



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

EVOLUTION OF SUBALTERN VOICES IN INDIAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Literature serves as a pivotal nexus of various socio-economic factors. It possesses the capacity for resistance and revolutionary functions. Additionally, literature is shaped by subaltern histories rooted in the school of history. In contemporary Indian literature, subalternity emerges as a predominant concept, with literary writers directing their focus towards marginalized voices in society. Indian authors have reimaged both fictional and non-fictional narratives to give voice to the silenced perspectives of subalterns. Conversely, during colonial India, disciplines such as history, social science, literature, and politics witnessed a surge of creativity through the exploration of 'the village and the individual' not merely as remnants of an ancient civilization but as nascent forms potentially alternative to capitalism. Many narratives in Hindi and regional languages portray perspectives on village life and society during both colonial and post-colonial periods. This paper examines the works of two eminent writers, Premchand from Hindi literature and Mahasweta Devi from Bengali literature, while also surveying Dalit literature from a subaltern perspective. These writers illuminate the enduring societal challenges from below, illustrating contrasting rural and urban landscapes. Whereas history typically chronicles events from above, literature often documents history from the vantage point of those at the grassroots. This study aims to explore the early roots of literature focusing on subaltern themes before the formal advent of subaltern studies as a methodological framework in India.

Key Words: Literature, Marginalized, Dalit, Societal Challenges, Civilization, Narratives, Translations.

INTRODUCTION:

Literature acts as a crossroads for various socio-economic factors, wielding the power to resist and incite revolutionary change. It is also influenced by subaltern histories rooted in academic frameworks. In contemporary Indian literature, subalternity has emerged as a dominant theme, with writers focusing on marginalized voices. Indian authors have rewritten both fictional and non-fictional narratives to give voice to subaltern perspectives. In contrast, during colonial India, disciplines like history, social science, literature, and politics witnessed a surge of creativity, emphasizing 'the discovery of the village and the individual' as potential alternatives to capitalism, rather than mere remnants of an older civilization. Many narratives in Hindi and regional languages depict village life and society during colonial and post-colonial eras.

SUBALTERN VOICES:

This paper focuses on two prominent writers: Premchand in Hindi literature and Mahasweta Devi in Bengali literature, alongside an exploration of Dalit literature from a subaltern viewpoint. These authors shed light on societal challenges from marginalized perspectives, highlighting distinct rural and urban experiences. While history often records events from above, literature frequently captures history from the grassroots level.

The term 'Subaltern,' coined by Antonio Gramsci, refers to societal groups marginalized under the dominance of ruling elites, including peasants, tribes, women, and others denied hegemonic power. Subaltern studies aim to amplify these voices, offering an alternative history written from below, challenging elitist perspectives. In literature, the roots of subalternity can be traced, with authors like Premchand prominently featuring subaltern subjects such as peasants, women, and Dalits. Premchand's work, like his notable novel 'Godan,' vividly portrays anti-colonial peasant struggles and rural life under landlords, showcasing his deep historical insight and literary prowess. His writings, including 'Nirmala,' delve into overlooked aspects of women's lives, addressing entrenched societal patriarchy. Premchand's literary contributions resonate significantly within India's colonial context, where issues of subalternity were often sidelined by mainstream scholars.

Mahasweta Devi, a prolific Bengali writer, left a profound legacy with over 100 novels and numerous short stories, including works like "Breast Givers," "Dhowli," "Draupadi," and "Rudali." Her writing explores themes of dispossession, rebellion, insurgencies, and student movements in Calcutta, often incorporating 'tribal' dialects. Mahasweta Devi courageously challenges hegemonic socio-political ideologies to amplify the voices of the subalterns she writes about. In the realm of subaltern literature, a significant milestone was marked by Gayatri Spivak Chakravorty's English translation of "Imaginary Maps," solidifying her influence as a leading post-colonial writer. Mahasweta Devi's narratives powerfully depict social realities, caste issues, and the struggles of Adivasi communities, offering profound insights into the complex challenges faced by marginalized sections of society globally.

Dalit literature, within the broader discourse of subaltern studies, has emerged as a critical voice challenging established literary norms, particularly within Hindi literature. It documents the harsh social realities experienced by Dalits and establishes an alternative literary tradition. Historically marginalized as 'uncivilized' and deemed impure and inferior, Dalit literature, according to Soumya Nair, serves as grievance literature that constructs and asserts the social identity of the oppressed. The assertion of cultural and political identities through Dalit literature is integral to their ongoing struggle for recognition. Scholars like Kancha Ilaiah have criticized mainstream historiography for neglecting the perspectives of Dalits and Bahujans in the writing of Indian history and literature. This critique extends to mainstream literature, which many Dalit writers argue perpetuates the hierarchical status quo of upper caste hegemony. They contend that traditional literary traditions in India have historically marginalized Dalits as subjects of history and literature, reflecting broader societal inequalities.

The enduring significance of Premchand's writings transcends their reflection of harsh social realities and critique of semi-feudal India. His novels attain revolutionary status in colonial Indian society by infusing literary representation with a critical-realist edge, establishing him as a pioneering fiction writer who boldly narrated social critiques and protests. Premchand's extensive critique of the colonial and feudal systems through his writings solidifies his position as a prominent voice of the subalterns in Indian literature and cultural history. While his earlier works often depicted patriotism and the anti-colonial struggles of the masses, a significant evolution in his writing emerges with a profound embrace of Marxist ideology, particularly evident in works like "Godaan," which epitomizes his exploration of class struggle and societal transformation.

In "Godaan," Premchand unveils a narrative shaped by a liberated sensibility, moving beyond the constraints of early Gandhian perspectives. The central character, Hori, a impoverished peasant, embodies a stark contrast between strong optimism within the illusionary semi-feudal system and the utter hopelessness it imposes. According to Joshi (2005), Hori's plight serves to expose the system's limitations and the ineffectiveness of reformist efforts aimed at alleviating peasant suffering.

Premchand's portrayal in "Godaan" remains ideologically uncompromising, aiming to resonate with subaltern masses rather than offering solutions through the benevolence of elite classes. His focus lies in enlightening and awakening peasant consciousness to a higher level, often identifying internal enemies within society such as absentee landlords, traders, and village councils ('Gram Panchayat'). Within the narrative, Premchand highlights the peasant's fatalism, false consciousness, and the compromises made to coexist with oppressors.

Throughout his works, Premchand captures the despair and resentment of Indian peasants crushed by colonial exploitation, highlighting both the systemic oppression and the human agents perpetrating it. His literary narratives extend beyond the peasantry to critique the caste system profoundly. Short stories like “Thakur ka Kuaan,” “Shudra,” and “Kusum” further explore various dimensions of subaltern experiences, offering poignant reflections on societal injustices and struggles.

Mahasweta Devi’s literary oeuvre is deeply rooted in addressing the struggles of marginalized communities, particularly focusing on the exploitation of Adivasis by wealthy landowners and the complicity of urban structures with colonial legacies. Her works critically depict bonded labor, prostitution, sexual violence against women, mistreatment of widows, and the plight of ill-treated wives. In independent India, which professes inclusivity and progressivism towards women, Mahasweta Devi’s writings serve as a stark rejection of superficial progressivism and entrenched patriarchy within society.

In her renowned novel “Ek Hazaar Chaurasi Ki Maa” (translated as “Mother of 1084” by Samik Bandyopadhyay), Mahasweta Devi intervenes deeply into patriarchal norms. The character of Sujata, relegated to neglect and marginalization within a patriarchal framework that objectifies and suppresses women, embodies this critique. The novel also highlights how the Naxalite Movement bridges class barriers, uniting two subaltern mothers despite societal divides.

Mahasweta Devi’s writing boldly exposes the hidden corners of patriarchy, both within and outside the family structure. Unlike traditional portrayals in literature where women are often depicted as subservient and voiceless, her characters assert their independence and agency. Her exploration of Adivasi communities is particularly significant within the context of subaltern literature, where she rejects the colonial term ‘tribal’ and emphasizes a fearless engagement with marginalized groups.

In Bangla literature, Mahasweta Devi stands out for breaking away from the traditional Bhadrakal tradition, which often depicted master-slave relationships. Her narratives vividly capture the people’s histories and lived experiences, prompting Gayatri Spivak Chakravorty to note that Devi’s writings effectively ‘tell history’ through their powerful portrayal of societal injustices and struggles.

In the discourse of subaltern literature, Dalit literature represents writings that authentically capture the experiences of Dalits from their own perspectives. It serves as a voice for various marginalized castes and communities across India. Subaltern studies have increasingly emphasized the significance of caste narratives, particularly focusing on Dalit issues, which have become prominently assertive in contemporary literature.

Dalit literature has carved out its own distinct space within literary circles. As noted by Omprakash Valmiki, Dalit consciousness draws its primary inspiration from the life and vision of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. This shared foundation unites Dalit writers in their commitment to portraying the realities and struggles faced by Dalits in Indian society.

In the discourse of subaltern studies, recognition is crucial for marginalized groups like Dalits, whose voices have historically been silenced. Post-independent India’s elitist literary discourse often centered around narratives of mainstream classes such as landlords and the petty bourgeoisie. However, contemporary Indian literature has seen a transformative shift with the emergence of Dalit writing, championed by prominent authors like Namdeo Dhasal, Omprakash Valmiki, Tulsi Ram, and others.

Dalit literature has significantly reframed literary narratives by shedding light on issues related to slums, ghettos, and spaces marginalized as untouchable. Namdeo Dhasal, a key figure in the Dalit Panthers movement, uses protest poetry to amplify the voices of the subalterns, employing a language that reflects the raw realities of their lived experiences, including those of the Red light area. Dhasal’s own background as a member of the Dalit community deeply informs his literary expressions, which resonate powerfully on behalf of the subalterns he represents.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, subaltern literature stands as a profound testament to the resilience and voices of marginalized communities that have long been silenced or overlooked in mainstream discourse. Throughout history, writers like Premchand, Mahasweta Devi, and Dalit authors have used their narratives to critique and challenge the entrenched powers of feudalism, nationalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. Their works not only illuminate the harsh realities faced by subaltern groups such as Dalits, women, and other marginalized segments of society but also serve as a powerful medium of resistance and empowerment.

The evolution of subaltern literature reflects a shift towards giving agency to those historically portrayed as invisible or voiceless. Ranajit Guha's exploration of narrative voices in subaltern studies, alongside contemporary authors like Arundhati Roy and Anjali Deshpande, demonstrates how literature continues to be a vital tool for highlighting issues of caste discrimination, social injustice, and human suffering.

As we navigate the complexities of modern society, the question of whether "Can Subaltern Speak?" remains pertinent, urging us to listen attentively to these narratives that offer not only a critique of existing power structures but also insights into the lived experiences and aspirations of subaltern masses. Subaltern literature thus remains a crucial heritage, providing a source of inspiration and a framework for understanding and addressing the ongoing struggles for equality and justice.

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