

The Narrative of Silenced Voices: A Retrospect to the 1969 Mass Upsurge Depicted in Akhtaruzzaman Elias's *Chilekothar Sepai*

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Abstract

This paper explores how Akhtaruzzaman Elias, one of the most influential Bengali writers, rewrites the narrative of the mass uprising of 1969 from the orbit of the subalterns by emphasizing their heroic role as well as the agencies behind their gradual absence from the elitist historiography of nationalism in his novel *Chilekothar Sepai* [The Soldier in an Attic]. To this end, this paper will refer to the subaltern historian Ranajit Guha's method of deconstructing historiography of nationalism that looks for an autonomous domain of revolution organized by the subalterns, and Spivak's postulation of their inability to create a space for themselves within that dominant narrative.

Keywords: Historiography of nationalism, elite domain, subaltern domain, representation, speech, 1969 mass upsurge

“...even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not to be heard.”
(Spivak, 1996, p. 292)

If anyone is asked to name a martyr from the mass uprising of 1969, the probability of uttering Rustam Ali's name is very low. He was a 14-year-old rickshaw puller who was shot dead by the police in that upsurge, as writer, journalist and activist Nurul Kabir mentions in his book *Deposing of a Dictator* (2020). However, remembering his name should be significant because the mass uprising consisted of many unnamed, unremembered people from the poor classes of the population, besides the students and different political party leaders and their members.

This mass upsurge of 1969 is broadly a result of the continuous socio-political, cultural and economic exploitation of the East Pakistan by the leaders of the West Pakistan, which reached its peak during the autocratic regime of Ayub Khan. Kabir (2020) states that more than three years into the Martial Law, the politically conscious section of the people became disappointed, as the authorities imposed restrictions on all forms of collective protests against government policies. Furthermore, this oppressive rule started to promote communal cultural policy by imposing a ban on broadcasting Rabindranath Tagore's songs during the Indo-Pak war in 1965. Besides, the huge economic disparity between East and West Pakistan was also very concerning. Later on, Ayub Khan's hostile reaction to the six-point programme of Bangabandhu Sheikh

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Mujibur Rahman for provincial autonomy and the consequent Agartala Conspiracy Case aggravated the whole situation of repression in East Pakistan.

People of East Pakistan inevitably became infuriated. Not only the students and political parties but also the peasants, workers, precisely the subalterns from rural villages and urban areas started rebelling against the repressive authority. In fact, this time, peasants and workers of East Pakistan struck the first blow with an aim to depose Ayub Khan's regime when Maulana Bhasani called upon a *gherao* movement, a tactic of surrounding government offices until the demands are fulfilled, on November 3, 1968. The student bodies took some time to prepare a comprehensive charter of demands to present in the first week of January, 1969 that included the political, cultural and economic aspirations of the people (Kabir, 2020).

Nevertheless, very few people can recall the names let alone the details of these peasants and workers who participated in that uprising of 1969 which overthrew the autocratic rule of Ayub Khan. The number of literary pieces and documents paying tribute to their contribution is also inadequate. However, in the post-modern era, there have been attempts by some academicians, theorists and writers to alter the popular manifestation of elitist historiography and unearth the alternative narrative incorporating the subaltern voices which might be even more significant than the previously historicized narrative. Akhtaruzzaman Elias's *Chilekothar Sepai* (1986) is one such brilliant Bengali novel which alerts the initiated readers to the silenced speech through its depiction of the 1969 mass uprising which seems to reiterate Spivak's notion of the non-acceptance of the subaltern voice within the discourse of nationalism propounded by the dominant group.

Chilekothar Sepai presents the situation of Dhaka and a rural village on the bank of Jamuna river in North Bengal during the mass uprising of 1969. The protagonist, Osman Goni lives in the roof-top of a building in Old Dhaka. He is an alienated and narcissistic persona who does not actively participate in any political activities related to the uprising although he is very observant about all the happenings around him. However, people around him are very active participants in different political activities. For example, his house owner Rahmatullah is a self-proclaimed B.D. (Basic Democracies, a local government system introduced during the rule of Ayub Khan) member. Rahmatullah's nephew, Alauddin Mia supports Awami League politics and is a leader of that party. However, one of the most important characters of this novel is Khijir Ali who lives in the slum owned by Rahmatullah. He works in Alauddin Mia's garage and drives a scooter. He actively takes part in the movements of anti- Ayub rule and is shot dead by the police eventually. Most importantly, dead Khijir Ali is the person who helps Osman to leave the roof-top as well as his narcissistic isolated petty bourgeoisie self behind to join the movement. Nonetheless, Elias simultaneously narrates another plot that takes place in Anwar's ancestral village. Anwar is Osman's friend and a leftist politician. He goes to his ancestral village to see the real scenario of the oppressed peasants. There, he also discovers the autonomous peasant rebellion against *jotedar*ⁱ Khoybar Ghazi who is economically exploiting the poor peasants. His brother Afsar Ghazi is also involved in local politics. Peasants such as Chengtu, Korom Ali and many more rebel against them under the leadership of Ali Boksh. However, unfortunately that

rebellion does not succeed and Anwar comes back to Dhaka to take care of Osman who became insane in the interim. The novel ultimately ends with Anwar remaining in that attic whereas Osman breaking free from it.

Now, Akhtaruzzaman Elias (1943-1997) is popularly known as a dedicated Marxist, and his *Chilekothar Sepai* has been mostly analyzed from different Marxist perspectives. However, in the introduction to *Akhtaruzzaman Elias Rochona Samagra 3* [*Complete Works of Akhtaruzzaman Elias 3*], his brother Khaliquzzaman Elias (2004) says that Elias was never a “radical” follower of any ideology - neither in his personal life, nor in his creative writing even though he is popularly considered as a writer with a particular agenda. Having said that, Khaliquzzaman does not deny that Elias believed in a society which acknowledges the abolition of class exploitation and keeps faith in the potential of every human being. This assertion is restated by Hasan Azizul Haque (2018), Elias’s close acquaintance and a renowned Bengali writer, in an interview with Chondon Anwar in his book *Amar Elias* [*My Elias*]. In that interview, he mentions that after joining the left-leaning association of writers, “Bangladesh Lekhok Shibir”, Elias started reading Marx more seriously; however, he also puts emphasis on the fact that they both were always vocal about the hypocritical behaviour of some Marxist leaders. The differing opinions about him present Elias as someone who has a Marxist orientation and still is not hesitant to critique the ideology or its activists. Nevertheless, in another interview from the same book, Haque (2018) questions some significant incidents illustrated in Elias’s *Chilekothar Sepai*. For example, he makes the point that one should notice from which perspective the political parties are being depicted and whether there is any bias or not at the end of the novel where the situation before liberation is being described, a great uprising is taking place in villages and the so-called *jotedars* are being beaten to death. Even though Haque is pointing at Elias’s Marxist biasness here, this statement also emphasizes the inclusion of an autonomous peasant upsurge in *Chilekothar Sepai* as well as its authenticity in the history of the mass upsurge of 1969. This simultaneously opens up new possibilities of exploring the novel that takes us beyond the traditional Marxist analysis of this text.

Moreover, while scrutinizing this novel, economist, writer and political activist Anu Muhammad (as cited in Dasgupta, 2018) draws the readers’ attention to the fact that “Elias did not spend a line on the role, positive or negative, of the leftist organizations and their movements. The peasant movement led by Ali Boksh and Chengtu was also not explicitly linked with the leftist organization which directed it” (p. 49). Here too, we see the emphasis on the peasant upsurge independent of any leftist political inclination or any other nationalist party of that time. This technique of writing involves tracing history from below. Even, Elias (2004c) himself wrote an article about Mahatma Gandhi titled “Shayebder Gandhi” [Gandhi of the Sahibs] where he applies this technique and alternates the image of Gandhi as “Mahatma”. He seems to apply this technique in most of his writings where he looks at the incidents from the perspectives of the subalterns by using their diction, emotion and psychology. This approach of tracing from below and critiquing traditional Marxism with a Marxist background to focus on the rebellion by the subaltern is found in the writings of the Subaltern Studies Collective, a group of South Asian scholars who were interested in the subalterns and their historiography in the post-

colonial and post imperial societies. Very few writers and critics have analyzed this novel from this perspective, and even when some of them brought the concept of subaltern characters while critiquing this novel from different perspectives, they primarily focused on how the subalterns can raise their voice and resist.

Zayed (2017), in writing about the importance of Elias in world literature, talks about the presence of the subalterns in *Chilekothar Sepai* where he asserts that “[a] character like Haddi Khijir is rare in Bengali literature; he is a subaltern who not only speaks but also resists” (para. 3). Nonetheless, whenever the concept of the subalterns’ ability to speak arises, as Spivak (1985) asserts, their lack of agency and speech gets challenged. Therefore, in this paper, I posit that this resistance done by the subalterns is not unlike Spivakian theorization because despite their attempts, their voice as well as revolt remains unacknowledged and unheard within the dominant narrative of history. To explore that rebellion of the subalterns in *Chilekothar Sepai*, I will first use Guha’s notion of two separate domains of historiography of nationalism to examine the autonomous subaltern domain and some distinctive, yet somewhat erroneous characteristics of their rebellion. In this paper, I translated all the titles and quotes into English which are originally in Bangla.

The elites and the subalterns in the Subaltern Studies Collective and *Chilekothar Sepai*

“Subaltern” traditionally denotes “a junior ranking officer in the British Army” (Morton, 2003, p. 48). However, in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of this term from the standpoint of the Subaltern Studies group, Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* is an essential resource where he uses this term to refer to “subordinate” groups that were under the domination of the hegemonic power of Italy (Gramsci, 1978, p. xiv). This term is restated by the Subaltern Studies Collective afterwards. Political scientist, anthropologist and a member of Subaltern Studies Collective, Partha Chatterjee talks at length about this term in one of his interviews:

When the Subaltern Studies Collective began, our initial move was reading Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, which had just been published in English. We were compelled by the fact that Gramsci used the term “subaltern” instead of “proletariat” . . . Gramsci was fundamentally altering the core definition of classes in the orthodox version of Marxism at the time. By simply renaming the proletarian class to the subaltern, he was suggesting that classical Marxist division of European industrial society into classes was not entirely adequate. (Chatterjee, 2012)

Here, he emphasizes the parallel situation of the people belonging to lower strata of society in Gramsci’s Italy and South Asia where “the orthodox formulation of classes in Marxism” was not useful for the simultaneous positioning of industrial sections and agrarian formations. However, this term does not strictly stand for only peasants and lower-class strata any longer. In fact, the founding member of the Subaltern Studies Collective, Guha (1988b) mentioned in his “preface” that this is “a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (p. 35). In opposition to the subaltern domain, he uses the term “elite domain” in his essay “On Some Aspects of the

Historiography of Colonial India” which basically signifies the “dominant groups, foreign as well as indigenous” (Guha, 1988a, p. 37). Although here, the readers can see that he includes subordination on the basis of gender in the definition of subaltern, these scholars in the beginning did not talk much about the gendered oppression in their essays and mostly focused on the interplay between the “elite domain” and “subaltern domain”, and how this “subaltern domain” always remained in the periphery of the national historiography. These classifications and methods that they used in the beginning were mostly for understanding their own historiography of colonial India; however, eventually this process became a theoretical ground for analysing other nations and their historical moments.

Notably, Elias (2004a) uses this term ‘elite’ in one of his essays named “Ami o Amar Somoy” [Me and My Time] in a similar manner. While describing the situation of 1969’s mass uprising in that essay, he mentions how a “new elite class” (p. 287) was formed by the then President Ayub Khan and how through people like them Ayub Khan’s mode of criminal activities was perpetuated in every corner of East Pakistan. This elite class is represented in *Chilekothar Sepai* through characters like Khoybar Ghazi, Afsar Ghazi, Rahmatullah and a few others. They oppress as well as manipulate people in any way they can.

Afterwards, Elias brings in the petty bourgeoisie class which also falls into this domain defined by Guha to some extent. This class is popularly known as middle class or lower middle class strata in our society. Osman, Anwar, Altaf – these are some of the characters that belong to this domain. This section adds to the ambiguities and contradictions among the lower strata of people, as despite their goodwill, they might sometimes end up working in favour of the dominant group. This is vivid in the characterization of Anwar. Guha (1988a) too mentions this ambiguous section which might sometimes fall into the domain of the elites and sometimes into the domain of the subalterns depending on their activities and alliances. However, among them, Osman is one such character whose metamorphosis to the subaltern domain is very significant in this novel. This issue will be discussed broadly in the last section of this essay.

Elias is especially masterful while portraying the subaltern class through some distinctive characters such as *Haddi Khijir*, Chengtu, Koromali etc. The first appearance of *Haddi Khijir* is described in this manner:

He is a very tall man, but the nickname that he achieved before his real name is for his emaciated body. You can see screwdriver and plier, always in his hands. (Elias, 1986, p. 7)

Elias, only in two sentences, brilliantly presents the proletariat man through the explanation of his name *Haddi Khijir* (translated literally, *haddi* is “bone” in English) and the instruments that he carries. However, the inclusion of peasants like Chengtu and Koromali as subalterns and their revolution is the most significant aspect of this novel because this is an important ground to look at this text from the subaltern perspective which also included the peasants in a novel manner following Gramscian understanding of subalterns, unlike the traditional Marxist analysis.

Through these prototypical characters and their activities, Elias brings a holistic picture of the mass insurgency of 1969. He explores the resistance from both of these

domains to give a realistic picture of that time. The popular elitist historiography of nationalism remains in the periphery of Elias's narrative. We do not notice any historically substantiated figure directly involved in the movement. The petty leaders, activists of different political parties that we see in this text are there to show the different layers of oppression, posturing and follies that were present in the real picture of the uprising too. In a letter written to writer Sadhan Chattopadhyay, Elias makes the point that in 1969, the common people were spontaneously protesting not only against the dictatorship of the President but also against all types of oppressive forces that resided in the country, which later was misused and misled by the "white handkerchief of nationalism" (Dasgupta, 2018, p. 46) by petty bourgeoisie leadership. Therefore, in *Chilekothar Sepai*, in the foreground, we see the author sketching the 1969 resistance from the subaltern perspective with the characteristics that are sometimes misrepresented in the elitist historiography of nationalism.

Subalterns as the makers of their own rebellion

The subaltern resistance is generally seen as more of a spontaneous, violent and horizontal act whereas elite politics is seen as cautious, legalistic and vertical (Guha, 1988a). However, as much as their resistance has spontaneity, violence and horizontal involvement, it does not mean that it is based on unconscious motive. In fact, Guha refuses to agree that their resistance is purely spontaneous at all, following Gramsci's statement that there is no room for pure spontaneity in history. The peasant knows what he is doing when he revolts to destroy the authority of the superordinate elite (Guha, 1983). Hence, Guha's focus of work is to refute the elitist historiography of excessively and manipulatively using these adjectives to demean the subalterns' participation in their autonomous movements as a "reflex action" (Guha, 1988c, p. 47) that springs out and vanishes all of a sudden. He along with his other members exemplify using different historical movements such as to show that the subaltern resistance is not as unorganized, unthinking or aimless as it is generally portrayed. Now, various examples from *Chilekothar Sepai* will be illustrated to disentangle the general characteristics of these domains as well as to show how the subaltern resistance is stereotyped.

In the account of the 1969 insurgency in Dhaka, at first glance it might seem that Elias portrays the subalterns as purely spontaneous and violent. For example, we see Khijir acting spontaneously in Chapter 9 when the wife of one of his passengers is kidnapped to be raped by some people from NSF party. He instantly asks the passenger to file a case with the police. However, even in that situation, that man calculates about his future security instead of rescuing his wife as he says "these swine will destroy my career" (Elias, 1986, p. 57) if he tries to case a file. Then, in Chapter 4, Elias juxtaposes these two domains by starting the chapter with the conversation between the leaders of different parties where they are debating against one another and ending the chapter with the subaltern's spontaneous act of rebellion. Moreover, this scene takes place in a restaurant where the portrait of Ayub Khan was hung on the wall. The agitated people come inside and take down the picture and destroy it by throwing stones and ashtrays. Elias focuses on one particular subaltern boy:

The lad of 10 /11, who threw two ashtrays and pieces of brick, still has a few stone and brick pieces left in the wrinkles of his lungi. He strides forward while wiping the snivel flowing out of his nose with his elbow. The shame of missing Ayub Khan in his first attempt has been wiped away from his face, with the success of his infallible aiming afterwards. The success brings changes in his expression and voice. Like a prudent, adult person, he says – “I have done it! I have brought the bastard down!” (Elias, 1986, p. 27)

In both of these incidents, the spontaneity and violent nature of the subalterns are undoubtedly present. However, it is not the case that they are always unconscious of their act and motive. The fact that Elias puts powerful metaphoric words of bringing down the President into the mouth of a 10/11 year old subaltern child shows that the child knows what this revolution is for, and what his aim is. Similarly, Khijir is not an unthinking subaltern either. When he asks the passenger to file the case, it shows that he was looking for a legal way to tackle the situation. Besides, many of his speeches in the novel reflect his national consciousness. For example, in Chapter 26, he has a conversation with a student worker where the student says that Ayub Khan is blind and hence, he is killing so many people in such manner, but Khijir does not agree with him. He thinks to himself that Ayub Khan is not blind; rather, he has too many eyes to see all of their planning, and that is why he should be blinded (Elias, 1986). This shows that he knows what they are fighting for. He does not aimlessly jump into any procession.

The peasant insurgency in and out of Dhaka

Having said that, the revolt of the subalterns that we see in the narrative of Dhaka is obviously not as nuanced as it is in the narrative of the village. In fact, Elias portrays the subalterns of Dhaka in an alienated and fragmented manner where they are under the leadership of various political parties. They do not create an autonomous domain by themselves, rather they sometimes fight among themselves. Nevertheless, the peasant insurgency that we see in this novel is the appropriate example of how subalterns create an autonomous domain of mobilization by themselves which includes planning, motive and consciousness of their rebellion. Guha (1983) while talking about the autonomous mobilization of the subalterns says that “conscious leadership”, a “well- defined aim” and “a programme specifying the components of the latter as particular objectives and the means of achieving them” (p. 5) are the important criteria for any political movement. The reason that the peasant uprising does not get credited is because the elite domain does not believe that the subaltern revolution has any of this criteria; but Guha discusses how the peasant insurgency does not lack in any of these qualities to be disregarded as such from the national historiography.

Similarly, Elias (1986) shows these characteristics when he narrates the peasant insurgency in the village. To begin with, the peasants in *Chilekothar Sepai* have been organizing themselves for quite some time under the leadership of Ali Boksh, who believes that only through ending the oppressive forces of each area, they will gradually be able to abolish the main authoritative figure of the country. This reflects that he has a clear aim and plan to destroy the oppression. To this end, they have tried to establish their own legal system and dreamt of putting an end to the brutality of the powerful elite in their village first. However, he will not be considered as a conscious leader by the elite domain because he is not like other party leaders. Unlike them, he is more of a member

like the other peasants whose speech, action and thoughts reflect any other member of the group, and he is as important and involved as any other member of the group.

On that note, Anwar, who is a petty bourgeoisie leftist activist in Dhaka, condescends Ali Boksh for his pronunciation and superstitions as well as for the characteristics which make Ali Boksh similar to the other peasants of the village. This can be an important ground to apply Guha's (1988c) postulation that these superstitions or myths which the peasants believe in, reflect their peasant consciousness. Guha mainly focuses on how the official as well as literary documents used the prose of counter insurgency to demean their involvement. Moreover, Guha (1988c) talks about how religiosity and their own myths such as "worshipping the Goddess Durga", the "exterminating angel incarnating as a buffalo" (p. 78) were an integral part of their movement which the elite domain fails to comprehend.

Even though the readers do not see any divine power commanding them for revolt in this text, Guha's concept of religiosity reflecting their consciousness can be used to deconstruct the myths that are being depicted here. For example, in the episode of the first meeting between Ali Boksh and Anwar, we see Anwar's tendency to consider Ali Boksh as superstitious because he believes in the myth of horse's neigh in time of turbulence, but to Ali Boksh, this myth signifies the upcoming turmoil that is going to take place in their area because of the longtime oppression by the landlords. The same thing happens when Anwar meets Chengtu and finds out that Chengtu believes in the concept of *jinn* who visits the village when disputes take place there. Anwar considers him superstitious, but if the readers try to connote the covert meaning of Chengtu's belief, he/she can see that Chengtu is bothered about the dispute that the *jinn* signifies. In both of these cases, it is vivid that the peasants are trying to evoke the tyrannical situation in their area and their desire of an autonomous domain of protest against that tyranny through these myths or religious beliefs which Anwar cannot comprehend. Hence, although their way of expressing themselves might be incomprehensible to the elite, it reflects their aim and motive when it's covert meaning is unearthed. However, as Anwar spends more time on the village, he gradually realizes that they are very politically conscious and prepared for their revolt. In fact, he is astonished by their preparation, plan and organizing skill when he directly sees the rebellious attack of the peasants. He too asserts that "this is not possible without an organized party" (Elias, 1986, p. 179).

Spivak and the subaltern speech

Till now, we have seen that Elias tries to illustrate subaltern's autonomous domain of rebellion where they fight against all types of oppressive forces in a united, organized, conscious, yet spontaneous manner. Their national consciousness is to create a society where neither Ayub Khan nor *jotedars* like Khoybar Gazi can oppress people. Nevertheless, the question arises – what happens to their resistance? Why do the names of the subalterns get lost in the dominant narrative of nationalism, and become some numbers?

To answer these questions, understanding Spivak's (1988) assertion that the subaltern cannot speak is important. This statement is widely misinterpreted as "subaltern cannot talk" (Spivak, 1996, p. 289) which Spivak herself clarifies in her interview with

Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean. According to her, by speaking she was talking about a “transaction between the speaker and the listener” (Spivak, 1996, p. 289) because both “speaking and hearing complete the speech act” (Spivak, 1996, p. 292). Hence, when Spivak says that the subalterns cannot speak, she does not question the subaltern’s ability to articulate; rather, she questions the receiver’s ability to receive the message. They are so positioned in the lowest section of the society that their voice does not reach the domain of the discourse of the dominant group; and if it ever reaches its end, the receiver does not approve of that speech.

The problem of representation in *Chilekothar Sepai*

These basic aspects of Spivak’s argument are very artfully reflected in Elias’s *Chilekothar Sepai* where the readers can see how the subaltern voice is distorted by the people who work for their empowerment, and how their voice is not heard literally as well as symbolically even when they make an attempt to speak for themselves. That is also why all their resistance, their activities, their speech that we have seen so far become futile.

Firstly, the episode of cattle raiding is important to explore the problem of representation. The poor villagers’ cows all of a sudden get stolen, and later they realize that they were being stolen by the *joteder*’s men and kept in cowsheds. Only after paying large amount of money, the poor peasants could get their cows back. However, when asked about this, *joteder* Khoybar Gazi’s faithful helper, who is also in charge of the cowsheds, Hosen Miya replies:

Careless, irresponsible, and envious people leave their cattle on the farmlands of others to destroy the crops, owners of the farms bring those cattle here. Only after paying financial penalties, the owner of these cattle redeem them. (Elias, 1986, p. 176)

His explanation seems to be in favour of keeping the order of the society so that people can preserve their crops. Thus, it appears that his deeds are benevolent. However, the reality is different. They were simply looting these poor people. Nobez acquired the information of the lost cows only because he was friends with the helper of Hosen Ali, hence could get his cow back for 50 taka with the pledge of not informing anyone. This is how the voice and the real situation of these poor people never get represented accurately by these representatives of the village, for they gain money and power by oppressing them.

The parallel representative in this novel from the Muslim League Party in Dhaka is Rahmatullah. There are many instances of him distorting the actual demands of the people for his own interest. Here, one particular episode will be considered as it emphasizes the concept of Spivak’s gendered subalterns. In the introductory section of this paper, it was mentioned that the members of the Subaltern Study Collectives did not really focus on women as subalterns even though they included gendered subalternation in their definition. This became an important ground of criticism in Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” where she showed how “the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (Spivak, 1988, p. 287). In Chapter 8, where the history of Khijir’s wife, *Jummoner Ma* is being described, the situation of the subaltern woman under the combined domination of patriarchal, political and hierarchical power becomes vivid. She

does not even have any name in the novel. She is called *Jummoner Ma* (translated literally, *Jommoner Ma* means Mother of Jummon in English). However, her former husband, Kamruddin gets married for the second time and he asks Khijir to inform *Jummoner Ma* that she is not even worthy of being a slave to the woman that he married. Besides, he also makes insulting remarks about Rahmatullah. When Rahmatullah gets to know about it, he becomes exasperated and boasts of his political power in such a manner that it appears to be in favour of keeping the order of the society in check and giving justice to *Jummoner Ma*,

He can put Kamruddin behind the bars if he wishes...Ayub Khan has made new law, one needs to have the permission of the first wife to marry second time. Rahmatullah is Ayub Khan's B.D.member, if he himself does not look into these matters, people's tendency to defy law will continue to increase. (Elias, 1986, p. 51)

However, these lines reveal Rahmatullah's interest of exhibiting power over Kamruddin hidden in the guise of saving *Jummoner Ma*, for we do not hear *Jummoner Ma* raising any voice about whether she wants to remain married to him or not. Given her history with Kamruddin, she might have wanted to attain emancipation from that man, instead of remaining his first wife and giving permission. However, no one asks what she wants. If Rahmatullah was really concerned, he would have asked her about this. Furthermore, it also shows how subaltern women are even oppressed by subaltern men. Women are a matter of power play between men, both in the subaltern and elite domains. So, Spivak's assertion that "the subaltern as female is deeply in shadow" (Spivak 1988, p. 287) to the subaltern men's history becomes vivid in this episode. This is a subplot, yet, speaks volume about the position of the subaltern women in our society.

Besides these elites appointed by Ayub Khan who do not really care about the subalterns, the party members who are supposedly sympathetic to the subalterns, misrepresent their interest too. In one episode, Awami League members, Altaf and Farid, and the leftist activist Anwar start their dispute. At one point, Anwar becomes very agitated and directly accuses Altaf asking "who gave you the right to use people's spontaneous upsurge for the bourgeoisie's interest?" (Elias, 1986, p. 26) when Altaf and Farid speak in favour of the middle class and bourgeoisie leadership misusing the subaltern resistance. However, Anwar, who has always been talking about the rights of the subaltern, himself could not really help the people either. Without even realizing it, he became the problem of the subaltern resistance initiated in the village. Anu Muhammad's (as cited in Dasgupta, 2018) observation that Elias does not show the role of leftist parties in this novel we mentioned before, can be refuted through this one character.

In "Sanskritir Bhanga Shetu" [The Broken Bridge of Culture], Elias (2004b) talks about about the problem of the members of leftist party while working with the subaltern (the cultural gap between these two classes is the main reason). He believes that only goodwill to help the subaltern is not enough; the leaders have to cultivate respect towards these people, their culture and understand them, accordingly. However, this is the quality that Anwar lacks, like most members of the leftist party. He is a person who believes in the power of the marginalized people; does political activities for them, and fights for their rights. Nonetheless, as he goes to the village to see the peasant uprising, he cannot mix with them, neither understand them properly, as it has been already

discussed in the earlier sections. However, a significant episode occurs when, despite his goodwill, unconsciously he helps Khoybar Gazi to escape. Thus, once again, the voice of the subalterns gets misrepresented by Anwar though he does not intend to do so.

Here, Elias raises his skepticism, just like Spivak, regarding representation of the subaltern and the inability of their exact voice having a place in the society. Despite this problem of representation, one subtle hopeful proposition that seems to be in the novel is the village peasants' unity under the leadership of Ali Boksh. A character like Ali Boksh shows how in the peasant uprising the leader is very much like another member of that group who empathizes with them, understands them and their situation. People who come from big cities and cannot mix with these rural peasants, will not be able to comprehend their action; rather, they will misunderstand it and create fraction within that group. In fact, Ali Boksh talks about this fragmentation in the political parties of Dhaka in his conversation with Anwar. He talks about how these political leaders only give speeches while staying there in Dhaka, how Motin Bhai came to their region and some important members left their team (Elias, 1986). Ironically, Anwar too becomes another Motin Bhai, another leftist member who utters big words and creates problems within the team.

Till his exploration in the village, he still was someone who dreamt of ending all the oppressive forces, though not as much exuberant as he was in Dhaka. Nonetheless, at the end of the novel, his metamorphosis is highly questionable. At the end, he returns to Dhaka to attend to his friend Osman as he becomes schizophrenic. Koromali comes to Dhaka in search of him after some days. Though Koromali requests Anwar to go back to the village with him to participate in their movements, Anwar continues to procrastinate. He decides to give Koromali a job with an attempt to persuade him to stay there. He almost starts a civilizing mission. However, Koromali does not believe in any of these propositions and goes back to his village. Thus, Anwar becomes a quintessential figure of those representatives who despite their good will and benevolence, cannot represent the subaltern voice; rather, eventually turns into a symbolic Repressive State Apparatus (RSA), a term coined by Louis Althusser (1971). This metamorphosis of Anwar into a symbolic RSA will be discussed in a later section of this paper.

Silence of the subaltern's voice in *Chilekothar Sepai*

It may be apparent from the discussion above that the subaltern's representatives in this novel fail to represent people's interests. If that is the case, the subaltern should speak up for themselves. Can they succeed in that endeavour? Elias replies to this question in Chapter 11 and 25 by literally showing their voice being stopped by the elite nationalists as well as other subalterns. In Chapter 11, martyr Abu Taleb's father is welcomed on the stage to talk about his son who gave life for the country. Nonetheless, processions from different political parties start creating disturbance in that meeting. In this situation, Awami League activist Alauddin worries about his own safety; he fears about getting shot by the activists. He gives signs to Khijir to stand in front of him so that he remains in a safe position. Misunderstanding the sign, Khijir stands up, takes the microphone and asks everyone to stop this fight. His voice is ridiculed by the audience as Elias (1986) writes:

Khijir Ali's height and scrawniness, his hollowed cheek, his coarse face, blackish plump lips or his purely local accent cause great laughter among the audience.The joined reaction of humour, joke and sneering at Khijir stops the bitterness that boys of different parties felt for one another. (p. 70)

Here, Khijir does talk, but his speech is ridiculed and mocked by the audience, not reciprocated. Later, when he again tries to speak, this laughter turns into irritation. People wonder if he has enough "commonsense" as he dared to speak on a political platform with his proletariat background. Alauddin then stops him lest he should make further mistakes.

In Chapter 25 too, Khijir becomes a laughing stock when he tries to put forward his opinion. The decision has been made that rickshaw pullers will hold a procession after the meeting. Rickshaw pullers who work in the morning shift can drive their rickshaws and then join the procession in the afternoon whereas those of the afternoon shift could not do so, and hence they protested against that decision. Alauddin gets angry saying that they should not only think about their livelihood now. Khijir Ali agrees with his master. However, when he repeats that, people start laughing at him. The same opinion becomes rejected when it comes from the subaltern, but accepted when it comes from the elite. Elias's brilliance is that, besides literally showing the meaning of the subaltern's inability to create any speech in the discourse of the society, he uses this concept in symbolic manner. His portrayal of Osman's madness is one such exemplary symbol.

At the very beginning of this paper, it was mentioned that there are ambiguities in Osman's actions. Osman belongs to the lower middle class. He attends all the meetings, processions in the 1969 uprising, yet he does not get involved in any of these parties. Khijir also wonders about this characteristic of him as he says, "Osman can come forward in these matters. This man goes to processions, listens to meetings, gives slogan, then why does he object to cooperate with Alauddin Miya?" (Elias, 1986, p. 59). Osman is repetitively presented as someone who is different from his friends such as Altaf, Anwar and Shawkat who are active members of different political parties. This petty bourgeoisie background does not let him belong to any class.

However, as the novel progresses, the ambiguity ceases to exist in Osman. He gradually becomes a rebel who is always thinking of destroying the authority of Ayub Khan and, eventually, he becomes schizophrenic at the concluding chapters of the novel. There is a connection between the two characters: *Haddi* Khijir and Osman. Khijir's death and Osman's madness both run in a parallel structure as they both lose their power of articulation almost at the same time. After his death, the rebellious subaltern zeal of Khijir Ali is transferred to Osman and his son Jummon. The signifiers such as 'fire', 'screwdriver- plier' that signified Khijir Ali's proletariat, rebellious spirit are now being used to signify Osman. Osman's ambiguous, cautious, narcissistic self is no longer there. He clearly sees through people, in fact some important clues about Anwar comes through his neurotic blabber with Khijir:

Khijir is urging him to hurry up. He is not getting how difficult it is to come out of the grip of this animal..... 'Why are you afraid?' Khijir urges again, 'Didn't you see how that rustic peasant jumped out of it this noon? This bloody Military shouted from back a lot, could he do anything?' (Elias, 1986, p. 298- 299)

Khijir is repeatedly asking him to come out of his attic which is obviously guarded by Anwar who is referred to as “military”, “animal”, “scoundrel” (298-299). In the previous section of this paper, it was discussed how Anwar hampers the peasant uprising and tries to control Koromali as well as Osman to remain confined within that attic. Here, Elias’s direct use of this term ‘military’ to refer Anwar is significant as it reminds a conscious reader of Althusser’s (1971) coinage RSA. According to Althusser, institutions like the police force, the army, prisons, courts which apply external force to maintain state power fall under this term RSA. This external force inevitably includes repression and violence. Anwar also uses physical force, repression and violence to control Osman at the end of the novel. Therefore, although he is not related to any Repressive State Apparatus in the literal sense, he symbolically becomes a part of it. However, at the end, Osman exits from that attic, breaking all the boundaries of that RSA.

Even though apparently this breaking out of the attic might seem to be a positive ending of the novel, it does not necessarily eliminate the subtle pessimism that this transition evokes. Osman rises above the ambiguity, and gets his clarity, becomes a rebellious spirit and comes out of his attic; nonetheless, his articulation becomes meaningless as his speech is not intelligible to anyone. At this point, the concepts of Foucault’s madness and Spivak’s subalterns seem to be brilliantly merged into the characterisation of Osman as he now turns into a doubly marginalized person. Foucault (1989) in his book *Madness and Civilization* examined how the treatment and meaning of madness changed over different phases of civilization starting from the middle ages till the beginning of the modern era in Europe. Through the process of othering by the RSA, the mad people came to such a position where they cannot communicate with the modern man any longer because there exists no common language.

Hence, the question arises once again, how his speech is going to be included in the domain of the dominant representation of the society, if no one understands it? Although Elias seems to associate Osman’s madness to inner wisdom, as it used to be presented in Renaissance art and culture, this novel is ultimately situated in post-modern time. There is even this hint at the end of the novel that he might get shot very soon on the road. Likewise, the peasant upsurge in the village, which was the most hopeful proposition of his novel, seems to be futile too. From Koromali’s speech, the readers get to know that Chengtu is killed and Ali Boksh is arrested. In fact, the possibility of Koromali’s survival is also very thin, as he goes back to his village where the police is trying to hunt him down along with many more peasants.

This is how the subaltern and their autonomous domain of resistance are generally effaced from history. They do not even survive in most cases to spread their story, and even when they survive, they are not heard. The dominant group takes advantage of this absence as well as silence of the subalterns. They establish their own documentaries and develop their resources by highlighting their own involvements to such a point that the subalterns hardly remain in the picture. However, just because something does not exist in history, it necessarily does not prove that it never happened.

In conclusion, despite the subalterns’ voice being unheard and their involvement being ignored, the subalterns kept fighting in their own way. Elias’ portrayal of this bleak version of the world where the subalterns are being silenced and unacknowledged, in no

way, suggests that they did not resist or should not resist when needed. They raised their voice creating their autonomous domain. This is why Elias could write this novel in the first place on the basis of real historical events. Hence, his novel suggests that the subalterns should speak for themselves, and their well-wisher should pave ways for the subalterns to speak for themselves, instead of misrepresenting their situation. Even though the elitist narrative of nationalism might not include their discourse as it should, people like Akhtaruzzaman Elias will write about them, only if they keep fighting by raising their voice.

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- i. *Jotedars* are a group of wealthy peasants who exert power and control over poor cultivators of villages by managing broad areas of lands, money lending, and local trading.

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