



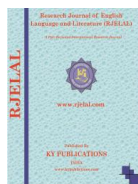
ALIENATED LABOUR AND ITS EFFECTS IN 'IN THE FOREST, THE SONGS AND SHACKLES'

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Abstract

Marx considers free, creative labour as essence of man and forced, alienated labour as having crippling effect on essential humanity. In the condition of alienated labour, the product is greater than the worker, though it is labour objectified yet it becomes independent of and hostile to the worker. The worker loses all charm, all individuality, hence feels homeless at work. Umakanta Sharma's 1986 novel *Ejak Manuh Ekhon Aranya* translated into English as *In the Forest, the Songs and Shackles*, well portrays the dehumanisation, exploitation, oppression, degradation of the coolies, which are effects and associates of the condition of alienated labour. But though the novel reads the symptoms well, yet it falls short of the true diagnosis of the disease, i.e., loss of human essence which is free, conscious, creative labor.

Keywords: Alienated, labour, Rupohijan, coolies, dehumanisation

Introduction

The primary task of a novel is to depict "man". But man can't be conceived without conceiving "free, creative Labour", which distinguishes man from all other species. Man is the only species that can self-create itself through conscious activity, through conscious transformation of its relation to nature. This human essence is subverted by the condition of alienated labour. Thus, a novel can't truly depict "man" without considering alienated labour and its effects. In this paper, we will try to examine how alienated labour and its effects on humanity are portrayed in Umakanta Sharma's 1986 novel *Ejak Manuh Ekhon Aranya* translated into English as *In the Forest, the Songs and Shackles*.

Alienation, Dehumanization in the Novel

Marx said that the devaluation of the human world grows in direct proportion to the increase in value of the world of things.

The novel also describes how about seven hundred coolies as cheap labour for tea gardens in Assam were brought from Odissa to Gowalond like animals only in four compartments of a train and from Gowalond to Dhuburi on only one ship where there is room only for two hundred. A doctor said to the Sardars, "What have you kept here? Men or other things? Even cows and buffalos shouldn't be kept like this. Here room is not sufficient for even one hundred men, and you have kept many more hundreds! You should be hanged." (pp. 24)

The product of labour stands opposed to labour as something alien, as a power independent of the producer.... What the product of his labour is, he is not. Thus, the greater the product, the less is

he himself.... Not only his labour becomes an object, but also it exists outside him, independently of him and alien to him, confronting him as hostile. – (Marx)

The tea-garden is the product of the labour of the coolies, but it assumes greater importance than them. "The coolies in the garden are imprisoned in the garden.... It's crime on their part to go out of the garden at night." (pp. 73) They are whipped for that. (pp. 96) Assistant manager Mackenzie thinks, "If they read, who will work for the garden and what will the educated boys and girls do?" (pp.320)

Not only coolies, but also other stakeholders are nothing compared to the importance of the garden. Manager Finley thinks, "It's easy to get Cheniram (Maiki Babu) out. His departure won't make any loss to the garden." (pp.275) Further, "Let Mackenzie die, he (Finley) won't bother. But his death will bring death to the garden too. This he won't tolerate." (pp. 374)

Dugga asks, "If Rupohijan estate is annexed with another, will you be able to object?" Bishnath replies, "No, we are coolies who work. How can we have objections?" Thus, their own product is not theirs or alien to them, exists outside them, independent of them.

Thus, the worker is enslaved by the object as it enables him to exist.

Labour produces marvels, palaces, beauty, intelligence for the rich but privation, hovels, deformity, stupidity for the workers. – Marx

"They all are dirty. When clothes are few, and works to be done in the forest day and night, bodies are tired because of hard labour, one must be dirty. It's a habit also." (pp. 209)

When post-earthquake diseases were all-pervasive, there was only one doctor, Dr Chakravarty, without any assistants, whom Tulsī, Bishnath and Bisni had to help. They had to improvise so many things as room was scanty in the hospital and other facilities were insufficient. People took recourse to Bholā's sudha samudra, bacylīne, black tablets, i.e. opium. (pp. 236)

"Child-death in the garden is not a big news.... But, death of five babies just in a week made people

anxious." (pp. 311) And it resulted in the killing of Dayalu's aunt whom some believed to be a witch. (pp. 313-318)

Some coolies like Dayalu and Bhakru are skeptical about the establishment of the school. So, they secretly disturbed the preparation of its inauguration. (pp. 335)

When others were talking about the annexure of Assam with Bangladesh, Magho got bored and said, "If you don't have other things to talk about, then talk about Timki. Or about children. How many do you have now?" (pp.296) He also thinks that the British alone are fit to be rulers. (pp. 514)

In the Marxist view, the worker's work is not part of his nature, so he doesn't fulfill himself in work but denies himself; he feels at home when there is no work and at work, he feels homeless. His labour is not voluntary, but forced. It is not the satisfaction of a need, but only a means for satisfying other needs. In work, the worker doesn't belong to himself, but to another person. He performs another's activity.

The man/worker feels freely active only in his animal functions like eating, drinking, procreating etc.; but in his human functions he is reduced to an animal.

The novel draws its liveliness from scenes depicted outside workplaces: from scenes of dancing, love-making, quarreling, drinking etc. It takes particular care not to depict any scene inside the factory. The few working scenes in the garden are also replete with torture (beating of Dugga by Mam Sahib for uprooting a rotten plant- pp.87-89), lengthening of working time ("As per Sahib's order, work is extended by one hour today." pp. 351) and other sorts of exploitation.

The coolies were forced to work at the extended division of the estate, i.e. at Chandinighat, against their will.

"Coolies ...are always beaten. It's blamable to praise them even when they do good works." (pp. 98)

Marx opines that free, conscious activity is the species-character of human beings...Animals produce only under the compulsion of direct physical need, while man produces when he is free from such physical need and truly produces in freedom from such need.

Bisni said to Timki, "How beautiful dresses are found in the market! But how will you buy? Where will you get money? For a few days you pluck more leaves. Only then a little money will be accumulated. I did the same." (pp. 103)

Thus, work itself is not a need but only a means to satisfy other needs.

Marx argued that division of labour creates less-skilled worker; less training is needed for each specific job. "Owing to the extensive use of machinery, and to the division of labour, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. It is only the simplest, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him."

At Rupohijan also the women, girls and boys uproot weeds, pluck leaves, clear the undergrowth, while the adult males work with spades, fell trees, make fencing etc. (pp. 87) Skill or individuality is scarcely needed to do such ordinary jobs.

Such alienation leads to dehumanization which implies death-in-life. The novel reinforces this theme of death-in-life through a series of physical deaths and scenes of destruction. "Inside the coolie depot nearby Gowalond station, altogether fifty lives are lost within two days." (pp. 27) Deaths of Banha, Fredrick, Kurhi, Ramu, Gojanan, the newly-married woman exploited by Fredrick, a number of babies, patients, livestock etc. and suicide of Mackenzie overshadow the whole novel and make it gloomy. The graphic description of the destruction of 1897 earthquake enhances the gloom.

Another form of dehumanization can be noticed in the man-woman relationship where women are mostly seen as object of lust and machines for producing children. "They (Bhakru and Dayalu) collect wives one after another." (pp. 349) What more, Bhakru even forgets his new wife Bijli's name! (pp. 362) Only the enlightened few like Tulsi,

Chitta, Arjun exemplify humane and sustained love-affairs.

Manager Fredrick, Assistant Manager Mackenzie, Maiki Babu Cheniram, Kamjari Babu Nitai Paul – all view coolie women as cheap objects of lust and exploit them.

At Rupohijan, both feudal and capitalist exploitations are present. The garden signifies feudal and the factory capitalist mode of production. The bound slavery of the coolies is feudal in nature and their wage slavery is capitalist. In the garden ordinary tools like spade are used and, in the factory, machines.

Tea produced in the factory as well as the garden is the objectification of the labour of the coolies. Tea, their product, is totally removed from them whereas the garden, though greater than them, still exists close by them. Thus, their alienation is somewhat less than it is in purely capitalist set-up.

The processes of degeneration and regeneration as effects of and reactions to alienation can be noticed side by side. Bholi's shop breaks down (pp.280); Magho's fingers grow too stiff to blow madol (pp. 500); Tulsi grows weak and lame and Kalondi falls ill (pp. 505-509); the married life of Dugga and Bishnath is not faring well (pp. 512); Chunu and his friends appear as heartless goons who accumulate money from doubtful sources. On the other hand, school is established (pp. 337-342); worker's union is established (pp. 420-421); Arjun studies at a high school outside the garden and dreams of becoming a doctor. (pp.434)

The novel is neatly divided into three chapters that represent three stages of the subjective consciousness of the coolies. The First chapter closes with the death of Banha (pp. 151) who stands for a coolie subjectivity which accepts without protest that "To be beaten is part of their work" (pp. 135) and "The coolies don't feel disgrace much" (pp. 89). Under the leadership of Banha's son Tulsi the coolies learn to protest in the Second chapter which disturbs Finley, the Manager. "Obeying Tulsi, the coolies come together, and as per his words, go away." (pp. 275) This chapter closes with the birth of Arjun, Tulsi's son.

Banha had no voice of protest, Tulsi had but without formal education. Arjun, the leader of the third generation, is a protester, leader, dreamer with a successful educational career. Along with him the subjectivity of the coolies gets metamorphosed. His mother Kalondi says, "Your minds are different, not like us. We are coolies, and we regard ourselves as coolies. You are our children; you are also coolies. But your minds are not coolies'." The enlightened Bisni says, "We will tell the British... Go away, we will rule our country ourselves." (pp. 515) Thus the victims of alienated labour progressively tries to overcome alienation.

The central theme of Marx is the transformation of alienated, meaningless labour into productive, free labour, not the better payment of alienated labour by a private or "abstract" state capitalism.

The novel doesn't clearly state the significance of this human essence, this free, creative labour. Even the most enlightened worker Chitta has a very limited view of the worker's plight: "You need medicines for your children, rice to eat, a house where rain doesn't fall inside. Will you be whipped by the Sahib for saying these? Won't you let the Sahib learn that workers are also humans?" (pp.398) Only the Mathematics Teacher Mr Bezbaruah (Risi Sir) once hinted at this human essence: "He who lives by working is a worker. And only he is worthy to have the status of human." (pp.488)

Conclusion

The novel, with adequate artistic means, gives graphic representation of alienated labour and the resultant dehumanization, degradation etc. in a semi-feudal, semi-capitalist set-up. That free, creative labour is the essence of humanity doesn't dawn to anyone in the novel, not even to Chitta, the most enlightened worker. Still people continue to develop their consciousness and continue to fight against oppression and exploitation which are conspicuous expressions of alienated labour. The historical existence of the coolies makes us forget about their potentialities, their human essence. "Seeing the dry sands of Rupohi, people forget that

beneath the shining sands, a river is flowing!" (pp. 69)

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