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Subaltern Voices and the Politics of Representation in Indian Postcolonial Literature: A Comparative Study of Mahasweta Devi, Bama and Arundhati Roy

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Abstract

The representation of marginalised communities is an important concern in Indian postcolonial literature. Caste discrimination, tribal exploitation, gender inequality and social exclusion have influenced the literary representation of disadvantaged communities. This paper examines the politics of subaltern representation through three prominent Indian writers: Mahasweta Devi, Bama and Arundhati Roy. It analyses Mahasweta Devi's *Imaginary Maps*, Bama's *Karukku* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Drawing upon the theoretical perspectives of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Ranajit Guha and B. R. Ambedkar, the study explores how these writers challenge dominant social narratives and represent marginalised identities. Particular attention is given to the differences between the representation of tribal communities, Dalit self-representation and the fictional portrayal of caste-based oppression. The study adopts a qualitative and comparative textual-analysis methodology. It argues that literature provides an important space for questioning social hierarchies, recovering marginalised experiences and asserting individual and collective identities. The paper concludes that the selected writers contribute significantly to the discussion of social justice, dignity and resistance in Indian postcolonial literature.

Keywords: Subaltern Studies, Indian Postcolonial Literature, Dalit Literature, Tribal Identity, Caste, Gender, Representation, Resistance, Social Justice.

1. Introduction

Literature is closely connected with the social, political and cultural realities of society. It reflects human experiences while questioning established values and structures of power. In India, caste discrimination, tribal marginalisation, gender inequality and social exclusion have remained important themes in literary expression. These concerns have gained particular significance in postcolonial studies, where questions of identity, voice and representation are central.

The term *subaltern* refers to individuals and communities occupying subordinate positions within established social, political and economic structures. In the Indian context, it is particularly relevant to the experiences of Dalits, tribal communities, women and economically disadvantaged groups. Their experiences have frequently been excluded from dominant historical and cultural narratives.

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Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" raises an important question about who has the authority to represent marginalised communities. Spivak highlights the difficulties involved when intellectuals and writers speak about disadvantaged groups or speak on their behalf. This issue is particularly relevant to Indian literature, where writers employ different narrative forms to represent marginalised experiences.

The present paper examines three distinct approaches to subaltern representation through Mahasweta Devi, Bama and Arundhati Roy. It argues that their works reveal the relationship between literary representation, social power and resistance. While Devi focuses on tribal exploitation, Bama presents Dalit experience through autobiographical self-representation, and Roy exposes caste and gender hierarchies through fiction.

2. Research Problem and Research Gap

Indian literature has extensively addressed caste, gender, tribal identity and social exclusion. However, the question of how marginalised communities are represented remains important. A writer's social position, narrative form and relationship with the represented community influence the construction of literary identity.

Existing scholarship has examined Mahasweta Devi, Bama and Arundhati Roy through different critical perspectives. The present study proposes a comparative examination of their works, focusing particularly on three approaches: external representation, autobiographical self-representation and fictional representation.

The research gap addressed here is the need to examine how these different narrative positions influence the representation of subaltern identities and the articulation of resistance.

3. Research Objectives and Methodology

The main objectives are:

1. To examine subaltern representation in selected Indian postcolonial literary works.
2. To analyse tribal identity and resistance in Mahasweta Devi's *Imaginary Maps*.
3. To investigate Dalit self-representation in Bama's *Karukku*.
4. To examine caste and gender oppression in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*.
5. To compare the narrative strategies through which the three writers challenge dominant social structures.

The study adopts a qualitative and comparative methodology based on close textual reading. The primary sources are the three selected literary works, while secondary sources include critical studies on postcolonialism, Subaltern Studies, Dalit literature and social justice.

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4. Theoretical Framework

The study primarily draws upon the ideas of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Ranajit Guha and B. R. Ambedkar.

Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" provides a framework for examining the relationship between marginalised voices and the structures through which they are represented. Her distinction between speaking about someone and speaking on someone's behalf is particularly relevant to the present study.

Ranajit Guha's contribution to Subaltern Studies emphasises the importance of understanding history from the perspectives of ordinary and marginalised people. His approach challenges elite-centred interpretations of history and recognises the agency of subordinated communities.

B. R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* provides an important Indian perspective on caste hierarchy, equality and social justice. His ideas help explain the structural nature of caste discrimination and the importance of dignity and social transformation.

5. Tribal Representation in Mahasweta Devi's *Imaginary Maps*

Mahasweta Devi is widely recognised for her literary engagement with marginalised communities, particularly tribal populations. Her *Imaginary Maps*, translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, contains three stories: "The Hunt," "Douloti the Bountiful" and "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha."

The stories explore tribal identity, economic exploitation, gender-based violence and cultural marginalisation. In "The Hunt," the character of Mary Oraon represents a tribal woman who exercises agency within a difficult social environment. Her actions challenge conventional portrayals of marginalised women as passive victims.

"Douloti the Bountiful" exposes the exploitation of tribal women through bonded labour and sexual violence. The story demonstrates how economic dependence and social inequality create conditions for multiple forms of oppression. Douloti's experience reveals the relationship between poverty, gender and the denial of human dignity.

"Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha" explores the difficulties outsiders face in understanding tribal experiences. The symbolic presence of the pterodactyl can be interpreted in relation to indigenous memory, cultural difference and historical suffering.

Devi's fiction challenges dominant representations of tribal communities by presenting their experiences of exploitation and resistance. However, it also raises an important question about the role of an author representing communities through fiction. This concern connects directly with Spivak's theory of representation.

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6. Dalit Self-Representation in Bama's *Karukku*

Bama's *Karukku*, originally written in Tamil and translated into English by Lakshmi Holmström, is an important contribution to Dalit autobiographical literature. It presents the author's experiences of caste discrimination, religious institutions, gender inequality and the search for dignity.

The autobiographical form gives *Karukku* particular significance because the writer narrates experiences connected with her own Dalit identity. Unlike external representation, the narrative emerges from lived experience and challenges the assumption that marginalised communities must depend on dominant voices to communicate their realities.

Bama exposes the everyday operation of caste through social relationships, occupation, language and religious institutions. Her narrative questions the contradiction between the ideals of equality promoted by religious institutions and discriminatory practices within them.

Gender is another significant dimension of the text. Bama demonstrates that Dalit women experience overlapping forms of oppression arising from caste and patriarchy. Their experiences cannot be understood by examining gender or caste independently.

Education and writing also become important instruments of resistance. Through autobiography, Bama transforms personal memories into a wider criticism of social discrimination. Her work demonstrates the importance of self-representation in challenging established literary and social hierarchies.

7. Caste and Gender in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* examines the relationship between caste, gender, family and social power. Set in Kerala, the novel portrays a society in which caste hierarchy and patriarchal expectations influence individual relationships and personal freedom.

The relationship between Ammu and Velutha challenges the boundaries established by the caste system. Velutha belongs to a socially oppressed caste, while Ammu belongs to a Syrian Christian family occupying a different social position. Their relationship becomes unacceptable within the surrounding social order.

Through Velutha's experience, Roy exposes the violence and inequality sustained by caste hierarchy. The novel demonstrates that caste is not merely an individual prejudice; it is reproduced through family authority, community expectations and institutional power.

The character of Ammu also highlights the relationship between gender and social restrictions. Her experiences reveal how patriarchal expectations limit women's independence and determine the boundaries of acceptable behaviour.

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Roy's narrative structure, characterised by fragmented chronology, memory and shifts in perspective, further strengthens the representation of social exclusion. Through fiction, she exposes how caste and gender influence even the most intimate aspects of everyday life.

Unlike Bama's autobiographical narrative, Roy's novel represents marginalised experiences through fictional characters. This distinction is important because it demonstrates that literary representation and self-representation are related but different processes.

8. Comparative Analysis and Findings

The three writers employ different literary forms to examine marginalisation and resistance. Mahasweta Devi uses fiction to foreground tribal exploitation and indigenous identity. Bama employs autobiography to assert Dalit self-representation. Roy uses fiction to expose caste hierarchy and gender-based restrictions.

The comparison reveals three important dimensions of subaltern representation.

First, **authorial position influences representation**. Devi's socially engaged fiction gives visibility to tribal communities, whereas Bama's autobiography presents Dalit experiences through a voice grounded in lived reality. Roy's fiction examines the consequences of caste discrimination through constructed characters and social relationships.

Second, **caste, gender and class intersect**. The selected works demonstrate that marginalisation is rarely based on a single factor. Tribal women, Dalit women and socially disadvantaged characters experience overlapping forms of discrimination.

Third, **literature provides a space for resistance**. In Devi's fiction, resistance emerges through individual action and indigenous identity. In Bama's *Karukku*, autobiographical writing becomes an instrument of social criticism. In Roy's novel, the challenge to established social boundaries exposes the violence of caste and patriarchal authority.

The study therefore finds that subaltern representation is not a uniform process. Its meaning depends on the writer's narrative position, literary form and relationship with the represented experience. It also demonstrates that marginalised communities should not be viewed exclusively as victims; their agency, cultural knowledge and capacity for resistance are equally important.

9. Conclusion

The works of Mahasweta Devi, Bama and Arundhati Roy demonstrate the significance of subaltern voices in Indian postcolonial literature. Through different literary approaches, the three writers expose the structures that sustain caste discrimination, tribal exploitation and gender inequality.

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Mahasweta Devi highlights the exploitation and resistance of tribal communities in *Imaginary Maps*. Bama's *Karukku* establishes autobiographical writing as an important form of Dalit self-representation. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* exposes the relationship between caste hierarchy, gender restrictions and individual freedom.

The comparative analysis establishes that representation and self-representation are distinct but interconnected literary processes. While external representation can create visibility for marginalised communities, autobiographical writing provides an opportunity to assert narrative authority through lived experience. Fiction, meanwhile, can expose the wider social structures that reproduce inequality.

The study concludes that Indian postcolonial literature contributes significantly to the struggle for social recognition, equality and dignity. By challenging dominant narratives and bringing marginalised experiences into literary discourse, these writers demonstrate that literature can become an important instrument of critical awareness and social transformation.

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