Research article

Investigating 'Moral Legitimacy' and 'Belonging' within Subaltern Counterpublics vis-à-vis the Raj: A Study of Select Short Stories by Janice Pariat

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Abstract

When there is a stringent demand for a viable reconstruction of the traditional socio-political structure, especially amid the paucity of "reliable" historical records from the pre-colonial era, the native population's recurrent anxieties of losing indigenous cultural heritage, and instances of its xenophobic politics, become visible in an unprecedented form. In this context, the discursive void between the dominant state-power and "excluded" subjects usually engenders counter-cultural values of endowed "subaltern counterpublics". Though these alternative public spheres are formed to uphold neglected discourses, often, a few 'dissident' voices reside within them to challenge the unanimity of such groups, towards more progressive ends. These apparent "nonconforming" discourses within the subaltern groups strive to foreground humanitarian principles by giving voice to alternative ideologies, and sometimes, for these propositions, are accused of lacking moral legitimacy towards the subaltern counterpublics themselves. Accentuating this vital site within the marginal yet homogenized discourse, the present paper attempts to foreground the question of moral legitimacy and its critical linkages with participatory parity of the subaltern counterpublics in the context of the British colonial era in Meghalaya. It further seeks to unpack how subaltern politics itself is manipulated by anti-egalitarian ethos within the subaltern counterpublics, in response to the colonial rule. In order to understand the inclusive approach of the "nonconformist" subaltern within the subaltern colonial subjects, who sometimes appear to challenge and rethink the very basic tenets of subaltern counterpolitics, and their negotiations of the varied legacies of the Raj, this study endeavours to analyze select short stories by Janice Pariat, the 2013 Sahitya Akademi Award-winning writer from Meghalaya.

[**Keywords**: Subaltern Counterpublics, Public sphere, Moral Legitimacy, Belonging, Alternative discourse]

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS   **Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions**

Introduction

The apparent equitable precepts of a collective consensus are always comprised of some "dissident" altercations. In the trajectory of "becoming" a citizen by transcending the concord of

incessant compliance to the prepotent judgment through participatory parity, the question of exclusionary politics remains relevant. While propounding his egalitarian socio-political ethos in the formation of interactive political convictions, Jürgen Habermas, a German philosopher, developed the concept called the "bourgeois public sphere". Emphasizing the equal accessibility for private people to become the participants of a public debate, Habermas celebrates the adequacy of critical dialogic negotiation for identifying social issues of common concern and thereby influencing the necessary political actions in adherence to mutual interests. Critiquing this strategic utopian acculturation of diverse opinions, Nancy Fraser, an American critical theorist, feminist, and philosopher, underscores the plausibility of conversational segregation owing to gender, non-proprietary social strata, and "racialized ethnicities" in the theatrical model of public discourse. Fraser's critical reconstruction of the limits of Habermas's ostensible democratic discourse entails a space for the synergic assemblage of subordinated counter-discourses, which she terms the "subaltern counterpublics". While Fraser primarily foregrounds the representation of counter-arguments conforming to disadvantaged social identities and the proliferation of polemical discourses as the salient essences of the counter-publics, she also underlines the probability of "anti-egalitarian" divergence of it. This entails the possibility to question the apparently legitimate and homogenous ideological ethos of the subaltern counterpublics. Accentuating this prospect of discursive bifurcation within the counter-publics, this study attempts to explicate the urge to uphold the values of the "moral legitimacy" by some subordinated participants that enable them to contend with the predominant "anti-democratic" persuasion within the same counter-public. While legitimacy, in general, is an attribution of approved recognition and popular acceptance that is conferred by the representatives of authority or people in power, moral legitimacy acquires its authenticity with the propagation of universal ethics that evade individual biases, societal prejudices, and cultural stereotypes. This unobtrusive dichotomy within the counterpublics complicates the potentiality of symmetric cohabitation and belongingness among its participatory members. Probing into the pre-eminence of moral legitimacy in the formation of a subcultural discourse of belongingness in the coterie of the counterpublics in relation to the colonial hegemony, this study further seeks to analyze two short stories- *A Waterfall of Horses* and *Echo Words* from the collection of short stories entitled *Boats on Land* by Janice Pariat, an Indian writer from Meghalaya.

Transcendence of Conformist Acquiescence in the Colonized Meghalaya

Formation of subjective identities amid the perpetual dominating appropriation and approbation by the colonial power, always involves added trials and tribulations for the geographically secluded and politically isolated populace, especially, in comparison to their mainland counterparts. Due to its strategic dissociation from mainland India till the initial years of the colonial era in the early decades of the nineteenth century, the north-eastern region of India has also experienced the same fate. Though initially maintained a policy of non-interference, it was with the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 as an aftermath of the First Anglo-Burmese War between 1824 and 1826, the British colonial administration executed a consolidated expansion in north-eastern India (Ralte, 2015, p. 67). Uncomprehending any stark differences between the "hill communities" adjoining the Brahmaputra Valley and the Surma Valley in terms of their diversified cultural lineages and socio-economic practices, the British forces homogenously referred to them

as the "tribes" of Assam (Srikanth, 2006). In order to satiate their commercial interests, the British government forcefully annexed different hill communities under it. Like many other tribal communities, the Khasis, the Garos (*A·chik mande*), and the Jaintias (*Pnar*) – situated on the southern part of Goalpara and the northern part of the Surma Valley – showed fierce resistance against their colonial annexation. However, it was in 1835, the Jaintia Hills were incorporated under British rule as an apparent outcome of barring the Jaintias from abducting British subjects to perform human sacrifice in order to pacify the aboriginal deities (Zou, 2005).

The armed conflict in the Anglo-Khasi War between 1829 and 1833 and the subsequent defeat of the Khasis under the leadership of U Tirot Sing Syiem provided supremacy to the East India Company over the Khasi Hills (with the active involvement of the colonial officer David Scott). Though from the 1830s the British administration started to control the bordering villages of the Garo Hills, it was between 1872 and 1873 the Garo Hills were brought the complete control of the British dominance in spite of the valiant resistance by the Garo warriors under the direction of Pa Togan Nengminza Sangma. Taking the opportunity of the absence of any "institutionalized religion", the British administration encouraged the spread of modern education and Christianity in order to attain commercial goals, as well as to enable the tribal communities to accept the modifications in colonial rule (Srikanth 96). Through the Government of India Act of 1935, the British government tried to increase its political influence on the hill tribes, and the Khasi Hills, the Jaintia Hills, the Garo Hills, the Naga Hills, and Mikir Hills were grouped together as the "partially excluded areas". Eventually, under the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act of 1971, the Khasis, Garos, Jaintias, and their aligned tribal communities attained a full-fledged state called Meghalaya in 1972 (Singha & Nayak, 2016). Whether it was the rebellion by the Jaintias against the colonial imposition of tax in the 1860s led by U Kiang Nongbah (Dutta, 1977), or the Garo protests against the colonial encroachment and expropriation of natural resources like forests and cultivated lands in the first decade of the twentieth century (Kumar, 2005), variegated anti-colonial struggles by the indigenous tribal communities in the annexed parts of present-day Meghalaya are detectable all through the colonial regime.

Ingrained Dialectics behind Apparent Consensus of the Bourgeois Public Sphere

Traditionally, social movements have often been portrayed as outcomes of shared values that simultaneously work to establish multifaceted demands toward collective identity. On many occasions, the influential propagators of social movements strive to uphold an opinionated narrative. As a consequence, the differences of opinions between the privileged public solidarities and the marginalized individual counter-arguments are hardly taken into consideration. Outlining an all-pervasive incorporation of subjective interpretations of general interests, Habermas (1991) conceptualizes the assemblage of diversified opinions as the "sphere of private people come together as public" (p. 27). The qualitative attitude of the public sphere presupposes that all the participants possess the authority of citizenship. Their democratic flexibility enables them to articulate propositions that are supposed to strengthen the actions of the state with general consent. Analyzing the democratized demeanour of interaction in the public sphere, Pauline Johnson (2006) comments that "The public sphere refers, then, to processes of rational consensus-

formation whose normativity is tied to a democratic interpretation of the aspiration towards self-shaped futures in an egalitarian and pluralistic age" (p. 1).

Reformulating Habermas's unbiased notion of the public sphere that upholds subjective functioning as a resistance to the state's domination, Nancy Fraser contends that marginalized alternative discourses are manipulated to be relegated to the periphery of classified consensus of the public sphere. Fraser (1990) argues that "This history records that members of subordinated social groups – women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians – have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics" (p. 67). She defines these socially excluded groups as the subaltern counterpublics. Due to the hindrance of social inequality, there is always a "contestatory relationship" that prevails between these counterpublics and the privileged sections of society. Fraser upholds the dialectical characteristics of the counterpublics: on the one hand, they represent the "spaces of withdrawal and regroupment" and, on the other, the arenas of perpetuating "agitational activities directed toward wider publics" (p. 68). She expresses her optimism in a way that with this dual nature of the counterpublics the "emancipatory potentialities" of the neglected strata can engender. While Habermas enforced the aspect of deliberation to decide the matters of a common good, the possibility of manipulation by the dominant people to demarcate the areas of general concern remains questionable. The deliberate desirability of the monopolizing sections of the public sphere circumscribes the socially inferior groups as the "weak publics" whose opinions can never be considered as contributing factors to the decision formation. Locating this internal power politics between the strong publics and the weak publics, Fraser conceptualizes the post-bourgeoisie notion of the public sphere through which autonomous decisions can be formed without any authoritative intimidation of exclusions.

Moral Legitimacy and Belongingness: Prerequisites but Infringed Prerogatives

Representation of a personalized conviction requires the incorporation of socially approved moral dimensions and majoritarian values, in order to be established. Though there is an apparent mutual agreement between general conformity and the spatio-temporal regnant edicts, the ethical inclination to enunciate individual assessment often remains suppressed. As the dissenting beliefs are not allowed to attain legislative visibility, only the ostensible symbiotic relationship between monopolizing power and the usual consensus of the public acquires recognition. In this process, the potentiality of moral legitimacy remains questionable, as it is always supposed to uphold the compatibility between the practice of an ideology and the moral substratum of the same. Antonio Gramsci coined the term "cultural hegemony" in order to recount how a class dominates and influences cultural means through social institutions, even as it "serves the interests of ruling groups at the expense of subordinate ones" (Lears, 1985, p. 571). While Gramsci's concept analyses the interrelation between power and socio-culture means under the capitalist frameworks, the influence of moral hegemony becomes perceptible in the formulation of an acknowledged sentiment in the bourgeois public sphere. Moral hegemony is often conceded by the monopoly of the "moral elites" (Sand, 2013). In many instances, the authoritative principles of the moral elites determine whether a practice is morally legitimate or not.

The predominance of the moral elites, engenders psychic segregation for the propagators of contradictory narratives in an assumed homogeneity of participatory parity. Such ideological

divergence renders the reformulation of the formal concept of citizenship that bestows "a derivative notion of belonging, in which belonging involves the legal membership of the political jurisprudence or polis" (Bagnall, 2010, pp. 450-451). Further, the apparent democratic participatory approach to citizenship and belonging enforces the idea of an "engaged citizen" who is concerned with "networking, collaborating, arguing, researching issues, and advocating positions" of knowledge that is "not only propositional but also dispositional, and particularly procedural" (p. 451). As a result, belonging is often considered an outcome of active participation in socio-political discourse. However, mere designation of citizenship does not ensure equal opportunity for every member of the nation-state to acquire a psychic space of belongingness. Exclusionary politics always prevails in the apparent parities as these "usually exclude traditional non-participants such as the poor, women, disabled, and ethnic minorities, and merely provide forums for the already well-represented sections of society" (Barber, 2009, p. 41). Apart from these hegemonized demarcations of belongingness, the ethical discernment of some members of the participatory parity seems to be the driving force for their relegation to the minority sections when the question of legitimizing a phenomenon or action emerges. In a colonized framework, this prospect of exclusionary politics situates the minority communities in a catch-22 situation, as there is an obvious threat of engrossing colonial predominance which stimulates their necessity to seek belongingness within the same subaltern communities. This double-edged consequence of dichotomous minority sentiments foregrounds the pluralistic design of a community. Nevertheless, it accentuates that an individual's affiliation to an identifiable community cannot ensure her or his unswerving dedication to it. The multifaceted rationale of an assumed unilinear community effectuates a varied range of categorical terms for belonging such as "historical assemblages, shifting constituencies, populations, relatively organised (disorganised) collectivities – to signal the difficulty of pinning down the 'truth' of human sociality and communal practices" (Pandey, 2005, p. 410). Such micro-narratives of liminal mindscapes are often subsumed under the metanarratives of the nationalist struggle.

Every sphere of socio-cultural life includes the constant power struggle and subaltern communities are no exceptions, as Malik (2020) argues that "class consciousness, hegemony, subalternity exists everywhere at the micro-level, which is multipolar, fragmented, divergent, and opposes anything that is totalitarian, including the subaltern itself" (p. 37). Among varied factors of inequality and deprivation within the subaltern communities, ethical discernment of the subalterns within subalterns who often seek to construct an inclusive socio-cultural rearrangement leads to the intra-subaltern conflict. However, the alternative discourses of the subjugated groups within the subaltern communities are often suppressed by the majoritarian sections. Such intimidations bring forth the disparity between a mere ascription of belonging and the empathetic sense of belonging to a community. Primary precepts of the subaltern studies minutely investigate the elimination of marginalized narratives at the predomination of hegemonic ones in the context of the colonial past. However, the blanket term "subalterns" deserves equal attention to be re-examined in the socio-political context as there is a perpetual dynamic of subordination exists between the weaker and the weak sections of the marginalized communities. In the context of Northeast India's colonial past, a reformulation of the conventional mode of historicity, as a binary oppositional framework of civilized and primitive, needs to be reimagined for upholding neglected, alternative discourses. Explicating this necessity, Misra (2011) argues that "Writing

histories of borderland then makes a strong case for foregrounding of ideas of multiplicity and contingent in the hope of returning the practices of the marginal and the suppressed" (p. 197).

Conceptual Polarities and the Ensuing Segregation of Alternative Discourse in *A Waterfall of Horses*

The instinct to assert an individual acumen for arguing against the indigenous antagonistic ochlocracy is doubly jeopardized when preeminent accountability exists towards resisting the looming presence of colonial jurisprudence. In order to locate how deprivation of agency is materialized by the predominance of an analogous discourse, this study analyses Janice Pariat's short story *A Waterfall of Horses*. Set in a locale called Pomreng in Meghalaya during the 1850s when British colonial domination is outrightly perceptible, the thirteen-year-old unnamed narrator depicts the ideological disparity between the abusive colonial officials and the suppressed indignation of the indigenous community. With the perspicuous reference to the tea plantation, the narrator delineates how the subordinated autochthonous people were tortured by colonial soldiers. When a brutish soldier mercilessly kills a plantation worker named Jymmang by dragging him behind his horse, the "muted rebellion" of the native workers is ignited (p. 11). Assembling to decide the required justice for this atrocity, the homogenous resentment of the poor villagers against the colonial appointees is manifested. Their collective decision to fight the colonial atrocities is explicated through statements like "We need to kill them" (Pariat, 2012, p. 12). An old villager, Nong Knia, paves the path for justice via his mysterious words and surreptitious rituals. A sense of apparent solidarity prevails in their conversation. Though sharing the same cultural lineage and experiencing almost similar dreadful revulsion from the colonizers, the narrator, due to his harmonious affinity with a colonial official named Sahib Sam, cherishes a distinct opinion that restrains him from corroborating the prevalent congruous detestation against all British officials. This impassioned impression leads him to be a protector of Sahib Sam, as he recounts:

> For days after, I moved around distracted and restless. The hours passed by glistening with sunshine and sudden autumn showers, yet they'd shifted, a little askew and out of line. I was nervous, constantly waiting for something to happen. The other villagers seemed to feel the same as they left work in the fields or opened their makeshift shops for business. They talked about it endlessly in hushed whispers over smoking pipes and cups of tea, but no one knew exactly what the elders had planned. I tried to keep the elders, especially Sahib Sam, within my sight as much as possible – following them, around, an unobtrusive shadow (p. 13).

In spite of participating in the formation of collective discourse, people like the narrator who cherish different opinions are forced to remain silent. The discursive alienation of the narrator implies the ethical nuances of conflictual politics within the subaltern counterpublics. The excruciating consternation that emerged out of colonial oppression invigorates the narrator to be inclined toward the formation of a unified public discourse with other villagers. Additionally, the question of his belongingness with the same socio-demographic ethos encourages him to share a collective identity with them. However, his emotional affinity with Sam Sahib, constituted through the moral precepts of social inclusivity, prevents him from asserting univocal indignation against all the colonial officials. This psychic entrenchment of the narrator between acquiring

belongingness within his community and upholding his altruistic concerns for integrated solidarity forces him to be a silent participant in the general consensus against colonial officials, including Sam Sahib. Discerning the prospect of such oppositional positionality within the seemingly all-inclusive public sphere, Fraser (1990) proclaims that: "The question of open access cannot be reduced without remainder to the presence or absence of formal exclusions" (p. 63).

Though in subaltern counterpublics, the participants belong to the marginalized category in the process of discursive formation, the predominance of congruent ideologies recreates the division between dominating class and restrained ones in the same public sphere. This manipulated approach to generalizing distinct reactions in the colonial context is also outlined by subaltern studies critics who exemplified how the subordinated voices were restrained from publicizing their distinct narratives, and their perturbing experiences were encoded according to the policy of elitist monopoly. Scrutinizing the tripartite structure of the historiographic complicity of the peasant rebellion in India under the British Raj as primary, secondary, and tertiary discourses, Ranajit Guha outlined the paramount importance of the peasants' discrete consciousness for these uprisings that most historians failed to capture. Guha (1983) also emphasizes that "Historiography has been content to deal with the peasant rebel merely as an empirical person or member or a class, but not as an entity whose will and reason constituted the praxis called rebellion" (p. 2). As Guha upholds the relevance of the disregarded specific subjectivity of the peasants amid the prevalence of the "historicized" accounts of the "spontaneous" peasant movements in colonial India, the question of lacking representation of certain ideological nuances at the individual level is outright perceptible. This uncritical traditional approach of taking the apparent "spontaneous" agreeability for granted to the detriment of individual sentiment is also evident in the subaltern counterpublics of *The Waterfall of Horses*. In the story, the narrator fails to assert his agency amid the all-pervasive homogeneity of village elders. His perturbed but silenced demeanour is conveyed through his recounting:

> Mama Saiñ, flames dancing in his eyes, sipped his drink in silence. A murmur rose around him, voices filled with anger and grief. It was cruel what the bilati men had done (what *some* of the bilati men had done I wanted to add, but didn't dare), they needed to be punished, to be driven out of the land, the village would fight them and take its revenge for all the wrongs the outsiders had committed (p. 11).

Such conditioned participation of individual agency under the predominance of majoritarian counterpublics is often assumed to be the spontaneous acceptance of the analogous discernment. Through such "informal exclusion and marginalization" within the counterpublics, the possibility of expanding "discursive contestation" is often hindered (Fraser, 1990, 67). Moreover, the psychic vacillation of the narrator between proclaiming his belongingness with other villagers and justifying his emotional affinity with Sam Sahib is in compliance with his elevated emotion induced through universal ethics. While the narrator professes his dissent against the antagonizing experience under colonial rule, he also feels anxious by imagining the possible outcomes of the villagers' anger and spirit of vengeance. The emotional congeniality encourages him to spend time with Sam Sahib before his leaving Pomreng. This penchant of the narrator to nurture the universal values of morality is aligned with the transformative characteristic of emotion as a cultural mediator, as defined by Sara Ahmed (2014): "If good emotions are cultivated, and are worked on and towards, then they remain defined against uncultivated or unruly emotions, which

frustrate the formation of the competent self" (p. 3). Referring to Ahmed's notion of emotion as a cultural practice, it can be argued that it is the relational nature of emotion with external events or people that reinforces moral legitimacy. It is the interactive relationality of the protagonist with Sahib Sam that engenders the configuration of Ahmed's "outside in" model of emotion which argues for the transference of emotion from outside that moves inward. In this process of psychic assimilation, the narrator transcends from his particular socio-demographic morality, which is pertinent among the other villagers, to a ubiquitous one based on the all-embracing values of compassion, endearment, and benevolence.

Conditioned Belongingness and Jeopardized Ethical Imperative in *Echo Words*

Emphasizing the question of ethical discernment in determining the democratic apprehension of the counterpublics, some repressive publics with their alternative perspectives are often relegated to the more deprived categories within the subaltern counterpublics. To further elucidate this concern, this study investigates *Echo Words* by Janice Pariat in which the narrator's moral cognizance reinforces his desire to uphold a discrete judgement based on permeating solidarity by defying the discursive consolidation of popular narrative. However, his altruistic intentions succumb to the preponderance of the conformist narrative of the populace. Set in the 1950s, the story focuses on an unnamed grocer who gives priority to his unique sense of emotionality while comprehending the nature of a French lady who comes to Shillong to write an anthropological book. When she hires a local man named Malcolm to work for her as a guide, the gathered people at the grocery shop do not hesitate to assume multiple facades of the psycho-sexual relationship between Malcolm and the lady. This process of propagating such institutionalized discourses is defined by Fraser as the "hegemonic mode of domination" (p. 62). In this regard, the narrator vindicates his moral legitimacy by engendering a counter-argumentative standpoint against a biased postcolonial fabrication that sometimes categorizes all Europeans under the shade of intimidating and domineering mindscapes. However, due to his fear of being alienated from his fellow villagers, he is unable to take a stand by starkly opposing their obnoxious remarks about the lady. Moreover, his necessity to profess his belongingness to other villagers perpetuates him to be part of their disparaging conversation. Fraser (1990) poignantly apprehends such possibility of the anti-democratic prospect of the subaltern counterpublics, as she mentions that "I do not mean to suggest that subaltern counterpublics are always necessarily virtuous; some of them, alas, are explicitly anti-democratic, and anti-egalitarian" (p. 67). In her attempt to recognize the implication of discursive multiplicities, Fraser is well aware of the influential manoeuvre of the strong people to designate some particular events as the core subjects of the public discourse.

Suppressing his philanthropic sentiment for the French lady, the narrator also contemplates that "I felt sorry for her, but there was little I could do apart from make small talk – the weather, the price of tomatoes, the rumours about nongshohnoh sightings in town" (Pariat, 2012, p. 53). This subjective inspection of the narrator never becomes able to be established as a persuasive alternative discourse against the cherished beliefs of the villagers. His ethical supposition leads his imagination to an amiable inclusivity, as he construes:

> I conjectured silently that she must be here on business of the church; it was the most likely explanation. If that were so, she'd probably be the most attractive sister of mercy

> we'd seen her yet. She greeted me, and said wished to buy a few things – candles, matches, barley water, a bottle of ink. Her accent was soft, slightly nasal and breathless; I couldn't recognize it even though I was familiar with many others – pukka British that had been around us many years, Italian from the Salesian priests at Don Bosco, the lilting Irish of the Catholic nuns and monks who ran the town's missionary schools, and even German, before the first great war rendered the Salvatorian fathers our enemies (p. 48).

Such disparities between the subaltern individualized realizations and the formation of their identities are also explored by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Though conceptually attributed to Michel Foucault's delineation of the relationship between power and knowledge, Spivak's concept of "epistemic violence" refers to the politicized production of knowledge of others. Instead of inflicting physical violence, epistemic violence is perpetuated through mediums of knowledge such as speech, writing, and controlled discourse. Spivak (1994) defines the functioning of epistemic violence as "The clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogenous project to constitute the colonial subject as the Other" (p. 76). It is through this manipulated process of epistemic violence that the powerful sections take the liberty to shape and reshape the authentic expressions of the subaltern people. The proliferation of such a predisposed narrative to the detriment of subordinated ones is also perceptible in the biased analysis of the French lady's relationship with Malcolm in *Echo Words*, as the narrator observes:

> As the days passed, the stories grew wilder and more extravagant. He'd spent the night with her, leaving for his house rumpled and sleepy in the early hours of the morning. They were at it like dogs, the people in the next room had complained to the receptionist about the noise. Someone said they'd seen them sneaking off like teenagers into the Risa Colony Forest, where all sorts of wanton debaucheries were rumoured to take place near the abandoned water tank. Soon, there was talk of Malcolm leaving his wife (p. 52).

The narrator's solitary empathetic assessment fails to acquire the potentiality of representation in the established renderings of the events. In spite of this inability, he is occasionally invigorated to render moral legitimacy to his attitude towards the French lady. His sense of moral legitimacy is derived from his traditional values, culture, and religion. While experiencing the same socio-cultural qualities, the decision-makers of this counterpublics develop a conscious passivity towards their traditional values, which eventually results in unbridled egotism. After the mysterious disappearance of the French lady and Malcolm, some villagers disseminate their opinionated speculations by defining it as a consequence of a secret love affair, as the narrator delineates:

> 'She's gathered more than enough material for her book.' Kong Lee giggled as she quartered betel nut on her palm. There was a deliciously thrilling ring to the story; perhaps they'd manage to make their way to Guwahati, or even as far as Calcutta to live in the big city – an unknown, mysterious couple, far from the cloistered confines of Shillong. Some people even said that they admired the pair for their courage and the unbridled surety of their love (p. 55).

The ideological disparity between the narrator and the hegemonic rumour-mongers also emphasizes that the privatization of morality by the dominating groups in the subaltern

counterpublics deprecates an all-inclusive socio-cultural equilibrium. Exploring how, Willkie and Willkie (2008) state that "One of the defining components of modernity is the privatization of morals, relegating moral to a status of private concern and replacing the public morality with ingenious idea of democratic legislative procedures" (p. 29). In this regard, it is only through the recognition of variegated moral standards that the unitary decision-making potentiality of the counterpublics can be achieved.

Conclusion

Though Habermas's concept of the bourgeoise public sphere proposes an egalitarian accessibility for all the private publics to become the participants of a public discourse. This dialogical interaction among all-encompassing sensibilities intends to contribute to the course of general concerns. Critiquing the underlying assumption of this democratic participation in the public sphere, Fraser upholds the marginalized positions of the oppressed groups in society who do not have equitable access to participate in the formation of public discourse for the common good. She also argues that Habermas's notion of a singular public sphere does not entail any space for a multiplicity of alternative discourses. Rendering space to the neglected ideologies, Fraser develops the proposition of the subaltern counterpublics that includes all marginalized strata of the society. Implying the apparent impartial exchange of alternative ideas in the subaltern counterpublics, this study shows that participatory disparity continues to reside in it as power politics is also an impetus to it. Analyzing *A Waterfall of Horses* and *Echo Words* by Janice Pariat, this study accentuates how the narrators fail to ratify their respective unique points of view before the homogenous villagers who enjoy commanding opinions. The narrators suffer from the crisis of double marginalization. On the one hand, colonial atrocities relegate them to the subaltern categories, and, on the other, they are excluded from the concerted discourse of the subaltern counterpublics. This main hindrance of the narrators to aligning their alternative ideologies with the predominating cultural ethos is due to their allegiance to their moral legitimacies that encourage them to prioritize the values of ethics. This psychic conundrum also problematizes the very notion of their belonging. In such scenarios, a sense of cohabitation can only be achieved when the mutual recognition of ethical discernment is encouraged through affection, empathy, and admiration for alternative narratives.

Acknowledgment

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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