



## Representation of Resistance: Subalternity in the Novels of Roy and Desai

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### Abstract

*The term subaltern refers to a subordinate position in terms of class, gender, race and culture. A subaltern is someone with a low ranking in a social, political or other hierarchy. It can also mean someone who has been marginalized or oppressed. It was originally used by Antonio Gramsci for the proletariat whose voice was not heard. It has since come to stand in for all subordinate subjects in society and has been revived in history to draw a distinction between the elite and the non-elite within colonized society. It has been almost thirty-five years since Ranajit Guha has taken an initiative in 1982 with his edited series on Indian historiography to provide an alternative history of the subaltern and the silenced. Since then, the crisis, prevailing in the Indian society on the lines of class, caste, gender and religion drew the attention of the subalterns. However, the changing scenario has posed new challenges for the actualization of the subaltern existence in different domains. It is, therefore, important to investigate the culture of subordination and a counter-culture of resistance. Postcolonial literature is the result of a clash between imperial culture and indigenous cultural practices. Postcolonial literature and criticism inquires into and analyses the consequences of colonization. It sees and re-examines history from the point of view of the colonized. . It examines how natives have been represented in the colonial text to create an epistemological framework that will help the colonizers to claim their domination over the 'other' party. Postcolonial theory studies this resistance and counter-discourse which emerged from the indigenous literature as a reaction against the domination of the colonizers. The colonized country suffers from the cultural domination of the colonizer, and it requires political and cultural identity. Subaltern Studies is an offshoot of recent postcolonial criticism. Resistance is the tool through which the dominated and oppressed subalterns made their appearance more prominent. Representation of the subalterns and representation of resistance has become a very vital ground to examine the colonial and postcolonial relations as they were and how they are changing. The present research paper intends to make an enquiry into the representation of subalternity and resistance in the fictions of Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai.*

**Keywords:** Subaltern, Subordination, Resistance, Postcolonial, History, Culture.

The word 'subaltern' may be applied to any person or group that is powerless, dominated, underprivileged, disadvantaged, and inferior to other dominant or powerful groups. A subaltern is, thus, anyone who is not holding a rank politically, socially,



economically and intellectually. They are subalterns because they hold a lower position in a hierarchy of command and dominance. In this way, subalterns constitute a larger population than elite in any paradigm of power and command. A subaltern group may constitute peasants, workers, children, female, tribes or minority of any kind who are denied the hegemonic power and are subjected to it. The present form of the word ‘subaltern’ is developed from late-Latin word ‘*subalternus*’ which is made of two words ‘sub-’ and ‘alternus’ where ‘sub-’ means under, beneath and behind; and ‘alternus’ means ‘one after the other’.

Italian Marxist scholar Antonio Gramsci used it for the first time in relation to class struggle in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Non-hegemonic groups or classes were addressed as subordinate, subaltern and instrumental by Gramsci. In his use of the word ‘subaltern’, Gramsci was particularly concerned with workers and peasants of the time. As in a military office, a subaltern has no autonomous initiative in any plan of construction, and they work only as a secondary person to carry out jobs already prepared for them. The subaltern class is also inferior to the dominant elite class and is supposed to follow the commands of the elite class. He stresses to revive the history of the subaltern in his phenomenal work ‘*The Prison Notebook*’ (1966). In its original Gramscian context, ‘subaltern’ referred solely to peasants who had not been integrated into Marx’s conception of the industrial capitalist system.

Subaltern studies began its impressive career in England at the end of 1970s, when conversations on subaltern themes among a small group of English and Indian led to a proposal to launch a new journal in India. Oxford University Press in New Delhi instead agreed to publish three volumes of essays called *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. These appeared annually from 1982 and their success stimulated three more volumes in the next five years, all edited by Ranjit Guha. At the inception of the project, Guha was concerned with the history of the common folk that had been subjected to the historiography of nationalist and Marxist writers. His aim was to address any group dominated by the state. The term ‘subaltern’ has been used as a general attribute of subordination in South Asian studies to address the issues of class, caste, gender, religion, age, and office. However, when talking from a particular point of view, especially in consideration to the first six volumes of *Subaltern Studies*, it addressed mainly workers, agricultural labourers, and the peasants only. In the later years, the concept of subaltern became a hot topic of discussion in post-colonial criticism. In 1985 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak brought language and epistemological enquiry in the periphery of subaltern studies. In her very influential work ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ she questions the approach of the subalternists in dealing with the subaltern concept.

Though the history of resistance can be said as old as the history of colonialism and domination but in the current scenario, the systematic study of resistance is rooted in Marxism and mainly in postcolonialism. The modern enlightenment project and postmodern denial of it have brought a paradigmatic shift in the critical stand of the thinkers and provided them with a new perspective to review all colonial situations and propagation. Resistance is one of the devices which have been analyzed by means of multiple approaches by social and



literary thinkers. The multiple approaches in examining resistance resulted in the pluralistic and discursive conception of resistance and made it very difficult to get a static and complete definition of resistance. The form of resistance is always conditioned by various factors like its structure (organized or unorganized), situation, context, culture, agency, place, aims, ideology, and opposition. Domination and subordination are the forms of power play that works on various assumptions and impositions. They are all directed towards seizing the individuality and agency of the person. The core intention of the dominant is to turn its subject into a null entity without any identity. However, resistance seeks to recover that identity and consciousness. Subordination seeks to distance the two groups: the dominant and the subaltern. A subaltern realises its identity in the form of difference from the dominant. The recurring incidents of marginalization and suppression leave a subaltern in a state of dissatisfaction.

The subalterns interpret their identity with reference to the values suggested by the dominant. Thus, their interpretations of self or the identification of self do not completely belong to them. The practices like acceptance-rejection-neutrality, good-bad, faithfulness-disloyalty, etc. are created outwardly for the subaltern by the elite. His/her behaviour is judged on the standards made by the powerful groups. The effort to see the self is not easy in any way for the down and subordinated. Since perceiving anything is conditioned by perceptions and interpretations, it is not free from the hegemonic discourses. Secondly, this clash of personal ideas and other's ideas does not necessarily results in questioning the artificiality of morality, but sometimes in punishing oneself too, as in *The God of Small Things*, "Velutha shrugged and took the towel away to wash. And rinse. And beat. And wring. As though it was his ridiculous, disobedient brain" (Roy, 214). However, this self-arduous attitude cannot hold the fire for a long within, as it does not fully satisfy the agony. It takes time to break the so-called moral lines and laws, but the dissatisfaction and sense of difference grows on to erupt someday.

Desai, on the other hand, depicts a subordination that causes mental and emotional suffering for the subaltern. Unlike Roy, the characters of Desai undergo some serious psychic upheaval where their philosophical positioning are in juxtaposition to the unacceptable reality of the outer world. She explores, again and again, the fractured identities of the modern men. The novels clearly show that apart from the strategic social subalternity there is psychological subalternity that forces an individual to crave for something else that s/he possesses. Throughout his life, Sampath was thought to be a sluggish idiot yet he is a self-reflecting person. His disagreement with the prevalent mode of life is expressed when one day he was thinking about his life,

How he hated his life. It was a never-ending flow of misery. It was a prison he had been born into. The one time he had a little bit of fun, he was curtailed and punished. He was born unlucky, that's what it was. All about him the neighborhood houses seemed to rise like a trap, a maze of staircases and walls with windows that opened only to look into one another. (Desai, HGO 43)



Arundhati Roy highlights the hierarchical power structure in a patriarchal society in Kerala that is already full of numerous social inequalities. She maintains an atmosphere of tension around her characters that pushes the readers to catch up on the unpleasant happenings around the characters. An intense subordination has been imposed on these characters, which sometimes result even in the death of the subalterns. The cruel, unfair and unjustified subordination is forced on them without considering them a living entity. Their voices are either dislocated or ignored, and their existence is not worth considering. In the novel, *The God of Small Things*, Estha was more of a thinker in the two (Rahel and Estha). Most of the time we see him compromising with the circumstances, yet we cannot deny the presence of self-consciousness in him. He used to grow silent as the days pass. In later years, it was hard to notice him when he was among people. He grew more and more accustomed to the background. The act of getting vanished was his conscious effort to contemplate his own self. “He began to do the housework. As though in his own way he was trying to earn his keep” (Roy, 11). He does not want to be an object of other’s desire. His denial of his own presence was the mark of his consciousness. The dominant, even if they want, cannot deny this presence of consciousness in the subaltern. They are well aware of it though they would like to hide it. Vellya Pappen was anxious about his son. He, like his masters, was well aware of Velutha’s attitude. “It was not what he said, but the way he said it. Not what he did, but the way he did it” (Roy, 76). His self-awareness destroyed the peace of the giant personalities of the society.

The questioning spirit, self-awareness, and action of the individual are always conditioned by a particular ‘intent’. This ‘intent’ may bring a variety of ideas in one’s mind depending on the circumstances, individual subjects and the things desired. However, in one word, this intent signifies ‘freedom’ for thinking, acting and living a life of one’s own choices and selections. Biju and cook represent the struggling individuals who want to earn money to transform their social condition. When Biju was tired of injustice and humiliation he was subjected to, he bursts out saying, “Without us living like pigs,” said Biju, “what business would you have? This is how you make your money, paying us nothing because you know we can’t do anything, making us work day and night because we are illegal...” (Desai, IoL, 188). However, resistance is a matter of an individual’s choice as to when s/he wants to put the thoughts into action. In *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, Pinky does not wait for her complaints to grow enough as to erupt someday, rather she decides to search her way and proceed on that before her emotional blast. She contemplates,

...her brother was quite right. There was no reason for her to drown herself in a bucket of tears, and neither would she sit and suffer through feeling like some faulty firework, with all the sparks flying inside her instead of blazing outward in a display that would surely create some sort of effect, make some sort of an explosion. And an explosion, she knew, is never without a certain amount of satisfaction. (HGO, 111)

Different things intervene in the psychological and philosophical construction of identity every time, and the person is compelled to recreate it. Yet recreation and



modification of identity is never a simple process. The person seeks freedom to model and remodel one's psychic perception of self. The socio-political setting of the characters has made their method of struggle fairly distinct. The authors have provided the characters with the uniqueness of their personality, which further added to the diversity of their struggle. The idea of freedom operates at two levels. At first level, an individual craves for materialistic freedom: freedom to buy anything, freedom to do any job, freedom to move anywhere, etc. The fulfilment of these desires is important to bring confidence in the individuals. We can see the labourers fighting for their right to get the job of their choice, "We are laborers on the tea plantations, coolies dragging heavy loads, soldiers. And are we allowed to become doctors and government workers, owners of the tea plantations? No! We are kept at the level of servants" (Roy, 158). At another level, the desire to be free tends to be more intense and urgent because it is spiritual in nature. It is the freedom of the being and establishment of an agency that is forbidden in a hegemonic hierarchical system. The effect of power in the hierarchical order of the social and political system is enough to dislocate or overlook the active will in the subaltern.

Recognition of that spirit will require providing them with space and the intention of the dominant is to erase that space. Chacko reiterates this idea when he tells Ammu that she does not have 'Locusts Stand I' and "What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine" (Roy, 57). However, does that stop Ammu from thinking about herself? Does that stop her from advancing on her way to love? Or has it made Ammu afraid of the big ones of society? The answer is no. She was not afraid of advancing on her way of love. She kept loving Velutha in her heart. Her grievances against societal duplicity also continue to accumulate. "It was what she had battling inside her. An unmixable mix. The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber" (Roy, 44). Ammu was struggling within to get out of the suppressing morality and patriarchal norms. Ammu grew tired of their proprietary handling of her. "She wanted her body back. It was hers" (Roy, 222). She could not hold her anger within forever. So, she was waiting for the right time for her desires to be fulfilled.

When suppression and humiliation cross their limits, they have to face overt forces against themselves in the form of protest and social revolution. Primarily, these overt forces germinate from perceiving the difference in behaviour of the dominant for the subordinates. The difference in behaviour for different groups creates an emotional imbalance and mental tension that lead to inward agitation. This agitation is responsible for an inward upheaval that further leads an individual to resist. There are a number of acts that can be counted as a clear signal of open resistance. The behaviour may be that of the disapproval in the form of revolutionary agitation (particularly a group act) where the suppressed group forms a collective either for non-agreement or to demand the authority for betterment. The novels *Inheritance of Loss* and *The God of Small Things* projects such protests again and again: one in the North-East place of Kalimpong and other in the South state Kerala. Local people could not put up with the injustice, corruption, negligence and peripheral attitude of government





anymore. They demand their own land i.e. Gorkhaland. Desai presents a vivid picture of protest handled by the locals of Kalimpong:

...the new posters in the market referring to old discontents, the slogans scratched and painted on the side of government offices and shops. "We are stateless," they read. "It is better to die than live as slaves," "We are constitutionally tortured. Return our land from Bengal..."

... But then one day fifty boys, members of the youth wing of the GNLF, gathered to swear an oath at Mahakaldara to fight to the death for the formation of a homeland, Gorkhaland. Then they marched down the streets of Darjeeling, took a turn around the market and the mall. "Gorkhaland for Gorkhas. We are the liberation army." They were watched by the pony men and their ponies... (IoL, 126)

Similarly, we find a description of the Naxalite movement in Roy's novel. The Naxalites have struggled so long for their land and rights, yet they have nothing in their hands, "They organised peasants into fighting cadres, seized land, expelled the owners and established People's Courts to try Class Enemies" (Roy, 68).

Resistance is neither just an act that has been shown outwardly through violent ways, nor it is something that always grows inside for liberation of an individual or a group. Resistance is also a provision for a hopeful future. However, they are imagined and attempted to be fruitful in the long run, for people of other time (may be the next generation) or other groups. The initiator may fail to bring changes for itself, but the agency within, let not stop the dreamer from dreaming. No one knows the result of such a dream venture, but this hope provides the dreamer to uphold one's courage in the present adverse situation. The cook in *Inheritance of Loss* sends his son to America to become a big and rich man so that he can see his son free from slavery. All his life he has just obeyed his masters. He cannot go beyond serving his masters, but his son can do many good things in his life. His son can free the cook from slavery with his earned money. Moreover, he has sent his son to U.S.A. which is a prestigious act in itself. He takes pride in it. "Her (doctor's) son was there as well. He shared this with a doctor! The most distinguished personage in town" (IoL, 85). He does not know whether his son will come with money or not, or he will be out of a life of servitude or not, but his hope made his life bearable to him.

*The God of Small Things* presents some more examples of implicit resistance where the rebel does not want to change anything but s/he is too full to accept the filth of the world any further. In such condition, an individual like Estha withdrew himself from the decision-making world around himself. His retreat was not meant to stop him from taking decision for anyone. He rather did not want to be an object of other's thought and decision.

Over time he had acquired the ability to blend into the background of wherever he was—into bookshelves, gardens, curtains, doorways, streets—to appear inanimate, almost invisible to the untrained eye. It usually took strangers a while to notice him even when they were in the same room with him. It took them even longer to notice that he never spoke. Some never noticed at all. Estha occupied very little space in the world. (Roy, 10-11)



The subject position of a subaltern makes him/her actualize his/her identity from two (let there be two categories for the time being: dominant and subordinate) passages: one as s/he really is and another how s/he is perceived by the superiors. The latter method of interpreting and defining one's identity has a long-lasting effect on the individuals. This line of argument clearly describes the dilemma and alienation of the Judge (IoL) and Pappachi (TGST). They are ill at ease with their Indian-ness of which they are a part. Their soul belonged to the colonial states ruled by supposedly intelligent and sophisticated race of Englishmen. They revered everything that is English. However, it put them only in a strange condition. Gyan ridicules the judge to be a man "with the fake English accent and the face powdered pink and white over dark brown" (IoL, 176). Pappachi was also a great imitator of English ways of life and "Ammu said that Pappachi was an incurable British CCP, which was short for *chhi-chhi poach* and in Hindi meant shit-wiper. Chacko said that the correct word for people like Pappachi was *Anglophile*" (Roy, 52). Thus, double consciousness of the subordinate is capable of disfiguring one's idea of identity. The person before being conscious of oneself becomes conscious of the other's idea of his/her. The idea of double consciousness is best materialised in the character of Vellya Pappen. His two eyes symbolise his two consciousness: his stone eye stands for his lack of self-awareness and from the other eye he only receives the message of loyalty for his benefactor. Since his one eye is lost, he cannot see himself i.e. he is unable to find his identity. His other eye is the symbol of grace and favour by his masters so that he can perceive himself only from their given eye i.e. from an available perspective.

In the novels of Kiran Desai, the issue of identity is related to the physical and emotional displacement of the characters and their existential quest. Her characters, again and again, express the loss of roots in their setting. The person who recognises the clutches of oppressive power over itself tends to deny and escape from it. In her novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, Kiran Desai subverts the political and religious notions through her satire. These high ideals of human life, especially in a place like India where they are worshipped, have settled in the commonplace and everyday world of the people. She argues that religion is created by people, and it's not a given thing. The satirical representation helps us to view how seriousness can be silly and a self-imposed foolery. For those who are involved in the whole state of affairs, it is so sacred a thing, but the observer finds it quite hilarious and ridiculous. She describes how petty considerations acquire such big features that they turn out to be so difficult to handle:

Below his tree, two fervent camps of devotees had been formed: one was adamant that the monkeys be removed so as to save the Monkey Baba and the holy atmosphere of his hermitage; the other was furious that these sacred animals were to be thus humiliated and turned from their rightful home. The battle lines had been drawn and everybody even remotely associated with the dispute felt compelled to involve themselves and make their voices heard. (HGO, 158)

A brand-new religion has been made in the name of Sampath who earlier was disrespected by everyone. The bureaucratic system of India of the time was also ridiculed.



The Brigadier, his soldiers, and the district collector, in spite of being exceptional personalities, are failed to tackle this Shahkot hullabaloo.

Denial and subversion of rules take a more deadly turn in *The God of Small Things*. It is a novel of revolt. It tells a tale of resistance even through its little characters. Estha and Rahel being angry with Baby Kochamma do not appreciate and enjoy her song and when, “she looked at Estha and Rahel, waiting for them to say “Coo-coo.” They didn’t” (Roy, 87). More than anything else it proclaims to be a demonstration of fractured love laws of society. Baby Kochamma loved Father Mulligan but leads a life of celibacy that is forbidden for a woman in her religion. She denied bringing anyone else in her life, and only Father Mulligan’s memories can traverse into her thought. Though not accepted by society and religion she fantasises Mulligan after his death as her life partner, in a plane where physicality dissolves.

Once he was dead, Baby Kochamma stripped Father Mulligan of his ridiculous saffron robes and re-clothed him in the Coca-Cola cassock she so loved. (Her senses feasted, between changes, on that lean, concave, Christ like body.) She snatched away his begging bowl, pedicured his horny Hindu soles and gave him back his comfortable sandals. She re-converted him into the high-stepping camel that came to lunch on Thursdays. (Roy, 298)

The study of resistance calls for an analysis of the everyday behaviour of the subaltern. It is the site where many stories are created, performed, ignored and sometimes not noticed at all. The language of everyday behaviour has much to say about the resistance of the subaltern groups. Giving words to one’s feeling is a direct attempt to show agreement or disagreement with any logic, but language is not words only. Expression of emotions and thinking is well reflected in non-verbal language too. The novelists have portrayed the characters in a political and socio-cultural setup where they are subordinated and suppressed. The subalterns, though, are not powerful enough to oppose the dominant directly, they are determined and face power in different indirect manners. Their individual level of resistance makes a complete subordination impossible. Roy has very aptly delineated the realistic picture of the subalterns in her novel. Each line written by Roy shows resistance. It is not just a story of a woman who has not given her due rights in a male-dominated world, rather the novel highlights the structural subversion of powerless irrespective of gender, caste, and class. She acclaims,

...my writing is not really about nations and histories, it’s about power. About the paranoia and ruthlessness of power. About the physics of power. I believe that the accumulation of vast unfettered power by a state or a country, a corporation or an institution—or even an individual, a spouse, friend or sibling—regardless of ideology, results in excesses.... (Roy, OPGE, 11-12)

As the novels of Kiran Desai portray a sense of loss, disillusionment and exile, the struggling spirit of the characters cannot be overlooked. They start from a state of loss and fight against the situation that has made them at loss and thus they gradually grow. They all have a bright dream in their imagination, a better tomorrow that can be achieved some day if





tried honestly. The indomitable will of the characters show their ability to acknowledge their identity and their efforts to maintain its integrity.

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