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IDEOLOGICAL REPRESENTATION OF CREATIVE AND ALIENATED LABOR IN *NADAI*,
AN ASSAMESE NOVEL

SHIVAJIT DUTTA

Research Scholar, Dept of Humanities and the Social Sciences, IIT, Guwahati &
Assistant Professor, Doomdooma College, Rupai Siding, Tinisukia, Assam, India



SHIVAJIT DUTTA

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Abstract

As the social reality is over-determined by many social processes determining one another, the reality of a fictional text is also over-determined by a number of story-threads that determine one another. To grasp the social reality or to organize the text one needs a point of entry that is arbitrary, incomplete and ideologically chosen. *Nadai*, an Assamese novel, also has a number of story-threads, one of which is the point of entry or the main thread organizing maximum number of other threads. Choice of any other story-thread as the point of entry would have made *Nadai* a different novel. This choice is ideologically motivated. *Nadai*, further, incorporates a Marxian imagination that involves the idea of class as a process of expropriation and also the idea of socio-historical development.

Keywords: Over-determined, point of entry, alienated, creative, labor

Introduction: The Marxian Imagination, Over-determined Reality and the Point of Entry:

Taking his cue from Lionel Trilling's book *The Liberal Imagination*, Julian Markels proposes and theorizes on "a Marxian imagination" in his book *The Marxian Imagination*. If the liberal imagination "establishes its essence and existence" by a primal act of imagination, that is, of variousness and possibility, of a general enlargement and freedom and rational direction of human life, then Marxism also "establishes its existence...by a primal act of imagination. This is its imagination of the enlargement of life and freedom specifically promised by the abolition of class, when class is understood as an over-determined process of appropriating and distributing surplus labor without consulting those who perform the labor." (*The Marxian Imagination*, pp 12)

"Resnick and Wolf argue that the dense web of over-determination among social processes can never be comprehensively analyzed and that Marxism, like all other theories, must choose for its analysis a *point of entry* (italics mine) which is necessarily incomplete and thus necessarily partisan – the concept of class as expropriation." (*ibid*, pp 20)

"In other words, Marxism's or Freudianism's or Social Darwinism's master narrative – of expropriation, or libido and superego, or survival of the fittest – can be made the organizing principle of a literary narrative just as it can of a social theory.... When a work is in fact governed by a master narrative ... a full apprehension of that work will include its point of entry, with its particular configuration of over-determined social processes, as an autonomous epistemological project." (*ibid*, pp 21) The reader's "response to the work's holistic progression makes us aware of its point of entry –

and also, in some very telling cases, of its author's rhetorical and epistemological struggle to establish or avoid the point of entry with the master narrative it entails." (*ibid*, pp 21)

As the social world is a complex of so many social processes, the textual world of fiction also is a complex of so many story-lines or threads representing those processes. The social processes determine one another and thus generate the over-determined social reality and in similar ways the story-lines or threads also determine one another and thus generate representation of such over-determined textual reality. In order to approach, grasp and acquire knowledge from this complex and over-determined reality of either a society or a text, one needs to take recourse to certain point of entry, a master-thread that weaves and interweaves all other threads, the master-thread being guided by a master-narrative. We think that the choice of the point of entry is not innocent of ideology; rather ideology is at least one of the major factors behind such choice. It is arbitrary and so highly ideological.

In our discussion of the Assamese novel, *Nadai*, we attempt to show that it could have chosen a number of threads as its point of entry, but all potential points of entry are discarded or suppressed in favor of one particular thread in the novel. Choice of any other thread as the point of entry would have organized the novel in different ways. Each thread is related to or determines or gets determined by, a few other threads, but it is the master-thread which weaves, interweaves, determines, and gets determined by, maximum number of threads and, therefore, it is the point of entry of the particular novel.

Over-determined Reality and Point of Entry in *Nadai*

The story of *Nadai* could be written, and the over-determined reality represented by the novel could be organized, with any point of entry from among the following: 1) the making of an independent farmer, 2) survival of the fittest, 3) exploitation of the sharecropper, 4) class-conflict between the farmers and the landlords, 5) conflict between rural/pastoral simplicity and modernization, 6) impact of the freedom movement

on an interior village of Assam 7) creative labor's production of forces which it cannot control and so on and so forth. All these factors or facets or threads influence one another, determine one another and thus collectively frame the over-determined reality represented by the novel. But the novel preferred to organize the over-determined reality from a particular point of entry, that is, *creative labor's production of forces which it cannot control*. This is the thread that stitches all other threads, all other aspects mentioned above into an over-determined totality. Let us examine the potential or alternative points of entry one by one.

1. First let us examine the supposed point of entry *the making of an independent farmer*. Incidentally, the homeless Nadai comes to a faraway village and becomes Bhadiya Gayan's servant or farm laborer or a kind of bonded laborer. Gayan appropriates his labor and thrives. He is given food and shelter but no wages. The illiterate Nadai instinctively perceives the condition of alienated labor, "True, he himself grows potatoes, it is his own product, but he has no right over it.... He starts not to feel any pleasure from working, farming.... These are not his. The land is Gayan's, the farming is Gayan's – he has no right over them." (*Dinanath Sharmar Uponyas Samagra*, pp 174) In his pursuit of becoming an independent farmer he harps on the necessity of means of agricultural production – first a pair of bullocks and then land, as either his own or in the system of sharecropping. The very first sentence of the novel is "He wants a pair of bullocks"! In the course of his pursuit of class-upgradation from a farm or bonded laborer to an independent farmer, the illiterate Nadai raises a few poignant questions into the nature of ownership of means of production, and thus into the system itself: "Why only a few people own all the land?" (*ibid*, pp 167) and "Why there is scarcity of land in such a wide world? If there is no land for people, where shall they do farm? What shall they eat? How shall they live?" (*ibid*, pp 180) He resolves, "There must have been some blunder, otherwise this cannot happen." (*ibid*, pp 180) Dambaru Bhattacharyya, jealous

of Bhadiya Gayan's luck of having such an industrious laborer like Nadai, paves the way for him to get wages from Gayan for his ten-year long service. But he is well satisfied with the pair of young calves Gayan allows him to own in return of his long service. Ownership of this first means of production is Nadai's first step towards class upgradation and also towards building up for him a condition of creative labor. Next, he goes to Dambaru Bhatta with a desire to get land for sharecropping. Rejected and disheartened, Nadai, later, along with other villagers starts to clear forest at Morisuti, ten to fifteen miles away from the village. Gradually, he and a few others shifted to Morisuti and their labor in general and Nadai's exertion in particular, transform Morisuti into a heaven for creative labor. Nadai's economic condition develops and develops. Nadai and Morisuti both develop parallelly. Nadai marries his fan Kaliya's sister Naduki, frees Kaliya's family from the cruel exploitation of Dambaru Bhatta exacted on the basis of sharecropping system, fathers three sons and two daughters, educates them, contributes to the socio-economic development of Morisuti like establishment of school and hospital, keeps farming assistants including servants/farm laborers and becomes a rich land-owning farmer.

Morisuti, a deserted forest area, becomes first an abode for three or four families and then turns into a great village sheltering many. Gradually, schools, hospitals, ferry port, mill, market etc. are established and modernization and urbanization of Morisuti continues. Through Premnath and Hemolota, Morisuti gets touch with the Gandhian freedom movement and through Nadai's youngest son, Bharat, it feels the wind of communist movement. Along with these, Maniki's incestuous relationship with a number of lovers, her elopement with Hafiz, Nadai's son-in-law Nandeswar's drunkenness and black marketeering, Laldhari's and Janaklal's black marketeering, his first son Mohan's detestation for farming and his contract during the war, his second son Gopal's desire for selling land, his

third son Bharat's communism and subsequent imprisonment, great number of deaths including Naduki's – all these are threads of the story which the potential point of entry *formation of an independent farmer* cannot weave, control or determine.

2. Then is it a story of *survival of the fittest*, that is, is *survival of the fittest* the organizing principle or point of entry? For a moment it looks so. True, Nadai's single-mindedness and industry help him to survive and escape the utterly bitter exploitation of the sharecropping system – a system that turns Rongai mad and threatens Kaliya's family's existence. He grabs the meager opportunity that the old village offers and makes the best of what Morisuti does. But this thesis of *survival of the fittest* won't explain or organize the other materials outlined above. The story is much more than Nadai's survival in the midst of all odds.
3. *Exploitation of the sharecropper* is there, but this also cannot organize all facets of the plot and so cannot be the point of entry. The novel indicates that this exploitative system is very much there: Rongai's family and Kaliya's family are sharecroppers in the land of Dambaru Bhattacharyya. Rongai is pauperized by the system and it is Nadai who protects Kaliya's family from extinction. But the novel does not dramatize this system on a wider scale and the hero Nadai is shown as one who escapes the stranglehold of the system or as one who thrives in spite of the system. This system is absent at Morisuti and the old village which harbors the system gradually wanes. Dambaru Bhattacharyya, typical representative of the system, is challenged by the Mymensinghians who make it amply clear that they are not going to pay him taxes and also by Rongai who spits on his face. The deaths of Gayan and Bhattacharyya and the decline of the old village ring the death knell of the system. They are rung out and the emerging middle class represented by Mohan, Nandeswar, Laldhari, Janaklal etc. is rung in. Further, this facet of the story cannot organize several other facets like introduction of Gandhian freedom struggle, communism of

Bharat, corruption and moral degeneration rampant at Morisuti, modernization along with its fair and foul aspects etc.

4. If *exploitation of the sharecropper* is not the point of entry for reasons mentioned above, then for similar reasons *conflict between the farmers and landlords* also cannot be the organizing principle. Various facets mentioned above cannot result from this. Besides, though there are a few incidents in the way of conflict yet they cannot be termed as “class antagonism”. There are clashes of interests no doubt. True, pauperized Rongai spits on Dambaru’s face; true that the Mymensinghias refuse to pay taxes to Dambaru; but such incidents are very few in the novel and so don’t amount to a continued and defining class conflict worth consideration. More importantly, the hero, the archetypal farmer, Nadai has no direct conflict with either Gayan or Dambaru. Exploited by one and insulted by the other, he respects both of them and feels much aggrieved at the time of their deaths. It was Gayan’s help, though meager, which significantly contributes to the making of Nadai as a farmer. Nadai is more comfortable with Gayan and Dambaru than with the members of the newly emerging middle class. To him their exploitation is natural while the enterprises of the new class are unbearably unnatural! Further, Nadai, initially an unwaged, bonded, farm laborer, rises to the level of an independent farmer who also keeps others as bonded, farm laborers. His questions are also different now. He, who earlier asked, “Why only a few people own all the land?” (*ibid*, pp 167) now asks quite its opposite question. Let us quote from the novel, “The reverse question comes to his mind “Why should he give away his land?”” (*ibid*, pp 258) Thus, his story is more of class-upgradation than of class-conflict.
5. Then is it *the conflict between pastoral, rural simplicity and modernization plus urbanization*? This conflict is very much there but it cannot be the organizing principle for everything. For example, this rural-urban dichotomy cannot and need not include the Gandhian practices of Premnath and Hemolota, communist practices

of Bharat, Kaliya’s indifference to material life and his becoming a saint away from the cozy, domestic life, and even the making of Nadai as an independent farmer. Moreover, “the rural” is not always free from vices and “the modern” or “the urban” too is not always vicious. If the urbanized Morisuti produces an amorous adventurer like Maniki, then the unnamed old village also has her counterpart in Ghotai who tried to harass Naduki sexually. If the representatives of this new, urbanized world such as Laldhari, Janaklal and Nandeswar are black marketeers, then the representatives of the old, rural world like Bhadiya Gayan and Dambaru Bhattacharyya are cruel appropriators of the labor of people like Nadai. A simple binary opposition between pastoral Morisuti and modernized Morisuti also cannot be drawn. The pastoral Morisuti was also not completely free from the traits of the modernized Morisuti and there are continuations between the old village and this pastoral Morisuti. To take the second first, Nadai, a victim of bonded-laborer system and landlordism, himself turns into a kind of landlord and thrives appropriating the labor of a few bonded laborers. The landlord of the old village, Dambaru Bhattachayya, also occupies land at Morisuti and leases it out to the Mymensinghias in exchange of taxes. Morisuti does not end appropriation but simply revises it. As Gayan did not give any land to Nadai, so Nadai also did not think of giving land to Budhan, his laborer, however sympathetic he is towards Budhan. Nadai is skeptical of machines, mills and large business, but he himself becomes rich selling his produce in the market, the market being one characteristic of modernity, assisting Nadai’s surplus product to turn into commodity. In truth, the old village, the earlier Morisuti and the later Morisuti are not simply opposed to one another, but they are three significant stages in the continuum of social development. The modernized Morisuti is not all evil but establishes schools, hospitals and a middle class which defeats the old classes. Significantly, the novel announces death of not only Bhadiya Gayan, Dambaru Bhattacharyya

but also Naduki and Nadai. The old village wanes and is defeated by Morisuti and the earlier Morisuti also gives way to the later Morisuti. To great dissatisfaction of Nadai, not a single son of him continues farming; all of them turn into businessman, contractor, lawyer or revolutionary. Janaklal, the farmer and herdsman, adjusts himself to the tune of the new Morisuti and so becomes a trader, mill-owner and black marketeer.

6. *The impact of the freedom movement on a remote village of Assam* has the least chance of being the point of entry. The smell of the freedom movement was totally absent in the first part of the story set in the old village and this smell is carried to Morisuti by a fugitive couple Premnath and Hemolota. They fail to organize people in the line of the movement but succeed to introduce certain Gandhian reforms at Morisuti such as making of home-spun cloth, assisting fellow human beings in their distress etc. They play significant part in modernizing Morisuti through their leadership in establishing schools and hospitals there. But they and their activities are given much little space, hence though a bright thread in the story, the impact of freedom movement ushered in by them cannot be the organizing principle for all threads and incidents of the story.
7. *But, creative labor's production of forces which it cannot control* may be the point of entry that can organize all such threads discussed above and the thread which interweaves all elements of the novel giving the novel its particular shape. Nadai's capacity for extraordinary labor and his physical strength are highlighted right from the very beginning. Losing both parents very early in his life and deceived and tortured by his relatives, Nadai runs away from his home and after a tortuous journey comes to a distant village where incidentally he meets Bhadiya Gayan and becomes his servant or bonded laborer. He is not content with his status as he is aware of the fact that he and his labor can do something more. Instinctively he perceives and refutes the condition of alienated labor and desires for overcoming it through ownership of

means of production - first a pair of bullocks and then a piece of land. As in capitalist mode of production, the capitalist steals the labor time of the worker, so in the half-feudal mode of production Nadai belongs to, Bhadiya Gayan steals his labor time. This fact is shown to Nadai by Gayan's rival Dambaru Bhattacharyya who calculates Nadai's wage for eight years to be approximately four hundred rupees while the cost of the two calves Gayan offers to Nadai is not more than twenty or thirty rupees. Still Nadai is content as these calves are his first private property, something of his own, and something that he owns as a means of production apart from his physical labor. Next, he searches for land, the most important means of production, to exert his labor. Gayan will never give him any land, so he approaches and requests Bhattacharyya to lend him a piece of land for sharecropping. Bhattacharyya downright rejected his proposal. Then Nadai, while accompanying the villagers for fishing in a *bee!* (lake) ten or fifteen miles away from the village, suddenly discovers the possibility of clearing forest and owning land there. People, most of them being exploited by the sharecropping system, always feel the need of such land, but afraid of the forest there and unwilling for much physical toil to clear it, hesitate to come to an affirmative resolution. But Nadai declares that he is going to grab the opportunity. Kaliya declares that he will accompany Nadai. Thus, it is the leadership of Nadai that is pivotal to transform that area into a habitat for human beings. His incomparable labor earns him this leadership. He is followed by Laldhari, Janaklal, Gelai and others and thus Morisuti, by degrees, turns into a new village. Nadai's creative labor not only builds his private property, his house, home, relations, family, money, or frees Kaliya's family from the bondage imposed by Bhattacharyya, but also creates Morisuti. True, the creation of Morisuti is the outcome of the labor of many, but it is Nadai's labor which starts and sets the whole process.

Nadai's labor is basic to building up his own life and to the creation of Morisuti as a new and better habitat. His labor is instrumental in unleashing various forces at Morisuti many of them being beyond his and his labor's control. Premnath and Hemolota come to Nadai's creation Morisuti and spread Gandhian principles and practices like home-spun cloth, love for others, education to all etc. They lead the process of establishing hospitals and schools. In those schools Nadai's children read along with others. Premnath advises Nadai to buy land and build house in town where his children can receive higher education. This modern education is one factor behind Nadai's children's distance from and reluctance for agriculture. Without Nadai's labor there would have been no Morisuti, but as inhabitants increase at Morisuti, elements of modern, urban life appear, develop and consolidate there some of which make Nadai deeply uncomfortable. He doesn't dislike the settlement of Nepalis, Mymensinghians etc., but he is certainly averse to mills, machines, large business etc. He is shocked by Maniki's incestuous relationships, his son-in-law Nandeswar's drunkenness, black marketeering etc. He is aggrieved by his children's detachment from land. He is disturbed by Hemolota's information that he too cannot keep land as he wishes. Finally, Nadai's labor cannot control his own class upgradation and his approach to the question of owning means of production. It's a structural irony in the novel that Nadai, who asked earlier, "Why only a few people own all the land?" (*ibid*, pp 167) ultimately asks quite the opposite question, "Why should he give away his land?" (*ibid*, pp 258)

While thus establishing that *creative labor's production of forces which it cannot control* is the point of entry or the organizing principle that encompasses and interweaves all elements or threads of the story, we cannot forget that Nadai's creative labor doesn't create a condition of creative labor at Morisuti. Half-feudal set up of the old village, though compelled many to parish, yet left a bit of scope for even its slaves to thrive through exertion of labor. Nadai is not a rule but an exception and his exceptional exertion, together with support from well-wishers, enables him to expand and own

the products of his creative labor. But this beneficiary of creative labor deprives his workers like Budhon of their products as earlier he himself was deprived by Bhadiya Gayan. Thus, Nadai's creative labor doesn't end the condition of alienated labor. There is no systemic difference between the old village and the earlier Morisuti. Morisuti simply shows how enormous possibility of the development of productive forces is lying in the lap of creative labor. In order to show this, the novel doesn't portray any class struggle for systemic change, but shows how individual industry and exertion can bear fruit even inside and despite an exploitative system or a condition of alienated labor. Nadai's labor can neither change the system nor control the forces at work at Morisuti, but it certainly develops Nadai's life-condition and also the situation around him. "You cannot change the world; you can change only yourself if you will and effort accordingly" – the novel means to say. No mistake, this is the bourgeois middle class pragmatic wisdom which is reiterated in books after books.

Thus, though Nadai's creative labor seems to fulfill and complete his individual life, yet it doesn't alter the systemic condition of alienated labor and so cannot influence the changes in the historical forces. Many of his close friends, relatives and acquaintances – Laldhari, Janaklal, his sons, his son-in-law etc. turn into middle class most of them being averse to land while Nadai is deeply attached to it. Even Naduki is repelled by the farming occupation – she wants to educate and not to engage her children in farming; she prefers Nandeswar, the compounder, to Bodhan, the farmer, as her son-in-law. In this she declares her opposition to Nadai. Nadai fails to control any of them, all moves away from land and farming. He would not give his land to Laldhari for establishing the mill, but cannot detain Laldhari from doing the same. Laldhari does what he wants and establishes the mill. The new Morisuti has both good and evil aspects; Nadai has support for some of them and reservation against others. But the novel affirms that the process of modernization will go on despite Nadai and his will. At Nadai's death in Prayag in the final chapter the reader is assured that no one in the novel is going to continue his spirit, his deep attachment to land. It is clear that the

new Morisuti is going to be dominated by the newly emerging middle class. If the earlier Morisuti overcomes the sharecropping system of the old village retaining the element of bonded laborer, the new Morisuti threatens the existence of the big farmers owning plenty of land. The Sealing Act and the communists' struggle for the redistribution of land are mentioned before Nadai by Hemolota and Nadai gets deeply concerned with this information. If the death of Bhadiya Gayan and Dambaru Bhatta are symbolic of the death of the old system of appropriation, then the deaths of Nadai, Naduki and even Budhon, the bonded laborer, signals the death of the modified form of appropriation represented by Nadai, the first inhabitant of Morisuti. The scene is set for the newly emerging middle class – the future is in their hands. This middle class is sure to defeat all earlier classes – landlords, peasants, farmers, bonded agricultural laborers - handed down from the previous age. Their defeat is symbolically represented by their deaths. In truth the novel is full of deaths – Nadai's mother, his father, his loving aunt, his father-in-law, mother-in-law, mother of Janaklal's son-in-law, Nadai's fourth child, Gelai's father, Bhadiya Gayan, his first calves and other livestock, Budhon, Dambaru Deu, wife of Benga the blacksmith, Laldhari, Premnath, Naduki, and finally Nadai himself – all die. The death of Laldhari, farmer-cum-artisan-turned-into-businessman, in an accident is an exception, but all other dead are representatives of the older way of life.

Nadai fails to retain even his enthusiastic fan Kaliya with whom he comes to Morisuti first and builds Morisuti. Kaliya resigns from "practical" life, escapes from Morisuti and turns an ascetic. If the system of the old village turns Rongai mad, then the system of farming at Morisuti also produces an ascetic. True, there may be a number of factors behind the shocking change of Kaliya's mind – the teachings of the Bhakti movement internalized by the rural society of Assam, hangover of the earlier experience of bitter exploitation of the sharecropping system, his inferiority to Nadai as a worker etc. But, I think, one cause is more significant than all these, and that is, the continuation of the condition of alienated labor. Though he is very close

to Nadai, and Nadai also loves him, and though both of them work together, and despite the less quantity of his work Nadai gives him an equal share, and frees his family from Dambaru Bhatta's exploitation, yet Kaliya feels that it is all Nadai's. He is not the producer but a beneficiary, things don't belong to him and his role in the production process is conspicuously very little. Failed to draw pleasure from work and work's product, Kaliya resigns from it and turns towards the spiritual.

Findings

The over-determined reality represented by the novel in question is presented to us with the help of a particular point of entry or master-thread or organizing principle. We have seen that there were a number of threads of the story, any one of which could have been chosen as the master-thread or the point of entry. Choice of a different thread as the point of entry would have made quite a different novel. For example, *Nadai* could have chosen *class-conflict between the farmers and the landlords* as the point of entry. Such choice would have made *Nadai* a socialist realist novel. Such potential points of entry are sidelined or suppressed or marginalized which is an ideological act. We have seen how the point of entry of *Nadai* is *creative labor's production of forces which it cannot control* which is motivated by a bourgeois middle class ideology. *Nadai's* point of entry entails the middle-class wisdom, "You cannot change the world, but you can change only yourself". Yet *Nadai* engages itself in a Marxian imagination through its perception of class and how the classes handed down from the middle age – sharecroppers, farmers, landlords, bonded laborers – are historically defeated and ousted by a newly emerging middle class. The novel depicts what creative labor can do, yet it shrinks from depicting a condition of creative labor or struggle for such a condition. Creative labor remains largely the hero's individual affair in.

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