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Fragmented Consciousness and Marginal Realities: Memory, Madness, and Marginality in Arun Sarma's *Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya*

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Abstract

Among the dramatists who had been consistently striving to bring in new modes of expression in Assamese theatre, Padmashree Arun Sarma and Sahitya Akademi Winner, stands tall in the list with his inventive plays such as Jinti, Urukha Poza, Nibaran Bhattacharya, Purush, Ahaar, Siyonr, Kukur Nechiya Manuh etc. His play Nibaran Bhattacharya, is considered a significant mediation in contemporary Assamese drama, that is deeply engaged with themes of memory, madness, and marginality. The play, through its characters, highlights psychological breakdown and appeals audience and readers as well to consider it not simply as a personal tragedy but as a replication of collective ordeal and socio-political estrangement. In the backdrop of postcolonial Assam, the dramatist emphasises the historical ruptures with an objective to explore embedded memory as a narrative apparatus that disrupts stable temporality while simultaneously foregrounding the maladies of the past. At the same time, it should carefully be noted that the figure of madness develops as both a symptom and critique—an embodied form of dissent against normative structures of rationality and authority. The play attempts to question institutionalized conversations of rationality and their connivances in quieting subaltern voices.

Keywords: *Arun Sarma, Nibaran Bhattacharya, memory, madness, marginality, subaltern*

Introduction:

The Post-Independent modern Indian drama has always been indispensably connected to the contemporary tumultuous socio-political issues. In this context, Arun Sarma, a stalwart in Assamese theatre remains prominent for his penetrating portrayals of psychological splits and social disintegration. Written in the postcolonial context of Assam, *Nibaran Bhattacharya* resists monologic representations and instead embraces plurality, fragmentation, and liminality. It records a character who is at once a citizen and an exile, a thinker and a madman, a rememberer and a forgotten.

Sarma, in *Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya*, creates a world of ontological obscurity, where the margins between reason and madness, memory and hallucination, truth and delusion dissipate. It is about a character whose relapse into madness lead the playwright to raise the larger issues of identity, history, and exclusion. As the play unfolds, it reveals unlike linear realist narratives, Nibaran's fractured consciousness and the disarray of his social environment. Madness is not used here as clinical pathology but as a radical epistemology. It is rather employed to understand the world that contests domineering rationalist and colonial interpretations.

The present paper locates *Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya* in the interdisciplinary intersections of memory, madness and marginality. It applies theoretical insights from trauma studies in particular Cathy Caruth's conception of trauma and Michael LaCapra's premises on acting-out versus working-through as modes of engaging historical trauma. On the other hand, while dealing with the topic of madness Foucauldian concept from *Madness and Civilization* (1961) is adopted wherein he argues that that madness is not simply a medical condition but a socially constructed category used to discipline and exclude non-conforming subjects. In the light of this the apparent insanity of Nibaran turns into a site of resistance. His monologues, inconsistent gestures and separation from the regular framework of time and space signal the loss of an alternative form of knowledge production, not the loss of self.

As far as the idea of marginality is concerned, its operation is visible at multiple level. The protagonist is marginalized not in terms of his mental state only but also by his geographic and epistemic position. In his representation as an estranged person both from the perspectives of the national mainstream and his immediate social environment, his voice echoes the silences and exclusions faced by the Northeast region in the Indian cultural and political imagination. To inquire whether Nibaran's voice, situated at the intersection of madness and marginality, can be heard or is structurally silenced Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's arguments in her *Can the Subaltern Speak?* is employed.

The paper further argues that the play *Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya* is a powerful critique of both national and psychiatric regimes that quells unconventionality in the name of order. The destabilization of hegemonic discourses and foregrounding of the subaltern experience is achieved through the collective use of non-linear temporality, memory fragments, and performative madness.

Memory: A site of Trauma and Resistance

In *Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya* memory operates more as a deeply political and performative act rather than a mere psychological faculty. The dramatic treatment of memory by Arun Sarma dislocates memory from the realm of nostalgia and positions it against the backdrop of the traumatic postcolonial experiences of Assam. The protagonist becomes an emblem of a struggle through whom the past erupts into present which is expressed via fragments of unresolved pain and dislocation. In this regard, Sarma aligns his play with the aesthetics of post-traumatic consciousness, resonating the theoretical frameworks of Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, who argue that trauma is marked by belatedness, fragmentation, and the inability to fully articulate or master the experience (Caruth, 1996; LaCapra, 2001).

The formation of a dialectic between presence and absence, between memory and oblivion is noticeable from the very beginning of the play. The recollections of Nibaran seem muddled and charged with emotions. Past is handled not in a linear pattern but allowed to relive it through fantasies, monologues and sequential shifts that perplex the audience. Such sequences are what Caruth (1996) explains as “the return of the event” referring to a psychic re-writing of trauma. What emerges out of this is that the frontiers of past and present become obscure and history develops into order of events that cannot be documented but as something very affective, forceful, bearing the power to encroach upon the present. It is to be noted that the play, instead of labelling a single source for the trauma of Nibaran Bhattacharya, attributes to a number of factors such as psychic erosion caused by personal failures, political marginalization and social alienation.

In order to mimic the structure of traumatic memory Arun Sarma uses dramaturgy in which the events do not progress chronologically but as fragmented snippets. Consequently, the victim of the trauma is trapped in a repetitive compulsion to relive the past without a scope to escape it.

Though memory in the play is presented as melancholic yet it is not without any action in it. In actuality, Nibaran's refusal to accept his forgetfulness- even at the cost of his sanity- can be studied as an act resistance. His continual recollection, though fragmented, is representative of the societal attempts to silence or erase the marginalized. When examined through the prism of memory the character of Nibaran reveals its deceptive outlook. His memories and imagined situations, instead of disbelieving him, signals to a profounder truth beyond the comprehension of a regular discourse. His inability to accept and perceive his surrounding realities reflects not his individual failure but a systematic failure to concede and process marginal histories.

Madness: As a device of Disagreement and Narration

The element of madness in *Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya* has been employed on various levels. It not only is used as a psychological condition but also as a metaphor which questions the extent of normative sagacity, hegemonic order and socio-political compliance. In his play Arun Sarma presents madness as a form to counter the world of rejection, forgetfulness and domination. While presenting madness under this perspective it can be maintained that the play relates to the proposition of Michel Foucault (1961/2006) explained in *Madness and Civilization* wherein he maintains that madness is a conditional construct of history put into force by modern institutions.

The portrayal of Nibaran Bhattacharya as a mad person is crucial as it presents an intellectual, a blend of heroic and tragic, whose insanity becomes an agent giving expression to truths that the society usually does not want to hear. In order to mimic the epistemic chaos caused by madness and provide the fissures of the contemporary society Sarma skilfully engages Nibaran's irregular behaviour, inconsistent shifts in tone and pattern of thinking as a tool.

With reference to the ideas of Foucault (2006) which argue that the concept of Enlightenment was built in contrast to madness in order to enforce confinement and elimination. As such to reinforce binary divisions between sanity and insanity, disciplinary institutions- hospitals, prisons or asylums, are created. Under this perspective, it may be said that Nibaran's alienation operates within the framework of Foucault. He is subjected to social exclusion and psychiatric categorization, his views are dismissed as futile.

Nonetheless, it is this exact space that Arun Sarma has desired Nibaran Bhattacharya to explore to test his moral and philosophical authority. His perceived madness, unlike other socially compliant characters empowers him to transcend the social norms. Although his expressions are scrappy and delusionary, they still carry deeper philosophical meanings along with underlying socio-political remarks. His perceptible withdrawal from reality is in fact, an agitated sensitivity to things that other people find hard to accept.

The mental breakdown of Nibaran can also be considered as an assessment of the modern rational man whose existence is primarily shaped by the Enlightenment ideal of progress, order and autonomy. Despite being educated, alert and committed, Nibaran finds himself unable to adjust to a world that opposes his philosophy and in this way he becomes a symbolic of failed promise. Arun Sarma employs the collapse of Nibaran to betray the profound disagreements of a society that regards conformity more than creativity, order over justice and progress over memory. The organizational system that terms Nibaran ‘mad’ belongs to the same ideological pattern which attempts to marginalize the dissenters and normalises cultural differences.

Marginality and the Subaltern Voice

The play, *Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya*, is significantly laden with the politics of marginality in which the protagonist manifests not only psychological and existential alienation but also encounters social negligence and intellectual rebuttal. With this multifaceted marginalization, Nibaran becomes a person without authority, an intellectual who is no longer heard, a voice whose consciousness fades into forgetfulness.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her pivotal essay *Can the Subaltern speak?* (1988), argues that admission into hegemonic discourses and justified institutionalized representation are denied to the subalterns. The voice of the subalterns, when they

speak, is often dismissed as inaccurate, by the dominant epistemic structures. Nibaran, as an embodiment of this contradictory structural pattern, too is denied his space or recognition and side lined on the pretext of his speech being irrational, hallucinatory or inconsistent.

Antonio Gramsci's theory of *Organic Intellectual* also supplies a framework for appreciating the protagonist's early position in the society and his consequent marginalization. In his essay *The Formation of the Intellectuals* (1971) Gramsci expounds the presence of two types of intellectuals- traditional and organic- the former emerges from the order of the establishment while the latter serves the interests of the oppressed section. When examined in the light of the two kinds of intellectuals Nibaran is found in acute affinity to the organic intellectuals as he is more confined to ethics, serious about culture, literature and of course, certain amount of justice through social recognition. But, tragically enough, as the play develops further, it becomes evident that his views and writings hold no value for the new generation.

Sarma's portrayal of Nibaran seems to be of an isolated individual, excluded from a community. The society around him has engrossed itself with pragmatism, materialism and societal ambitions leaving hardly any space for intellectual exercises or critical thinking. The ideas or writings which once was revered is now rejected as obsolete or out of context. Such a shift in position illustrates the fact that without the hegemonic consent ideas can become redundant and the intellectuals turn out to be marginalized. Through the portrayal of Nibaran by Arun Sarma, the gradual plunge into madness is presented to exemplify how organic intellectualism gets erased if the character does not conform to the existing norms of the society.

Another notable aspect of marginality in *Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya* is accentuated through spatial metaphor also. During the staging of the play, Nibaran is frequently placed on the edges not at the centre both literally and symbolically. He either moves around the sides of the stage or remains imprisoned in symbolic interiors. Such spatial arrangements emphasize the refusal of power and legitimacy to the individual concerned. Nibaran's own room is an intermediate place where hallucination collides with reminiscence, reality with fantasy. This echoes what Edward Soja (1996) defines as *Thirdspace*, a concept that explains real and imagined geographies of resistance. The placement of Nibaran provides him adequate space to critique both the physical world that he survives in and the ideological world that rejects him.

Speaking of the theatrical strategy that Arun Sarma employs with reference to marginality it may be mentioned that unlike many other mainstream Indian theatre practices that rely on either classical model or urban realism, he subscribes to a dramaturgy that draws upon techniques like linear temporality or fragmented narrative. Innovative in his own way, this experiment positions his works on the peripheries of Indian theatre, akin to his attempt to explore the thematic marginalities. His intention to highlight the impending intellectual crisis of Assamese people, his concern for the gradual decline in respect for its own language and literature is in fact a method of protest on the part of the dramatist.

Memory, Madness and Marginality: A discourse at the cross-roads

With respect to the structure and the thematic significance of the play the triangular relationship between memory, madness and marginality seems crucial for it. Arun Sarma intertwines the recurrent ideas to draw a complex representation of a character whose internal disintegration reflects the cracks visible in the larger socio-cultural spheres. In his own unique way, Sarma holds the view that personal trauma is beyond separation from memory. Further that the perceived insanity is rather a reaction to structural violence and also a means through which one can assess and argue about reality.

It is so far observed that the consciousness of Nibaran is burdened by split and invasive memories of the past with reference to its connectedness with the present. They are not mere remembrances of the past but rather are reminders of the traumatic experiences that have the power to produce terror. The inability of the traumatized subject to fully process or testify to the traumatic event

The motif of madness in Sarma's play serves a dual role, both as a symptom of trauma and also a reaction to marginal discourses. As it happens in general with any individual, Nibaran's rejection of social norms, institutional authority, and rationalist discourse is shaped by his exclusion from these very structures. The madness of Nibaran is both performative and mutinous- it attempts to disrupt and disclose the vulnerability of the world that surrounds him.

The play can also be studied with its form in view where it is employed to imply epistemological resistance. Arun Sarma, in order to experiment with the form and content, has shunned Aristotelian unity and replaced it with fragmented narrative, non-linear temporality, and disrupted spatiality. Such eschewing of traditional norms of stagecraft is not merely stylistic but ideological. The form of the play is intended to react against the traumatic experiences of the marginalized. The denial to provide a comfortable solution to Nibaran's madness, its opposition to tolerable conclusion has led to the renunciation of the foremost dramaturgical and philosophical norms. In this sense, memory, madness and marginality can be considered as not mere themes but rather key elements that have given shape to the architecture of the play.

It is perhaps correct to regard Nibaran as a subaltern figure in whom we notice a synthesis of the major themes. His position is conditioned by certain situations that have made his voice inaudible. Metaphorically viewed, he does not speak for himself but for people like him whose voices are usually not given an ear to. In this sense, his entire existence- the body, utterances and silences provoke a sense of pain of those who are found standing on the margins. It is painful to see Nibaran speaking incessantly but without an audience. Being rejected his words disappear in thin air and it is this rejection which reveal the inherent violence in the prevalent system.

Conclusion:

Arun Sarma in the play *Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya* portrays a marginalized character Nibaran- a madman, a thinker, a marginalized intellectual- through whom the dramatist constructs a deeply layered narrative that transcends regional boundaries while remaining rooted in the sociohistorical realities of Assam. The play, through the combination of diverse themes – memory, madness and marginality- contests hegemonic models of madness and marginality. Memory is being used as an agent that destabilizes linear occurrence of events and exposes the underlying traumatic lived experiences.

Memory, it is evident, is also used as an epistemological resistance to counter the arbitrariness between sanity and insanity. The incoherence of Nibaran's thoughts becomes meaningful as his delusions divulge deeper truths about the involvement of society in silencing voices. Thus, madness in the play acts as a means to protest- an alternative way of knowing the world. As far as the theme of marginality is concerned, it is realised through every dimension of the play, be it linguistic, intellectual or spatial. The voice of Nibaran is dismissed not because of his psychological condition but rather because of his position which the so called superior or advanced group does not want to acknowledge. The dramaturgic treatment by Arun Sarma appeals all to reconsider the binaries that structure our world: memory/forgetting, reason/madness, centre/periphery. It is to be noted that in an age when mental illness is still snubbed to a great extent, a section of people is marginalized or their traumas are not adequately attended, Arun Sarma's plays offer a window to consider his plays with urgency and relevance. His play *Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya* is more than an elegy. Instead of mourning, it endeavours how lives at the margins need to be explored or voices be heard to recover what has been lost in the process.

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