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(Dis/Re) Locating Identity and Culture: A Bhabhaian Reading of Jaladas's *Ramgolam*

ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to explore the identical and cultural location of the marginalized Sweeper community and how this location is dislocated by so-called mainstream society and the community's struggle for relocating their identity, culture, and rights as fictionalized and textualized in Harishankar Jaladas's novel, *Ramgolam*. The interactions among location, dislocation, and relocation can be viewed from Bhabhaian's perspective as theorized through the discourses – ambivalence, hybridity, and mimicry. Jaladas narrativizes the sweepers' attraction and repulsion to mainstream society in socio-cultural context, as taken place in colonial and even decolonial periods; consequently, the community has to experience the hybridization between their own identity and culture and those of the socially, economically, and politically empowered, thus being mimic. The article will show that Jaladas's *Ramgolam* (2012) not only represents the narratives of ambivalence, hybridity, and mimicry but it also articulates the mimic sweepers' attempt to relocate and re-search for their suppressed history, dislocated identity, and othered culture in both colonial and decolonial eras. The present paper has also examined ever unchangeable socio-cultural conditions of this othered community for its being colonial and decolonial victimization of othering, disintegration, and deprivation; colonization and decolonization remain the same to the othered of the othered, indeed.

Key-words: Ambivalence; Hybridity; Mimicry; Othering; The Sweeper Community

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1.0 Introduction

Born on 12 October 1955 in a fisher-folks' village of North Patenga of Chattagram, Harishankar Jaladas is a novelist in Bangladesh representing marginalized and outcaste communities through his fictional works. Not only is he engaged in creative works, but he is also a passionate and academic researcher of the way of the life and the socio-cultural conditions of the subaltern fisher-folks. The author, having PhD on "River based Bangla Novels and Fishermen's Life" in 1982 from the University of Chittagong (Jaladas 2), fictionalizes as well as historicizes the distressed life of the subaltern, portraying the dichotomy between mainstream society and the othered including the fisher-folks, prostitutes, and the 'Harijons' or '*Methors*'. His portrayal of the life of the marginalized becomes vivid and alive in his debut novel, *Jalaputro* (2008), and other three works – *Dahankaal* (2010), *Kosbi* (2011), and *Mohona* (2013). More importantly, his fictional work, *Ramgolam,* narrativizing the life and livelihood of the Sweeper community, has brought him much fame as a Bangladeshi Dalit writer.

In Bangla literature, the writers dealing with the subaltern include Satyen Sen (1907-1981), Gunamaya Manna (1925-2010), Mahashweta Devi (1926-2016), and Avijit Sen (1945-). Jagadish Gupta (1886-1957), Tarashankar Bandapadhyaya (1898-1971), Manik Bandhapadhyaya (1908-1956) (Das), and Al Mahmud (1936-2019) are the other prominent exponents of Bangla literature who sketched the life of pariahs with artistic prudence. The great fictional works in Bangla literature including Satyen Sen's *Bidrohi Koiborto* (1969), Mahashweta Devi's *Chotti Munda O Tar Teer* (1980), Avijit Sen's *Rahu Chandaler Haar* (1985), and *Mute* (1992) by Gunamaya Manna are the very illumining instances that have enriched the genre-dalit literature very prominently. Commonly, Harishankar Jaladas is compared with the noted novelist Adwaita Mallabarman (1914-51), the author of *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* (*A River Called Titash,* 1956), and Manik Bandopadhyay, the author of *Padma Nadir Majhi* (*The Boatman of the Padma*, 1936). However, Jaladas' fictional works have uniquely reached the zenith highlighting the narratives of pangs and plights of the marginalized caused by the caste system and the oppression perpetrated by the upper class in the name of religion, cultural differences, and social position. Particularly, in respect of a successful plot fictionalizing and historicizing these stories, *Ramgolam* is an excellent outburst of a fictional work. The rebellious attitude of the protagonist, Ramgolam, raised from the *Methor* community, for his own and community's betterment has been very extraordinarily delineated in *Ramgolam.*

Jaladas' novels including *Ramgolam* can be viewed from various critical theories– Marxism, feminism, historicism, postcolonialism, and so

forth. Our present attempt is to read *Ramgolam* postcolonially, applying a postcolonial critic Homi K Bhabha's theory on ambivalence, mimicry, and hybridity for locating the dislocated and re-located identity and culture of the Sweeper community, the other of the other. Relevantly, the study, therefore, first presents Bhabha's theory, and then analyzes and interprets this fictional text.

2.0 Homi K Bhabha's Theory

Homi K Bhabha (1949-), one of the Postcolonial Trinity, along with Edward Said (1935-2003) and Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak (1942-), plays his outstanding role in the postcolonial critical enterprise by theorizing on 'ambivalence', 'hybridity', and 'mimicry'. As Bill Ashcroft uniquely demarcates hyphenated and unhyphenated poscolonialism, so does Bhabha outline the three terms distinctively. Though he theorizes on these, considering the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, the theory we can take into consideration for examining the relationship between the so-called mainstream society/ 'Centre' and the marginalized/ disempowered/ subaltern in the decolonized context. It is obvious that the downtrodden remain ever disempowered, and the so-called mainstream/ upper class takes the position of the colonizer in the post-independent era. Frantz Fanon (1925-61), a French political philosopher, rightly opines that in the period the 'black skin' / native leaders wear 'white masks', and consider that over the State and its power they have the prerogative right as their personal property, neglecting and controlling the fate of the disempowered. And, then there essentially creates the gap between the centre and the marginalized, and also develop the interactions between them. The interactions warrant to be examined in the light of the Bhabhain perspective. The present study, therefore, aims at examining the interaction between the Hindu-Muslim upper class and the Sweeper community in the setting of the city of Chattagram as depicted in *Ramgolam*.

2.1 Ambivalence

Bhabha uses the term ambivalence to show the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, which denotes the attraction and repulsion between them. It refers to "the simultaneous presence of conflicting attitudes toward an attitude target, most commonly the presence of both positive and negative attitudes" (Kaplan 1972).

In other words, an ambivalent attitude is distinguished from a univalent attitude in that an ambivalent attitude indicates the presence of both positive and negative attitudes, whereas a univalent attitude is conceptualized as bipolar, with positive and negative attitudes on

opposing ends of a spectrum. In addition, ambivalence may also reflect conflicting attitudes among any combination of effect, behaviour, and cognition (Thompson, et al 367).

2.2 Hybridity

Again, by the term 'hybridity', Homi K. Bhabha means the colonizer/ colonized relationship stressing the inter-dependence and mutual construction of their subjectivities. "[It] is a kind of negotiation, both political and cultural, between the colonizer and the colonized" (Zohdi 146). As a matter of fact, it refers to "the in-between spaces … [or] merged identity" (Zohdi 147). As Zohdi puts:

> [T]his [in-between] is what Bhabha calls the "third space", and describes it full of ambivalence and contradictory. Bhabha says that 'border lives" put the person in 'the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion, [for] there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction in the 'beyond'' (Bhabha 1). In fact, anybody who lives in the in-between spaces, between two different cultures, lives a dual life which doubles his/her identity. Moreover, Bhabha points out that, 'these 'in-between' spaces provide the train for elaborating strategies of selfhood- singular or communal- that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself (Bhabha 1-2).' (147)

In his *The Location of Culture* (2004), Bhabha, further, observes:

> Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the 'pure' and original identity of authority). Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. (160)

So, hybridity, as a cultural exchange due to the meeting of one culture with another one, "arises through hegemony between the dominant and subordinate groups, through the internalisation of colonial culture among the Indigenous people. Under these conditions, the natives adapted to the new values which were carried out through colonialism". (Wardani and Widyahening 423)

Apart from the colonial setting, it is evident that hybridity exists in the relationship between the disempowered and the empowered. Abandoning own identity and culture, the marginalized want to follow the empowered,

but cannot become the same as the powerful part of society, thus, being located in the third space what the present paper intends to delineate.

2.3 Third Space

More remarkably, Bhabha (1994) conceptualizes the third space of enunciation in coloniality and postcoloniality in a political discourse of in-betweenness and hybridity. He scrutinizes "a formation of hybrid cultural identity of colonized people in their cultural encounter in colonial domination and inequality. For him, hybridity is the process by which the colonial power attempts to transform the identity of the colonized people within a uniform global framework, producing something recognizable and new" (Papastergiadis 54). A new hybrid identity evolves from the cultural negotiation of the colonizer and colonized. In this context, Lazarus (2004) elucidates that Bhabha's third space "is a fighting term, a theoretical weapon, which intervenes in existing debates and resists certain political and philosophical constructions" (4) by interrogating the legitimacy and validity of the essentialist cultural identity.

"The importance of the third space does not lie on tracing the origins from which the third emerges; rather it enables other positions to evolve. Discrediting the histories, the third space unfolds new possibilities which require a novel approach to understand it" (Bhandari 173). Bhabha (1994) clarifies that "the transformational value of [third space] lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are neither the One...nor the Other...but something else besides, which contests the terms and territories of both" (28). The third space is a new space although it partially belongs to two preceding spaces. It departs momentarily from the established values and norms, and allows scrutinizing them with fresh perspectives.

Byrne (2009) expounds that Bhabha's notion of the third space "is not simply one thing or the other, nor both at the same time, but a kind of negotiation between both positions" (42). Similarly, Ikas and Wagner (2009) consider that this negotiation is a creative and fertile ground that leads to a kind of dislodgment of both groups from their origins. In this sense, the third space might be termed as an anti-essentialist revolutionary strategy against every form of authoritative domination. So, this interfering third space can be described as "being in the beyond" (Bhabha 10) with ramifications to multiple directions. Moreover, implications of the notion of the third space proliferate different disciplines like anthropology, sociology, education, communication studies, linguistics, human geography and archaeology, and inquire about human encounters across time and space (Xiaowei & Pilcher 1). In its emphasis on human encounters, it acknowledges the role of human agency.

As the colonial and neocolonial exploitation produces material inequality along with discourse and ideology that helps sustain such form of unequal relationship, it is pertinent to raise a question to the relevance of the negotiation in the third space in the subversion of such material inequality. The deconstruction of binary relationship may dismantle the hierarchy as created by the colonial relationship in its discourse. Such deconstruction would not guarantee to mitigate the material inequality between the East and the West, or the colonizer and the colonized.

In its emphasis on the cultural negotiation, Bhabha's third space, moreover, remain silent to global expansion of capitalism and neocolonial exploitation of the third world countries (Kapoor 657). He does not give a significant space to capitalism in his analyses of the third space, and the very titles of his books, *The location of Culture* (1994) and *Nation and Narration* (1990), obviously reflect his preoccupation with his cultural agenda and indifference to the economic issues. He occasionally refers to "multinational capital" and the "multinational division of labour" (241). Thus, he foregrounds a cultural agenda by ignoring the economic exploitation of the colonized people.

Another point of contention in Bhabha's conceptualization is its lack of attention to the ground realities of inequalities among the heterogeneous inhabitants of the third space of the metropolis and diaspora. In Moore-Gilbert's (1997) words, "Bhabha assumes that the effective economies of mimicry and ambivalence operate equivalently for all colonial subjects irrespective of their positioning in the social hierarchy" (168). In this context, we may raise a question, "does the colonized subject's status in the capitalist economy not impinge on her/his ability to represent or negotiate, or on how forcefully s/he can represent or negotiate in relation to another subject?" (Kapoor 658-659). The cultural negotiation in the third space, in fact, remains silent in this aspect of heterogeneities of marginalized groups.

2.4 Mimicry

In addition to ambivalence, hybridity, and the third space, Homi K. Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture* argues that Colonizer through "mimicry strategy" or "sly civility" wants the colonized "almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha 86). As Shri Kant B. Sawant (123) puts:

> 'Mimicry' is an important term in the post-colonial theory, because it has come to describe the ambivalent relationship between [the] colonizer and [the] colonized. When colonial discourse encourages the colonized subject to 'mimic' the colonizer, by adopting the colonizers' cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of these traits. Rather, it results in a 'blurred copy' of the colonizer that can be quite threatening. Bhabha describes, 'Mimicry as one of the most effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge' (35).

> British wanted to create a class of Indians who should adopt English opinion, morals…. They are 'mimic men'. They learn to act English but do not look English nor are they accepted as such as Bhabha puts it, 'to be Anglicized is emphatically not to be English.' (87)

As a matter of fact, mimicry is a process of imitating the dominant group by the colonized or the subaltern sect. This happens because the latter consider that the culture of the former is better or more advanced than their one. In practice, however, "cultural imitation does not actually occur entirely. There is an element of ambivalence in it. On the one hand, subaltern groups try to form cultural similarities with dominant groups, but they cannot be entirely the same. They are still seen as subaltern groups that are not equal" (Wardani and Widyahening 423) to the empowered in society.

Though mimicry is an important concept of understanding the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized, it is often seen as disgraceful, and black or brown individuals engaging in mimicry are usually derided by the members of their group as mimics or mimic-men.

Nevertheless, some from the marginalized mimic the mainstream/ empowered class which is observed in the decolonized society as shown by this paper.

3.0 *Ramgolam:* (Dis/ Re) Locating Identity and Culture

Now the present study attempts to view, in the light of the Bhabhain perspective, the *Methor* community's identity and culture dislocated by the empowered and the community's struggle for relocating their identity and culture in the decolonial society in *Ramgolam*. The novel, set in the suburban area in the Chattagram city, deals with a narrative about sweepers, the most marginalized community. The novelist himself states, "They are more neglected than fishermen. Sweepers' children are never accepted as equals by the elite even if they are educated" (Urmi). However, the narrative of the marginalization, victimization, and oppression is not only a particular region based, it also historicizes the background of the professional confinement of the community during the Mughal and the British periods and even the post-independence era of the Indian subcontinent (Jaladas 31). Not only does Jaladash trace the spatial shifting and dislocation, identical crisis and the socio-economic condition of the *Methor* community, he also narrates the emergence of this community in the light of Hindu mythology (Jaladas 30), which is the root-cause of their suppression and oppression caused by the powerful and their alliance – so called mainstream society.

The fictional work, *Ramgolam*, Jaldas entitles after the name of the protagonist Ramgolam, a combination of a Hindu name Ramachandra (the tenth Avatara of Hinduism) and a Muslim name Golam connoting the loyal

servant of Allah. It is obvious that the attempt to name so is to blindly copy both Hindu and Muslim identities. Ramgolam himself is confused about his own name, so he asks his grandfather about this peculiar name, "Grandfather, who has given me such a strange name?" (Jaladas 9) The grandfather replies thus, "I, I myself have given you the name" (Jaladas 10).

The main purpose of naming such is that "he will not be hated by Hindus and Muslims" (Jaladas 11). It is because first to the Hindus and later to the Muslims, the Sweeper community becomes the victim of hatred for their "filthy profession to clean toilets and sewerage lines" (Jaladas 11). Then, the grandfather tells him how they have become *Methors* and why they are here (Jaladas 11). In addition, as they clean toilets and sewerage lines, the so-called gentlemen can live in such a city in which both Muslims and Hindus treat *Methors* as beasts. Even "they take a puppy in their lap, but they keep us far away with hatred, and frequently rebuke us with slang words" (Jaladas 11), as Gurucharan, one of the characters of the novel, says. This is the obvious tendency to follow the empowered by the disempowered, which Homi K Bhabha calls 'mimicry'.

This mimicry is the result of the relationship between the centre and the margin characterized by 'attraction'. But the marginalized people cannot be the identical compared with the so-called mainstream people socially, professionally, and culturally. Very correctly, Jaladas fictionalizes the fact related to Baba Sahib Ambedkar (1891-1956), who was not even touched by his personal staff, an upper caste Hindu. Ambedkar once led the movement of the Sweeper community's right for water from the upper castes' water tanks. Even, the then government did not help him despite his frequent appeals. As protest Ambedkar along with his followers – the Harijans as the name given by Gandhiji – wanted to accept Islam, and finally embraced Buddhism.

In the novel, the novelist Jaladas narrativizes that in decolonized society, the fate of the Sweeper community remains unchanged, and even more neglected. A school was setup for educating the Sweeper children, but there they are hated, neglected, and avoided by all except Kutubuddin, a Muslim teacher. In the same school, there is another teacher named Hari Mohan J Das – Jaladas – in which Jala is abbreviated as "J" for hiding his own identity that reveals that he belongs to fish-folks, another marginalized community. Hari Mohan also married Shukhlata Datta, a teacher of Lakhachar High School. However, he cannot escape from inferior complexity and equalize himself with his wife's social status. The novelist, thus, portrays the mimic character- Hari Mohan Jaladas. It is also noteworthy that the novelist sketches Hari Mohan's complex tendency that he considers himself to be superior to the *Methor* community. Like Shamoly Dey, another teacher of the school, Hari Mohan J Das, holds the same

opinion that "the *Methors'* children will never be civilized. This filthy and hated folks are born to clean the excrement and urine of the civilized society; education is not for them" (Jaladas 42). In the novel, Hari Mohan can also be taken into consideration as a hybrid character as he has lost his own identity and fails to attain the identity as his wife holds.

In *Ramgolam*, again, we see that the school for sweepers' children was first run by the concerned directorate, but latter it was taken by the City Corporation under which sweepers work. And then, it was decided the president and the secretary of the school managing committee would be from the Corporation office and one or two members would be selected from the *Methor* community. And even, this privilege for sweeper children will not exist and the children from other community will be taught at the school which will be detached from the Harijan community by erecting a new wall, and the new gate of the school will be made. Kutubuddin rightly says, "The sweeper children do not come to school attached with their homes; they may not come to school when they need to come following the distant road. More darkness will appear to their life" (Jaladas 45). Another character of the novel, Kallaney Sarkar, also supports it, and this apprehension comes true very shortly. It is clear that the attempt has been taken to other this subaltern community in the decolonial phase, which even did not happen in the colonial period.

By this time, the novelist Harishankar Jaladas portrays Ramgolam who has recently passed the SSC examination. Both his father and grandfather suggest him not to continue his further study.

> Ramgolam wanted to ask–why is the study not needed? But before his asking, Gurucharan said, we are a lower caste. The lower caste does not require more study. Hazards only increase for more study. You have passed the SSC examination; it is meaningless to the Corporation. You cannot get the job from the part of *the other* due to another castes. Why do you not get? You won't get because you are a *Methor*… . Whatever you study, your job is fixed for carrying excreta and urine of the Corporation, cleaning the sewerage lines, and sweeping roads and streets. (Jaladas 67)

Later, we see this privilege of getting jobs is violated as the job seekers from the other upper class communities are employed.

To postcolonial writers, the periphery refers to those that are on the margins of society. Those people or groups that are side lined and oppressed can be described as the periphery. The relationship between the centre and the periphery in any context is, however, problematic. It is because the very existence of the periphery gives power to the centre. In other words, the centre cannot exist without the periphery. The headmastership of Abdul Aziz is functional for the existence of the school to educate *Methors'*

children. Interestingly, the services given by the Chattagram City Corporation heavily depend on the Sweepers' jobs there.

Very clearly, the marginalized people feel inferior complexity, and they intend to be close to the centre; some hybrid (so-called) educated people, like Hari Mohan J Das, work to make the periphery more lag behind so that the deprived cannot come forward to demand their human, civic, and constitutional rights. When Abdul Aziz joins as the Headmaster in the *Methor* community school, J Das wants to be close to him and tries to act how Abdul Aziz desires for the cause of the empowered. For it, he betrays his own oppressed community and its vulnerable existence. In collaboration with J Das, Abdul Aziz first proclaims that "*Methor* children must sit on the last benches in the class" (Jaldas 128). In reply to a Kutubuddin's question related to the interest of the Sweeper community, Abdul Aziz becomes so full of rage; however, highlighting the real cause of the existing social distance, the former further asks the later thus:

> Sir, why have you called them uncultured? They have no education like us- it's true, but they are not uncivilized, Sir. … According to you, only Hindus-Muslims are cultured and sophisticated, Sir. Although *Methors* can do some odd jobs, they are not uncultured and unsophisticated. Now-a-days a number of Chowdhurys, Sens and Roys are fishermen, some are cobblers and some barbers. Are they now unsophisticated? (Jaldas 129)

So, it is clear that "[Aziz] does not teach the people to love the other, rather he teaches base mentality" (Jaldas 128). Here, Abdul Aziz represents himself as the centre, making the *Methor* community sideline in terms of their socio-economic conditions.

In British and Pakistan periods, *Methors* were colonialized like the upper class, but in the post-independence era, they have become doubly oppressed. Firstly, they are humiliated in the name of religion, caste, and class. Secondly, they have lost their rights in their particular job as it becomes open for all. So, having lost their rights, they become frustrated, and decide to call a strike to prevent the newly recruited ones from the so-called mainstream classes. After observing the strike, their rigid feelings for their own interest become shaken; some of them become arrogant, some confused, and some diverted to the center. As a result, they have stepped in the trap and finally have lost their harmony in their own community. We observe that because of their protest, Ramgolam and Kartik have been arrested and imprisoned for several years, thus being more marginalized. After the failure of the protest, the harmonious sweeper community witnesses its own intersectionalism. Consequently, Kartik represents repulsion or resistance, whereas Jogesh signifies a mimic man by losing his own identity and trying to serve an aide to the main stream society.

The novelist Jaladas also portrays the double dislocation and violation of the identity and rights of *Methor* women. Firstly, they are dislocated for being women in their own society. Secondly, they are dislocated and oppressed by the so-called upper class. The novelist very realistically articulates the vulnerability of the *Methor* women in their male dominating society. As Jaladas narrates,

> Harijan society is male dominating. The *Sardar* (headman) is the most powerful in the community. The illiterate are his advisors and assistant force, as well. Women are truly frail here. They are not only weaker, but also muted. Women's needs are not fulfilled at all in society. If necessary, males take their advice, but for implementing the suggestions, the males depend on their own will. Since long, Harijan women have not been dependent on men. They earn too, but the earning is snatched away by the males. Males mean their husbands. (Jaladas 83)

4.0 Conclusion

To sum up, Harisankar Jaladas represents the identical and cultural crises of the most under privileged Sweeper community caused by the so-called main-stream society. The empowered society dislocates the sweepers' own identity and culture by extremely othering them. They are othered through the disintegration of their social cohesion and deprivation of their rights and privileges. Generation after generation, they, therefore, cannot cross the boundary of victimization of untouchability and injustice. However, sometimes the community members organize resistance for their rights, showing their repulsive attitude towards the empowered. Through this kind of ambivalence, they attempt to locate, relocate and re-search for their dislocated and violated identity and rights. As failure then, they show their attraction, another part of ambivalence, towards the socially, culturally, and politically privileged class. They want to become submissive to the powerful and even are ready to lose their own culture and creeds, thus being first hybridized as they cannot hold their own position and gain the status of the powerful and next they become mimic for the tendency of coping the culture and conditions of the empowered unconditionally. Jaladas very eruditely projects the facts of ambivalence, hybridity, and mimicry as experienced by the *Methor* community in his great fictional work, *Rangolam*.

[**Note:** Here the quotations from the text, *Ramgolam*, are translated into English by the writers of the present paper.]

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