

The idea of location in Nabina Das' *Footprints in the Bajra*



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Abstract

The present paper explores the idea of location in contemporary narratives of people from the margins. The position of the subject plays an important role in the issues of hegemony, power, domination, identity and subjectivity. Reality gets permeated into the text either intentionally or unintentionally. It locates the formation of narratives, what goes into its background and foreground, the erasures of the history of the subalterns, the contemporary social scenario in which the text has been created, the author's milieu, the hidden gaps deliberately left by the author and the age that it describes. Post-Colonial theorists study location in sense of space occupied by the narrative. Literature can never be written in isolation as it is the author who manifests the power of literature to turn experience into life-narratives that will eventually give rise to a differentiated kind of social experience. The text under analysis is Nabina Das' *Footprints in the Bajra*. The text centres around the red brigade topography known for its Naxalite movements. In the present paper, Nabina Das takes the reader through the difficult improbable paths through the Bajra fields of Bihar. It is her proximity and her acquaintance with the cultural, ethical, geographical location of the Bajra belt that makes the question of location as utmost important in a postcolonial text. The text centers on the sites of cultural intersection, the great class divide, the caste divide and the gender divide which is rooted in the Indian society.

Keywords: Location, Culture, Contested Spaces and Resistance.

Introduction

Post-colonial studies have occupied itself with the issues related to power, hegemony, identity, domination and resistance. Today it has become inseparable from the idea of the location of the subject position. Eminent theorist Edward Soja, in *Third Space* feels that there has been an inseparable connection between post-colonial studies and human geography. As this study has started gaining importance recently, therefore Post-colonial studies have been encountered with new challenges of space and subject location (ix-x). The idea of location broadly refers to the position of the subject in relation to where it has been historically, geographically and culturally located and rooted. It becomes a challenge for the reader to unearth these silent spaces of subject positionality. Alongwith the position of the subject, the other things which are of the value is to which audience does the text caters to (that is the position of the narrative itself). The novelist narrativizes the concerns and issues of the subalterns who do not find any representation in the main stream. The subaltern history is deliberately wiped as in today's world of media and digital surveillance reality is sifted through the power structures and the institutes of hegemony.

Dwelling on the idea of location, the study would be incomplete without the reference to Edward Said who builds a relationship of empire and geography in his seminal work "Imaginative geography and its Representations: Orientalizing the Oriental" in *Orientalism*. However it was Homi K. Bhabha who uses the term "Third Space" to articulate the subject space which is representative of hybridity and ambivalence. It is this location that poses a threat to the articulation of the meaning of the text. Bhabha calls this space as "liminal" and "interstitial" space often at crossroads with dominant cultural traditions. The novelist, dwells on this third space which is a site of contradiction and resistance, trying to project reality through the garb of fiction.

Studying Michel Foucault's "heterotopias"; it is these heterotopias that provides with the counter sites, an effectively staged utopias in the real sites that are concealed and hidden inside. Therefore

the location of the narrative need to be unearthed below the apparent location. Literature is a mirror to society, it can be never written oblivious to reality. Literature cannot escape the influence of the place where it is written and about whom it is written. The writer, whether consciously or unconsciously is an imitation of life of the times. The immediate environment goes into the making of a literary articulation.

Another aspect of the idea of location in literature can be studied is that sometimes the imminent reality is harsh enough to be spoken off openly. Then it becomes the responsibility of authors and writes to speak up. In today's times the institutes of democracy are facing a serious threat, as their voice has either been throttled or muffled up. Therefore, it becomes all the more important for the author to voice reality.

The text under study is Nabina Das's *Footprint in the Bajra* which is set in the badland topography of North Bihar. The fictional epicentre of the novel is Durjanpur. Although the characters are fictional, the location is fictional, yet it bears a close semblance to life on the edge. The bajra belt of North Bihar is notorious for its Naxalite activities which are highlighted by Nabina Das. The novel articulates a life like picture of the northern central regions of India always in the news for its Naxalite connections where people have given up their faith in democratic set up. She explores deeper, through the veil of fiction as to what are the causes of this ambush.

The novel's chief protagonist is an old school master Suryakant Sahay who runs a school in Durjanpur for the poor villagers. There is Nora who is a part of a theatre troupe that has come from Delhi University. Sahay has an adopted daughter, Muskaan who runs the entire household. Both Muskaan and Nora are age mates and each others counter foils as one represents the urban and the other represents the rustic. Both share a humanist and philanthropist heart but on contrary terms. If Nora is educated, elite, refined, gentle and sophisticated; Muskaan is crude, agile, passionate and raw force. Nora works with the theatre group that works for the enlightenment of the needy and destitute. Muskaan is a firebrand revolutionary, who believes in fighting and snatching for ones rights. She believes in snatching from the rich and distributing among the needy. The novel's climax reaches when both come face to face of each other in their real self.

The theatre artists perform a play in the centre of the village at the shrine of *Chinnamasta*. In the garb of the play, they have their own agenda of revenge from their oppressors. They kill the son of the oppressive zamindar and in return, the revolutionaries are captured and tortured. Muskaan is kidnapped and brutally raped by zamindars and kept as a hostage.

The novelist has highlighted the great divide that is prevalent in the bajra belt of state of Bihar bordering Orissa, Jharkhand and Chattisgarh. There is a wide class divide. There is a handful of zamindar in nexus with the administration, bureaucrats who are plundering the poor in the rural areas.

The so called elites, take away the natural resources of the villagers and the tribals (who have a privileged right over them by virtue of their location). The water which is meant for the irrigation of their fields is diverted to the fields of rich zamindars in connivance with the administration. The poor and their fields are left to starve their own death. The government schemes which are meant for the benefit of the poor are diverted midway. It never reach the deserving person. The public rationing system meant for the downtrodden is an utter failure, as ration never reaches them. The resources which actually belong to them- the rivers, mountains, forests, wildlife are all plundered away. The air, water and land which is their God has been defiled under the garb of modernisation, development and globalization. There are children and women who are prone to human trafficking due to extreme poverty. Sometimes the children are made to work in matchstick factories which are very dangerous for their health.

The grievances of the poor never reach the administration as it is deaf to their cries. In amidst of all this, the only hope they find is joining the ranks and files. They take up arms against the system as they fail to make themselves hear through peaceful plaints. So gunshots, mines and blasts are the only ways through which they can make themselves heard of. The rich farm owners had their own personal army sponsored in order to crush the revolutionaries.

Nabina Das portrays the text in a very familiar tone to the cultural milieu of the land. The novel has been composed during her journalistic encounters with reality and she herself writes about the source of inspiration of the novel as her real life encounter. She portrays the novel as a life like canvas of Bihari and Santhali names and surnames, the Bihari cuisine and the Bihari accent. She has a close familiarity with the surnames prevalent in Bihar- The Thakurs, the Chaudharys, the Singhs, the Murmus, the Paswans, the Yadavs and the Gondas. She also describes the adivasis in the form of the Santhal tribe.

The novel also has a close semblance of the Kangaroo courts to that which is found in the Naxalite embedded areas. The rebels have their own system of legal dispensation as the government system has totally failed them.

Aim of the Study

The present paper aims to highlight how location becomes one of the dominant factors in framing the text. It goes into the format of the text in one way or the other. The location of the subject is a key factor to the articulation of the discourse of power, knowledge, hegemony and identity. The present paper aims to study the idea of location in Nabina Das' novel *Footprints in the Bajra*. The novel is based in the Naxalite dominated area popularly known as the red corridor of India.

Conclusion

Therefore, it can be concluded that the idea of location is intrinsic to the formation of a narrative. Nabina Das's novel *Footprints in the Bajra* is a fictional account of novelist's own encounters in the Bajra belt when once she was on a brief trip to Bihar from Delhi. Her character Nora in the novel is very

close to the novelist as she has drawn Nora on her own lines. Therefore, the location of the narrative becomes a key feature in articulating reality. In today's digital World reality is permeated through various checks and ultimately becomes vulnerable. Therefore in words of GayatriChakrabortySpivak it becomes the duty of the elite to represent the subalterns as they can never speak for themselves.

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