

Portrayal of the subalterns in the selected works of
Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy

Thesis submitted to
Mother Teresa Women's University
For the award of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

In
English

By

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June 2019

Summary

Thematic Comparison is the methodology which is chosen. And the twin modes of confrontation of marginality – Passivity and Resistance are used as the framework to study and analyse the chosen works. Resistance Theory of the early modern period, which is a political thought and Theory of Fatalism which is a philosophical doctrine are used to understand the twin modes.

To start with, Marginalization is studied at a deeper level where the three kinds of marginality (individual, community and global) were clearly described with examples. As the detailed survey of the practice of the Caste system and Gender marginality in the country is essential to understand the concept marginality, the next step of study undertaken has been to do a detailed survey of Caste System in India. Under this subject, how various religions practiced caste system amongst them has been studied and alongside, the different people's and different ways of struggles against the practice of caste system has also been studied. Under the study of Gender Marginality in India, the focus has been on the origin of gender discrimination and kinds of discrimination against women. The discrimination in the forms of malnutrition among girls, domestic violence against women, dowry system, honour killings, witch craft, 'agnipravesha' in tribal women, forced prostitution have been brought to light in detail.

After this spade work, the writers considered for the study are taken for the survey about their background lives and their themes and concerns in their works of literature. After studying their family lives, careers and their major focus in their works, the chosen texts written by the two writers have been briefly dealt with.

As the next step, the theories which are used to understand the twin modes of confronting marginality (Resistance theory, theory of fatalism and Antonio Gramsci's cultural hegemony) have been discussed briefly through which the idea of how the theories are applied to understand the theme of the research becomes clear. As Antonio Gramsci has specified, it becomes imperative to understand hegemony to find out its weaknesses so that there can be ways which could be drawn to overcome it. Hence, in the next stage, the selected works of Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy are considered for a thorough examination to find how they have represented marginality in their works. Here different kinds of exploitation by the upper class towards the subalterns are traced and also how the subalterns have rebelled against the hegemony is also

followed. Whether the revolts were successful or not also have been looked into. It was found that one set of marginal people was **passive** and accepted hegemony and exploitation as their fate and continued to suffer silently. And another set has been **resistant** towards the oppression and have fought against their oppressors where some were successful and some were not. The **two modes of confronting marginality** have been very clear through the study of the fictions.

The next step of study considered has been the representation of women who are subaltern of subalterns in the works of the writers. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has mentioned in the introduction to 'Signposts', that 'a major issue is the indices of the status of women'. She has also said that women are poorly faring on all counts in Independent India as it is very clear that violence against women was on the increase in the forms of rape in police custody, deaths inside the family, and sexual harassment at work-sites and on the streets and so on and so forth. While talking about the importance of gender analysis, she moves on to say that, women's issues can no longer be turned into an enclave. Wherefore, in all the sites of action and discourses like culture, religion, law, illiteracy, new social movements concerning dalit, tribal, anti-dam, self-employed women's association etc. gender has begun to figure as an issue as well as a category of analysis. So keeping this view in mind, a thorough survey of the status of women right from the ancient times to the modern period has been undertaken in this thesis. In the process, the investigation has been on the following topics: Status of Indian women in ancient times, status of women in India during medieval period, women during the British rule, Education and Employment opportunities for women, property rights for women, crimes and injustice against women, sexual harassment, dowry, child marriage, female infanticide, domestic violence, trafficking.

The survey about the status of women has been followed by the study of how women are represented in Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy's works. Here also it has been found that just like how women have been undergoing different kinds of exploitation in the male dominated society since ages, the women of the present day also suffer the same kinds of harassment at the hands of men around them. And the plight of women of the lower caste is still worse as their oppression is double folded at the hands of their own community men as well at the upper class society. Just like any other marginal group, it has been found that there are women who are **passive** as they think that it is their fate and no modifications can be made. On the other hand,

there are women who rebel and **resist** the exploitation and try to fight for their rights in their own way.

The final part of the survey in the thesis has been that of how the marginal groups are represented in the non-fiction written by the two writers. Mahasweta Devi has written many articles after 1980s in different journal and newspapers on bond labour and contract labour problems. The system of witch hunting has also been one of the problems faced by the marginal group which is brought into focus. In the various articles the writer also has talked about the various resistance movements undertaken by the marginals to resist the injustice done to them. The study of these articles has revealed that though there are many marginal groups who have been passive towards the exploitation against them, there are many more marginal communities who involve themselves and take initiatives with the help of the social workers in the social movements as steps towards their own salvation.

Findings

It was found that a genuine step of the Centre towards the marginal groups to bring them to the mainstream would definitely be beneficial for the oppressed. Otherwise, their struggles would have no meaning and strength. Even in the study of Arundhati Roy's 'The Greater Common Good', an article compiled in the book 'The Algebra of Infinite Justice' by the writer herself, there have been many tribals who have been **passive** and many more who had resolved to **resist** injustice and have actively involved in NBA and tried to get solution to their problem. Their movements gained momentum after many people like Medha Patkar, a social activist from the Centre supported and hence beneficial to an extent. Another long article 'Walking with the Comrades', written by Arundhati Roy has been taken for the thorough study. This article in which the writer reveals the background reasons and lives of the Maoists in Dandakaranya forest, shows the fact that the marginal group of people will never stay silent anymore by suffering the injustice done against them. It has also been evident that if the Centre doesn't give the marginal group of people a chance to live their lives, violence would be the only consequence.

According to David Arnold, Gramsci says that ‘subalterns are being in perpetual ferment, but as a mass...incapable of giving a centralized expression to their aspirations and needs’¹ and hence passive towards injustice against them. Gramsci also says that ‘without outside direction, subaltern movements were likely to lapse into anarchic turbulence’² which is very evident in the reaction and the kind of fight the Maoists fighting according to Arundhati Roy in her article ‘Walking with the Comrades’ or they would ‘be re-absorbed within the prevailing hegemonic order’ as could be seen in many tribals and low-caste people who had to get back to bonded labour system as seen in Mahasweta Devi’s articles.

Further David Arnold has said that Gramsci’s purpose of coining the concept of hegemony was to explain why state power was very difficult to overthrow and why the subaltern classes appeared to accept their subordination. He has also said that their movements have failed and hence are always subject to the authority of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up. When this explanation of Gramsci has been applied in the Indian context, his explanation can be considered valid after studying the NBA about which Arundhati Roy has written in her article ‘The Greater Common Good’.

As Arnold further says, the concept of hegemony has made Gramsci understand the subjectivity of subordination. According to his understanding, it was not just externally imposed, but was internalised by the subaltern as a part of their culture and their consciousness. A parallel thought runs through the argument of Uma Chakravarty in ‘Gendering Caste’ when she talks about the uncomfortable customs that women are following, which they do not want to come out of, as they have internalized the thought that it should be the way a woman has to live. Gramsci says that this concept of hegemony, which is accepted by the subalterns, virtually denies all independence of thought to the community. So finally he felt that it is important to understand hegemony to find its weaknesses and to overcome it.

¹Reference taken from David Arnold’s ‘*Gramsci and Peasant Subalternity in India*’, Mapping Subaltern Studies, edited by Vinayak Chaturvedi, London: New Left Review, pp.24-49, 2000. e-book.

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At this juncture, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' adds on to the thought of hegemony which is the term Spivak borrows from Gramsci. In her essay, she takes the finest example of Sati system in India and shows how this practice projects the patriarchal dominance and also how women have no say about it. Moreover, they are trained from childhood that this kind of widow self-immolation is their highest kind of duty which is more religious and respectable.

Here, Spivak comes up with an argument that the system of Sati should have been considered as an act of martyrdom. A martyr does not die for the sake of the self but sacrifices himself or herself for the sake of the others though he/she does not have any personal advantages. Spivak strongly feels that the women who are burnt alive are no less than the martyrs. And that this martyrdom should have been a kind of protest against the society which had failed to give any kind of individual identity for the women.

Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern speak?' is a rhetorical question as Spivak herself says and she never had any thought of expecting any kind of answers to this question. She purely intended to mention the obstacles and sufferings of the subalterns. Through her essay, she discusses in depth the problems of widow sacrifice and repeatedly tries to prove her standpoint that the subaltern cannot speak. If the subalterns are women, their condition is still more complicated and worse. Spivak very strongly argues that every woman will have a voice of her own within herself, a voice of opposition and disapproval though she satisfies the expectations of the men and the society. She believes that all those women who are subjected to the patriarchal exploitation and atrocities would want to have their own opinion about whether they accept the proposition or deny it. In this way women definitely would want to make their position clear to all but they are never given a chance to voice out their opinions.

As the historians have failed to document the voice of the oppressed, especially the subaltern women, it is very difficult to retrieve the subaltern voices. With respect to women it is still more complicated as they are stuck between the colonial power structure and the Hindu religious beliefs.

Her essay became a controversial one and started receiving comments critically from different corners of the world. One of the major reasons of the controversy was the usage of the word

‘speak’ instead of ‘talk’. Many of the critics were seen to use the sentence ‘subaltern cannot talk’ in the place of ‘subaltern cannot speak’. The difference between the act of talking and speaking is clearly understood by every individual. The act of talking can be very passive but the act of speaking needs a different set of codes. The speaker should be more active and expressive where the listener will be able to decode the message given by the speaker. Here the feedback is immediate and hence the achieving of the objective is more effective.

But Spivak was very clear about the idea that the subaltern cannot speak. At this point, she specially emphasizes on the element of noise which is actually influenced by racial, socio-economic and cultural factors. She moves on to say that the voice of the subaltern which is supposed to reach the non-subaltern group is lost in the noise. The main purpose of the communication from the speaker would be achieved only when it is conveyed to the receivers in the same form without any deviations.

Spivak further substantiates her statement ‘the subaltern cannot speak’ by implying that the subalterns are capable of pronouncing their opinions very well and also are capable of going to any extent to make their stand point clear and visible in front of the authorities. But the real problem lies in the listeners who are non-subaltern and who are not ready to listen to the subalterns. They are neither in a position to understand nor listen to the voice of the subalterns. The noise based on the social and economic factors of the region contributes in the distorting of the message given by the subalterns and hence the communication system cannot achieve its goal of reaching the receiver.

Spivak says that this is what happens with a woman ready for self-immolation. She may be trying to cry out about the loss that she would have undergone and still wish to continue to live. But the funeral pyre becomes the first and the last stage for her to communicate. And at that point nobody would have any patience to listen to her cry. Hence the communication system fails in this case as the woman is not in a position to convince the listeners. Spivak further tries to say that the society does not allow the subaltern to speak at all. Since many years, subalterns have been subjected to the colonial rule, and only the voice of the colonizer could be heard prominently. Though the colonizers left the country, subalterns never had any escape from the subjugation. They were again suppressed by the elite upper class people. And in the case of women, they continue to suffer and seem to have no scope of raising their voices or any kind of empowerment. According to Spivak’s theory of subalternity, unless the subalterns continue

to make their voices be heard at the centre, there is no salvation.

Further keeping Spivak's theory of subalternity in mind and applying Gramsci's thought of hegemony in the Indian context, an attempt has been made in this thesis to understand the nature of hegemony, by studying the plight of marginal groups as represented in the fiction and non-fiction of Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy. The twin mode of confronting marginality as a framework for the entire study has given the overview of the nature hegemony and depressing plight of the various groups of marginality as well. This study would make way to find many more ways and means other than the ones which are shown as projected in the works, to help the marginals' voice be heard by the Centre and also help them move from periphery to the Centre.

Moving ahead, the researchers interested in the language study can carry on with the study of language used by the writers either individually or comparatively to see how language is used in terms of tone, linguistic devices etc. to project the plight of marginality and hegemony as well. There can also be a study of the use of politics regionally and nationally in these works to understand the works of the writers from a different perspective.