

# Allegorized Subaltern: Subjectivity and Death in the Works of Bahman Ghobadi

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**Abstract**—The aim of the present study is to explore the reflection of the subaltern in the works of Kurdish filmmaker, Bahman Ghobadi. In order to do so, three periods in the development of the works of Ghobadi is analyzed. These periods include the time prior to the invasion of Iraq by United States and its allies when *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000) and *The Songs of my Homeland* (2002) appear. The second phase is at the time of the invasion of Iraq including *Turtles can Fly* (2004), and the third period is after the invasion with *Rhino Season* (2012). These works deal with the neglected minority within Kurdish ethnicity and look through the ways in which there might be a possibility for this group to attain a sense of identity. Facing internal and external oppression, minority-within-minority section of the Kurdish society finds no way for resistance other than death where the power structures that are in a tacit concurrence in its subjugation are challenged and as a result, a space is created where the subaltern can speak.

**Index Terms**—subaltern, Bahman Ghobadi, minority, identity, death, resistance

## I. INTRODUCTION

The metaphor of the flight of the turtles is central to the works of Bahman Ghobadi. The significance of this image is revealing in the story about a turtle who wishes to fly; unable to do so, he asks two swans to take him to the sky. They consent on the condition that he would not open his mouth as he bites on a stick on which they take him up. While flying in the sky the turtle wishes to voice his enjoyment by saying some words that would result in his fall and death. These turtles are the long oppressed subalterns for whom the presence of colonization, due to long duration and forceful implementation of oppression, has led to a fractured existence. In such a context, the flight of turtles creates a paradox-negation of colonialism and oppression is equivalent to the destruction of the self. In the context of the life of the Kurdish ethnics, this image depicts the status of the subjects who confront the fall of the oppressor regime (and in this instance the dictatorship of Saddam Hosen) by the swans (the U.S and its allies). Therefore, such a flight to freedom is a combination of life and death with the colonized subject who wishes to gain Subjectivity and inevitably must embrace both. Ghobadi's attempt is to confront the cultural paradox of internalized oppression and the possibility of resistance. The question that remains in this regard is "Can [Kurdish] Subaltern Speak?" Is it possible for her/him to voice the resistance against the oppression that has affected her/his existence to an extent beyond the fall of the dictators? Or her/his newly gained freedom is just a change of the style of oppression in a situation that the old dictatorial regime has been transformed into a more subtle form against which the oppressed can't embrace any hope of freedom.

The present study attempts to answer the abovementioned question in the context of the works of Ghobadi. These works vacillate between the Subject's attempt to gain her/his rights, and simultaneously look through the way that she/he copes with the internalized sense of alienation in the period of moving away from official colonialism. As Shohat (1997) maintains in the context of the postcolonial cinema, "[these works] call attention to the fault lines of gender, class, ethnicity, region, partition, migration, and exile. Many of the films explore the complex identities generated by exile – from one's own geography, from one's own history, from one's own body—within innovative narrative strategies" (p. 14). Thus, the paradox that has torn the psyche of the Subjects apart and has become latent because of the greater fear of immanent death at the time of colonialism's military presence, is foregrounded when it no longer exists. There is no possibility for the subjects to resist such an intricacy; the links between the past, present and future is demolished and there is no possibility of voicing one's subjectivity. Resistance, in such a situation, must negate all the preconceptions that the cultural system and the external forces rely upon. The willed death of the subject creates such a link. The concept of death, prevalent in Ghobadi's work, puts up resistance that protects and recreates subjectivity while subaltern faces old and new forms of oppression. As a result, regarding the question of the possibility of the voicing Subaltern's identity, the answer takes a positive shape. Death of the subjects in these works is an optimistic restatement of *Sati* that in addition to the rejection of the internal and external oppressors goes a step further in creating a "minority space" (Bhabha, 1994, p. ix) and a balance where the voice of the subaltern can be heard.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The main critical approach used to study the works of Bahman Ghobadi is postcolonialism. The critical analysis is based on the concepts that explore the situation of the subjects in the periods of transition from colonialism to postcolonialism. Accordingly, the present study analyzes internal colonial structures, external representation of the subjects and the native dominating structures, which are in the same context in oppression of the Kurdish subaltern. Among the theorists in the context of postcolonial studies, the present paper benefits from Hamid Nafici's the concept of self-othering which plays a key role in exploring the inter-relationship of the mentioned oppressive structures. In addition, this study benefits from the theoretical framework that Bhabha presents in his exploration of the state of the subalterns who face layered levels of oppression. Regarding the death of the protagonist in the works of Ghobadi, the present study applies the concepts that Spivak presents in her analysis of the self-willed suicide of the subaltern that resists the layered oppressive systems. Bill Ashcroft's analysis of the postcolonial culture has also been applied to the cultural space in which the works of Ghobadi appear.

Based on the mentioned argument, the first section of the present study identifies the social group that Ghobadi targets in his representation of the subaltern. The second part analyses the status of the subaltern in his works and maintains that the borderlines shift from physical to psychological along with the shift of the status of the Subjects from colonial to postcolonial (prior to the invasion of Iraq to post-invasion period). The third section argues that death is the ultimate resistance that leads to creation of a space for the subjectivity of the subaltern and deconstructs the overall cultural and psychological status of the subjects and results in creation of a new space in which there would be a possibility of Subjectivity.

### III. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

#### A. *Minority-within-minority: Subalterns among Kurdish Subalterns*

The bulk of Ghobadi's works "focuses attention on the 'dispossessed' – the peculiar form of agency, subjectivity and modes of sociality (such as customary laws and practices) ignored or 'subjugated' by colonial and imperialist institutions, as well as by the universalizing and legitimating modes of historiography and political theory that accompanies them" (Iverson, 1997, p.3). Therefore, the question would be, are all the segments of the Kurdish society hailed as oppressed subjects? In opposition to such a vision, these works are an acute disillusionment "with the (national-bourgeois) state of the...Third World" (Ahmad, 1992, p. 68). Situated on the physical and psychological borderlines, these works do not represent a coherent body called the Kurdish subaltern. As a result, *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000), *The Songs of my Homeland* (2002), *Turtles can Fly too* (2004), *Half Moon* (2006) and *Rhino Season* (2012) as "post-colonial cultural expressions are based on the experiences of people and communities, rather on the master narrative of the nation state. They foreground questions of cultural and social identity rather than direct [sic] struggles for political power. They are pragmatic, immediate, and non-ideological seeking to change life but putting force no single blueprint for future" (Lipsitz, 1994, p. 31)

The harsh reality of smuggling goods in return for a little money for poor Kurdish residents in *A Time for Drunken Horses* is a great opportunity for the others who pile up wealth and benefits. Unlike the powerful sector of the society, the poor face death every day; and even if they succeed in smuggling goods, they do not get but a meager share of the interest. In *Turtles can Fly too*, although the social structure is severely damaged by the reality of enforced displacement and genocide, groups like arm dealers are the beneficiaries. Even the people, in whose village the refugee children have found a temporary shelter, use them to collect mines from their fields that results in killing and maiming of many of the children. It "[reminds] us of the generations of migration and genocide whose burden clings to the Kurds like the keratinous armor of the turtle" (Sadr, 2006, P. 287). Moreover, in the context of the last phase the serene atmosphere of the *Rhino Season* attests to the recalcitrance of the social structure for change because of the possibility of the loss of the gains that is accumulated during the period of social stability.

As a result, the main target of representation in the works of Ghobadi is the minority within the Kurdish society: a minority-within-minority. They are invisible, silent by-products of colonialism that, at its best, non-sympathetic Subjects have represented them or if being represented by native subjects, the most powerful sectors have done so and simply neglected them. A revealing example in the context of the works of Ghobadi is Agrin the female protagonist of *Turtles can Fly too*. The fact that she is among the first that feel the presence of the army of Saddam Hosein, which results in killing of her parents, brothers and sisters, makes her the embodiment of the subordination by the direct colonial force. On the other hand, the fact that she has been raped and begotten an illegitimate child, makes her the target of severe stigmatization of the social structure, resulting in her alienation and double oppression. From his first work to the last, the main preoccupation of Ghobadi as a filmmaker concerns this group. These characters are left in the borderlines of identity both physically and psychologically; they are colonized and at the same time not included among members of the colonized society. In the context of the works of Ghobadi, "[once] the liminality of the nation-space is established...The national subject splits in the ethnographic perspective of culture's contemporaneity and provides both a theoretical position and a narrative authority for marginal voices or minority discourse" (Bhabha, 1990, p. 302).

#### B. *Minority-within-minority and Borderlines*

In Ghobadi's works before the fall of Saddam Hosein, the main challenge that the subjects face is the vicissitudes of being on the geographic borderlines. These subjects live along the border between Iraq and Iran. In *A Time for Drunken*

*Horses*, the “story [depicts] the courage of orphaned Kurdish children, forced to support themselves under the harshest of conditions” (Sadr, 2006, p. 245). This is the main subject in *The Songs of my Homeland* in which a Kurdish musician searches for his wife at the time when Iraqi Kurds are attacked by Saddam Hussein’s army. “In these films the narrative is driven by its characters’ attempts to cross the border between Iran and Iraq, but the landscape gradually dissolves into disconnected spaces, ‘border’ ceases to be an identifiable, recognizable place and instead signifies a nightmarish unstable zone of inexplicable military atrocity” (Chaudhuri & Finn, 2003, Pp.10-11). As a result, the borderline which is the main challenge regarding the consciousness of the subjects is shaped as the physical border between Iraq and Iran. This is the main reason behind the fact that in this period the characters are mainly types rather than actual Subjects. In such a context the schoolchildren, the toiling parent, the girl who is married off without her consent and the old singer who is searching for a lost wife in a wasteland tormented and torn up by the threat of war can be anyone. In other words, the types merge into the body of nation that is stagnated and oppressed for its sustenance.

The second period is the time when the international forces led by the U.S. are at the brink of the invasion of Iraq. While in the first period the contradictions surrounding the characters are left behind the representation of a group afflicted by threat of war and concerned with maintaining basic requirements, in this period the individuals are due to speak and different voices emerge. Now the fact of being under the colonization of Iraq’s regime shows its psychological effect on the individual level, the characters face the traumatic effect of a long period of oppression. While living on the geographical borderline remains intact, the traumatic experience of being war victims is added to their psychological reality. They live in a world that every aspect of it is in a limbo and everything is disconnected. None of the major characters is bodily and mentally complete. Agrin, the underage mother, who has been raped and has begotten an illegitimate child, has lost her honor. Hangaw, his brother, has lost his arms because of the explosion of a mine; and Rega, the illegitimate child, has lost her eyes while being born. The three characters can make one soul if they unite; but there is no possibility of it because of the trauma of oppression, and the cultural stigmatization that regards Rega as illegitimate.

The Physical/psychological limbo that dominates this work extends into the symbolic structure of signification and consequently decenters everything related to the subjects. The pond from which in the past people would take water and has been regarded as a source of life changes to a symbol of death and disaster. The gold fishes, which are believed to have the power to cure the blindness of Hangaw, become the symbols of death and disappearance of hope. In the scene that Agrin lets Rega to be suffocated in the pond, he transforms into a dead fish. None of the elements in the symbolic context of the *Turtles can fly*, fishes, turtles, and the disjointed working bodies, have the capacity to rejoin to make a coherent body. Here, the physical and psychological limbo coincides.

Rega, the illegitimate child of Agrin, is the most obvious embodiment of this coincidence. He is the symbol of love and hate; he is beloved for his mother and is hated by her because he is the symbol of death and oppression. In words of Ashcroft (2001) he is:

The colonial subject [which] is both inherently evil and potentially good, thus submerging the moral conflict of colonial occupation and locating in the child of empire a naturalization of the ‘parent’s’ own contradictory impulses for exploitation and nurture. The child, at once both other and same, holds in balance the contradictory tendencies of? with enlightenment, debasement with idealization, negation with affirmation, exploitation with education, filiation with affiliation imperial rhetoric: authority is held in balance with nurture; domination Living on such a paradoxical boarder. (pp. 36-7)

He comes into the world blind. His blindness signifies the loss of orientation and emptiness of signification. He is the symbol of the point where the oppression of colonialism reaches into the domain of the relation between the subject and the surrounding world; thus, he is the embodiment of oppression. His search for father, as a point of reference and signification is shown in his incessant shouting inside the empty bombshells in vain; the temporality of oppression has become a permanency in his existence. He is the son of oppression and death, a symbol of innocence begotten by sin. This leads to the fact that Rega, the “illegitimate” child of rape and tyranny, can be situated at the center of the chaotic world of psychophysical boundaries in *Turtles can Fly*. Rega is not only being created by a paradox, he also embodies the paradox.

The third period of the works of Ghobadi contains the psychological limbo created from the pressures of a destroyed past whose effects penetrate into the present state of the characters. This period, which includes *The Rhino Season*, creates a symbolic world where the elements oscillate between present and past. The protagonist of *Rhino Season*- a poet imprisoned for three decades of his life, when released from incarceration finds society much changed. After finding his family, he cannot unite with them because the harsh reality of the past is still alive in his mind. Like the previous period, the symbolic elements presented in this work are in a state of limbo. Rhino as the subject of the book written by the protagonist, simultaneously symbolizes strength and weakness: strength to injure years of imprisonment and weakness to embrace reality. Turtles, another powerful symbol in this film, fall in the same domain. They depict endurance, but at the same time, paralysis and inability to move. The children of his wife are the result of a sense love and hate which both are unfulfilled. The incidents are set in a city in Turkey, a foreign land and a foreign language, a land where the characters have taken refuge for many years. Therefore, at the same time, it is a homeland and a foreign land. The sea gives a sense of freedom with its vastness; on the other hand, it signifies confinement by being situated between the foreign land and the homeland. In the extreme case of the *Rhino Season*, everything becomes mute and

language is paralyzed. The characters, who in the aforementioned works, would look for a chance to voice themselves now rarely even speak out a word. The physical limbo, in which the characters are situated in the previous works, cedes into a complete pure psychological paradox of existence. The hybridity of existence that is luxuriously bestowed upon subject who contain a duality of something of the both as Bhabha mentions, now is changed into the point of negative hybridity, which in contrast contains elements of nothing of the both. The voice of the inmates of the boarders which began in *Time for the Horses to be Drunk* with a schoolgirl talking in broken sentences now cedes to a resentful silence where the signifiers look helplessly for a signified and find nothing, nothing to hold on to, nothing to recreate.

### C. Borderlines, Resistance and Death

The inaction of the colonized originates from alliance of three structures; these three power systems are the political pre-invasion, the post invasion, and the native social systems that are active in the subtext of colonial and post-colonial structures. In their façade, these groups seem to be in opposition to each other. The Ba'ath party's ideology is based on insolation, negation and obliteration. As a result, Kurds essentially function as Others who would find no way to the venue of the Same. They are liable to be captured and their lands to be occupied. On the other hand, for the western occupiers, in the context of the works of Ghobadi, Kurds are subjects whose freedom is an accidental historical by-product of a war with an aggressive regime. They are set in a historical conjecture where a war not fought for their sake, makes an incidental freedom. The third group, which is in tacit consent with the other two structures, is the Kurdish stratum of power for which the fact of being subaltern is the least perceptible because of the power and wealth that is under its control.

At this point, it would be useful to analyze the mechanism of relation between these three poles of power structure in the context of the Kurdish colonial/postcolonial era and analyze the mechanics based on which they collude to oppress the subaltern. A key term in this context is the concept of self-othering introduced by Hamid Nafici (2000). In his paper "Self-Othering: A Postcolonial Discourse on Cinematic First Contacts," he defines the concept as such "[lacking] a significant local film industry, the Third World people could not narrate their own stories in the new medium—stories in which they could explore, find, and assert their own identities. As a result, they tended to define themselves vis-à-vis the way the West was defining itself and imagining them by means of the new medium"(p.3). Although Nafici explores the relation between a dominant system of power in the context of the binary relation between West and its other as the Iranian audience, his concept of self-othering can be extended to the political relation between three dimensions of power introduced at the beginning of this study. It can be argued that the effect of self-othering does not stay at the space between the colonizer and the colonized; it creates a mechanism of self-othering in which the alienated nation in its multiplicity projects the structure into all the layers of ethnic and social stratum. Thus, facing the "epistemic violence and representation crisis," (ibid, p.4) the power structure projects this sense into the other social strata, which are less powerful ethnicities or minorities. The higher social status attempts to escape from the position of alienation by attempt to be situated at the same statues as the colonizer- a subject, which can claim an Other for its existence. As a result, the colonial structure and the internal system of power reach a common point, which although unrecognized, plays a central role in the power dynamism of the relationship of different players in the social system. The structure of self-othering reaches deep into the social structure of the colonized in which every distinguishable power structure projects the sense of self-debasement into its nearest less strenuous. This process can be called cross reflecting self-othering. As a result, because of the layered system of power in the colonial structure, the main players in this context would be the external colonial regime, the internal most powerful power structure and the higher stratum of the minority structure, which based on such a process, exist in a tacit concurrence. Moreover, by maintaining that the concept of minority is relative and fluid rather than essential and identical, one can claim that the self-othering transforms into a mechanism of formation of minorities in which the minority-within-minority is the last layer that does not have the power of projecting the mechanism into any other social sector. In such a context of multi-layered oppression subaltern lapses into invisibility- a blank space. In addition, whenever there might be an opposition through voicing her/his identify "[her/his] speech...[is] appropriated by these superior forms of authority" (Das, 1989, p. 5).

In such a state of none-representability in which the ultimate position for the subaltern is misrepresentation, the question in the context of the works of Ghobadi is "if the oppressed under socialized capital have no necessary access to "correct" resistance, can the ideology of *sati*, coming from the history of periphery, be sublated into any model of interventionist practice?" (Spivak, 1988, p. 43). This question can be better understood by recognizing the fact that any possible form of resistance would be blocked by the tacit alliance of the structures that deeply affect the existence of the subaltern. As a result, death would be the only way through which there can be a possibility of resistance in which "[an] *anti-dialectical* movement of the subaltern subverts any binary or sublatory ordering of power and sign" (Bhabha 1994, p.55). Death, in these works, creates a negative resistance through non-representation. It is a restating of the Subaltern, a "cultural difference [whose] aim is to re-articulate the sum of knowledge from the perspective of the signifying *singularity* of the 'other' that resists totalization – the repetition that will not return as the same, the minus-in-origin that results in political and discursive strategies where adding-*to* does not add-up but serves to disturb the calculation of power and knowledge, producing other spaces of subaltern signification" (Bhabha, 1990, p.24). This issue subverts the hopelessness, which Spivak states at the end of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In works of the Kurdish filmmaker, death of the subjects makes coherence where the subjects refuse to be appropriated by the external or internal factors. Although the case of *Sati* reappears in a work of art, the effect is the same. It "would challenge and deconstruct [the]

opposition between subject (law) and object-of-knowledge and mark the place of “disappearance” with something other than silence and nonexistence, a violent aporia between subject and object status” (Spivak, 1988, p.46).

In the first period, death is concomitant with the material reality of existence around the characters. It does not enter into their own subjectivity and remain in the space between the subject and the social reality. In *A Time for Drunken Horses* and *The Songs of my Homeland*, the subaltern faces the harsh physical reality with death as an intertwined part. *A Time for Drunken Horses* is the panorama of death of the people who live on the border between Iran and Iraq. Being left on their own, the oldest son of the family tries to replace the position of his murdered father. Based on the physical dominance of the first period, the threat of death is intertwined with the reconciliation of the character with the harsh reality in which he is situated. In *The Songs of my Homeland*, the concept of death does not penetrate the subjective reality of the main subjects. On the other hand, it becomes an inseparable section of their lives; ultimately, the death of the estranged wife of the artist, results in the recreation of the unity between Barat the singer and the woman with whom he has fallen in love. In the context of the first period, death as the final stance of the existence of the subjects in the material stasis, acts in two ways. It thwarts the movement of the subjects in the first stance, and when enforced on their reality of the existence, recreates the space through which there might be a possibility of the creation of a new order. As a result, both of the works in the first period conclude in a new stance for a beginning in which the physical borders are negated and are opened for of recreation and reconstruction.

The state of subjectivity in the second period is manifest in the character of Agrin- the protagonist of *Turtles can Fly* who is oppressed by both internal power structures. The ferocious Ba’ath party, which has regarded her as an object and at the same time less ferociously, but more prolonged, the traditional Kurdish social structure with its stigmatization of the raped female subjects and their “illegitimate” children. Here, the resistance of the subaltern is in its rejection of the dominant systems by anti-traditional and anti-constitutional suicide of the female subject.

In the third phase, death of the protagonist in *Rhino Season* reinvigorates a senseless world. In opposition to the previous periods where death constitutes a rejection of a system of power in combination with a psychological resistance, here, death contains pure psychological revolt which empowers the Subjects for a reunification with an origin. Therefore, “[this] surplus is the effect of the radical alterity of the other, whether as ‘face’ or as death, which prevents the totality from being constituted as such. As might be expected, it is the possibility of this absolute otherness, and the ability to exercise all violence in the relation with it” (Young, 1990, p.16). This can be best witnessed at the end of the *Rhino Season*. While the family of protagonist return to the land which they have long abandoned, the protagonist, Sahel, rejects the passivity of his state and lives in a timeless world which exists in a third space away from life and death. Such a poetic presentation of the subaltern attests to the fact that as long as the physical pressure of subalternity is not cast away, the psychological structure that has been created in long periods of oppression proves an intransitive obstacle. In this state death goes beyond its physical signification; it develops into the death of the symbols, which are being created in the process of oppression, “[it] is a historiography of the subaltern that displaces the paradigm of social action as defined primarily by rational action... [it] enables the historian to get away from defining subaltern consciousness as binary, as having positive or negative dimensions. It allows the articulation of the subaltern agency to emerge as relocating and reinscription. ... The synchrony in the social ordering of the symbols is challenged within its own terms, but the grounds of engagement have been displaced in a supplementary movement that exceeds those terms. This is the historical movement of hybridity as camouflage, as a contesting, antagonist agency functioning in the time lag of sign/symbol, which is a space in between the rules of engagement” (Bhabha, 1992, p.19). Therefore, it is a recreation of the subject, in which “[the] illegal alien, the colonized, the okhcha – [who] they are all exposed to violence; they do not engage in conversation, they are not ‘reduced’ to ‘signifiers’, and so symbolic exchange alone cannot remove them” (Wagner, 2012, p.15). Therefore, regeneration becomes possible in a newly created space free from the oppressing systems of power.

#### IV. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Ghobadi's works are situated in the center of Kurdish self-consciousness as the subaltern of multilayered structures of oppression. These works join the narrative with documentary genre in an attempt to represent the subaltern in a tangible world of change and constant regeneration. By being in the status of the social and diasporic Subject, Ghobadi's attempt is to re-present and resist the oppressive structures both in the context of the Same and the Other. In the words of Ashcroft (2001), this kind of re-imagining of the minorities is a counter discourse “which is not a separate oppositional discourse but a tactic which operates from the fractures and contradictions of discourse itself” (p.102). In addition, by depicting the fluidity of such a stasis at a time that the political structures, Kurdish or non-Kurdish, claim a state of identity which either passes through absolute non-representation or mis-representation as a result of politico-social benefits, he attempts to “use the camera less as revolutionary weapon than as a monitor of the gendered and sexualized realm of realms of the personal and the domestic, seen as integral but repressed aspects of national history. [He displays] a certain skepticism toward metanarratives of liberation but do not necessarily abandon the notion that emancipation is worth fighting for...” (Shohat, 1997, p. 26). These works represent a resisting cinema in which the subaltern is allegorized, and the attempt is to create a space in which the world can be a just place in which all can live and be equal. The present study is at the same context; it can be an allegory of the state of subaltern through studying a layer of signification, which is the works of Ghobadi. Thus, the subjectivity of the writer that is among the natives comes into

the context. On this level, the object of study goes a level deeper. In other words, this paper is a resistance against the structures that are on the façade paradoxical and antagonistic, but in reality complicit in their oppression of subaltern.

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