



SUBALTERN INTELLECTUAL AGENCY: GRAMSCIAN REFLECTIONS ON HEGEMONY AND PASSIVE REVOLUTION IN SELECT DALIT WOMEN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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Abstract

The persistence of social inequality and systemic oppression has entrenched hegemonic structures that marginalise subaltern communities, preventing their political and intellectual autonomy. Antonio Gramsci's social philosophy of the subaltern highlights how dominant groups maintain power through cultural hegemony, relegating marginalised voices to the periphery of historical narratives. The study explores the lived experiences of select Dalit women as recounted in their autobiographies through close reading. Dalit women articulate forms of organic intellectualism, transforming personal suffering into collective consciousness. Additionally, this analysis examines how these select life writings constitute a powerful archive of Dalit feminist thought, fundamentally reorienting global conversations on selfhood, emancipation, and social justice. By applying Gramsci's concepts of hegemony, passive revolution, and organic intellectuals, this analysis explores how Dalit narratives disrupt dominant discourses and create alternative frameworks of knowledge and resistance. The study also reinforces Gramsci's argument that subaltern groups must generate independent intellectual and political movements to achieve emancipation. Ultimately, this paper contends that Dalit women's life writing not only exposes the contradictions of hegemonic modernity but also redefines intellectual praxis from the margins, envisioning a more egalitarian and emancipatory mode of social transformation.

Keywords

Hegemony, Passive Revolution, Organic Intellectuals, Emancipation, Archive, Knowledge., etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Dalit women's autobiographical narratives represent a vital epistemic space where silenced histories, collective trauma, and vernacular knowledge systems find articulation. Emerging from the socio-political margins of Indian society, life narratives confront and destabilise hegemonic epistemologies that have historically privileged the literate, the upper-caste, and the masculine voice. Dalit women's autobiographical narratives constantly represent a vital epistemic space where silenced histories, collective trauma, and vernacular knowledge systems find articulation. Emerging from the socio-political margins of Indian society, these life narratives confront and destabilise hegemonic epistemologies that have historically privileged the literate, the upper-caste, and the masculine voice. Dalit autobiographies function as persuasive counter-narratives confronting dominant caste hegemony while affirming Dalit identity, resistance, and agency. They



unveil systemic oppression and, at the same time, subvert dominant literary conventions and social structures. These narratives function as a counter-discourse, exposing systematic oppression and resisting dominant ideologies.

The dominant classes enforce caste hierarchies through social, economic, and cultural supremacy. The reassertion and challenging of the syndicate of dominant caste narratives, writings on the lived experience of Dalits are inevitably required. This contemplation was made possible with the emergence of various Dalit writers and their narrative forms, such as native speech, language and imagery, contrary to the standard language and traditional methods. Dalit literary studies have a significant impact on academics as it has the potential to bring about positive social change. Through inscribing lived experiences alongside presenting a historical critique of dehumanisation, inherent situations of enslavement reposition the writers as an intellectual agency.

Reflecting Gramsci's conception:

According to Antonio Gramsci, the term *Hegemony* means the dominance over a social group through an ideology and cultural bias. Gramsci argued that “the power or superiority can be vindicated not through the overpowering force or coercion but with an intellectual and moral leadership”. Every relationship of ‘hegemony’ is necessarily an educational relationship” (Gramsci, 350). Functioning as counter-hegemony, Dalit women's autobiographies deconstruct casteist as well as patriarchal ideologies while contriving an alternative discourse of dignity and resistance. Dalit resistance requires annihilating caste, not just economic redistribution. In Dalit women's autobiographies, hegemonic concepts can be identified through social exclusion, cultural and religious sanction, economic exploitation and literary erasure. By applying Gramscian analysis, the role of intellectuals in maintaining hegemony is discernible between traditional intellectuals, those who endorse the caste order and organic intellectuals who confront it.

Exposing the mechanisms of caste oppression, Dalit autobiographies simultaneously craft an oppositional narrative of defiance, resilience, self-affirmation, reclaimed identity, unyielding pride and unbroken spirit. The concept of “integral state” correlates with Urmila Pawar in *The Weave of My Life*, where she recounts “forced labour” in her community symbolising caste subjugation, disempowerment and dehumanisation (Pawar, 45). Subversion, on the other hand, deals with the act of debilitating or challenging the dominant order. Dalit women's autobiographies add another layer of subversion by addressing both caste and gender oppression, often from within their communities. In *The Prison We Broke*, Kamble captures how the rupture of the Ambedkarite movement, strongly rooted within the Mahar people, has led to the normalisation of internalised domination. Marriages in the lives of young Dalit brides often accompany patriarchal overshadow, brutality, malnutrition, and postpartum depletion, as seen in (Kamble, 112-115). It shows the deprivation of fragmentation under patriarchal hegemony.

Reshaping socio-political and literary landscapes, Dalit autobiographies encompass structural, linguistic and provoking ideologies. “The supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as ‘domination’ and as ‘intellectual and moral leadership’. A social group dominates an antagonistic group and leads kindred and allied groups” (Gramsci, 57). Analysing Gramsci's concepts, Dalit women's life writings can be viewed as exposing the culpable lines of caste society and transforming the texts to subvert hegemonic discourse, paving the way for an incentive form of collective consciousness. Entrenched within this framework, Dalit autobiographies subvert caste by showing its brutality, mocking its lies, and rewriting history from below. Further, the conceptual study of Gramsci with subaltern understanding elucidates, “the history of subaltern groups is fragmented; their resistance lies in reclaiming their fragmented past to challenge the dominant narrative” (Gramsci, 55).



Encompassing Subaltern Theory:

Gramsci's concept of subaltern refers to the social groups who are economically, socially, politically and geographically excluded from the hegemonic power structure and in addition, the Marginalized community is precluded from political representation and cultural dominance. He developed the subaltern theory in a series of essays, *Prison Notebooks* (1929), written when he was imprisoned by the Italian fascist regime in 1926. He emphasised his focus on economic determinism, cultural hegemony, Subaltern classes, the importance of intellectuals and the implications of resistance. It coincides with Dalit women's narrative, particularly life writing, where personal narrative forges communal truth, aggregating subaltern voices where strategic capability questions preoccupied sophistication of dominant literary narrative. Gramsci comments on subaltern classes for their "sporadic resistance" for being disorganised, fragmented in passive forms, while resisting dominant power structures. "The spontaneous movements of the subaltern classes must be led toward consciousness through the work of organic intellectuals who systematise their fragmented struggles into a coherent political force" (Gramsci, 198).

According to Gramsci, Subaltern classes will remain fragmented and reticent until they form a unified consciousness, similar to the narratives of Dalit autobiographies, contributing to the collective consciousness and emerging as huge socio-political identities. Gidla refers to her family, even though they managed to attain education, "caste followed us like a shadow" (Gidla, 2013). Dalit autobiographical writers assert their long-denied voice and agency, disrupting dominant caste narratives that have historically rendered their experiences invisible. Dalit autobiographies viewed through a Gramscian subaltern theoretical lens are not just personal accounts but political acts as they give voice to subaltern agency, counter-memory and socio-political assertion. These texts do more than recount individual lives as they function to disrupt dominant discourse and create alternative frameworks of knowledge and resistance through Gramsci's concepts of hegemony, passive revolution, and organic intellectuals.

Unlike speaking through elite mediation, Dalit women writers reshape the terrain of representation, utilising autobiographies and memoirs as a vital space where the subaltern speaks with radical emplacement (Guru, 2015). These life writings do not merely represent personal grievances but serve as unprecedented interventions that expose and subvert the cultural hegemony upheld by institutions like education, social class and religion. Gramsci's theory inspired postcolonial thinkers, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, to critique Western intellectuals in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" as they often speak for the subaltern rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. Kamble replicates this ideology in her inscription on the Ambedkarite movement and consciousness bloom, "market vending into literacy circle" (Kamble, 2014), situating the universality of selfhood without any elite mediation. Gramsci's theory, when revamped with Ambedkarite thought, offers a sturdy lens to understand Dalit autobiography as literature, history and revolution.

Probing Hegemony, Passive Revolution and Organic Intellectuals:

Hegemony is a form of intellectual and moral leadership that makes the status quo seem natural and inevitable. Gramsci's concept of hegemony argues that a ruling class maintains power not just through force, but also through the dominant ideas, values and beliefs that shape society including both civil and political society: "The separation of powers together with all the discussions provoked by its realisation and the legal dogmas which its appearance brought into being, is a product of the struggle between civil society and political society in a specific historical period" (Gramsci, 2015).



ShilpaRaj's *The Elephant Chaser's Daughter* merges with this contradiction, "The boarding school was supposed to be my escape from the village dirt" (Raj, 102). Shilpa invades her selfhood with the leverage of education as an escape and transformation from exclusion.

Gramsci coined the term 'Passive Revolution' to delineate how the status quo is maintained and preserved. It is a strategic transformation where disruptive, reformation, and representation are used instead of structural transformation. "When a social group lacks the strength to establish hegemony, it will instead choose a path where its interests and demands will be satisfied by small doses, legally, in a reformist manner, in such a way that it is possible to preserve the political and economic positions of the old ruling class" (Gramsci, 168). The central idea of the Gramscian concept of Organic Intellectuals elucidates that they organically emerge within a specified social class, especially from subordinate classes. Organic intellectuals are deeply conjoined to the subordinate class's struggle, incidents and ideologies. Their role is not just theoretical but actively engaging and organising the interests of their class.

Organic intellectuals play a vital role in forming a counter-hegemonic culture, claiming leadership in moulding and transforming the chain of command. This intellectual agency can be understood through the praxis of life writing by Dalit women writers. Gidla pens down her life by narrating, "we build our own paths through grass, unnoticed but persistent", which emancipates by breaking barriers of servitude (Gidla, 87). Their collective experience of getting a token inclusion in education, but they endured persistent humiliation and systematic exclusion, demonstrating that mere inclusion does not equate to true equality. Intellectual agency emerges as a refusal to continue one's life with deep-rooted desperation and shame but turning it into a reformatory lineage to pass it over to the next generation, "I am refusing to hide my identity. I'm leaving that old lie behind and stepping proudly into my caste, owning my caste" (Dutt, 210). It is explicit how one's own life of concealment or subjugation transforms into a counter-narrative with purposeful persistence, emphasising communal voice in socio-political spaces.

Conclusion:

The interpretation of Dalit women's life writing by substantiating subaltern ideas of Gramsci, the study helps to understand how caste hegemony operates through ideology, education and religious discourse. His concepts align with the tenets of Dalit movements, which dismantle centuries of ideological domination there by reclaiming agency and not just economic upliftment. Life writings such as memoirs and Dalit autobiographies act as a counter-hegemonic tool that authenticates Dalit voices and can intrude on domineering historical epistemology. Dalit narratives disrupt hegemonic silence by providing first-hand accounts of caste oppression, thereby resisting the elite-controlled historical and literary discourse, emphasising raising consciousness within Dalit communities and fostering collective resistance that serves as evidence that Dalit autobiographical writers function as organic. As Gramsci noted, "The old is dying, and the new cannot yet be born", encapsulating where Dalit autobiographies challenge the outmoded and ensure a society free from caste that has remained unthinkable. It is embedded with new standards and thoughts to break down the social hierarchy and psychological preoccupied misconception of marginalisation for the next generation. Life writing is a powerful medium to dismantle the presence of historical perspectives fabricated upon them and these writers establish the text as a vigorous canon of inclusion in Dalit literary studies.

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