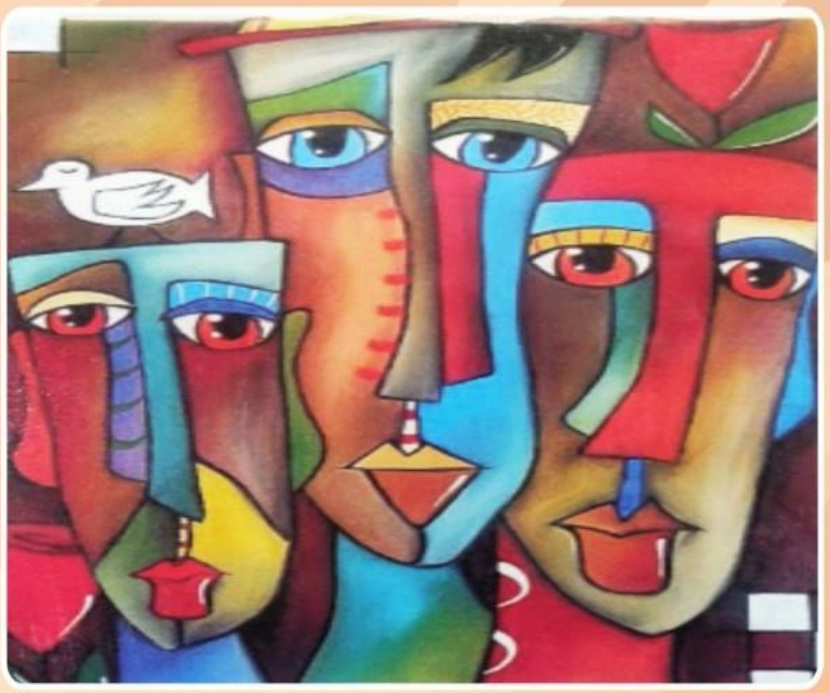
# SUBALTERNITY IN INDO-ENGLISH FICTIONS

First Edition

Bimal Kishore Shrivastwa



DARSHAN PUBLISHERS, TAMIL NADU, INDIA

SUBALTERNITY IN INDO-ENGLISH FICTIONS

**Bimal Kishore Shrivastwa** (PhD) is an Assistant Professor of English at the Post Graduate Campus, Tribhuvan University, Biratnagar, Nepal. In addition to teaching literary criticism, he is passionate about academic research and conducting training programs.

**Publishers:**
**Darshan Publishers,**
**8/173, Vengayapalayam, Rasipuram,**
**Namakkal, Tamil Nadu, India – 637406.**
**www.darshanpublishers.com**
**E-mail: darshanpublishers12@gmail.com**

ISBN 978-93-93942-37-1

# Subalternity in Indo-English Literature

**Bimal Kishore Shrivastwa, PhD**
Assistant Professor
Post Graduate Campus (TU),
Biratnagar, Nepal

**Darshan Publishers, India**

First published: 2022
This edition published by Darshan publishers
http://www.darshanpublishers.com


**ISBN: 978-93-93942-37-1**


**Published by:**
Darshan Publishers,
8/173, Vengayapalayam, Kakkaveri, Rasipuram,
Namakkal, Tamil Nadu,
India – 637406.
www.darshanpublishers.com
E-mail: darshanpublishers12@gmail.com

# Contents

## What is Subalternity?

The concept of *subalternity* has evolved to encompass a range of marginalized groups, including peasants, laborers, and others excluded from dominant power structures. The term 'subaltern' was first introduced by Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, who used it to describe groups with a lower social status, particularly those lacking political representation and access to hegemonic power. Etymologically, the term stems from the Latin words *sub* (under) and *alter* (other), and it originally referred to a lower-ranking military officer (Abrams, 2000). Gramsci redefined the proletariat through this term, distinguishing between the conscious, revolutionary working class and the disunited, often unaware subaltern groups. Unlike the proletariat, subaltern groups do not have a cohesive class consciousness or a unified means of resistance.

A significant turn in subaltern discourse came with the publication of *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, edited by Ranajit Guha in 1982. This collection marked a pivotal shift in disciplines such as history, anthropology, sociology, political science, and literary studies. The Subaltern Studies collective aimed to critique the elite-centric focus of historical narratives and recover the voices of those outside dominant structures.

In the postmodern and postcolonial context, the notion of the subaltern has broadened to include marginalized populations in former colonies, especially in Asia,

Africa, and Latin America. Subalternity now spans across boundaries of caste, race, gender, ethnicity, and minority status. This broader application is particularly relevant in regions like India and Nepal, where colonial rule and rigid caste systems have long perpetuated systemic inequality. In such societies, lower-caste individuals were denied basic rights and access to public facilities, including schools, roads, and wells. The arrival of British colonialism further entrenched social hierarchies, subjecting local laborers to exploitative conditions characterized by minimal wages and maximal labor demands.

Gramsci (1971) classified subaltern groups as non-hegemonic, that is, outside the realms of dominant culture and political influence. In South Asian contexts, Guha and his colleagues sought to define subalternity not just by exclusion from political power, but also by the demographic gap between the elite and the rest of the population. The 'elite', in their framework, encompassed both non-Indians-such as British colonial officials, foreign capitalists, and missionaries-and certain dominant Indian groups, including feudal landlords, industrial capitalists, and high-level bureaucrats (Guha, 1982; Spivak, 1986). At regional and local levels, even Indians who acted against the interests of their own social groups-such as wealthy peasants or local landowners could be considered part of the elite, depending on social and economic contexts.

Guha (1982) further emphasized that the term 'subaltern' captures a broader condition of social subordination,

whether determined by class, caste, gender, age, or institutional role. This flexible yet critical lens allows scholars and writers alike to engage with the lived realities of marginalized communities in literature, history, and culture.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1986) critically engaged with the theoretical framework proposed by the Subaltern Studies collective, pointing out several key limitations. She argued that although the collective attempted to rethink colonial history, especially the idea of colonization as a linear progression from feudalism to capitalism; they did so by introducing two alternative perspectives. First, they proposed that historical change should be viewed as a series of confrontations rather than a seamless transition. Second, they suggested that these shifts are marked by changes in sign systems, allowing for a redefinition of terms, for example, reinterpreting crime as insurgency or bondsman as worker. These interventions, while innovative, also expose weaknesses in the collective's foundational assumptions. Spivak (1986) noted that attributing the agency of transformation solely to the subaltern or insurgent oversimplifies the dynamics of power. She emphasized that true historical shifts occur through moments of crisis, disruptions that alter the function of meaning within a given social or linguistic system. However, the Subaltern Studies group, according to her, underplays the importance of such crises, favoring instead a model of cultural or symbolic consciousness.

Spivak challenged the collective's notion that society functions as a continuous 'sign chain', where disruption of meaning can liberate the subaltern. While this idea may seem empowering, she cautioned that the collective's attempts at 'discursive displacement' often fall short, resulting in theoretical failures (Spivak, 1986). She questioned the assumption that the subaltern possesses a coherent political awareness, suggesting that what appears as subaltern consciousness is more accurately a projection of elite desires and perceptions. Drawing on Hegel, Spivak (1988) contended that identity is frequently formed through the desire for recognition by the dominant other, making the subaltern subject a construct framed by elite narratives. Guha (1982) similarly observed that elites define the subaltern's social position in relation to their own power. In this sense, the subaltern cannot be understood independently but only in opposition to the elite, rendering any claim to a 'pure' subaltern consciousness inherently flawed.

Spivak also critiqued the Subaltern Studies group for overlooking gender in their analysis. She pointed out the absence of female voices in historical narratives and criticized the failure to consider women's roles in insurgencies. In her landmark essay, *"*Can the Subaltern Speak?" she argued that women face a double marginalization, first as subalterns and second as gendered subjects. Within dominant discourses, their experiences are rendered invisible. She wrote, "the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak, 1988, p. 287), highlighting the compounded

silencing of women within colonial and patriarchal structures.

Through this critique, Spivak illuminated the structural and epistemological gaps within subaltern historiography, especially the limitations of speaking for or about the subaltern without reinscribing dominant power relations. In her critique of Subaltern Studies, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1986) addressed the gendered dynamics within male-dominated structures of power, noting that women often function as instruments of 'exchange-value' in patriarchal systems. She argues that both historical continuity and communal identity are constructed by systematically erasing the disruptions caused by female experience. Spivak illustrates this through her analysis of the British colonial response to the Hindu ritual of *sati*, the self-immolation of widows on their husbands' funeral pyres. Although outlawed by the British in 1829, the practice became a site of ideological conflict: colonial rulers framed their intervention as a moral duty of white men saving brown women from brown men while some Indian men claimed that the women voluntarily embraced death (Spivak, 1988).

Crucially, Spivak (1986) highlighted that in both narratives, the voices of the women themselves remain absent. The widows are portrayed either as victims or agents, but never as self-representing individuals. Their silence becomes the ground upon which colonial and patriarchal powers assert their authority. She observed that women are reduced to ideological tools, lacking

agency or a platform from which to express their subjectivity: “There is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak” (Spivak, 1988, p. 307). She also critiqued the Subaltern Studies collective for largely ignoring female subalterns, even while claiming to represent the marginalized.

In contemporary discussions, the figure of the subaltern is often equated with the rural, uneducated peasant of the Global South. Ranajit Guha’s studies on peasant insurgencies, Mahasweta Devi’s portrayal of tribal women, and other Subaltern Studies scholars such as Shahid Amin, Gyan Prakash, Ajay Skaria, and David Hardiman, explore different marginalized communities, from bonded laborers to working-class mill laborers, highlighting their resistance and voice within systems of oppression (Pandey, 2006). These figures, often dismissed as backward or politically irrelevant in mainstream historical narratives, reemerge in Subaltern Studies as agents of historical significance. The aim is not simply to grant them a voice, but to make their silences meaningful. As Gandhi (1998) suggested, Subaltern Studies strives “to allow the ‘people’ finally to speak” by disrupting elitist accounts of history and foregrounding the experiences of the truly oppressed (p. 2).

Indian writers such as Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, and Aravind Adiga have profoundly explored subaltern themes in their fiction. Anand, through his seminal work *Untouchable* (1935), broke new ground by addressing caste-based discrimination. His secular and humanist

lens offered a powerful critique of institutionalized religion and promoted values of equality and brotherhood. The portrayal of marginalized communities in his work laid the foundation for legal and social recognition of the rights of Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

Colonialism deeply affected the identity of subaltern populations. Through systemic comparison with their colonizers, who presented themselves as superior and civilizing forces, subaltern groups were made to internalize their supposed inferiority. Imperial dominance was maintained not only through ideological manipulation but also through outright violence. The idea that offensive action was the best defense characterized many colonial policies, further suppressing subaltern agency.

It is only within a postcolonial framework that previously colonized populations can begin to confront and reclaim their historical identities. However, this process is fraught with challenges, as colonial ideologies often persist in subtle forms, embedded within the collective consciousness. Subaltern identity, by its nature, represents difference, and it embraces multiplicity and hybridity. As Barry (1999) noted, the subaltern identity thrives on cultural polyvalency and resistance to singular narratives of power.

Spivak (1988) offered a transformative perspective on feminist discourse by drawing attention to the unique challenges faced by women in the Global South. Her critical intervention questioned several foundational

premises of mainstream feminism, particularly its tendency to generalize female identity. According to Spivak, a singular, universally accepted concept of womanhood is unattainable, and instead, feminism must acknowledge and respect the internal diversities among women. Although she critiques certain feminist assumptions, her arguments ultimately reinforce feminism by highlighting the importance of intersectionality—factors such as race, class, religion, citizenship, and culture significantly shape women's experiences.

In *French Feminism in an International Frame* (1981), Spivak examined how the lived realities of Third World women are often marginalized by the theories of French elite feminism. Such frameworks fail to consider the deep-rooted differences in history, language, class, and culture. Her analysis of Mahasweta Devi's short story "Breast Giver" exemplifies this critique. In the story, the protagonist Jashoda—a devout, impoverished upper-caste woman—embodies a form of subaltern resistance. Unlike the Western feminist belief that childbearing and motherhood are forms of unpaid domestic labor, Jashoda transforms motherhood into a livelihood by nursing the children of others to support her family.

The idea of the 'Other' is foundational to understanding gendered power dynamics. Across cultures and histories, the dominant group (typically male) positions itself as the central subject, relegating women and others to the category of the 'Other'. Simone de Beauvoir (1973), in *The Second Sex,* highlighted this condition, arguing that

women have historically been perceived not as autonomous beings but as relative to men. She famously wrote: "Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man… He is the Subject, he is the Absolute, she is the Other" (pp. 16–17). This entrenched binary positions men as central figures in society while casting women as secondary.

This marginalization is even more acute in the context of Third World women, who face multiple layers of discrimination, not only by gender, but also by race, caste, and class. Historically, cultural practices such as *sati* in India reflect the societal belief that a woman's existence is inextricably linked to her husband. When he dies, she is expected to follow him into death, symbolically affirming that her identity cannot stand on its own. The institution of *sati* thus reinforced the notion that once the male 'Subject' is gone, the female 'Other' loses her purpose.

Furthermore, women's contributions to major historical movements, including India's independence, have often been erased or underrepresented in dominant narratives. Within this context, Spivak's concept of the gendered subaltern becomes particularly significant. These women, often relegated to the background, are reduced to mere extensions of the men in their lives. When the man is gone, their visibility and value disappear as well. Spivak's theory remains relevant today, as various forms of marginalization—based on gender, class, and caste—continue to shape lived experiences. The time has come for these subaltern voices to assert themselves within

systems of power before continued silence further entrenches their invisibility.

## Subalternity in Nepal

In the context of Nepal, the concept of the *subaltern* requires a nuanced reinterpretation that reflects the nation's shifting historical and social landscape. The People's Movement of 2007 AD not only dismantled the 240-year-old Shah monarchy but also created a platform for engaging with various strands of postcolonial theory. This shift enabled critical investigations into identity categories such as class, caste, religion, gender, and other historically marginalized communities through both horizontal and vertical lenses. Consequently, the discourse on subalternity gained ground in Nepal, though its application has often been unclear, inconsistent, and at times misrepresented.

Subaltern status in Nepal has often been defined predominantly by caste rather than by access to resources or socioeconomic status. This has led to an unfair generalization where individuals from the Brahmin and Chhetry communities, even those engaged in manual labor or living in impoverished rural settings, are automatically categorized as privileged. A Brahmin or Chhetry working as a street vendor, a porter, or subsistence farmer—echoing Spivak's reference to rural laborers—may still be considered dominant, while members of affluent communities are often granted subaltern status and benefit from state-sponsored reservations and opportunities.

This caste-based categorization has allowed well-connected individuals from designated groups to access quotas in civil service, education, healthcare, and politics, sometimes even securing jobs in international organizations or prestigious governmental positions, including foreign ministries and the army. Recent recruitment campaigns, such as those for schoolteachers, have seen candidates with no personal or ancestral ties to certain remote regions receiving appointments there under the subaltern label. Meanwhile, Brahmins and Chhetrys who have lived in those regions for generations and suffer severe economic hardship are denied similar opportunities due to their caste identity.

Such practices challenge the democratic principles outlined in the Interim Constitution of Nepal (2063 BS), which ensures equal rights for all citizens. All Nepalis, regardless of caste, are guaranteed the freedom to pursue education, employment, movement, worship, and property rights. If these rights are constitutionally guaranteed, the continued demand for reservations through political agitation, vandalism, and violence raises serious ethical and legal questions. Political leaders and lawmakers have often misused the term *subaltern* to serve short-term electoral interests, rather than grounding it in sound academic or historical frameworks. In reality, those truly marginalized still lack access to education, employment, and governance.

Western frameworks have also contributed to a distorted view of Nepali caste dynamics. Edward Said (1991) noted that the West constructs itself as rational,

disciplined, and enlightened while portraying the East as passive and irrational. Similar orientalist frameworks have been imposed on Nepal, leading to generalizations that see Brahmins and Chhetrys as inherently elite, regardless of their material realities. Many international NGOs, operating under these assumptions, have reinforced such binaries, pressuring Nepali leaders to institutionalize a caste-based understanding of privilege and marginalization. This has given rise to an elite subalternity, where caste, rather than lived experience, determines access to benefits.

Nepali political rhetoric often reveals a shallow or misguided understanding of key theoretical concepts such as subalternity, marginalization, and colonization. Politicians either lack critical insight or strategically misuse these terms to manipulate public sentiment and secure votes. Their interpretation is frequently steeped in bias, painting Brahmins and Chhetrys, even those from disadvantaged backgrounds, as natural colonizers, and other groups as perpetual victims.

This reductive understanding stands in stark contrast to theorists such as Homi Bhabha and Aimé Césaire. Bhabha (1992) emphasized the absence of genuine cultural exchange between colonizer and colonized, and showed the dehumanizing nature of colonial domination. Gramsci, Guha, Spivak, and Bhabha emphasize power dynamics, not merely identity markers. In Nepal, however, this logic is inverted: many Brahmins and Chhetrys labor in roles akin to Césaire's instrument of production, as drivers, guards, porters, and gardeners for

the so-called subaltern elites, yet are still labeled as inherently privileged. This contradictory narrative reveals the urgent need to redefine subalternity in Nepal through a more critical, evidence-based, and inclusive lens that goes beyond caste and examines real socio-economic conditions.

Subaltern is instead shaped by regional, economic, and social disparities. Masselos (2008) emphasizes this complexity, noting that elite groups were neither unified nor static. According to him, "The elites were dispersed and heterogeneous; significantly, their members might in regional or local levels according to the circumstances and situations be classified as subaltern" (p. 189). This perspective is particularly relevant in Nepal, where a Brahmin or Chhetry from remote areas like Jajarkot or Taplejung may experience marginalization in urban centers such as Janakpur or Kathmandu. Similarly, an individual owning just a small plot of land in central Kathmandu or Pokhara may be economically better off than someone who holds a much larger piece of land in underdeveloped areas like Kapilvastu or Gorkha.

Guha (1982) further elaborated that the same group can be dominant in one context and subordinate in another. He explains:

> The same class or element which is dominant in one area could be among the dominated in another. This could and did create many ambiguities and contradictions in attitude and alliances especially among the lowest strata of

> the rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants, and upper middle-class peasants, all of whom belonged, ideally speaking, to the category of people or subaltern classes. (p. 8)

Thus, the categorization of subalternity is not only multifaceted but also fluctuates over time and across spaces. Rigid definitions based solely on caste, as is often done in Nepal, fail to capture this dynamic nature. An individual labeled as subaltern in one context may hold privilege in another, and vice versa. The status of subaltern is therefore not inherently tied to caste, gender, or religion, but should be evaluated based on an individual's material conditions, social position, and access to resources.

Given this complexity, it is inappropriate to generalize subaltern identity using caste alone. Doing so, it disregards economic and regional factors that shape actual lived experiences. It is the responsibility of a just and inclusive state to assess, free from bias, who qualifies as subaltern, provide them with official recognition, and implement meaningful policies to support their development. Rather than politicizing the issue for electoral gains, there must be a national discourse that includes all social groups and intellectual communities. Otherwise, affirmative actions based on narrow definitions may lead to division, social unrest, and institutional disintegration. A more nuanced and fair understanding of subalternity must prioritize an individual's socio-economic status over rigid identity markers.

## Caste, Gender, and Subaltern Identity in Roy's Works

Arundhati Roy's critically acclaimed novel, *The God of Small Things*, serves as a profound commentary on subalternity. Although it brought her international recognition, including the Booker Prize in 1997, its deeper value lies in its exploration of oppression, marginalization, and social hierarchy in postcolonial India. Set in Kerala, the novel presents a detailed portrayal of a family entangled in issues of domestic violence, betrayal, sexual abuse, social stigma, and death. Through this familial lens, Roy reflects broader socio-political tensions that have shaped modern India.

In her narrative, Roy highlights the struggles of individuals from oppressed castes who confront the hegemony of upper-class society. As Spivak (1986) argued, subalterns are often silenced and excluded from dominant narratives, while elites are afforded visibility and authority. Having grown up in Kerala herself, Roy draws upon personal observations of the entrenched casteism and socio-political turmoil of the region. The story of the Kochamma family in the novel captures India's ongoing battle with colonial legacies, class-based inequalities, and internalized Western ideals. Characters are often torn between imitating colonial standards and grappling with indigenous systems of discrimination and patriarchy. This cultural tension is deeply felt by the protagonists, especially the twin siblings Estha and Rahel, who suffer lifelong emotional wounds as a result of familial and societal dysfunction.

Roy's commitment to portraying subaltern voices is also evident in her character construction. Ammu and Velutha, two central figures in the novel, personify different aspects of subaltern identity. Ammu represents gender-based subalternity, as she is confined and punished by patriarchal norms for attempting to assert her autonomy. Her life is shaped by limitations placed on women, who are expected to conform and not challenge traditional roles, an observation echoed by Beauvoir (1973), who stated that women are not born but made subordinate by social conditioning.

Velutha, on the other hand, symbolizes caste-based marginalization. Despite being a skilled carpenter and valued worker, he is ostracized and targeted simply because of his identity as a Dalit, a member of the so-called 'untouchable' caste. His talent and diligence provoke jealousy among his peers, and when societal norms are breached through his relationship with Ammu, he is denied protection by political institutions, the police, and even the children of the household.

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy constructs a powerful opposition between oppressors and the oppressed: the rich and the poor, the touchables and the untouchables, the dominant and the silenced. Her portrayal reflects the complexities of subalternity, not just as an academic idea, but as a lived reality. The narrative underscores that subalterns exist at the intersection of class, caste, and gender, and that true justice requires acknowledging these intersecting oppressions. Through her fiction, Roy

continues to challenge social norms and advocate for those who exist on the margins of society.

Arundhati Roy has emerged not only as a prominent novelist but also as a committed activist, extending her literary focus on marginalization to real-world issues. She uses her platform to advocate for the rights of the Dalits and the dispossessed, particularly addressing themes of ecological degradation and subalternity, central to her debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, in her later non-fictional work. Roy transitions from the artistic sphere into direct political engagement, replacing imagined subaltern characters with the voices of actual oppressed communities. This evolution marks a movement from fictional representation to active participation in socio-political discourse.

In her novel, Roy portrays caste and gender-based subjugation from a historical and cultural perspective. Indian society has long experienced subalternity based on class, caste, and gender divisions (Guha, 1982). Like many postcolonial authors, Roy critiques the persistence of cultural imperialism even after formal colonization ended. Although the British have withdrawn, their ideological and cultural influence continues to shape Indian consciousness. As Barry (1999) observed, colonial rulers often disregarded and invalidated pre-colonial cultures, creating a historical vacuum that many postcolonial writers attempt to reclaim. For writers like Roy, decolonizing the mind becomes an essential step toward empowering the marginalized and recovering indigenous identity.

Roy also draws attention to the lingering colonial mindset among Indians, particularly the uncritical reverence for British customs. Bhabha (1992) noted that this type of cultural mimicry is a defining feature of the postcolonial condition. In India, English language and British values are frequently prioritized over native languages and traditions. This colonial hangover is epitomized by the character Baby Kochamma, whose obsession with English leads her to fine children for speaking Malayalam and force them to copy lines pledging to speak only in English. Her extreme behavior showcases the extent of cultural self-erasure instilled through colonial education and socialization.

Beyond language, Roy's novel addresses systemic gender and class inequalities. In a patriarchal social order, women are consistently relegated to secondary status, often treated as if they lack personal agency or identity. Beauvoir (1973) argued that women are socially constructed as the 'Other' and denied equal participation in public and private spheres. Roy's work repeatedly highlights how society's double standards marginalize women while excusing men's moral transgressions.

Ammu, one of the central figures in the novel, is a poignant example of female subalternity. Following the breakdown of her inter-caste marriage with a Bengali man, she becomes an unwelcome presence in her parental home. Her brother Chacko's patriarchal attitude is revealed in his declaration: "What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine" (p. 57). Unlike Chacko, who was sent to Oxford, Ammu was denied educational

opportunities by their father. Living in a society where a woman's right to exist is contingent upon her marital status, Ammu suffers relentless social rejection. Baby Kochamma's belief system reinforces these norms, holding that a married daughter has no place in her parents' home, and a divorced daughter, even less.

Ammu's romantic involvement with Velutha, a Dalit man, becomes the ultimate transgression in the eyes of her Syrian Christian family. Already disapproved of for her inter-community marriage, Ammu is further condemned for engaging in a relationship that defies rigid caste hierarchies. Her family, upholding patriarchal and caste-based values, views her actions as disgraceful. When Velutha's father, Vellya Pappen, reveals the affair to Mammachi, he does so reluctantly, torn between filial loyalty and personal affection: "torn between loyalty and love" (p. 255). Mammachi's reaction is laced with caste prejudice, as she dehumanizes Velutha with disgust, comparing him to an animal: "They have a particular smell… Like animals… Like a dog with a bitch on heat" (pp. 257–258).This relationship is vilified as immoral and unnatural, while Chacko, who routinely exploits the women working in his factory, faces no such backlash. Ammu and Chacko both breach societal norms, yet the responses to their actions are glaringly unequal. Mammachi's tolerance for Chacko's behavior is rooted in the patriarchal belief in a man's entitlement to pleasure, a tolerance that fuels her intense anger at Ammu:

> Her tolerance of ‘Men’s Needs’ as far as her son was concerned, became the fuel for her unmanageable fury at her daughter. She had defiled generations of breeding... For generations to come... people would point at them at weddings and funerals. At baptisms and birthday parties. They’d nudge and whisper. It was all finished now. (p. 258)

Roy exposes how societal hypocrisy forgives male privilege while harshly penalizing female autonomy. Through Ammu’s and Velutha’s stories, Roy critiques the entrenched structures of caste and gender oppression. Roy challenges readers to reconsider the inherited social codes that legitimize discrimination, laying bare the mechanisms of power that silence and marginalize subaltern voices.

The caste system in India remains deeply entrenched, maintaining rigid boundaries that disapprove of any form of inter-caste association, especially romantic relationships. In Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, this caste rigidity is reflected in the metaphorical distinction between the privileged ‘Laltain’ and the marginalized ‘Mombatti’. Women in the Mombatti category face a particularly harsh reality. Ammu, after the failure of her inter-caste marriage, is reduced to working in her brother Chacko’s pickle factory where she is treated with neither respect nor recognition. Her role is diminished further by Chacko's patriarchal authority, which he uses to suppress Ammu and her children’s rights. Fearing that they might stake a claim to the family property, Chacko continually

emphasizes his sole entitlement, referring to the factory and produce as “my factory, my pineapples, my pickles” (p. 57). Legally, this exclusion is rooted in Ammu’s status as a daughter, which, under traditional inheritance laws, denies her any claim to family assets.

Ammu and her children are perceived by Chacko as burdens. When she questions his lack of support for her children, his dismissive response, “Are they my responsibility?” (p. 56), exposes his unwillingness to acknowledge any obligation beyond his male privilege. This rejection fosters in Ammu a sense of alienation. Over time, she becomes accustomed to such emotional neglect and learns to confront it with defiant resilience:

> As she grew older, Ammu learned to live with this cold, calculating cruelty. She developed a lofty sense of injustice and mulish, reckless streak that develops in Someone Small who has been bullied all their lives by Someone Big. She did exactly nothing to avoid quarrels and confrontations. In fact, it could be argued that she sought them out, perhaps even enjoyed them. (pp. 181–182)

Ammu’s resistance against patriarchal oppression culminates in her tragic death by suicide at a lodge in Alleppey. Her demise symbolizes both her rejection of an unjust world and the world's refusal to make space for a woman like her. She died at the age of thirty-one, “Not old, not young, but a viable, die-able age” (p. 161). The church refused to conduct a proper burial because she

had broken social and religious codes, choosing her own partner and ending her life by suicide. Even in death, institutional structures withheld dignity from her. This is narrated in these words:

> Throughout her life, Ammu was belittled and mistreated, by her father, who disregarded her rights; by her husband, who betrayed her; by the police, who harassed her; and by her brother, who rendered her homeless. Collectively, these figures embodied a patriarchal ideology that denied her any rightful place as daughter, wife, sister, or even citizen. Her existence was reduced to mere social roles, none of which granted her individuality or freedom (p. 54).

On the other hand, Velutha represents the subaltern—the Dalit subject who remains voiceless within dominant social structures. According to Spivak (1986), the subaltern exists within hegemonic systems that deny them participation. Velutha's name ironically suggests fairness, though his skin is dark, a symbolic tension that mirrors the contradictions of caste. The term *Dalit* originally denoted the downtrodden but has since grown to include those marginalized by both caste and social structures (Narang, 2014). Historically, untouchables were relegated to impure labor and were considered a source of misfortune. Many sought refuge in Christianity, though the church often exploited their vulnerability rather than offering true inclusion.

Dalit Christians found themselves in a liminal state, ostracized by their former community and never fully accepted by the new one. This dual marginalization is vividly portrayed in Roy's narrative. Mammachi recalls the systemic discrimination of her youth, noting that untouchables such as the Paravans had to sweep away their own footprints to avoid polluting upper-caste paths: "They were barred from public roads, forbidden from covering their torsos or carrying umbrellas, and required to speak with their hands covering their mouths to prevent their breath from contaminating others" (pp. 73–74). Despite these oppressive structures, Velutha's talents could not be ignored. A skilled carpenter, he built intricate toys and repaired machinery with precision, gaining attention for his craftsmanship. Mammachi, despite her caste bias, recognized his extraordinary abilities and lamented that, had he not been born a Paravan, he might have had the opportunity to become an engineer.

Velutha, the symbolic 'god of small things', is ultimately crushed by the very forces that seek to silence the subaltern. Falsely accused of crimes, including the molestation of Ammu and the death of Sophie Mol, he is brutally beaten by the police. Even the political group he supported turned its back on him. When summoned to the Ayemenem house after news of his relationship with Ammu spread, Velutha faced not just familial outrage but also venomous verbal attacks. Mammachi, unable to contain her rage, initially screamed at the furniture until Baby Kochamma redirected her fury toward Velutha himself:

> When Velutha arrived, Mammachi lost her bearings and spewed her blind venom, her crass, insufferable insults, at a panel in the sliding-folding door until Baby Kochamma tactfully swiveled her around and aimed her rage in the right direction, at Velutha standing very still in the gloom. (pp. 283–284)

Velutha's fate, like Ammu's, underscores the brutal consequences of defying social hierarchies. Through their stories, Roy critiques the caste and gender-based inequities that continue to define Indian society. Her narrative elevates the marginalized voices and exposes the deep-seated violence of systems that deny dignity and justice to the subaltern.

Sophie Mol's drowning in the Meenachal River was a tragic accident. However, Velutha, the untouchable carpenter, was falsely implicated in her death. Despite no evidence linking him to any wrongdoing, he became the convenient scapegoat. The narrative reveals that Baby Kochamma fabricated a story to preserve the family's reputation, alleging that Velutha had sexually assaulted Ammu and endangered the honor of the Ayemenem household.

At the police station, Ammu tried to correct the false narrative, pleading with Inspector Thomas Mathew to hear her out. But her voice, and identity, were dismissed with brutal contempt. The inspector scornfully rejected her request to give a statement, asserting that the police didn't take statements from prostitutes or their

illegitimate children (p. 7). Even when it was clear to him that Ammu had willingly loved Velutha, he could not look past the caste boundaries: “What the Paravan had taken from the Touchable Kingdom had not been snatched but given” (pp. 259-260). Velutha, a registered member of the Communist Party, sought help from Comrade Pillai. Yet Pillai, representing the elite segment of the ruling class, refused to intervene.

As Guha (1982) notes, elites are often characterized by their access to political power and control over public institutions. Though Pillai was familiar with Velutha, he withheld crucial information from the authorities, including Velutha’s party affiliation and his plea for help the previous day. His silence was not incidental, it was strategic, aimed at removing Velutha from the factory and community (Prasad, 2005).This betrayal led to Velutha’s fatal end. Beaten into submission, he died in custody, forsaken by all the systems that claimed to fight for justice: “Abandoned by God and History, by Marx, by Man, by Woman and (in the hours to come) by Children, [he] lay folded on the floor” (p. 310). Despite being a card-carrying communist, Velutha found no protection from the political ideology that purported to stand with the oppressed. In Roy’s portrayal of Kerala, Marxism becomes little more than a replacement for the moral authority of Christianity, loud in rhetoric but hollow in action (p. 66). Religion and politics, both of which publicly champion the rights of the marginalized, ultimately fail them when it matters most. As the narrator bitterly reflects, “And there it was again. Another religion turned against itself. Another edifice

constructed by the human mind, decimated by human nature" (p. 287).

Arundhati Roy's narrative intertwines gender and caste-based subordination, illustrating how both women and Dalits are subjugated within a rigidly patriarchal system. Despite modernity's superficial advances, characters like Ammu and Velutha remain socially and legally dispossessed. As Prasad (2005) observed, ancient texts like the *Manusmriti* institutionalized the exclusion of untouchables from knowledge and spiritual life, barring them from temple access and sacred learning (p. 5). This cultural denial resonates in the novel's depiction of Velutha, whose intelligence and creativity are acknowledged yet negated by the caste he was born into.

Though seemingly a supporting character, Velutha's life carries profound thematic weight. His journey echoes that of countless subalterns whose voices remain unheard. Roy unearths the systemic silencing of individuals like Velutha, who become victims of institutionalized injustice. By choosing to love beyond social boundaries, he challenges the hierarchy—and pays with his life.

Velutha's death is not accidental but a calculated result of layered oppressions. Roy explores how even Christianity, commonly perceived as egalitarian, reproduces caste divisions among its followers. The Syrian Christian community, much like the dominant Nambudiri Brahmins, upheld class-conscious distinctions and regarded Paravan converts with disdain.

Vellya Paapen's dread for his son's defiance reveals internalized oppression, while Mammachi and Baby Kochamma's hostility shows how elite castes policed those boundaries with cruelty.

Despite being surrounded by forces seeking to suppress him, Velutha defies silence. His dignified presence, calm, confident, and quietly assertive, sets him apart. The narrative captures this unspoken strength:

> Perhaps it was just a lack of hesitation. An unwarranted assurance. In the way he walked. The way he held his head. The quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked. Or the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel" (p. 76).

Ultimately, Velutha becomes a tragic hero—a man of quiet courage who challenged systemic injustice and suffered the consequences. Ammu's recognition of her role in his demise is captured in a moment of haunting remorse: "He's dead…I've killed him" (p. 8). Through Velutha's story, Roy critiques the societal mechanisms that uphold inequality and demonstrates the devastating costs of crossing boundaries drawn by caste and gender. *The God of Small Things* thus emerges as a poignant elegy for the silenced, exposing the deep fissures in a society that clings to its hierarchies under the guise of tradition, religion, and political ideology.

Velutha's quiet strength, which resembles the stealth of a predator rather than submission, gains a new edge when

he becomes actively involved with the Communist movement. This transformation intensifies during the years he spends in Trivandrum. Upon his return, prompted by personal crises like his mother's death and his brother's accident, he immerses himself in political activism. Despite his dedication and skill, his colleagues, especially those from higher castes within the factory and the party, begin to view him with suspicion. His calm competence becomes a threat. They manipulate his social vulnerability, his untouchable status, as a weapon to diminish his influence. Comrade Pillai, a party figurehead, even convinces Chacko, the owner of the factory, to remove Velutha under this pretext.

The complete apathy shown by Pillai during Velutha's moment of crisis leads Velutha to an awakening. He comprehends the shallow promises of caste equality and class unity. As Spivak (1986) asserts, the subaltern's voice is often obstructed by deeply embedded power structures—history and politics only skim the surface when addressing injustice. Velutha sees through the false narrative of a religion without caste and a political movement without hierarchy. Arundhati Roy hints that political organizations claiming to represent the marginalized frequently serve the interests of those already in power. She poignantly questions, "Who was he—the one-armed man? Who could he have been? The God of Loss? The God of Small Things?" (p. 217). Velutha becomes symbolic of both fragility and resilience: socially crippled, while Ammu's dream figure is physically impaired.

Velutha's death is the consequence of his unwavering belief in social reform. He hoped for a society where caste barriers could be dismantled through compassionate human connection. However, he fails—not because of ideological inadequacy—but because he follows his heart in a world that punishes such defiance. While Roy's novel may not fit neatly into the mold of a protest novel or explicitly Dalit literature, it is a sensitive exploration of what it means to live as a subaltern. Without overt ideology, Roy crafts a deeply human story, making Velutha's suffering the emotional center of her novel.

## Defiance and Dignity: Subaltern Agency in *A Fine Balance*

Rohinton Mistry delves into the lives of marginalized individuals, depicting not only their oppression but also their conscious resistance to dominant ideologies.this can be marked in his novel, *A Fine Balance*. The novel, set during the turbulent years of 1970s India, showcases how the oppressed challenge power structures in their own ways. While theorist Gayatri Spivak (1986) famously argued that the subaltern "cannot speak" due to systemic exclusion from decision-making spheres, Mistry portrays characters who do attempt to voice their dissent and fight for justice.

Characters such as Dukhi, Narayan, Ishvar, and Omprakash belong to the chamaar caste—a group historically relegated to the lowest rungs of society. Dukhi, determined to change his sons' fates, trains Narayan and Ishvar as tailors. These characters demonstrate growing awareness of caste oppression and cultural marginalization. Among them, Omprakash stands out as especially defiant, consistently challenging authority and inequality.

Dina Dalal, from a minority Parsi background, also resists patriarchal control in her personal life. One moment in the novel captures her frustration vividly. After tolerating her brother's negligence and imposition for too long, she bursts out: "I'm not your servant! Wash your own dirty plates! You said we would each do our own work! All your stinking things you leave for me!"

(p. 19). Her brother, Nusswan, responds with amusement, while Mrs. Shroff gently reminds Dina of the need for harmony. But Dina's words expose her anger at being manipulated. Nusswan had dismissed their servant to shift domestic burdens onto her, assuming she would comply silently. This confrontation highlights Dina's refusal to remain passive, reflecting an assertive stance against familial patriarchy.

In broader social terms, women have long been subjected to oppression, particularly in South Asian societies where they are often treated as the subordinate sex. Simone de Beauvoir (1973) observed that women are frequently relegated to the role of the Other, especially in Third World contexts. Yet, Mistry does not present his female characters as helpless. Protest, both physical and verbal, features prominently in his narrative.

One example occurs in a temple, where a priest attempts to violate Dina's personal space. Despite the setting's sanctity, he uses it as a pretext to abuse her under the guise of blessing: "He touched her neck and back while pretending to pat her head in prayer. Bits of grated coconut from his hand stuck to her face and body. Just as she summoned the courage to pull away, he let go" (p. 20). This scene portrays Dina's inner struggle and moment of resistance. Though hesitant, she manages to reclaim her space. Her discomfort, courage, and awareness highlight the real and persistent threat women face even in sacred spaces, and their determination to resist it.

Through these interwoven narratives, Mistry sheds light on the many ways subaltern characters, across caste, gender, and class, speak, resist, and reclaim their agency. *A Fine Balance* becomes not just a story of suffering, but one of human dignity, resilience, and rebellion against entrenched power systems.

In a patriarchal social structure, women as subalterns often face physical and emotional subjugation. Men frequently seek opportunities to assert dominance over women, particularly by objectifying or exploiting their bodies. One significant example occurs within the so-called sanctity of religion, where the priest at the fire temple, renowned for taking advantage of his spiritual position, exploits women under the guise of blessings. Dina, accompanied by her brother to the temple, experiences such an inappropriate encounter. However, she remains alert to the situation and silently resists, reflecting her awareness of and opposition to patriarchal exploitation.

The same system also deprives women of their basic rights, such as education. In 1970s India, as discussed by Guha (1982), access to education was severely restricted for women, especially in conservative households. Although some women attended school, patriarchal norms continually imposed barriers, often disguised as concern or practicality. In the novel, Nusswan, Dina's brother, discourages her from continuing her education, citing her poor academic performance: "Very decent of Miss Lamba to promote you.' 'But the fact remains that your results are hopeless. I'm not going to waste money

on school fees for another year" (p. 26). Dina immediately counters his argument: "You make me clean and scrub all the time. I cannot study for even an hour a day! What do you expect?" (p. 26). This exchange reveals how patriarchal structures manipulate domestic roles to sabotage women's academic progress, all while maintaining a facade of rational concern.

Dina's character, as depicted by Mistry, is deeply aware of the systems that seek to control her. She does not merely accept authority; rather, she challenges it with assertiveness and clarity. Her awareness is further emphasized when she appeals to her grandfather instead of her mother to mediate her conflict with Nusswan. The narrative notes: "She held her breath and hugged him, then poured out her troubles in a torrent of words. 'Please, Grandpa! Please tell him to stop treating me like this!'" (p. 27). This action indicates Dina's deep understanding of power dynamics within her family, knowing that her brother is more likely to heed their grandfather, a male authority figure, than their mother, who is marginalized in both gender and generational terms.

Marriage, ideally a personal and private decision, becomes another space where female autonomy is stripped away in a male-dominated society. The control over women's choices, especially in terms of selecting a life partner, is reserved for male family members. However, Dina again defies this expectation. She declares at the dinner table: "'I'm going to marry,' to which her brother responds with a list of suitors he had

previously introduced. But Dina surprises everyone with, 'His name is Rustam Dalal.' When questioned further, she firmly asserts, 'We didn't, I did'" (p. 35). Dina's decision to choose her own partner—someone outside the list of her brother's selected candidates, demonstrates her refusal to conform to traditional expectations. Her silence over the years and eventual choice is an act of resistance in itself.

Dina's pursuit of independence following her husband's death further underlines her strong subaltern consciousness. Rejecting her brother's offer to stay under his guardianship, she states, "Actually, I have decided to live in Rustom's flat from now on. I came only to ask if you could find me some work" (p. 53). Her decision to live alone and seek employment reflects not only her desire for autonomy but also her understanding of how patriarchal authority functions—even within familial relationships. Dina's journey toward self-sufficiency is a powerful statement of resistance against the cultural constraints imposed upon widowed women. In *A Fine Balance*, Dina emerges as a character who challenges the established gender roles and asserts her right to live with dignity. Her resistance, be it verbal, emotional, or symbolic, offers a nuanced portrayal of how subaltern women can recognize, resist, and negotiate with the structures that seek to silence them.

Set against the backdrop of the Indian Emergency during the 1970s, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* captures the social and political upheaval experienced by the marginalized. This period, marked by overpopulation in

cities and increasing state control, rendered life particularly challenging for the subaltern population. As Guha (1982) highlighted, systemic domination and exploitation were widespread, leaving little space for the underprivileged to sustain themselves. Nonetheless, the novel suggests that these individuals were not entirely unaware of their circumstances; a growing awareness of oppression surfaces through their dialogues and actions.

An illustrative moment arises when Dina criticizes Omprakash for smoking: "You shouldn't smoke anywhere… Cancer will eat your lungs," to which Omprakash replies, "We don't have to worry about cancer. This expensive city will eat us alive, for sure" (p. 77). His words reflect not only the harshness of urban life but also an acute consciousness of the systemic neglect and daily struggles endured by migrant laborers. Omprakash and Ishvar, tailors working for Dina, represent this migrant class—displaced from rural areas and forced to live in unauthorized settlements threatened with demolition. They survive on minimal wages, lack formal documentation like ration cards, and experience constant insecurity.

The novel also critiques the exploitative nature of capitalism, especially in how middlemen profit off the labor of others. Omprakash emerges as the most vocal critic of this system. When Dina returns from her dealings with a clothing export company, he questions her role and compensation: "'And what is the name of the company you go to?'… 'Was she paid a commission, or a set price for the complete order?'" (p. 78). Dina,

who acts as an intermediary between the company and the tailors, receives payment without contributing to the actual sewing. Omprakash's probing reveals his awareness of economic exploitation, and he bluntly states, "She cheats us. We should directly work for the Export Company. Why does she have to be in the middle?" (p. 81).

This scene also highlights a broader issue: the absence of collective resistance. Although Omprakash recognizes their exploitation and voices dissent, his uncle Ishvar remains passive. This lack of unified action among the subalterns underscores that claim that without collective consciousness, structural change remains elusive (Guha, 1982). Urban capitalism intensifies class inequality, especially for laborers who face worse conditions in cities than in villages. Mistry's characters acknowledge this reality. In a conversation with Ishvar, Omprakash vents: "She treats us like slaves... Look at her house. With electricity, water, everything. What do we have? A stinking shack in the slum" (p. 82). Despite toiling all day, they live in squalor while Dina enjoys modern amenities. This contrast fuels Omprakash's anger and fuels his determination to expose the inequality, even if Ishvar remains more resigned and cautious.

Dina herself is under pressure due to her unauthorized use of the apartment as a workspace. When the rent collector makes surprise visits, she fabricates stories to conceal the tailors' presence. Omprakash is forced to masquerade as a domestic servant, an act that enrages him. His frustration is evident when he protests: "'I am a

tailor, not her maadherchod servant who sweeps and mops… If we are dead tomorrow, she will get two new tailors'" (p. 91). Despite knowing that challenging Dina might cost him his job, Omprakash values his dignity and refuses to accept a false identity. His statement, filled with anger and despair, reveals both a resistance to dehumanization and a yearning for a life that no longer feels possible.

Thus, *A Fine Balance* portrays the subaltern struggle not just as one of survival, but also as a journey toward awareness and resistance. While systemic oppression limits their choices, characters like Omprakash begin to articulate their rights, challenge exploitative relationships, and express a desire for justice, even when the odds are stacked against them.

Omprakash, a lower-class tailor in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, is portrayed as a subaltern figure who is both self-aware and dignified in his identity as a craftsman. Despite being from a rural background and facing immense hardships in the city, Omprakash retains a strong sense of pride in his profession. His comments about the exploitative conditions under which he and his uncle Ishvar work reveal the oppressive nature of urban labor structures during the 1970s. While subalterns like them work tirelessly, those who merely act as intermediaries, such as Dina, enjoy a far more comfortable life (Guha, 1982). Omprakash's bleak outlook, even expressing a wish for death, underlines his realization that their struggle is part of a repeating cycle, where their deaths would simply make room for more to

be similarly exploited. His statements reflect a sharp critique of the contemporary capitalist system and his place within it.

From a broader cultural lens, religion and the caste system play significant roles in reinforcing marginalization. Spivak (1986) argued that the hierarchical structure of caste is ideologically upheld by *dharma*, which assigns each caste its specific role and maintains both separation and interdependence among them. This can be observed in the experience of Dukhi, a member of the chamaar caste, who is wrongfully blamed for an accident at work. After laboring all day, he is assaulted and denied payment by Thakur, a representative of the dominant caste. "'I spit in their upper-caste faces,'" he says, rejecting the social order that perpetually oppresses him (p. 105). Dukhi's refusal to return to the upper-caste household is a subtle but significant act of defiance, rooted in his recognition of generational injustice and his own agency.

Religious ideology is frequently used as a tool for reinforcing the subjugation of Dalits, and this systemic discrimination discourages any form of complaint or resistance. Many individuals from these communities are too fearful to challenge the status quo. As Guha (1982) noted, dominant groups often claim divine justification for exploiting Dalits. However, resistance still manifests, even in small gestures. When Dukhi's sons are brutally beaten by a teacher for allegedly disrupting the classroom, Dukhi approaches the village priest to report the abuse. He does so respectfully, using careful

language, yet the act of lodging the complaint itself challenges the established order: "'Some time ago I was hammered badly by Thakur Premji… But I did not come to you'" (p. 112). His decision to speak up, despite potential consequences, is a form of resistance grounded in rising subaltern consciousness.

Importantly, caste-based discrimination is not limited to the upper castes' treatment of the lower ones. Mistry also reveals how such biases persist within the lower castes themselves. For instance, Narayan, a man from the chamaar caste, welcomes Bhunghi—who is considered even lower—into his home. When his mother opposes this action, Narayan confronts her: "'Because the uppers treat us so badly. And now you are behaving just like them… I can't live like this anymore'" (p. 134). Narayan's protest demonstrates his awareness of the need to dismantle discriminatory attitudes within marginalized communities themselves.

Culture plays a vital role in shaping identity, and its transmission from one generation to the next reflects both pride and awareness. After Narayan's son Omprakash turns five, he is taken to the tannery to learn the skills and traditions of the chamaar community. Narayan, having learned the trade from his own father, proudly introduces his son to the craft of skinning, curing, and dyeing (p. 139). Though Narayan has become more economically stable than others in the village through his tailoring business, he continues to support and participate in community labor. This act of cultural continuity, teaching traditional skills and

maintaining a connection to communal identity, emphasizes a deep-rooted cultural consciousness.

Mistry offers a layered exploration of subaltern life, marked by suffering but also by growing awareness and forms of resistance. Whether through labor protests, rejection of caste norms, or the preservation of cultural heritage, Mistry's characters assert their identities in a society that systematically marginalizes them. Through their voices, the novel critiques both capitalist exploitation and caste-based oppression, echoing the theories of scholars like Guha and Spivak.

According to Homi Bhabha (1992), the postcolonial discourse on untouchability opens a space for a reimagining of politics, breaking decisively from entrenched historical injustices. The civil rights framework initiated by the independent Indian state aims to uphold the dignity of historically marginalized citizens, primarily through safeguarding their bodily and moral integrity as a way of redressing past injustices. This broader political context finds a striking reflection in Narayan's assertion within *A Fine Balance*. While massaging his father's feet, he laments the hollow nature of reforms:

> Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper-caste bastards still treat us worse than animals... More than twenty years have passed since independence. How much longer? I want to

> be able to drink from the village well, worship in the temple, walk where I like. (p. 142)

Narayan's statement illustrates his acute awareness of the gap between legislative promises and social realities. Even decades after independence, Dalits like him are still denied fundamental human rights. His longing to access public resources and sacred spaces symbolizes his broader yearning for dignity and equality, marking a critical instance of subaltern awareness and defiance.

Additionally, the novel critiques the manipulation and failure of political figures who exploit the hopes of the marginalized during election cycles. Despite their promises of equity, education, and opportunity, these leaders routinely neglect their commitments. This disillusionment is captured by Dukhi's bitter observation: "There must be a lot of duplication in our country's laws. Every time there are elections, they talk of passing the same ones passed twenty years ago. Someone should remind them they need to apply the laws" (p. 143). Dukhi's remark underscores a well-developed political awareness—he understands that legislative repetition without enforcement is meaningless. His skepticism reveals a growing discontent among the lower castes, who recognize the symbolic nature of state reforms that fail to translate into real change.

Narayan, similarly, views the right to vote not just as a civic duty but as a fundamental claim to equality. His desire to personally cast his vote—despite opposition

from upper-caste authorities, shows his political awakening. He insists: "Next time there is an election, I want to mark my own ballot... I will exercise it in the next election, I promise you. Life without dignity is worthless" (p. 144). His assertion, and refusal to merely provide a thumbprint as instructed, indicates his determination to be treated with respect. The desire to exercise voting rights reflects a broader subaltern consciousness that is rooted in political agency (Guha, 1982). His understanding of democratic participation as essential to human dignity affirms his awareness of how caste oppression is sustained through both social practices and political exclusion.

This spirit of resistance becomes even more pronounced on election day. Standing in line, Narayan demands a ballot and inspires others to do the same:

> 'Thumbprint? I will sign my full name after you give me my ballot.' Two men behind him echo his demand: 'Yes, give us our ballots. We want to mark our mark.' 'We cannot do that, we don't have instructions.' 'We do not need instructions. It is our right as voters.' (p. 145)

In this moment, Narayan transcends individual rebellion, becoming a symbol of collective assertion. His stand emboldens others, indicating that political consciousness among the subaltern is not only growing but beginning to mobilize. Despite the threats posed by powerful figures like Thakur, Narayan's resistance reflects a deep internal shift within his community.

Historical parallels can be drawn here to the actions of the Dalit Panthers between 1974 and 1978. These young activists transformed urban and rural landscapes in Maharashtra by planting symbols of resistance, statues of Dr. Ambedkar, blue flags, and renaming institutions in his honor. These symbols signified a new assertion of Dalit identity and pride, much like the growing confidence in characters like Narayan and Omprakash within the novel.

Omprakash, in fact, emerges as one of the most radically conscious characters in the story. He envisions armed resistance akin to that of the Naxalite movement, aimed at toppling the exploitative systems in place:

> I will gather the small army of chamaars, provide them with weapons, then march to the landlords' house... We'll do it like the Naxalites. At the end of it we will cut off their heads and put them on spikes in the marketplace. (p. 149)

Omprakash's revolutionary imagination stems from years of exploitation and suffering. His radical stance reflects a refusal to passively endure oppression any longer, he envisions liberation through direct and forceful means, symbolic of a collective psychological breaking point.

Caste dynamics, as discussed by Rao (2005), can be understood as an ideological structure within the Indian social superstructure, designed to reflect and maintain material relations. In this context, caste functions not just

as social classification but as a system that governs labor, rights, and access. This is evident in the Chamaar community's shift from traditional leather work to tailoring. Though it may seem like a simple occupational change, it is deeply subversive in a system where caste rigidly dictates profession. Omprakash points out their mistreatment even by their employer, Dina: "Our jobs are terrible, that Dinabai watching us like a vulture, harassing us, telling us when to eat and when to belch" (p. 184). Despite facing constant microaggressions, Omprakash and Ishvar are keenly aware of the power dynamics in play. Their shift in profession, from tanning to tailoring, is a form of rebellion against the script that Hindu society has written for them. Their resistance to being boxed into hereditary roles is a vivid example of subaltern consciousness and agency.

Thus, *A Fine Balance* captures the complexity of caste-based oppression and the evolving resistance of the marginalized. Through characters like Narayan and Omprakash, the novel illustrates the political awakening of subaltern groups, their skepticism toward institutional promises, and their efforts to claim space and dignity in a society long structured to exclude them. Their voices, like those of the Dalit Panthers, are loud, clear, and deeply political, testaments to an ongoing struggle for justice and equality.

Following the declaration of the Emergency in India, the conditions for ordinary citizens, especially those from marginalized communities, worsened significantly. The upper castes and elite groups exploited the crisis to

consolidate power, subjecting the subaltern classes to even deeper oppression (Rao, 2005). This dual exploitation came not only from dominant social groups but also from state mechanisms. Mistry captures this vividly in a scene where government representatives try to rally support: "The water queue moved forward disinterestedly... 'The Prime Minister's message is that she is your servant, and wants to help you...' 'Tell her yourself!' Omprakash shouted. 'You can see in what prosperity we live!'" (p. 258).

This dialogue encapsulates the people's resistance through sarcasm and refusal to comply. Even though they are forced to attend such political gatherings, their cynicism and refusal to engage sincerely with the government's narrative signify subtle but powerful defiance. Resistance, here, does not always manifest through overt violence, sometimes it is visible in the form of non-cooperation and passive dissent.

Rohinton Mistry not only depicts the suffering endured by subaltern communities but also brings to light their growing awareness of their exploitation and rights. Although justice often eludes them, they recognize injustice and express their anger. One powerful moment arises when: "The hutment dwellers straggled back... venting their anguish... 'For the poor people there is no justice, ever! We had next to nothing! What is our crime, where are we to go?'" (p. 295).

The government's so-called urban beautification drive led to the demolition of makeshift homes, displacing

already impoverished families without warning or alternative. These homes, though informal, were rented and inhabited for years. The same state that once sought their votes now strips them of shelter—illustrating systemic betrayal and exploitation (Rao, 2005).

The theme of resistance also extends to the female characters in the novel. Indian patriarchal traditions often place severe restrictions on widows, who are expected to lead lives of austerity and isolation. Dina, a widow, challenges these norms by choosing to live independently and refusing to remarry. When questioned by a rent collector about housing a male paying guest, she reacts strongly: "'How dare you suggest I keep young men in my flat!... You, with your beard so white, saying such nasty, shameful things!'" (p. 354). Her fierce response reflects her awareness of gender-based discrimination and the social policing of women's lives, especially widows. She upholds her dignity in the face of societal judgment and refuses to let patriarchal suspicion define her.

Despite this strength, Dina is eventually compelled to seek help from her brother. Though reluctant, she recognizes the necessity: "Once again, I'll have to swallow my pride and ask for his help, that's all" (p. 433). Her hesitation signals a deep desire to maintain independence in a society where women often rely on male figures for protection or stability. Still, her actions reflect a pragmatic approach to survival within oppressive structures.

The novel further critiques gender roles through Dina's conversations with the tailors. When Ishvar talks about Om's future wife helping with household chores, Dina questions the fairness of such expectations: "'Are you getting wife for Om, or a servant?' she inquired... 'There can be no happiness without fairness,' she said. 'Remember that, Om...'" (p. 474). This interaction highlights conflicting views: the male perspective sees domestic labor as a wife's duty, while Dina stresses equality and mutual respect in marriage. Her words advocate for women's rights and challenge traditional gender dynamics.

In a society where marriage often excludes women's voices in decision-making, Dina's stance is progressive. She critiques the social structures that stigmatize women and deny them autonomy, emphasizing that it is societal norms, not women themselves, that create moral labels. Her perspective and choices position her as a fully developed and politically aware character who resists the limitations imposed on her gender and class.

Although political parties claim to represent the interests of ordinary citizens, in practice, they often align themselves with powerful and exploitative elites. In Rohinton Mistry's novel, the thoughts of subaltern characters about eliminating their oppressors reflect a deep mental and physical form of resistance. According to Spivak (1986), true liberation for the subaltern cannot occur unless the sources of oppression are removed. Many characters in the novel are aware of this harsh reality.

For instance, when a character questions, “What about Thakur Dharamsi? Does he murder babies to control the population?” and another replies, “I think our people should gather and kill the dog” (p. 519). It shows their suppressed anger and desire for justice. Yet Ashraf cautions, “That demon is too powerful... he is now a big man in the Congress Party... When he wants to threaten someone, he tells the police” (pp. 519–520). This exchange reflects both awareness of systemic injustice and the limitations imposed by political power structures.

Omprakash, one of the most aware characters in the story, considers organizing a group to fight back against such systemic oppression. His belief in collective action underscores the potential for resistance. Unlike passive characters, Om is determined to create change, believing that unity can challenge figures like Thakur Dharamsi. However, this ambition remains largely unrealized due to fear, disorganization, and the overwhelming power of their enemies, supported by political institutions (Rao, 2005).

Later in the novel, Omprakash symbolically resists by spitting in Thakur’s direction, declaring, “My wedding and the Thakur’s funeral” (p. 523). Though he does not succeed in avenging his family’s suffering, this act is symbolic of defiance against the powerful. The novel also shows the brutal measures taken under the guise of population control—forced sterilizations regardless of age, marital status, or previous medical history. Omprakash is a victim of this cruelty. While he tries to

remain indifferent, Ishvar laments, “Our family name will die... everything is lost!” (p. 535), mourning the destruction of their lineage and manhood.

Through these characters, Mistry presents a nuanced view of resistance. Though oppressed, the subalterns in the novel are not passive; they are fully aware of their condition and, in various ways, resist domination. Characters like Dina, Ishvar, Omprakash, Dukhi, and Narayan demonstrate different forms of consciousness and resistance, whether through direct confrontation, personal dignity, or survival under oppressive circumstances.

## Hegemony and Marginalization in *Rudali*

Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* powerfully explores the themes of oppression, marginality, and social dominance. Devi, known for her unwavering commitment to the upliftment of tribal and Dalit communities, uses her writing as a form of activism, exposing the exploitation and suffering of marginalized individuals, especially women. In *Rudali*, she presents the life of Sanichari, a woman whose existence is defined by constant struggle and societal neglect.

Literature often acts as a mirror and a critique of society. Many Indian writers function as social reformers, drawing attention to caste-based discrimination and the challenges faced by marginalized communities (Das, 1988). In the Indian social hierarchy, Dalits or "subalterns" are often excluded due to their low status in the caste system (Narang, 2014). They live on the periphery of society, both literally and metaphorically, and are subjected to systemic oppression and hegemonic control (Guha, 1982).

Devi's *Rudali* uses fiction as a medium to highlight these issues. As Ross (1999) notes, Devi was not only a writer but also an activist, journalist, and editor who gave voice to the silenced. Her work confronts the hypocrisy of the elite classes who speak of equality while benefiting from deeply rooted inequality. In *Rudali*, she captures the ongoing struggle for survival among the oppressed, especially through the life of Sanichari.

Sanichari, the central figure, endures endless hardship. Her name, derived from "Sanichar", considered inauspicious in Hindu belief, becomes symbolic of her fate (Gupta, 2009; Ross, 1999). From birth, she faces societal scorn and constant adversity. Her mother-in-law's repeated reminders of her ill-omened birth only compound her suffering. She questions the logic behind being labeled unlucky merely because of her birth day, struggling to understand why fate discriminates.

Sanichari lives in abject poverty in a Rajasthani village dominated by the Ganju and Dushad castes. Her economic hardship and low social status as a Ganju woman make survival extremely difficult. The narrative opens with a telling detail: "In Tahad village, Ganjus and Dushads were in the majority. Sanichari was Ganju by caste. Like the others, she lived in poverty" (p. 1). Her misery is underscored when she cannot even afford to perform her husband's last rites, a moment that illustrates her total social and economic powerlessness.

Sanichari's illiteracy and poverty continue to push her deeper into misery and debt. She finds herself helpless during the deaths of her close family members—her mother-in-law, brother-in-law, sister-in-law, and her only son, Budhua. Due to her dire financial circumstances, she cannot even grieve properly, let alone perform the cremation rituals with dignity. She lives in constant fear of powerful figures like Ramavatar and his son Lanchman, who use intimidation to maintain dominance over the Ganjus and Dushads (Ross, 1999). Budhua, stricken with tuberculosis, eventually dies, and

Sanichari's daughter-in-law deserts her, while her grandson Haroa runs away with a street magician. As Budhua's health deteriorates, Sanichari's inner turmoil is vividly expressed:

> It felt as though the flames from the funeral pyre had ignited within her. The unbearable heat seemed to surround her constantly. Watching her son fade away, she came to the painful realization that the life she had hoped to build around him would never come to be. (p. 14)

Even though the loss of her son is emotionally devastating, Sanichari channels her energy into raising her grandson. But fate strikes again when Haroa abandons her, leaving her broken once more. A glimmer of relief enters her life when she reunites with Bikhani, a childhood friend who has suffered similar hardships. They begin living together, sustained by Bikhani's earnings (Narang, 2014). Their shared need for survival forces them to find work, and their situation takes a new turn with the arrival of Dulan. He introduces them to the profession of *rudali*—women hired to weep loudly at funerals, perform grief theatrically, and lament for the dead. Driven by desperation and hunger, Sanichari and Bikhani accept the role.

This shift into professional mourning highlights the bleakness of poverty and the ironic commodification of grief in Indian society. Through Dulan, Devi introduces a powerful critique of social disparity. Dulan remarks: "Don't trouble yourself weighing what's right and

wrong—leave that to the rich. We only understand hunger" (p. 25). The adoption of this profession not only sustains them but also reflects a subtle rebellion against a system that marginalizes the poor. By turning grief into a profession, they expose the hypocrisy of the upper caste, for whom displays of sorrow have become public spectacles. "They were professional. Nowadays, professionals rule, not amateurs. Paid mourning for the forgotten dead has become a business" (p. 29). This newfound stability empowers Sanichari and gives her a sense of purpose and strength.

Sanichari begins to see through the hollow rituals of the wealthy, who show no care for their kin in life but go to great lengths to stage grand death ceremonies. These funerals, complete with hired mourners, serve only to boost the family's social image: "The money spent on funerals immediately raised the family's prestige" (p. 31). Her perception of this social charade deepens after Bikhani's sudden death. Struck by her friend's absence, Sanichari finds herself not overcome by sorrow, but by fear, a fear rooted in the realization that her livelihood is now at risk: "What did she feel? Not grief, but fear. She had faced loss before- her husband, her son, her grandson, even her daughter-in-law. But this fear was new. Bikhani's death threatened her survival and left her uncertain about the future" (p. 36). As Sanichari grows older, she begins to worry whether age will become a barrier in continuing her work. But her evolution into a pragmatic and resilient individual helps her push forward. Dulhan reassures her: "One should never give up their land, and for you, your mourning is your land.

Don't abandon it" (p. 37). Through this metaphor, Devi equates the profession of *rudali* with ownership and identity.

Sanichari's journey also intersects with those from *randi bazar* (the red-light district), as she becomes a figure of leadership and acceptance. Despite her initial hesitation and embarrassment upon finding her daughter-in-law among the sex workers, she eventually accepts her and encourages others like her to join the mourning profession. With encouragement from Dulhan, she accepts that "What people do to fill their stomachs can never be wrong" (p. 43). This moment marks Sanichari's transformation into a figure of empowerment for other marginalized women. She embraces those who have been exploited and discarded by the elite, particularly the women coerced into sex work, offering them a dignified alternative. Katyal (1997) insightfully notes: "Grief becomes a product, and mourning becomes labor. When sorrow is commodified by the elite, tears become the tools of trade for the poor" (p. 43). Sanichari, once a passive sufferer of caste and gender-based oppression, emerges as a symbol of strength. Her experiences show how a subaltern woman, despite being doubly marginalized, can challenge systemic barriers. Through her tears, once considered signs of helplessness, she crafts a livelihood, dignity, and agency not only for herself but for many others who society had forgotten.

Sex workers, often marginalized and rejected by every society, can also be understood as a form of subaltern. A subaltern, as Guha (1982) defines, is someone excluded

from mainstream culture and denied social belonging. Through the character of Sanichari, Mahasweta Devi sheds light on the plight of these women. Despite belonging to a lower caste herself, Sanichari extends support to them, a courageous and defiant act given her social position. Katyal (1997) remarks that "prostitutes are not a distinct caste as some assume; rather, they are impoverished women compelled to earn their livelihood... they too are victims and should not be treated as untouchables or outcasts" (p. 4). Over the course of the narrative, Sanichari transforms from a submissive figure into a strong, empowered woman. Gupta (2009) describes her as a muted subaltern who nevertheless resists oppressive forces. Although she witnesses many deaths in her household, Sanichari maintains her composure until the death of her friend Bikhani profoundly shakes her, signaling the next phase of her life's struggle. Yet she resolves not to cry again, having come to understand that tears have become mere commodities, part of a commercialized ritual. Despite her fear of loneliness, she presses forward, emerging as a confident provider, decision-maker, and employer to many ostracized women. Katyal (1997) supports this view, seeing Sanichari as a woman capable of adapting, surviving, and manipulating the social system to her advantage.

Devi's female characters often appear silenced by circumstance, deprived of their right to voice and expression, pushed to the social margins. However, Sanichari breaks this tradition, growing stronger and almost invincible. Her portrayal as a Dalit woman is

intentional, giving voice to those typically silenced, and Devi succeeds in this task. According to Gupta (2009), Mahasweta Devi imagined the nation as an inclusive, egalitarian, and non-hegemonic space that truly empowers the historically marginalized and 'othered.' Sanichari rises to become the breadwinner not only for herself but also for many outcast women, despite her tragic past. She exemplifies the burden imposed by the malik-mahajans and crushing poverty that force her to live on society's fringes. Through her role as a *rudali*, she gains the opportunity to mock and expose the hypocrisy of the malik-mahajans. The woman who once could not shed tears for her own grief, seen as a sign of depression, turns her mourning into a professional act, transforming it into a source of empowerment.

In this way, Sanichari emerges as a victorious figure embodying subalternity, hegemony, and marginalization. Her journey is marked by hardship, but her continued survival is significant. Drawing from existentialist theory, the novella foregrounds two key concepts: 'existence precedes essence' and individual 'freedom.' These ideas resonate strongly through Sanichari's character, whose existential spirit inspires hope that exploitation and suffering can eventually be overcome. For Sanichari and the other women in the story, the profession of mourning (*rudali*) offers a means to escape long-standing oppression and pain.

## Conclusion

Indian authors like Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy, and Rohinton Mistry depict the struggles of subaltern communities through themes of caste oppression, colonial and postcolonial violence, gender discrimination, and economic exploitation. These works seek to reclaim subaltern histories, give voice to silenced groups, and expose systemic injustices. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy highlights the lives of socially marginalized groups, especially lower castes and women, emphasizing their silenced voices. The novel explores how caste rules dictate social interactions and sustain inequality. Through fragmented narratives, Roy portrays how subaltern characters resist erasure by reclaiming their histories and memories. The intersection of caste and gender exposes subaltern women to compounded oppression. In novel, *A Fine Balance*, Mistry examines the Parsi community and marginalized groups under political turmoil and economic hardship. His narratives portray poverty, labor exploitation, and systemic neglect faced by the subaltern. Mistry humanizes subaltern lives by focusing on daily struggles and relationships, resisting their reduction to mere victims. His novel, shows how subaltern communities are impacted by broader socio-political corruption and violence. Devi's stories, like *Rudali* and *Draupadi*, foreground indigenous tribes displaced and oppressed by state and capitalist forces. Her characters often experience brutal state and feudal violence but respond with strong resistance and dignity. There is a focus on strong tribal women who challenge patriarchal and state

oppression, redefining subaltern agency. Devi acts as a chronicler of subaltern histories, giving narrative space to marginalized indigenous people. By foregrounding subaltern perspectives, Indian writing contributes to a more inclusive understanding of history and society, emphasizing resistance, identity, and agency amid marginalization.

## REFERENCES


Abraham, M.H. (2000). *A glossary of literary terms.* Harcourt Asia Pvt.Ltd.

Beauvoir, S. de. (1973). *The second sex*. Vintage Books.

Bhabha, H. K. (1992). Redrawing the boundaries: The transformation of English and American studies. In S. Greenblatt & G. Gunn (Eds.), *Postcolonial criticism* (pp.114-131). Modern Language Association.

Das, V. (1998). Subaltern as perspective. In R. Guha (Ed.), *Subaltern studies VI: Writings on South Asian history and society* (pp. 311–315). Oxford University Press.

Devi, M. (1997). Rudali: From fiction to performance. (A. Katyal, Trans.). Seagull Books.

Gandhi, L. (1998). *Postcolonial theory: A critical introduction*. Oxford University Press.Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks* (Q. Hoare & G. Nowell-Smith, Eds. & Trans.). International Publishers.

Guha, R. (Ed.). (1982). *Subaltern studies: Writings on South Asian history and society*. Oxford University Press.

Gupta, V. (2009). Fiction, history and memory. *Mahasweta Devi: A critical reading*. Creative Books.

Katyal, A. (Trans.). (1997). *Rudali: From fiction to performance*. Seagull Books.

Mistry, R. (1996). *A fine balance*. Faber and Faber.

Narang, H. (2014). Politics and poetics of writing/translating Dalit. In S. P. Singha & I. Acharya (Eds.), *Towards social change: Essays on Dalit literature* (p. 122). Orient BlackSwan.

Pandey, G. (2006). The subaltern as subaltern citizen. *Economic and Political Weekly, 41*(46), 4735–4741. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4418914

Prasad, Amar N. (2005). *Arundhati Roy's the god of small things*: *A critical appraisal.* Sarup & Son

Rao, A. (2005). Death of Kotwal: Injury and the politics of recognition. In S. Mayaram, M. S. S. Pandian, & A. Skaria (Eds.), *Subaltern studies XII: Muslims, Dalits, and the fabrications of history* (pp. 145–175). Oxford University Press.

Ross, R. L. (1999). Seeking and maintaining balance: Rohinton Mistry's fiction. *World Literature Today*,*73*(2), 239-44.

Roy, A. (1997). *The god of small things*. India Ink Publishing.

Said, E. (1991). *Orientalism*. Penguin.

Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Spivak, G. C. (1981). French feminism in an international Fframe. *Yale French Studies*, *62*, 154–184. https://doi.org/10.2307/2929898

Spivak, G. C (1986). *Subaltern studies: Deconstructing historiography*. Routledge