Subversive Resistance in a Literary Theory Perspective

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Abstract:
The literary concept of subversion is normally seen as the assertion of a coherent and integrated subjectivity in literature and literary theory. It cannot be imagined in isolation from the real social and historical conditions where radical ideas as actual or potential practices have consequences for the many of literary writers and their works. As an activity on the part of a particular individual or a group it is primarily a consequence of the conflicting processes of subordination and domination in a particular culture. With subversion comes resistance, which usually prevents one force or agency entirely overwhelming another in social and cultural environment. Essentially, the context for a discussion of subversive resistance has been that of violence, sometime in relation to geographical occupation or colonization of a nation-state. In literature it accumulates its strength from the fact that a literary text is organically associated with even rooted in historical and social realities. Literary theorists profess that all forms of innovations, change, dissent or revolt are basically produced by the already existing forms of cultural representation. The side effect in the development of a particular culture of value-system is that the inconsistencies, blankness and contradictions have always existed in the dominant value system. While some types of resistance or non-conformist tendencies can gain momentum in literary representations, they will also become the testimonies of intellectual growth and literary success of writers.

Keywords: subversion, resistance, theory, subjectivity, literary works

Introduction

In the study of literary theory and works, “subversion” is one of the key concepts. It accumulates its cultural strength from the fact that a literary text is organically associated with even rooted in historical and social realities. It bears the features of the secular world and human development. According to crude Marxism, literature, be it fiction, drama or poetry, is essentially a product of historical conditions of the times and has a role play therein. A normal dictionary definition of the term subversion is about overthrowing a state government or to destroy its internal order. (Abram, 1986:47) metaphorically it is can be appreciated in the cultural and literary world. As the term subversion is so pragmatically significant in terms of cultural and literary understanding and criticism, it is imperative that a cursory look at the situational changes that modern critical theories have brought about in the relationship of literary production and reception with the ethos of subversion.
Theorizing Subversion

It is evident that subversion of all controlling, unifying and incorporative pressures working in a text, on the author or the reader is quite pronounced in critical theory. Apparently, this may be helpful for us to look upon subversion as the most important activity to which reading of any piece of creative writing may invite us. If we look more closely at the position adopted by the major writers associated with the critical theory, we shall find that this notion of subversion is not as satisfactory as it seems initially. The primary weakness is that the “self” of the individual virtually dissolves into a subjectivity which is palpable only in the form of a function of discourse and has no existence beyond this function. What such subjectivity would seek as satisfying stance is a space for itself within the existing structures which could give it an illusion of resistance against total incorporation and homogenization. Such a mode of subversive resistance usually takes the form of a defensive withdrawal and not that of an active engagement.

Some literary theorists profess that all forms of innovations, change, dissent or revolt are basically produced by the already existing forms of representation, additions to which are the maximum that the writer as an “improviser” can achieve. (Adorno, 1990; Eagleton, 1996; Barthes, 1992; Lu, 1999) The term “subversion” has to be seen as the assertion of a coherent and integrated subjectivity in a work of literature. The argument that the writer is merely an “improviser” in the available forms of representation and that his writing does not amount to any active intervention tends to enervate the meaning of the term subversion. The following statement by Stephen Greenblatt summarizes the kind of functioning these views attribute to a writer, “All discourse is improvisation, both an entry into and a deflection of existing strategies of representation… All artists enter into representations that are already under way and made a place for themselves in relation to these representations which, we might add, never fully coordinated.” (1981:29) Discussing about the ramifications of this weakness of the “central domination” from all “discursive writing”, Jeremy Hawthorn observes, “When the subject is described as site, an attack is being made on view of the subject as in control—or even aware of its destiny; a subject is according to such a view, more or merely a site on which extra-subjective forces clash and resolve their differences.” (1994:269) The presence of domination as the controlling agent from outside or a pre-existing meaning prior to language is, thus, held as mythical.

According to Edward Said, it is proper to remark that “as texts they place themselves—that is, one of their functions as texts is to place themselves--and they are themselves by acting in the world.” (139) Thus, with the relationship that subversion carries with the real world being neither illusory nor secondary, literature may well become the vehicle of ideas of resistance. Whether conscious of it or not, it is always endowed with a responsibility in actual terms. The affirmations and negations made by a writer in his literary works are not instances of personal whims or visions, but more complex products of the writer’s conscious and unconscious participation in the socio-historical realities of his era. Illustrations of oppositional and radical characters we associate with the writings or world view of a particular author are primarily at the level of ideas. Ideas are, undoubtedly, the most complex
reflections of the psychological patterns that individuals constantly imbibe from the lived and imaginatively envisioned mass of their whole personal and social experiences. Therefore, radical subversion is “not merely the attempt to seize existing authority” but “a challenge to the principles upon which authority is based.” (Said, 1981:67) The most explicit form of subversion is then, essentially, not a simple act of like or dislike for a particular piece of writing. Rather it is that intrinsic and all prevailing element of one’s ideology or beliefs through which his whole sociability asserts it with an oppositional character against what is experienced by the individual an assault on his imagined ideals of the society. Referring to the complexity and the wider implications that the term subversion carries, Jonathan Dollimore remarks: “Nothing can be intrinsically or essentially subversive in the sense that prior to the event subversiveness can be more than potential; in other words, it cannot be guaranteed a priori, independent of articulation, context and reception. Likewise the mere thinking of a radical idea is not what makes it subversive.” (1981:30)

Therefore, subversion cannot be imagined in isolation from the real social and historical conditions where radical ideas as actual or potential practices have consequences for the many of the few. In fact, subversion as an activity on the part of a particular individual or section of individuals is primarily a consequence of the conflicting processes of subordination and domination in a particular culture. The idea with its emphasis on the “authority” appears to give the impression as if the “authority” or the “dominant” and the forces that subvert them can be clearly demarcated. Though always accompanied by a certain degree of clarity, the multi-dimensional reality of domination and subordination in the process of literary production and consumption, constantly defies an easy and stable identifications of the dominant and the one excluded from it. In this regard, Said remarked that “culture is the process of domination and struggle always dissembling, always deceiving.” (1978:79)

Here Said’s argument focuses on the power relationships of discourses relative to essentially political agenda. No Western discourse, literary or political, about a nation, culture and people can be on the passive end within the context of imperialism and colonization because all participants maintain a cultural sovereignty. For Said, literature has both “an internal consistency and a highly articulated set of relationships to the dominant culture surrounding it”. (1980:67) Literary texts are constructed within political contexts, creating a discourse about the East as the cultural “other”. Commenting on Oriental history, Said thinks that history of the East for Hegel, for Marx, later for Burkhardt, Nietzsche, Spengler, and other major philosophers of history, was useful in portraying a region of great age and what had to be left behind. Said remarked, “Literary historians have further noted in all sorts of aesthetic writings and plastic portrayals that a trajectory of the literary, found for example in Keats and Holderlin, customarily saw the Orient as ceding its historical preeminence and importance to the world spirit moving westwards away from Asia and towards Europe” (1978:17).

Said uses the discourse analysis to deal with colonialism and resistance—an experimental approach. It examines how the formal study of the “Orient”, in combination with key literary texts, firmly formulated certain viewpoints and ideologies which in turn contributed to the exercises of colonial power”. (Ibid:3). In discussing about the
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hegemonic canonization of Western literature, particular about literary texts by Shakespeare, Said remarks, “Each age, for instance, re-interprets Shakespeare, not because Shakespeare changes, but because, despite the existence of numerous and reliable editions of Shakespeare, there is no such fixed and non-trivial object as Shakespeare independent of his editors, the actors who played his roles, the translators who put him in other languages, the hundreds of millions of readers who have read him or watched performances of his plays since the late sixteenth century.” (1980:16)

However, due to the unbalance of cultural exchange and tilted flux of occidental culture, the spread of Western canons has more been experienced in the orient. The canonization and recognition of oriental literature in the East have been confronted many “natural” resistances. Said’s major argument is that the literary discourse can create not only knowledge but also the reality – political and cultural. It is proper to say that Said initiated a new kind of study of literary representation of the East. He maintains that representations of the “Orient” in European literary texts, travelogues and other writings contributed to the creation of a dichotomy between Europe and the “other”, a dichotomy that was central to the creation of Euro-centralism as well as to the maintenance and extension of European hegemony over other lands. Said presents that this dichotomy or opposition is crucial to the self-establishment of Europe. This dialectic between self and other, derived in part from deconstruction, has been greatly influential in subsequent studies of colonial hegemony and resistance in other fields.

In defining cultural dominance Raymond Williams explicates the complex character of what Said termed as “hegemony”, and highlights the process of inclusion and exclusion in a given culture. He said, “It is a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of the living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values – constitutive and constituting – which they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming…It is, that is to say, in the strongest sense a culture, but a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes. (1961:28) Following the argument, the cultural theorist observes that no “dominant culture ever in reality, includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy, and human intention.” (Ibid.) So, in a cultural process when a certain value-system or world view is gaining domination over others, a process of subversive resistance is also going on. But the world-view or notion of reality that has this sense of exclusion, instead of always accepting the subordination on the terms of the “hegemonic” or the dominant, may cause moments of introspection for the dominant one. Dollimore rightly observes, “Non-dominant elements interact with the dominant forms, sometimes coexisting with, or being absorbed or even destroyed by them, but also challenging, modifying or even displacing them.” (1981:20)

As matter of fact, subversion thought as consequence of a particular social or cultural process is not a general one. It is the marginalized or the excluded group or section of society that is prompted to subvert or overturn the dominant or the “hegemonic” formations. The nature and authenticity of subversion is actually determined by an unmistakably clear identification of the dominant value system. A particular “hegemony” for the perpetuation of
its domination may throw different and even conflicting self images. Giving the impressions of oppositions and radicalism to the activities and ideas of different groups, it may confuse them and remain intact. That is why every act or gesture which looks subversive is no guarantee of social change or revolution or even realistic challenge. Alternatively, subversion does not consist in a quarrel which is radical only in its form and not in the challenge it poses to the established structures of the dominant culture. Thus, what is more important is not the conspicuous form of radical quarrel, dissent or opposition, but the nature and extent of achieved effect. While loud assertions may ultimately prove obedient to the dominant system, modest and apparently low keyed interventions without any ostensible plan of overturning the things may result in a real threat to the established order. Greenblatt is right in his observation that “a gesture of dissent may be an element in a larger legitimation process, while an attempt to stabilize the order of things may turn out to subvert it.” (1981:6)

Interestingly, it is meaningful to notice another dimension of a subversive act of gesture which can take the place of the dominant or “hegemonic” value-system which marginalizes and subjugates some under-privileged groups. Sometimes the images of this alternative that generate subversion may actually turn out to be illusory. In fact, beneath the ostensible forms of subversion, one may “discover not a straight forward opposition but a process more complex.” (Dollimore, 1981:46) Further, “subversiveness may for example be apparent only, the dominant order not only containing it but paradoxical as it may seem, actually producing it for its own ends.” (Ibid) Based on the perspective which can offer an alternative set of values, the effectiveness of subversion owes a lot to the occasion and context of its occurrence. That is why, sometimes, departures attempted from the dominant order in a particular historical period or context may begin to strengthen or weaken a specific system only at a later phase. This is another important factor which has to be taken into account for identifying a subversive act or gesture. It has to be seen whether it has the potential of building up into a collaborative intervention by a number of people or subjectivities who share the common subjugation and exclusion at the ends of the dominant culture. Therefore, the ostensible forms of subversion at a given time “may retrospectively be constructed as a crucial step towards progress. In a different historical context it may later be received as “having contributed to either revolutionary change or anarchistic disintegration.” (Ibid. 24)

A particular way of thinking encouraged by the dominant set of values which have acquired hegemonic status today is to visualize the role of the individual in society primarily as a consumer. Such a notion of the individual’s role in society tends to preclude the possibilities of an act or gesture which can ultimately assume a subversive character. It is pertinent to quote Williams thus, “The popularity of the ‘consumer’ as a way of describing the ordinary member of modern capitalist society in a main part of his economic activity is very significant.” (1961:34) Accordingly, in such a system if community or collectivity is ever imagined, it is only the terms of “market” or consumers. The thinking patterns that such a system generates remain grossly unaware of the larger implications that the consumerist culture embodies. Now, when the consumerist culture is nearing substantial success all over the world, the crises becomes more felt. With such a transformation of the human world, as Frederic Jameson States, “the last surviving, internal and external zones of pre-capitalism --
the last vestiges of traditional space within and outside the advanced world -- are now ultimately penetrated and colonized in their turn.” (1982:165) Thus, in this new phase of “neo-colonialism, the hegemonic culture of co-modification is consolidating itself.” (Ibid.)

However, this dominant set of values which have now brought co-modification of the human substance had initially held out a promise to all individuals of dignity, enlarged freedom, and fulfillment of their vital needs, as also the development of their human faculties. Historically, the initial form of this set of values is generally identified as the humanistic values of traditional society. When market society had got fully established and the middle classes had become “hegemonic” in the social order, a new set of attitudes, values and a new perspective for recognizing reality, got defined in the form of progression. Thus, a process was initiated that changed mankind’s self-understanding and “opened new scopes for freedom and prosperity and gave new meanings to man’s relationship with culture and society.” (Williams, 1973:48).

**Discursive Resistance**

Generally, resistance is what prevents one force or agency entirely overwhelming another. Probably the most consistent context for a discussion of resistance has been that of violence, sometime in relation to geographical occupation or colonization of a nation-state. Yet it is the element of subjectivity in “resistance” that gives the concept its full resonance. This can be cast in an individualist way, as in “There is a spirit of resistance in this country, which will not submit to be oppressed” (Junius, Letters, 1769). By the nineteenth century in Europe “civic and national resistance” (Southey, 1827)—that is to say, the people as incorporated in the nation—was imagined to be the principal agent of resistance.

In the times of modernity, resistance is the heritage of humanism. Barbara Marshall explains, “Modernity is associated with the release of the individual from the bonds of tradition, with the progressive differentiation of society, with the emergence of civil society, with political equality, with innovation and change. All of these accomplishments are associated with capitalism, industrialism, secularization, urbanization and rationalization.” (1994:7) As we have seen, traditional humanism came as a most welcome development which gave the status of axiomatic truth to the feeling that it behaves “to the dignity of human beings that they should rely upon their own capabilities, rather than on some transcendent power.” (Ibid) However, this reliance on the primacy of rationality or reason and the centrality of the “human agency” in all spheres of life did not acquire substantial weight in one stroke. Different nations and societies were exposed to this phenomenon at different points of time in accordance with their distinctive historical conditions. Thus, the ideals of modernity did not get expressed in identical life-forms everywhere and they were adopted variously by different cultures. A side effect in the development of a particular culture of value-system is that the inconsistencies, blankness and contradictions existed in the dominant value system. Different types of non-conformist tendencies raise their heads and gradually gain momentum. However, we should not commit the mistake of conflating all these varied critical responses to the dominant culture under the single category of resistance. Williams has rightly observed that the modes of “non-conformity are at least varied as the modes of
Resistance can in fact be defined as that of a subjectivity which tires to preserve its authenticity by abstracting itself completely from the oppressive character of the objective reality. It consists of practices, patterns of behavior and the institutional apparatus created by the dominant culture. The main stance of resistance is that of withdrawal so as to avoid the contaminated and distorting pressures of the cultural fabric which has grown inimical towards the individual. Within the scale of resistance, variations are possible. Jameson observes, “Many are the images of this profound subjectivization and fragmentation of our social life and of our very existences, in the world of late monopoly capitalism. Some strike terror inspires us with a kind of metaphysical pathos at our condition.” (1982:165) Because such tendencies are basically the result of the social fragmentation inherent in the dominant system. But to have a wider view of the kinds of negation and affirmation the historical present generates, it may be useful to look at some main forms of resistance. Each form tries to project a specific notion of the dominant and the possible alternative order.

The first discursive resistance has its own notion of the “hegemonic” culture and the alternative to it. Taking the present state of human existence in the highly developed societies as an advanced phase in general human degradation and cultural disintegration, this world-view seeks an alternative in the forms of life which belong to a remote past where the ideal state of individual as well as social existence are imagined to be. This tendency of resistance adopts a strategy of total withdrawal from the historical present and survive through creation of an imaginary world. Discussing about the proponents of this ideology, Jurgen Habermas says, “They do not allow themselves to be contaminated by the cultural modernism. They observe the decline of substantive reason, the differentiation of science, morality and art, the modern world-view and its merely procedural rationality with sadness and recommend a withdrawal to a position anterior to modernity.” (1993:14) The dichotomy between “Nature” and culture, the primitive and the civilized, and the “country” and the “city” is central to this world-view. As Williams observes, “Whereas the pull of the idea of the city is towards progress, modernization, development, the country is generally identified with old ways, human ways, natural ways.” (1985:21) The general outlook of Levi Strauss and his coinage of polarity of the modern and the primitive societies have given new justifications to this world-view. Strauss is right to believe that the civilized society should be rejected. He remarks, “Primitive people produce little order through their culture. Today we call them under-developed peoples. But they produce very little entropy in their societies…Civilized peoples, on the other hand, produce a good deal of order in their culture, as is demonstrated by the mechanization and great work of civilization, but they also produce a great deal of entropy in their society.” (1983:12)

Strauss’ term “order” is indicative of the “rationalization” that the life-forms in the civilized and developed societies have undergone. This “rationalization” is supposed to have caused the domination of the “monoculture” of industrialization. As Strauss’s statement implies, the primitive societies have retained themselves so skillfully. This world-view or ideology stands at a remarkable distance from the “postmodernist” stance against modernity and the heritage of Enlightenment. Whereas the postmodernists need no “center” in the past
or the present, the world-view clings desperately to the “center” which may be envisaged as “primitivism”. The attitude basically rests on the assumption that the human history is a progression downward towards degeneration and disintegration. Because the world that stands as an ideal is not any specific historical period but an oversimplified and generalized description of the past or of its remnants in the present. T.S. Eliot puts in this way, “When one considers the large amount of determination in social structure, this policy appears Utopian: if such a way of life ever comes to pass, it will be – as may well happen in the long run – from natural causes, and not from the moral will of men.” (1989:203) this longing for the past can culminate in fatalism and a total negation of the achievement of the present. Patricia Waugh’s observation in this regard is quite pertinent, “Apocalyptic modes always tend to express a sense of a fall from an original state of harmony into a fragmentation.” (1992:43) Such an attitude, whether expressed in an endorsement of primitivism or not is always a deflection from the actual character of the reality.

The literary practice corresponding to this category of resistance is characterized by the aggressive and playful style of representation. Here, the artist is an “improviser” who rejects meaning itself as a hopeless delusion. Thus, grounding his literary practice in the belief that it is not worth trying to understand the world, the writer is divested of all seriousness and responsibility. Characterized by a celebrative attitude towards the historical present, the literature of this kind indulges in extreme intimidation of the reader as the occurrence of irony, parody or other combinations in the presentation of the surface reality, which is marked by arbitrary shifts and not by any logic or coherence. It takes the subjective ideals of modernism to the point of solipsism, which characterizes this form of resistance.

The second discursive resistance belongs to the ideological positions. There is no faith here in the promise initially held out by Enlightenment heritage. On account of this stance of total rejection of Enlightenment spirit, this attitude looks very radical in character. Its impact on literature as well as the general humanities is far reaching. One of the primary aims of this ideology is to lay bare an epistemology and methodology with an oppressive rationalism. Making a complete departure with the past, the historical present is celebrated as a radically new era in human history. All forms of coherent thinking and program of human emancipation are declared as part of the “project of modernity.” Thus, it is basically characterized by a pervasive cynicism about the progressivism ideals of modernity.

The third discursive resistance to the dominant culture is basically opposed to the previous two ideologies and is neither celebrative of the present state of human existence nor ejective of it. What distances it from the previous ideological positions is its affirmative though critical attitude towards the heritage of Enlightenment and the “project of modernity”. To approach this perspective on modernity, it is mistaken to call any position which is critical of modernity thought as “post modern” as to do so ignores the self-critical feature of modernity. Rather than abandoning the notion of “modernity” altogether, there is much to be gained in building on the critical impulse which has always inhabited it. And it is not proper to criticize the “project of modernity”. Instead, there is a need to scrutinize the principles on which the modernity project is based. Accordingly, this resistance attitude also recognizes the need for intervention aimed at rectifying the negative aspects of modernity so that the
emancipatory agenda of modernity can be realized in a significant manner. Though it does not see fundamental contradiction between the prospects of human emancipation and the governing principles of modernity, it refuses to isolate the positives and negatives of modernity from the socio-economic conditions. Rather than viewing modernity as a self-governing or autonomous project in human history, this attitude demystifies its homogenizing tendencies by exposing how it has always been a subordinate to the more traditional forms of domination. It neither shows a total hostility towards the “metanarratives” of historical development and scientific progress nor does it adopt the regressive ideology of the primitive style of existence. In order to increase and expand the positive human substance, this world-view seeks fresh negotiations with the process and principles of rationality and commercialism. Viewing man’s relationship with nature with greater caution, it sees meaning and relevance in the popular pleas for ecological balance but not in isolation from the human exploitation.

Therefore, it is seen that the above-mentioned categories of resistant responses to the historical past and present are not merely intellectual categories or attitudes towards literature and art but “‘structures of feeling’, not feeling as against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as though.” (Williams, 1973:297) Correlating the works of any particular writer with one of these resistance categories, doesn’t mean a mechanical reproduction of the particular set of ideas. It is not necessary that a particular author and his works will fall totally under one category and without imbidding elements from the others in his literary career. Though in a writer only one of the forms of resistance is likely to dominate, it is necessary to note that beginning with strong inclinations towards any one of the resistance orientations a writer may reach the climax of his literacy growth by moving towards other orientations of resistance.

Conclusion

In sum, the concept of subversion is normally seen as the assertion of a coherent and integrated subjectivity in a literary and cultural work. It cannot be imagined in isolation from the real social and historical conditions where radical ideas as actual or potential practices have consequences for literary writers and their works. As an activity on the part of a particular individual or a group of individuals it is primarily a consequence of the conflicting processes of subordination and domination in a particular society or culture. With subversion comes resistance, which usually prevents one force or agency entirely overwhelming another in social and cultural environment. As discussed very previously, the essential context for a discussion of resistance has been that of violence, sometime in relation to military occupation or colonization of a nation. But on the relationship of subversive resistance and literature it accumulates its strength from the fact that a literary text is organically associated with even rooted in historical and social realities. Literary theorists profess that all forms of innovations, change, dissent or revolt are basically produced by the already existing forms of cultural representation. The side effect of a moment in the development of a particular culture of value-system is that the blankness and contradictions have always existed in the dominant value system. While some types of resistance or non-conformist tendencies can gain force in literary representations, these types of resistance represented in literature will become the
testimonies of intellectual growth and stylistic success of literary writers.

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