



Research Paper

## Indian Literature as a Carrefour of Various Subaltern Issues

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**ABSTRACT:** Many Indian writers have written about the subaltern problems that existed and continue to exist in Indian society. Literature became a revolutionary tool to solve the problems of the subalterns and was the only way Indian writers could proclaim the atrocities that the subalterns were forced to go through. Numerous novels and non-fiction books were produced by various writers. Many Dalit writers have emerged with autobiographical and semiautobiographical novels in which the subalterns were treated with no respect at all and were merely considered as living beings by the high castes. Among them also the women were the ones who had to face the most act of brutality. Dalit men had to go through only the oppression by the elite classes, whereas the Dalit women had to face both Dalit oppression and male dominance within their group over them. Thus, Literature stands as the Carrefour of all the misfortunes confronted by the subalterns of Indian society.

**KEYWORDS:** Indian Literature, Subaltern Study, Identity Crisis, Male Domination, Dalit Literature.

Received 28 April, 2021; Revised: 10 May, 2021; Accepted 12 May, 2021 © The author(s) 2021.  
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### I. INTRODUCTION

The Italian Marxist and communist Antonio Gramsci coined the term 'subaltern'. The subaltern study was defined as an attempt to allow people to speak within the pages of elite historiography, speaking for or sounding the muffled voices of the oppressed. The sufferings of the subalterns under the hegemony of the ruling elite class were manifested to the world by the Indian writers through their writings. The Dalit were considered the untouchables by the upper castes and were treated poorly. The subaltern class consists of the tribes and groups of common folks who are denied the right to hegemonic power.

In Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* (1993), she represents how the dushad community and the ganju community, the lower classes, who make up the majority of Tahad village, were exploited by the ruling upper class. Sanichari, the protagonist who is also from a lower class was forced to choose to become a 'Rudali', a custom of professional mourning in rural Rajasthan performed by the lower caste women for the deceased upper-caste men. The lower caste people are thus forced to be emotionless and even fake their emotions for their survival due to all the situations they face. Extreme poverty is what drives these women into such undignified activities. It is ironic that the Sanichari who had not cried when her mother-in-law, brother-in-law, his wife, and even when her husband died, took up a job that needs the continuous act of crying. *Rudali* is thus the struggle of survival of the subaltern where tears are commodified. The inability of Sanichari to cry has been caused by all the traumatic experiences she had to go through and can also be compared to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's inability to cry as mentioned in her poem, *Grief*.

Kamala Markandaya's diasporic novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) with the protagonist Rukmani, who has the power to narrate her own story, is the story of the hardships of a farming family. Markandaya through her novel portrays how the rural society is not even bothered by the huge events happening around them because they are too indulged in the thought of filling each one's stomach. Poverty and hunger were the stumbling blocks that prevented them from worldly affairs like colonization. Rukmani and Nathan worked in the fields which were not even theirs as the Zemindar owned the land. Their family was so impoverished that their daughter Irawady chose prostitution to feed the family. These events are an eye opener to the levels to which the lower class had to go to keep themselves alive while the Zemindars reap all the benefits of the poor peasants' hard work.

Mulk Raj Anand, an empathetic writer of the subaltern class talks about poverty, slavery, and the inhuman exploitation of the protagonist Bakha in his novel *Untouchable* (1935). This novel portrays how even among the lower class there is again classification of the upper class and lower class. Bakha's sister Sohini is

being molested by Pandit Kalinath, who is supposed to be a holy person. Here we can see that poverty is a predictor of molestation, taking into Sohini's helplessness the pandit misbehaved with her and finally put the blame on her. Thus the women are Dalit among the Dalit who face triple subjugation. As the title suggests the untouchability of the lower class is being strictly shown in his novel. Bakha is being brutally beaten up and cursed when he accidentally touches an upper class. Here is the misconception of the upper class that the lower class are not even meant to be given the consideration of a living being who have feelings just the same as them. The novel gives an insight to the fact that the poor will always remain poor as they are not given the opportunity to education. Although Bakha wanted to study, he didn't get the opportunity and instead went to work in the latrines at the age of six. That becomes the fate of the subaltern class; with whatever talents they are born, they are pulled down by the aristocrats or are forced to go to work so as to make both ends meet.

Mulk Raj Anand's second and the most soul-stirring novel *Coolie* (1936), portrays the story of the protagonist Munno and his hardships. Although there are many issues the writer tries to unravel through the novel, the two major themes are exploitation of the poor by the rich and death and degradation caused by hunger. Munno is an orphan and is being taken care of by his uncle and aunt who throw him into the urban world which is completely alien to him. Both they and his owner's wife, Bibi Utham Kaur, in whose house he worked, treated him awfully. Munno's owner Baboo Nathoo Ram's wife did not consider Munno to be a human and nothing more than a servant. He was not properly fed and was being tortured mentally and physically. There is also an instance where Nathoo Ram's daughter tells Munno that he should play with her because he is their servant. Here we can see that our protagonist is not given much of an option to even consider his wish in the matter. The taken-for-granted kind of attitude of the rich towards the poor and the helplessness of the downtrodden could be observed here.

*Karukku* (1992) by Bama is a Tamil autobiographical entry that was translated into English and published in 2012. *Karukku* is written as an elegy to the community, Paraiyar which she belonged to. 'Karukku' refers to a double-edged stem of the palm leaf that represents the life of Dalit in Indian society. Being a Dalit herself, Faustina Mary Fatima Rani with the pen name Bama, was able to bring forth into the readers, the oppression and humiliation faced by the Dalit. She tells that even in the games she used to play in her childhood, women are subjected to triple subjugation. She had to face so much humiliation just in the name of the community to which she was born. After all these insults she herself started feeling it as an insult to have born to that lower caste community. Even after she and her brother were educated they were not given the equality they were supposed to have by the upper caste people. Bama decided to help her community from this misery they were facing by writing novels and the Dalit people started fighting for their rights.

Mulk Raj Anand should be considered the first to have voiced his opinion about the marginalized sector through literature. His *Untouchable* and *Coolie* were the bare representation of the atrocities faced by the marginalized. Even Bama in her autobiographical novel *Karukku* confirms that she chose to write novels as a protest against the cruelties and the inequalities she and the people of her community had to face.

Dalit people, from the ancient time itself, were considered unworthy and outcasts. The colour of the skin played a major part along with religion and caste. It is ironic that even now, even after all these novels and writing which are as strong as swords, untouchability is still prevailing in India. But much of the misconceptions of the people about untouchability were eradicated by the power of literature. Thus, literature became a Carrefour of such social issues.

## II. CONCLUSION

This paper focuses on the humiliation, discrimination, and exploitation faced by the Dalit people based on caste, religion, gender, and the vulnerable situation of the Dalit community. From the analysis, many used the power of writing to beat the shackles of untouchability and Dalit oppression. Also, a number of Dalit writers also emerged claiming the equality they should be provided. A silent and safe protest could be made by the process of writing. Nobody was banned from writing and as long as they could write they continued to unravel the cruel deeds of the upper class. Nobody but the women writers could talk of the difficulties they had to face in such a caste and religion-based society. In the daylight, all the upper caste people seem to have a feeling of untouchability towards the lower castes, but in their darkness, they saw the lower caste women as an object for sex. Now, they don't seem to have a problem with the untouchability. All these issues are brought to people's attention by the magic of writing through the writers.

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