

Subalterns and Evolution of their voices in the Literature Depicting Mahasweta Devi's RUDALI, R.K. Naryana's *THE DARK ROOM*, Bharti Mukharjis' *JASMINE* and Alice Walker's *THE COLOR PURPLE*

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The term Subaltern is closely related to the disempowered. Subaltern issues are inseparable part of the society since categorization and marginalization are rampant in every society. Indian society is in the grip of the menace of a divide between the marginalized and the privileged, the mighty and the weak. The privileged and the mighty, on the one hand have the upper hand in all matters and miss no opportunity in staking claim over the wealth that should naturally and equitably fall to the share of all those born on this earth. They spend this wealth on their physical comfort and personal glory. The marginalized, on the other hand, are forced to live from hand to mouth notwithstanding their diligence and austerity. Given these conditions, the rich are growing richer and the poor, poorer. Society always remains categorized and subaltern issues are the consequences of these categorizations. But what actually subaltern is? Subaltern is one of the most talked about words in literature today.

The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* explains the subaltern as, 'an officer in British Army below the rank of captain, especially a second lieutenant' (1434). Hence the subaltern, according to this definition is only secondary rank wise position of an officer in British Army.

The 1993 edition of *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* included 'history' for the first time as a context for defining 'Subaltern'. The

word has long past. It was immensely applied to vassals and peasants in late-medieval English.

By 1700, it denoted lower ranks in the military, suggesting peasants' origins. By 1800, different authors wrote from a subaltern perspective, published novels and histories about military campaigns in India and America. G. R. Gleig (1796 -1888), who wrote biographies of Robert Clive, Warren Hastings and Thomas Munro, mastered this genre. Later on an Italian thinker and philosopher, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) in the first half of twentieth century, began to weave ideas about subaltern identity into theories of class struggle. He declared that the 'subaltern' was the subjected underclass in a society on whom the dominant power exerts its hegemonic influence. Gramsci was not influential in the English reading world, however, until Raymond Williams promoted his theory in 1977, well after translations of *The Modern Prince* (1957) and *Prison Notebooks* (1966) had appeared. By 1982, Gramsci's ideas were in wide circulation. History, seen thus, is one of the several factors along with politics and anthropology on which the idea of subaltern is built.

The discussion on the term has prompted immense disagreement about how the term "subaltern" has to be defined. There have been diverse viewpoints regarding what constitutes subaltern. Should the term designate only the

tribal and lower castes or should it encapsulate all those people suffering from similar experiences of social ostracism? Does the analogous mould of experience make all the exploited people, women for instance, "subaltern"? These are vexed questions that have prompted immense discussion in the inter-disciplinary fields in recent decades. It is important to elucidate this before embarking on the crucial arguments of this study. The term to be dealt in the present study needs to be elucidated more clearly. Since a single adequate definition is absent for subaltern it is useful to examine various designations accorded to it by different thinkers.

Admittedly, each designation carries its own nuances, all corresponding subjectivity and subordination. As discussed earlier, subaltern, according to the dictionary, is a person holding a subordinate position, originally a junior officer in army. However, the term "subaltern" is seen to have undergone semantic metamorphosis since its origin. Earlier, in the Middle English period, it simply denoted the peasants, subordinated or otherwise. But by 1700, "subaltern" shifted its meaning and came to designate the military officer of inferior rank.

In India, the term "subaltern", which initially designated Tribal and Dalits, was expanded in later decades to encompass women and other weaker sections in the society. Today, it is used collectively to denote people who are marginalized and exploited by the dominant castes/classes. Dr. Ashok Sen define the 'Subaltern' in his book *Capital, Class and Community* as ...the entire people that is subordinate in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office, or in any other way. (203)

According to him, subaltern is an umbrella term which envelops all types of subjectivities -

class, caste, race and gender. Arguably, the people who are designated as subaltern have certain shared experience in connection with the conditions of their subjugation. Today, the term "subaltern" has become an all-encompassing classification which, besides building a linkage among the different subjugated communities, homogenizes the otherwise heterogeneous groups of oppressed people. Viewed from this perspective, it can be seen that, subaltern is a social residuum, necessarily misrepresented in that the subaltern does not access the social structures of representation. Subaltern is either non-existent or forcibly accommodated in the peripheries by the dominant classes/castes. It is a condition of relative inferiority within a social order, structured according to the rules of hegemony which perpetually reinforces the condition of marginality. All those groups that, for whatever reason, remain outside representation are, then, subaltern. Women, for instance, are subalterns according to this concept, in so far as they are seen inferior in the society. In the present paper work, which studies select works by different authors, subaltern is a pivotal term around which the whole discussion revolves.

Mahasweta Devi, R.K.Narayana, Bharti Mukharji and Alice Walker are proactive figures in literature, represents those who are not permitted to represent themselves, by vehemently defying all existing ideals. They lend visibility and voice to the depressed and erased people and thereby question the arbitrary referents of various hegemonic centers. They bring to fore the silenced and marginalized, be it in terms of class, cast gender or community. Tribal, lower-castes, bonded laborers and economically deprived people find a

sympathetic and full-fledged treatment at the hands of these writers. For the people in adversity, they are a 'torch-bearer' in true sense of word.

Their protagonists are victims of social exploitation. Women in their stories have to undergo oppression not just because of gender consideration but also because of caste and class to which they belong.

The present paper discusses the journey of the protagonists for empowerment in *Rudali, The Dark Room, Jasmine and The Color Purple*. The protagonists in these stories Sanichari, Savitri, Jasmine, celie- are women burdened with society and political oppression. Though they all live on the periphery of society, they can still be differentiated. They all belong to different strata of society some are economically rich and some are poor, representing oppression and activism both. All of them are 'dispossessed, abused and exploited in one way or the other.

Mahaswetadevi's *Rudali* is one of the prominent works in Indian literature depicting the plight of a subaltern, Sanichari, the protagonist. The story is her journey to empowerment in a feudal society where everything, including the life of the villagers, is controlled by the malik-mahajans. Sanichari, the ill-fated, as she considered herself, is a low caste Ganju woman. The story revolves around the life of Sanichari. It is an 'Ironic tale of exploitation, struggle and survival and is concerned with the evolution and growth in the personality of the protagonist. She is a woman with higher potentiality but has not good luck and right social channel. She feels and shares what the society gives her. Even her name has a symbolical meaning Sanichari, one who is born on the Saturday and is taken as inauspicious. She is

spokesman of all contemporary poor and illiterate women.

In the story Sanichari does not get empowerment in a few years but it takes her whole life. Her empowerment can be divided into many categories but the most important is her economic empowerment. Sanichari gets the solution keys for her sufferings at the end of the novel. She fights against the adverse social setup. She is a poor, low caste woman, and unlucky because of her birth on the inauspicious day of Saturday. She lives in the Tahad village, which is the centre of the whole story. The setting is obviously rural where Ganjus and Tushads are in majority. She is a Ganju by caste. Poverty, oppression, exploitation and prostitution are the major social abuses around which the whole story of the novel revolves. Sanichari is a social victim. She is sharing the poverty and oppression of the Malik Mahajans with other villagers. She loses her husband in a religious ceremony where he dies of cholera after drinking the milk; she also loses her child who is suffering from tuberculosis. She gets hard blow when her daughter-in-law and her grandson leave home. It is a perfect social novel and anti-fiction that reflects the truth of the time. Mahasweta Devi has perfectly depicted all the social evils in the novel i.e. exploitation, oppression, issue of survival, prostitution and role of community. Tears, which generally symbolize emotions, feelings and sentiments, become instruments of vengeance in the hands of Sanichari. Her story is her journey to empowerment wherein she also leads the other low caste poor women working as whores.

R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room (1938)* presents a picture of domestic disharmony. Ramani, the office secretary of Engladia Insurance

Company in Malgudi is very domineering and cynical in his ways. He governs his house according to his own sweet will. As he is always irritable, the atmosphere in his house is generally gloomy and his wife, Savitri, his children and servants always remain in a state of terror.

Savitri is a true symbol of traditional Indian womanhood. Savitri, whose place is in the dark room (kitchen), is a timid, silent, suffering and self-sacrificing Indian wife. She is very beautiful and deeply devoted to her husband. Ramani, however, does not respond to her sentiments even with ordinary warmth. Though they have been married for fifteen years, his wife has received nothing from her husband but rebukes and abuses. Even his children get more rebukes from him than expressions of his fatherly love. Soon there arrives at the scene a beautiful lady, Shanta Bai, who has deserted her husband and joined Engladia Insurance Company. Ramani succumbs to her beauty and coquettish ways. Ramani spends nights in Shanta Bai's company. Savitri feels disturbed but she decided that it would be better to suffer in silence than to venture question. When Gangu, the talkative friend of Savitri informs her about Ramani's infidelity, she sulks only in self-pity. Perhaps I am old and ugly. How can I help it? I have borne children and slaved for the house. She pathetically prepares herself to win him back by reviving her charm. How pathetically she longs that he may come and love her as boisterously as he loved her in the first week of her marriage. All her dreams are shattered. Her fury is implacable. Her anguish born of self-pity and impotent anger is heart rending. Seeing no way of correcting her erring husband, Savitri revolts against him and in utter frustration and disgust, she leaves her

husband's house with an intention of committing suicide which, she concludes, is the best way to show her emancipation from her husband and the best way of revolt against the tyranny of her husband. Though she is saved by a man, Mari, and is led to live in his village temple, the eternal bond of a traditional mother compels her to come back to her home. The subaltern here despite her short rebellion surrenders to the chauvinistic social setup of the Indian family atmosphere. Unlike Gauri, the heroine in Mulk Raj Anand's *The Old Woman and the Cow*, Savitri has neither the courage nor the independence of spirit that Gauri shows. Gauri leaves her husband's house once and for all, adopts the profession of a nurse and never returns home.

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, which was based on an earlier short story in *The Middleman and Other Stories*, tells the story of a seventeen-year-old girl widowed after her husband's murder in a bomb attack. She and her husband originally planned to move to Florida, but as a result of his death Jasmine continues with the trip on her own. On the way she faces many obstacles as she travels from Florida to New York City to Iowa. Her journey from a small Indian village, with painful childhood memories becomes the instrumental in her fight against fate and her search for self-identity. The prediction of widowhood and exile by an astrologer when she was only seven years old did not bring down her courage to face life; instead she always tried to raise herself above what she thought were blind belief and superstition. She leaves her country, shattered and broken with the tragedies in her life, running away from her own painful and shocking fate, determined to create her own destiny. On reaching the U.S.A, her first

step was to be self-dependent. The challenges she faces in her search for independence and identity make her realize finally that self-dependence is not to be an Indian or an American but to be at peace with herself.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel, made up of letters written by Celie to God and by Nettie to Celie. At the start of the novel, Celie is a fourteen-year-old, vulnerable, abused black girl who addresses her letters to "Dear God." Thirty years later, at the end of the novel, she has forged her own life despite a male-dominated and racially prejudiced society. She fights her way through life and questions everything she has been taught. Her most ambitious challenge is to remake her idea of God as an old, white, bearded male—her antithesis—into a God who encompasses everything and lives within her.

In Celie's first letter to God, we learn that she has been raped by her father, Alfonso. Alfonso told her that she must not tell anybody what happens, except God. After her mother dies, her father marries her off to a man named Albert who is referred to as Mr. ___ until the end of the novel. He already has three children, the oldest of whom is named Harpo. Celie's life in Mr. ___'s home is not much better until her younger sister Nettie comes to live with her. The girls are best friends and everyday Nettie goes off to school but when she comes home, she teaches Celie what she learned that day. Pretty soon however, Mr. ___ decides he doesn't want Nettie there and drives her off. Nettie promises to write but Celie never receives the letters. Celie grows up into an infertile, subservient woman. She does not see herself as happy and gets through each day by thinking that it's almost over. When Harpo brings home his new

wife, Sophia, this sheds new light on Celie's existence. Sophia is everything that Celie is not; loud, bossy, and pants-wearing.

However, this independence scares Celie and when Harpo asks for help controlling his independent wife, she tells him to beat her. This does not go over well and Sofia leaves Harpo. It is at this time that the love of Mr. ___'s life, Shug Avery, comes to visit. She's a traveling singer who's known for her wild ways and for her love of men. But even in the sickly state she comes to Celie, Celie sees her as beautiful and they form a lifelong friendship. Shug opens all sorts of doors for Celie, including showing her that she too is a beautiful woman and Shug teaches her what it really means to make love.

As a result of her relationship with Shug, Celie too learns to be a strong, independent, man slayer. This new personality really shows itself when Celie announces to Mr. ___ that he is a horrible man who never treated her fairly and she is leaving him to go to live in Chicago with Shug. Living in Chicago allows Celie to spread her wings. She opens up her own tailor shop and learns to make pants for both women and men. After several years of this, Celie decides to return south to take care of Harpo and Albert (Mr. ___) but she continues her business.

Although this book centers mainly on Celie and her life, it also focuses on the journeys of the other women who are in her life, including Shug, Nettie, Sophia, and Squeak, Harpo's second wife. Together, these women help one another discover the beauty in them and in life and by leaning on each other, they gain the strength to overcome their oppressive men and live their lives their way. These stories disturb the reader's composure, heightening their awareness about the travails of

wretched existence. There exist a peculiar tension between the world of destitution and poverty and that of upper class avarice and debauchery in these stories. This tension lends uniqueness to her works. This dichotomy makes the reader sympathize with 'Dispossessed' strata of society all the more. These people have been victims of hypocrisy of rich money lenders, feudal lords and the establishment, who can go to any extent to serve their ulterior motives. That ensure that nobody challenge their authority. However, they prove that they are more sensitive and human as compared to those wicked men who masquerade as respectable members of the society.

An in depth analysis of the stories shows that a persistent search for and assertion of an independent, strong, integrated self are dominant themes in the stories. The protagonists, though meek and docile in the beginning turn conscious beings towards the end. They are ready to challenge societal prohibitions that have bound them for long. Sanichari, Savitri, Jasmine and Celie grow maturity and positivity from nihilism and nothingness. The 'Sublatern' comes out of the drudgery of domesticity. The strength with which they carry out their struggle is noteworthy. It is strength that aids them to come out triumphant in the end. They reject toe stereotypical roles assigned to them by the society. The oppressed and the wretched overcome the oppression inflicted upon them with courage and are able to assert themselves in the end.

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