

Reading Subnations in Fiction: Locating Bodies, Resistance and History in *The Far Field*

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Abstract

The paper examines the various ways in which subnations are manifested in fiction. The political, social, economic, cultural and personal subnations have their own semantics of expression that require an unlearning of the dominant modes of reading resistance. The paper also views the subject-citizen of these subnations as subalterns in the Gramscian sense and examines the ways that their agency has often been subsumed by single celled ideologies. It is posited that there is a need to step outside the prescribed imaginaries of power and look at the networks that run beneath the surface. The structures of solidarity, resistance and intense knowledge and weight of history become apparent at this point. The paper contextualises Madhuri Vijay's novel, *The Far Field* as it seeks to discuss these avenues of narratives.

Keywords: Azadi; Indian fiction in English; Kashmiriyat; Subaltern; Subnations.

The subnational is a point where the interest of a certain group of people supersedes that of the larger geopolitical ideology. This larger ideology has overarching, umbrella terminologies that speak of the larger good and the greater vision. It claims to understand the needs and demands of the entire landmass that is commonly agreed to be the 'nation'- which again is a tenuous proposition as a nation begins or ends where its neighbours also concur. The ideology that one subscribes to under the aegis of a nation is one that is presented at fora across the world and an appeal made to have pride in one's heritage, history, international policy, sporting performances- all of which are remembered, performed, enacted, played out under the shadow of the Nation and the national flag. Patriotism is the visible marker of nationalism- thanks to its colouring, the binary nature of the demands it makes on those it considers its participants, patriotism is

what is read as the ultimate test of nationalism and a lot of subversion of human rights take place under the guise of patriotic feelings when citizens are asked to give up their rights. The suspension of human rights for the sake of internal security- a term that has assumed draconian proportions since 9/11 is not lost on anyone.

When the national is such a monolith, what goes on under its roots is something that bears scrutiny. India is a country that was subnational before it was even a nation. While the Independence movement is seen as a unified movement that had only a single leader and then a set of advisors, the truth is far from it. The mini revolts, the little movements and the local leaders in various parts of British and French India fighting for their rights, fighting against oppression on the basis of caste have all been subsumed under the larger story of Gandhian Ahimsa and Satyagraha. Movements such as the Vaikom Satyagraha, Ayyan Kali's bullock cart mobilization, Sree Narayana Guru's tenets of intermingling of castes all scripted a new modernity in Kerala, the debates and action across Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh etc are hardly spoken of in the textbooks of history.

The organisation of states along linguistic lines, in the Post-independence period is one of the first indications of how India chose to align its people. This presented an internal contradiction in terms of the motto of Unity in Diversity and clubbing groups of people based on their language into a state. Andhra Pradesh became the first state to be reorganized along linguistic lines. Since then, there has been a thrust towards loyalty to state, linguistic groups and grassroots identity markers that form the subnational and seek to protect their own interest while staying within the republic. In a sense of the term, it is important for the National to nurture the subnational so as not to foment overt dissent and separatist tendencies.

Today, nationalism is a word that is loaded with umpteen connotations, with each of these significations standing out distinctly. The anxieties of performing nationalism and seeking affirmation of the same amongst an imagined political community to refer to Benedict Anderson's use of the term, is something of a preoccupation in mainstream media and public spaces.

It is not that the versions of nationalism as we know them today were the result of the spectacular rise of right-wing politics that India has witnessed in the recent times. In fact, the opposite is the true reading. The Indian idea of nationalism as enunciated in the writings of the pre-independence period, went beyond the idea of the British as colonisers to refer

to the Muslim conquests that happened in pre-British India. This process of pre-dating grants “traditional patriotism” in the words of Chris Bayly, who felt that it was a way of affiliating the language, the land and other cultural components from a time before western dominance.

The positions occupied by printing presses and their presentations of iconographies of Bharat Mata as well the concurrent picturisations of Goddesses of the Hindu pantheon further served to embed these ideas in the Indian imagination. The notion of a unified cultural and ideologically aligned participative economy was supposed to lend credence to the idea of an India that was greater than the whole of its parts put together. It tried to build aspirations that were utopian in nature and aspirational in terms of history. These Brahminical concepts of time, history and cultural glory conveniently excluded the marginalized. The bulk of subaltern histories remained unnarrated as though there was nothing worthwhile to be said. The indigenous systems of knowledge- be it of medicine, the natural world or their systems of kinship and religious beliefs, were washed over through the politics of exclusion or cultural and political amnesia.

Romila Thapar points out “Cultural nationalism does not mean the imposition of the culture of the majority community on society but the search for an integral cultural articulation that includes the range of communities.” (50) She goes on to ponder about the ways that histories change when identities change. It points not only to the mutability of identities but also to the fluidity of histories. While there is a lot of research being done into the mechanics of nationalism and the grandeur of pre-Muslim history, there is a very distinct vacuum or lack of intellectual curiosity regarding the origins of languages, customs, food habits and the ways that communities have syncretized their practices with those of others who are contiguous to them.

The blanket of monolithic histories has often obscured the regional and local histories and have divorced history from the geographies that have fashioned them. Often, school textbooks have presented history as episodes and periods with characteristics and important figures, thus reducing nuanced worlds and systems into prosaic and isolated incidents. Perhaps, this is one of the reasons that history in India is a simple subject in the eyes of the common man. A compilation of kings and their deeds and the struggle for independence.

The freedom movement comes with its own share of contestations on account of the rather edited version presented in which a few individuals

and a few movements are seen as pivotal. The contributions of one mainstream political party being foregrounded over the decades, its leaders projected as giants who fought almost single handedly for the nation—such rhetoric, has over time, not only made itself susceptible to criticism but also positioned itself as the Centre that must be written to/at by marginalized histories. In gaining political legitimacy, regional politics has often revived local heroes who have been subsumed by the unitary cult of the Indian National Congress. Case in point is the way that regional politics is writing about the impact that its leaders have had on the freedom movement and the ways that subaltern protests against the British preceded the mass movements that Gandhi had organized or ran parallel to the freedom movement. The term subaltern refers to the use of the word by Gramsci to denote the exclusionary politics that power and knowledge exercise.

The reason why such politics and political participation has largely gone unnoticed is the difficulty it posits when one tries to place it in the ambit of recognised modes of sociological systems. Partha Chatterjee in his essay, *For an Indian History of Peasant Struggle* looks at this very angle when he sets out to ask for an “... Indian history of peasant struggle” rather than a “history of Indian peasant struggles”

On the one hand, there was the domain of the formally organised political parties and associations, moving within the institutional processes of the bourgeois State forms introduced by colonial rule and seeking to use their representative power over the mass of the people to replace the colonial State by a bourgeois nation-State. On the other side was the domain of peasant politics where beliefs and actions did not fit into the grid of ‘interests’ and ‘aggregation of interests’ which constituted the world of bourgeois representative politics. Seen from the former domain, the latter could only appear as the realm of spontaneity, which was of course nothing more than to acknowledge that the specific determinants of the domain of peasant political activity remained incomprehensible from the standpoint of bourgeois politics. (7)

Ranajit Guha goes on to develop these ideas further in his landmark essay, *The Prose of Counter Insurgency* where he points out

Yet this consciousness seems to have received little notice in the literature on the subject. Historiography has been content to deal with the peasant rebel merely as an empirical person or member

of a class, but not as an entity whose will and reason constituted the praxis called rebellion. The omission is indeed dyed into most narratives by metaphors assimilating peasant revolts to natural phenomena: they break out like thunder storms, heave like earthquakes, spread like wildfires, infect like epidemics. (46)

The need for reading subaltern histories of dissent by situating it in the Indian sociological context is extremely important and while this call is being increasingly answered, the drafting of right-wing political rhetoric seems to derail the project off to anxieties that seek to fragment and diversify rather than seek to help piece together a composite picture. Contrary to popular perception, subaltern histories have had to contend with the politics of dominance rather than that of hegemony as Guha points out. That being the case, what was earlier an attempt to write subaltern histories as a means to bring to light the existence of agency as opposed to what mainstream history would have us believe, the current politics of selfhood and stratified social codes make it incumbent upon subaltern histories to show how they are different and to register the dissent by becoming more specifically defined. For example, the narrative of vegetarianism and cow politics makes it imperative to answer those questions and thus taking away from the establishment of a subaltern history that just is and is not one that is not in a state of constant countering or answering. While these processes are important and form a very urgent part of historiography, it is the recovering of the subject (O'Hanlon) that presents a very tectonic need for examining the subaltern avenues of dissent in terms of discovering a nuanced, gendered approach to Indian history.

My own further emphasis would be that the very dichotomy between domination and resistance, as we currently conceive it, bears all the marks of dominant discourse, in its insistence that resistance itself should necessarily take the virile form of a deliberate and violent onslaught. Rejecting this, we should look for resistances of a different kind: dispersed in fields we do not conventionally associate with the political; residing sometimes in the evasion of norms or the failure to respect ruling standards of conscience and responsibility; sometimes in the furious effort to resolve in ideal or metaphysical terms the contradictions of the subaltern's existence, without addressing their source; sometimes in what looks only like cultural difference. (222-223)

The need for a different template to read local histories thus works to the inclusion of the vernacular modes of historical narratives and articulating

local aspirations and points of view that either has escaped the notice of the larger national narrative or simply goes against the agenda of the bigger picture. This renders these histories and aspirations invisible and unheard. And thus form the bedrock of the subnational movements that seek ways and means to be heard. In most cases, these are political channels that seek to evoke local associations in the minds of the people and look to raise issues of neglect by the government at the centre. The references to these dual systems- namely an all powerful and dismissive power at the centre and the (by association) contrasting regional advocates at the centre, creates a subaltern positioning within the larger narrative of the Nation.

The resultant fragmentation of the national identity that is then replaced by the local imagined community creates subnations of dissent, community and grievance. These subnations represent aspirations that are among others, political, social, cultural, historical, anthropological, linguistic, gendered, geographical and personal. The overriding rhetoric of Unity in Diversity and military parades do not succeed in papering over the deep schisms that exist in India. These subnations express themselves through a number of different channels- such as some states having a separate flag, the insistence that official communication be in the regional language, dedicating monuments of interest to figures of regional importance, recovering regional histories of resistance, demanding statehood in the name of development, releasing tourism brochures that stress on the particular state's specialty- something that may not even refer to the country in general or even in passing. Through these overt and covert methods, there are different voices seeking their space in history.

Kashmir is one such geography that has become the by-word for the subnational in India. In her essay *The Silence is the Loudest Sound*, Arundhati Roy notes,

Kashmir, they often say, is the unfinished business of the 'Partition'. That word suggests that in 1947, when the British drew their famously careless border through the subcontinent, there was a 'whole' that was then partitioned. In truth, there was no 'whole'. Apart from the territory of British India, there were hundreds of sovereign principalities, each of which individually negotiated the terms on which it would merge with either India or Pakistan. Many that did not wish to merge were forced to.

.... In India the project of assimilation, which goes under the

banner of nation- building, has meant that there has not been a single year since 1947 when the Indian Army has not been deployed within India's borders against 'its own people'. The list is long- Kashmir, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, Hyderabad, Assam. (*Azadi*, 94)

There is a rich literature on the texture of the subnational movement in Kashmir. From Mulk Raj Anand (*Death of a Hero*) to Salman Rushdie (*Shalimar the Clown*), Arundhati Roy (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*) Kashmir has been discussed through multiple lenses, but rarely without the context of the events of 1947 and the subsequent conflicts or the progression of militancy in the state. After all, it is indeed one of the most heavily militarized zones in the world. The presence of Kashmir in the works of writers of Kashmiri origin is one that swings between despair on one hand and simmering anger on the other. There is a search for belonging that many of these writers such as Basharat Peer (*Curfewed Night*), Rahul Pandita (*My Moon has Blood Clots*), Mirza Waheed (*The Book of Gold Leaves*), Malik Sajad (*Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*) write about. The narratives carry the weight of history and the acute consciousness of geopolitics within them.

These writers weave the political and the personal in their works as these are after all their lived experiences. The sense of disenchantment with the 'national agenda' is evident as they write of their dispossession, their curtailed rights, the status of refugees that they are accorded, the ways that their Hindi is mocked at by mainstream India. As is the case with the North East, India is perceived as the mainland. The very use of such a term to refer to the country of your nationality points to the perception of that nation as an entity that is at some distance- physically, mentally and ideologically. The crossovers into the borders of Pakistan to receive training, the alternate routes of return through Nepal, are all discussed as a way of life. So is the gaze of the Army that roams free and unfettered over the lives of the citizens or in this case, the subjects.

The bonds of citizenship that these subjectivities have with the larger narrative of India are tenuous at best and fraught with the tensions of contemporary and past histories. This is why there is a resistance from the Kashmiri towards subscribing to the cultural citizenship of India. Toby Miller defines cultural citizenship as something that "concerns the maintenance and development of cultural lineage through education, custom, language, and religion and the positive acknowledgment of difference in and by the mainstream." (2)

It is rather evident from the events unfolding in the Valley that these processes that affirm the cultural citizenship of Kashmiris- be they Pandits or Muslims is woefully absent except through stray incidents of tokenism. In fact, a close reading of Pandita and Peer show that in the case of the former, the adherence to an Indian identity stems from a sense of alienation and anger on account of being dispossessed on the night of the Pashtun raid and the subsequent occupation of the lands and properties by the people who stayed behind. The country India becomes an instrument of navigation and negotiation in the politics of identity- of Kashmiriyat. This is evident in the presentation of the cricket match that is watched by both the Pandits and the Muslim settlers. The countries they support points to the satiating of a rivalry between them more than it can be construed as an indication of their nationalist and anti- nationalist tendencies.

The narrative of resistance in Kashmir has, like all resistance movements, roots in its cultural specificity and draws from the stories and landscapes of its own personal history. perhaps one of the most famous slogans to come out of Kashmir is the cry of *Azadi* (Freedom). It is a call that answers all and every injustice or denial of right. Such is the impact of this slogan that it has been co-opted by the anti-CAA protests that have broken out across the country. It is telling that this slogan represents the will of the Kashmiris to be free of Indian dominance, now has come to represent the semantic implication of the Indian state's apathy towards its citizens as a whole. The networks of solidarity thus are claimed and celebrated even without the complete approval of the Kashmiris themselves. The appropriation is both political and cultural.

Whether it was the first organised protest of shawl weavers in 1865, the silk factory labour unrest in 1924, mobilisations against the autocratic rule of Maharaja Hari Singh in 1931, for demanding plebiscite from 1953–1975, the civilian uprising and armed rebellion against Indian rule in 1990, or the more recent mobilisations of 2008, 2009 and 2010, Kashmir has always resisted. (Faheem, 23)

The resistance movements of post-independence Kashmir have been generally viewed with a distinct lack of sympathy by the Indian public on account of the separatist agenda it advocates. Hence the adopting of this slogan for a movement that opposes the disenfranchisement of heretofore citizens is a way of symbolically distancing the citizen from the government at the Centre. This also ironically helps the Government to brand the anti-CAA protestors as anti-nationals and foreground right-wing nationalism as an ideology that stands for a united India.

While fiction is not a stand-in for History, it enjoys a malleability and the possibility of greater inclusiveness- that History could well do to emulate. The flexibility enjoyed by the novel to discuss subjects that are uncomfortable or taboo has come at a time when the literal is in danger of being overinterpreted or misinterpreted and demands are often raised for certain books to be banned. The last decade has seen Indian fiction in English publish books not only original English writing, but also works of translation. The regional is well represented and translations of regional writers, old and new have begun to appear in a prolific fashion.

These writings from the margins- be it translations of the vernacular or writings from the social margins by Dalits, gender non-binary people, indigenous people, people being published by independent presses are a growing body of work that present subnations of caste, language, geography, identity and ideology. They present accounts of all that Indian society demands or thinks as it temporarily stays within the lines drawn by the Indian Union. The nature of dissent, which is a much-maligned word and often used interchangeably for sedition comes to the fore in these works. They challenge the prevalent norms and create main lands out of the History, politics and other state apparatuses of the land. The much-vaunted subscription to the worlds of the monolith doesn't come about. The writing back by the subnational is an act that seeks to 'Other' the national and its agencies and in the process create communities of its own.

The works of Mahashweta Devi, Indira Goswami, Perumal Murugan, Poomani, Hansda Sowvendra Shekar, Easterine Kire, Manoranjan Byapari, Saikat Majumdar, Vasundhara, Peer, Pandit are but a small cross section of the subnational fiction that has been published. The social, political, economic, geographic and cultural and in particular, the personal subnations that they have created have provided valuable insights into the always-already fragmentariness of the federal system and the intersecting circles within it.

There has been a very concerted effort to discuss insurgencies from across the country and works such as *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency*- a collection of short stories from Assam- one of many of these recent times present a picture that up close and front row into the ways that militancy and military have upended lives and how there is no existence that can be possible in these regions without a mention, thought or factoring in of these aspects. On the other side of the country, there is Madhuri Vijay's *The Far Field* that tells the story of another insurgency.

Published in 2019, Madhuri Vijay's debut novel is a riveting take on the political and cultural subnation of the North and South of India. The novel centres around Shalini, a rather privileged Indian woman, who tries to come to terms with her mother's death. Drifting from various jobs, the usual circuits of weed and alcohol; the impending wedding of her father sets her off on a journey from her native Bangalore to Kashmir, in search of a man her mother could possibly have been in love with. The novel weaves in and out of Shalini's memories of her feisty, quirky and eccentric mother. The sort of woman who held people in thrall and seemed teetering on the brink of disaster. A sort of ancient mariner, who induced acute anxiety in her daughter who wanted to be loved and cherished but constantly found herself falling short.

It is as an act of redemption that Shalini goes to Kashmir to find the carpet and clothes salesman- Bashir Ahmed- to tell him about her mother's death. A death that took place years ago but reverberates in the daily consciousness of the protagonist. The people she meets on her journey in Kashmir and the exposition of their means of coping with their fears and losses is what forms the soul of the novel. The Kashmiri family that takes her in and serves as a halfway house for those searching their missing kith and kin points to the realities of disappearing bodies- alive and dead in an insurgency. Ishfaaq is taken on the way to school and is never heard of from again. So are countless other young men. any enquiry is stonewalled or is reported as a border crossing. Most families have no way of knowing if the person is indeed across the border or in a torture camp.

The imposition of draconian measures such as the Disturbed Area Act (DAA) 1990, Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) 1990 and Public Safety Act (PSA) 1978 have given far ranging powers to the armed forces and thereby reduced the citizenship of the people to a state of subjecthood. It is these subjects that Shalini visits in her position as a citizen. She is protected by her 'Otherness', her status as a South Indian, and thereby a legitimate, non-insurgent citizen and her wealth and influence guard her in the form of the Brigadier posted in Kashmir and who is a friend of her father's.

While Shalini is in Kashmir to redress the injuries sustained by her mother and Bashir Ahmed on account of an aborted almost-love affair, she meets his surviving family- his widow, his son Riyaz, the daughter in law Amina and grandson Aaquib. The village headman Mohammed Din and his daughter complete the milieu of this segment of the novel which is set high in the craggy mountains. She is initially told that Ahmed is dead

but goes on to discover that there more ways than one of dying or living for that matter. The threatening figure of the soldier looms over the place and raids are conducted over a whim. Threats are issued and the people have no way of finding out if or when they will be carried out. Heads are always meant to be kept lowered.

In the novel, Shalini is a problematic protagonist. She is the saviour/ pilgrim who while redressing wrongs of the past also seeks to 'save' the victims of her actions. She comes from the trope of Amir in *The Kite Runner* and Briony Tallis in *Atonement*. The India that Shalini occupies is very different from the one that lives and breathes in Kashmir and in the daily lives of the Kashmiris. At one time, Shalini's father even arranges for a small party of his close friends so they can listen to Ahmed speak of life in Kashmir. This exoticization of the apparent compatriot is an act of instant alienation and requires simultaneous performances of disbelief. Disbelief that this could be happening in this very country where Bangalore was also a city and disbelief that people could survive in the midst of these actions of insurgency and counter military operations. The Kashmiri who is caught in the web of this disbelief is then left to battle the demons in his mind where he is the performer, the perpetrator and the victim.

While *The Far Field* is a work of fiction, it is also a reading that undermines the nationalist narrative through the disruptive agency of its fictionality. This fictionality is rather important to the process of reading and in the words of Richard Walsh, should not

be equated simply with "fiction," as a category or genre of narrative: it is a communicative strategy, and as such it is apparent on some scale within many nonfictional narratives, in forms ranging from something like an ironic aside, through various forms of conjecture or imaginative supplementation, to full-blown counterfactual narrative examples. (7)

It is this fictionality that does not allow the readings to settle down into the comfort zone of a story and makes one look for documentary evidence within the text in the form of possible statistics and data that concretises the narratives of disenfranchisement that Vijay speaks of. The very absence in major of part of such accounts in fact reinforces the atmosphere of fear that she talks about. The people of the land seeking a way out, looking to get away from the gunpowder that surrounds them and trying to escape to the mainland to live out their lives in anonymity rather than stay and face the ignominy of being branded militants by the villagers, being

asked to shelter militants by the separatists or being seen as militants by the army. All of which Riyaz undergoes and looks to Shalini as a rabbit hole he can disappear down to reach Bangalore. But she, tired of the big city seeks her intimacies in the toe holds that the craggy mountainside offers her. she plans not to leave, while he wants to leave everything behind and go away with her.

Shalini is a poster girl for modern day feminist narratives- being bold, independent, unafraid of her desires, acutely aware of the power of her body and the role it plays in social, cultural, sexual and political discourse. The very presence of this body in a place like Kashmir disrupts time tested configurations as the body is not a victim, it is not there on account of being a human rights watchdog or a journalist. The body is on a quest to summarily reject all that was ascribed to it and gifted through the matrices of caste and class. In the end, it is a process of reconciliation- a recognition of how bodies- non male, albeit privileged, have to seek out liminal spaces to live and act out their ideas of participatory politics. The intersectionalities these bodies present with the national and subnational narratives, the systems of power and the semantics of cultural and spatial discourses create main lands, heartlands and conflict zones. These are rather important areas of representation in a work of fiction. "Intersectionality argues that multiple aspects of identity – gender, race, ethnicity, class, nationality, global position, age, sexuality, ability, religion, language, historical moment – converge and interact to create actual or perceived social positions, meanings, experiences, and representations in a world patterned by structural inequalities" (Warhol and Lanser 27)

Thus, the presence of the subaltern in *The Far Field* goes beyond the obvious figure of the Kashmiri and registers the seemingly non-vulnerable protagonist as well. This is not just on account of her return to Bangalore, but also on account of the recognition of the state of powerlessness that is imposed by a certain dominance exerted by ideological state apparatuses and a fatigue that emanates from the sheer protean nature of power. But one senses that it is not the end of the story. That there are forms of resistance that the bodies in Kashmir and in Bangalore are actively seeking out and acting out. The agency of memory and the ability to wait are crucial in this resistance. The novel takes up Shalini's life six years after her return from Kashmir. Six years where she did nothing for the cause. While this act may be seen as beating a retreat, it is in truth, an act of defiance. The ability to sit by and let people take charge of their own destinies and deal with their own histories and real time politics without jumping in with missionary zeal is an indication of a body that seeks to turn down power,

reject the hypocrisy of socially sanctioned privilege and through passive resistance, enable other subnations to become vocal.

Shalini watches on TV, the mass movements and protests against state sponsored killings in Kashmir and does nothing while sitting in Bangalore, not on account of her powerlessness or fear but because she accords the movement the respect it deserves and understands the currents of resistance that flows underneath the silence of the people. The subnational woman/citizen in Shalini realises that what she had imagined to be the helplessness of the people of Kashmir as they went from camp to camp searching for their missing ones, was a parallel country setting out its history and placing it in documents and pamphlets that are incomprehensible to the systems of the main land. The network of support- sort of an underground railroad- that operated between the people was Shalini's life after her return is a tacit nod of respect to the fact that the subnational – Kashmiri or otherwise- needs new paradigms to read it and to contextualise it. To situate it within the existing and recognised systems of binary is to do it a great disservice.

The subnational exists in forms obvious and covert. To recognise it and to realise the forms of resistance and propagation needs a more nuanced understanding of power and knowledge. An understanding that is willing and wise enough to step outside and is aware of the concentric and intersecting circles of history.

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