. The idea is not to present a confused multi-dimensional scenario but to make history “more authentic” and literature more “comprehensive”. It is pertinent to understand that the inculcation of a justified space concerning the marginals, shall lead towards a comparatively “more authentic” and “comprehensive” history and literature respectively. But to accommodate this ‘deviation’, of offering space to the marginals and the mainstream alike, the already built edifice of life and literary representations and their spatio-temporality has to be adjusted. It has to be an accommodation of the rightful due of the entire social order in narratives.

Main bataoon kya, mujhe kia mile,...(How do I tell, what do I deserve)

Jo mera hai woh mujhe aa mile. (What is mine should come to me)

The question, now, is whether it is the end of narratorial spaces? In other words, is it the ideal scenario to have exclusive spaces, in narratives, for the mainstream and the marginals: how mandatory are *grand* and *petit recit* to narratives? With Ambedkar opining an ideal social order as one based on liberty, equality and fraternity, the binarization in narratives, as it turns out, is redundant. Hence, the principles need to be implemented on narratives as a whole and this is achievable by one narratorial quality: presence of voices, all independent. Bakhtin defines an ideal narrative to be polyphonic when he states, “The essence of polyphony lies precisely in the fact that the voices remain independent and, as such, are combined in a unity of a higher order than in homophony. If one is to talk about individual will, then it is precisely in polyphony that a combination of several individual wills takes place, that the boundaries of the individual will can be in principle exceeded” (21).

It is pertinent to understand that any ‘promotion’ of the *petit recit* to an equal space in the *grand recit* shall foreground the voices of the hitherto unknown and silenced aspects of human life and experience but an absolute promotion, raising the *petit recit* to *grand recit*, needs to be expostulated because such a ‘raise’ shall create the same issue of negation and negligible space for the erstwhile *grand recit*. Stephen Gallagher and Greenblatt, in “Counterhistory and the Anecdote” say, “Counter-history opposes itself not only to dominant narratives, but also to prevailing modes of historical thought and methods of research; hence when successful, it ceases to be counter” (52). The periphery shall, consequently, own the spatio-temporality of literary representations and have adequate space and a voice of their own and lose its status as counter-history and counter-literature by becoming the mainstream.

This, though, shall launch the former marginal to the dominant, and offer him a spatio-temporality that it has vouched for for centuries; yet the larger social interests shall be left unchanged and untouched. For every order, irrespective of its stature or level of development, the social interests are paramount as they are central to the growth of that order. In

case of an overturning of the *grand recit* and *petit recit* binary in literary representations, the dominant-dominated binary remains untouched and the social order, hence, remains unfazed. The order still ends up with a *grand recit* and a *petit recit* where the former constructs historical and literary narratives, albeit opposite to the former ones. As Bhyrappa asserts, "...the categorization on the lines of majority and minority would itself be dividing the society, or at least a step towards dividing the society. This idea of 'seeds of poison' is prejudiced".

It is evident, then, that the concept of *grand* and *petit recit* has a grave and restricting limitation: they switch places, based on the principle of power in the social order. The need of the hour, hence, is to annihilate the very idea of *recits* from narratives and create a new spatio-temporality where all voices are amply represented independently, even if unresolved. To put it differently, an equal and unbiased space and voices, in the spatio-temporality of narratives, for all the heterogeneities and multifacetedness in a social order, needs to be put in place.

This, however, is neither feasible nor practicable unless, the root of *recits* is interrogated and eradicated: the principle of power in the social order. It is extremely important to comprehend that narratives, literary and historical, are products of the human mind of a milieu and unless the frame of mind is not altered to a more balanced one from the dominant-dominated, a balanced spatio-temporal space cannot be created in narratives. The ideology of "mentioning the name of the exploited is as good as offering him space", in life as well as narratives, has to pave way for independent spaces and voices for all, even if dissenting and contradictory at times. The only way to achieve this as Dr Ambedkar opines is through a social order that is based on the principle of one caste where all are equal and equitable opportunities are offered to all. As Ambedkar says in "The Annihilation of Caste", "What is your ideal society...If you ask me, my ideal would be a society based on Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. And why not?" (23). A narrative, historical or literary, that emerges from such a social order shall uphold the humane values that are critical to constructive social growth as it shall offer "adequate" space to all in its spatio-temporality: A literature and history that shall be, genuinely, closer to and a reliable representation of life.

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