

## SUB-ALTERNITY AND ITS APPLICATIONS IN SELECT INDIAN WRITINGS

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### ABSTRACT

*In critical theory, the term "Subaltern" describes the section of people that are socio-politically and geographically excluded from the dominion of the power structure of the colony and the colonial homeland. Antonio Gramsci coined the term "Subaltern" that refers to 'of inferior rank'. It indicates those groups in society who are under the supremacy of the ruling classes. The term "subaltern" is used in the fields of history, anthropology, sociology, human geography, literary criticism and art history. There exists a "Subaltern Studies Group" - SSG, a collection of historians of the Indian Subcontinent, who explored the role of men and women who constitute the mass population, rather than the political roles of social and economic elites, in the history of the Indian subcontinent.*

**Keywords:** Subaltern, Peasants, Dalit, Resistance, Suffering, Indian writing

'Subaltern' has been a much endorsed subject among Indian writers. In India, the pioneer was Ranjit Guha who had encompassed the peasant uprisings in India in his works. Another of the leading scholars of subaltern studies is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Born on 24th February 1942 in Calcutta is a literary theorist and Feminist Critic. She is a professor at Columbia University. Briefly married to fellow student, Talbot Spivak (1964-1977), Gayatri is considered one of the most influential post-colonial intellectuals; best known for her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak". She compares in her writings, several theoretical positions of Indian History, such as deconstruction, Marxism, Feminism etc. She was highly critical of current histories of India that were told from the vantage point of the colonizers and presented a story giving voice to the subjugated people. Some of the popular subaltern books are: *A Princely Imposter* by Partha Chatterjee, *Orientalism* by Edward Said, *Selected Subaltern Studies* by Ranjit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Another famous book is *Standayini* by Mahashweta Devi. Infact, all the literature that is based on Feminism, the entire Dalit Literature, everything that is written by the oppressed and marginalized is 'Subaltern' studies.

Munshi Premchand, referred to as "Upanyas Samrat" authored masterpieces like, *Godaan*, *Karmabhoomi*, *Shatranj Ke Khiladi*, *Gaban* and so many short stories. He spearheaded the concept of giving voice to the suppressed, downtrodden strata of society. His writings brought out the pathos in human life. Set in the pre-colonial period, *Godaan* (The Gift of a Cow) showcases the lives of peasants in India. The protagonist, Hori and his family represent this community and

Hori gives the impression of having a noble heart. The novel brings to surface the oppression and injustice faced by the farmers. In the beginning of the story, Hori buys a cow from Bhola the cowherd. Maintaining a cow is a symbol of flourishing in rural India. Hori begins to earn a few annas by selling the milk of the cow. But, his brother Hori is jealous of his prosperity and poisons the cow. Hori, a kind soul, bribes the policemen to save his wicked brother. Jhunia, Bhola's daughter gets pregnant by Hori's son, Gobar. Afraid of the angry reaction by villagers, Gobar runs away to Lucknow with a promise that he would earn enough money to pay off all the debts of his parents. But he did not keep his promise. Hori and his wife give shelter to Jhunia but the villagers impose a fine of hundred rupees on them because they sheltered a lower caste girl. Hori was surrounded by problems constantly being harassed by Bhola who was actually a puppet in the hands of Dattadin. After a lot of struggle and humiliation, Hori met his sad demise. The priest asked Dhania, Hori's wife to do 'Godaan', the act of giving a cow as charity, so that the soul of the dead one rest in peace. But, Dhania could not afford a cow so she gave the priest 1 rupee 25 paise for the ceremony of her dead husband. Thus, *Godaan* is the story of naked poverty, incessant hunger and ruthless exploitation of the poor in Indian society.

Laxman Babu Mane is a renowned Marathi author and social activist hailing from Maharashtra. Born to very poor parents and belonging to low-caste they used to travel from one village to another for work and for food. But his hard work and determination made way to the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for his autobiography, *Upara*, meaning 'Outsider'. The novel gives a detailed account of the writer's struggle in life within the repressive framework of a caste-biased society. It lays bare the stark reality of the subjugation of the Kaikadis, a nomadic group in Maharashtra by the upper caste communities. The author reveals in his work the details of everyday life, customs and beliefs of his community. He narrates and records the social practices, the specifics by constantly shifting the focus between the individual and the community. Like an ethnographer, the author documents instances of deprivation, suffering and violation experienced by the likes of him and also displays the resistance offered by him and his community.

Noted Hindi litterateur, revolutionary thinker and author Om Prakash Valmiki known for his autobiography, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* is an icon and signature name in Dalit literature. His writings are progressive and people-oriented. He always struggled against supremacy of Brahminism, feudalism, gender based discrimination and capitalist powers. His contribution in making Indian literature democratic and pro-people is quite remarkable. The author writes, "Moving from childhood to adolescence when my personality was being shaped, I had to live in this terror-filled environment...At times I feel like I grew up in a cruel and barbaric civilization"(pg.57). Unfortunately, the author faces the humiliation towards Dalits by upper class society of India, no matter where they lived. He looks back to terrifying incident when he was forcefully dragged to work by Fauza Singh Tyagi in the field, irrespective of the fact that he was studying for the Maths examination on the following day. He recalls, "My mind was filled with deep revulsion. I was then an adolescent and a scratch appeared on my mind like a line scratched on glass. It remains there still." (pg.45) He writes how he was not even spared in school. He was

made to sit apart from Tyagi boys on the floor, while other boys sat on the benches. He could not drink water from the glass and was forced to sweep the school and adjoining field. His teachers behaved like others, "The scars that I have received in the name of caste- even eons won't suffice to heal them."(pg.61) The character of Dalit Literature is univocal. And this emerging univocality is now feeding the political discourse of India. From confusion and conflict, ideological or regional, Dalit identity seems to be taking on a cohesive form.

Another literary giant who deserves special mention is Mahashweta Devi. An Indian writer in Bengali, she was a luminary par excellence. She is remembered for depicting the lives of India's deprived, be it women, adivasis or any one who is marginalized. Women have often been the centre of her narrative. Her story, *Draupadi*, centres around Dopdi Mehjen, a tribal woman from the Santhal tribe of West Bengal, who is accused of being a Naxal and picked up by police. An officer orders his subordinates to gangrape her to draw informations. After that, they threaten her to 'cover up'. But Draupadi shows her resistance by ripping off her clothes and walking towards the officer. *Draupadi* has been translated by theoretician Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 1981, thus, introducing the powerful work to the western readers. This powerful text can be categorised as "literature of resistance". It "shatters the framework of institutions- blows up the law, breaks up the truth with laughter". Draupadi's individualism and instrumentality are sources of rebellious identity and gesture. She does not accept what is provided to her by the society and culture. She emerges as 'new' woman holding new attitude and new viewpoint. Draupadi treads the not traversed before. She resists to accept established and yet unquestioned benchmarks of the society. She does not accept readymade values. Though Draupadi is the 'other' in the society, she refuses to concede 'Senanayak'- her rapist and the existential priority. Draupadi represents physical as well as psychological resistance to the whole patriarchal paradigm.

Next in the series is Amrita Pritam. Writer and poet, who wrote in Punjabi and Hindi, was born in undivided India in 1919. She witnessed the horrible incidents during the partition of India as a young woman. These experiences shook her to the core and traumatized her soul. She expresses her agony in the poem *Ajj Aankhan waris Shah Nu* as the repercussion of the horrific experience. It reflects the sense of hopelessness, horror and grief that overtaken every individual who had witnessed the dreadful era of partition. Through her poignant writings, she became a voice for women in Punjabi literature and the leading twentieth century poet of the Punjabi language. Her literary works have been translated into various Indian and foreign languages. Her most famous novel is *Pinjar* (skeleton). This work established her as a representative voice for the inflicted women who suffered numerous agonies during the partition.

Talking of sub-alternity and its applications in literature, Adam Gondvi, a poet from Gonda needs special mention. His real name was Ramnath singh. He highlighted the plight of marginalized castes, suppressed dalits and impoverished sections of society. His poetry reflects a deep concern for the downtrodden. His language is simple, one that any commoner can comprehend. He is known for his social commentary, scathing views of social irony and corrupt

politicians. He asserts that our civilization has its roots in the hard work of peasants and labourers and not in the grandeur of the Bourgeois class.

On the basis of the study of above mentioned texts, it can be concluded that the patriarchal, chauvinistic and indifferent caste discrimination is being challenged by Indian authors.

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