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## **Locating the Subaltern Voice through Pre-Capitalist Modes of Exchange in R.K. Narayan's *The Guide***

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### **Abstract**

The subaltern as a subject has undergone several transformations on the path to being established as both a historiographical tour-de force and an enabling weapon in the hands of South Asian bricoleurs. In its present avatar it continues to be contextualized and decontextualized in spaces of contestation in post-colonial scholarship, with the noticeable departure that these sites of contestation have now graduated from the periphery to somewhere near the center of postcolonial interlocution notwithstanding the irony that the true voiceless subaltern remains rooted to the margins. It was Antonio Gramsci who first anchored the term to its present ideological bearing, paving the way for Oriental bricoleurs to dress it in the context of South Asian and Oriental insurgency. Ranajit Guha alongside eight collaborators, who would come to be known as the Subaltern Studies Group published a series of essays titled *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (1997/1982) which provided the much needed impetus for Gayatri Spivak's contextualization of the term in her seminal study-*Can the Subaltern Speak*. Gayatri Spivak is well aware of the strict confines within which Marx operates. Marx's implied reader is necessarily 'the worker within capitalist logic. My focus is on Exchange or rather a rethinking of the idea of exchange through as a possible means of escaping subalternity through the much documented figure of Rosie in R. K Narayan's *The Guide* (2011/1958) I also want to explore why it is problematic to dogmatically persist with the foundational binary of an economic base and ideational superstructure.

**Keywords:** Bourdieu, Karatani, Revisionism, Subaltern Studies, Vehkehr.

### **Introduction**

Neo-Marxist critics have gone to great lengths to highlight the rigidity of Marx's foundational doctrine. Perhaps Marx himself provided enough critical fodder to revisionists by using the loaded term 'Verkehr' in his *The German Ideology*. The precedence of writing "productive forces and intercourse", over "productive forces and relations of production" prefigures the neo-Marxist critical evolution from "modes of production to modes of exchange" (Marx and Engels, 2004/1932). Verkehr in the sense Marx uses it is an inclusive term that could mean anything from coitus to a martial conflict, not to mention relations of production and trade and commerce. The underlying principle in all these instances is a form of exchange. Kojin

## Locating the Subaltern Voice through Pre-Capitalist Modes of Exchange in R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*

Karatani underlines the openness of this exchange in his *An Introduction to Modes of Exchange* (2017): “What I call modes of exchange includes both relations between nature and humans and relations between humans.” (2017) Karatani is interested in the problematic relationship between the economic base and the ideational superstructures. Karatani's belief in the relative autonomy of the ideational superstructure is underpinned by historical ruptures such as the rise of the Nazis in 1930s. The victory of the Nazis is important because for Karatani because it was fashioned to be counter revolution, the unlikely triumph of a force that emanated from the political ideational superstructure, in this instance racial essentialism. (2017) The reason I call this a rupture is that it compelled the conservative Marxists to rethink the conventional hierarchy of the base and superstructures eventually leading to a renewed interest in psychoanalysis. Incidentally Freud was unabashedly incredulous of the rigid outlines of Freud's historical method,

The strength of Marxism clearly lies, not in its view of history or the prophecies of the future that are based on it, but in its sagacious indication of the decisive influence which the economic circumstances of men have upon their intellectual, ethical and artistic attitudes. A number of connections and implications were thus uncovered, which had previously been almost totally overlooked. But it cannot be assumed that economic motives are the only ones that determine the behaviour of human beings in society. The undoubted fact that different individuals, races and nations behave differently under the same economic conditions is alone enough to show that economic motives are not the sole dominating factors. It is altogether incomprehensible how psychological factors can be overlooked where what is in question are the reactions of living human beings; for not only were these reactions concerned in establishing the economic conditions, but even under the domination of those conditions men can only bring their original instinctual impulses into play—their self-preservative instinct, their aggressiveness, their need to be loved, their drive towards obtaining pleasure and avoiding unpleasure. In an earlier enquiry I also pointed out the important claims made by the super-ego, which represents tradition and the ideals of the past and will for a time resist the incentives of a new economic Situation. (Mann, 1968, p.71)

As a story teller Narayan's narratives serve as repeated reminders of the 1930s India, a time marked by the intermingling of a rigid caste structure with its consequent division of labour and the aspirations of a few who, while still operating within the confines of Marx's historical materialism, still pregnant with aspirations of different forms of 'exchange' that might give them momentary respite from the vicious cycle of commodities. In *The Guide* we see numerous such exchanges which are not strictly bound by the Marx's holy trinity of production, exchange and consumption but also some of the 'psychological factors' that Freud talks about in his critique of Marx's historical method, that precipitates those exchanges.

### **Karatani's Pre-Capitalist Modes of Exchange**

Rosie's anglicized name is symptomatic of her position as the outsider to the order she seeks to enter. Her profession also goes a long way in underpinning her position as an other in a society that continues to undervalue her prowess as a dancer and her academic achievements—she has a Master's degree in Economics—while repeatedly reminding her of her Achilles heel—her inglorious origins. Rosie harbours no illusions about the true nature of her position, which is evident in her early interactions with Raju—“We are viewed as public woman... we are not considered respectable, we are not considered civilized” (Narayan, 2011, p.100). Marco

provides Rosie with an opportunity to finally be considered civilized. Yet it is destined to be an unhappy union because Marco despite his scholarly mien is an embodiment of the same conservative principles that de-legitimizes her agency. Spivak turns her critical attention to the Sati in *Can the Subaltern Speak* (1993/1988) oscillating between two radically converse views which deny the subject their agency in equal measure. The English, in particular, the English men, are collectively represented as saviours, protecting the Indian woman from the clutches of an overtly Patriarchal Hindu community. The other side of the argument is “the women actually wanted to die” (p. 93). Spivak's intention is not to provide a "clinching solution" (p.92) which she readily concedes but to show how both sides of the polemic deny the Indian woman her voice and agency. In *The Guide* Narayan replaces the gun-toting sahib with the binocular-wielding explorer Marco. Raju is simultaneously amused and perplexed and variously describes him as “grotesque creature.” (p.26) Marco's real name is never revealed in the narrative because of the implications of his sobriquet. For Rosie, the brown devdasi, the scholarly Marco, is akin to the colonial saviour, a means to catapult herself above and beyond the clutches of the patriarchal Hindu community that has denied her agency. When it becomes evident that Marco has little interest in either his wife or her art, Raju tempts her with chimerical visions of liberty and agency. Eventually Marco doesn't turn out to be a saviour when he abandons Rosie who must now turn to Raju for protection. From a Marxist perspective these are all interesting developments because what we are seeing here is essentially a series of exchanges. Karatani in his critique of Marx's historical materialism, has exposed his relative reluctance to critically examine modes of exchange in Pre-Capitalist societies. Despite Marx's prophetic belief that future communism will see a 'return in a higher dimension' (Karatani, 2017) of pre-capitalist clans he never got around to explaining how that process shall be crystallized. The exchanges that materialize within a capitalist society are predominantly the exchange of commodities but the dogma of historical materialism problematizes any attempts at a proper understanding of the nature of exchange in pre-capitalist societies. The first answers were provided not by a Marxist but by a French sociologist Marcel Mauss. Mauss' *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (Mauss, 1994/1925) is a seminal study of how gifts were exchanged in archaic clans and communities, particularly in Polynesia and the American Northwest.

What they exchange is not solely property and wealth, movable and immovable goods, and things economically useful. In particular, such exchanges are acts of politeness: banquets, rituals, military services, women, children, dances, festivals, and fairs, in which economic transaction is only one element, and in which the passing on of wealth is only one feature of a much more general and enduring contract. Finally, these total services and counter-services are committed to in a somewhat voluntary form by presents and gifts, although in the final analysis they are strictly compulsory, on pain of private or public warfare. We propose to call all this the system of total services. The purest type of such institutions seems to us to be characterized by the alliance of two phratries in Pacific or North American tribes in general, where rituals, marriages, inheritance of goods, legal ties and those of self-interest, the ranks of the military and priests—in short everything, is complementary and presumes co-operation between the two halves of the tribe. (Mauss, 1994, p. 6)

What we take from this passage is that the exchanges that took place between archaic clans were not strictly economic exchanges but were closer in form and principle to 'verkehr'. These exchanges also led to alliances between clans. Karatani builds upon Mauss' studies and creates a more systematic hierarchy of exchanges. He calls the mode of exchange of commodities as "mode of exchange C" distinct from the "mode of exchange A" which is the

## Locating the Subaltern Voice through Pre-Capitalist Modes of Exchange in R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*

label he uses for the reciprocal exchange of gifts. (Karatani,2014, p.5) However it is the "mode of exchange B" that I'm more interested in for the purpose of this paper. Karatani explains this mode of exchange as follows:

It has its beginnings in conquest and violent domination, but it can only become a sustained form of rule when the ruled willingly submit to it. This becomes possible when they receive protection in return for their submission—in other words, when the relation of ruler/ruled becomes a kind of exchange. This gives rise to a form of 'power' other than violence. This power binds not only the ruled, but also the rulers, because if the rulers are unable to protect the ruled, they will lose their position as rulers. In this sense, this relationship is bilateral (reciprocal), so that in a sense it is related to mode of exchange A. I call this form of exchange mode B. Just as with mode of exchange A, a kind of non-material 'power' is at work in mode B. (Karatani, 2017)

The web of exchanges that take place in Narayan's narrative, particularly the ones involving Rosie are imbued with a non-material power. Since "mode of exchange A" also deals with an exchange of gifts that are not limited to but predominantly include commodities which may or may not be fetishized or imbued with mana—"its magical, religious, and spiritual force" (Mauss, p.10) the exchanges in Narayan's narrative can be better explained through "mode of exchange B" where alliances are forged through the reciprocation of abstract principles rather than material commodities. The idea of the ruled willingly submitting to the ruler is of course nothing and both Marx and Engels, the latter in particular, spoke about false consciousness as the ruling classes imposing their ideology on the subordinate classes. However the exchanges that Rosie engages in do not presuppose her consent through ideology or deceit. She marries Marco since she believes it provides her with an opportunity to find a semblance of agency. For Rosie agency would naturally be found through the performance of her art. What we therefore see is a mimicking of the form of exchange that brought archaic clans together. The prerequisite of such an exchange is that must take place between two un-equals, the ruler and the ruled. In other words, Rosie enters into an exchange with Marco where she is offered protection in exchange for submission. It is an exchange that is destined to fail because what Rosie truly desires is agency rather than protection. Simultaneously Marco's expectations of Rosie's submission are problematized by Raju's intrusion. While Marco pores over his studies and becomes increasingly distant, Raju fawns on Rosie taking every opportunity to remind her of her dancing prowess. This in many ways is reminiscent of Bimala's tempestuous romance with Sandip in Tagore's *Home and the World* (Tagore, 2018/1916). Much like Rosie, Bimala enters in a domestic exchange with Nikhilesh, who despite being well-intentioned can only offer his spouse protection and the trappings of aristocracy in exchange for loyalty. Yet what Bimala is looking for is agency rather than mere protection and this gives Sandip the opportunity to sweep her off her feet and lead her into the turbulent world of the Swadeshi movement. Both Sandip and Raju prey upon unfruitful exchanges and offer the beleaguered subject glimpses of agency. Rosie's dalliance with Raju is therefore not so much a consequence of her estrangement with Marco or her feelings for Raju in whom she finds a listener more than a lover. Raju realizes he must force the moment-

It was nearing midnight. The man at the hotel desk watched us without showing any interest... 'Shall I go away?' I asked in a whisper. 'Yes, Goodnight,' She said feebly. 'May I not come in?' I asked, trying to look my saddest. 'No, no. Go away,' she said. But on an impulse I gently pushed her out of the way, and stepped in and locked the door on the world. (p.104)

Marco's abandonment of Rosie naturally leads Rosie to reach out to Raju but unlike her previous alliance with Marco, Rosie now seeks protection rather than agency. Raju offers her shelter and protection and through a circuitous path eventually a window to agency by offering her talents to the world as her manager. How does this fit into Karatani's structured model of exchanges? While Rosie is initially offered protection and eventually agency through her art, how does Raju benefit from this exchange. The initial impression the reader gets is that Raju has found the woman he desires and therefore when seen in the context of Karatani's structured model of modes of exchange, there is an exchange of abstractions, protection and agency is offered to Rosie in exchange for companionship which closely approximates the "mode of exchange B". However as the narrative unfolds it becomes increasingly difficult for us to look at this exchange independent of the forces of material production that informs Marx's historical materialism. Raju quickly realizes the monetary benefits of his dalliance and ascends the social order. Raju revels in his new found wealth but Rosie grows increasingly tired of "all the talk of inferior and superior"(p. 205) gradually retreating into her shell. Her disappointment is the disappointment of an artist whose art has been commodified. Rosie's tryst with agency is short lived yet it is significant in so far as it is a reminder that the markers of subalternity are primarily products of an ordered capitalist framework and it is through a negation of material modes of exchange and a retelling of the ideational exchanges that underlined pre-capitalist communities that brings agency within the realms of possibility for a truly subaltern figure.

### **Bourdieu's Social Capital**

Pierre Bourdieu's works deal with production and reproduction of power and the means by which the dominant class retains its hegemony. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Bourdieu, 2015), he talks about cultural signifiers which distinguish the middle class from those that lie beneath them. He fashions his method in a manner where culture, knowledge and economics are not mutually exclusive fragments but continuously refer to each other in his the exploration of class relations. He later goes on to make the following crucial distinctions:

A science of the economy of practices that does not artificially limit itself to those practices that are socially recognised as economic must endeavour to grasp capital, that 'energy of social physics'...in all of its different forms...I have shown that capital presents itself under three fundamental species (each with its own subtypes), namely, economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992 p.118–19)

As a Picaro Raju enjoys a head-start over his literary counterparts in so far as he has no qualms about adopting deceit as his ally in his zealous pursuit of economic capital. Bakha and Rakha struggle to cope with a series of rejections in a social order that dehumanizes them in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (Anand, 1935/2014) Munoo. The protagonist of Anand's *Coolie* (Anand, 1936/1994) dies a tragic death after a series of unfortunate events. Yet Raju survives. Not only does he survive, he thrives as he adapts himself to a series of roles. The web of exchanges that precipitate Raju's meteoric rise enable him to accumulate economic capital, particularly as Rosie's manager but much like Rosie's tryst with agency, it is short-lived. The problem is perhaps that Raju's economic capital is not necessarily coterminous with his social capital. Bourdieu defines social capital as follows- "Social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and

## Locating the Subaltern Voice through Pre-Capitalist Modes of Exchange in R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*

recognition”(Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.119)

One might argue that Raju does forge a fair share of connections as Rosie's manager including two judges, a few politicians and mill owners. Bourdieu's model though seems to suggest that social capital-and here it is distinct from economic capital which is largely a subjective enterprise-is an exclusionary device that is used by those that have imbibed it to keep out those that don't belong in the clique. Raju despite accumulating economic capital clearly doesn't belong. The men of money that form a part of Raju's make-belief circle of influence have acquired social capital in abundance and are limited to Karatani's mode of exchange C, that is the merely the material exchange of commodities. Raju's meeting with Velan and the villagers provides him with another opportunity to tie the loose ends. The role of the Guru, or spiritual guide unlike the roles he has played before, is thrust upon him. Through a fortuitous turn of events Raju suddenly finds himself with an opportunity to redeem himself but in order to do that he must undergo a trial by fire-he must fast to bring the rains and end the famine. What follows is another instance of an exchange that appears to be asynchronous with Marxist fetish of commodities, but rather an abstract ideational exchange. This is a retelling of the archaic exchange of submission-of Velan and the village folk- in return for protection-of their interests-an exchange which imbues the protector with 'power', without resorting to a violent ideological imposition.

### Conclusion

Raju and Rosie are both posited on the margins of a rigid social structure. While Raju is a picaro continuously inventing new ways to improve his lot, Rosie struggles to exuviate the label of a devdasi. Yet, remarkably both are able to find what they are looking for. Rosie seeks agency and finds it in the garb of Nalini. Raju zealously pursues, finds and accumulates economic capital only to lose it all because it is not concomitant with his social capital. It is only through a turn of fate that he is able to secure what he truly craves, recognition through social capital. These are made possible only through a series of exchanges which negate the normative order of the Marxist historical materialism. In other words what we see is a set of exchanges that are not strictly material but rather ideational in nature. These exchanges bear the mark of a pre-capitalist order and give new meaning to Marx's prophetic statement that the future of communism shall see a return of pre-capitalist clans "in a higher order". It is in this higher order that we can perhaps find the elusive subaltern voice, which lies not in the center of an ordered capitalist framework dominated by an exchange of commodities but in its periphery which is the site of non-material modes of exchange where we see a continuous churning of the archaic and the industrial.

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