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**Situating the Subaltern as Protagonist: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance***

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**Abstract:**

Since its adoption as an analytical category by the discipline of Literary Theory, the idea of the subaltern has proved to be a very powerful tool to explore the institutional disenfranchisement of the non-elite segments of society. This paper proposes to study the rise of Subaltern Studies in India as a concerted attempt to reinscribe the underprivileged, underrepresented, and socially and culturally discriminated sections of society into the dominant narrative. It takes up for elaborative purposes, two contemporary Indian English novels, *The God of Small Things* and *A Fine Balance*, and shows how the subaltern paradigm has been successfully employed to showcase the plight of the subaltern.

**Key Words:** Hegemony, Postcolonialism, Marxism, Ideology, Representation, Historiography, Agency, Resistance.

Over the period of past four decades, "Subaltern Studies" has positioned itself as one of the major trajectories of postcolonial studies. The subaltern studies emerged as a result of the intersection of Postcolonial and Marxist studies. Postcolonial theory retrospectively examined the processes and strategies of colonisation and marginalisation of the colonised. It began with a critical appraisal of the mechanism of racial discrimination and subjugation, while on the other hand, Marxism theorised 'ideology', 'false consciousness', and 'ideological state apparatuses' as tools to exploit the working classes. On one level, the whole discourse of the post-colonial theory may be considered as speaking for the voiceless and the politically marginalised groups by their intellectual representatives.

The notion of the subaltern was first referred to by the Italian Marxist political activist and theorist Antonio Gramsci in his article "Notes on Italian History", which was later published as part of his book *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci was an Italian intellectual and head of the Italian Communist Party from 1925 to 1927, when he was imprisoned by the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini, and eventually died in prison in 1937. The first section of the eighteen-page essay is titled 'History of the Subaltern Classes: Methodological Criteria', where he first elaborates the idea of the subaltern.

In Gramsci's works the subaltern refers fundamentally to any "low rank" person or group of people in a particular society suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class which denies them the basic rights of participation,

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in the making of history and culture as active agents. At the time when Gramsci used the term, he had in mind the interest of the “workers and peasants” who were oppressed and discriminated against by the National Fascist Party. The officially sanctioned historical narrative is the narrative of the dominant class and it effectively silences, gags, and erases the narrative of the subaltern classes. These narratives are marginalised and exiled from mainstream history. Gramsci suggested a six-step methodology to properly study the history of the subalterns.

First, the objective formation of the subaltern social groups, by the developments and transformations occurring in the sphere of economic production; Second, their active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formations, and their attempts to influence the programmes of these formations in order to press claims of their own; Third, the birth of new parties of the dominant groups, intended to conserve the assent of the subaltern groups and to maintain control over them; Fourth, the formations which the subaltern groups themselves produce, in order to press claims of a limited and partial character; Fifth, those new formations which assert the autonomy of the subaltern groups, but within the old framework; and Sixth, those formations which assert the integral and total autonomy. (Gramsci 202-3)

Gramsci brings in the question of the under-representation of the subaltern groups, and their lack of accessibility to the institutional sites and locations through which they may ensure visibility and presence. The first decisive step in this direction, according to Gramsci is the liberation of the subordinated consciousness of non-elite groups from the cultural hegemony exercised by the ruling class.

The basic premise of the theory of hegemony that Gramsci propounded was that men are not ruled by force alone, but also by ideas; and in most of the cases these two—force and ideas—operate in connivance. As he put it: “The founding of a ruling class is equivalent to the creation of a *Weltanschauung*(world-view).” According to Gramsci, hegemony or “predominance by consent”, is a condition in which a class exercises a political, intellectual, and moral leadership within a hegemonic system cemented by a common world-view. This common world-view or consent or solidarity is achieved through the mediation of what Gramsci designates as the class of “organic intellectuals”. The rise of the subaltern to self-awareness, for Gramsci, could only be achieved by the subversion of the structure of hegemony.

Gramsci’s foundational idea of the subaltern, deeply influenced a group of Indian academics and intellectuals who under the notional leadership of Ranajit Guha, founded the “Subaltern Studies Group or Collective” in the 1980s. The work done by this group came to be christened as “Subaltern Historiography” because it basically focused on the rewriting history-from-below, which means a historiography from the perspective of the subaltern, in which the subaltern is inducted and his role and agency is recognised. It means proper space and representation for the subaltern as a class. The masses were for the first time enlisted as the proper subject of history and their momentous role in the making of social and political history was formally recognised and recorded.

This group included Gyan Pandey, Dipesh Chakravarty, Partha Chatterjee, Gautam Bhadra, Shahid Amin and Sumit Sarkar among others. The first volume of

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*Subaltern Studies*, was edited by Ranajit Guha and published in the year 1982. Guha edited the first six volumes, while later volumes were edited by other members of the collective. The 12<sup>th</sup> volume published in 2005 is titled: *Muslims, Dalits, and the Fabrications of History*.

In the first chapter of the first volume of the project entitled “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India”, Ranajit Guha outlined the aims and programmes of the group. This is considered as the manifesto of the ‘collective’. In the “Preface” to the volume, Guha defines the Subaltern as “the general attribute of subordination in South-Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (Guha 1982, 1-8). The subaltern for him is that clearly defined entity which constitutes “the demographic difference between the total population and all those whom we have described as the elite” (Guha 1993, 124). Thus, we see that one of the seminal concerns of the subaltern group was to interrogate the elitist presumptions and the elitist representation of history. This concern originated from the assumption that the writing of Indian national history had been controlled by colonial elitism as well as by the nationalist-bourgeois elitism, which were both produced by British colonialism in different historical periods. This kind of historiography, obviously, could not possibly transmit, analyse or acknowledge the kind of changes or contributions brought by common people. Subaltern studies aim to uncover the histories of groups which are consigned to the margins within the colonial and nationalist archives, and remained totally undocumented and underrepresented. In this wider project the subaltern are viewed as the “subject” of history rather than its “object”.

The notion of “political mobilisation” is central to the understanding of the objectives of the Subaltern Group. They believed that there was a fundamental difference in the nature of political mobilisation between the elite and the subaltern. The elite political mobilisation is fulfilled through appropriation of or adjustment to the British parliamentary institutions and laws. On the other hand the subaltern political mobilisation is founded on classical forms of social organisation such as: blood relationship and kinship, territoriality, traditional and tribal affiliations where group mobilisation takes the form of peasant insurgencies and regional demonstrations. No matter how heterogeneous the subaltern class may be, there is a unique constant that defines them: the notion of resistance to the imposed domination of the elite class.

The intervention of the Indian-American postcolonial feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in the subaltern debate pushed it into the complex theoretical terrain, and it remained one of the most contentious issues in the postcolonial lexicon for almost three decades. Here we should underscore the fact that Spivak was the English translator of all major texts of Jacques Derrida, and has deep connection with post-structuralism and deconstruction. She injected typical strategies of deconstructive reading into the evaluation of postcolonial, feminist, and Marxist texts. Her trailblazing essay “Can the Subaltern Speak” (1988) brought in the complex issue of subalternity as an essentialist notion, and contended that the actual

voice and agency of the subaltern is discursively essentialized by the subaltern studies group.

Spivak underlined and elaborated how the subaltern project co-opted and mediated the true voice of the subaltern according to their own ideological compulsions, and work as proxy for the subaltern. She further pointed out that the real nuances of the voice of the subaltern were lost in the theoretical contexts in which they were placed and represented. This leads to a vitiated presentation of the subaltern voice. The elite voice once again colonises the voice of the subaltern and refashions it according to its priorities. As the famous American feminist critic bell hooks, observes about the twisted dynamics of subaltern studies:

There is no need to hear your native voice, when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your own voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the centre of my talk (hooks 142).

A major problem to which Spivak points out, is the intellectually unsustainable issue of the “permanent subalternity” as an essential, homogenising attribute. She reconsiders and recasts the problem of subalternity within new historical developments of division of labour in a globalised world and in the context of capitalistic politics. She adopts the notion of “situational subalternity” and explains it with reference to her work on Indian women during colonial times. She studied Indian women as a special case of subalternity and made significant contribution to our understanding of ‘Sati’ as an institution, where the voices of the women were silenced or co-opted. Spivak argues that the ‘Sati’ women as a subaltern group were lost between two polarities: the British humanist discourse calling for the individual choice and freedom of the sati women on the one hand; and on the other the Hindu native policy calling for voluntary participation in the ritual. The conflict between these two seemingly identical positions produced a discourse with no possible solution.

On the one hand was the progressive, rational, civilisational idea that “the white man is saving the brown woman from brown man”, and on the other hand, the idea that “the women actually wanted to die” (Spivak 279). The third world woman caught between the competing discourses of modernity and tradition loses her voice and agency. While the two antagonistic discourses tried to give a voice to the Hindu woman, her own voice was suppressed. It appropriated the voice of the Sati and deprived her of her agency and conscious, autonomous subjectivity. After a detailed discussion of many such cases in different situations and contexts, Spivak concludes that the “subaltern cannot speak.” Spivak speaks for the subaltern as female and theorises that female stands in a position of double jeopardy.

Having etched the theoretical trajectory of Subaltern studies, I take up two representative texts from Indian English writing to demonstrate and elucidate the manifestation of subalternity in real-life situations. I have chosen two texts for this

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purpose: *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, and *A Fine Balance* (1995) by Rohinton Mistry.

The contemporary postcolonial Indian English novel has been in the vanguard of subaltern literary studies, and its best achievements have been in the study of the deprived sections of society. The three Booker prizes that have come to India in recent times, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* are all concerned with the plight of the subaltern. Apart from these, the works of Amitav Ghosh like the Ibis Trilogy, *The Glass Palace*, and *The Hungry Tide* are all subaltern narratives.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* takes up the issue of untouchability and its devastating impact on the destiny of common people. Other important subaltern class depicted in this novel is the female. Gender discrimination and patriarchal oppression is a major theme in this novel. Ammu, Velutha, Rahel and Estha are the spokespersons of Roy, through whom she dissects the ugly realities of entrenched patriarchy and caste system in Kerala. The victimisation and denial of rewards and equal opportunities to the members of castes lower in the social hierarchy is a common phenomenon even today. This is brought about by Roy in the person of Velutha, an untouchable. At Paradise Pickles, the workers from the intermediate castes sniff at Velutha because he belongs to outcaste community of Paravans, who are considered untouchables in Kerala. Though Velutha is more skilled than any other worker in the factory, he is paid less by Chako. A false FIR is lodged against Velutha by Baby Kochamma, and Inspector Matthew and the "crusader of the oppressed", Comrade Pillai wilfully shake hands and connive against Velutha, just because he is a low-caste. For the upper class Syrian Christians the untouchables like Velutha and Vellaya Pappan are lesser human beings. Velutha laments that he never got the opportunity to develop his innate engineering skills, and if he had been from the upper class he would certainly have become an engineer.

The 'paravans', like other untouchables, were not permitted to walk on public roads and they were not allowed to cover the upper part of their bodies. They were not allowed to carry umbrellas, and they had to cover their mouths when they spoke to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed (Roy 74). Now, we must keep in mind the fact that the Syrian Christians are not the original inhabitants of Kerala, yet they wield all power and financial clout, and are considered the elite. As Franz Fanon has said: "The governing races are first and foremost, those who come from elsewhere, those who are unlike the original inhabitants; the other" (Fanon 87). It is also interesting to note that from her mother's side Arundhati Roy is a Malayali Syrian Christian. When Velutha goes to Mammachi to plead innocence against the fake charge of murder and abduction, he is treated like a subaltern in an abusive language:

If I find you on my property tomorrow I'll have you castrated like the pariah dog that you are! I'll have you killed!...Mammachi spat on Velutha's face. Thick spit. It splattered across his skin. His mouth and eyes. He just stood there. Stunned (Roy 284).

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Such inhuman treatment leaves a traumatic scar on the mind of the victims, leading them to lose their mental equilibrium, individual identity and social recognition, and ultimately results in radical alienation and rebellion.

Roy prominently takes up the issue of Women rendered subaltern. The fate of the divorced women is highlighted in the novel. Comrade Pillai pronounces the word divorce as die-voice, which is almost like pronouncing Rahel dead. Divorcee Margaret is no more than a whore in Mammachi's eyes, and Baby Kochamma's attitude towards deserted Ammu is typically indian. As Baby Kochamma puts it about herself:

She subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parent's home. As for a divorced daughter—according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position, nowhere at all (Roy 45-6).

Although Ammu does equal share of work in the factory she, as a daughter, has no legal claim to property. Ammu's precarious position as a business partner in Paradise Pickles is illustrative of her marginalised position. Unlike her brother Chako, Ammu was robbed of her rights and opportunity to continue her education abroad. On the other hand, Chako goes to Oxford and realizes his dreams. Here, Pappachi stands as a typical orthodox Syrian Christian patriarch who subscribes to the belief "that college education is an unnecessary expense in case of a girl" (Roy 38). Not only this, the first perpetrator of patriarchal cruelty in Ammu's life is her father, Pappachi. An authoritarian Anglofile and misogynistic male, Pappachi beats his wife Mammachi, and daughter Ammu:

Ammu had endured cold winter nights in Delhi hiding in the mehandi hedge around their house (in case people from good families saw them) because pappachi had come back from work out of sorts, and beaten her and Mammachi and driven them out of their home (Roy 181).

He would not hesitate to flog Ammu at the slightest provocation, and Ammu remembered the violence with which Pappachi had shredded her favourite gumboot. He disliked a woman who was vocal and had a vocation for herself. Interestingly, Pappachi assiduously maintained a public façade that effectively concealed his sadistic and abusive tendencies:

He was charming and urbane with visitors...He donated money to orphanages and leprosy clinics. He worked hard on his public profile as a sophisticated, generous, moral man. But alone with his wife and children, he turned into a monstrous, suspicious bully with a streak of vicious cunning. They were beaten, humiliated and then made to suffer the envy of friends and relatives (Roy 180). Thus, we see that Arundhati Roy deals with the plight of the subaltern in its various manifestations.

A major contemporary Indian English novelist, Rohinton Mistry registered his arrival on the Indian literary scene with his acclaimed first novel *Such a Long Journey* (1991). In *A Fine Balance*, he turns to an exploration of the question of subalternity and precarity in the cultural space of rural India as well as the social space of cosmopolitan Mumbai. It is a kind of intersectional study of caste based subalternity and the new subalterns being created by the unbridled operations of the

capitalist order. Ishwar and Om, the two protagonists of the novel, belong to the cobbler caste—the lowest in the Hindu caste system. Eventually, they shift their occupation to that of tailoring and this changes their identity as well, for now they are Ishwar darji (tailor), and Om darji. Ishwar is the paternal uncle of Om. Dukhi is Om's grandfather and Ishwar's father. Narayan, Ishwar's brother is Om's father. In their village:

For walking on the upper-caste side of the street, Sita was stoned, though not to death—the stones had ceased at first blood. Gambhir 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 108-9).

Low caste birth and poverty forms a deadly combination in the novel. Dukhi's wife and grandmother to Ishwar and Om, in order to satiate the hunger of her children, was trying to steal mangoes from a garden belonging to an upper caste feudal landlord. She was caught and raped. Dukhi, unable to resist, silently suffers his humiliation. On the night when his wife was raped, "he pretended to be asleep as she entered the hut. He heard her muffled sobs several times during the night, and knew from her smell, what had happened to her... He wept silently, venting his shame, anger, humiliation in tears; he wished he would die that night" (Mistry 99). The right to education which should be a basic right in any egalitarian society was denied to the people from the subaltern communities. Dukhi's sons, Ishwar and Narayan are very eager to learn like the upper caste children, but because of their caste they are beaten up and abused by the teacher, and thrown out of the premises:

Shameless little donkeys! Off with you or I will break your bones!... You Chamar rascals? Very brave you are getting, daring to enter the school! Is this what your parents teach you? To defile the tools of knowledge and learning? Wanted to look! Well, I will show you now! I will show you the back of my hand! Holding on to Narayan, he slapped six times in quick succession across the face, and then delivered the same number to his brother's face (Mistry 109-10).

The above discussion of the prevalence of caste, gender and other kinds of discrimination in Indian society is ample evidence of the truth contained in the claims of Subaltern Studies group. Postcolonial studies, of which Subaltern studies forms an integral part, aims at pointing the faultlines of traditional society, so that a better and more equitable and egalitarian society can be envisioned and realised.

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