

## **SUBALTERNITY IN POST-COLONIAL CONTEXT**

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### **Abstract**

*This article discusses in detail the theme of subalternity in literature in the post-colonial context and how it paves way for combating social evils. Subaltern themes have been depicted in their fullness by eminent writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, Toni Morrison and Arundhati Roy. These writers had an inner thirst within them to celebrate the fragments of subaltern identity. The conditions of the subalterns vary in each sub-continent and these writers have catered to the immediate needs of the people. The individual attention to the problems of the subalterns by these writers has resulted in a progressive change in the society. Subalternity becomes an overriding concept in literature when the marginalized section of the society has no voice of its own. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* depicts the caste and gender subalternity from a historical perspective. In the Indian cultural context, 'subalternity' acquires more significance owing to the colonial past. Women and the untouchables are subordinated to the dominant culture of the male world. They are rendered as destitute even in this modern era. In the post-colonial scenario, the Gramscian term 'subaltern' gets wider perspective as it refers to the third world countries and the marginalized groups in the society. Gramsci had given a new dimension to the Marxist doctrine by inculcating the method of persuasion to achieve the social goals in the society. He moved away from the Marxian terminology to refer to the 'proletariat' as subalterns to refer to those groups in the society who are "subject to the activity of the ruling class." The proletarians and the subalterns are not equal but different in their approach and attitude towards society. The proletarians are conscious of their class identity and they always rebel against the bourgeoisie for the establishment of a classless society. The subalterns on the other hand are not conscious of their class as they are non-hegemonic in their approach to the society. To fight the menace of untouchability, one should decolonize the mind to accept the fact that all are equal. Arundhati Roy in her novel *The God of Small Things* celebrates Velutha as the God of the small things and the God of loss. He is the Christ-like figure in the novel, and he is forced to carry the burden for the good of other people. Arundhati Roy as a post-colonial writer takes up the 'small things' in the society, such as the problems of women and the dalits. She immortalizes them as Gods in the society and celebrates their angelic existence.*

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Gramsci, the Marxist thinker and theorist of Italy, adopted the term 'subaltern' to refer to those groups in the society who are "subject to the activity of the ruling class" (55). The literal meaning of the word 'subaltern' as given in the *Oxford Dictionary* is 'any officer in the British army who is lower in rank than a captain.' So, the term signified subordination and Gramsci attached a special significance to this military term by incorporating "peasants, workers and other groups denied access to hegemonic<sup>1</sup> power" (Ashcroft 215). Gramsci was one of the founders of the Italian Communist party and he had contributed a lot for the upbringing of the lower class people. He was imprisoned several times and most of his philosophic thoughts emulated from his 'prison writings.'

Gramsci had given a new dimension to the Marxist doctrine by inculcating the method of persuasion to achieve the social goals in the society. Gramsci moved away from the Marxian terminology to refer to the 'proletariat' as subalterns. The proletarians and the subalterns are not equal but different in their approach and attitude towards the society. The proletarians are conscious of their class identity and they always rebel against the bourgeoisie for the establishment of a classless society. The subalterns on the other hand are not conscious of their class as they are non-hegemonic in their approach to the society:

The subaltern class, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a "state": their history therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of states and groups of states (Gramsci 52).

In the post-colonial scenario, the Gramscian term 'subaltern' gets wider perspective as it refers to the third world countries and the marginalized groups in the society. *Subaltern Studies* as a distinctive branch of learning and research began first in England in late 1970s to excavate the history of the marginalized section of the society. In order to get wider acclaim and extensive outlook, the historians from both England and India agreed to launch a new journal in India. In 1982, Oxford University Press in New Delhi brought out the first volume of essays entitled *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, edited by Ranajit Guha. The first three volumes of essays appeared annually from 1982 and the volumes of essays were mounted to six within the next five years.

Ranajit Guha retired as an editor of *Subaltern Studies* in 1989, after having edited six volumes to his credit. Ranajit Guha had eight collaborators to succeed to his throne and their strenuous effort resulted in bringing out several volumes of *Subaltern Studies*. David Ludden sums up the achievements of *Subaltern Studies* in the following words:

In the 1990s Subaltern Studies became a hot topic in the academic circles on several continents; a weapon, magnet, target, lightning rod, hitching post, icon, gold mine and fortress for scholars ranging across disciplines from history to political science, anthropology, sociology, literary criticism, and cultural studies (1).

In the Indian cultural context 'subalternity' acquires more significance owing to the colonial past. In the preface to the first volume of *Subaltern Studies*, Ranajit Guha says:

The aim of the present collection of essays, the first of a series, is to promote a systematic and informed discussion of subaltern themes in the field of South Asian studies. And thus help to rectify the elitist bias characteristics of much research and academic work in this particular area (vii).

Subalternity becomes an overriding concept in literature when the marginalized section of the society has no voice of its own. In India the caste system was so rigid that the lower caste people had not even the freedom to share the public properties like roads, wells and even educational institutions. People were divided on the basis of caste and people who belonged to different castes would have to carry out certain duties assigned to them. The *Shudras*, the lowest class in the Ancient Hindu society, carried out the filthy jobs and they suffered the greatest humiliations when they were segregated as untouchables from the main stream of the society. Mulk Raj Anand published his first novel *Untouchable* in 1935 and it was an eye-opener to the rigid observers of untouchability. In the preface to *Untouchable*, E. M. Forster says:

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 for ever, born into a state from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolations of his religion. Unclean himself, he pollutes others when he touches them. They have to purify themselves, and to arrange their plans for the day. Thus he is a disquieting as well as a disgusting object to the orthodox as he walks along the public roads, and it is his duty to call out and warn them that he is coming. No wonder that the dirt enters into his soul and that he feels himself at moments to be what he is supposed to be (8 - 9).

Mahatma Gandhi was an influential figure at the time of India's struggle against the British forces and he himself appeared as a character in *Untouchable* to preach against the practice of untouchability. Though the Government of India abolished the practice of untouchability by law, the mentality and outlook of the people remained the same. India is also not free from the class system. The class system was firmly footed with the advent of the British rule to India. The availability of cheap labour and rich resources prolonged their stay here in India. The labourers under the British rule had a traumatic experience with minimum wages and maximum work. The labourers were very often cheated by the agents by offering high wages as in the case of Gangu in Mulk Raj Anand's *Two Leaves and a Bud*. In India, subalternity is caste bound whereas in Africa and in the U. S. the same issue is encountered on the basis of race and class. Racial discrimination in its worst form exists in the U. S. and the atrocities against the coloured people are still on the rise. The Emancipation Proclamation was signed by

the American President Lincoln in 1863, which brought an end to the slave trade in the U. S. Even after hundred years, the deplorable condition of the coloured people remains the same. Martin Luther King Junior, an eloquent black Baptist Minister, was a true champion of Civil Rights Movement in the U. S. from the mid-1950s until his death by assassination in 1968. In order to annihilate the racial discrimination, Martin Luther King Junior played a crucial role in the South and other parts of the U. S. On 28 August 1963, Martin Luther King organized an interracial assembly at Lincoln Memorial in Washington to demand equal rights for all. Luther King addressed the interracial assembly by pointing out the shameful condition of the Negroes:

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and find himself an exile in his own land (27).

Racial subalternity is a reality even now in America. In the post modern context the voices against racial segregations get more prominent. Toni Morrison, the Afro-American writer, realized very early in her life that racism had become the greatest enemy of the 'coloured' people. Through her writings, she tried to vindicate that getting back the black identity was the only way to check the racial discrimination. Pecola, in *The Bluest Eye*, desires to have white skin, blond hair and blue eyes against her dark complexion. It is the result of a misconception regarding race in the American society. Racial discrimination grows to such an extent that even the mental make up of the coloured people supports the racial differences and superiority of the white. The Afro-American writers inculcate through their writings that black identity is not inferior to white in any way. Physical appearance and culture may be different but that doesn't mean servitude of the entire race.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* depicts the caste and gender subalternity from a historical perspective. In Kerala, untouchability was observed by the Brahmins in the pre-independent India. The lower caste people were discriminated on the basis of caste but at the same time the paddy fields were given to them on lease. They were asked to present the major portion of the yield to the landlord. The lower class people didn't get anything out of the contract as it was fixed on high terms and conditions. In order to escape the scourge of untouchability, the lower class people were readily converted to Christianity. They realized that it was a historic blunder when they were denied all the privileges of reservation by the Government. The newly converted Christians are still ill-treated by the society. The after-effects of conversion and the approach of the society towards the downtrodden are clearly manifested in Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*.

The condition of the women in the society was not much different from that of the untouchables. Though a woman is respected like a goddess, her role is very much limited by the male dominated world. The men-folk will be happy when women carry out the traditional job of rearing children and looking after the house hold duties. Women in the society occupy only a subordinate position and their rights and privileges are determined by the patriarchal society.

Marriage decides the fate of a woman and after marriage the woman has no role in her parental home. The institution of marriage has deteriorated to a position of pure business. Women are destined to share the loss and their sacrifices add to the privileges enjoyed by men. Ammu, in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, becomes the victim of gender subalternity, as she is ill-treated by her husband and the family. She married a person of her own choice when all other ways were closed. Ammu's family took an extra care in giving higher education to her brother Chacko. He was sent to Oxford for higher studies, on the other hand "Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl ... since her father did not have enough money to raise a suitable dowry, no proposal came Ammu's way" (Roy 38).

In order to regain her freedom, Ammu escapes from her family to spend the summer with her distant aunt who lived in Calcutta. Ammu agreed to the person who proposed her, as she "thought that *anything*, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem. She wrote to her parents informing them of her decision. They didn't reply (39). Ammu didn't take much time to realize that she had married the wrong person. "Ammu was repelled by the medicinal smell of stale alcohol ... his bouts of violence began to include the children" (42). Ammu was left with no choice, except to return to Ayemenem. "To everything that she had fled from only a few years ago. Except that now she had two young children. And no more dreams" (42). Arundhati Roy's vivid portrayal of the subalterns in *The God of Small Things* is a retreat into the past events. Arundhati Roy's fictional and non-fictional writings address the needs of the subalterns. She becomes the post-colonial voice of the marginalized and the oppressed sections of the society. The subaltern themes of gender and caste have been revitalized in her novel *The God of Small Things* with an exuberance of fictional reality.

Subaltern themes have been depicted in their fullness by eminent writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, Toni Morrison and Arundhati Roy. These writers had an inner thirst within them to celebrate the fragments of subaltern identity. The conditions of the subalterns vary in each sub-continent and these writers have catered to the immediate needs of the people. The individual attention to the problems of the subalterns by the writers have resulted in a progressive change in the society. Mulk Raj Anand bags the credit for exposing the theme of untouchability in Indian Literature for the first time. His humanistic approach and secular outlook in *Untouchable* paved way for the inclusion of more constitutional rights to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. He cultivated among people the good values of brotherhood and fraternity instead of running after the institutionalized religions. As Anand says:

I do not believe in institutionalized religion. And like Tolstoy, I would like to leave the beliefs of the people to their private conscience, collaborating with them for certain secular ends, without objecting to their pet religion (George 24).

The concept of physical beauty has been given undue importance by the consumerist society. The greatest threat that the world is facing today is the non-recognition of subaltern values. Discriminations based on racial superiority have become the greatest evil of the day. The black feminists in the U. S. reiterate through their writings that the 'coloured' people's

identity is different and that they are not in any way inferior to the whites. Toni Morrison's debut novel *The Bluest Eye* cautions the youth to be vigilant against the excessive influence of colonization. Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* cultivates a kind of hatred towards her own race whereas Jadine in *Tar Baby* is more indifferent in her attitude towards the people. Both these attitudes are wrong and when weighed against each other, indifference seems to be more harmful. In Toni Morrison's writings the black people occupy the centre stage and she dedicates her time and energy for the upliftment of the coloured people. As Morrison says:

When I view the world, perceive it and write about it, it's the world of black people. It's not that I won't write about white people. I just know that when I'm trying to develop the various themes I write about, the people who best manifest those themes for me are the black people whom I invent. It's not deliberate or calculated or self-consciously black, because I recognize and despise the artificial black writing some writers do. I feel them slumming among black people. (Peach 5 - 6).

Subalternity of gender and caste dominate in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Women and the untouchables are subordinated to the dominant culture of the male world. They are rendered as destitute even in this modern era. As Prasad says:

In the *Manusmriti*, the law book of Hindu social code and domestic life, we see the pathetic plight of the untouchable, who are deprived of gaining knowledge particularly the Vedic knowledge. An untouchable, this book says, has no right to go to the temples; no liberty to listen to the incantations of the Vedas or the other great scriptures. They are also deprived of the right of reading and studying the language (5).

To fight the menace of untouchability, one should decolonize the mind to accept the fact that all are equal. Arundhati Roy in her novel *The God of Small Things* celebrates Velutha as the God of the small things and the God of loss. He is the Christ-like figure in the novel, and he is forced to carry the burden for the good of other people. Arundhati Roy as a post-colonial writer takes up the 'small things' in the society, such as the problems of women and the dalits. She immortalizes them as Gods in the society and celebrates their angelic existence.

This article discussed in detail the theme of subalternity in literature in the post-colonial context and how it paved way for combating the social evils.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to Gramsci 'Hegemony' is an arrangement of domination by those who are dominated. Ruling groups dominate not by pure force but through a structure of consent, and culture is part of this structure that legitimizes current social arrangement.

<sup>2</sup> The 'Big Three' of the Indo - Anglican Fiction includes Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao.

<sup>3</sup> A person who loves England and English things.

<sup>4</sup> The third chapter of *The God of Small Things* is entitled “Big Man the Laltain, Small Man the Mombatti.” Laltain and Mombatti refer to the powerful and the powerless sections of the society respectively.

<sup>5</sup> *Veshya* is a Malayalam word for prostitute.

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