



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

SUBALTERN IN INDIAN LITERATURE: CHANGING NARRATIVES

Vidyasagar Sharma is working as a Junior Research Fellow at Department of Political Science, University of Delhi.

Abstract

Literature is the source of the Carrefour of various socio-economic factors. Literature has the power to perform resistance and revolutionary functions. Literature also shaped by subaltern history which initiated from the school of history. In contemporary Indian literature, subalternity became a superseding idea and literary writers turned their writings towards the suppressed voices of society. Indian writers re-wrote the fictional and non-fictional narratives as well to articulate the passive voices of subalterns. In sharp contrast, in the disciplines of history, social science, literature and politics in colonial India, there was an outburst of new creativity through 'the discovery of the village and the person', not as the historical residues of an old civilization, but as the embryo of a new civilization form having the potentially of being an alternative to capitalism. Many fictional and Non-fictional narratives in Hindi and in regional languages make the perspective of village life and society in colonial time and post-colonial time as well.

In this paper, my focus will be on two prominent writers Premchand from Hindi literature and Mahasweta Devi from Bangla literature and also overviewing the Dalit literature from a subaltern's perspective. These writers unfolded the existing challenges of society from below. Though, the picture was very different in rural and urban areas. History records from above, but mentioned literature records history from below. This paper will focus to understand the genesis of literature writing on subaltern subjects before the emergence of subaltern study as a methodological structure in India.

Keywords: Dalit Literature; History; Indian Literature; Subaltern Study.

I

Literature is the source of the Carrefour of various socio-economic factors. Literature has the power to perform resistance and revolutionary functions. Literature also shaped by subaltern history which initiated from the school of history. In contemporary Indian literature, subalternity became a superseding idea and literary writers turned their writings towards the suppressed voices of society. Indian writers re-wrote the fictional and non-fictional narratives as well to articulate the passive voices of subalterns. In sharp contrast, in the disciplines of history, social science, literature and politics in colonial India, there was an outburst of new creativity through ‘the discovery of the village and the person’, not as the historical residues of an old civilization, but as the embryo of a new civilization form having the potentially of being an alternative to capitalism. Many fictional and Non-fictional narratives in Hindi and in regional languages make perspective of village life and society in colonial time and post-colonial time as well.

In this paper, my focus will be on two prominent writers Premchand from Hindi literature and Mahasweta Devi from Bangla literature and also overviewing the Dalit literature from a subaltern’s perspective. These writers unfolded the existing challenges of society from below. Though, the picture was very different in rural and urban areas. History records from above, but mentioned literature records history from below.

The ‘Subaltern’ is a term given by Antonio Gramsci to refer to those groups in society who are under the hegemony of the ruling elite class. Subaltern classes include peasants, tribes, women and other groups denied access to get hegemonic power. Historically speaking, Subaltern studies defined itself as an attempt to allow people to speak. Under Subaltern studies, new kind of writings has been started. The Subalterns have given an opportunity to speak and share their pains, anger, sufferings and experiences which was denied by the elitist historians and scholars. The Subaltern scholars try to make an alternative history writing in which history would be written from below rather than from above. In the domain of literature, we can trace the root of subalternity. In the narration of Premchand writing subaltern subject such as peasants, women and Dalits makes their strong presence. But Subaltern as an autonomous domain of history and cultural studies emerged against elitist historiography of the Western world. In post-colonial India, the Subaltern studies reflected in the various forms of writings of history and literature. So, subalternity becomes a dominant framework in literature when the marginalized section of the society has no voice of its own.

Premchand’s work has the same historic significance for India as compared to other authors like Tolstoy, Gorky and Balzac. Premchand has written extensively on the issue of peasants, caste and gender. His most important writing ‘*Godan*’ which reveals the anti-colonial peasant outburst and conditions of local peasants and landlords. In the words of P.C.Joshi, “the colonial peasant emerges, as dramatic personae in Premchand’s writings and an account of his deep historical insight into the circumstances of colonial India on the hard and his exceptional gifts of literary imagination on the other”. Premchand’s literary contribution comes through the strong and experienced narration of peasants and other subjects. His most of writing based on the colonial past of India in which the issues of Subaltern as like peasants, women, and Dalits were ignored by the enlightenment scholars. In his book ‘*Nirmala*’, Premchand touches the ignored corner of women’s lives and he portrayed the character of Nirmala as a symbol of rooted patriarchy in the society.

Mahasweta Devi, a prolific writer left behind an impressive collection of more than 100 novels and many short stories, namely *Breast Givers*, *Dhowli*, *Draupadi*, and *Rudali* encompassing themes of dispossession, rebellion, insurgencies and student movements in Calcutta. She has written mainly in the Bengali language but incorporating ‘tribal’ dialects. She goes against all sorts of hegemonic socio-political ideologies to voice subalterns. In subaltern’s writing the major breakthrough, especially in the global literary world, came with the English translation of *Imaginary Maps* by Gayatri Spivak Chakravorty, considered one of the most influential post-colonial writers. Her powerful narratives on themes of social reality, caste and most important, Adivasi allows us to meander through the complex and more intense struggle faced by a particular section of society on the map of the world.

As a subaltern discourse, Dalit literature has challenged the existing literature and their method, especially in Hindi literature. It recounts the existing social conditions of Dalits and creates an alternative literary tradition. In the existing definition, Dalits are defined as uncivilized, and their selves are awarded with a sense of impurity and inferiority. Soumya Nair argues that Subaltern literature in crux is a gripe literature and it constructs the social identity of the oppressed. Declaration of cultural and political identities is viewed mainly as a part of the struggle of the Subaltern literature. Some Dalit scholars like Kancha Illaih intervened in the Subaltern studies and argued that the mainstream historiography has done nothing to incorporate the Dalit Bahujana perspective in the writing of Indian history and literature. Such kind of allegation also comes in the literature writing. Most of the Dalit writer says that mainstream narratives of literature are hierarchal and it tries to maintain the status quo of upper caste hegemony. They argued that all traditions of literature writing in India had neglected to include Dalits as the subject of history and literature.

II

The enduring significance of Premchand writing lies not just in the fact that they reflected the harsh social reality and mirrored the contemporary critique of semi-feudal India. It is the revolutionary writing which Premchand’s novels acquire in the colonial Indian society by imparting a critical–realist edge to literary representation that gives him the badge of the most pioneer of a fiction writer who narrated in the form of social critique and protest of India. It is Premchand critique of the colonial and feudal system through extensive writings which makes him the prominent voice of Subalterns in Indian literature and as well as in cultural history. In the earlier writing of Premchand, he comes through the patriotism and anti-colonial struggle of masses but the major shift in his writing captured the Marxist ideology of class struggle and ‘*Godaan*’ is the best example of this kind of writing.

In ‘*Godaan*’, Premchand presents the fruit of an enriched and uninhibited sensibility which has been released from the constraints of the early Gandhian outlook. The main character of ‘*Godan*’ is the pauperized peasant, *Hori*, whose strong optimism in the illusionary of the semi-feudal system, the total hopelessness of *Hori* shows the limits of the system and the futility of all schemes for relief to the peasant through the ‘reform’ of the system (Joshi: 2005). In ‘*Godaan*’, Premchand never compromised in an ideological sense to portray the realities; his writings attempted to connect with subaltern masses rather than providing a way out of the Subaltern problem within the given system through the change of heart of elite classes. Premchand believes in the enlightening of subaltern classes and

awakening of peasant classes to a higher level of consciousness. In most of his writings, Premchand focuses to keep the enemy inside the society that is 'the village- the absentee landlord, the traders and the Gram Panchayat'. In '*Godaan*' Premchand puts the enemy inside the village and the enemy is Gram Panchayat, the *Biradari* and the priest working on behalf of rich peasants. Premchand also puts in the centre of the stage the peasant's own fatalism, his false consciousness and sacrifices and compromises to make peace with oppressors. Premchand's works revive the despair and anger of the Indian Peasant, who is crushed by the colonial system and the human agents of colonial exploitation and oppression. Premchand's literary narratives focus not only on the peasant class however it comes with a strong socio-political critique of the caste system. He also touches the various dimensions of Subalterns in his short stories like '*Thakur ka Kuaan*', '*Shudra*', '*Kusum*', and other stories.

Mahasweta Devi's predominant concerns are the tribal backwaters, the exploitation of the Adivasis by the landed rich or the urban-machinery perpetuating a legacy of complicity with the colonizers, bonded labour and prostitution, sexually tortured women, widows, ill-treated wives and others are adequately represented. Her writings come in independent India who claims to be inclusive and progressive in treating to women but Mahasweta Devi's writing strongly rejected the pseudo-progressivism and rooted patriarchy of contemporary Indian society. In her most popular novel '*Ek hazaar chaurasi Ki Maa*', (Originally written in the Bangla, English translation *Mother of 1084* by Samik Bandyopadhyay) shaped a new intervention in patriarchy. The insignificant role of *Sujata* in the *Mother of 1084*, as a woman who has been relegated to the position of a neglected, suppressed, ill-treated and marginalized in the all forms in a patriarchal society who consider woman as an object and does not express her own concerns. This novel also shows how the Naxalite Movement connects two subaltern mothers closer in spite of the class barrier.

Mahasweta Devi strongly touches the hidden corner of patriarchy that revolves inside the family and outside the family. In existing literature woman always projected as an authority of male and soft heart and she never speaks independently. Her writing on Adivasi communities is very significant in Subaltern literature. She refuses to call 'tribal' because of the word's colonial connotations, and she emphasizes the fearless relationship with a marginalized section of society. In Bangla literature, Mahasweta Devi is the only writer who broken the *Bhadra* tradition of writings in which the master-slave relationship was very much present. The narratives of Mahasweta Devi speak of the people's history and experiences. In the words of Gayatri Spivak Chakravorty, 'Devi's writings are telling history'.

In subaltern literary discourse, Dalit literature stands for the writings on Dalits by Dalit experience; Dalit literature voices the concerns of various Subaltern castes and marginalized communities in India. Subaltern studies took the question of caste seriously and caste narratives became the major part and even in literature caste issues especially Dalit issues become the most assertive in contemporary times. Dalit literature created her own space and as *Omprakash Valmiki* writes, 'Dalit Chetna obtains its primary energy from Ambedkar's life and vision, and all Dalit writers are united with respect to this truth.'

In the discourse of Subaltern, recognition becomes important for marginalized sections as Dalits, whose silenced voices have brought in the centre stage of literary narratives. In an elitist literary discourse in post-independent India

narrated the history of mainstream classes like landlords, petty bourgeoisies and dominant classes. In contemporary Indian literature, Dalit writing encompasses through many prominent Dalit writers like *Namdeo Dhasal*, *Omprakash Valmiki*, *Tulsi Ram* and others. Dalit literature has certainly reframed the narratives of slums, ghettos and untouchable spaces. Namdeo Dhasal, founder leader of the Dalit Panthers movement, favours protest in poetry choosing the language of subalterns as like, Red light area. Dhasal himself belongs from the Dalit Community and his literature speaks on behalf of subalterns.

III

The marginalized subaltern always shown in the invisible projection but changing nature of literature gives us strong and assertive voices and these voices assert and employed against the exploiters whose only interest was in maintaining the power and hegemony. There are differences in the themes and issues of the literature of the subaltern of various times. In *Subaltern Vol.I*, Ranajit Guha theorizes the different stories and myths of the society and in “Chandra’s Death”, Guha engages with the voice of the narrative, specifically the multiple ways in which narrative voice constructs subalternity. After revisiting through the writings of Premchand, Mahasweta Devi and Dalit writers, the subaltern narratives seems to subsumed by the discursive power of feudal class, nationalism, colonialism and patriarchy, which critiqued by the Subaltern literary figures.

Contemporary literature writing in India still reframing the subaltern subjects like women, Dalits and discarded segments of society and the question ‘Can Subaltern Speak’ is still present in mainstream Indian literature. In recent times, the Subaltern method of literature writing reflects from the writing of Arundhati Roy’s *God of Small Things* and Anjali Deshpande’s *Mahabhiyog*, both of them come with strong narratives of caste discrimination and pain of victims of Bhopal Gas Tragedy respectively. These all Subaltern literature represents a most precious heritage and unending source of motivation and significant framework for writing narratives of subaltern masses.

Reference

- Chatterjee, P. (2019), 'After Subaltern Studies', Economic and Political Weekly, 47(35), 44–49.
- Chakraborty, Chandrima (2003). 'Subaltern Studies, Bollywood and Lagaan', Pub., Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 38, No. 19, pp., 1879–1884.
- Consolaro, A. (2011). 'Resistance in the postcolonial Hindi literary field : Mohan Dās by Uday Prakās'.
- Devi, Mahasweta., *Mother of 1084*. Seagull Books: Calcutta, 1997.
- , *The Breast stories.*, Seagull Books: Calcutta, 1997.
- Joshi, P.C., 'The Subaltern in Indian Literature: Some Reflections on Premchand and his "Godaan"', Pub., Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 49, No. 2, pp., 101-118.
- Latin, L., Learner, O. A., Marxist, B. I., & Gramsci, A. (1891). CHAPTER - II SUBALTERN LITERATURE : A SURVEY, 37–68.
- Munshi Premchand - गोदान Godan-Maple Press (2014).pdf. (n.d.).
- Nair, Soumya & Kumar, Anoop., 'Language and culture discourse of Indian Dalit Literature from a Subalternist's perspective', Proceedings of Academics World 70th International Conference, Melbourne, Australia, 5th-6th July 2017.
- .Pandey, Gyanendra(2006)., 'The Subaltern as Subaltern Citizen', Pub., Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 41, No. 46, pp., 4735–4741.
- Ranjan, R. (2017). 'Remembering Mahasweta Devi : a saga of writing on subalterns', pp., 1–11.
- Ranjit Guha (Ed.) - Subaltern Studies. I Pub., Oxford University Press (1982).
- Stats, B. (2019). The Subaltern Identity and, 2016(June 2016), 3–5.
- Shandilya, K. (2014). 'Writing / Reading the Subaltern Woman : Narrative Voice and Subaltern Agency in Upamanyu Chatterjee ' s English, 9(3).
- Vanashree (2015). 'Struggling Peasantry in Literary Narratives', Pub., Sahitya Akademi, 59(4), pp., 182–200.