

## **Cultural Sub - alternation: Critical Study of Joseph in Genesis in**

### *The Holy Bible*

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#### **Abstract**

This article attempts to study the concept of cultural sub-alternation. It deals with the biblical character Joseph. Joseph is taken as a slave into a foreign land. This study elaborates the cultural practices followed by the minority tribe the Hebrews and by the majority ruling group the Egyptians. It focuses on how the intolerant nature of the ruling majority tries to suppress the minority in every way. This leads the dominant group to enforce its values and culture upon the inferior group. The cultural minorities including the protagonist undergo cultural shock. The minority group as an ethnic minority is considered as a subaltern. And this study highlights the sufferings faced by the subalterns.

**Key words:** Cultural sub - alternation, dominant group, ethnic minority, cultural shock, subalterns.

The story of Joseph is one of the most graphic and attractive in the Old Testament. It has a well defined plot. It is almost like a novel that has a beginning, middle and the end. The rapid growth of the protagonist from his boyhood to his old-age is narrated in a well-manner. This narrative deals with the central character Joseph, son of Joseph who is a Patriarch. Joseph, the protagonist is a man of great integrity. Yet, he is thrown as a slave in a foreign land. This study deals with the sufferings of Joseph has the result of cultural clash and cultural shock.

In many ways, the protagonist has been oppressed and humiliated. He is marginalized. There are several events that have paved way for his subjugation. It is quoted that, “The difficulties he encounters, meanwhile

shows how Joseph his with many conventional obstacles, sibling rivalry, slavery, sexual harassment, imprisonment, neglect, alienation from home” (Ryken 460). Thus, he becomes the victim of the undeserved adversities.

Joseph undergoes subordination in social, political, geographical, religious and economical hierarchies, that all comes under the term 'culture'. In the book *An Introduction to Cultural Studies*, Nayar says, "Culture derives from 'cultura' and 'colere', meaning 'to cultivate' " (4). Thus culture is a cultivated behaviour. Simply, it refers to the way of life of a group of people. It includes their behavioural pattern, beliefs, values, religion, language and many. A person's human nature is determined by the learning he/she has obtained as a member of a particular society. Thus, the culture of a person gives identity to the person in a society.

Joseph, as a young Hebrew undergoes subjugation as a result of the cultural domination of the majority Egyptians. Thereby, he can be termed as a 'subaltern'. The idea of the subaltern is a complex one and both Gramsci and Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak have foregrounded and adequated the theory of the subaltern. Indian feminist deconstructive, critic Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak tries to bring the term 'the subaltern' that culminates the lives and histories of those people who are frequently subjugated and subsequently ignored and forgotten. So, she proposes to use the term subaltern to conceptualize a range of different subject positions. She believes that the groups or people who are marginalized, cannot raise their voices collectively and have no political consciousness are 'subalterns'.

Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak has borrowed the term 'subaltern' from the Italian political theorist and prominent socialist, Antonio Gramsci, from his work on 'cultural hegemony'. The term 'subaltern' means an 'inferior rank'. This term identifies a person or group of persons who are discriminated, subjugated, victimized, marginalized and 'othered' by the ruling class on the basis of race, class, caste, religion and region. They are considered as the voiceless and are excluded from the society's established rules.

Thus, the subaltern theory allows a thorough account of the intersections of social, historical, political, economical and cultural hegemony of the dominant groups on the minorities. It generates the concept 'cultural subalternation'.

Geography is one of the key elements that constitute a culture. The first subjugation the protagonist undergoes is based on the geography. As a victim of cultural sub - alternation, he is placed as a slave in a foreign land. He is deprived from his native place. Although the story of Joseph is all about a Hebrew, it sets in Egypt. Egypt is the ancient kingdom and modern republic in the North East corner of Africa, it is bounded on the north by the Mediterranean Sea and on the south by Nukia or Sudan, on the east lies the Red Sea and on the west the Libyan Desert. Egypt has always been predominantly an agricultural country. And these Egyptian follow different customs and traditions. Their religious practices and their way of living are extremely unique. Their funeral beliefs are so different. They believe in after life. They build royal tombs called pyramids and they carry out the process of mummification, an artificial means of preserving the body.

On the other hand, the protagonist is a Hebrew. Joseph and his family lived in Canaan. Canaan is a civilization in the Ancient Near East. And Hebrew is a small ethnic group in it. According to biblical tradition, the Hebrews are people descended from Sheon, one of the sons of Noah. The term Hebrews is used to designate the descendants of the patriarchs of the Old Testament, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They normally live together. And they follow specific culture and practices that are unique to their clan.

The cultural studies elaborate the concept sub - alternation by different kinds of social formations. In the social formation of an empire, the natives are considered as the dominant group and the slaves as the subaltern. As a slave in a foreign land, Joseph is being rated and sold like a commodity to the high-ranking Egyptian. Human value is denied. Just like the cattle, humans are treated and sold. Being the youngest of the family and the favourite of his father, he is deprived of love and care. He is put into a situation of insecurity and alienation. In Egypt, he is bought by Potiphar, an Egyptian, who is one of the Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard. Joseph very well adapts to the new situation. Cultural diffusion takes place. When he thinks everything is alright the problem arises. Potiphar's wife is captivated by the well-build physic and handsomeness of Joseph. She woos him and takes notice of him. She calls him to bed with her. The dominance of the superior comes even in this way. As, he is a slave in the foreign land, even a woman tries to seduce him and take hold of him. But Joseph is so strong in his standards and he is not carried away by her advances. In spite of his refusal, several times she looks for opportunities to grab him and use him. He faces a kind of double subjugation in

Potiphar's house. One he is a slave working there. Another he is forced by Potiphar's wife to be a sexual slave. With that attitude one day she catches him by his cloak and calls to bed with her. He just leaves the cloak with her and runs. This is an extraordinary and noble act. This reveals that the superiors, who dominate are not superior in their values. And so, he is falsely accused by his master's wife and he is pushed into the prison. Being a slave, justice is denied for him.

The other basic element of a culture is the institution named family. Joseph is separated from his family. It is one of the great threats he faces. He is from a Hebrew tribe where, "kinship ordinarily involved living together. Whether migrating from one place to another or remaining in a more or less permanent place of residence, the members of a family or a clan naturally pitched their tents or built their houses together" (Burrows 134). Most of the customs and traditions according to their tribe are centered in the family. The family is a religious and social unit to them. The cruelty of his brothers paves way for Joseph to be suddenly removed from his culture and tradition and be placed in the new environment.

Identity plays a crucial role in a person's life. It is said that, "the identity of a person is, for cultural studies, dependent upon the roles played by that person, the signs that designate that person" (Nayar 24). In Egypt, as a slave he is identified as a slave and a minority Hebrew and not as Joseph, an individual man. Initially, Potiphar's wife tries to sleep with him and she is completely attracted towards him. But, as he refuses, she names him as 'the Hebrew'. She projects his identity as 'the Hebrew slave'. It is a derogatory way to call a person who has a name by the name of his clan that is a minority by that time. Again, after Potiphar returns home, she lodges the same complaint against Joseph, she introduces him by saying, ". . . that Hebrew slave you brought us. . ." (Gen. 37:17). Again, when the cup-bearer of Pharaoh, introduces Joseph to Pharaoh about his ability to interpret dreams, he introduces him as: "Now a young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. We told him our dreams, and he interpreted them for us, giving each man the interpretation of his dreams" (Gen. 41:12). This shows the fact that Joseph loses his identity. He has the identity just as a Hebrew and as a slave.

Even after he is raised to be the in charge of Egypt by Pharaoh, he loses his identity. Astonished by the prudence and by the divine wisdom of Joseph, Pharaoh says to Joseph, “. . . “I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt”” (Gen. 41:41). In spite of being raised to such a level, they are not ready to accept Joseph as he is. It is said that, “Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-Paneah. . .” (Gen. 41:45). He loses his identity as Joseph. He is called by the new name. the influential writer Tramod K. Nayar insists book *An Introduction to Cultural Studies* states that, “Cultural studies' interest in everyday life proceeds from what Raymond Williams (1981) called 'lived cultures', where culture is produced through every day living : the food people eat, the fashion they adopt, the entertainment they prefer or the festivals they celebrate”. (27)

So as a culture it includes specific food people eat, their entertainment, the fashionable way of dressing and the occupation. And all these come under the material culture. Being a cultural minority there material culture of the minority is dominated by the majority.

On hearing the remarks given by the cup-bearer, Pharaoh sends his subjects to bring Joseph before him. As soon as Joseph is called, he is quickly brought out from the dungeon. And before they take him to Pharaoh, in appearance they change him like an Egyptian. It is described that, “. . . when he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh” (Gen. 41:14). At the most mundane level hair signals a person's health or lack of it. It is also said that there are social distinctions which are associated with hair quite early. And the practices of shaving are rooted in how a culture views hair. In some culture shaving is seen as a symbol of a purity and cleanliness, others view shaving as humiliation, where as others view shaving as mourning. In the case of Hebrews, “The normal Israelite custom, for both sexes, seems to have been to let the hair grow to considerable length” (Marshall 440). In many tribes like the Hebrews, every one view growing of beards as great. The attack on beard is considered as the attack on the person. Because the beard is the symbol of manhood, it is considered as a great insult to degrade someone's beard. It is said that, “the full, round beard was a sign of manhood and source of pride to Hebrew men. It was considered an ornament and much care was given to its maintenance” (Ryken 80).

But in the case of Joseph, basically a Hebrew has to be properly shaved and robed in linen to appear at the court before Pharaoh. Here the values, feelings, customs and practices of the subaltern are not considered. In Egypt, shaving is considered as purity and it is done as a part of hygienic requirement. Therefore, “In Egypt the head and face were shaved, however, and Joseph had to comply with the local customs” (Marshall 441). That may be the reason for his brothers to unrecognize him, when they come to buy grains from Egypt. Moreover, the clothing of the Hebrew is normally made up of wool or animal skin. But, to stand before Pharaoh, Joseph has to be robed in linen. Joseph adapts to it and he also gifts it to his brothers. Each one is gifted with one set of dress and Benjamin with five sets of dress.

The next alarming cultural subjugation specified in the narrative is based on the occupation. It is said that, “‘you should answer, ‘your servants have tended livestock from our boyhood on, just as our fathers did.’ Then you will be allowed to settle in the region of Goshen, for all shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians” ” (Gen. 46:34). The issue is, the shepherds are considered as detestable. The scholars come up with multiple reasons for their abomination. Some say that Egyptians rear cattle just for milk and wool in small numbers and not for meat and for offering sacrifices like the Hebrews in large numbers. Others say that Egyptians detest the shepherds out of xenophobia. And few others have put forth the argument that, Egyptians may worship cattle as their Gods and therefore they hate the shepherds who rear them. Various other scholars observe that the shepherds are looked upon by the Egyptian aristocracy as people who follow a disgraceful employment and unhygienic. But in the case of the Hebrews, when one thinks on the economic forms of their life, “When the Hebrews first appeared on the scene of history, they were a semis nomadic people, tent dwellers and keepers of sheep and goats” (Burrows 136). As a subaltern in the alien land, their traditional occupation is underestimated and held as detestable.

The other bothering narration that show up cultural marginalization is, “they served him by himself, the brothers by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because Egyptians could not eat with Hebrew, for that is detestable to Egyptians” (Gen. 43:32). Again scholars come up with innumerable reasons for Egyptians detesting dining with the Hebrews. It is said that, “When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of his house, “Take these men to my house, slaughter an animal and prepare a

meal; they are to eat with me at noon”” (Gen. 43:16). Since, it is said that he has ordered his servants to prepare a meal by slaughtering an animal, some say that the Hebrews eat the cattle worshipped by the Egyptians. It is said that, “Egyptians religion was never a unitary whole. There were always local Gods up and down the land” (Marshall 300,301). And they believe that their Gods will manifest them on earth through animals. It is also said that they worship the constellation Ram and that is why they do not eat meat of a beast. Other scholars believe that Joseph eating by himself was evidently because of his exalted status, but the segregation of the Hebrews is due to the Egyptian's feeling of racial and religious superiority and the Egyptians regard for foreigners as unclean.

Somehow or other, the Egyptians discriminate and detest the cultural customs and traditions of the Hebrew minorities. And hence forth, Joseph has to adapt to the Egyptian customs to survive and to rule Egypt. Thus, Joseph can be considered as a subaltern in a foreign land. and it is clear that he is culturally marginalised. He has no say for seeking justice or for practicing his traditions and customs. As a slave in the foreign land, he patiently endures all the hardships and adversities that come his way. He adapts to the new environment and customs without rebelling against it. The entire social and cultural constraints he faces make him to remain so passive and undisturbed. This delivers the note that the subalterns can never speak.

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