



25

**UNDERSTANDING THE 'SUBALTERN': A CRITICAL STUDY OF
CONTEMPORARY WOMEN NOVELISTS, GITHA HARIHARAN AND
K. R. MEERA**

Deepali Ashok Kumawat

Research Scholar

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University

Chhatrapati Sambhajanagar, MS, India

&

Dr. Nilima Prakash Kale

Associate Professor and Research Guide

Department of English

Dagdojirao Deshmukh College, Waluj,

Chhatrapati Sambhajanagar, MS, India

Abstract:

*The very term 'subaltern' is British. It means of inferior in rank, now a days we can see that this term is used in reference to the person who is depressed, dominated and discriminated considering his/her gender, race, class, caste or sexuality. Incorporating Gramsci an Marxist thoughts, the subaltern school is influenced by various modern and postmodern theories and concepts like feminism, anthropology, post-Marxism, post modernism, with an emphasis on decentralisation of Europeanised histories, Many of the countries with colonial past subaltern studies is multidisciplinary in nature; it connects itself with postcolonial studies, deconstruction history, anthropology , psychology, gender studies and cultural studies. The present research paper deals with various definition and issues aligned with the term subaltern and subalternity. It present a critical study of various kinds of subaltern (the women, the marginalised and oppressed people and black people) portrayed in the novels of Githa Hariharan and K. R. Meera: *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *Hangwoman*.*

Keywords: *Subaltern, Marginalised People, Black and Inferior People. etc.*

*“There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,
There is society where none intrudes,
By the deep Sea, and music in its roar:
I love not Man the less, but Nature more,”*

-Byron, Lord. Childe Harold's Pilgrimage.

Introduction:



One of the root causes of the socio- cultural and political tension in this contemporary time is inequality pervaded all over the world. This inequality of human beings is not limited for economic and financial growth but it is limited to their identity, their rights, and their thoughts to express their views. When we are trying to understand the subaltern specially women we are getting lots of questions in front of us. Means, it's not really easy to understand the women and that's why many writers started writing about their rights their problems which they faced and faces in day today life. A women novelist like K. R. Meera and Githa Hariharan very nicely portrayed the condition of today's women in their novels.

Definition of subaltern:

Subaltern means inferior in rank is a term adopted by Antonio Gramsci to refer to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. The word 'subaltern' stands for inferior rank or status which can be called as subordinate in terms of rank, power, authority and action. In other words it refers to the subordination of class, caste, gender race, language and culture. It also indicates to those groups in society who are subject to those groups in society who are subject to the domination of the ruling classes.

In general subaltern classes include peasants, workers and other groups who have been denied access to hegemonic power. Many writers' talks on subaltern like, Antonio Gramsci, Gayatri Chakrovoty Spivak, Mitchel Foucault, Raymond Williams etc. But the prominent writers who describe subaltern in depth are Antonio Gramsci and Gayatri Chakrovoty Spivak both talks on the subaltern, but their perceptions are different. The term 'subaltern' is the product of this inequality of the world. The recent studies as well as theories on the issues of subalternity is influenced by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian scholar who collected and organised his miscellaneous notes on subaltern social groups and classes into a new notebook to which he titled "On the margins of history (The history of subaltern social Groups)" in 1934. Antonio Gramsci used the term 'subalternity' in more holistic and inclusive ways referring the oppressed people in his prison notebooks.

The concept of subalternity was discussed by many thinkers of the world. Gayatri Chakrovoty Spivak is considered one of the prominent critics who worked on it. Her ideas on subalternity are different from gramscian ideas. She has a more rigid perspective on the concept of subalternity. For her the position of subaltern is not a linear progression. It cannot move from one position to another. In her early writings, she discusses that the subaltern loses his/her speaks. Defining the subaltern, she writes, "I define the subaltern as the person removed from all lines of social mobility. That is, the subaltern is barred from access to all public resources that would allow for upward movement, out of dire poverty and into political invisibility" (Chakrovoty, 67).

For Spivak, denial and consequent absence of voice are the key features of subalternity. She writes that "I define the subaltern as the person removed from all lines of social mobility. That is, the subaltern is barred from access to all public resources that would allow for upward movement, out of dire poverty and into political invisibility". In her views, a subaltern is a person who is excluded from dominant discourse and starkly affected by his/her non representation in history. It was the rigid view which inspired the subaltern studies collective to present and represent the subalterns. Currently, it is not wrong to term the



subaltern studies as a discourse because it presents a set of statements which are complimentary, contradictory and addition to the vast field of knowledge. These statements are politically charged and linked to the relations of power.

The term 'ideology' is also connected with the study of the subaltern. I, class, gender t can be defined as a body of ideas or way of thinking. In the words of Raymond Williams, "Ideologies were simply false ideas imposed upon people". In its current usages in literary theory, 'subaltern ' is an umbrella term used to show the condition of being oppressed either due to race, class, gender sexual orientation, caste etc.

The term is referred for one who is exploited and eliminated from the mainstream politics, society or culture. This evidently exposes the division of human beings into higher and lower categories. The term also connotes one who is marginalised from society and culture.

Githa Hariharan and K. R. Meera are most significant writers who contributed through there progressive trend in English literature. Their works present the criticism of orthodoxy and superstitions. In their literary world both writers Githa Hariharan and K. R. Meera exposes the divide between the rich and the subaltern. They skillfully expose the different mechanisms of domination, oppression and exploitation of the subaltern. Literature not only plays a crucial role in establishing as well as concerting the ideologies of elite class but it also shows the ruling class which are established, disseminated and perpetuated with a purpose to dominate over the poor. He brilliantly exposes the mechanism of subordinating the peasant, the woman and the Dalit.

Hariharan's novel the thousand faces of night shows, with exceptional fictional skill, the subtle and everyday way in which women are bludgeoned to play male scripted subordinated roles. The book is a portrait of Devi, her mother Sita and housekeeper of her husband house Mayamma. All three ladies had potential but were suppressed in one way or other after marriage. Devi comes from an orthodox Tamil family. While studying ion USA she befriends Dan, a fellow black student. Though it's more than just friendship, Devi is influenced by her grandmother. She does not really know what she wants in life. Doesn't know what will bring her joy and in her pursuit of it makes one wrong decision after another. It's incomprehensible why she becomes a meek housewife from a foreign educated independent youngster. Devi is continuously on the run. First from America, then from Dan, then from her mother, then from her house, then from her husband and then from Gopal in search of something that she does not know. It's a search for something that she wants to do. She has to confront her own problems and demons, make her own choices, only to be sucked in by the old order of things-a demanding mother's love, a suitable but hollow marriage, an unsuitable lover who offers a brief escape. But the women of the hoary past come back to claim Devi through myth and story, music and memory. They show her what it is to stay and endure what it is to break free and move on.

Sita is passionate about everything. She longs for perfection in everything order is second nature to her. She shapes career of her husband and childhood of her daughter (devi) impeccably. Sita has been the ideal daughter-in-law, wife and mother. But now that she has arranged a marriage for her daughter devi, she has to come to terms with an old dream of her own. Mayamma knows how to survive as the old family retainer, bending the way wind



blows. But, through Devi, she too can see a different life. Mayamma has a happy marriage with abusive husband and mother in law who ill-treats her. She sees everything that happens in master house. She watches occupants and their problems and watches the events unfold while doing her daily chores mechanically and remembering the past.

Another novel by K. R. Meera, *Hangwoman* is the English translation of one of the famous contemporary Malayalam novels namely *Arachar* written by K. R. Meera. The English translation was done by J. Devika and released by Arundathy Roy. The book has won numerous accolades: The Kendra Sahitya Academy award, The Odakkuzhal Award, The Vayalar Award etc. The central theme of *Hangwoman* is feminism. The story depicts the life of the Grudha Mullick family; Mr Mullick possessed the job of public executioner, as a legacy for over hundred years. Chetana, the protagonist of the novel is a unique and exemplary character in the south Indian literature. She is a strong build and tenacious 22-year old woman. Her father, Panibhushan hung more than 450 convicts to death, during his tenure of public Executioner.

The novel covers various fears of life like love, sex, death, fate, life after death, and is full of profound philosophical thoughts. The background of the story is Kolkata and there is perfect juxtaposition of history, myth, imagination with realism. This renders the novel is intriguing. The concept of a woman public executioner is alien to a typical Indian scenario and, this theme has not been dealt with so far in south Indian novels. The very title of the novel is fascinating. The concept of the lady public executioner is alien to a typical Indian scenario and this theme has not been dealt with so far in south Indian novels.

To conclude, both the writer of the select novels is very well known for their writing on women their perception towards the subaltern term is same. Both successfully promotes a different image of the Indian woman. Both novels can be regarded as a metaphor for the multiple facets of a culturally specific womanhood. The main characters extract its peculiarity from the mythological sources of India while simultaneously re-shaping traditional norms. Devi stands for the woman in search of liberation and redefinition. In this case, resistance can be discussed in terms of both silence and action: reinterpretation of myth serves as a prelude for action. One should not neglect the importance of oral performance. This is the origin of the resistance-chain, along which myth serves as an empowering link.

References

- A writer is inherently a feminist, humanist, environmentalist and socialist. The Telegraph. January 18, 2015. Web.
- Antonio, Gramsci. *The Prison Notebook*. Columbia University Press. 2011. Print.
- Beauvoir, Simone De. *The second Sex*. Random House, 2015. Print.
- Chakrovoty. Gayatrispivak. *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Afterall Books, 2020. Print.
- Hariharan, G. *The Thousand Facers of Night*. London; Viking. 1992. Print.
- Meera, K.,R. *Hangwoman*. Penguin, 2014. Print.
- Wilkins, W.,J. *Hindu Mythology*. New Delhi: Rupa and co, 1986. Print.

Literary Cognizance

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online) Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)

An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism

Vol.- IV, Issue- 3, December 2023



This is an Open Access e-Journal Published Under A Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

To Cite the Article: *Kumawat, Deepali, Kale, Nilima. "Understanding the 'Subaltern': A Critical Study of Contemporary Women Novelists, Githa Hariharan and K. R. Meera". Literary Cognizance, IV - 3 (December, 2023): 145-149. Web.*

