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Constructing the Other: Colonial Legacies, Local Oppressions and Subaltern Resistance in *Alma Kabutari*

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Abstract

The present study examines Maitreyi Pushpa's *Alma Kabutari* using the theoretical framework of Self and Other, demonstrating how the narrative constructs and deconstructs social binaries that marginalize de-notified tribes, particularly the Kabutaras. The novel utilizes the lived experiences of the Kabutara characters to illustrate how dominant discourse reinforces the perception of the Kabutaras as the 'Other' in both colonial and postcolonial India. This paper states that the text functions as a form of literary resistance against hegemonic identity politics, emphasizing the voices and agency of individuals marginalized by history and mainstream society. The Kabutaras (a de-notified tribe) are a minority population living on the margins of civilization; they are periodically threatened with eviction, their bastis are regularly searched by police, and they live in perpetual fear. The present study critiques the dominant culture's worldview for denying Indigenous peoples the ability to live with dignity. To break such restrictive patterns, it is critical to pay close attention to how each individual perceives them. In an attempt to speak for the voiceless and downtrodden, *Alma Kabutari* by Maitreyi Pushpa explores the difference as a superfluous term that challenges the concept and representation of tribal people, especially the Kabutaras, who are viewed by the general public as 'other' and considered as objects rather than human beings.

Keywords: Community, Colonial, Criminal-Identity, De-notified Tribes, Mainstream, Marginalized, Postcolonial.

Introduction

This study examines Maitrayi Pushpa's novel *Alma Kabutari* through the lens of postcolonial theory, focusing on the text's conflict between the Self and the Other. Frantz Fanon is credited with popularizing the concept

of the "Other" in postcolonial studies. However, the binary opposition of Self and Other is introduced by Edward Said in his famous work *Orientalism* (1978), in which Said demonstrates how the West (Self) constructs the East (Other) through essentialist, demeaning representations to justify colonial domination. This framework holds significance in the analysis of Indian colonial and postcolonial literature, where British rule established inflexible identities and legal frameworks such as the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871, which classified entire communities as hereditary criminals. This legislation echoed the colonial need to construct the Other that could be surveilled, contained, and reformed. As Radhika Singha explains, the Act "reproduced colonial knowledge systems that linked tribe and criminality, thereby producing a surveillance state" (Singha, 2001).

However, the connection between the Self and the Other is never one of dominance and submissive compliance; rather, the relationship is constantly laden with tension, resistance, and even disobedience. This research aims to explore the discursive tension between the Self and the Other, as well as the Other's resistance to the Self's dominance, as Pushpa powerfully depicts in *Alma Kabutari*. The De-notified tribe, notably the Kabutara tribe, which has suffered the most from historical upheavals or political crises, has been chosen as the primary subject of the story. The society refers to these disadvantaged individuals as 'others.'

Pushpa also addresses the conundrum of postcolonial intelligentsia over the capacity of these disadvantaged members of society to communicate by giving them a significant role. In her novel, Maitrayi Pushpa aims to give voice to those who have been previously unheard, voiceless, or ignored by history and exploited by the powerful. She successfully navigates the challenges of recovering and conveying the stories of these marginalized people comprehensively. She brings up the concerns of the De-notified tribes and attempts to integrate this topic with her expertise. Most of the characters in the text, including Kadambai, Janglia, Bhoorie, Ramsingh, Rana, Alma, and Malia, are members of the Kabutara community, which is a socially stigmatized group in society. The struggle of these people and their survival issues are chronicled in this work. Pushpa's novel is an eloquent attempt to expose this prejudice and bring people around to the view that the people of these tribes are also human beings and require help from all to bring them into the mainstream of social life.

Pushpa's novel intricately weaves together multiple axes of oppression, showing that the Kabutaras are not only Othered by colonial structures but also by local systems of class and patriarchy. Community-based marginalization manifests in the Kabutara tribe's low social status, which prevents them from accessing land, education, and economic mobility. The village society internalizes colonial stereotypes, reinforcing the image of the Kabutaras as deviant and unworthy. Moreover, Alma's journey highlights the gendered dimension of Othering. As a woman, she faces systemic sexual exploitation, domestic violence, and a lack of autonomy. As a member of a stigmatized tribe and a woman in a patriarchal society, she experiences double marginalization. The narrative voice underscores that to be born a Kabutara was bad enough, but to be born a Kabutara woman was to be sentenced without trial.

The novel is set in the Bundelkhand region of central India. The narrator aims to create a positive identity for the community by offering an alternate history, which is explored by examining the conflicts between the Kabutaras and the Kajjas, a general term for middle to upper castes that represent the exploitative "self" for the Kabutaras.

Discussion

Alma Kabutari is the tragic story of the marginalization and exploitation of the Kabutara tribe, which expands through three generations. Colonial laws that labeled the

Kabutara people as a "criminal tribe" are a prime example of institutionalized Othering. Even though the Criminal Tribes Act was repealed in 1952, public opinion has not change. This action was denounced by Jawaharlal Nehru, who said that "no tribe can be classified criminal as such, and the whole Act is out of consonance with all civilized principles of criminal justice and treatment of offenders."(Schwarz 45) Nehru's concern highlights the Act's contradiction with democratic principles. Pushpa, however, demonstrates that these tribal identities are still ensnared in the criminal and deviant frameworks from which Nehru aimed to liberate them. The Kabutaras are still considered a collective Other that must be managed, contained, or destroyed by the "civilized" society, which continues to project criminality onto them. The societal branding of the Kabutaras as criminal establishes a binary relationship in which the 'civilized' Self (the dominant class/state) can establish its moral and legal identity in opposition to the 'barbaric' Other (Kabutaras). The novel commences with an epigraph from Jawaharlal Nehru that offers a critique of the Criminal Tribes Act, serving as a legislative manifestation of the Self/Other dichotomy:

> "I am aware of this monstrous provision of the Criminal Tribes Act, which constitutes a negation of civil liberties. Wide publicity should be given to its working and an attempt made to have the Act removed from the Statute Book. No tribe can be classified criminal as such, and the whole Act is out of consonance with all civilized principles of criminal justice and treatment of offenders..."

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru expressed his concern over this legislation, claiming that it may adversely affect society. Consequently, this statute necessitates the reevaluation and abrogation of the Constitution. It is erroneous to designate any group as inherently criminal. Approximately five years post-India's independence, this remedial measure was implemented and subsequently repealed on August 31, 1952. However, neither the police administration nor the members of civilized society have changed their attitude toward these tribes from that of colonial India. Society perceives people from these tribes differently. Instead of being identified by their names, members of these tribes are recognized by their professions, which include money theft, prostitution, alcohol manufacturing, and dacoity. While some idealistic Kabutaras interpret the sentence as a hopeful indication of a brighter future for their community, the author's unwavering precision in exposing the multifaceted exploitation endured by its members becomes progressively more poignant and deeply distressing. Ironically, these individuals are failed by societal institutions, law enforcement, and governmental authorities. The unsuspecting victims remain unable to see beyond the prevailing identity constructs shaped by ideological frameworks; despite the evident reality that true equality has yet to be attained.

The Kabutara (De-notified) Tribe faces a dual struggle: first, against the oppressive forces of mainstream society, and second, against the entrenched traditional beliefs within their own community. Veer Singh and Bhoorie, pivotal characters in this novel, symbolize the twofold struggle encountered by the Other: opposing both the outward forces of hegemonic oppression and the internalized standards of their marginalized communities. Veer Singh, a Kabutara from first generation, said:

> "the king said that nomad folks and gypsies who were listed as criminals are also free from now. The law that was the enemy of man is henceforward struck down. The nomad people will get the same justice and the same rights that every man in the country gets. They are not criminals, but born warriors...These lion-hearted sons today will uphold the honour of the motherland by enrolling

in the army." (114-15)

Veer Singh and Bhoorie are elated to have heard such profound remarks from the nation's ruler, believing that a new era of justice and equality has finally dawned. Veer Singh's endeavor to transcend this gap by affirming his claim to national identity and military service is a poignant instance of resistance. He starts to believe that now they will also get the same justice and the same rights that every man in the country gets. However, their community does not resonate with their enthusiastic discussions; instead, they face ridicule and social ostracism. Although the neighborhood's mockery is not intended to weaken Veer Singh's resolve, his aspiration to join the army is summarily dismissed solely based on his identity. Veer Singh's exclusion from military service, despite his adherence to national ideals, illustrates how the Self delineates the boundaries of the Other within the frameworks of national identity, including institutions like the army and the judiciary. Recognizing the transformative power of education and its potential to challenge systemic inequities, he seeks justice through legal means. However, his tragic killing by individuals of a higher caste illustrates the persistent brutality employed to uphold the marginalized position of Kabutaras and to safeguard prevailing power dynamics. The Self, as exemplified by the dominant society, must negate the Other's assertion of equality to maintain its identity and privilege.

The educational system in *Alma Kabutari* presents itself as a complex and contradictory realm. For Ram Singh and subsequently Alma, the pursuit of knowledge serves as a mechanism for personal transformation, while simultaneously intensifying their sense of alienation. They possess an education that distances them from the Kabutara realm, yet their perceived 'impurity' renders them unwelcome in the prevailing Kajja society. They exist within a transitional realm—a threshold identity—characterized by postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha as the "Third Space." Acknowledging education as a vital means of resisting oppression, Bhoorie is the first character in the narrative to recognize its importance and actively strive to secure it for her son. Despite facing intense societal opposition, she remains steadfast in enrolling Ram Singh in school, undeterred by the ensuing turmoil. With remarkable resilience, she withstands pressure from both within and outside her community, reassuring herself that enabling her son's education would give purpose to her struggles. In her defiance, she openly challenges the customs and traditions of the Kabutara people, even disobeying the headman's authority. She justifies her choices by viewing her body to facilitate her son's educational opportunities. Bhoorie's resilience in confronting formidable forces is profoundly inspiring. As a Kabutara woman, she endures dual marginalization—both as a victim of the Kajjas' oppressive mechanisms and as a member of a socially disadvantaged group within her own community. Despite the adversity exacerbated by Veer Singh's death, she remains steadfast in her belief in the transformative power of education. In an act of agency, she consciously chooses to leverage her sexuality as a means to both educate her son and resist systemic oppression. Fully aware of the societal stigma associated with prostitution, she voluntarily embraces this path, disregarding external criticism. Her conviction is encapsulated in her reflection: "This body is nothing compared to the treasure house of knowledge" (117), which underscores her unwavering determination. In this way, she subverts the sexualized Otherness imposed on her by both insiders and outsiders, using what society has deemed her weakness—her sexuality—as a means of empowering her son. Ultimately, Ram Singh's achievement of becoming a teacher affirms the validity of her unwavering determination.The unfortunate woman remains largely unaware that when an external threat emerges, all power centers collaborate to suppress it.

Pushpa illustrates the notion that the concept of the Other is not merely an external imposition but is also assimilated within the Kabutara community itself. Ram Singh, Bhoorie, and Alma emerge as focal points of conflict between the ingrained sense of inferiority and the aspiration for change. For the Kajjas, an educated Kabutara poses such a threat. Ram Singh, who has aspired to be a positive force within his community since childhood, is constantly subjected to relentless exploitation. Even after becoming a teacher, he is constantly reminded of his inferior status, subjected to ridicule, and pressured into unlawful activities. Eventually, when provoked beyond endurance, he reacts impulsively and kills the chaprasi, rendering his mother's sacrifices meaningless. However, he retains his job, as his dismissal would disrupt the regular payments made to police officials. At this point, Ram Singh becomes entangled in a complex network of interactions between law enforcement and the dominant caste groups, rendering him incapable of escaping their influence. His self-esteem is profoundly diminished, particularly when the police visit his home to demand money. The officer menacingly threatens to disrobe his wife in his presence if he fails to comply with their demands. Moreover, he is cautioned against filing any complaints, as the authorities assert their supreme control within the government. He is forced to acknowledge that his education has not granted him the power to challenge or dismantle the deeply entrenched structures of authority. Ram Singh, a profoundly dejected and disillusioned father, ultimately submits to his circumstances, holding onto the hope that complying with the police's demands will allow him to educate his daughter, Alma, and spare her from humiliation. However, he becomes the victim of a staged encounter and is killed by the police under the false allegation of being the notorious dacoit, Beta Singh. Ram Singh emerges as a poignant character who comes to understand that the Self he yearned to embrace still regards him as an Other. Fully aware of the police's exploitative intentions, he recognizes the pervasive threat they pose to the women and girls of his community:

> "Drops of sensual laughter dripping from the eyes of the soldiers touched his eyes and started bursting. No, no, it's not... better than that I'll strangle Alma. I will push Alma's mother to Betwa. How was my mother's heart? Tolerating injustice kept sweeping the path of justice! I can't get honesty out of the dishonest! The poison tree sown by them is big, its roots are hundreds of years old. It has spread all over the earth." (103)

Ram Singh's psychological disintegration illustrates the failings of inclusion via mimicry—he is unable to entirely embody the Self due to the fundamental inscription of his Otherness: "Ram Singh is aware of how meaningless and deceptive the egalitarian ideals have become" (Pushpa 118).

The story of these disadvantaged people shows that even after the repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act, the reform has been slow, and the Kajjas and police abuse the tribes. In the narrative, a few members of the community rise up and try to break free from exploitation. These individuals have been seen as less important than other members of our nation since ancient times. The author has done a wonderful job of exposing how societal structures are to blame for these De-notified Tribes' mistreatment. Additionally, despite the challenges they encounter, the author has made it apparent that these people continue to fight for their rights. Their shared experiences, issues, and cultural beliefs are consistently disregarded. The illusion of refinement and morality upheld by the higher-caste Kajjas is critically exposed when Jangalia, Kadambai's husband, poses a thought-provoking question to Mansaram, a Kajja "benefactor": *"Malik, the tricks that we people use just to keep alive, you people use to finish off your own family. And you don't go to jail. Is simple stealing the biggest crime in the world?"* (25). This

process of Othering becomes fundamentally ingrained within the structure. As Jangalia endeavors to assimilate into society via hard work, he is swiftly undermined: "Kabutara! Kabutara! He'll make off with your shovel and trough!" (Pushpa 48). Kadambai, in a state of distress due to her pregnancy, finds herself unjustly accused of orchestrating a robbery: "Kabutari! Kabutari! She'll give birth in a moving bus. The child... will nose into pockets..." (Pushpa 50) In this context, the societal perception takes precedence over actual circumstances—it shapes behavior, aligning with Beauvoir's assertion: "One is not born, but rather becomes, the Other

After her father's death, Alma embarks on a painful journey, where she is treated as a mere commodity, bought and sold. She endures the same suffering as her grandmother and other Kabutara women, facing both physical and sexual exploitation. Despite these severe hardships, she ultimately reclaims control over her fate, resisting the oppressive forces that seek to dictate her life. As an educated woman, she swiftly secures a position as Sriram Shastri's escort and rises to prominence in political circles.

Even Sriram Shastri comes to recognize the pervasive dishonesty within the so-called "civilized" society. He is astonished to discover that the number of politically motivated murders occurring openly in urban centers far exceeds the number of killings he committed as a dacoit. Police officers, whose primary responsibility is to ensure public safety, simultaneously exploit the Kabutara community. Beyond dismantling their *dera* (settlement), the police subject the women to mistreatment, including forcibly stripping them of their clothing. In their interactions with bandits, the police partake in a morally reprehensible and manipulative game. By orchestrating a fabricated confrontation, the police eliminate Ram Singh as a scapegoat when no Kabutara is found to take Beta Singh's place. This episode effectively illustrates the dual nature of so-called civilized society.

The author highlights this duplicity through the character of Mansaram, who holds a respectable position in society yet engages in morally questionable acts. He initially steals from Jungliya, leading to the latter's death at the hands of the police, and subsequently assumes Jungliya's role in the wheat fields, engaging in sexual relations with Kadambai. The so-called civilized society condemns the Kabutaras as criminals, yet in reality, it is the Kabutaras who are systematically oppressed and deprived of fundamental human rights. Those who claim to embody civilization not only exploit the Kabutaras but also manipulate and coerce them into criminal activities, ultimately orchestrating their demise. Furthermore, individuals like Surajbhan, in their pursuit of power and political appeasement, perpetrate heinous acts such as the sexual assault and captivity of women like Alma. As observed by Vasani Krishnavanti P, this systemic oppression reflects the underlying hypocrisy and brutality of the so-called civilized world.

> "Alma is oppressed and oppressed in many ways and by many people, but the strength to bear it is unparalleled. This does not apply only to Alma, but it also applies to all tribal pigeon women." (Vasini 2010:185)

Even though the role of the social welfare minister is to protect and uphold the well-being of the public, individuals like Alma remain unlawfully confined within their residence. However, over time, Shri Ram Shastri transforms, gradually developing empathy and emotional attachment toward Alma. At one point, he draws a parallel between politicians and dacoits, remarking: "Adding details of the murders committed by him and combating the killings in broad daylight in politics. Neither he is entitled to give a speech against the bloodshed nor any leader-minister here." (355)

In the contemporary consumerist society, indigenous communities are commodified and reduced to objects of

exploitation and ornamentation. People perceive them not as individuals, but as manipulable products for material gain. Mansaram selfishly exploits Jangalia's skill in theft for his own benefit while simultaneously fixating on the physical allure of his wife, Kadambai. Once his desires are satisfied, he deceitfully arranges Jangalia's murder by inciting his adversary against him, thus securing his own access to Kadambai. Kehar Singh, a close associate of Mansaram, similarly demonstrates a lack of ethical restraint, readily engaging in the trade of women for financial profit. Furthermore, he seeks to capitalize on the Kabutara community's proficiency in alcohol brewing. In an attempt to persuade Mansaram to collaborate in this endeavor, Kehar Singh presents an idealized vision of the future, in which Mansaram will not only exploit the Kabutaras' brewing skills for financial gain but will also ascend to a position of dominance over them, with Kadambai as his consort. According to this vision, the Kabutaras, by leveraging their brewing expertise, will achieve economic prosperity, elevate their social status, and become immune to legal repercussions, even from law enforcement authorities.

In the novel, the Self is represented by the state, police, upper-caste society, and capitalist patriarchy. Characters such as Mansaram, Kehar Singh, and Surajbhan exemplify the mechanics of supremacy. They abuse the labor, sexuality, and vulnerability of Kabutaras. Even when Kabutaras want to express their autonomy, they are reminded that authority resides with the Self. The police humiliate, strip, and kill Ram Singh not for his actions, but for his identity. The concept of the Self is thereby linked to the control of narrative, law, and power, whilst the Other is perpetually redefined via violence and exclusion.

The dualism of Self and Other is also shown in the linguistic difference. Alma, Ram Singh, and Rana's proficiency in English estranges them from their indigenous society and their dominant class, producing a 'third space'—as both alienating and possibly empowering. They transform into hybrids, neither entirely Self nor entirely Other, so destabilizing the binary distinction. They do not fully belong to the Kabutara community, nor are they accepted within the higher-caste Kajjas' world. As a result, they experience spatial confinement and endure both internal and external turmoil, yet they remain unable to break free from the constructed reality to which they have grown accustomed. This state of disillusionment serves as the culmination of Alma, Ram Singh, and other educated Kabutaras' lived experiences, as they develop a more profound awareness of their status as human beings within an oppressive social structure. Their only request is to be treated with the same dignity and equality as others

Despite these layers of marginalization, *Alma Kabutari* is ultimately a story of resistance. Alma's refusal to accept her social positioning reflects a subaltern feminist agency. Her quest for dignity, love, and education challenges both colonial constructs and indigenous patriarchy. Gayatri Spivak argues in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that dominant discourses often deny voice to the subaltern. However, through Pushpa's narration, Alma speaks powerfully, breaking the silence imposed on her by history. Alma, the central figure, represents the intricate interplay between the Self and the Other. She possesses a strong educational background, engages actively in political discourse, and exhibits a sense of sexual independence—characteristics emblematic of the prevailing Self. Alma's journey embodies the full arc of becoming from Other to Self. Nevertheless, society consistently inhibits her ability to surpass her origins. She serves as a resource for both the political elite and law enforcement, and despite her considerable influence, she remains insignificant. Her disillusionment embodies Bhabha's concepts of mimicry and hybridity: she mimics the Self yet remains fundamentally Other. Alma's recognition of this hypocrisy reflects Frantz Fanon's claim that the colonized

Other internalizes the Self's image but ultimately denounces it as deceptive.

Pushpa's literary strategy—centering the narrative on a tribal woman—reverses the colonial gaze. Instead of a colonizer defining the Other, the Other defines herself. Alma's narrative becomes a form of epistemic resistance, rewriting the script of marginalization. However, she soon becomes disillusioned with the pervasive corruption within the system. It is at this point that she fully comprehends her father's profound dissatisfaction with the entire situation:

> "Bappa used to fret, is the government running its writ or has it made over all its responsibilities to dacoits, murderers and police? On top of it, the claim that everything is for the people, by the people and for the people. What could be better eyewash?" (550)

Pushpa ensures that the Other is not rendered silent. The tale transforms into a counter-discourse, enabling the Kabutaras to articulate their suffering, challenge injustice, and envision an alternative future. When Jangalia confronts Mansaram by asking, "Is simple stealing the biggest crime in the world?" (Pushpa 25), he interrogates the ethics of the Self and posits an ethical relativism that challenges dominant norms. In this struggle, the upper-caste elite holds significant responsibility. Through the characters of Mansaram, Kehar Singh, and, most notably, Dheeraj, Maitreyi Pushpa calls upon the Kajjas to adopt a more active and constructive role in integrating the Kabutaras into mainstream society. Although the novel primarily conveys a sense of despair, it also offers glimpses of hope. Alma emerges as a transformative figure, leading her community toward social recognition through her achievements in politics. In the final moments of the novel, she embodies higher human values such as forgiveness and magnanimity. By rejecting vengeance against Shri Ram Shastri, who symbolizes the Kajja self, Alma assumes the role of a modern-day Rani Padmini, demonstrating moral strength and leadership in the face of adversity. By analyzing the novel through the lens of the Self and Other, this paper has shown how colonial policies like the Criminal Tribes Act institutionalized marginalization, which was later perpetuated by postcolonial structures. Yet, the novel also provides a counter-narrative: one where the Other resists, reclaims, and redefines her identity. *Alma Kabutari* stands as a testament to the enduring power of literature to interrogate history and empower the silenced.

Conclusion:

Alma Kabutari offers a deep examination of the mechanisms by which the Self shapes and sustains the Other through the lenses of law, culture, gender, and violence. Maitreyi Pushpa presents not merely a narrative of the Kabutaras' plight, but a profound examination of the systems that create Otherness as a means to reinforce authority. The novel, through its characters such as Alma, Bhoorie, and Ram Singh, posits that identity does not dictate one's fate. In profound oppression, the marginalized can exercise their agency, challenge dichotomies, and insist on their recognition as complete human beings. Pushpa offers a critical analysis of the utilization of Kabutaras as instruments in political maneuvering. Characters such as Surajbhan and Mansaram manipulate the community while portraying themselves as benefactors. The leaders, often regarded as civilized, exhibit moral bankruptcy, with their offenses obscured by legal and political advantages, in contrast to the Kabutaras, whose minor infractions are exaggerated and penalized. This dynamic reflects Gayatri Spivak's concept of the "subaltern," who is silenced not due to a lack of voice, but because prevailing structures choose to ignore them. Alma's voice is strong, but it is still filtered through institutional suspicion and sexualized monitoring. Her ascent to political power is a commentary on how the Other is only included when it serves the system's purposes.

Alma Kabutari is an engrossing story that sums up the Kabutara people's resistance against institutionalized othering. The book sheds light on the complex dynamics of marginalization and the timeless human need for acceptance and belonging by way of the Self and Other theory. Education and self-awareness are crucial stepping stones in reclaiming one's identity, and Pushpa's writing stresses the need to confront long-standing prejudices.

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