



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

An Analytical Study Of Subordinate Identity In M.T. Vasudevan Nair's *Manju (Mist)*: A Cultural Critique

Dr. MANJU. V. MADHU,

Assistant Professor, Dept. Of Malayalam -Maharajas College,
Ernakulum, Kerala – India.

Keywords: Hegemony, Subordination, Patriarchy, Colonialism, Trauma Healing

Introduction

M.T. Vasudevan Nair's *Manju (Mist)* occupies a seminal place in Malayalam literature, celebrated for its exploration of human emotions against the backdrop of societal norms and constraints. The novel delves into the internal and external struggles of Vimala, a schoolteacher confined by memories of a brief romantic encounter. Through the lens of subaltern studies and post-colonial theory, this essay investigates the multiple layers of subordination present in the narrative. It explores how patriarchy, cultural hegemony, and psychological trauma intersect to create and perpetuate a subordinate identity, offering insights into both the mechanisms of suppression and potential pathways for liberation.

Background

Published in 1964, *Manju* is one of M.T. Vasudevan Nair's most introspective works, reflecting the zeitgeist of a rapidly changing Kerala society. Set in the ethereal yet isolating hill station of Nainital, the novel narrates the life of Vimala, who epitomizes emotional stagnation and social alienation. Nair's portrayal of human fragility and resilience resonates universally, transcending geographical and cultural barriers.

The novel reflects the social climate of the 20th century, marked by the tensions between tradition and modernity. Women's roles, shaped by patriarchal norms and familial expectations, were undergoing a slow transformation. However, economic independence was often insufficient to challenge ingrained cultural subordination. This historical context serves as a crucial backdrop for analyzing Vimala's struggles.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three foundational theoretical perspectives to unravel the layers of subordination in *Manju*:

1. **Antonio Gramsci's Hegemony:** Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony explains how dominant groups maintain control not just through coercion but through consent, normalizing certain ideologies and social structures. In *Manju*, this framework highlights how patriarchal norms and cultural expectations become internalized, influencing Vimala's choices and identity.
2. **Edward Said's Filiation and Affiliation:** Said's theories help analyze the tension between familial bonds (filiation) and cultural constructs (affiliation) in shaping identity. Vimala's inability to reconcile her filial ties with her need for personal growth reflects the struggle between inherited roles and the search for autonomy.
3. **Ashish Nandy's Critique of Colonialism:** Nandy's critique underscores the psychological and cultural subjugation perpetuated by colonial and patriarchal constructs. The internalization of these constructs, evident in Vimala's behavior, sheds light on how subordination is both a personal and systemic phenomenon.

Plot Synopsis

Set against the serene yet haunting landscape of Nainital, *Manju* traces the life of Vimala, a schoolteacher whose existence is marked by stagnation and emotional dependency. Nine years after a brief encounter with Sudheer Kumar Mishra, a tourist, Vimala remains tethered to the memories of this fleeting relationship. Her fixation on Sudheer reflects her deeper entrapment within societal norms that dictate women's emotional and psychological identities.

Symbolism plays a significant role in the narrative. Objects such as an untouched calendar and unopened books signify Vimala's arrested development, mirroring her inability to move forward in life. Contrasting characters like Buddu, an optimistic boatman awaiting his father's return, embody resilience and hope, further highlighting Vimala's emotional inertia.

Hegemony and Patriarchal Constructs

Gramsci's concept of hegemony is vividly illustrated in *Manju* through the interplay of familial, cultural, and psychological forces:

Familial Patriarchy

Vimala's upbringing in a patriarchal household lays the foundation for her subordinate identity. Her father's authoritarian nature relegates women to secondary roles, conditioning Vimala to seek male validation. This upbringing creates a psychological framework where her worth is tied to the approval of male figures, particularly Sudheer.

The moment he reached home complete silence reigned. The scent of tobacco from his pipe would float everywhere. Talking was done in subdued tones.

Mother could not rest in the afternoon. She had to start at three. Only then could she begin to make tea and things to eat, before he reached home at four-thirty in the evening.

The moment he stepped in, without even bothering to change, he would sit on his chair in the dining room. If the table was not set then, there would be hell to pay.

Even eating with him was an ordeal. "Where is Vimala? Where is Babu?"

"They are not ready. Let them eat later."

"No. Vimala, Babu, come and join me."

If the tea was split, if anyone belched or sneezed, his ruddy face would turn crimson. He would not scold but his piercing look was enough to chill one's soul.

Once Anita said:

"Father! We must go to our village home in Kerala once!" "Do you have your grandfather there waiting for you?"

Anita's eyes filled with tears.

Father had never spoken warmly of his village.

Father was always feared. Even when writing to him. The letter had to be in English only. The errors were always underlined in red and sent back with a warning. "Remember that my hard-earned money is being spent on your education!"¹

Psychological Entrapment

Sudheer, despite being a transient figure in Vimala's life, becomes the fulcrum of her emotional existence. Her dependency on his memory underscores the cultural conditioning that defines women's identities through their relationships with men. Sudheer represents not just a lost love but also the patriarchal and socio-economic structures that dominate Vimala's life.

The ripples of sounds and colours moved around her. A thousand strange faces. Among them was a pair of eyes searching for a girl met nine years ago? Deep dark eyes, below the unruly curls, two deep blue oceans!

Where was Buddhu? Was that bald man in shorts a European? Among the boatmen crowding the jetty, was there a boy, with the picture of a "white man" in his breast pocket, scanning the crowd?

Vimala walked on.

My God, there is something wrong with me!

I can't shed even a single tear.

She found that her steps were not even unsteady. The rivulets of sorrow were not making grooves in her soul.

¹ Gray, Jennifer B. "The Escape of the 'Sea': Ideology and 'The Awakening.'" The Southern Literary Journal, vol. 37, no. 1, 2004, pp. 53–73. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20078397>. Accessed 15 Dec. 2024.

This morning at 5-30 my father died.

She had anticipated that on hearing the news of death she would be helpless like a twig caught in the whirl of a current. But so far nothing had happened to her. Only a cold calm was in her mind.²

Maternal Subversion

Vimala's mother, while also trapped within patriarchal norms, subtly reclaims autonomy by controlling the domestic sphere during her husband's illness. However, her resistance remains limited to private spaces, failing to challenge the larger societal structures that perpetuate subordination.

Subaltern Identity and Cultural Constructs

Vimala's subordinate identity extends beyond economic factors to include cultural and psychological dimensions:

Cultural Conditioning

Despite being financially independent as a teacher, Vimala remains ensnared by societal expectations. Her inability to assert her individuality reflects the cultural constructs that prioritize male dominance and diminish women's agency.

Edward Said's Filiation and Affiliation

Said's theories illuminate Vimala's struggle to reconcile her filial ties with her quest for autonomy. Her silence when Sudheer asks about her homeland signifies her disconnection from both personal and cultural identity, illustrating the erasure of self within patriarchal frameworks.

Once, seated near the boat-club opposite the Alka Hotel she had thought of her village home.

"No, I can't remember anything."

"Nothing?"

"It was sixteen years ago, Sudhir. Sixteen years." It was a night in May. Far away the clusters of trees looked like clouds of blue smoke." I can recall things which happened when I was a mere five-year-old."

It was like untying the knots of a web. Sounds and colours slowly

Came undone. The ferry boat smelling of cashewnut oil, the green rice fields where the grasshopper sprang here and there, the folk songs heard from the Vettuva huts.

"Come on, tell me."

² Said, Edward W. "Abecedarium Anthology: The Cambridge Introduction to Edward W. Said." *Boundary 2*, 25 Feb. 2015, www.boundary2.org/2015/02/abecedarium-anthology-the-cambridge-introduction-to-edward-w-said/.

But her heart had murmured: Don't, please don't force me to, Sudhir. Do not push me into the past now, when I will have only the moments with you to live on afterwards. Let me live these, when words mingled with the masculine smell of cigarette smoke caress my cheeks.³

Trauma and Psychological Stagnation

The novel delves deeply into the psychological consequences of subordination, particularly through Vimala's unresolved trauma:

Recurring Motifs

Symbols such as the frozen calendar and unused books encapsulate Vimala's inability to move forward, both emotionally and temporally. These motifs poignantly depict her arrested development, highlighting the psychological toll of subjugation.

Contrasting Characters

Buddu, the boatman, serves as a foil to Vimala. His optimism and resilience stand in stark contrast to Vimala's despair, emphasizing the transformative power of hope and agency. Buddu's character offers a glimpse of liberation, further underscoring Vimala's entrapment.

Resistance and Liberation

While *Manju* primarily portrays subjugation, it subtly hints at the potential for resistance:

Gramscian Liberation

Gramsci's assertion that mental emancipation is the first step toward liberation resonates with Vimala's journey. However, her inability to confront her past or redefine her identity suggests that true liberation remains elusive.

"Will you help me choose a sweater?"

"For whom?"

"It's for a girl."

He had looked at her with mischief in his eyes, searching for sparks of jealousy.

The old shopkeeper himself spread the things before them.

She was seeing a sweater with embroidered musical notes for the first time. The colour too was beautiful.

"This is a nice one."

"Do you like it?"

³ Bates, Thomas R. "Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1975, pp. 351–66. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2708933>. Accessed 13 Dec. 2024.

“I like it. But I can’t say about your girl!”

“If you like it, it’s all right.”⁴

She kept the packet with her even when they walked to the restaurant attached to the theatre.

At the very next table one of her students was seated with her family.

She could still recall every detail of it all. She never spread the news at school. That Miss Vimala has a boyfriend who has blue eyes and curly hair! It was the students who had spread the scandal about Pushpa Sarkar.

Rather unnecessarily she introduced him as her cousin who had come there for the season.

She never went again to that hotel meant for the upper class. Were the cushions of the hotel of red plush even now? Were they still serving their guests the cassata ice cream with a white wing-like wafer stuck in the middle?

Inside the theatre it was warm with the breath of the crowd.

They sat in the last row, close to each other on plush seats. It was a film about pearl divers. There was a dance by Hawaiian girls wearing garlands round their necks. When the hero kissed his girl’s moist red lips, their palms were clasped together.

“Lucky man!”

Whisperings in her ears. Breath mingled with the smell of tobacco caressing her cheeks.

Bidding farewell at the turning to the boarding house, she handed him the packet containing the sweater they had just bought.

“It’s for you!”

She was bewildered. She wanted to decline the offer.

“I—— for me ——?”

But she could not complete her words!”

I bought it just for you. Good night.”⁵

⁴ Brown, Laura S. “DECOLONIZING THE CONSTRUCTS AND MYTHS OF SAFETY, PART I.” *Decolonizing Trauma Healing: Toward a Humble, Culturally Responsive Practice*, 1st ed., American Psychological Association, 2025, pp. 181–208. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.14416307.11>. Accessed 12 Dec. 2024.

⁵ Wurgaft, Lewis D. “The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism. By Ashis Nandy. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983. Xx, 121 Pp. Index. \$16.95. - Crippled Minds: An Exploration into Colonial Culture. By Susantha Goonatillake. Delhi: Vikas, 1982. Xii, 350 Pp. Index. \$32.50. (Distributed in the United States and Canada by Advent Books, New York.)” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2, Feb. 1985, pp. 434–36, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2055978>. Accessed 14 May 2021.

Alternative Perspectives

The Sikh character introduced toward the novel's end symbolizes resilience and the possibility of meaningful dialogue. His attempts to engage with Vimala represent a potential pathway to healing and autonomy. Yet, Vimala's silence in response highlights the deep-seated nature of her subjugation.

Conclusion

M.T. Vasudevan Nair's *Manju* is a profound exploration of subordinate identity, critiquing the socio-cultural and psychological constructs that perpetuate subordination. Key findings from this analysis include:

1. Subordination is not limited to economic factors but is deeply rooted in cultural and psychological dimensions.
2. Patriarchal norms and cultural hegemony play a central role in shaping subordinate identities, as seen in Vimala's dependency on Sudheer.
3. Familial and cultural constructs restrict self-actualization, highlighting the need for mental liberation as a precursor to resistance.
4. The novel's open-ended conclusion underscores the enduring struggle for identity and liberation.

Through *Manju*, Nair invites readers to reflect on the complex interplay of culture, patriarchy, and trauma in shaping identity, leaving a lasting impression of the human condition's fragility and resilience.

Theoretical Note

1. Althusser's cultural theory explains the structure and function of ideology, his central thesis stemming from Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. In cultural theory, the term describes the dynamic by "which a dominant class wins the willing consent of the subordinate class to the system that ensures their subordination"
2. By filiation, Said means the writer's natural and organic connection by "inherited location." And affiliation is a "network of relationships that human beings make consciously [...] often to replace the loss of filiative relations in modern society."³ A writer's work, the text, therefore is a conglomeration of both filiative and affiliative connections hence, a "worldly" phenomenon.
3. The apathy and indifference of the masses to the appeals of the revolutionaries expressed for Gramsci the fact of their subordination, not only to the force of the state, but also to the world view of the ruling class. To achieve a revolutionary perspective, the worker must first be freed of the ideological fetters imposed on him by the cultural organizations of the ruling class.
4. As trauma is a universal experience, a colonized paradigm for responding to trauma re- introduces problematic dynamics of domination and subjugation that are inimical to healing. Decolonising Trauma Healing offers a new paradigm for how psychologists and other mental health providers can learn to properly understand and work with people whose lives, psyches, and souls have been damaged by exposure to trauma. Dr. Laura S. Brown introduces her decolonial, humble, culturally responsive (DHCR) model of trauma healing practice. It urges readers to abandon the concept of cultural competence and other approaches that maintain a Eurocentric perspective, in favor of a decolonial method that re-centers the sufferer's lived experience, with an understanding of the subtle ways in which the colonial mindset underlies the causes of trauma as well as our traditional conception of trauma healing.
5. As Nandy observes, "The pressure to be the obverse of the West distorts the traditional priorities in the Indian's total view of man and the universe and destroys his culture's unique gestalt. It in fact binds him even more irrevocably to the West" (p. 73). In the same way the pressure of rationalization in Western

societies, at both the cultural and material levels has created a paradoxical situation in which "Indian society has held in trusteeship aspects of the West which are lost to the West itself"

References

1. Gramsci, Antonio. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
2. Said, Edward W. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
3. Nandy, Ashish. (1983). *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Religion in Modern India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
4. Nair, M.T. Vasudevan. (1964). *Manju* (Malayalam). Mathrubhumi Books.
5. Nair, M. T. Vasudevan (Trans: V. M. Premila), *Mist*, 1974, Orient Blackswan Private Limited, Hyderabad

Further Readings

1. Menon, Seema. (1999). *Everyday Nationalism: Women and the Nation in Postcolonial India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
2. Viswanath, Kavita. (2014). *How Does Caste Matter?: Dalit Consciousness in Independent India*. Delhi: Penguin Books.
3. Menon, Rajeswari Sunder. (2007). *Of Multiculturalism and the Public Sphere: Dilemmas of Difference in Modern India*. Delhi: Permanent Black.

