

Tom Jones : A Subaltern Critique

Dr. Shreeja Tripathi Sharma

Assistant Professor

Institute for Excellence in Higher Education

Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India

shreeja.sharma@gmail.com

Abstract

Henry Feilding's Tom Jones offers a picture of English society during the imperial times through a thought-provoking scrutiny of the marginalised voices and indirectly subverts the imperial authority of oppression. Fielding's defining work which notably laid the foundation of the English novel has often been implored for nuances of morality and sin.

This research paper explores the novel as a prelude to the postmodern subaltern voice against the dominion of the social and economically elite through the emancipatory empowerment of the roguish foundling hero of the picaresque tradition: Tom Jones. The paper seeks to establish the relevance of Tom Jones for the readers of the so-called Third World, as it offers a glimpse into the subaltern aspects of identity of the coloniser. In this context, this paper evaluates the narrative of Fielding's Tom Jones with reference to two key concerns: exposition of the oppressive power structure and revelation of marginalised oppressed.

Keywords: Tom Jones, Henry Feilding, Subaltern, Third-World Readers, Gender, Voices of the Marginalised

Fielding published Tom Jones in 1749 when the English novel was in its infancy and significantly influenced the tradition of the English novel through his work. He introduced a new fictional hero through the character of Tom Jones – a rather misjudged character from

the marginalised society whose moral scrutiny by the elite upper class, ironically exposed their hollow ideals. Fielding's novel may be regarded as a prelude to the post-colonial narrative with the voice of subaltern oppression flowing like a stream prophetically interrogating the colonial social structure.

Fielding introduced the protagonist, Tom Jones as a 'foundling'- an illegitimate child born out of a wedlock, and brashly launched the subaltern hero on a so to say, 'pre-subaltern stage'. He whirled the focus on the marginalised voices of the society through the 'foundling hero' Tom Jones.

The narrative transformed the rebellious image of the stereotype foundling typified by orthodox connotations of villainy and deceit into a panorama of naïve sensibilities through the character of Tom Jones. The work interrogated the legitimate structures of authority by exposing the norms of elite society and assigned a fresh perspective to morality from the perspective of the marginalised, thus granting voice to the speechless, through a rather amusing account.

This paper seeks to analyse the novel as a historical precursor of the "subaltern movement". The "subaltern" embodies the general attribute of subordination in the South Asian society expressed in a multitude of ways such as class, caste, age, gender and " (Guha, "Preface" 35). The Subaltern studies fundamentally concern the examination of the "binary relationship" of the subaltern and ruling classes in the social structure and essentially involves the interplay of dominance and subordination in colonial systems.

The Subaltern encompasses and involves wider connotations and associations such as exploring the undocumented historical archives of the subaltern groups. The term was notably used by the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci, who described the term 'Subaltern' to refer to 'inferior rank', in the context of the subjugated working class people in Soviet Union, oppressed under the hegemonic power of the ruling class.

Eventually, it was adopted by a team of historians comprising what is now called the ‘Subaltern Studies Group’ to describe the subordination in terms of class, gender, race in the South Asian Society. The members of the group include notable members such as Ranjith Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gyanendra Pandey.etc. The concept was further popularised by the Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern speak? In which expanded the scope further through the inclusion of the concerns of feministic of the women belonging to the Third World (1985).

The key focus of the approach concerns examining and voicing the concerns of the oppressed Subaltern classes buried beneath the structures of dominant social classes. It is in this context that Tom Jones emerges as a predecessor of the genesis which would eventually culminate into a the discourse on the Subaltern.

Since the historical narratives necessarily privilege the elite class and overlook the marginalised, the documentation of the Subaltern in the narrative inevitably becomes a crucial vantage point for readers of literary history. Tom Jones becomes particularly relevant in this regard. The novel is significantly relevant for the contemporary readers of the so called Third World, as it holds up a mirror to the contemporary English society and culture and offers a glimpse into the subaltern aspects of identity of the coloniser; with scarcely a few contemporary analogous works offering a realistic snapshot of the society. Moreover, Feilding made a departure from the conventional themes of the eighteenth century works which relied on substance from classical mythology, religion, epics, history and likewise. Feilding drew much of his substance for the plot from the common place world of the trivial and the insignificant chunks of society.

Therefore, while a significant number of contemporary works were prone to eulogising the elite and remained silent towards or even belittled the marginalised class; Tom Jones voiced the concerns of the marginalised sections and provided a more real slice of life.

Feilding had built a 'life and blood-real-hero', a clear departure from the contemporary traditional mode analogous with Gramsci's notion of the subaltern, "Knowledge of the subaltern classes relates to real men, formed in specific historical relations, with specific feelings, outlooks, fragmentary conceptions of the world, etc..." (220).

The novel reveals the binary dichotomy between elite and the subaltern sections of the society and implores the possibility of a transformation positioned in the silent subaltern domain. Tom transforms during the course of the novel, as he moves from the country, via the highway towards the urbane setting of the city; maturing amid bourgeois class exploitation, and exhibiting in Gramsci's words, the "historical forms of passive revolution".

The work reevaluates the structures of power and hierarchy and seeks to disempower the dominant structure. Several, instances in the novel raise questions on the values of the dominant social groups and juxtaposes it against the 'sinful morality' of Tom Jones. Squire Allworthy ironically proclaimed as "the wisest of men" does little to exemplify so through his actions and on the contrary is evidently a poor judge of character vulnerable to being easily deceived and swayed by falsities. His lack of judgement is apparent from the way he is manipulated by Blifil against the honest and straightforward Tom.

His misjudgement is also evident through his relationship with Captain Blifil, towards whose flaws he apparently turns a blind eye. Allworthy's failure to recognise the true character of Thwackum and Square, the hypocritical tutors engaged to teach Bilfil and Tom is equally unjust. In fact, the approach to education adopted by them raises questions on the real aim of education in terms of development of morality and ethics in conduct and behaviour. He makes vital errors of judgment in nearly in every situation involving decision making - including the cases of Partridge and Jenny Jones. Jenny Jones deliberately deceives him, but nevertheless he fails to investigate the matter judiciously and Tom, Jenny Jones and Partridge suffer heavily on account of his misjudgement.

Squire Western and Bilfil, the other members of the dominant group cannot likewise display unquestionable credentials and direct the decision to marry Sophia on the basis on materialistic objectives. While Squire Western wants Sophia to marry Bilfil as he is the heir-apparent of Squire Allworthy; Bilfil wants to marry her in order to inherit her wealth. Explicitly, Squire Western changes his mind to marry her to Tom upon learning that Tom and not Bilfil is the legitimate heir to Allworthy's estate. The novel clearly exposes the hypocrisy and hollowness inbuilt in the corruptible structures of hierarchy and juxtaposes them with the so called sinful but profoundly honest morality of Tom Jones, the foundling, who loves Sophia for her virtues - not her wealth and possessions. Bilfil's intentions of marrying Sophia become clear in the following lines:

He was indeed perfectly well satisfied with his prospect of success; for as to that entire and absolute possession of the heart of his mistress which romantic lovers require, the very idea of it never entered his head. Her fortune and her person were the sole objects of his wishes, of which he made no doubt soon to obtain the absolute property; as Mr Western's mind was so earnestly bent on the match; and as he well knew the strict obedience which Sophia was always ready to pay to her father's will. (Fielding, 109)

The narrative redresses the central question of a subaltern discourse – *Can history be written outside the dominant structure of power* ? The subaltern texts examine the degree to which a narrative documents the voices and concerns of the marginalised classes, the constituents usually overlooked in documentation of a historic, social or a fictional narrative.

The novel with its title “The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling” acts as a chronicle of socio-cultural contemporary structures describes the life outside the dominant structure of the elite class and subverts the authority of the hegemonic discourse. Fielding describes the life of the subaltern classes – Tom, Black George, Partridge, and ladies in Tom's life, in rich

detail, clouded by the overarching shadow of the dominant social class. The characters seem to enact Gramsci's hypothesised "consented coercion" and apparently ungrudgingly comply by the expected codes of conduct and behaviour:

... the supremacy of a social group manifests in two ways, as "dominion" and as "intellectual and moral leadership" ... it seems clear... that there can and indeed must be hegemonic activity even before the rise to power, and that one should not count only on the material force which power gives in order to exercise effective leadership.

Religion plays an important role in subaltern protests against an order and the setting of the Jacobite Rising of 1745 serves as a suitable backdrop. Fielding boldly bestows Tom Jones a roguish, reckless hero with questionable ethics the most exalted virtues like courage, generosity and benevolence and juxtaposes his morality with vices like hypocrisy and injustice present the 'refined and intellectual' elite class. The proclivity towards a thematic concerns - simple rustic life and ordinary language of common rural folk, which would be emphatically emphasised by the Romantic poets in the succeeding age, find a genesis in Tom Jones.

The novel explores the subdued position of the female characters against the role of power play in a male-dominated world and the wide variety of the female characters, including Sophia, the female protagonist largely fail to voice and assert their problematic identity. Women belong to the subaltern sections of the society and represent the marginalized, the silenced, and the oppressed.

Sophia's natural prudence makes her recognise Tom's true character in contrast to the learned 'acquired prudence' of Squire Allworthy and Squire Western. Though she is apparently a better judge of human character yet the degree of her autonomy and exercise of her prudence and will remains bound by the overarching dictates of her father's decision to marry her. She subordinates her love for Tom to her duty towards her father as apparent in

the lines: “ those Cardinal Virtues which like good House-wives stay at home, and mind only the Business of their own family...” (601)

Sophia loves Tom but never transgresses the decorum and complies by the norms of rightful conduct. In spite of her feelings for Tom she typically fits the persona of a stereotypical ‘chaste maid’ who follows the path of morality and good virtue consistently, in contrast to Tom Jone’s evolutionary transformation. Her love for Tom never appears to be exceedingly overwhelming and she rather remains in a state of ambivalence. However, as the novel proceeds she begins to assert her identity when she boldly absconds from her father's estate and travels fearlessly to London. But despite the bold initiative she does not accept Tom until the final resolution of the conflict in the plot and thus confirms to the image of the voiceless Subaltern. Though in part her decision may have been affected by Tom’s apparent involvement with Mrs. Waters.

Tom Jones can be seen a precursor to post-modern ideology of the voices of the sub-altern. Fielding deliberately reverses this perception through his comic representation. The Third world readers who often undergo suffering in various forms such as racist, casteist or retrogressive and orthodox, can particularly relate to the voice of the sub- altern in the narrative of Tom Jones.

Works Cited

Fielding, Henry. *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*. New York : Penguin Classics, 2005.

Guha, Ranajit. *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986-1995*. University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?." *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, 1988.