

The Voice of the Voiceless: An Analysis of the Making of a Rebel Slave in Shaukat Osman's *The Laughter of a Slave*

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Abstract:

This paper investigates into the making of a rebel slave in Shaukat Osman's novel *The Laughter of a Slave* through the lens of the subaltern theory. It argues that though a slave is traditionally voiceless, the protagonist of the novel, with his voice of breaking the boundary of subjugation, attempts to show how he also possesses the right to laughter which signifies the dream and yearning for freedom. The research also identifies a scope in the existing Bangla literature to interpret a novel from the subaltern perspective. The research findings highlight how a slave being oppressed in the dichotomy of slavery discovers him empowered with love and for his love he shows a resistance which shatters the so-called domineering tendency of the ruler. Using Third Space theory the article also offers an insight into how a slave's identity can question the identity of a ruler and how he looks for a new identity through the making of a new space.

Keywords: Slavery, Desires and Dreams, Voicelessness, Subaltern, Third Space

1. Introduction

Shaukat Osman's award-winning novel *The Laughter of a Slave* (1962) with a setting in the Caliph Harun-al-Rashid's (the 5th Abbasid Caliph 786-809) exotic Baghdad records a heart touching tale of a slave named Tatari. In his existence as a slave the indomitable spirit of man is dramatically portrayed with a meaningful message of protest to the authority. Here Tatari's struggle is glorious and exemplary as he possesses a heroic soul who does not surrender either to temptation or to torture. The author shows how Tatari is ready to embrace death but not defeat because he is not made for defeat. This strong sense of determination of Tatari emphasizes the power of resilience in the face of adversity. Possessing a spirit of nonchalant attitude, Tatari's struggle is against all types of oppression under the Caliph's rule. In fact, the origin of

the oppression springs from his love for clandestine wife Meherjan, an Armenian slave-girl with whom he can share laughter. To them laughter is the expression of life in its true colour. Kundera (2000) in his *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* says that to laugh is to live profoundly and the slaves in Shaukat Osman's novel reflect the same message that they have forgotten their status of a slave and enjoyed the pleasure of life through laughter. But we know that like others, a slave is not entitled to laugh freely. Thus, the beauty of the slave Tatari's free laughter generates in the heart of the Caliph a sense of jealousy as he, being so powerful and an elite, cannot laugh freely. The Caliph is very much aware of his own class and his extreme sense of class consciousness with supreme sense of authority has developed in his mind a sense of racism to treat the slaves. According to Audre Lorde (2004) in "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" racism is "the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over the others and thereby the right to dominance" (p. 855) and with this sense of superiority and the sense of domination, the Caliph rules the slaves and the officials and even his wives.

The portrayal of the slave named Tatari by the novelist also establishes the fact that the slaves are under the whims and dominance of the authoritative ruler whose "goal of behavior will be the other, for the other alone can give him worth" (Fanon, 467). Thus, the slaves here are bound to be 'the other' and their identity and life are in the hands of 'the other' meaning the ruler. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that the slaves are marginalized, abused, tortured and harassed in the hands of the elitist group.

2. Research Objectives

This research work aims to find out how a slave, a subaltern in his existence, is treated in the paradigm of the powerful and the powerless in the context of Asia. In doing that a comparative picture is drawn from other cultures where slavery is a common practice. Through this investigation, the voice of slaves which is traditionally unheard, is pointed out to demonstrate the deprived psyche of the class. A slave can be a rebel but not always; a slave can be a man of desires but not always; a slave can dream of achieving the status of a true human being but not always. With these lenses, the slaves are analyzed here historically, socially, culturally and politically.

3. Methodology of the Study

This research article, qualitative in characteristics, involves an in-depth analysis of the slave characters from the novel. Thus, the primary resource of the research is the novel itself. Besides the primary source, the secondary sources used here are different literary criticism and relevant texts with the

similar issues. Furthermore, the research integrates Subaltern theory, Spivak's ideas on subalternity and Bhabha's theory on space. The research is conducted following APA Style (7th Edition).

The textual analysis method employs an intensive reading of the text to uncover the class differences and the protagonist's negotiation with the new form of identity through his love. Focusing the key passages and narratives of the characters the socio-cultural context is also brought under critique.

From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) a nuanced insight is unfolded when the ruler is dealing with the subjects and how the subjugated react to the master and throughout this scenario a sense of class consciousness is revealed.

4. Theoretical Framework

The Laughter of a Slave (1962) narrates the life of slaves in the palace of Harun-al-Rashid, the Caliph of Baghdad and their interactions with the elitist groups such as the Caliph himself, his ministers and courtiers as well as the Begums of the Caliph. This relationship can be interpreted from the perspectives of the colonizers and the colonized, the ruler and the ruled, the master and the subject and the elite and the common. Therefore, the text provides much thoughts on subalternity of the protagonist Tatari.

Subaltern historiography has its beginning in the 80s of the last century with an aim to record the history of the subjugated, downtrodden and oppressed people. With the initiative of Ranajit Guha a group of Marxist scholars such as Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, Shahid Amin, Susie Tharu have started to find out the contributions of the subaltern people regarding the liberty of India. Thus, subalternity is a counter discourse to colonial and elitist ideology. The Eurocentric narrative regarding the colonial people is rectified by the South Asian subaltern group.

According to Guha (1983), there is a demographic difference between the subaltern and the elites. The Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) uses the term 'subaltern' as a common term for subjugation referring to gender, race, caste and class. To Guha (1983), the term 'subaltern' refers to "a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or any other way" (Preface 35). According to Spivak (2010), the term 'subaltern' stands for third world women and men, working class people or those disfranchised and marginalized by the western culture.

SSG aims to change ‘suppressed voices’ by throwing challenges to ‘authoritative voices.’ This idea is well tuned in the novel of Shaukat Osman where Tatari represents the idea of the ‘suppressed voice’ and the Caliph stands for the ‘authoritative voices.’ However, the group emphasizes giving power of voice to the oppressed and marginalized which later influences the different branches of knowledge. Their attempt is a kind of deconstructing and reshaping the Eurocentric narrative about the colonial people. To Amin (1997), Subaltern studies have revolutionized people’s understanding of history and society. Also, the studies reexamine the complexities of power structures. In this regard, Antonio Gramsci’s (1973) intuitive analysis of power dynamics is relevant. To Gramsci, there are two ways to maintain control over the ruling class. The first one is coercion and the other is cultural hegemony. Likewise, Spivak (2010) in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” also points out the characteristics of the subaltern when she says that there is “no space from where the subaltern subject can speak” (p.122) as they are dominated by the elites. But Guha (1982) in “Some Aspects of Historiography” is more convincing as he says that the subalterns have “autonomous domain, for it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter” (p. 4). This autonomous domain is important for the subalterns by which they can speak.

A slave, being a subaltern, is always voiceless and from this status of voicelessness he can be considered as dead. Stephen Greenblatt (1988) begins his essay “The Circulation of Social Energy” with “I began with the desire to speak with the dead” which shows relevance when the Caliph in the novel *The Laughter of a Slave*, representing the elites, wants to communicate with Tatari, a slave and subaltern historically non-speaking dead entity. A slave’s subalternity starts with the idea of the belief that he is voiceless and so he is dead and he is considered as “‘other’, marginalized, and colonized” (Ashcroft et al. 1989, p. 172).

With the identity as a slave, Tatari’s struggle for survival through his relationship with Meherjan ushers a new identity for him giving a new space. About identity postcolonial theorist Bhabha (2006) opines the inclusivity of parameters such as class, gender, institutional context, politics etc. Therefore, multifaceted nature of identity is a reality which we can find in the protagonist of the novel. Nayar (2011), a postcolonial theorist, views Bhabha’s concept of identity as “constantly shifting, liminal and displaced” (p. 69). Therefore, identity is, in its nature, always fluid. This fluidity of identity can be incorporated with Bhabha’s (2006) theory of Third Space focusing the in-between position of the character. Bhabha investigates how being in between different spaces creates a ground for the individual or the community to generate a new form of identity. Bhabha emphasizes saying that “we may

elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves” (p. 39). Thus, the idea of the Third Space is characterized with the idea of the negotiation done by the characters which is evident in Tatari.

5. Discussion

5.1 Tatari as a Slave and Subaltern in the Palace of the Caliph

Though Tatari is the protagonist of the novel with the status of a slave and rebel, the beginning of the novel is important to discuss. When the novel opens, we come across in the palace the wife of the Caliph Harun-al-Rashid Begum Zubaida in conversation with her slave-girl Meherjan. She is not in the tone of the Caliph’s wife but as a more intimate person to Meherjan with the feelings of goodwill. In her conversation we can observe that she exhibits no class differences and sense of elitism. This is quite unusual in the practice of slavery as far as the master-slave relationship is concerned. Like Mrs. Garner, a compassionate slave owner in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1997), this lady Begum Zubaida believes in the rights of Meherjan not as a slave but as a human being when she says, “Go now, Meherjan. It is such a dark, black night! What bliss to be tightly locked in the embrace of your loved one in such a night as this!” (Osman, *The Laughter of a Slave*, 2008, p. 23)

Again, the wife of the Caliph Begum Zubaida possesses a good understanding about Tatari, the beloved of Meherjan. Her comment about Tatari is remarkable. She says, “When I saw him I at once said to myself that he and you would make an excellent pair. He is an Africa slave; but what a beautiful, well-proportioned body he has” (p. 24). Such a relationship between the master’s wife and the slave-girl is unprecedented. Actually, Begum Zubaida’s life is defined by frustration and loneliness despite living in the plethora of palace luxury. She says,

You come and that gladdens my heart. You are here and so there is some happiness for me in this palace. Otherwise, who cares for anybody in this vast palace? There are hundreds of Begums and hundreds of slave-girls here, but it is hard to find someone who is close to you. (p. 25)

Thus, Meherjan is a happy spirit to her whose companionship she enjoys the most. Certainly, to her the ruler Caliph is not a good human being to recommend. She says, “The Caliph always listens to me, but who knows what might happen some day? It is better not to rely on anything where someone’s mere whim is justice and law” (p. 25). Thus, we have got an idea about Caliph’s master like attitude in the phrase “whim is justice and law” (p. 25)

even when he deals with his wife. And in this way, the Caliph's wife is also a subaltern with no power of voice in the hands of her husband.

As the plot of the novel advances, we are introduced with the conversation between the Caliph and Masrur, a loyal official. This conversation reveals some key ideas about the ruler of Baghdad. Very recently the Caliph orders for the death sentence to Jaafar Barmeki, the Chief Minister and Abbasa, his own wife and since then the Caliph is passing a bad time. It is important to note that there exists an air of superiority in the Caliph who considers himself more than the master or lord of the state. From this point of view, he considers himself unquestionable for his actions and believes all as his subordinates and demands everyone to be obedient to him. His rule demonstrates the nature of the theory of 'divine right' focusing always the elitist point of view. At present, the Caliph has become a victim of his own memory about the death of the two persons and as a consequence he finds himself helpless. He is a solitary being with a heavy heart of loneliness and passes everyday life. To him the voice of the dead is louder than the living. With this status of unsettled and melancholic mind one late night, the Caliph happens to overhear the sound of laughter and instantly becomes curious and jealous. The Caliph earnestly listens to the laughter for a while and says,

This laughter is not coming just from the lips. Its source is the deep secret corner of the heavy heart. The way a hilly spring gushes out from some lonely cavern of the mountains, scattering tiny pebbles on all sides, so does this laughter spring from some fountain of the soul. But who is this happy soul? I envy him, Masrur. I, the Emperor of Baghdad, am a beggar hungering for happiness. Compared to me, he must be poor, and yet he is the king of happiness. Who is he, Masrur?" (p. 32)

Here, the reply of Masrur determines the origin of the laughter. To quote, "The African slaves live there, on the other side of the palace wall, Your Majesty" (p. 32). This information of Masrur surprises the Caliph who questions, "Can slaves laugh like that?" (p. 32) And to the slaves, to laugh is to speak with a voice which echoes Spivak's (2010) essay "Can the Subaltern speak? And here as the slaves laugh, their laughter is the voice that opposes the idea of Spivak. However, Masrur justifies the query of the Caliph which gives an impression that his knowledge about slaves is wrong. To quote Masrur, "They can, Amir-ul-Momenin. They enjoy no happiness, that is why they know its meaning. Living a sub-human existence, they know the taste of humanity. That is why they laugh" (p. 32). Thus, Masrur clarifies the subaltern existence of the slaves. The Caliph analyses the laughter and interprets that both the genders' laugh is merged inextricably to create an angelic effect which is

unearthly in nature. Then the Caliph reveals his elitist point of view saying, "They will laugh and I can't. No, no, that can never be" (p. 32). Afterwards, the Caliph is seen adamant to investigate the laughter and says, "I still seem to hear that laughter, Masrur. I want to laugh like that" (p. 33).

5.2 The Investigation of the Caliph, the Discovery and the New Identity of the Subaltern Slave Couple

In the following night, the Caliph with his earnestness and accompanied by Masrur starts the investigation about the source of the laughter and after waiting for a long time, they have discovered the origin of the sound of the laughter. It is ringing from "beyond the wide walls of Qasr-ul-Akhdar" (p. 35). The speciality of the laughter is immeasurable "by its volume" (p. 35). Masrur says, "It could be compared only to the magic of music created by a maestro" (p. 35). The Caliph's overwhelming reaction is recorded in the following question in a whispering tone: "Can human beings laugh like this, especially slaves?" (p. 35) Thus, the slaves, who are the subalterns, are silenced with the beginning of their subalternity. Guha (1982), in his "On Some Aspects of Historiography of Colonial India" opines that the domineering and oppressive discourses of the elites silence the subalterns and to the rulers, the voice of the subalterns is deemed to be secondary. From this perspective, the Caliph's question is well justified.

However, the investigation of the third night proves that a woman is giving gestures to someone to come to her. The Caliph is doubtful whether the woman is his *begum* or some slave-girl. They have discovered the scene in this manner- "Suddenly an African youth came into the room and lay down on the earthen divan. A young Armenian girl followed at his heels and sat by him on the bed. She had a bunch of grapes in her hand" (p. 39). The sound of the laughter of the both has come out of the boundary of the hut and made the entire environment very inviting. The narrator comments, "Tonight's laughter did not know how to come to a stop. Like changing musical scales, the young woman's words merged into her laughter" (p. 40). After this long observation, the Caliph wants to know the identity of the persons and Masrur requests the Caliph not to force him. Hearing the threat from the elitist Caliph Masrur becomes helpless. The Caliph is against any act of adultery in his palace which is also a matter of great disgrace for him. Masrur finally reveals the fact that a poor Armenian slave-girl called Meherjan gets married to an African slave with the help of Begum Zubaida. As a part of the further investigation, the Caliph and his assistant visit the slave quarters in the following night and enter the room of Tatari and Meherjan. As everything is revealed, Tatari is behaving like a subaltern and is ready to encounter his destiny. At this moment, through the court poet Ishak, the Caliph tells that he is delighted to hear the laughter

and has come to reward him. This surprises Tatari but with utmost courage he tries to hide the identity of Meherjan as he says, "Kill me, if you please, Your Majesty, but I cannot answer" (p. 50). Here is the beginning of the voice of the voiceless as he is in love and it is an anti-subaltern attitude. Actually, love for his beloved gives him the power of voice of resistance. To have a voice means to have an identity. Here lies Tatari's sense of self-respect and empowerment and thus he denounces his subalternity against the elite. Tirthankar Roy (2001) points out that the subalterns can alter the elitist historiography through encountering different fronts such as "domination-submission-resistance" (p. 2223). On the contrary, Guha (1982) argues that the subalterns can do it by decoding many ideas of the elitist about the subalterns and eliminating "many of those familiar signs" ("Aspects of Colonial Historiography", p. 1).

However, hearing this opposition of Tatari the Caliph, being unable to check his anger says, "Masrur, the dog is still not answering me, tear out his tongue. Abu Ishaq, look, the slave is rolling on the ground. He is weeping, Abu Ishaq, and yet he is not answering me" (p. 50). In the power nexus and the binary of master-slave relationship it is very much evident that language is a tool to suppress the subordinates. So, it is not unusual when the Caliph calls Tatari a dog and orders to "Kill him. Right now" (p. 50).

5.3 Meherjan's Revelation and the Reaction of the Ruler Caliph

The dramatic come out of Meherjan from the darkness of Tatari's house draws the attention of the Caliph. The unparallel beauty of Meherjan ignites in the Caliph the Freudic tendency of attraction through the pleasure principle and he starts to own Meherjan. But as a committed lover, Meherjan advocates pardon from the ruler to save the life of her beloved Tatari. Now, it is the turn of Tatari to play his role. In the process of enquiry, he boldly proclaims that this lady is his wife. Knowing this the Caliph comments, "You married and didn't care to inform us? I find that slaves have grown too impertinent these days. Because of this, the other day, we had to crush a few slaves to death in the city of Aleppo" (p. 51). This statement of threat testifies the cruelty of a master towards his slaves. Later, Tatari tries to convince the Caliph saying that his poor and low status cannot allow him to invite the ruler of the state which is refuted by the Caliph who says, "Do you know that a slave can neither marry himself nor give his daughter in marriage to anyone without the permission of his master?" (p. 51) Thus, the institutionalization of slavery is in function but Tatari does not know it. Once again, the ruler focuses here on the idea of the master-slave relationship. In this connection, Morrison's (1997) novel *Beloved* can be referred to where the rights of the slaves are brutally denied. In the novel, the old slave Baby Suggs, the protagonist Sethe's mother-in-law,

recalls how she has eight children from six fathers and all the children are taken away from her at the tender age except one. Sethe kills her own daughter Beloved not to encounter the cruel slavery while Paul D, a male slave defines his runaway slave life as “Move. Walk. Run. Hide. Steal and move on” (p. 66). However, a slave cannot but be obedient to the master which Tatari shows later like a subaltern, by surrendering to the Caliph saying, “I am ready for any punishment you may impose, Your Majesty. I deserve the punishment due to a disobedient slave” (p. 51).

Therefore, being a slave and a subaltern, it is a typical mind set-up to sacrifice the self to be slavishly obedient and Tatari is doing so for the time being. But it can also be said that through the relationship with Meherjan he has attained a new self-identity for which he will become a different slave. The sense of possessiveness of the master is once again revealed here when the Caliph says, “A slave-girl of my palace got married and nobody cared to inform me? It is strange indeed” (p. 51). The more the Caliph is conscious of his position, the more he showcases his authoritative power as the ruler and supreme authority of the state. Then, addressing Tatari he says, “Your impertinence has reached the limit. One should tear out the tongues of dogs like you. That’s the treatment you deserve” (p. 52). At this moment Ishaq, the poet remarks, “Those who can speak well and utter good words, can also laugh well” (p. 52). The above statement is further philosophized by Ishaq saying,

Good words are echoes of the soul. They lie in the soul and then gush out from there like a fountain, pure laughter is the physical manifestation of good words...The main source of both laughter and good words is the same (p. 52).

The comment of Ishaq influences the Caliph supremely. In an utter surprise, instead of giving punishment of death penalty, the Caliph says, “I announce to you all that from today the chains binding these two in slavery are shattered to pieces. They are freed of this moment. From now on they are two free citizens of my kingdom” (p. 52).

Now, Tatari’s status is that he is a noble chief but it is meaningless to him. It is also reported to the Caliph that Tatari has not laughed at all since the moment he is given a new status which is, according to Ishaq, because of the absence of Meherjan in Tatari’s life. Ishaq is informed that Meherjan is “making somebody else happy” (p. 58). The poet argues that when a woman is married, according to the scriptures, making someone happy beyond her husband is forbidden. This argument is refuted by the Caliph as he says that Meherjan is a slave-girl and a slave-girl cannot marry someone without the permission of her master and so her marriage is invalid. This explanatory note

of the Caliph shows how a slave master owns a slave. Even the right of marriage is withdrawn as ownership is everything. It is a different kind of total possessiveness through the lens of materialism as the master thinks of the slaves as a material. Thus, the Caliph shares similarities with the schoolteacher in Morrison's *Beloved* (1997) who takes the ownership of slaves from Mr. and Mrs. Garner, the kind masters. The schoolteacher shows every possible way of ownership of the slaves and starts to treat them as material objects.

5.4 Tatari, the Poet and the Caliph as the Authority Vs the Subaltern

The Caliph and the two poets named Atahiya and Nawas are in the garden-estate to hear the laughter. On the insistence of the Caliph, Tatari declares that he is unable to laugh. At this, the Caliph with his authoritative power says, "Tatari, I, the Caliph, personally command you to laugh. We want to hear your laughter. I invited them all to hear the laughter. Would you like to insult me?" (p. 71) Very modestly Tatari denies to laugh. To interpret the multidimensionality of the subalterns as Tatari behaves here, Sumit Sarker (1987) says that there are "different strata coming under the omnibus subaltern category" (p. 278) and this condition of the subaltern is interpreted by Guha (1982) as an "autonomous domain" ("Some Aspects of Historiography", p. 4).

However, the more Tatari shows reluctance to laughter, the more the Caliph is angry and at one stage he says, "You want to insult me before my friends" (p. 71). Then the Caliph orders Masrur to use the sword. In this regard, the intervention of Nawas is timely as he saves Tatari from being killed when he says, "But there is a time for laughter as there is a time for prayer" (p. 71). The following night offers Tatari a new challenge. This time the Caliph has sent Busaina, the most famous dancer of Baghdad, in order to bring back in Tatari the laughter. The dancer tries to produce temptation in the heart of Tatari but fails. As an effect Busaina reveals to Tatari that if she is unable to produce in him laughter, she is going to be killed in the garden-estate. Tatari explains that like him she is also suffering from the sickness of the soul and the only way to be cured is to die.

Later, Busaina's committing suicide instigates the Caliph to suspect Ttadari who calls him an "ungrateful wretch" (p. 87). Now, the Caliph, along with Masrur, has decided to investigate the matter and visits the spot. The Caliph's anger is unleashed once again as he says,

...Masrur, ask the son of a bitch, that bloody bastard to be taken away to the prison. Take him to the worst prison of all... He has disgraced me before Nawas. I made him the master of so much of wealth and

property, and yet this bloody son of a slave would not laugh. But I'll yet squeeze his laughter out of him. (p. 87)

This statement once again establishes the master's authoritative attitude to his servant and reflects on how revengeful the ruler is when his own interest is at stake.

5.5 The Revolt of Nawas: A Subaltern Can Also Speak

In the chapter XIX Tatari's trial is arranged at the Caliph's Darbar as he is held responsible for the death of Busaina and the punishment declared is death sentence which is opposed by Nawas. Then he pleads forgiveness for Tatari saying that the trial lacks proofs against the murderer. The Caliph reacts to it saying, "But the slave did not say a word in self-defence. He never opened his lips. Does that not amount to confessing his own guilt?" (p. 96) Thus, the voicelessness of Tatari begins as a subaltern. Then, Nawas has disagreed the Caliph as he says, "That black slave is like black stone. Silent, motionless. Black stone cannot be faked. It is only the white stone and glittering stones that can be easily faked" (p. 96). The Caliph takes the interpretation of Nawas as a token of arrogance and orders Masrur to kill Nawas.

Nawas's revolt is unlike a subaltern who is here with a powerful voice that recalls Spivak's theory on subalternity. To quote Nawas,

But please remember that today I am offering my life in order to save Baghdad from being destroyed; for I love Baghdad, Baghdad, my native land. At least in future there will be someone who can say that Baghdad did not bow down before injustice. Your Majesty... (p. 97).

Thus, in front of all the dignitaries Nawas has proved that the Caliph is doing injustice not only to him but also to Tatari. Here the author tries to give a limited scale of power of voice to Nawas and thus, allows a subaltern to speak. Nawas's voice is quite unexpected to the Caliph. Later, Nawas's voice takes a new height when he utters,

Therefore, do I raise my head today, against injustice. The seed you are sowing today will one day devour Baghdad. That is why Abu Nawas is giving his life today... "I am a poet, the voice of Eternity. Neither Masrur's sword nor the Amir-ul-Momenin's frowns can touch even a hair of the poet. Love of Baghdad has made me a poet. Love for her has turned me into a martyr... The blade of your sword has touched no man so far. Let it be rid of that disgrace at last. Good bye, Amir-ul-Momenin. (p. 98)

The audience roars up for Nawas who eventually turns out to be a hero. The Caliph, who has been so far unchallenged by anyone, has become upset in his heart. This is an example of Foucauldian idea on power and resistance as he mentioned in *The History of Sexuality* (1998) that at the seat of power there is sure to be the birth of the resistance. Thus, Nawas, who has been very loyal and submissive to the Caliph so far, has become aware of his own self and resisted his own standpoint and voiced out courageously.

5.6 The Trial Scene of Tatari: An Idea of Anti-subalternity

In the chapter XX Tatari is produced in the private chamber of the Caliph. To quote the narrator, “Tatari in chains entered. His whole body, lacerated by cruel lashes of the whip, looked skinned and raw. There were festering wounds on his forehead and cheeks” (p. 100). Thus, the right of marriage for a slave is denied and Tatari is brutally whipped. This brutality reminds us of Frederick Douglass, a celebrated speechmaker and social activist, who in his autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), records how harrowing the life of a slave is. In the Chapter 1, he says, “I have no accurate knowledge of my age (p. 970) and it is the wish of the slave masters to keep their slaves ignorant of the matter. About his parental identity, like other common slaves, he knows nothing. To quote, “...the means of knowing was withheld from me. My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant- before I knew her as my mother” (p. 970). Douglass further says, “I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night” (p. 970). For a slave child death of his mother also remains unknown. Thus, the slaves are historically denied of their rights.

The next scene takes place in the courtyard of the Prison. A bruised Tatari is presented before the Caliph who cannot stand up properly because of the heavy whipping. Finally, Tatari’s physical movements take the attention of all. Slowly he sits on the sand putting down his head between the knees. In a dramatic manner Meherjan, who is now the wife of the Caliph, enters the scene. She considers Tatari as an ordinary disobedient slave and wants to know his identity. Even after questioning again and again by Meherjan, Tatari is as usual silent which makes the Caliph laugh. But Meherjan being irritated utters, “Prisoner, who are you? Please answer me” (p. 109). The reply is given by the Caliph who says that it is Tatari. To Meherjan Tatari is unrecognizable who, according to the Caliph, is a wicked person who has stopped speaking for the last four years. It is Meherjan who asks the Caliph to ensure the death of Tatari instantly but the Caliph declines as he is determined to have a word from Tatari. Now, Meherjan is entreating Tatari to speak while the Caliph is in

laughter. In order to end the sufferings of her beloved, she requests the Caliph to order Masrur to kill Tatari. The Caliph's reply is an example of his sense of cruelty. To quote, "He must be tortured minute by minute, inch by inch of his body" (p. 110).

Now, Meherjan prefers the death of her beloved to free him from sufferings the way Tithonus's death is prayed by his beloved Aurora, the goddess of dawn in Tennyson's poem "Tithonus". Then she reminds Tatari of the romantic conversation on the uniqueness of a slave's love once they had quite long ago. Meherjan extends her two hands towards Tatari which creates a sense of jealousy in the mind of the Caliph. Next, he orders the guards to take Meherjan away who denies to go but is taken away dragging. She calls out Tatari's name loudly again and again in a tone of wail which arouses the voice of Tatari. Actually, his sense of love for Meherjan comes to be alive and with the force of love for his beloved he speaks out, "Meherjan, Meherjan! (And then immediately) Listen, Harun-al-Rashid" (p. 111). This address angers the Caliph very much as it is an expression of dishonour to him as well. Then Masrur is asked to whip Tatari whose final words are, "Listen, Harun-al-Rashid: Money can buy you a slave. It can buy you a slave-girl, but it cannot buy the laughter of a slave" (p. 111). Then he dies. Thus, Tatari's uncompromising negotiations echoes Hemingway's hero Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea* (2004) when he says that man is not made for defeat and he can be destroyed but not be defeated. Again, Tatari's final voice of denial, protest and defiance gives us the idea that a subaltern can also speak though not always and, in this way, Tatari opposes the views of Spivak on the subaltern. Tatari establishes the idea that physically the slaves are bonded to their masters but the soul is always free. The laughter signifies that freedom of the soul of a man. Laughter and good words are the reflection of man's soul which the Caliph lacks in.

5.7 Tatari, Third Space and "Still Activism"

According to the narrator, Tatari is brought from Africa and he is a slave in the palace of the Caliph in Baghdad. In Africa, his homeland, he has been a free human being who loses his that very identity after coming to Baghdad and his new status is subjugation under the slavery system. Thus, he, at his heart, yearns for freedom which creates in him a sense of in-between position. Does he deserve freedom? Should he dream of a common man's life? His existence of life is now in-between the concept of free life in Africa and slavery in Baghdad. Through his relationship with Meherjan he feels for freedom once again which is his new idea of existence.

Postcolonial theorist H. K. Bhabha (2006) analyses the nature of in-between position when he says, “These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain 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 of the idea of society itself” (p. 2). Bhabha points out that having in-between space provides a new platform to a person by which the person can be able to create new identities and in this way, he can redefine his relationship with society. Again, Bhabha’s (1994) theory of the “Third Space of Enunciation” says, “And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves” (p. 39). Thus, to Tatari his African origin is the first space, his coming to Baghdad and becoming a slave is his second space and finally, through his marriage with Meherjan and becoming a rebel against the Caliph is his third space that gives him a different identity.

Tatari’s resistance in the entire novel can also be interpreted from the theory of “still activism” by Kelly Klein (2014), a photographer and activist. To her, the power of stillness is that the body has the ability to interrupt the rule of capital and subjectivity through a means of non-violence which, according to her, is “still activism.” Therefore, this still-activist body is “an alternative mode of being” (211). In the novel, the protagonist Tatari’s mode of protest is a kind of resistance where his body, undergoing a heavy whipping, exercises enormous power of resilience to show the reality of existence which is his love for Meherjan. His physicality exhibits “body as articulate matter” that has a tremendous role in “constructing both individual agency and sociality” (395) as Susan Leigh Foster, a choreographer and scholar conceives. To her, “active stillness” is “not a state of non-action but rather a kind of motion” (412). Thus, we can say that even the silence that Tatari displays in the trial scene or while he is brutally whipped is louder enough to unsettle the throne of the Caliph. This challenge is also shown by non-action body motion as his protest is a kind of non-violence one.

6. Conclusion

The novel *The Laughter of a Slave* is a tale of love, life and sacrifice with the tone of protest against the Caliph who embodies cruelty, jealousy and revenge. Being a subaltern with the status of a slave, Tatari proves the fact that he can laugh the way a man can which the Caliph cannot. The author, through this novel, actually voices his protest against the then cruel Pakistani authority. However, the ruler is not only hostile and authoritative to his slaves but also to his ministers and wives. That’s why the novelist informs us that in the heart of Begum Zubaida, a rebel heart lives and so she hates her husband, the Caliph. The court poet Nawas, also a subaltern but to an extent superior to the slaves,

is presented before us as a man of voice against the injustices done to Tatari. This character turns out to be a blow for the Caliph who is never challenged earlier. But the final blow comes from Tatari, who, in an unprecedented bold outlook, has revolted against the Caliph by addressing him with his name. Tatari, being a subaltern, gains his voice finally which gives him a new identity, an identity of freedom in the form of disobeying the command of the ruler. His awareness comes through Bhabha's Third Space idea that has redefined his existence. Thus, the protagonist Tatari is a representative figure to the subaltern with his power of voice.

The author Shaukat Osman also shows us how a common slave has gone through a radical transformation through love which triggers in him the power of voice. The protagonist's deconstruction of power paradigm of the authority exhibits the undiscovered and underrated power of a subaltern. This portrayal paves the way to look into the Bengali literature from a unique postcolonial perspective.

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