



Cover Page



UNDERSTANDING THE SUBALTERN SUBJECT: A READING OF EKALAVYA'S MYTHIC NARRATIVE

Dr. Mayuri Dutta

Assistant Professor in English
 J.B.Law College, Guwahati

Abstract

It has always been the elite academy with their dominant and privileged culture which is able to generate literary and cultural consciousness. This results in a monolithic culture where the elite sections with their accessibility to power and knowledge control all political and social institutions including pedagogical institutions. However, for the representation of an all embracing cultural reality the participation and contributions of scholars from the third world countries are not to be overlooked. As a matter of fact it is the negotiations of the third world scholars within the dominant western paradigm of culture which mark out the subaltern spaces of postcolonial study. The subaltern classes with their inferior rank and status are denied access to hegemonic power. The locating of the subaltern subject in a dominant discourse is important to redress the existing imbalance generated in academia by its tendency to focus on privileged elite cultures. This paper attempts to examine the character of Ekalavya from the ancient Indian epic *Mahabharata* so as to understand the position of the subaltern subject from the context of dominator-dominated relationship. The second part of the paper highlights how the subaltern subject, Ekalavya, who was discriminated against by his teacher, Dronacharya, attempted to subvert the then pedagogical institutions of power and knowledge.

Keywords : Monolithic culture, Power, Knowledge, Pedagogical, Subaltern, Hegemonic power, Dominant discourse.

The literature and culture of dominant First World western tradition is elite-centric as against the subordinate culture of the Third world tradition. The Western assumption about the superiority of hegemonic discourses creates a radical politics from the postcolonial perspective. Post colonialism deals with the impact of colonialism on cultures and societies at large. Post colonialism is a broad cultural approach to the study of power relations between different groups, cultures or people, in which language, literature and translation play role. (Hatim & Munday, 2005,p.106) It is a literature of the marginalized people from the formerly colonized countries. Postcolonial literature addresses the role of literature in perpetuating and challenging what Edward Said calls, Cultural Imperialism. Originally historians used the term post-colonial to denote a particular chronological period, designating the post-independence period. However, from the late 1970's the term gained currency among literary critics to include the various cultural effects of colonization.

In post-colonial studies and in critical theory, the term 'subaltern' designates the colonial populations who are socially, politically and geographically outside the hierarchy of a power colony. It is a term which has a long and rich history. During the middle ages, serfs and peasants in England were referred to as 'subaltern.' The lower ranks of the military later adopted this term by the 1700s. 'Subaltern' is a term coined by the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), to mean groups of people of inferior rank or rather to identify the social groups excluded and displaced from the mainstream social and political institutions. Gramsci used the term subaltern in a broad sense and used it interchangeably with the term 'class.' According to him the history of the oppressed people is always interconnected with the history of the ruling class. Subaltern studies emerged around 1982 as a series of journal articles published by Oxford University Press in India. A group of Indian scholars trained in the west wanted to reclaim their history. Its main aim was to represent history of the marginalized and make heard their unheard voices. Their writings focused on the subaltern in terms of class, caste, race, gender, language and culture. Leading scholars of Subaltern studies like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak , Ranajit Guha etc. espoused the idea of giving voices to the subjugated people who were the victims of colonial incursion. However many post colonial critics including Dipesh Chakrabarty in his work *Post coloniality and the Artifice of History*, Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak's work, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, among others suggest that it really impossible to fully break from the dominant western narrative.



Cover Page



This paper attempts to examine the mythic tale of Ekalavya from the ancient Indian epic, *Mahabharata* from the postcolonial subaltern perspective. The mythical narrative of Ekalavya's story deals with pedagogical institutions-teaching, learning, scholarship and disciplinehood. The initial part of the *Mahabharata* concerns itself with the childhoods of the two branches of the royal family, the Pandavas and the Kauravas as they live together in Hastinapur. The Pandavas are persecuted by the Kauravas and eventually a war breaks out between them, in which the Pandavas emerge victorious.

The education of the princes in the royal family is placed in charge of Dronacharya who is a teacher of great fame and renown. Drona belongs to the higher social rank by his being a Brahmin: a priest, a scholar, and a teacher by profession and birth. The Brahmin identity of Drona is important as it places him at the top of the social ladder along with his princely students, who are *kshatriyas*. That is, the teacher and the students of the royal family of Hastinapur constitute the elite class. In ancient times the most skilled form of combat was archery and same holds true in the *Mahabharata*. Drona's most favourite student in archery is Arjuna, a Pandava who excels as a great warrior. Ekalavya's story is crucial at this point in the epic. Ekalavya was the son of a poor, tribal chieftain who wanted to learn archery, to protect the deer in the forest that were being haunted by the leopards. Moreover the social background of Ekalavya situates him outside the purview of the privileged Aryan social order. It was his father who after recognizing his talents commanded him to leave his tribe and learn skills by getting an exposure of the world outside. So he went to Dronacharya who was the teacher of the royal family in Hastinapur and requested him to teach him the art of archery. Drona refuses to admit Ekalavya as his student as he belongs to the lower rung of the social ladder. The dejected Ekalavya refuses to accept the rejection from Drona so he takes on a journey to the forest adjoining Hastinapura and builds there a clay effigy of Drona. Every day he would worship the clay idol of Drona and practice archery under Drona's virtual tutelage. With the passage of time Ekalavya becomes an immensely skilful archer. Then one day Arjuna along with his brothers happen to pass that part of the forest with their dog which was Ekalavya's dwelling. The Pandava's dog immediately discovers Ekalavya at his lessons and begins to bark furiously at him. Hearing the dog bark and disturbing his lessons, Ekalavya neatly seals the mouth of the dog in a circle of arrows. Witnessing such skill of archery the Pandavas are spellbound and Arjuna in particular realizes the fact that there is another competent archer with almost equal skills like him. After being asked by Arjuna about his teacher, Ekalavya truthfully says that his teacher is Drona. Arjuna shocked by the reply rushes back to Drona who is otherwise forbidden to impart his teaching apart from members of royal family. However, Drona clears up the matter before Arjuna and proceeds to meet Ekalavya in the forest. Ekalavya expresses his gratefulness to Drona for his visit and he shows him the clay statue of Drona which he worships regularly. He also displays all his skills he has imbibed under the tutelage of Drona's image. Drona recognizes the unsurpassable skill of Ekalavya's archery and sees in him a skill far greater even than that of his favourite disciple, Arjuna. In fact his excellence in archery surpassed even Arjuna's which not only exposed the vulnerability of Arjuna in front of a tribal man but also made him a potential threat to Arjuna's brilliance. At this climactic point Drona demands from Ekalavya *Gurudakshina*, the offering due to a teacher for tutelage. Having acknowledged Drona as his teacher, it is incumbent upon Ekalavya to offer him *Gurudakshina*. The *Gurudakshina* which Drona demanded was the right thumb of Ekalavya and without hesitation Ekalavya took out his knife and sliced off his right thumb for his teacher. The loss of his right thumb will cost Ekalavya dearly as he is rendered disabled to be an archer because the right thumb is crucial in placing an arrow in a bow and drawing back the bowstring. Drona's blatantly violent demand for Ekalavya's thumb right as *Gurudakshina* may be seen as an act of reasserting control over marginalized people whose brilliance threatens the privileged people. This is how a person like Ekalavya, belonging to the inferior rank and status was subjugated by the upper elite class, the Brahmin represented by Drona.

The mythic story of Ekalavya places him as an oppressed subaltern subject who is brought down by the dominant discourse of power and knowledge. Ekalavya's condition can be equated with the concept of hegemony which implies domination by consent. This term was coined and popularized by Antonio Gramsci, who investigated why the ruling class was so successful in promoting its own interests in society. Hegemony is the power of the ruling class to convince other classes that their interests are the interests of all, e.g. in Ekalavya's story the duty of a student to offer *Gurudakshina* to a teacher has been eulogized. Ekalavya is a Nishada tribal boy who wishes to become the best archer in the world. However, it is obvious that as he was born in a low caste who was discriminated against and later victimized by the higher class Drona, who had all the access to power and knowledge.

Ekalavya's



Cover Page



story in the *Mahabharata* indicates how resistance emerges from the boundaries of exclusion. The royal teacher of the Kuru princes, Dronacharya, refuses to teach Ekalavya because of his low birth. However, Ekalavya learnt the skill of archery by making a clay idol of Drona as his teacher and guide. By engaging in this act, he breaks the monopoly of the upper class which dominates the institutionalized authority of Brahmanical knowledge. By taking lessons from the clay idol of Drona along with his dedication towards his goal he becomes adept in the skill of archery. His action proves that only dedication, skill and discipline are determining factors to master archery thereby undermining the ideological foundation of caste. Moreover, Ekalavya also redefines the process of learning as self-directed rather than its dependence on any hierarchical systems. He also stands for any marginalized learner who challenges the domain of sanctioned institutions of power and knowledge.

In this context it pertinent to consider one of the most influential postcolonial intellectuals, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* In this essay Spivak develops Gramsci's concept of the subaltern and expresses her skepticism about the liberal humanist assumption that the voices of the marginalized can be represented within dominant discourses. She argues that "The subaltern cannot speak...there is no space from which the subaltern can speak" (Spivak,1988) because their voices are always ignored, distorted, appropriated or silenced by the hegemonic social system. Spivak problematizes the production and reception of subaltern speech in its dependence on controlling and dominant discursive practices. She also argues that by speaking out and reclaiming a collective identity, subalterns will end up in reinforcing their subordinate position in the society. This insight finds a striking echo in the ancient myth of Ekalavya where the subaltern's self-taught excellence must be rendered mute so that the hierarchal power structures remain intact. Moreover, the apparent challenge of Ekalavya against institutional oppression can hardly be seen as pure self-expression. This is because the clay idol of Drona itself indicates that Ekalavya himself cannot escape the symbolic power structure of Brahmanical authority. Even in his act of rebellion, he needs his master's clay image to render legitimacy to his learning. Using postcolonial theory in the same essay, Spivak draws an interesting parallel between Ekalavya, a character from the *Mahabharata* and Caliban, a character from Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Both the characters are subaltern figures and victims of an unjust, exploitative system. They also represent the oppressed subject-Ekalavya of caste oppression and Caliban of colonial subjugation. Spivak observes that Caliban's voice is trapped with the belief system of the colonizer's (Prospero) discourse. Caliban's learning of the colonizer's language may be seen as an act of appropriation which he uses it only to curse the colonizer. Similarly Ekalavya's silence when his thumb was severed by his teacher reinforces the structures of domination that controls the subaltern's voice. Caliban's linguistic assimilation of the colonizer's language and Ekalavya's passive surrender to mutilation function as forms of mediated expression and internalization of the power structures. As a subaltern his speech is thus "mediated through the oppressor's signifier." This is what Spivak points out as the tragic paradoxical position of the subaltern agency: "The subaltern must speak in the master's language, thereby reaffirming the structures that silence him." In the same context, Ekalavya's mythic story may be seen as a metaphor for the subaltern condition itself. Even if Ekalavya does speak, it is not his individual voice restored but as a collective symbol of the silenced.

There is an interrelatedness of power and knowledge in which societies operate under the prevailing dominant discourse. Foucault argues that knowledge is power over others and also a power to define others. In his view, knowledge ceases to be a mode of liberation and becomes a mode of surveillance, regulation and discipline. In his work *Discipline and Punish*(1975), Foucault holds the view that power relations can be expressed on the basis of certain elements that are indispensable. The one over whom the power is exercised must be recognized and maintained as the subject who is capable of acting; in such a relationship of power. The only way that subjects can be free is if they have the ability to change the situation to resist the oppression. Foucault's panopticon is an important concept where power is no longer needs to be exercised through acts of violence; it operates instead through surveillance, normalization and examination. Panopticon is a metaphor for the way power operates in modern society. The clay image of Dronacharya serves as a symbolic panopticon. In a passive manner Ekalavya wilfully submits to the institutional discipline of his teacher generated by the clay image. Even if it is lifeless, it is a figure of authority that keeps a close vigil over Ekalavya in the teacher's physical absence. Ekalavya's self-training towards excellence and devoted adherence to the imagined standards of Drona's teachings reflects the internalization of power and authority. By constructing the statue of Dronacharya, Ekalavya reconstructs the surveillance of the teacher within his own consciousness. This may interpreted as what Foucault calls the 'capillary' nature of power in



Cover Page



its ability to penetrate every corner of the social structure. Moreover, the subaltern image of Ekalavya gets shattered when Ekalavya by his act of total surrender to Drona enacts the violence of the system upon himself. Foucault's theory of subject implies that we are not always trapped, but there is freedom to act and consequently the possibility of transformation. Knowledge is trapped in a conflict of dominations and all investigations or discourses are engaged in a process of exercising control, that is, power. Ekalavya's mythic story not only becomes a powerful allegory for disciplinary power but also establishes its complex link between power and knowledge. His body represented by his right thumb becomes the site of discipline and the severing of his thumb ensures obedience exacted through disciplinary control. The illustrative example of the subaltern subject, Ekalavya, who at the same time may be seen as a representative of an immigrant Third world scholar in an elite pedagogical institution.

Postcolonial studies must consider the material consequences of its postulations both for the elite society, for the subordinate class and most importantly for itself. The character of Ekalavya embodies the figure of the marginalized learner and the social set-up at that time warns prospective scholars situated in a subaltern position as third world scholars against asserting their positions with complacency. The story reveals the insidious way of elite power and shows there is some possibility of resistance to such power. Ekalavya's gaining of mastery over military knowledge without institutional sanction destabilizes the power dynamic prevalent in a hegemonic society. Characters like Ekalavya are in there in history and also in the present times. These marginalized characters exist because some dominant characters exert power over them. At some points in our lives we come across and even acknowledge the complicated question of power and knowledge as posed in the mythic story of Ekalavya. The subaltern subject in all its various dimensions is still struggling to mark out a space for itself within the elite pedagogical institutions of the world.

WORKS CITED:

PRIMARY SOURCE:

1. Chaturvedi, B.K. (1998). *Ekalavya*, Diamond Pocket Books (P) Ltd. ISBN 9788171829507

SECONDARY SOURCES:

1. Bandopadhyay Debaprasad, *The Ekalavya Relation: Translation, Colonialism and Modernity*, Technical Report, Sept, 2018, DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.217653.1760
2. Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Subaltern Studies and Post Colonial Historiography*. Nepantla: Views from South 1.1 2000
3. Chaturvedi, Vinayak. *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (Mapping Series) Verso Books, 2012
4. Evan Carton, Alan Warren Friedman, *Situating College English: Lessons from an American University* (1996) Greenwood Publishing Group Bergin & Garvey, Westport, Connecticut.
5. Foucault Michel, *Discipline and Punish*, 1975, Translated by Alan Sheridan, Penguin Publishers
6. Hatim, Basil and Munday, Jeremy. *Translation: An Advanced Resource Book* (Routledge Applied Linguistics), Routledge Publishers, 2004
7. Shakespeare, William, *The Tempest*. Maple Press, 2010
8. S.Shankar, *The Thumb of Ekalavya: Postcolonial Studies and the "Third World" Scholar in a Neocolonial world*, World Literature Today, Vol.68 No.3 (Summer, 1994), Pg 479-487
9. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Walther Konig, Verlag, 2021
10. *Guru Dronacharya and Ignorant Ekalavya*. [www. Speaking tree.in](http://www.Speakingtree.in). July 8, 2019
11. *Ekalavya*, <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>