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Voicing the Marginal: A Study of Anita Agnihotri's *Mahuldiha Days*

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The term 'Subaltern' refers to "subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language, and culture and was used to signify the centrality of domination/dominated relationship in history." (Prakash "Subaltern", 1477)

Rohini Punekar and Abhigyan Prasad in their essay "Absence as Presence: The construction of 'Subalternity' in Amitabh Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*" write, "One indication of subordination and dominance is the absence of voice and representation: the subaltern is someone who is, generally, represented and spoken for by others." Thus representation has remained an important concept in the discursive field of 'postcolonial studies'. Deepika Bahri in "Feminism in/and postcolonialism" states that "lack of representation" has often been compensated for by (mis)representation of minorities by the powerful in any discourse of power differences. Thus, "those with the power to represent and describe others clearly control how these others will be seen" (204-5) Some of the issues raised in Subaltern Studies echo these concerns: Who represent the subalterns? How do they represent them? To what end are they represented?

Anita Agnihotri, an IAS officer and a distinct author in contemporary Bengali literature, has dealt with these issues – oppression, absence of voice, and (mis)representation in *Mahuldiha Days*. Set deep in the tribal village of Orissa, *Mahuldiha Days* is a poignant story of a young civil servant, Kamalika, who is in charge of administering the progress of development and modernization in the tribal zone. As she supervises the work she gets acquainted with the indigenous people and gradually gets into the depth of the problems they face at different levels.

Agnihotri, through the narrator Kamalika, reflects on the bleakness of the lives of the marginalized people living in seclusion in the interior of the tribal zone. Mahuldiha, as the place is known, belonged to the Mundas, the Oraons, the Kandhs and the Juangs tribes. These tribal communities along with their sub-communities had lived there for ages. Kamalika recounts how with colonialism came the revenue-collecting zamindars into the otherwise secluded lives of the tribals, who gradually encroached their land and completely disrupted their culture. With trade road and rail transport came closer to these isolated villages, bringing changes in their daily lives. They were introduced to the outside world. They were told how different they were, how backward, how uncultured they were when compared to the people living in the world outside, thus constructing the notion of "Other". Commodities, which were once insignificant for them, were introduced to modernize them. They were sold dreams. Thus while the traders bought fresh harvests at a cheaper rate, they sold the indigenous subalterns tobacco, spices and kerosene, colourful combs, silk hair ribbons and strings of plastic beads. The prevalent easy barter system was thus replaced by complicated cash transactions. The illiterate tribals were easily beguiled and cheated, both in business dealings and cash transactions. Losing out their food stock, they started investing the little money they had in things they never required but made to desire. Their debts grew and gradually they lost their land, their plough and their bullocks and got transformed into landless wage labourers. Agnihotri writes that in 1930 the tribals owned two-third of the land but half a century later not even an inch is left with them. The tribals are completely uprooted from their soil, just as the mahul trees, and relocated to the dry highlands which are devoid of any irrigation. Thus now they have to depend on uncertain rainfall for their

cultivation. However this is the predicament of those who own land. “Others like Bigna Munda, Dukhu Oraon, Hasu Kharia, whose hunting trips once sent shivers through these hill forests, are now reduced to bonded labourers.” (203) Thus for the displaced subalterns survival has become a daily struggle against all difficulties.

Even after so many years of independence development hasn't reached them in its true sense. Thousands of people go to bed on empty stomach. But the cries of these subalterns do not reach either the government or the elite class. Rajashree Mohanty in his article “Impact of Development Project on the Displaced Tribals: A Case Study of a Development Project in Eastern India” writes that most of the development projects especially in Orissa are constructed in areas dominated by the tribal, which has led to their displacement of people from their homeland. He elucidates how the loopholes in the rehabilitation measures extended by the project authorities have affected the displaced. The displaced subalterns are thus pushed into impoverishment, marginalization, backwardness and further threshold of poverty.

Echoing the subaltern historians, Kamalika laments that though many tribals have sacrificed their lives in the freedom struggle of India and there are ample commemorative plaques placed at different places in the villages, yet their names never appear in the pages of history texts nor are they recognized by the government after independence. They are lost in oblivion. In fact, after independence it took them some time to realize that their struggle was not yet over. Initially they had to fight against the colonizers and now they have to defend their own people. Of course the government is working towards the development of the tribals, “there are laws and the courts, there are development plans, seed supplies, bankloans, wells, motor pumps, tractor cooperatives” (204) However Kamalika sheds light on the farcicality of the so-called development plans on paper.

“The lives of the tribals are still tied by invisible strings to the *goti-malik* they were bonded to all these years, the creditors, the *sahukars* who promised them everything and then bled them dry.” (204) Since it's the *sahukars'* sons and grandsons who are in the cooperative bank, the ration shop, the tractor rental business, the adivasis have no other option but to knock their doors to mortgage their land. Though our constitution says no adivasi land is supposed to change hands without the district magistrate's permission. The cases of illegal land transfer are not unknown but the way the land transfer is carried out it becomes difficult to trace the illegal buyers. Even if a case is registered the adivasis deny it in court as during the dry seasons their survival depends on their mercy.

The traditional system of judgement prevalent in the tribal communities, which ensured that justice was meted out, too fell apart once the police stations, the courts and offices came into the scene. Now to report a theft or a murder the adivasis have to approach the court. However this new law doesn't help these subalterns. In fact the people at power manipulate law and police to silence the voices of the uneducated subalterns. Thus while the Mahuldiha businessmen smuggle logs and earn huge profits, the “nearly naked starving people – adivasi, harijan, landless, untouchable- get caught by the police, the forest guards and armed police for taking away a mere headload.” (205)

Kamalika comments on how the ‘outsiders’ manipulate law and thus uprooting the mahul trees whose fruits and flowers keep the tribals alive, have set up licensed liquor shops and in the ‘potsherd-roofed huts’ sell the “services of adolescent girls procured from the villages.” (205) Businessmen from outside, men from different villages, and truck drivers

from different states visit here regularly. And to meet the growing demand of 'fresh female flesh' young indigenous subaltern women are lured and sacrificed daily. But the police, the local authorities are all silent. The new law of the state which is made to protect these subalterns is used against them. The subalterns have nowhere to go, no one to register their complaints. Thus the 'outsiders' not only deprived the adivasis of their land and livelihood but also disrupted their tradition and culture.

Kamalika questions the delay in completing a project undertaken by the government to develop and modernise the tribal areas. A bridge is under construction to facilitate the marginalized people who live at the other end of the river and are dependent on the boat service for every little thing from a match box to medicines. Though there is a primary healthcare centre but the doctor is mostly away on vacation, looking after his thriving private practice. During monsoon the overflowing river makes it difficult for the people to cross it. Thus many have died without treatment. Kamalika recalls how last year Latif's boat got overturned, drowning many lives. The unfinished bridge has cost many lives, yet, "Nine years, and the work on the bridge is still not complete." (144)

The medical team would suddenly set up a camp to complete the task of immunizing and distributing iron pills in a rush. And 'the ambitious young doctors', to get promotion would sterilize hundred mothers in a day. The subaltern women are just reduced to numbers to be accomplished:

If the boring of twenty tubewells can be done in a day, then why not two hundred surgical procedures, which require only human bodies to work on!
(153)

During the state of Emergency (1975-76) compulsory sterilization program was initiated by the government to control population growth. Anne Morse and Steven Mosher in their article "A Once and Future Tragedy: India's sterilization campaign 39 years later" writes how government officials mobilized *en masse* to accomplish state-wise sterilization targets. "The sterilizations that followed were carried out under so-called "compul-suasion," (a combination of compulsion and persuasion), with a heavy emphasis on the former." They further write:

The sterilizations were performed in assembly-line fashion, in great haste, and in unhygienic conditions. There was no "follow-up care" offered whatsoever. Many men and women died from subsequent infections.

Agnihotri depicts how badly the sterilization program affected the ignorant tribals who were already subjected to different other forms of exploitations. Agnihotri, in her subtle way, underlines how capitalism and consumerism exploits the illiterate and naive tribals. They are used as experimenting tools. Agnihotri reflects on how the milk powder companies send women in white uniforms to the mothers of newborns and pretending to be nurses they hand the mothers sample tins of the milk powder. They convince the mothers that breastfeeding is not sufficient and powdered milk will help the baby grow healthy like the one shown in the picture on the tin. The irony is while the developed countries have banned their products, India is continuing to allow them to do business here thus putting the lives of the subalterns at risk. The report of the death of the two infant babies after consuming the powdered milk brought Kamalika to the realization how these subalterns are exploited and duped by the capitalist market.

Death of infants is not new in this region. They are used to it but the death of these two infants was horrifying. It's not because they were the only child of their parents but because the parents can never hope for another child – both the mothers have been sterilized. While Kamalika is aghast to learn the truth and on confronting the doctor how could he encourage sterilization in such a case, he casually replies “What can we do? We too need to meet our targets.” (249) Thus, even if an ‘eighteen year old unmarried girl or sixteen year old boy’ becomes a part of the drive to meet targets nobody cares. Nobody cares because they are subalterns and they have, apparently, nowhere to go and register their complaints.

The helpless and devastated women to mark their first silent protest hand over a bunch of green cards to Kamalika. The green cards were awarded to the women who after having two children, were sterilized. According to the law the green card holders were supposed to get loans, and land if they were landless, and if the son was eager to pursue higher education he would have access to reservation benefits. But leave alone getting all these facilities, these women could not even lead a healthy life. Kamalika noticed that after sterilization sixty percent of the women were suffering from infections and complications. They were not provided any follow-up treatment. Forty per cent of them had lost one or more of their children. “In the state-wide competition for sterilization targets, this district has won – and these are the women who were sacrificed in that *yagna*.” (250)

The green card holders were promised reserved jobs for the next generation. But did they ever reach that phase from where they could access the benefits of the reservation policy? Through Bhajaman Juang Agnihotri addresses this issue and shows how reservation policy of the government has terribly failed to accommodate the indigenous subalterns. Bhajaman, a sharp, young orphan boy, dreams big. Since he herds goats, collects mahua, picks kendu leaves and saal seeds throughout the day, he doesn't attend the primary school. But his zeal for learning brings him to the evening school. He dreams to complete his studies and go out of Mahuldiha and see the country. Kamalika wonders if he would be able to finish his school even he gets admission there. Would he be able to become a college graduate and avail the office post reserved for him. Would he be able to overcome all the barriers and manage to get a cooperative loan for himself? Many children like Bhajaman drop out before they could finish with middle school. While girls leave to collect cowdung or to help their mothers queue up for water or take care of children, the boys to wait at tables and wash dishes in food stall and tea shops or herd goats. Thus though they have jobs reserved for them, but “who can wait that long?”

However this is not the only time that the indigenous subalterns were duped and forgotten. The government, while developing various projects in the forest area, had promised to rehabilitate the tribals living there and compensate those who owned land with government jobs. But the shrewd contractors cheated the uneducated adivasis and usurped their land thus denying them the government jobs which they deserved as compensation from the government:

Initially the mill had a demonic hunger, and took people like a crazed ghost. Overnight a job contracting racket came up, and hundreds of non local people got in forged land papers. (150)

Thus someone from Rajasthan, who has nothing to do with the tribals, is easily passed on Mungru Oraon's son and is employed in the factory. It took the uneducated tribals a long time to realize that they have been cheated. And when they did, the displaced tribals

organized 'morchas' but nothing changed. Once again the subaltern voices remained unheard and they were denied justice. Once their land and compensatory jobs were usurped, the displaced tribals had no other option but to work as wage labourers in the mills and mines to survive.

Adil, an adivasi, represents all those who were 'reduced from farmers to marginal farmers, from farm labourers to mine labourers.' Adil worked as a labourer at the limestone quarries. Though the labourers were paid a meagre amount they somehow managed to survive. But when the wages at the limestone quarries were withheld for nearly two months even that last bit of ground was snatched from their feet. Thus the workers sat on *dharna*, demanding their wages. But instead of solving their problem the top management had fled to Delhi. The local shops stopped selling groceries on credits once the rumour was spread that the mine was closing down. Adil took initiative and organised the workers to come armed and meet Kamalika as a mark of their protest. On intervention the workers got two week's overdue wages but their happiness was short-lived. After few days the notice was up that the mine would be closed. Kamalika couldn't do anything. Later the news of Adil and his wife committing suicide reached her. Thousands of Adils, representing workers of locked up factories, are silenced everyday and soon 'they become history'.

While some became history like Adil, some of the displaced tribals moved in to the labour colonies encircling different mines to work as contractual labourers. But these colonies didn't offer them any relief. In fact the inhuman living condition sans any basic facility is emphasised through Kamalika's consciousness. Kamalika registers the pathetic living condition of the people at Chiri, one such colony surrounding the iron mine. Though the colony is urbanised, it is surrounded by the scattered slums where the labourers live. People who come from far off villages to work here have built shacks and tin-roofed huts. Since most of them work as contractual labourers they are left to suffer without sufficient wages, basic amenities, educational or medical facilities. Their addiction to liquor adds to their misery. The nominal amount that they received as wage was misspent on liquor and they returned home empty-handed.

Even the dispensary is not accessible to them. Kamalika accounts how once Iignes, the union leader, and his group had to run the entire day from post to pillar to admit three labourers who had been injured in an accident. The government health centre shrugged off its responsibilities stating that the case didn't belong to the area it covered and the doctor at the dispensary mentioned that though the case was in its jurisdiction but since the labourers were hired by the contractor and not directly by the company they couldn't help. Thus two of the injured died of excessive bleeding and one ended up disabled and was dismissed.

Even the pipe water is only provided to the company staff and the contractual labourers have to quench their thirst with the 'muddy, foul-smelling, reddish brown thing'. While some people boil and strain it before drinking, the old woman, Mangru's grandma, "fills her bucket from the nullah and drinks it straight, they don't have either wood or the kerosene to boil it." (177) Though tube wells were installed, none of them worked and nobody cared. Thus they remained dry. Several applications have been submitted but in their delayed response the officials and the ministers have cited huge expenditure, complexities of fund allocation as excuses.

Agnihotri, through the consciousness of her protagonist, thus reflects on the different levels of reality of socio-economic development in the country post independence and how it affects the marginalized indigenous subalterns and what exactly it means to them.

However the subalterns refuse to submit to their subaltern status. Time and again they have displayed courage to protest and question the authorities. When required they have come forward to take responsibilities and change their predicament. Agnihotri documents such courageous endeavours of the indigenous subalterns in her narrative.

There was an old out-of-order lift point which had been lying unused for a long time in the jungle. It was once used to supply water to nearly one hundred and fifty acres of land. But when the motor developed some minor problem it wasn't repaired. Though applications were submitted repeatedly to the concerned department but nothing happened. There were excuses that there was no money to repair the old points. Thus gradually the pipes got stolen. The agriculture and irrigation department went on arguing to decide who was to take responsibilities. Thus the headman of the village came forward to take charge. So one fine day he blocked the road and along with a large number of people 'almost hijacked' Kamalika and took her to the out-of-order lift point. Though the senior most irrigation officer had rejected the demands of the tribals, Kamalika's insistence encouraged the young overseer Amulya to try and find a solution. Working incessantly days and nights, Amulya redid the map of the pipeline. Since most of the route was densely covered in wild shrubs and vines, the headmen's men stayed with him to clear the pathways. Amulya took pain to check each piece of machinery that had remained there in disuse, repaired them with the spare parts lying in their workshop and finally one day he accomplished what no one did in the last thirty years. The flow of water into the barren land brought hope of fertility into the lives of these marginalized tribals.

The government machineries have a complex structure; its policies and schemes are too complicated for these illiterate and ignorant indigenous subalterns to decipher. Most of them are not even aware of their rights, let alone claiming it from the government. They are handed over some cards and papers but they don't know what to do with it. Hence even if the policies made for them do not reach them, they don't protest. Even if they try to they are silenced with various political and technical excuses. How are they going to challenge the authorities without any knowledge whatsoever about the workings of the government?

In Igenes and Stan De Souza they found a voice to address their issues, their concerns and their protests. Stan D'Souza, an outsider and an engineer, travels in the interior villages and collects facts on the living conditions of weavers, blacksmiths, potters and fisherfolk. Stan, sitting with his co-workers and eating coarse rice with curried eggplants, trains the young adivasi men and women in building leadership qualities. He tells them about their rights and how to fight for it. Igenes encourages them to be self dependent and live with dignity. So now together they have plans to surmount the difficult situations. Igenes have set up a night school. With the help of some volunteers illiterate labourers are tutored here. They even run a playroom for the children of the labourers. In his own little ways Igenes is trying to bring changes in the lives of the subalterns. The problems of the labourers trouble him and hence desperate to resolve the water issue he produces an alternate design to Kamalika. The geometry of pipelines, estimated calculations, everything is ready. Thus a copy of the proposed design and sample of the muddy water are sent with Kamalika to keep reminding her about their conditions and her responsibilities to do something about it.

The voice which is rising against the powerful authorities has to be stopped. Igenes was gradually becoming the voice of the subalterns. Hence just as "The chhokra inspector who found traces of cyanide in the water, and was the first one to report it was sent away by the

top bosses, transferred right out of the district, much to the relief of the steel factory managers”(150), they tried to silence Agnes by arresting him.

Agnihotri portrays how Rupak Mishra along with other policemen, on the pretext of arresting Agnes, raided the colony past midnight. The management and the contractor's agents too were present there. Thus “turning the homes upside down, tossing and scattering their belongings, they proceeded to rape the women in self-assured confidence” as they knew that no one would bother to come to this remote tribal area to read their petitions and investigate the incident. The slum dwellers too had sticks in their hand to defend themselves which, however, was reported as knives, axes and explosives in the F.I.R. as directed by the powerful.

Agnes had sensed the raid and hence he and his associates managed to inform the journalists who had published about the raid thus revealing the atrocities of the state police. Generally any such incident is hushed up but since it came up to the public notice, the authorities have ordered an enquiry. Kamalika and her colleague Ajayendra were to jointly prepare the report. Immense pressure from the higher authorities to cover up the atrocities had put Kamalika in a conflict. A representative of the state she has her responsibilities towards the people she is supposed to serve, but at the same time she is just a minor government official caught in the complex hierarchical structure of the state agencies.

Kamalika, however, makes her stance clear that she won't sign any report that gives Rupak Mishra a clean chit. Ajayendra, Kamalika's colleague, refuses to believe the “story of torn blouses” and blames the journalists who reported the raid. Ajayendra's comment that they shouldn't have allowed the newspaper stories to appear before their statement underlines how truth is hushed up by the authorities. Internal information confirms that Mishra was drunk at the time of the raid. Mishra didn't have a reliable report regarding the sabotage during the strike and the company had not even requested him in written to take care of the fact that the labourers from the minority union were scared to report to work. But still he led the raid. The joint report was written at last with the hope that the guilty would be punished. But Kamalika is well aware of the ground realities. She knows in the name of justice a little amount of money would be thrown at them as compensation. “New thatch for some of the huts, blankets, milk powder, some petticoats and blouses for the young women” and ‘speeches’ would pour in.

The same predicament was meted out to Stan. The authorities had doubts about his intentions. They assumed that perhaps it could be debauchery or preparations for religious conversion that he was spending so much time with these tribals. Hence the government officials were instructed to keep a watch on him and his movements. A bright and concerned social activist is thus easily reduced to a suspicious element. Finally he was charged with a rape case. It was reported that Stan had brought a girl, belonging to their own organization, to his room and raped her. Though the girl is adult, it's not her but her father who gave the statement to the police. The girl was reportedly moved to some other place. Ajayendra had informed Kamalika how the local M.L.A., the block chairman and Ranadeb pressurizing on them to arrest and file a case against Stan to silence him.

The state and its agencies would never allow any intrusion. Anyone who tries to interfere into their world of corruption would be silenced. Thus to wait for someone to come and protect the rights of the subalterns would be futile. They themselves have to fight their struggle. Only education and awareness can empower the subalterns. Thus Kamalika takes initiative to build up an informal discussion group in every village to talk about their

problems and collectively figure out ways of protest and solution. Gradually volunteer organizations like Banabasi Sangha, Adivasi Mukti Bahini, the elected panchayat members and Teacher's Federation workers came forward to join and support her. Initially the Kumardihi cultural society did some street plays to bring awareness. The performers from outside came at their own expense and performed. Then one day it came into the consciousness of the local young boys and girls that they too had talents of their own. They didn't need anyone from outside to speak for them, to write for them, to perform for them. They can do it on their own as it's their story. While Sarvodaya leader Avinash babu motivated the local boys to make posters and write on the wall, he himself started collecting songs and poems by folk artists and local poets to spread awareness in their own language, in their own tongue, and thus:

Hundreds of plays, yatras, skits were written in the next few months. The message was, after all, staring us in the face. Know the world. Figure out the accounts that affect you, you are surrounded from all the sides by the mahajans, the traders, the bank babus, the officials. If you must pay good money to broker just to have printed paper read out to you or a form filled out for you, then how are you going to fight? How much longer you are going to live the lives of bonded labourers and ploughmen? Come on, take up the pen first. (239)

Politics of representation has remained an important issue in the domain of Subaltern Studies. Agnihotri addresses this issue through Kamalika's consciousness when she satirically recalls how anthropologist E. A. Samuel had mentioned that in 1856 he found some people in India clothed in just two leafy branches. She reiterates that even in 1931 when Vivian Mick rediscovered these people, nothing had changed. Mick reported that the Juangs survived just on fruits and roots found in the forest. However in 1940 Verrier Elwin found them doing jhum cultivation which required advanced thinking abilities. Thus the Juang tribe was not as barbarous as portrayed by the white men. In fact the tribals have a rich tradition and culture of their own. Their community is well structured. Dhwantari, the oldest man in the village, explains the complex social rules of their community and the dynamics of clan structure to Kamalika. Apart from myths and oral literature the tribals have rich repertoire of folk music and song.

However the barbaric image of the tribals, constructed by the colonisers, has so ingrained in our mind that even today we generally fail to see beyond it. For most of the elites, the tribals were uncivilized and they still are. And hence they are easily displaced, duped and exploited. The colonizers adopted the politics of representation to colonize the Asians and the Africans. The colonizers represented us as the exotic "Other". Such representation provided them an opportunity to rule over us for two centuries on the pretext of civilizing us. Now that the country is de-colonised, the persons in power imitate the ways of the colonizers to oppress their own people. Agnihotri, in *Mohuldiha Days*, has thus remodelled internal colonialism as a critical and realistic category in the hidden and pervasive colonial legacies in forming the state and nation of postcolonial India. Thus it is manifested how the politics of representation is used as a tool to marginalize the subalterns.

Agnihotri in her narrative *Mahuldiha Days* has thus explored how the indigenous subalterns are oppressed and rendered voiceless. Living in the periphery of the civilized society they remain completely invisible. Their existence doesn't matter either to the agencies of the state or to the elite class. Their issues, their sufferings do not make headlines in the newspaper. Since they have no one to speak for them, these displaced indigenous

subalterns are subjected to oppression at various levels. They are silenced everyday while the elites remain silent. Yet they exhibit immense courage in overcoming their daily struggle for existence. When required they don't hesitate to come forward and register their protests in their own ways, sometimes through silence, sometimes through aggression. And it's because of this protest of several years that sometimes they get noticed, things change, things improve.

Since the letter from Igenes was printed in the newspapers, the crisis of drinking water that the people of Chiri were facing got noticed and due to the upcoming election the government changed its previous intransigent position. The ruling party's secretary in the emergency meeting declared that they would solve the drinking water problem and if the company would refuse to bear the expenditure, the party would pay for it. Meanwhile they would pressurize the company hospital to take responsibility for the medical care of the contractual labourers. The political pressure also compelled the chief engineer to declare Chiri a problem area. While the joint report compelled the authority to transfer Rupak Mishra, the charge sheet against Igenes was dropped. There was news that the work of the bridge would be rapidly finished.

Kamalika refused to be silenced. She didn't give up to the pressure from the higher authorities to hush up the atrocities of the dominant and oppressive state agencies. However the question arises: Since the novella is narrated by a development administrator and a representative of the oppressive state, how authentic is the representation?

Agnihotri's voice does not simply ventriloquise the sufferings of the subalterns, who live at the periphery of the society but goes deeper to analyze and reflect upon how power structure stimulate marginalization at different levels and how the subalterns fight these power structures. Nowhere in her narratives has she portrayed the subalterns as weak and submissive. In their refusal to be represented by the elites they assert their identity. Agnihotri has restricted herself to just being an instrument in bringing out the hidden, unheard voices to the forefront without any alteration or manipulation. Thus the insult, the frustrations, the anger, the distrust, the hurt, and the hope – everything is visible in the voices of the subalterns in her narratives.

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