RESISTANCE, REPRESSION AND MAHASWETA DEVI’S , ‘ROMTHA’

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ABSTRACT

Romtha connects with the notion of resistance which is no longer the site of a struggle against the law and order of the sovereign tyrannical state, but against a process of subjection that carries on throughout one’s entire life. Foucault connects bio-power, one of the means of resistance with power, sexuality and techniques aiming to modify and control biological phenomena related to human life. In trying to tackle this problem of how individuals are subjected through techniques of domination, two sets of relations have been put forth: those of power and of knowledge and in this framework bio-power is embodied in regulatory techniques by which human life can be modified.

“When life itself becomes an object of politics, this has consequences for the foundations, tools, and goals of political action. No one saw more clearly this shift in the nature of politics than Michel Foucault.” (Lemke 2011, 32).

The present paper tries to clarify Foucault’s notions of bio-power and biopolitics through the medium of Romtha, a person who has undergone severe offences. The work Romtha by Mahasweta Devi has been translated into English by Pinaki Bhattacharya. The story depicts the misfortune of Sharan, a bio-power that has been marked romtha by squeezing a hot iron into the skin. Devi showcases the practice of Romtha being used as a bio-power in the reign of Ruler Laksmansen who was volunteering the expenditure of huge measures of gold in order to further the cause of Ayurveda. In such practice the Baidya (doctor) can pick any romtha and use him in any fitting way for facilitating the reason for medication.

“For Mahamash oil, mahamash ghee. It can only be prepared by roasting a human being _ still alive _ in a cauldron of boiling oil. But will Your Majesty, the protector of the people, wish such a death upon any of your subjects?”(Bhattacharya, Pinaki, pp.14)

The background of the story is set in Gaur and the forest areas of the Bengal.

“And in the city of Gaur, those who work hard syndy by helplessly as others reap the benefits of their toil. In the kingdom of man thus governed by mortal hubris, was it surprising that death too was decided by royal decree?”(Bhattacharya, Pinaki, pp.16)

Consequently, the last part of the story portraying the murder of Sharan by the townspeople showcases Foucault’s notion that power is not seen as being fixed into institutions (police, courts, and prisons) but is a name for those relations and practices by which human beings are first, subjected to adopt certain social roles (students, workers, insane, etc.) and then bio-power is used to modify their lives as a biological phenomenon. The paper thus presents the picture of bio-power being used as a mode of power in the society through the life of Sharan, a convict Romtha.

Keywords: Ayurveda, Bio-power, Resistance, Repression.
consequently to the possibility of being cured of neurotic suffering. In *Studies on Hysteria* (Freud, 1893) Freud mentions that he had decided to abandon the hypnotic method, “since in quite a number of cases this roused the patients’ resistance and shook their confidence in me, which I needed for carrying out the more important psychical work” (Freud, 1893, p. 107). Even after the hypnotic method has been replaced by interpretation, following Freud’s choice of the technique of free association, resistance continues to manifest itself as a force contrary to treatment, since the aim of analysis remains unchanged (Wainrib, 2000). However, this is not the only meaning of the term which we find in his work. In his 1913 “On Beginning the Treatment” we see a change in Freud’s effort to understand the term conceptually. Realizing his inability to communicate, by means of interpretation, the homosexual psychical content proper to the psychical constitution of his young female patient, Freud argues that

“conscious knowledge, even if it was not subsequently driven out again, was powerless against those resistances” (Freud, 1913, p. 141). Therefore, the inefficacy of the patient’s appropriation of conscious knowledge in the process of treatment confronts psychoanalysis with certain questions, most importantly with the idea of a limit to interpretation as a method. In terms of resistance as a concept, the therapeutic disappointments of this method ultimately cause Freud to come to a theoretical-clinical turning point. He now turns his attention to repetition, introduced in connection with transference love, and being able to handle the latter becomes the main issue of analytical technique. Interventions must only be made in the field of transference, even though this highly particular patient-analyst relationship is also taken advantage of by the resistance to treatment – in the sense of negative and erotic transference. Transference and resistance are thus two sides of the same coin, which together have the power of both furthering and paralyzing the analytical process.

The different types of resistance can be assigned to different psychical agencies, according to their topological localization (Freud, 1926). The ego’s resistances are expressed by repression and transference; the resistance attributed to the superego manifests itself as the need for punishment/feeling of guilt; finally, the resistance of the id appears to be responsible for the need for working-through, since it is intimately linked to repetition compulsion. In addition to these three, Freud also mentions one other source of resistance (1937) that slows down the process of treatment. Here, the question is of the libido’s “adhesiveness,” which complicates the process of libidinal disinvestment and therefore also inhibits object-substitution. Regardless of the type of resistance discussed, the concept of working-through always plays a central role in psychoanalytic technique. This notion, which is elevated to the rank of a concept as a result of the limits imposed by the exclusivity of the interpretative method (Freud, 1914), shows that any effort at neutralizing and suspending the resistance of the id – actualized in repetition compulsion – is destined to fail. Resistances cannot simply be suspended: they must be pointed out, so that the subject can work through them. While repetition compulsion puts working-through at the forefront of psychoanalytic technique and therefore highlights the importance of subjective experience rather than attempts at complete rational understanding, its recognition necessarily points towards what escapes the framework of representation (Freud, 1920). However, repetition compulsion leads Freud to put forward the hypothesis of the death drive and ultimately challenges the possibility of eliminating resistance.

From its notion as an obstacle to the analytic process, to its becoming the expression of a specific mode of psychical functioning, the concept of resistances demonstrates its theoretical fruitfulness and clinical importance for Freud’s work as a whole

“No immensity is greater than a detail” (Foucault, 1995 [1975], p. 140).

Foucault’s formulation highlights the tiny residues, the minute particles of the power relations circulating at the heart of everyday life. We propose a simple overview of several “details” of Foucault’s notion of resistance, details which seem to us noteworthy, in order to raise certain questions regarding the same notion in Freud’s work. There is no doubt that starting from the 1970s Foucault refers to the notion of resistance more regularly, especially in his theorization of power. Two texts are particularly significant: the first volume of *History of Sexuality* (1990 [1976]) and a text entitled “The Subject and Power” (1982).

. Foucault rejects the idea of power as firmly attached to a particular institution, or even to a general system of domination promoted by a single element or group. Instead, power in a given society is a

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complex strategic situation: “Power is not something that is acquired, seized or shared, something that one holds onto or allows to slip away” (Foucault, 1990 [1976], p. 94). Power is not then something external, something that we glimpse at the limits of a universe, of a scene, beyond a thing or an institution. This non-external character of power is one of the conditions of possibility behind the notion of resistance. Foucault’s famous maxim,

“What there is power, there is resistance;” (Foucault, 1990 [1976], p. 95)

confirms, on the one hand, the strictly relational character of the scene of power, and, on the other hand, the impossibility of contemplating either resistance or power as some freely moving entity, existing outside a hermeneutically closed corpus. The points of resistance are thus present across the entire power network. For Foucault, there is a plurality of resistances: possible, necessary, improbable, spontaneous, solitary, savage, premeditated, violent, irreconcilable, etc. Each is only realized on the strategic scene of power relations. These resistances are

“distributed in irregular fashion: the points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space with varying densities, at times mobilizing groups or individuals in a definitive way, inflaming certain points of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behavior” (Foucault, 1990 [1976], p. 96).

, resistance would therefore serve to bring power relations into light, by looking at where they inscribe themselves in the social field, by discovering their points of application and the methods and strategies that are employed. By undertaking this analysis of power relations from the perspective of their inner logic, using the notion of resistance, Foucault distinguishes between three kinds of struggle. There are firstly struggles against domination (ethnic, social, and religious), secondly those that denounce the forms of exploitation which separate the individual from what he produces, and finally struggles that fight against all that ties the individual to himself and is responsible for submitting him to others (struggles against subjection [assujettissement], against different forms of subjectivity and submission) (Foucault, 2001 [1982]). Resistances do not arise in opposition to an institution or a group but in opposition to the effects of a particular technology of power, which operates in our immediate everyday life and whose frame is subjugation and subjection [assujettissement]. We should remember that this focus on the notion of power occurs during the second half of the 1970s. The idea is not solely one of disciplinary power, which annihilates the macrophysics of sovereignty, but one of a power that is a power over life and over living beings, a biopower. The notion of resistance is expanded as well, albeit in another direction: it is no longer the site of a struggle against the law and order of the sovereign tyrannical state, but against a process of subjection that carries on throughout one’s entire life.

Romtha by Mahasweta Devi has been translated into English by Pinaki Bhattacharya. The story depicts the misfortune of Sharan , a bio- power that has been marked romtha by squeezing a hot iron into the skin.

“Once the word romtha was branded on a man’s chest, the hot iron pressed into the skin at the base of his throat, he gave up on life itself.”(pp.2)

Devi showcases the practice of Romtha being used as a bio- power in the reign of Ruler Laksmansen who was volunteering the expenditure of huge measures of gold in order to further the cause of Ayurveda.

“Any Romtha who tried to escape would be considered the gravest of offenders. And whoever aided his attempt would be equally guilty in the eyes of the King.”(pp.16)

In such practice the Baidya (doctor) can pick any romtha and use him in any fitting way for facilitating the reason for medication.
“For Mahamash oil, mahamash ghee. It can only be prepared by roasting a human being _still alive_ in a cauldron of boiling oil. But will Your Majesty, the protector of the people, wish such a death upon any of your subjects?” (Bhattacharya, Pinaki, pp. 14)

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Sharan in the due course of time gets enamored with Chandrabali, “the city’s finest whore”. Chandrabali, though middle aged but accomplished in both dancing and painting was held in high respect by all. She was so fluent in languages as well and ran her own business with pretty young girls bought from the slave market. Sharan was her only lover, a paid lover. His heart was full to the brim with love for Chandra. Her mind would be elsewhere whenever she is lost in the thoughts of Sharan. Chandra too felt an invisible beckoning tug at her soul.

“She was not only a courtesan but the city’s most accomplished whore. A talented singer, a witty talker, a gifted painter. Fluent in Prakrit and Magadhi languages.” (pp. 25)

Chandrabali lured numerous individuals like Gopal who was the Chief of the gatekeepers. Gopal has the joy of tormenting the prostitutes. Also when he comes to know of Chandrabali’s love for Sharan, he is slanted to torment her. Gopal's overwhelming nature is known to everybody. Chandra did not have the slightest desire to entertain the chief of guards but she lacked courage and in order to survive in Gaur, she also had to please the chief.

At the very moment of Chandrabali’s opening doors to her lover Gopal, Sharan explodes into fury and killed Chandrabali in vengeance. The citizens of Gaur had no respect for Sharan who had brutally killed his beloved who adore him like anything.

“But perhaps Sharan possessed no self-respect, no shame. Such a brutal murder could have been committed only by a man who was at heart a savage monster, by nature lowlier than the maggots and the worms.” (pp. 21)

In this way, he chokes his cherished to death and on such wrongdoing Sharan was given life detention. There was a great impact of the baidyas (physicians) during the span of King Lakshmansen. The King himself was volunteering the expenditure of huge measures of gold in order to get the noble cause of Ayurveda. The physicians were provided with everything they needed such as corals, precious stones, pearls at an affordable prices without any taxes. They were gifted tax-free lands. Also the man power or the bio-power was provided to them at quite an affordable rates.

The King was making it clear that the fate of his subjects was under his control.

“The King passed a new decree: the baidyas could select any prisoner who had been tried and sentenced to death. The word romtha would then be branded on their bodies. A the service of the baidyas thereafter, the romthas could be used by their masters in whatever manner was thought fit, to further the cause of medicine.” (pp. 15)
Sharan turned into the romtha of a Baidya, Kobiraj Chandrasen. Remarking on the practice of romtha, Vadana Gupta states,

“By roasting a human being, a medicine is prepared for the benefit of mankind.” (Gupta, 118).

Devi tends to how the life of the romthas can be relinquished in ruthless manners for the probably noteworthy inspiration of drug. Chandrasen has an energetic dispossessed young lady, Subhadra. She is also captivated by Sharan and yearns for their happiness.

“Sharan! His very name thrilled her, set her blood afire. They would elope, escape to a distant land, run away to some remote destination like Tamralipta; anywhere would do. Anywhere where there was no Chandrasen, no Lakshmansen. Anywhere where a romtha could finally be free.” (pp.7)

Being a widow for quite a long time, her life was riddled with misery; stuck at home with a cruel father and an indifferent mother. Then one day Subhadra fell in love with Sharan and was swept away by a torrent of turbulent emotion that she even dreamt to escape with him.

“Subhadra had not the slightest bit of hesitation in eloping with the romtha despite knowing the disgrace it would bring her family, the humiliation it would visit upon her father. Life had given her nothing and she was not going to give up this one chance of happiness.” (pp.12)

Chandrasen being aware of Sharan’s indomitable will to live didn’t allow him to take off his chains. Infact Chandrasen could not afford to be complacent about Sharan. Obsessed with the thought, he would wake up several times each night and check on Sharan. Sharan and Gaurgo both in chains had come looking for herbs. They had never come to this part of the forest before. Suddenly, Sharan raised his arms and smashed the free end of his chain on Gaurgo’s head. His skull like a coconut burst open with a crack. Sharan did not wait, did not look back at Gaurgo’s corpse but ran into the forest. Not even for an instant did he thought of Subhadra. When it grew dark, he walked across to the riverbank, hunched over the water, climbed up the bank. Then a solitary boat in the distance had caught his eye. The river guards were very strict, they inspected every passing boat to ensure it carried no runaway slaves. The boat carrying Sharan slowed down and the boatman did not spoke any word and stared at Sharan.

“But the boatman could only stare, transfixed, at the word romtha branded on Sharan’s chest.”(pp.67)

He stammered in fear pointing at Sharan and sped off towards the village shouting for help from the villagers. The villagers came in and pelt stones at Sharan. The enraged crowd beat him with their paddles and sticks. Sharan passed on.

“The enraged mob still hit him, beating him furiously with their oars and their sticks. A deep red stain began to spread across the water, widening slowly, growing larger and larger.” (pp. 69)

The King’s order permitting the bubbling of the romthas and Chandra's sufferings owing to her widowhood are parts of feudal authority over the oppressed people in Indian culture. The story is rendered masterfully using expressive gadgets, remythification, portrayals, depictions, story inside a story procedure, blending of third individual portrayal with exchanges, trades and the authorial interruption. Elaborate gadgets, for example, pictures and comparisons have large amounts of Romtha and they fortify portrayal.

A romtha is set apart forever and he has no means of escape. Romtha depicts the medicinal practice of Ayurveda in detail. Elucidating the narration of Ayurveda, Gupta states,

“Ayurveda . . . turns out to be a system of medicine that is intrinsically feudal and therefore anti-tribal and anti-people” (Gupta, 118).
The bubbling of an alive man in a cauldron showcases the bio-power being used as a means of resistance executed on humanity. The notion of resistance is expanded as well: it is no longer the site of a struggle against the law and order of the sovereign tyrannical state, but against a process of subjugation that carries on through out Romtha’s entire life.

WORKS CITED


I. NOTES

[1] It is important to recall that already in his lectures at the Collège de France, in the years 1973-1974, which were published under the title Psychiatric Power, Foucault was turning towards a critique of certain philosophical traditions which analyze power (from Rousseau to Althusser and including Goffman), moving away from the notion of sovereign power towards disciplinary power and suggesting that today, power no longer belongs to any person because it is set in motion in proportion to its dispersion. Therefore, we are not simply declaring the death of the sovereign as an insignia of power, the ultimate decline of sovereign authority. On the one hand we have power that crystallizes into an object, into the king, and on the other hand anonymous power, which is only exercised through the dispersion of authority. See Foucault (2003 [1973-1974]).

[2] It is important to state that although we have employed the term “subject” without any distinction, the noncoincidence of the two notions in Freud and in Foucault must be stressed. In the latter’s thought, the question is not simply one of a structured subject, outlined beforehand, whose shape lies beneath the veil of defenses that the psychoanalyst must unveil, but of the processual nature of the different modes of subjectivation (Foucault, 2000 [1982]). In this sense, his conception of the subject would be closer to the formulations derived from the second Freudian topology, that is to say, those which draw logical consequences from the dynamic functioning of the diverse psychical agencies that only gradually become differentiated. Despite this discussion, in this text we keep the terms used by Foucault, such as “subject,” “individual” and “modes of subjectivation,” although they may also have different meanings in the psychoanalytic field.

[3] In his text, Foucault uses the term struggle as a synonym for resistance.