

Voicing the Voiceless: Subaltern in Indian Literature

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“You don’t know nothing, Mary, the air comes from the north now, and it’s full of dying. This independence is for the rich only; the poor are being made to kill each other like flies. In Punjab, in Bengal. Riots riots, poor against poor. It’s in the wind.” (Rushdie 116).

ABSTARCT:

This paper focus on and would try to locate the writers from Indian Literature, who have dealt with the characters from the marginalized or downtrodden section. It also try to find out and foushow these writers have been successful in depicting marginalized characters and their plight in literature. It traces the writers of Indian Literature from 1920 onwards and mainly focus on how subaltern can speak in literature. It is also questioned whether the voice of subaltern is echoed in Indian novels is original, authentic and sincere.

Keywords: Subaltern, Voice, Marginalized, postcolonial literature

Introduction:

Indian Literature has produced rich literature since the antiquity. It has its own rich heritage of culture and literature. It got mixed up with the alien traits since the establishment of British colonies here in Indian subcontinent. As Meenakshi Mukherjee aptly writes in ‘Epic and Novel in India’, “it is only very recently, in the last couple of decades to be exact, that critics have begun to address themselves to the complex question of plural heritage, the multiplicity of determinants-both indigenous and derived from other cultures- that overlapped, interacted, and fused to make the shaping of this literary form a tangled and unique process in India” (Moretti 598). Indian writers got influenced by western narratives and writers but the Indian ethos remained intact. As Raja Rao says in his famous ‘Forward’ to *Kanthapura* “The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own” (Rao v) and “We have to look at the large world as part of us. The tempo of Indian life must be infused into our English expression. We, in India, think quickly, we talk quickly, and when we move we move quickly” (Rao v). Writers in India in 1920-30’s have started written in English language in shades and omissions of their own culture.

Discussion:

Postcolonialism discards the European narratives of the western colonization and strikes back on the face of world history. They replaced the European narratives with narratives written in their own voices and through their own cultural ethnic perspective. Postcolonialism draws upon ethnic identity, otherness, race, and language during and after the colonial periods. It unravels the composite and complex relations between imperial center and colonial periphery. Indian writers too has verity of subjects from the society, to deal with, one of the most dominant subject these writers have focused on is the ‘marginalized’ or subaltern sections. Subaltern is an excluded group in the society, they have been denied to raise any voice against the power structures. It refers to any weak and inferior group whether because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and religion. In India writers in the 1930s have been influenced by Marxist thought, and the ideology is reflected directly and indirectly in the narratives of the times. It was the Marxist philosopher and theorist, Antonio Gramsci, who adopted the term ‘subaltern’ to refer to the working class people that is, proletariat class, who are subject to the hegemony power of the dominant ruling classes. Gramsci used the term Subaltern to underline an inferior or subordinate place in terms of class, caste, gender and culture.

Indian novels based on the stories of the untouchable attracted international community and also bagged awards and international reputation for these novelists. Following is the list of novels where the readers can found this subaltern class portrayed. *Untouchable* (1935) by Mulk Raj Anand, *The Children of God* by Shanta Rameshwar Rao, *God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, *Outcast-Life and Triumph of an Untouchable Family in India* by Dr. NarenderaJadhav, *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh, *Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry.

Untouchable (1935) by Mulk Raj Anand exposed the hypocrisy and arrogance of the upper caste Hindus. The novel peeps into the life of an outcaste, Bakha who represents the gloom and inhuman treatment of the marginalized and the have-nots during pre-independent times when India was experiencing through move from tradition to modernity. Bakha, in the novel seems to be enslaved by both the external and internal forces, and could not get rid of the suppression and injustice meted out at the hands of Caste Hindus. Bakha along with his counterpart Munoo in *Coolie* (1936) are oppressed and remained aloof at periphery. E.M. Forster in his Preface brings out the wretched and pitiable predicament of the untouchables, "The sweeper is worse off than a slave for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound forever, born into a state from which he can't escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolation of his religion. Unclean himself he pollutes other when he touches them..." (Anand 10). Gandhi and Iqbal's influence on Bakha is thread bearing, he became bewitched on seeing him, "The babble of voices died out, as if he had sent an electric shock through the mass of humanity gathered at his feet. This strange man seemed to have genius that cloud, by a single dramatic act, rally multi-colored, multi-tongued India to himself." (Anand 160-161). As E.M. Forster opines in his foreword, 'a change is at hand'. Bakha received optimism, the narrative concludes with the prospect and possibility of better future for him. Positively Hutchinson, Gandhi and Iqbal have given comfort and relief for Bakha.

Rohinton Mistry is among the famous writers of India, his works have won international acclaim. His writings are based on a social purpose, a prominent writer of the post-colonial era. His novels deal with the theme of exploitation, he deals with the plight of untouchables, one such example is novel *A Fine Balance* (1995). Since the time of immemorial untouchability has been social in India, and the writers have portrayed them well in the Indian narratives, even the women who have been continuously marginalized have been placed in these narratives. Rohinton Mistry made an attempt to depict the malice and oppression experienced by these muted untouchables in this novel *A Fine Balance*. The novel depicts class and caste inequalities of Indian society which also reflects a visual representation of those who undergo its discriminations. 'Chamars' or 'Mochis' reflects the merciless spite of the caste-system, the oppressions are carried out on the lower-castes by the upper caste Jamindars and Thakurs. This mercilessness has forced Dukhi, a Mochi, and the grandfather of Omprakash and father of Ishvar from their traditional occupation of working with leather to other occupation. They shifted to metropolis. They struggled to get the shelter to live, their psychological turmoil is being depicted in the novel. They often desire to go back to their village after earning some money. They are being caught in the dilemma therefore are in search of identity.

Rohinton Mistry illustrates 'Chamirs' who are born into a leather-making *chamir* family, considered lower castes in the Indian society. The elites or upper castes treat them inhumanly in a distressing manner. The brutality is being illustrated in the following lines

"For walking on the upper-caste side of the street, Sita was stoned, though not to death- the stones had ceased at first blood. Gambir was less fortunate; he had molten lead poured into his ears because he ventured within hearing range of the temple while prayers were in progress. Dayaram, reneging on an agreement to plough a landlord's field, had been forced to eat the landlord's excrement in the village square. Dhiraj tried to negotiate in advance with Pandit Ghanshyam "the wages for chopping wood, instead of settling for the few sticks he could expect at the end of the day; the Pandit got upset, accused Dhiraj of poisoning his cows, and had him hanged" (Mistry 7).

A Fine Balance gives an agonising account of man's barbaric viciousness to man and also the unthinkable deprivation and disparities experienced by the subjugated and marginalized in India.

The God of Small Things proposes the progression of social control through protests and anxieties. Subsequently there occurs 'a conflict between freedom and security'. The main character Ammu is exposed to trials and misfortunes because of being in love with Velutha, a low caste and downtrodden servant. This demonstrates the gendered conservative responsiveness of the upper caste sectarian society. Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* triggers resistance against extremist Hindus collectively and portrays discrimination and suffering of minority, marginalised groups. The novel recollects "Marxist theory of history in which colonialism, the endemic violence and the exploitation of the proletariat condition an inherited relation of the dominant class to the dominated class" (Robert, 415).

Amitav Ghosh, one of the eminent writers on India, also has given space to the subaltern, minority and marginalised class in his novels, he has written important and well-known novels like, *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and *River of Smoke* (2011). The novel *The Hungry Tide* is set in 1979 and summarises the events at Morichjhapi, it also portrays the subaltern consciousness that Nimal finds. Amitav Ghosh has articulated his concern for the oppressed people of Indian society in many of his novels. Alienation, migration,

and several other external crisis are is themes in his narratives. "Can Subaltern Speak?" line by GayatriSpivakis apt here, implies that silence is the critical factor of subaltern identity. Spivak debates that subaltern people do not have opinion and voice in the community dominated by power structures, but Amitav Ghosh claims that the subaltern people would speak and create a place for voice if they have chance and opportunity. In *The Hungry Tide* Fokir, Kusum, the dalit refugees, settled in Sunarbans, Westbelnga, are given place as the subaltern.

The writer attempts to bring out the suppressed voice of the refugees of Morichjhapi. Through this narrative the writer shows social, political, economic and cultural issues of subaltern people. These marginalized class are vulnerable of the nature's fury, like Tiger killed Kusum's father, Fokir's vulnerability towards state officials depicts the subaltern and marginalized people that is abandoned section of people of Sundarbans. There are other writers in regional languages of India who writes about marginalized section of Indian society. They have been translated into other languages like, Om Prakash Valmiki, Munshi Premchand, Baburao Bagul and Mahasweta Devi.

Conclusion:

The interesting fact is subaltern class in the Indian English fiction are reproduced not by the writers belongs to downtrodden, but by the writers from the elite class. E. M. Forster writes in the preface to *Untouchable*, "And no untouchable could have written the book, because he would have been involved in indignation and self-pity" (Maheshwari 138). The voice of the downtrodden, their struggle and sacrifices were unobserved in the chronicles of the history began its place and voice Indian English Literature in diverse ways. Literature portrayed real image of subaltern and their challenges and survival thus literature became voice for the voiceless people who have been subjugated in different spheres of life.

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