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## SUBALTERN THEORY: DELINEATING VOICES OF THE VICTIMS IN LITERATURE

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### Abstract

Marxism and Poststructuralism paved the way for subaltern studies, which have evolved into a field of postcolonial critique. Subaltern theory is a relatively new subcategory of postcolonial theory. Literature, history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, politics, cultural studies, and other disciplines all investigate diverse views in many periods and settings as part of subaltern studies. The theory of the subaltern is a popular theory in postcolonial literature that stresses how colonial power and imperialism employed ruthless measures to marginalize and silence native peoples. The subaltern theory has proved to be the best mode of expression for victims of discrimination of all sorts. Novels, plays, poems, short tales, and autobiographies penned by authors from all over the globe have presented the subaltern perspective, crediting subaltern theory with its global relevance and appeal.

**Keywords:** Poststructuralism, Subaltern Studies, Voices, Victims, Discrimination

### Introduction

*They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.* (Marx 106)

Literary critics, feminists, art critics, social reformists, political scientists, and political economists all affected the vast literature produced by postcolonial literature. Other worldwide academic fields, such as African American literature, literary theory and criticism, anthropology, and cultural studies, have suffered as a result of postcolonialism's ongoing growth in its new accounts. *Subaltern studies* is a relatively new subcategory of postcolonial theory. The connotation and features connected with the word "subaltern" have dramatically changed as a result of socioeconomic concerns. Due to globalisation in Third World countries, Subaltern Studies, Postcolonial theory, and critique gained prominence in the latter part of the twentieth

century. Subaltern writers fight to guarantee that repressed cultures are recognized for their historical settings, which are often ignored by history. The word "subaltern" is frequently used in postcolonial studies. Subaltern studies arose from Marxism and Poststructuralism and has subsequently expanded into a discipline of postcolonial critique. The present paper is an effort to focus on the subaltern theory as a comprehensive delineation of voices of the victims of all sorts of discrimination.

'Subaltern' is a British word that combines the Latin meanings for "under" (sub) and "other" (alter) to describe someone of lower military rank (Abrams 307). A servant or peasant was referred to as a 'subaltern' in medieval England. Lower-ranking troops or foot soldiers were called subalterns in seventeenth and eighteenth-century England. A person who works in a lower or subordinate position is known as a subaltern. Antonio Gramsci coined the term in his article *Notes on Italian History*, which appeared in *Prison Notebook*. The Subaltern, he explained, is the oppressed underclass in a society where the ruling authority wields hegemony.

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Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines Subaltern as *any officer in the British army who is lower in rank than a captain*'.

The definition of subaltern proposed by Julian Wolfreys and others have extended to some extent in this regard in *Key Concepts in Literary Theory*:

*Term, taken from the work of Antonio Gramsci and used initially to define proletarian and other working-class groups, subaltern is employed in postcolonial studies after Gayatri Spivak to address dominated and marginalized groups. (Wolfreys et al. 80)*

In his essay *Notes on Italian History*, published in *Prison Notebook*, Antonio Gramsci used the word "subaltern." Gramsci's interest in three dimensions was piqued by the subaltern. According to his notes, he was interested in developing a subaltern historiography methodology, a subaltern history, and a political transformation policy based on the subalterns' historical evolution and existence. This three-dimensional technique creates a nexus where several of Gramsci's concepts collide. He considers history, politics, literary criticism, and cultural activities in his study of subaltern history.

The idea of subaltern studies is progressively growing beyond peasant insurrection, colonial studies, postcolonial studies, and gender studies. Critical theory, postcolonialism, Marxism, Deconstruction, Phenomenology, imperialism, poststructuralism, and colonialism are all theoretical views that fall under the umbrella term "subaltern." As part of subaltern studies, literature, history, philosophy, sociology,

anthropology, politics, cultural studies, and other disciplines study various perspectives in different times and situations.

Subaltern is a popular concept in postcolonial literature that stresses how colonial power and imperialism employed ruthless measures to marginalize and silence native peoples. The description and treatment of the natives as "strange" and "inferior" people is governed by Eurocentric ideology in the colonies, and postcolonial studies study and respond to this discourse. Subaltern literature, which is one of the branches of postcolonialism, discusses oppression, marginalisation, subordination of the lower and working classes, gender discrimination, disregarded women, poor classes, racial and caste discrimination, and other concerns and concepts. Antonio Gramsci, Italian Marxist also used the term "hegemony" to characterise a stream of ideas, a social or cultural group, or an ideology's cultural or intellectual supremacy over subalterns. Hegemony is a term used by Gramsci to characterise the cultural or intellectual domination of one school of thought, social or cultural group, or ideology over another. Gramsci connects the notion of hegemony to the concept of social coercive power representations. Gramsci relates the concepts of hegemony and social compulsion expressions. A discussion of the state is used to deliver this message. According to Gramsci, the state is split into two sectors: political society and civil society. The dominant social group maintains hegemony over subordinate or subaltern social groups by the coercive force of its governmental institutions, together with education and the church, while also nonviolent expression of cultural values and beliefs.

### **SUBALTERN STUDIES GROUP**

The movement's earliest and most notable leader was Ranjit Guha, an Indian historian who had written about India's peasant insurgency. *Subaltern Studies: Writings on Indian History and Society* began in 1982 as compilation of essays in response to arguments on how to write modern Indian history. The main goal was to rewrite history in the favour of the underclasses, whose voices had hitherto gone unheard. Aristocratic histories, as well as the Eurocentric tilt of present imperial history, were supposed to be eliminated by subaltern historians. Guha and the 'Subaltern Studies Project' were also greatly influenced by Gramsci's thoughts and writings, which gave rise to the phrases "subaltern" and "elite/subaltern division," allowing Guha to define subordination in a broader sense than only in terms of class. Based on Gramsci's theories, Guha redefined subordination as "expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way." Guha believes that power in India must be understood as "subordination of the subaltern by the elite," as though the names "subaltern" and "elite" are nothing more than euphemisms for him. Guha constructed a separate pair for each phrase in his pair, "domination" and "subordination." Subordination should be viewed as a mixture of "resistance" and "collaboration," while domination should be viewed as a blend of "coercion" and "persuasion."

The main goal was to rewrite history in the favour of the underclasses, whose voices had hitherto gone unheard. Aristocratic histories, as well as the Eurocentric tilt of present imperial history, were supposed to be eliminated by subaltern historians. Ranjit Guha, a lecturer at the University of Sussex at the time, was the inspiration for it. Guha stepped down in 1988. Until Guha quit in 1988, the editorial collective of Subaltern Studies consisted of him and eight younger scholars working in India, the United Kingdom, and Australia. This group includes Shahid Amin, David Arnold, Gautam Bhadra, Dipesh Chakrabarty, David Hardiman, Gyan Pandey, Touraj Atabaki, Shahid Amin, Partha Chatterjee, Sumit Sarkar, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Susie Tharu, among many more South Asian historians, social critics, and intellectuals.

### **Edward Said**

Edward Said showed a significant interest in the Western Marxist philosophical background throughout his working life. During Said's lifetime, Gramsci was a leading Marxist philosopher who developed his own theoretical framework and subjective politics. Said is heavily influenced by Gramsci's hegemony theory, the concept of civil and political society, and intellectual ideals. The typical Marxist theory emphasises the use of force and violence as the foundation of ruling-class power, but Gramsci's idea of hegemony emphasises the intellectual control mechanisms prevalent in all oppressive organisations. For this aim, he distinguishes between "domination" and "hegemony," the former referring to repressive institutions' direct coercive force and the latter, he contends, to the intellectual fabrication of consent. From this pivotal ideological moment, Said emphasises the revolutionary mission of building non-coercive forms of knowledge in order to criticise dominant systems.

Gramsci's theory of hegemony, according to Said, assists in confronting the Orientalist logic of this production. In *Prison Notebooks*, he argued that the set of ideological signs that sustain the dominant classes' authority is more than a continuation of their military and economic power; rather, these signs are 'organisational and connective' forms that aided the bourgeois state apparatus' strategic victories and allowed it to continue negotiating a consensual authority over the masses. Hegemonic authority's ideological agreements, according to Gramsci, are more than merely reflections of economic power; they precede, transcend, and enhance its activities in a manner that is inextricably linked to its global-colonialist growth. To emphasise the need for intellectuals to react violently to authoritarian behaviour and be conscious of hegemony's coercive assumptions, Said relies on Gramsci. Said, in *Introduction of Orientalism*, writes:

*The construction of identity—for identity, whether of Orient or Occident, France or Britain, while a repository of distinct collective experiences, is finally construction in my opinion—involves the construction of opposites and "others" whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from "us." (Said 356)*

Said's critical practice transforms literary criticism into a contradictorily self-imposed and willfully chosen intellectual field of work, a laborious and unresolved way of life, a troublemaking technique that seeks out the complexity and apparent inconsistencies of human reality in order to subvert, complicate, or disturb everything taken for granted, while emphasising that so-called "truths" are nothing more than conventionally agreed-upon meaning. Criticism, according to Said, is the primary task toward human freedom. Because of its ideological opposition to tyranny, domination, and passivity, it increases awareness of the dispassionate workings of coercive mental systems. Its mission is to assist the oppressed, subaltern, and wretched of the earth in reconnecting with their experiences and exercising their will, allowing them to define their own identities.

### **Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak**

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is an eminent Indian literary critic and political thinker. Spivak fits within the post-humanist theory's larger framework. Spivak is most known for examining how we read and think about colonial literature and culture using contemporary cultural and critical ideas. Spivak has long championed the voices and texts of those who have been marginalised by Western society, while also challenging many current viewpoints. Marxism, feminism, deconstruction, postcolonial theory, and cutting-edge globalisation research are all discussed in Spivak's critical views.

Spivak refers to women, black people, colonised people, and the working class as "subaltern." Subalternity has become a metaphor for the displacement of the gendered and colonial, i.e. subaltern subject, and the imposition of internationalist and nationalist ideas, as well as a symbol for white Western thinking's repressive dominance. Spivak is very worried about the devastation done to the East by Western habits of thought. She considers the third world to be a Western creation that links non-Western cultures to imperial expression. She calls "worlding" the process by which "colonised space" is "introduced into the work to live as part of a world largely constituted by Eurocentrism."

Spivak is a well-known contemporary feminist deconstructionist who is interested in gender and racial issues. Her use of the term "subaltern" was influenced by Italian academic Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci frequently alluded to a submissive position in aspects of class, gender, race, and culture. Spivak's article *Can the Subaltern Speak?* focuses on how the 'subaltern' woman is portrayed as detached, dumb, or unheard. Her work is mostly concerned with women's "muteness" in postcolonial settings. Her main argument is that the female figure dissolves into a marginal position between tradition and modernization, patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object creation, rather than into pure nothingness.

## Voices

Voice is defined by Baldick in Oxford *Dictionary of Literary Terms*:

*The voice of a literary work is then the specific group of characteristics displayed by the narrator or poetic 'speaker' (or, in some uses, the actual author behind them), assessed in terms of tone, style, or personality. Distinctions between various kinds of narrative voice tend to be distinctions between kinds of narrator in terms of how they address the reader (rather than in terms of their perception of events, as in the distinct concept of point of view). Likewise in non-narrative poems, distinctions can be made between the personal voice of a private lyric and the assumed voice (the persona) of a dramatic monologue. (Baldick 428)*

The subaltern characters raise their voices to protest, confront, and stand on the outside of society, advocating for victims' rights, equality, justice, and identity. The voices can be in the form of speech or action. These forms may seem vulgar or violent, but their intentions are sincere and serious.

### Literary Representation of Subaltern Voices

Subaltern theory aids in voicing the social, cultural, religious, and political marginalization, oppression, and exploitation of the downtrodden and exploited. Novels, plays, poems, short tales, and autobiographies penned by authors from all over the globe have presented the subaltern perspective, crediting subaltern theory with global relevance and appeal.

Novels like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin or, Life among the Lowly* (1852), Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* (1899), E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966), Ahmadou Kouroum's *The Suns of Independence* (1968), Isabella Allende's *The House of the Spirits* (1982), J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) and *Disgrace* (1999), J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992), Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* (1894), Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* (1936), Mulk Raj Anand's *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), Manohar Malgonkar's *Combat of Shadows* (1962), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), Bama Faustina Soosairaj's *Karukku* (1992) (translated in English by Lakshmi Holmstrom) and *Sangati* (1994) [translated in English by Lakshmi Holmstrom's *Sangati (Events)* (2005)], Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan : A Dalit's Life* (Translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee 2003), Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Perumal Murugan's *Seasons of the Palm (Koolla Madari, 2004)*, Vikas Swarup's *Q & A* (2005), *Six Suspects* (2008) and *The Accidental Apprentice* (2013), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), Tarun J. Tejpal's *The Story of My Assassins* (2009), Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* (2012), Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India* (2017).

Dramas like Barclays Ayakoroma's *Dance on His Grave* (2002), Irene Salami's *Sweet Revenge* (2004), Ahmed Yerima's *Hard Ground* (2006), Vijay Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder* (1972), Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (2013).

Short stories like Mahasweta Devi's *Dhowli* (1990), Rudali (1993), *Standayini (The Breastgiver)* (1997), Premchand's *The Co-wife and Other Stories* (Translated by Ruth Vanita 2008): *On A Winter's Night, Two Graves, The Farce of Brahm, Newly Weds, The Price of Milk, The Shroud*.

Poems like *A Subaltern* by Siegfried Sassoon (1916), *I, Too* by Langston Hughes (1926), *Ballad of Birmingham* by Dudley Randall (1965), *Riot* by Gwendolyn Brooks (1969), *The Subalterns* by Thomas Hardy (1976), *Caged Bird* by Maya Angelou (1983), *Afterimages* by Audre Lorde (1997), *Rosa* by Rita Dove (1999), *Immigrant Blues* by Li-Young Lee (2009), *The Tradition* by Jericho Brown (2019), *Slave* by Hira Bansode (translated by S. K. Thorat and Eleanor Zelliott, 1992), *Empty Advice* by Prahlad Chendwankar (translated by Jayshree Godhale Turner), *The Life We Live* by Arun Kamble (translated by Gauri Deshpande), *Poisoned Bread Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* Edited by Arjun Dangle (1992).

The issues of subalternity are found in every work expressing a subaltern perspective and are depicted in diverse and unique ways, mirroring the contemporary circumstances of that moment in all forms of literature listed above.

## Conclusion

Poverty, caste, class, race, colour, faith, religious and cultural superiority, gender, and government positions are all among the factors of diversity that cause discrimination. Discrimination like this has been practiced all throughout the world. In all communities, the human predisposition for superiority and inferiority is present in human behaviour and psychology. Discrimination against the inferior or subaltern is a result of this propensity, which might lead to violence. Discrimination and violence towards subalterns have become major challenges in the world. Literature has always been an impressive tool to voice human feelings and emotions, both happiness and suffering. The subaltern theory speaks about the voices of the victims of discrimination as the subalterns of all forms of marginalization, degradation, and subversion of gender, class, caste, religion, indignity, disgrace, restriction, hostility, untouchability, poor peasants, labourers, widows, outcast female characters, particularly religious hypocrisy, poverty, a corrupted system, fear, power, greed, sexual domination, politics, child abuse, abandonment, epiphany, spirituality, a battle between male dominance, unemployment, religious riots, opposition to love marriages, child labour, colour discrimination, gender discrimination, racism, financial discrimination, feminine resistance etc. The Subaltern theory is not limited or restricted to any caste, class, gender, race, colour, creed, or any country. It voices the sufferings of the victims of discrimination from all over the world.

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