

***Fyataru and Subaltern War Cries: Nabarun Bhattacharya and the Rebirth
of the Subject***

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Fyataruder hatekhoru mane oi bhangchur, chherachheri, hisu kora. [fyatarus are committed to sabotage, subversion and urination at the establishment] (Nabarun Bhattacharya 2004: 14)

Fyatarura attack kore, bhangchur kore, nongra kore but never churi [fyatarus attack, subvert, dirtyfy but never do they resort to corruption] (2004: 24)

Ki nirjib, ki nirjib

Nirghat oti budhhijib [how lifeless, how indifferent to the surrounding plight!! he must be an intellectual] (Kobi Purandar Bhat, Nabarun Bhattacharya 2013: 38)

In his just published work, *The Reject: Community, Politics, and Religion after the Subject* (2015), Irving Goh critically engages with the discursive narratives of the contemporary post-ideological age and elucidates his theoretic observations by addressing Jean Luc Nancy's question *Qui vient après le sujet*, or *who comes after the subject*? Needless to say that Nancy's question comes in the wake of the so called dissolution or the "liquidation" of the subject. This critique or deconstruction of subjectivity is a fall out of poststructural scepticism of the totalised, unified cogito that ultimately borders on to the male, colonising, Euro-centric sovereign self/subject. This heteronormative subject is liquidated to accommodate the polysemic or heteroglossic selves who are de-subjectified or deflated of all totalitarian hubris. This hypothesis of the deconstructed self however led to a sense of groundlessness or paralogy, a condition that disavows any effort to constitute a different grammar of subjectivity, an entity that envision a non-sovereign but dissenting agency, a dissident self that reconfigures the contours of subjectivity beyond the position of

tyrannising power. Such is the notion of Badiouian subject who composes a counter-narrative of dissident act – the act of subtraction as mentioned by Slavoj Žižek that disentangles the self from the hegemonic logic of global capital. Following Irving Goh we can call it the *act of reject*, the act of dissent. In what follows I would argue that Nabarun Bhattacharya, the radical voice of literary Bolshevism in Bengal demonstrates such notions of the *act of reject*, the act of subtraction. His fictive dissenting subjects, the *fyatarus*, the *choktars* typify such rebellious and dissident roles in a post-ideological era when complicity and conformity are rewarded as the norm. The subsequent sections would dwell on the Nabarun, his legacy of literary crusade, his interrogation of the status quo and his composition of counter-currents of subjectivities.

With the recent untimely demise of Nabrun Bhattacharya, the Sahitya Academy award winning author from Bengal, the literary fraternity has lost a firebrand writer who was a revolutionary saboteur and a radical voice in the true sense of the term. He was someone who redefined and deepened the mode of subaltern representation by scripting the *prose of counter insurgency* through literature. The present excursus pays homage to this noted maverick writer of dissidence and attempts an analysis of the singularity of Nabarun's fictional domain with specific references to some of his best known fictional works such as *Herbert*, *Fyataru* and *Kangal Malsat*. All these three works constitute and explicate his prototypical subaltern anti-heroes such as *fyatarus* and *Choktars* and while doing that they emerge as brilliant metaphorisation of dissent and disgust at our contemporary socio-political praxis. With the untimely demise of Nabarun we have lost a writer whose tireless mission has been to articulate the collective sense of disparagement and disgust at the pervasive ideology of subjugation and willing enslavement. While the popular literary trends of the day have colluded with the hegemonic narrative of global capital that prevents the litterateur to coronate revolutionary anarchism or insurgency, Nabarun has consistently caused epistemic tremors through his overt advocacy of radical violence and systemic change. His literary bolshevism and social commitment elevated him to a unique locus of artistic activism that abhors all forms of aesthetic compromise in the name of decorum and aestheticism. Nabarun, like his mother Mahasweta Devi and his father Bijan Bhattacharya has sharpened and reinforced the idea of the writer as the literary crusader, as the emancipatory agent and when the elitist cult of the writer is being valorised and appropriated by the ideology of the market, Nabarun through his prose works has foregrounded the originary dissident *avatar* of the

writer whose sole objective is to unmask the process of shameless reification of the life-world. In doing that Nabarun was influenced in a great way by the Russian anti-establishment writer Mikhail Bulgakov who was also noted for his rants against the systemic norms.

His novel *Herbert* got him the Sahitya Academy award in 1997 and both *Herbert* and *Kangal Malsat* have been screened as films for their powerful thematic, but what makes Nabarun such a compelling voice in contemporary literature is not the recognitions lavished on him through prestigious governmental awards or his popularity in box office hits but his scathing critique and vitriolic dark humour in scripting the gory details of social anomalies generated under the logic of global capital and consequent non-ethicality. In fact Nabarun through his fictional outpourings has captured the bizarre canvas of the contemporary Waste Land where human beings cannibalise other fellow beings in the name of *laissez faire* and where the state has failed to provide the necessary succour for the needy and the suffering multitude. While many others before him have also engaged with such issues of state coercion, social anomalies and economic Darwinianism, Nabarun's uniqueness lies in the radical brilliance and efficacy with which he captured the state of collective angst, existential cynicism and economic disparities of a society that valorises the doctrine of the simulacrum and hedonistic self-enclosure to conscript the ideology of status quo and conformism. Nabarun had often been accused of anarchism and vulgarity for his prolific use of slangs and street words in his novels and for his overt endorsement of violence as a means of rebellious change in society, but such criticism ignores the fact that his literary diatribes are the fall out of the reigning injustices and facades of a shameless system that endures and justifies all forms of social misrule and anomalies. For Nabarun, nothing could be more vulgar and anarchic than the continued endurance of poverty and other forms of social coercions.

What can a writer do, when she/he is pitted against such social and systemic apathies? Should she be a mere chronicler of the existential blues, scripting in the process a fictional testament of her times? In that way all literary works are attempting that and Nabarun's is no exception but what distinguishes him from his contemporaries or even from his illustrious predecessors is the singularity of fictional rage potential and the vehemence and intensity of critique that he brought in capturing the agonies and tribulations of the marginalised sections of society. He did not stop there, the simmering anger of the subaltern outsider, the bizarre absurdity of the social fabric and the unbearable indifference of the reigning bourgeoisie to

the predicament of fellow human beings – all these are concretised in the fictional narratives and in the robust invectives of his anti-heroes who are subaltern themselves. In that way Nabarun succeeded in carving a niche for his own *genre* of writing, a *genre* which cannot be characterised by any specific school of Bengali fictional writing. It is a curious mix of the agitprop, the magic real, the absurd *gharana*, activism and the carnivalesque. One can find few parallels of Nabarun in Indian literary tradition and his unique creative domain emerges as a powerful weapon for dissent and constitutes what Jacques Rancière called, a *dissensual sensorium* (Rancière 2010, 119). The subsequent section would dwell on this role of activism and literary critique vis-a-vis the works of Nabarun Bhattacharya.

Fiction as *Dissensual Sensorium* and *Faytaru* as Subjectivity

The *dispositif* of globalization has unleashed an unquestioning hegemon of marketised kitsch culture that nibbles at the very ethos of resistance and agency and as the entire socius is subsumed under the logic of global capital, the ideology of conformism and subservience prevents the birth of subjectivity and even literary and artistic representations too fail to constitute a counter-narrative of anti-capital but amidst this hegemonic ambience of conformism, Nabarun Bhattacharya emerged as the rare voice of epistemic radicality and subversion. In his fictional works such as *Herbert*, *Lubdhak*, *Fyataru*, *Kangal Malsat*, or in his book of poems, *Ei Mrittu Upottoka Amar Desh Noi*, etc he explored the possibility of the constitution of a materialist ontology or a constitutive ontology of dissent through literature. Nabarun through the consolidation of resistant literary outpourings has substantiated the notion of an artistic sensorium that constitutes a singular aesthetico-political ontology of radicality. When the topoi of a constitutive utopia look retreating, one can argue for forging the contours of new beings and new singularities through art and one may seek to probe, in the light of Nabarun's works, into the immanent and constituent potential of literature that can unleash an antagonistic praxis of self-liberation or can coronate the sovereignty of the social collective capable of composing a coherent project of revolutionary transformation in the age of global capital. Reading Nabarun, one may propose to enquire if literature can be seen as the constituent power articulating the desires of the multiplicity of human singularities or *multitudo* whose collective power produces the world of *counter power*. Drawing on the idea of *aesthetic politics* (Rancière 2006) which suggests a foundational drive for subjectivity or a new temporality of *vis viva* or mutating constituent power of living

creative labour, one may wish to see if literature can be liberated from epistemic subjugation by foregrounding their singular power to forge a new plank of *aesthetic sensorium*, a new domain of artistic metaphysics which helps in launching a counter-hegemonic historiography to reinstate the small voices of history, voices that attend to the pre-colonial idea of the *Gemeinschaft* or community that undo the univocity of the current globalised elitist sign system. Nabarun through his explosive literary invectives exactly does the same, always striving to subvert the elitist sign system through a staunch critique of the reigning epistemic hegemon. While the gentrified middle class of “aspirational India” are bewitched by the catchy slogan of “India Shining,” forgetting thereby the reality of poverty, farmer’s suicide, economic exploitation and political genocide, Nabarun would play the bloody spoil sport and would remind us,

Ei mrittu upottoka amar Des noi [I do not call this valley of death my country] (Nabarun Bhattacharya 2004)

Herbert hodhis pachhe. Ebar take dapate hobe, Binur somoy esechhilo, ebar tar somoy. Sob landobhondo kore dite hobe, nokrachhokra kore, faratfai kore biswasansare ekta tandov lagie dite hobe. [Herbert could see a beginning, now he has to take the plunge, Binu also had his time, now is his. He has to subvert everything, he has to usher in a revolution in the world] (1993, 37)

*Angabaho Das, ore angabaho das/sarajibon badhli anti/chhirla *** ghas/
Angabaho dasmohasoi, angabaho das/ jotoi takas anre anre/ hotat ese dhukbe
***/bamboo vilar reckto killer/gant pakano bans/ angabaho dasre amar
angabaho das.*

[Hey Subservient slaves, you subservient slaves/ all your life you have amassed your own wealth/ have torn your ***/subservient slaves, subservient slaves/ whatever you do to plot your own privileges/all of a sudden would you be hit in your ***/the bamboo of resistance would kill you/subservient slaves] (2013, 69)

In the above lines, Nabarun is at his ruthless best to unmask the selfish subservience of the privileged classes and his pungent use of the four letter words are designed to subvert and to dislodge the spineless colluders from their comfort zones. Binu as mentioned by Herbert in the above lines was a Naxalite and he died in fake police encounters while attempting to usher in a classless egalitarian world, Binu's sacrifice is not lost on Herbert as it is lost on today's younger generation of India who are drugged with Bollywood and other forms of mindless hedonism. It is a strange world where farmers commit suicide as they fail to repay loans and the privileged classes continue to have their cushioned fundom. What a writer needs to undo this criminality of indifference and injustice is a new *dissensual politics* of aesthetics and in Nabarun one encounters such a promise of dissent. In his *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière argued that we need to rethink aesthetics as 'the invention of new forms of life' (Rancière 2006, 25). Art as politics is thus a manifestation of what Rancière calls *dissensus*, or a gap in the sensible itself. Exemplifying the notion of such aesthetic politics or the spirit of *dissensual sensorium*, Nabarun in his fiction literally bludgeons the capillaries of power and the ideologies of exploitation through a brutal use of semantic assaults and invectives against the bourgeoisie. His protagonists of rebellion, the *Fyatarus* or *Choktars* consist of social outcasts or mysterious members of the urban underbelly who resort to macabre mechanisms of subversion and sabotage to undo the matrix of power and legitimacy. Their overt mission is to disrupt the capitalist order or the hegemonised narrative of capitalist legitimacy. Nabarun demonstrates how we, the so called citizens of this country are so over-enchanted with the seductive narrative of the contemporary liberal democratic doctrine that we have forgotten to dissent at all on the aporias of *laissez faire*,

*Sei bangali aaj trosto beraler moto, vito mergerer naya machher bajare chokkor
mare o mayo mayo koria krondon kore. Bangalir lom poritechhe, lej veja o Gof
ja ache tahate ta deoa somvob noi.*

[The fire brand Bengalis of the yesteryear are scared to protest today, move about frantically like a panic stricken cat in the fish market, Bengalis today are devoid of their valour and the remnants of their rage potential are inadequate to be concretised into meaningful dissent] (2013: 49)

This total taming and complete de-radicalization of the citizenry has been discursified as the norm of the day and Nabarun has mercilessly blasted our self-enclosed, de-politicised

selves through his brigade of *fyatarus* or the subaltern guerrilla vanguards who are the magical rebellious bodies of immanence rising from the netherworld - the small non-voices of history, the *Vodis*, the *Madans*, the *D.Ks*, the *Bodilalas*, the *Bechamonis* - names which reveal their non-elite eerie origins. They all Calibanise, as the Shakespearean protagonist of the same name did, curse and rally against their exploiters and strive to script a counter-narrative of revolution. In fact *Kangal Malsat* which can be translated as the *war cries of the beggars*, is the fictional name of an assault submarine which the *fyatarus* are fashioning to surreptitiously launch a massive revolutionary onslaught against the current systemic structure. The *shenanigans* of this ideological *coup d`etat* are the *fyatarus* and *Choktars*, the bizarre supernatural figures consisting of former Naxalites, police informers, ghostly murderers; corpses – all bare bodied and briefly clad subaltern entities and the ghostly womenfolk of their homes also help them in amassing gun powder, their spectral urchins too have a role in this revolutionary arsenal stock piling. All these eerie figures from the netherworld who appear ghostly to our elite eyes are actually real and non-transcendental, they have a flesh and blood existence and to the subaltern, unfed, unclad skeletal urchins of this world, *Kangal Malsat*, the revolutionary agent would offer the following

Pottasium Nitrate, sulfur, coal (2013, 52)

All these are the constituent elements of gun powder and articulate overt advocacy of revolutionary violence to register protest, something that does not, according to Nabarun, come within the purview of traditional literary paradigms. (2013, 52) In the novel, *Kangal Malsat* we also come across the following identity card flaunted by the *fyatarus* that explicitly endorses arms struggle to usher in systemic change,

AKU. 47

(Ekti Bangali Protisthan)

Proprietor: Sri Vodi Sarkar, Srimati Bechamoni Sarkar

Financial Advisor: Michael Kolashnikov

Accountant: Sri Nolen (2013, 59)

One may go on quoting profusely more instances of anarchic subversion of our elitist fetish for gentrification and conformity from Nabarun and in that way Nabarun`s works reinforce the artistic *dissensual sensorium* through the subversive agency of the *fyatarus*, the dissenters. In what follows we would see how Nabarun`s *genre* of dissident literature has

been capable to cause the epistemic rupture necessary to undo the cognitive hegemony induced by global capital.

Subaltern War Cries, Slangs and Upper Class Hypocrisy

Nabarun's best known works, *Herbert*; *Kangal Malsat* (War Cries of Beggars), *Fyataru Bombachak o Onnanno* are testaments of the prevalent socio-economic injustice, the suppressed agonies of the marginalized and also the war cries of the subalternised sufferers. They are brilliant documentations of the cruel and shallow lives of the bourgeoisie and Nabarun explicates on all these to articulate how collusive we all are in perpetuating the current *zeitgeist* of unabashed consumerism, injustice and self-interest. The poignancy in the portrayal of such gloomy ground reality does not fail to provide a severe jolt to our slumbering consciousness or to our complicity with the forces of domination and the sure-footed after effects of such revelation are the birth of subjectivity that causes subtraction from the networks of hegemony. This clarion call for revolutionary violence which is described as "*chakti ka khel*" is accompanied by its justificatory logic,

Aakas – alo – jol – bayu – char
E sokole Jodi thake odhikar
Sob manuser bhumete kebol
Du char joner rohibe dokhol?

[The sky, the light, water and air- if all are entitled to enjoy these four natural resources to survive, then why are they being exclusively usurped by the privileged class?] (2013, 92)

Given this pervasive logic of injustice and coercion, what do we, the average population, do to stall the process of exploitation? The answer is we do nothing and this continuation of subjugation and plunder of the many by the privileged few has been possible because of our servility and lack of resistance. Nabarun's *fyatarus* sound a scathing caution,

Uritechhe haans, urichhe bolta, uritechhe vimrul,
Nitombo des adhaka dekhile futaiibe tara hul
Mohakas theke gu kheko sakun hagitechhe tobo gai,

Bangali sudhui khochhor noi, tadupori osohai

[Ducks are flying, so are the deadly insects/if our bottoms are unclad, then they may sting our uncovered buttocks/ from the sky, the vultures who feed on shit is aiming his own excreta on us/ The Bongs are not just abominable but are helpless beyond redemption] (2013, 98)

This is indeed savage stuff by our so called civilized and constitutional norms and the normative standards of our literary canon do not allow such wild vitriolic vocabulary, but Nabarun and his *fyatarus* would exactly look for that - sabotaging, subverting the elite canon, the normative codes so that a cognitive and epistemic tremor take place and we, the gentry wake up from our comfort zones to encounter the following question

Joto nari, joto nor

Poria Naboni dhor

Uru uru mone dei hama

Fyataru lukie thake

Pakhna gutie rakhe

Tar gaye keno chhera jama?

[All men, all women fetishize in reading pot boilers/ are on the throes of gluttony and bliss/ the fyatarus watch unseen, this disparity in the distribution of joy/ and thinks why has he got a torn, shabby attire/ while the privileged handful enjoy the surplus?](2004: 101)

Such a scathing critique of the existing system is further reinforced when Nabarun even refuses to spare God, the almighty of the allegation of complicity,

Bhagaban gachhe chhilo

Huku huku dak dilo

Gachh vora ata chhilo

Sob ata Bhoga nilo

[God was on the tree/ he chuckled and sounded a whistle/ the tree was full of fruits/ all the fruits were possessed only by Bhoga, the privileged] (2004, 114)

Here Bhoga, the colloquial version of the capitalist usurper coalesces with God, the almighty and divine providence is painted in the dark shadow of collusion, God and Evil are shown as party to the same act of usurpation of the poor. The only deliverer, the sole source of succor for the poor then is the *fyataru*, the subaltern saboteur, who keeps alive the dream of relief, the possibility of emancipation or at least sustains the element of dissent in a society where complicity and fidelity to the reigning hegemon is the only norm, the only religion to follow. Such aesthetic politics of dissensus is only possible according to Ranciere through the artistic *savoir-faire* and Nabarun`s writings exactly execute that *artivism of dissensus*. A connection between art and politics should be cast in terms of *dissensus* as it designates a reframing of the real by generating a new real or a new critical *dispositif* that denounces the reign of the commodity and its putrid excrements unleashed by global capital. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her recent book, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012) also postulated the need of constituting a *counter-logic* of hegemony by exploring the construction of new collectivities and newer agents of aesthetic/artistic epistemology. In that way, Spivak offers her new hypothesis which, as she tells us, concern itself with a “productive undoing” of the current popular aesthetic of what should be learned and desired. The goal of Spivak’s approach is to create a new aesthetic basis, one with different premises, from which a new epistemology could develop. Spivak sees hope for aesthetic education in the subaltern. The new aesthetic/political epistemology derived from the subaltern, from the margin, from the non-global market calculus life-world, can inspire a restoration of literature as the new domain of artivism or the spectral or the new aesthetic tool of ‘productive undoing’ of the hegemonic. Any functional change in the sign system, Spivak reminds us ‘is a violent event’ (Spivak 1985, 331) with huge political reversal effect, turning things upside down and this alteration in the signification system supplements a lack or void in the signified.

Echoing Spivak we may add that by anointing literature or any existing aesthetic political forms as potential subjectivity one can supplement the lack in the existing master signifiers of epistemic practices. The entire socius, Spivak reminds us (and her valued observation appears more true in today’s context) is “what Nietzsche would call a *fortgesetzte Zeichenkette* – a continuous sign chain” and the “possibility of action lies in the dynamics of the disruption of this object, the breaking and relinking of this chain” (Spivak 1985, 331). Such a vision enables the ethics of resistance to be inserted into the sign system of

bourgeoisie politics and as the sophisticated vocabulary of academic theory and elitism shields their ‘cognitive failure’ to read the signs of contemporary domination, the necessity to constitute a grammar of radical supplementarity becomes all the more important to undo all forms of theoretic metalepsis that fails to assert any progressivist taxonomy of neo-subjectivity. The epistemic violence that led to the effacement of the subject that was obliged to cathect (occupy in response to a desire) the space of the other can be strategically reverted through the reinscription of subaltern/subject consciousness. Subaltern consciousness as emergent collectivity may help in composing the prose of counter-insurgency and the semiotropy of these aesthetic small voices of history can be construed as a rebel consciousness akin to Marx’s idea of “un-alienated practice” or Gramsci’s notion of an ideologically coherent, spontaneous philosophy of the multitude’ (Spivak 1985, 331). Nabarun’s works make a case for literature as a political ensemble or as a site of the people nation that locates the agency of dissent within the narrative of the marginalized multitude.

Conclusion

For Nabarun, the one and only way out of the pervasive cult of subservience, the tradition of enduring collusion with the existing system is through revolution – *fat fat sai sai* – the sound of flight of the *fyatarus* – the presaging of revolution. *Fyatarus*, the subaltern forces of immanence are everywhere, in every nook and corner of our elitesphere- they are lurking around the book fair, in the glossy glitzy lavish marriage parties, in poetry festivals, social ceremonies, fashion parades, etc – waiting to pounce on, just looking for the best moment to subvert, to devastate

Alokojjol vasoman hotel ba flotel boroi noyonaviram. Tolai tolai hongkong aina, singapuri bajna ... se rat chhilo special tanduri nite. Sahorer bishisto NRI, sahebsubo, nartoki, smuggler, hawladar, fashion designer, model, politician, beautician, mafia ... sampadok ... sokolei swa swa plete tanduri moja pora pa, tanduri brest, ... tanduri ankhi, tanduri chul with rice nuddles, tanduri bleeding harts, ... tanduri lips, tanduri arm pits khachhilen. Amon samy like a bolt from the blue kichhu bistha, chhon chhon kore pora mut, ... vanga unun, muro jhanta, pank, pochha alur dom ... batil tooth brush, ... salun theke kurano kata chul, bed pan ityadi porte laglo.

[The glossy, glitzy floatel is magnificent. It is studded with colourful mirrors and glittering glass pieces imported from Hongkong. The festive ambience of the floatel is abuzz with music of Singapore. People on the floatel were celebrating a Tandoori night. They were distinguished NRIs, elites, dancers, smugglers, howladers, fashion designers, .. are are gorging on their plates of tandoor, they are donning tandoori socks, eating tandoori arm pits, tandoori eyes, tandoori breasts, ... Amidst this gala moment of fun, all of a sudden like a bolt from the blue, there started a shower of human excreta, human urine, broken brooms,... cut hairs, bed pan, etc.] (2004, 19)

Nothing can be more rupturous and subversive of the elite consumption-oriented life-world than this and for the *fyatarus*, the mission of revolution is accomplished with the sabotaging of the system. Once the bourgeoisie fundom is rattled by the bombardment of the filth by the *fyatarus*, D.S, the leading *fyataru* says, “*ofh! Madan, aj jeno jibone mane jake bole fulfilment holo.*” [With the subversion of the elite privileges, the mission of the *fyataru* is accomplished.] (2004, 19) It is because of this resuscitation of the radical rage potential in an age when compromise and conformity have become the only norm, the legacy of Nabarun Bhattacharya would remain with us, although he is no longer there. In a society which is blinded with the seduction of hierarchy, over-consumption, privilege and interpellation, Nabarun’s *prose of counter-insurgency* would continue to provide the necessary grammar of resistance so lacking in this pervasive ambience of universal Thermidorianism and mindless subservience.

Note

Transcreation in English of all the lines from Nabarun Bhattacharya’s works is done by me.

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