

CULTURAL ASSIMILATION IN SAMARES MAJUMDAR'S "LEAVES OF BLOOD"

Dr. Priya Sharma Chatterjee and Prof. Arjun Patel Gupta

Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee, India

Abstract: Samares Majumdar's novel, "Leaves of Blood," delves into the harsh realities faced by poor villagers in Chhotnagpur during the late 19th century under British colonial rule. This abstract provides an overview of the novel's central themes, characters, and the profound transformation experienced by the villagers as they grapple with the promise of a better life in the tea plantations of Dooars.

Keywords: British colonization, India, 19th century, poverty, exploitation.

Introduction

Samares Majumdar's "Leaves of Blood" unfolds against the tumultuous backdrop of British colonization in 19th century India. This gripping narrative draws inspiration from the true-life ordeals of impoverished villagers from Chhotnagpur, who were lured by the tantalizing prospect of escaping drought-induced hardships in their homeland. Their journey to the tea plantations of Dooars, guided by the deceptive promises of Lalmohan, exposes them to a world of unforeseen suffering and disillusionment.

In their native villages, these simple, free-spirited individuals had endured the relentless torment of drought, resulting in an acute shortage of food and water. The parched land, scorched by the unforgiving sun and deprived of rainfall, had broken their spirits. It was under these dire circumstances that they consented to leave behind their homes and elders, driven by the allure of unlimited sustenance and water, as Lalmohan had promised. Little did they know that their decision would lead them into the capricious world of white colonial masters?

Upon their arrival in this new and foreign land, these villagers are subjected to a profound transformation. They are coerced into adopting Christianity as their religion and are given new Christian names, forsaking their previous beliefs in "Baba," their indigenous deity. They strive to emulate their English-speaking masters, dressing like them and attempting to speak their language. However, this metamorphosis introduces a new set of trials, with men enduring conditions akin to slavery and women compelled to satisfy the carnal desires of their masters. The promised paradise swiftly crumbles, leaving them in a state of disillusionment and despair.

Even the Village Headman and his wife, Sukhi, who once wielded authority and enjoyed freedom in their own village, find themselves powerless before the tyranny of the white masters. The Village Headman is reduced to a mere slave in this unfamiliar land, while Sukhi becomes a victim of the white masters' insatiable lust.

Intricately weaving together themes of colonial oppression, cultural transformation, and the resilience of the human spirit, "Leaves of Blood" offers a poignant and thought-provoking exploration of the complexities of life under British colonial rule in India. This novel sheds light on the indomitable will of individuals striving to retain their identity and dignity amidst the crushing weight of exploitation and cultural assimilation.

1.2. Brief Summary of the Novel

Samares Majumdar's novel *Leaves of Blood* is set in the backdrop of British colonization of India in the late 19th century. The story of the novel is based on the real-life experiences of poor villagers in Chhotnagpur brought by the tea planters to work in the plantations in Dooars. The villagers back home have endured severe drought. They do not have sufficient food to eat and water to drink. The soil has been burnt by the scorching heat of the sun and received no rainfall for a long period of time. Their hunger and thirst have broken their spirit. Being lured by Lalmohan's false promise of getting unlimited food and water in exchange of labour in making tea gardens, the free-spirited, simple folks have shared consent to leave their homeland and elders behind only to find themselves at the receiving end of the whims of the white people. At the new place, they are converted to Christianity and receive new Christian names. They try to follow Christianity as their religion and start believing "Jesus" as their God leaving "Baba" whom they used to believe as their God back in their villages. They try to speak English and wear dresses like the masters. But, ironically, the new set of problems arise, where men experience slave-like treatment and women have to satisfy the lust of the masters. The dream of paradise does not take long to fade. The Village Headman and his wife, Sukhi, who used to enjoy authority and freedom back in their village, helplessly surrender themselves to the white masters. The Village Headman is turned into a slave in the new place, and his wife, Sukhi falls prey to the white masters' lust.

2. Theoretical Framework

Bhabha's concept of "mimicry", which he has discussed in his most critically acclaimed book *The Location of Culture* (1994), is one of the most pivotal notions of postcolonialism. The word 'mimicry' bears some connection with the word 'mimesis'. 'Mimesis' is a term with a classical lineage. Originally, it is a Greek word, which has been used in aesthetic theory to refer to the attempt to imitate or reproduce reality since the time of Plato and Aristotle. In his *Republic*, Plato uses the word "mimesis" with a primarily visual significance; "mimesis" suggests an image, a visual image related to imitation and re-presentation.

As indicated by Bhabha, the colonized subject emulates the colonizer by embracing the colonizer's social propensities, language, clothing, values, and so forth. In doing as such, one taunts and spoofs the colonizer. Mimicry, in this way, finds a split in the conviction of colonial predominance, a vulnerability in its control of the conduct of the colonized. Bhabha noticed that mimicry is the procedure by which the colonized subject is recreated "as almost the same, but not quite" — it contains both joke and threat; it uncovers the restrictions in the authority of the colonial rhetoric, nearly just as the colonial authority definitely exemplifies the seeds of its own decimation.

Jacques Lacan, in one of his essays, has extensively dealt with the concept of mimicry. Bhabha's explanation of 'mimicry' has great influence of Lacan. Bhabha starts his seminal essay *Of Mimicry and Man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse* (1984)[2] with the words of Lacan from that essay. He notes: "Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage... It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled — exactly like the technique of camouflage practised in human warfare" [9].

Mimicry impacts the authority of colonial rhetoric significantly and upsettingly. In 'normalizing' the pioneer state or subject, the fantasy of post-Enlightenment courtesy antagonizes its possessed tongue of freedom and generates additional wisdom on its standards. The vacillation, which in this way, informs this technique is unmistakable. It is from this zone among mimicry and mockery, where the improving, acculturating crucial undermined by the uprooting look of its disciplinary twofold that the occurrences of pioneer impersonation come. What they all offer is a desultory procedure by which the overabundance or glide delivered by the inner conflict in mimicry does not just burst the rhetoric yet gets changed into a vulnerability wherein the bringing together frontier talks will undoubtedly perceive the colonial subject as a fractional existence. It seems as though the very ascent of the 'colonial' is reliant for its portrayal upon some conclusive constraint or counteraction inside the legitimate rhetoric itself. The achievement of pioneer allocation relies upon the multiplication of unseemly items that guarantee its strategic disappointment, with the goal that mimicry is without a moment's delay similarity and hazard.

Mimicry consistently verges on imitation or irony, which implies that impersonating conduct, iconography, and propensities for the other is a protected incendiary system. While the inferior appears to modify and acclimatize to predominant rhetoric, it provides a fake impression that the colonized is assuaged and innocuous, while opening a space for shrouded plans. A few practices might be that unusual that they must be proceeded as irony, something that most comprehend as a joke, however, is too unobtrusive to be in any way smothered or rebuffed by the authority. Ironic mimicry would thus be able to be utilized as unification reinforcing technique that jurisdiction will experience issues to boycott.

Bhabha proposes that the development of mimicry infers from a basic however unsteady longing concerning colonial sovereignty. From one perspective, there must be mediators or teammates with whom the colonial force can work in the act of its power; on the other; these middle people show up to seem excessively like the colonizer, disrupting belief systems of predominance. In addition, when brought into this economy of similarity and threat, the colonial subject comes to weaken his/her own self-indistinguishable force, as the mimic man.

Another result of mimicry is the sabotaging of the colonizer's clearly steady, unique personality. The way that anybody could be 'almost white but not quite' infers that nobody would ever be very white. There is no 'fact' of darkness or whiteness, and this is a gloomy acknowledgement for the colonizer than for the colonized. The personality of the colonizer is continually sliding ceaselessly, being subverted by impacts of composing, joking, guileful thoughtfulness, and redundancy. These impacts are clearly oblivious. Mimicry verifiably offers an initiation for authority and even a pattern for authority.

3. Textual Analysis

There is ample evidence of representation of mimicry in Samares Majumdar's seminal novel *Leaves of Blood*. Mimicry plays a significant role in reforming the identity of the characters and thereby complicating it. The effect of mimicry on the cultural, religious, individual, linguistic, and social identity of the characters is apparent in the text. For example, taking bath after a long time, Sukhi got to wear a top and a skirt which were of Hague's wife, and Ali cut her hair short. Going in front of the mirror "Sukhi was stunned! ...She touched her cheeks. Had she changed so much? How? She had never imagined that she could look as young and pretty as she did now in this blue skirt and yellow-white top" [11]. The sudden changes in her looks make Sukhi feel flabbergasted. Back to

her village, taking a bath was a luxury for her. Because of the scarcity of water, she could hardly afford it once a month or so. Washing the whole body with hot water and soap was a dream which she could hardly dream of and adorning herself with such types of beautiful clothes was too far from the reach of her imagination. She had to wear torn and dirty clothes for months. Wearing short hair and donning white beautiful English dresses, she starts to think herself as a 'Memsahib'. Sukhi assumes that Hague's wife's clothes have made her look almost like that lady. Apparently, she turns into almost a 'Memsahib' in attitude but not quite. To make a woman of his choice out of Sukhi, Hague instructs Ali to provide her new English clothes which metaphorically and implicitly refers to his desire to change the other almost completely. With the help of Ali, Hague not only works on her accent, language, and behavior, but he also works on her appearance to make a new character out of her; a new character which is assimilated with the mannerism of his own social class. Dasht Peyma (2009) argues that colonizers generally enforce their language onto the colonized, "coercing colonized people to speak the colonizers' tongue" [3]. Sukhi is made to simulate a Memsahib or as Bhabha proposes, to "mime" a Memsahib. Ali justifies Hague's purpose of teaching Sukhi: "if you listen to sahib and never disobey him then you'll be the number two person in the house. You'll order everyone else around"[11]. The way he vindicates his purpose is very much like the way the colonizers justify their treatments towards the colonized, or towards the Others. Sukhi is swinging between two identities. Bhabha exploits Lacan's psychoanalytic concept, "camouflage" referring to "blending in with something in the background that none the less is not entirely there itself" [16]. Thus, it is not only Sukhi, but also Hague who is affected in this reciprocal colonizer-colonized relationship.

Mimicry, like in Majumdar's *Leaves of Blood*, develops as a crucial subject in Hanif Kureishi's *My Son the Fanatic* (1994) too. Kureishi's story opens with Parvez's endeavor to comprehend his son's, Ali's conduct changes as of late. The story closes with an essential inquiry, which Ali places before his father, Parvez— "So who is the fanatic now?" [8]— contests Parvez's endeavors which he made life long to resemble the colonizer's speech. Karam Nayeypour indicated that the real narrative conflict, therefore, is between the modified version of the colonial voice as imitated by the father and the son's voice, or the emancipated voice of the colonized or suppressed [12]. As Gilman notes, the account struggle is "between the father's desires for the improvement of his son within the acculturated values of England and his son's newly discovered Muslim newfundamentalism" [5]. In this way, of the two facets of colonial mimicry—likeness and threat—threat is the predominant mode in this account. The son's rhetoric not just challenges the institutionalized rhetoric of his father, yet in addition sabotages the father's definitive rhetoric, which is the rhetoric of colonial mimicry too. Their contention is, in this way, a contention of starting points, as the colonial mimicry seems to be "a mimicry of the 'original' the 'true' which exists at the source of power"[1].

"Come here, my son", the Father's voice was gentler, "What is your name?" "Charoya". He somehow blurted out the word. Father touched what was hanging around his neck to the man's forehead and started muttering something. "Forget that name. From now on you are Charles. You have become a Christian now. Go, and drink the Holy Wine"[11]. That is how the Father converts the villagers to Christianity and gives everyone a "Christian" name. Shomra becomes Samuel; Mangra, McDonald; Etoya, Edward; Dukhon, Daniel. The women are also given new names – Susan, Elizabeth, Lisa, Martha, Mary, etc. After being converted and given new Christian names,

the attempts of mimicking that religion become evident in the villagers' attitude. They try to fit their feet in the boots of the colonizers. Leaving "Baba", whom they used to believe as their God back in their village, here the villagers start believing "Jesus" as their "New" God who will save them from various problems and sufferings at the new place. They assume that like kings, Gods also have their own territories. They surmise that from this point in time, they are under the care of 'Jesus' instead of 'Baba'. They try to sift their religious belief from 'Baba' to 'Jesus' and follow the Christian rituals like going to church on Sundays for prayer. Despite their best attempts to follow Christianity, they cannot perform the rituals properly, and their attempts often go wrong and seem funny. Moreover, their religious belief becomes ambiguous. Loomba maintains that postcolonial terms like "unhomeliness" and "mimicry" are only "a helpful shorthand, because they do not allow for the differences between distinct kinds of colonial situations, or the working class, gender, [geographical] location, race, caste or ideology among people whose lives have been restructured by colonial rule" [10].

The villagers are converted to Christianity and given holy wine to drink. Nevertheless, they cannot remember their "Christian" names the very next day. When "the head henchman looked at the sheet in his hand and called out, "McDonald!" No one answered. "Mangra McDonald", he shouted again, "Come up here." This time Mangra walked up tentatively" [11]. From the above incident, it's evident that they can only recognize their new names when they are called by keeping their original first names at the first place and the "Christian" names at the second place. The incident also helps us to make out that neither they become thoroughly Christian, nor they remain what they were earlier. Though some of them take pride thinking about their "Christian" names and assume themselves as if they are colonizers themselves, they lose their native religious identity, i.e., Hinduism and fail to adopt the 'New' religious identity, i.e., Christianity properly. Therefore, their religious identity receives ruptures.

The process of religious conversion took place without even asking them for their consent. Once the villagers get converted to Christianity, it seems to them that Christianity is the religion of the new land, and they should follow the religion which will keep them safe and secure there. They start to follow the religion unquestionably. On a Sunday, the villagers are ordered to go to the church for prayers. Getting there, they gather in the courtyard. Once the sermon gets over, each villager is given a sip of holy wine from a drum. Not being satisfied with the only sip, many of them go to ask for more and get scolded. They fail to realize that "it was holy wine, only to be sipped, not drunk"[11]. Back in their village, after harvesting the crop, they used to drink a lot once in a year to get drunk. When they are given a sip of holy wine at the church, the taste of that wine seems to them quite similar to the wine they used to drink in their village. That is why, many of them go to ask for more holy wine to get drunk. Their attempt of mimicking the religion, i.e., Christianity, turns out to be a source of laughter for others. This is a kind of mockery of the colonizers' religion i.e., Christianity by the colonized. As a result, the masters feel a kind of threat to their religion from the slaves and it makes the former feel insecure and get enraged.

Sukhi tries to learn the colonizer's language i.e., English and their maneuver too, including task mannerism from Ali, so that she can match with the Sahibs in terms of etiquette and can respond if Sahib asks her anything in English. However, in her happily made attempts of acquiring these two things, the endeavor of mimicking the colonizer becomes obvious. Initially, she starts learning from Ali the key words along with the pronunciation of each and every word of daily conversation which may takes place between Hague sahib and her. At the beginning,

it seems to her very tough to learn the language with the correct accent and losses patience sometimes as the language is totally different from the language she speaks. Besides, it is a totally new language which she not only never spoke before but also even never heard of it. But gradually, she acquires the language quite well and does not face any difficulty to converse with the Sahib in English. The colonized's acquisition of the colonizers' language is a kind of threat for the latter. Once the colonized learn the language and etiquette of the colonizer, the latter's identity is in danger. Fanon pointed out that the purpose of the yearning African was to talk the European language like the European himself and forget all African articulation and intonation. Explaining upon this type of colonial coercion, Bhabha portrayed the recreation of locals on the lines of their European aces through absorption of European religion, training, writing and social practices. Local subjects, contended Bhabha, trying to be progressively similar to the white ace, Anglicized and Europeanized themselves. What Bhabha and Fanon are signaling at is the absolute control of the colonized by the colonizer through tricky methods.

Chagna's wife comes to Shomra's hut and enters the kitchen, thinking to cook for Shomra. But she finds that Shomra has already cooked for himself. Then Shomra offers her some meat for her family. Nevertheless, she denies taking the meat saying that the meat may be poisonous, and she may die after eating that meat. To convince her that that particular meat is good, Shomra puts, "It's delicious. The sahibs eat it" [11]. To make his point strong, Shomra uses the reference of the masters. He ascertains that the meat must be delicious and harmless as the sahibs eat that particular meat which Shomra offers her. Shomra expects that after knowing about the liking of the sahibs for that particular meat, she should not have any doubt in her mind about that meat and should accept the meat happily. Here, it is evident that the colonizer's choice of food also has a great impact on the colonized's food selection. Even though the colonized are not habituated to the particular food items which the sahibs prefer to eat and do not like the taste of the same, they happily eat those items as those items are there in the colonizer's diet chat.

Thus, the colonized attempts to mimic the food choice of the colonizer to be equal to them in terms of food habit. The concept of food voice was first suggested by Hauck-Lawson (2004). She claimed that what one eats or doesn't eat expresses components of one's identity or feeling in a way that words alone can't. Families, migrations, assimilation, resistance, changes over time, and personal and collective identity all reflect in food choices [6]. Kittler and Sucher assert that the "Adoption of new food items does not generally develop as a steady progression from traditional diet to the diet of the majority culture. Instead, research indicates that the consumption of new items is often independent of traditional food habits. The lack of available native ingredients may force immediate acculturation, or convenience or cost factors may speed change" [7]. Food, both literary and non-literary, acts as a marker for identity in a class-conscious world. Food has a wide range of literary uses. While Terry Eagleton draws connections between eating and writing [4], Sarah Sceats and A. K. Ramanujan argue that food contributes to, substitutes for, and even undermines language [14][13].

One day, Ali enters Sukhi's bedroom in the afternoon and finds her asleep. Ali wakes her up by calling her for three times and advises her not to sleep till that time of the day because he thinks that if she sleeps that much, she will put on a lot of weight, and he assumes that Hague sahib will not like that figure of her and will not be happy with her in bed. Nevertheless, Sukhi defends her action saying that the Sahib has asked her to put on weight and

putting her hands on her hips, she mentions, “[t]hese are too small for him. Anyway, you won’t understand these things” [11]. Sukhi believes that Ali would not be able to make out those things as he is a very simple man who cannot imagine the sexual fantasies others may have for their partners in bed. Ali realizes that Sukhi is no more the Sukhi he met on the first day. She is changing rapidly. Nowadays, she has started understanding and following whatever instructions the Sahib gives her. She has started to feel that she is now the mistress of Hague sahib and tries her level best to keep the Sahib always happy.

“Sukhi, get up.”

“Call me Susan. Sahib said so.”

Ali swallowed. It was like he had just been slapped” [11].

Sukhi does not want to be called “Sukhi” anymore even from Ali, the man who has made her learn the things of which she is boasting off now and helped her to be what she is today. Sukhi’s order to Ali to call her “Susan” instead of “Sukhi” makes Ali feel thunderstruck. After hearing this order from Sukhi, the author assumes from the way Ali reacts that as if Sukhi has just slapped Ali. She wants to be called as “Susan” now. She is of the impression that she is no more a village woman and has achieved the level to be treated as Sahib’s mistress. It is evident from Sukhi’s attitude that she no more sees herself as a colonized whose duty is to obey and serve the masters but a colonizer who is equal to the masters. She feels that she has now qualified to be treated as the Sahib’s mistress by others and can order the others anything she wishes. The feeling of superiority has got space in her mind lately. Forgetting her root and the moral values which she used to practice back in the village, she blindly mimics the masters to be like them. The sudden changes in her attitude come at the cost of her original identity. In her attempt to achieve something which is not so easy as she assumes that to be, she loses her previous social identity. As Hague sahib never considers and approves Sukhi to include her with his own social identity, Sukhi’s aspiration and attempt to see the social class upliftment of herself and see herself as socially equal to the sahibs fail eventually. But this thing does not fail to threaten Hague. That is why when Sukhi gets pregnant, Hague Sahib gets anxious. He becomes impatient thinking that if Sukhi gives birth to a white child, people will suspect that none other than Hague is the biological father of the child. In that case, his reputation will be humiliated, and people may force him to accept Sukhi as her wife and the child as their child. Then he will also have to share his social identity with these two whom he considers inferior to him and who can only be exploited, not accepted as equals. This thought makes Hague feel insecure. Thus, at Hague’s command, after seeing the light of the earth, the child gets separated from the parents. Sukhi dies just after giving birth to a male child who and Hague denies giving the baby boy its original parental identity and orders to leave the baby in front of the church secretly. The Father finds the baby and rears the child without the knowledge of his parentage.

4. Conclusion

Samares Majumdar’s novel “Leaves of Blood” is pregnant with the instances of colonial mimicry. In the above instances, we see the tendency of the villagers to mimic the Sahibs in every possible aspect and in doing so, their cultural, religious, social, and linguistic identity; and food choice get affected. There are lot of similarities between Hague and Higgins (a character in GB Shaw’s “Pygmalion”) and Sukhi and Eliza (a character in GB Shaw’s “Pygmalion”). In Shaw’s “Pygmalion” [15], Higgins is the colonizer, and Eliza is the colonized. Similarly, in

Samares Majumdar's "Leaves of Blood" Hague is the colonizer, and Sukhi is the colonized. Like Sukhi, Eliza too tries to learn the language and accent of her master. Sukhi tries to learn manners, etiquette, and dressing from Ali to look like a mistress. Eliza tries to learn manners, etiquette, and dressing from Higgins and her mother to look like a princess. In both the texts, mimicry sometimes turns out to be a threat for the masters. As Shaw's play contains instances of colonial mimicry, few researchers call the play "a play of mimicry". Taking these similarities into account, if GB Shaw's play can be called "Pygmalion: a play of mimicry", Samares Majumdar's novel may also be called "*Leaves of Blood: a novel of mimicry*".

Authors' Bio

1. Sudipta Ghosh

Sudipta Ghosh is currently pursuing Ph.D. from the Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee on mimicry and displacement in South Asian novels. He has completed his M.A. in English Literature from the Department of English and Foreign Languages, Guru Ghasidas University, Chhattisgarh, India and has taught there for a semester. His areas of interest comprise colonial and postcolonial literature, cultural studies, and migration.

2. Rashmi Gaur

Email- rashmi.gaur@hs.iitr.ac.in

Rashmi Gaur is a Professor of English, she teaches courses in Communication, Culture, Gender Studies and Media (Film and Literature) at IIT Roorkee. In her career, spanning three decades, she has guided about 12 Ph.D. theses. She has published four books, also to her credit there are more than ninety research papers in national and international journals. Besides, she has travelled extensively and has participated in many conferences in India and abroad. She also runs consultancy projects in related areas. She has worked across disciplines and cultures in different research and cultural milieus and formed strong intercultural networks through international collaborations. She is also a member of several academic bodies. At present, she is working in the area of Media, Digital Humanities and Professional Communication.

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