



REPRESENTATION OF THE RURAL POOR AS SUBALTERN SUBJECTS IN INDIAN FICTION

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Abstract

*The demonstration of the rural poor occupies a significant position in the history of Indian fiction. From colonial-era narratives to contemporary regional and Indian English literature, writers have repeatedly returned to the village as a space in which caste, class, landownership, patriarchy, religion, colonialism, capitalism, and state power intersect. The rural poor are not merely presented as economically deprived individuals; they are frequently positioned at the margins of social, political, cultural, and epistemic power. In this sense, the concept of the subaltern, developed from Antonio Gramsci's understanding of subordinate groups and subsequently transformed by the Subaltern Studies collective, provides an important theoretical framework for examining literary representations of peasants, agricultural labourers, Dalits, tribal communities, landless workers, and rural women. This paper examines the representation of rural poverty and subalternity in selected Indian fiction, with particular attention to Munshi Premchand's *Godaan* (1936), Fakir Mohan Senapati's *Six Acres and a Third*, Mahasweta Devi's selected fiction, particularly "*Draupadi*" and "*Pterodactyl*", *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha*," and selected contemporary perspectives on rural marginality. These fictional illustrations complicate the idea of the rural poor as passive victims. Characters such as Hori and Dhanu in *Godaan*, Bhagia and the exploited peasants in *Six Acres and a Third*, and the tribal figures in Mahasweta Devi's fiction demonstrate different forms of negotiation, endurance, refusal, and resistance. The paper also involves with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" The central concern is not simply whether the rural poor are represented, but how they are represented, who speaks for them, and whether literary representation can recover their autonomous voices without reproducing the structures of authority it seeks to criticize. The study concludes that Indian fiction has played a crucial role in making rural subaltern experience visible, while simultaneously exposing the limitations and ethical complexities involved in speaking about marginalized communities.*

Keywords

Subaltern Studies Marginalization, Resistance, Representation, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Indian society has archaeologically been characterized by complex structures of caste, class, gender, landownership, religion, region, and community. Within this social structure, rural India has remained a particularly important site of inequality. Agriculture has traditionally constituted a major source of livelihood, while land and access to productive resources have been unequally distributed. The village, therefore, cannot be understood merely as a picturesque space of nature, tradition, community, and cultural continuity. For millions of people, it has also been a space of



economic deprivation, caste-based discrimination, indebtedness, labour exploitation, patriarchal control, and political exclusion.

Indian fiction has reliably responded to these contradictions. Writers have challenged romanticised representations of village life by presenting the rural poor as individuals caught within complex systems of power. Munshi Premchand's *Godaan*, published in 1936, is perhaps one of the most influential examples. The novel presents the tragic life of Hori, a poor peasant whose desire to possess a cow becomes entangled with debt, caste, religious authority, family responsibilities, landlordism, and economic exploitation. Scholarly discussions of *Godaan* have similarly emphasised its representation of peasant suffering and the structures through which rural poverty is produced.

The picture of the rural poor becomes even more complex when examined through the theoretical concept of the subaltern. The term, originally associated with Antonio Gramsci, acquired a distinctive historical and critical significance through the Subaltern Studies project initiated in South Asian historiography. Ranajit Guha and other scholars sought to recover histories of groups who had remained outside dominant nationalist, colonial, and elite narratives. The fifth volume of *Subaltern Studies*, for example, included Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential essay on Mahasweta Devi's *Stanadayini*, demonstrating the significance of literary texts for understanding subaltern representation.

Literature is mainly important to the study of subalternity because it provides access to experiences that may not appear adequately in official histories. A government document may record agricultural production, land revenue, population statistics, or rural development. A literary narrative, however, can represent hunger, humiliation, fear, desire, hope, exhaustion, silence, and resistance. Fiction can therefore reveal the human consequences of structures of power.

Yet depiction is not uncomplicated. The rural poor may be represented by writers who themselves occupy different social and educational positions. This raises a fundamental question: when an educated writer writes about a marginalised community, whose voice is actually being heard? Spivak's question concerning whether the subaltern can speak remains relevant because representation may simultaneously give visibility to marginalised people and appropriate their voices. The problem is not simply the absence of speech but the conditions under which speech becomes recognisable as meaningful.

This paper therefore studies the rural poor as subaltern subjects, rather than merely as poor characters. The distinction is important. Poverty describes an economic condition; subalternity describes a position within structures of power. A rural labourer may be poor, but becomes subaltern when economic deprivation is reinforced by caste, political exclusion, social stigma, lack of institutional representation, and restricted access to dominant forms of knowledge.

The word *subaltern* has a long intellectual history. Antonio Gramsci used it to describe subordinate groups whose social and political agency was constrained by dominant structures. His reflections on subaltern groups were connected with questions of class, hegemony, political organisation, and historical consciousness. The concept underwent significant transformation when scholars associated with the Subaltern Studies collective applied it to South Asian history. Ranajit Guha's work challenged conventional historiography that tended to represent colonial India through the actions of British rulers, nationalist leaders, educated elites, and organised political movements. Guha sought to emphasise the autonomous politics of peasants and other subordinated groups.

The distinction between elite and subaltern history is particularly useful for studying rural fiction. A conventional historical account might describe land reforms, colonial revenue policies, peasant movements, or agricultural production. A subaltern perspective asks how these processes affected the people who actually worked the land. The subaltern is therefore not simply



synonymous with “poor.” A wealthy person can experience marginalisation in one context, while a poor peasant may experience several simultaneous forms of subordination. Caste, gender, tribal identity, occupation, literacy, property ownership, and political power may intersect. This intersectionality is particularly visible in Indian rural society. A landless Dalit woman agricultural worker, for example, may experience class exploitation as a labourer, caste discrimination as a Dalit, gender discrimination as a woman, and political exclusion as a member of a socially marginalised community. Consequently, literary studies of the rural poor need to move beyond an exclusively economic understanding of poverty.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” makes this problem particularly clear. Spivak does not simply argue that oppressed people are literally incapable of speaking. Rather, she examines the institutional, ideological, and discursive structures that determine whether their speech can enter systems of representation and be recognised. This problem is especially significant in literature about rural communities. The educated writer often becomes the mediator between the rural poor and the reading public. The writer can expose exploitation, but can also unintentionally reproduce stereotypes. Indian fiction provides numerous examples of both possibilities.

The Indian literary tradition contains numerous representations of village life. Early modern Indian fiction often portrayed rural communities through social realism, reformist concerns, nationalist sentiment, or moral narratives. Over time, representations became increasingly critical of the structures that produced rural poverty. Premchand's fiction represents a major turning point. His rural characters are not merely decorative figures in a nationalist landscape. They occupy the centre of the narrative. His *Godaan* is particularly significant because it places the peasant economy within a wider network of social and institutional power. Later writers expanded the field by representing Dalit, tribal, landless, and gendered experiences. Fakir Mohan Senapati's *Six Acres and a Third* satirically exposes the mechanisms through which land and wealth are appropriated. Mahasweta Devi's fiction moves further toward the representation of tribal communities confronting landlords, police, state institutions, contractors, and development structures. The trajectory from Premchand to Mahasweta Devi demonstrates an important movement in Indian fiction.

Munshi Premchand's *Godaan* is one of the most important literary representations of the Indian peasantry. Published in 1936, the novel centres on Hori, a poor peasant whose aspirations are modest but whose life is continuously destabilised by economic and social pressures. Critical scholarship identifies *Godaan* as a major work of social realism and notes its treatment of poverty, caste, class, gender, and rural exploitation.

Hori's desire for a cow appears simple. Yet the cow becomes a symbol of economic aspiration, social prestige, religious belief, and rural identity. The inability to possess the cow without becoming further indebted reveals the contradictions of the agrarian economy. Hori works hard, but labour alone cannot free him from poverty. His labour produces value, but the distribution of that value remains controlled by others.

Debt is one of the most powerful instruments of subalternisation in *Godaan*. For the rural poor, money is often required for seeds, animals, marriage, ceremonies, food, medical emergencies, and social obligations. Since the poor possess little capital, they depend upon creditors. The resulting debt becomes more than an economic obligation. It becomes a mechanism of social control. Hori's inability to escape debt demonstrates the circular nature of rural poverty. This cycle prevents meaningful social mobility. The problem is therefore structural rather than individual. Hori cannot simply “work harder” and become prosperous because the economic system appropriates much of the value generated by his labour. The tragedy of Hori lies precisely



in this contradiction. He is hardworking, responsible, and committed to his family, yet the social structure continually converts his virtues into instruments of exploitation.

Economic class cannot be separated from caste in the representation of rural India. The village depicted in *Godaan* is organised through caste hierarchy. Individuals occupy different social positions based not only on wealth but also on caste status. The result is that poverty is experienced differently by different communities. A poor upper-caste peasant and a poor Dalit labourer may both suffer economic deprivation, but their social experiences are not identical. Premchand exposes this intersection of caste and class through various characters. His rural world reveals how religious authority and caste ideology can reinforce economic exploitation. The priestly figure, for example, can exercise authority not because he owns the largest amount of land but because religious legitimacy gives him social power. The subaltern is therefore produced through multiple institutions:

- Economic institutions;
- Caste hierarchy;
- Religious authority;
- Patriarchal family structures;
- Political institutions;
- Colonial administration.

The village becomes a miniature structure of power. One of the strengths of *Godaan* is its representation of Dhanu, Hori's wife. Dhanu is economically poor and socially vulnerable, but she is not portrayed as completely passive. Her responses to injustice often reveal a sharper awareness of social hypocrisy than Hori's. This creates an important distinction between subordination and agency. A person can occupy a subaltern position while still exercising agency within limited circumstances. Dhanu's strength is expressed through speech, anger, emotional resistance, practical intelligence, and protection of her family. Her character demonstrates that the rural poor are not silent in an absolute sense. However, the forms of resistance available to Dhanu are constrained by poverty and patriarchy. Her position is therefore doubly marginalised:

Mahasweta Devi significantly expanded the literary representation of marginalised communities in Indian literature. Her fiction frequently focuses on tribal communities, landless labourers, bonded workers, women, and people confronting state and economic power. Unlike narratives that treat rural poverty as a sentimental problem, Devi's fiction often exposes the political structures behind marginalisation. Her work demonstrates that tribal communities are not simply "poor villagers." They possess histories, cultural identities, land relationships, collective memories, and systems of knowledge that are often threatened by dominant institutions. The critical literature on Devi's fiction has specifically examined how her narratives move beyond silence and depict resistance among marginalised tribal communities. Her fiction is therefore particularly valuable for subaltern studies.

Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* is one of the most frequently discussed texts in postcolonial and subaltern literary studies. The protagonist Draupadi Mehen is a tribal woman involved in political resistance. She is captured and subjected to brutal violence by state forces. The story challenges the reader to reconsider the conventional representation of the oppressed woman as a helpless victim. Draupadi's body becomes a site upon which power attempts to demonstrate its authority. Yet the final movement of the story reverses this relationship.

Draupadi refuses to submit psychologically even when her body has been violently violated. Her refusal to cover herself and her confrontation with the officer challenge the expectation that the



oppressed subject must behave according to the rules established by the dominant. Her resistance is therefore embodied.

Mahasweta Devi's *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha* provide another important representation of tribal marginality. The story examines the encounter between tribal communities and the modern structures of administration, journalism, development, and knowledge. The appearance of the prehistoric pterodactyl becomes symbolic. The creature represents a form of history and existence that modern systems cannot easily understand. Devi herself described the story as a parable concerning the predicament of India's tribal peoples; critical studies have likewise interpreted the text as an exploration of tribal marginalisation and the failure of dominant modernity to understand indigenous experience.

One of the most important questions in subaltern literary criticism is the relationship between silence and voice. Silence should not automatically be interpreted as absence of consciousness. The rural poor may remain silent because:

- Speaking may invite punishment;
- Institutions may not listen;
- Literacy may be limited;
- Political power may be absent;
- Social customs may restrict speech;
- Dominant groups control public discourse.

Thus, silence can itself be a consequence of power. At the same time, literature can recover forms of speech that official institutions ignore. Songs, oral narratives, folklore, dialects, proverbs, memories, stories, and everyday conversations can function as alternative forms of knowledge. Indian fiction often incorporates these forms into its narratives. This is particularly important because standard literary language can itself become an elite medium. When writers incorporate regional speech patterns and local cultural practices, they challenge linguistic hierarchies.

A comparison between Premchand and Mahasweta Devi reveals the changing nature of subaltern representation. Premchand's *Godaan* primarily focuses on the peasant within the structures of agrarian society. Mahasweta Devi frequently focuses on communities subjected to state violence, tribal dispossession, and class-caste exploitation. In Premchand: the peasant is trapped within a hierarchy. In Mahasweta Devi: the tribal subject increasingly confronts the institutions enforcing that hierarchy. Premchand's realism generates social awareness through detailed representation of everyday suffering. Mahasweta Devi combines realism with political intensity and symbolic strategies. Both writers, however, share a commitment to exposing the structures that deny dignity to marginalised communities.

Conclusion:

The representation of the rural poor as subaltern subjects occupies an important position in Indian fiction because it challenges dominant understandings of poverty, power, and rural life. The selected works demonstrate that rural poverty is rarely an isolated economic condition. It is produced through interconnected systems of caste, class, landownership, patriarchy, religious authority, colonialism, state power, and economic exploitation.

Premchand's *Godaan* provides a powerful representation of the peasant as a subject trapped within a complex agrarian system. Hori's tragedy demonstrates how labour does not necessarily produce economic freedom when the structures of ownership and debt remain unequal. Dhania's character adds an important gendered dimension to the representation of rural subalternity. Scholarship on the novel has repeatedly emphasised its realistic portrayal of peasant suffering, caste hierarchy, poverty, debt, and institutional exploitation.



Mahasweta Devi's fiction takes the question of subaltern representation into more explicitly political territory. In *Draupadi*, the tribal woman becomes a figure of resistance whose body refuses to remain merely an object of state violence. In “Pterodactyl,” tribal experience challenges the epistemological assumptions of modern institutions. Critical discussions of Devi's fiction emphasise precisely this movement from marginalisation toward forms of resistance and agency. The theoretical contribution of Subaltern Studies enables these literary representations to be understood not merely as stories of poverty but as narratives of power and exclusion. Ranajit Guha's emphasis on history from below directs attention toward groups excluded from elite narratives, while Spivak's intervention reminds us that representation itself is a site of power. The main conclusion of this paper is therefore that Indian fiction does not simply “give voice” to the rural poor. It's more important function is to make visible the structures that determine whose voice is heard, whose knowledge is recognised, whose suffering matters, and whose humanity is acknowledged.

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