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Bangladeshi Transgenders as Other: A Postcolonial Critique of the Film *Common Gender*

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Abstract

Common Gender, a Bangladeshi film of the year 2012, explores the Bangladeshi society which dominates the lives of the transgenders where the latter is always marginalized by the prior powerful class. It is also seen that androgyny people are mistreated not only by their father, siblings, females, and lovers, but also by their mothers. Thus, Hijras are suppressed by the Bangladeshi society which considers them as Other. As postcolonialism focuses on the powerful colonizers who subjugate, beat, and brutally destroy the identity of the subaltern colonized, this movie is discussed in the light of this theory. Both postcolonialism and the film deal with the same themes, but no research has been conducted yet to examine this film which depicts the dehumanization of the subjugated Hijras under the lens of postcolonialism. Transgenders are the colonized subaltern class controlled by the colonizer (our society). Therefore, this qualitative paper attempts to study and connect with the concepts like colonizer, colonized, subaltern, occident, and eurocentrism which are pivotal aspects of postcolonialism. As a result, this research locates the similarities as well as differences between the heterosexual individuals of Bangladesh and the colonizers. It also connects the deprived transgenders with the colonized to trace the meeting and departure points of transgenders and the African colonized. In this way, it analyzes the film from the perspective of postcolonial theory.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, colonizer, colonized, Eurocentrism, subaltern, transgender

Introduction

Common Gender is the first Bangladeshi film to focus on the miserable lives of the Transgenders in the Bangladeshi society of the twenty-first century. Released on 22nd June 2012, the filmmaker Noman Robin in his debut feature portrays the oppression of the Hijras as they are rejected by their parents, siblings, lovers, and the whole nation. After being abandoned by their family which considers them as abnormal, they are raised

within a Hijra community by Masi, the leader or head of the community. In the process of altering from males to females their names are changed like Shushmoy turns into Shushmita or Babu into Bubli. Tuli, Shakiba, Shakira, Pori and Tushi also work as dancers in the opera shows along with these two lead characters Shushmita as well as Bubli. Tota Mia, a male residing nearby their slum, is also their friend. During a wedding, a Hindu young man named Sanjay (Dileep Chakraborty) proposed transgender Shushmita (Saju Khadem) to be his friend. As Sanjay introduces Shushmita with his parents, they scolded their son for befriending a Hijra. This ill-treatment by Sanjay's parents eventually leads to Shushmita's tragic suicide. Ironically, Shushmita's mother visits the slum the very day of her death and this makes Bubli miss her own mother too. As she visits her home in midnight, her brother beats her for entering the home. This terrible incident also provokes Bubli to commit suicide. The film ends with an imaginary scene whereby Shushmita and Bubli meet in heaven happily.

This film focuses on the enslavement of Hijra human beings by the Bangladeshi society. Transgenders are the colonized subaltern class controlled by the colonizer (our society). However, no research has focused on this film which succinctly depicts the brutalities afflicted on the Hijra people. Significantly, this paper attempts to fill in this research gap and associate with the concepts like colonizer, colonized, subaltern of postcolonialism. It interlinks the heterosexual individuals of Bangladesh with the colonizers and the deprived Transgenders with the colonized. What is colonialism, its causes and the tenets of postcolonialism are studied. The meeting points as well as the points of departure between the colonizer and the non-Transgenders and the similarities and differences between the colonized and the third gender also remain the key aspect of this research. The protagonist Shushmita and the other Transgenders are monitored in the lenses of postcolonialism. In this way, this article examines the film in the light of postcolonial theory.

Postcolonial Critique as Theoretical Framework

This section scrutinizes the causes behind colonialism and it describes the postcolonial theory which acts as the backbone of this research. Theories of eurocentrism by Edward K. Said, mimicry and hybridity by Homi K. Bhabha and the concept of the subaltern by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak are also explicated. O'Reilly identifies that Europe wanted to plunder Africa for its resources. In his account, the scramble for Africa was a race between rival European powers in the 1880s to take as much of Africa as possible. At the Berlin Conference of 1885, the European powers divided the continent amongst themselves (30). O'Reilly adds that the cheaper prices of cotton, palm oil in the Niger Delta of West Africa led to the creation of Nigeria as the major source of raw materials and a market for goods manufactured in Britain. Cheap black labour was another commodity for white entrepreneurs and settlers and thus forced labour for road building became a potent symbol of British rule in West Africa (30). These profits were the main causes behind the advent of colonizers in Africa.

Innes describes colonialism as "the extension of a nation's power over territory beyond its borders by the establishment of either settler colonies and/or administrative control through which the indigenous populations are directly or indirectly ruled or displaced" (234). To point out the differences between postcolonialism and post-colonialism, Innes states:

The nonhyphenated 'postcolonial' refers to the consequences of colonialism from the time of its first impact – culturally, politically, economically. 'Post-colonial' with a hyphen tends to refer to the historical period after a nation has

been officially recognized as independent and is no longer governed as a colony. (239)

As former colonized countries got emancipation, like South Africa, India, Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya got freedom in the years 1931,1947,1957,1960 and 1963 respectively and two wars -The First World War (1914-1918) and the Second World War (1939-1945)- ended, various sensitive voices from former colonized nations like Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Toni Morrison and so on to attack against colonialism.

Now I will explore the Holy Trinity comprising of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak triad. First, one of the crucial tenets of postcolonial literature is the concept of the orientalism as developed by Edward W. Said in his groundbreaking postcolonial book *Orientalism Western Conceptions of the Orient*. As Said asserts: “The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s oldest and richest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (1). This shows that the non-European civilization has been negated by the western canonical discourse. Thus, the colonized is interpellated as the other subservient secondary inferior race. Moreover, Said mentions that the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination and complex hegemony (5) where rational, virtuous, mature, normal (40) European display superiority over irrational, deprived (fallen) childlike (40) Oriental backwardness (7). In Albert Memmi’s view, colonized is hardly a “human being” (130), an oppressed creature whose development is broken and who compromises by his defeat (133) as per western gaze.

In drawing on colonialist ideology, Lois Tyson observes the Anglo-European culture was metropolitan¹ but the Black colonized Orientals are savage, evil, inferior, the demonic other (420). As a result of this false representation of the natives, many ex-colonials seek to transcend western influences by establishing nativism²(423). More than this, cultural imperialism or the takeover of one culture by another where the economically dominant culture takes over the vulnerable culture (425) occurs during colonialism. In fact, colonizers seek power and they dominate the powerless class barbarously (Shama 173).

Other conspicuous features of postcolonialism are mimicry and hybridity. Indian theorist Homi K. Bhabha’s mimic people imitate the white man as he is trained under Western education, religion and structures to behave like the White man. In this process, native fractures and disrupts and is never fully white. This hybridized native struggles (qtd. in Nayar 170) as that person cannot accept the colonial authority and also refuses to return the colonial gaze. Thus, third space where the split, decentered, unstable colonized (Nayar 171) articulates resistance is created. Another crucial thought aligned to postcolonialism is the concept of subaltern. Marxist Italian communist scholar Antonio Gramsci in the early 1930s used this word as an alternative to proletarian who are economically given class identity (Döring 60). This term means a low ranking officer in a military hierarchy, that is someone in a subordinate position but himself part of the system that controls him (Döring 59). 21st century Indian postcolonial writer Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explains the concept of subaltern in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak”. Sati or the widow wife follows the tradition of killing herself in the fire of her deceased husband (93). As she remains silent towards the oppression which the society has imposed on her, she is a subservient character with no power, status and individuality.

¹ Europeans are civilized, sophisticated and postcolonial critics call this scenario as metropolitan

² Emphasis on indigenous culture or nationalism to recuperate their national image or ancestral roots

Results and Discussion

This section traverses the film from the angle of the postcolonial theory. Firstly, just like the colonized Africans who were forced into living away from their home as slaves, the Bangladeshi transgender people are also homeless ones as their parents disown or forsake them from their root, space, their family. They are the voiceless peripheral inferior other who are displaced from their parent's house. Although Shushmita's family is rich, she has to live in a dilapidated poverty-stricken slum without any formal education. Besides, she has to beg in the market for money or dance to earn her livelihood. Tota Mia throws light on this issue of acute negation of Shushmita by her upper crust family which, if they wanted, would have sent her abroad upon knowing that she is a Hijra. Wearing the garb of religion, they lead to the depredation of their own transgender child.

Secondly, Africans were beaten cruelly by the Whites. According to Aimé Césaire, forced labour, intimidation, pressure and rape (*Discourse* 42) occurs between a colonizer and a colonized. Césaire is right when he writes "Colonization=thing-ification" (*Discourse* 142). Césaire mentions that fear and inferiority complex has been cunningly instilled in the hearts of millions of men (*Discourse* 43). Here Bubli when she demands to go to her home is scolded and thrashed by her brother Raju who thinks that Bubli has damaged the prestige of their family. Raju here derogatively says "I spit on you" and "I will kill you" and wants her to die. Notably, here the perpetrator and the subjugator is her own brother who is more class conscious than the human bonding which they both share with each other. Apart from this, she is also beaten by both males and females as she tries to use the public toilet. So, hijras are the victim of both verbal abuse as well as physical punishment. Many African slaves were barbarously tortured as limned in *Beloved*. In my view, this commodification of the hijras wrecks their autonomy and like the African colonized they suffer from sheer debasement. Bubli's voice as well as subjectivity is utterly despoiled.

Thirdly, Africans were considered nonentity according to the Eurocentric gaze. When Sanjay's parents disapprove of their love affair on the context that what will the society think of them, it is apparent that they think of Hijra as a subservient class. Kalyani Thakur's poem "The Recusant" deals with the struggles of the Dalit society, the other marginalized periphery of the Hindu Bengali community in India. The writer's grandfather was a servant of the upper caste Indian people. He was not allowed to step into the premises of the upper crust people. In a similar vein, we can see a similar group in Africa in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* called an outcast or osu. They were dedicated to God, a thing set apart, a taboo forever and his children after him just like a Dalit. He could neither marry nor be married by a free-born and he was an outcast living in a special area of the village close to the Great Shrine (111) as similar to a Dalit. Both the Dalit society and the osu outcasts are like the hijras of this film. This film highlights that even though religious parents have taught Sanjay not to discriminate among human beings and to respect all religions, ironically, they are themselves doing misdeeds with a third gender individual.

Furthermore, it is noted that the African land, language, culture, individuality, resources and psyche were ravaged by the conquerors. Lack of home, education, work, money, love and identity in the film made them puppets who can only scream "Are we not human beings?". The sheer debasement incurred on the Africans led many to commit suicide and here both Shushmita and Bubli take their own lives as they can no longer live with their detrimental state. Shushmita's death occurs as her dream of a lover and a marital life is shattered. Her psyche becomes distorted and fragmented due to her no acceptance in this society. These exhibit the social manacle of slavery imposed on Hijras

by the hegemony of the heterosexuals. This means Hijras are captivated in the cage of their bodies in Bangladeshi society and if they want to transcend this social space by loving a boy or by visiting their own home, they will be abused physically as well as mentally. Although the colonized Africans got emancipation from the imperialistic settlers, our Bangladeshi Hijras cannot break the shackle of slavery which is continuing for ages. Unlike the pre-colonial African democratic, communal, happy society which is delineated in *Things Fall Apart*, the Hijras never got any community bonding outside their own sphere in the society. Just like the colonizers who deemed the Africans with evil, wretchedness, death, war, famine (147) as pointed out by Frantz Fanon, the third gender are also considered an outsider omen in the Bangladeshi Society.

Moreover, the colonizers deemed themselves as a superior race. Men believes that they are the ruling class. Being the powerful ones in Bangladeshi society, they always exploit the Hiras, the lower class in the social hierarchy. In this context, we can detect that one girl leaves the shop abruptly as Shushmita and Bubli enter. No one gives work, education and none marry them also. Some people even touch them inappropriately and they have to allow men so that they can survive with money. Sethe along with many African women were raped by Whites in *Beloved*. Economic impoverishment leads them to prostitution even. A similar tragic scenario emerges also in the Indian movie ‘‘Safed’’ where the transgender Chaandi has to face severe sexual assault by a man. Chaandi later commits suicide just like Shushmita of this film as a result of the devaluation infecting on his life. Even when Shushmita dies, her body is cremated not with her original androgyne identity which throws light on her non-identity. As for me, colour prejudice of the Whites who detest dark skin is neither practiced in the film nor the colonized develop mimicry and hybridity, but still the ill-treatment of the colonized is put on the Hijra community of Bangladesh.

Finally, turning to the plight of the mothers, we can find that their husbands do not allow them to keep any bonding with their transgender children. Many colonized African women lost their children as colonizers took them to other countries or states as slaves. Sethe in *Beloved* attempts to kill her children which eventually leads to the murder of her daughter Beloved to safeguard her offspring from derogatory lives of slavery. In a similar vein, Shushmita’s mother suffers a lot as her husband refrains her from keeping the son for society pressure. Likewise, Bubli’s mother also cries and the father says ‘‘do not give this problem to my enemy’’. He even allows her another son Raju to strike Bubli mercilessly. Strikingly, Moti’s parents are not rich, but his handicapped father wants Allah to protect his son and both the parents cannot live without their son. This indicates a positive change where we might hope for a better life of the Bangladeshi Hijra people in the upcoming years.

As far as the positive traits of this film is concerned, the colorful dresses of the Hijra with loud makeup totally represent their attire. The songs are well placed and it goes with the movie story like the item song displays the work of the Hijra, the lover’s romantic song is heart touching and soothing to the ears, especially with the cinematography of the boat ride of Shushmita and Sanjoy. Use of many slang words like magi and sinal, foam headlight and the only body no engine completely justifies the apt true picturization of the Hijra community of Bangladesh. The scene where the director shows the dumping of garbage at the beginning of the film brilliantly connotes our society which totally neglects or dumps Hijra as human beings. Significantly, the outburst of weeping due to Shushmita’s demise and taking out her body from the well is a scene shot beautifully. Another emotional moment was the crying of Bubli for warm rice from a poor mother where the camera focuses on her tribulation and sorrowful face. All the audience of the cinema hall cried at the ending of this 2 hours 11 minutes’ film.

The beginning of the film with the pictorial city life explicitly detailed with cars, traffic jam, child labour, people on the streets and so on showcases the film's ugly crude life. From the religious perspective, the mullah or imam, the Hindu priests and the Christian priests appear as loving people caring for the Hijra and the Hijra people always believe in Allah. The Imam believes that Hijras' prayers and curses are answered by Allah. What is more, the heaven scene where Shushmita and Bubli smile at each other is beautifully captured too. The movie ends with a peaceful note- peace Be upon on you- which represent a world of equality as well as freedom of all human beings just what the postcolonial theorists want in this world.

Conclusion

On the whole, it is notable that just like the Africans, the third gender inhabitants of Bangladesh are beaten, sexually abused and looked down as a thing living in the periphery of the society. They are distanced from their family like the Africans and psychologically fragmented by the societal stigma of being physically the other. Slavery, dominance, brutality of master race, no identity and no freedom of the colonized are here apparent in the desubjectivization of the Hijras who cannot work in their own country. The demise of the protagonist who is deprived of his family along with his lover further sheds light on the exclusion of the Hijra inhabitants in our Bangladeshi society. The families, like the colonizers, oppress their own blood with nothingness- no family title, status quo, career and education – from the family. So, it becomes evident that postcolonialism and its features are apparent in this film.

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