



THE SUBALTERNS CAN SPEAK: A STUDY OF THE PROTAGONISTS IN BOOKER PRIZE WINNING NOVELS OF ARUNDHATI ROY, KIRAN DESAI AND ARAVIND ADIGA

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ABSTRACT

Subalternity is one of the prominent features discussed in post-colonial theories and literature. Literature is used as a medium to voice the sufferings, pain, trauma, and grievances of the subalterns. However, post-colonial writings have also been used to voice the demand for social justice, equality, freedom and resistance in an attempt to counter the dictatorial structures of caste, class, gender and racial discrimination, prejudice and ill-treatment. As such subaltern voices which were otherwise the oppressed, silent, marginalized and struggling for their survival, emerged as rebellion voices of self-assertion. These subaltern issues of both subjugation and resistance have been portrayed in recent Indian English novels. The present paper attempts to explore the representation of subaltern voices as rebel voices in Booker prize winning novels of Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Aravinda Adiga.

Key Words: *Subaltern, oppressed resistance, rebellion, self-assertion*

INTRODUCTION

Antonio Gramsci is believed to have introduced the term 'subaltern' meaning inferior status, quality or importance. Later the term was popularized by critics like Gayatri Spivak and Ranjit Guha. The term has a very wide scope, as it stands for all those who are oppressed, exploited and marginalized in terms of caste, class, gender, race etc. Gramsci considered the subaltern as a historically determined category that exists within particular historical,

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economic, political, social and cultural contexts. He tried to know the process, development and lineage of the subaltern; how their social conditions were developed; how some groups survived at the margins of the society and how others succeeded in their ascent from a subordinate social position to a dominant one.

According to subaltern theory norms are established by those in power or have superior status and imposed on the 'other' who did not have voice because of race, class or gender.

The question that puzzles one is - why do the subaltern groups continue to remain perpetually thwarted? The answer is they have begun to question their subjugation and throw back a question. They have begun to speak.

Subalternity in one of the recurrent themes repeatedly used in recent times in literature. It is studied as a major area of post-colonial theory and literature. In post-colonial literature, the sufferings, pain, trauma, and grievances of the subalterns are given a voice. This is true in the Indian context also. The Subaltern concerns have been quite aptly portrayed in some of the recent Indian English fiction with reference to those that have been subordinated in manifold ways. Themes like oppression, discrimination, exploitation gender bias, marginalization etc. constitute the major issues in majority of Indian English literature.

The Indian English novel evolved as a subaltern consciousness; as a reaction to break away from the colonial literature. Slowly but surely, the post-colonial literature in India witnessed a revolution against the colonial writers. Gradually the Indian English writers, especially novelists began to voice the demand of the age-old subalterns - demand for social justice, equality, freedom and resistance to the dictatorial structures of caste, class, gender and racial discrimination. Thus, the saga of the Indian English novel therefore, stands as the tale of changing Indian tradition. The suppressed voices need resistance to register their existence and survival. As such the subaltern voices that were otherwise the oppressed, silent and struggling for survival emerged as rebellion voices of self - assertion.

This paper discusses the emergence of the new voice of self-assertion with special reference to the Booker Prize winning novels of Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things', Kiran Desai's 'The Inheritance of Loss' and Aravinda Adiga's 'The White Tiger'.

Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things"

Arundhati Roy is undeniably acclaimed and acknowledge as a revolutionary and an iconoclast in her approach to the novel 'The God of Small Things', which won the Man Booker prize in 1997. In this novel, she brings out the sufferings as well as the rebellious spirit of the subalterns. She highlights the voice of the suppressed women and the



untouchable workers. Two female characters Mammachi, Ammu and one male character Velutha, an untouchable are treated as subalterns.

The story is set in Ayemenem of Kerala. There are three generations in this novel. The central character Ammu suffers from depression. Ammu's father Pappachi, an unsuccessful scientist tortures his wife Mammachi regularly. He even hurts Ammu several times without any reason. Ammu being a live witness of all the sufferings of her mother leaves her house and goes off to Calcutta. Then the story takes us through the inter-caste affair of Ammu and Velutha, subsequent beating and killing of Velutha, Ammu's twins Estha and Rahel.

Thus, 'The God of Small Things' emerges as a protest novel. It is an assertion of the subaltern through meaningful expression which transgresses socially approved relationships. Ammu, Velutha, Rahel and Estha are Roy's spokespersons. Through Ammu and Estha Roy voices the female self and sensibility. She aims at exploring female psyche boldly encountering male chauvinism, patriarchy, social discrimination, political exploitation, sexual subjugation, with the assertion of their identity. Ammu represents the resistant, post-colonial spirit. Velutha, on the other hand violates the age-old love-laws which forbid cross-cultural relationship. He even boldly protests against Mammachi "we'll see about that....." It is the protest of the untouchables- a protest of the silent and the subaltern. Though Ammu and Velutha were finally silenced, they have at least been able to raise their voice for a space in a male dominated and caste committed society.

Kiran Desai's "The Inheritance of Loss"

Kiran Desai, a modern expatriate Indian novelist, won the Man Booker Prize, for her novel 'The Inheritance of Loss' in 2006. The novel deals with migrants, expatriation and alienation from one's motherland. In this novel, Kiran Desai tells the story of Sai who lives with her grandfather Jemubhai Patel a retired judge, in Kalimpong. Simultaneously she portrays the life of Biju, the cook's son and Gyan, the Nepalese teacher. Through the techniques of telling two parallel stories and introducing the issues of the east and the west, Kiran Desai expands her narrative into larger socio-political subjects. While doing this, Desai acquaints us with the injustice which is visible in case of the countries of the third world. The novel refers to the injustice and harm the English have caused, the oppression due to race, gender and class, through the characters. Desai shows how discrimination due to race can influence and even destroy the human mind. Through the character of Jemubhai, the reader recognizes a pattern of white, imperial superiority and how people from colonized countries are not accepted or welcomed into the western "world".



In Desai's novel, several characters are victims of discrimination. Sai, Gyan, Biju, the Cook and so on. However, each one in his/her own capacity tries to raise voice against the system and attempt for self-assertion.

Aravinda Adiga's: "The White Tiger"

Adiga who won the Booker Prize for his debut novel 'The White Tiger' in 2008 presents a powerful social commentary on injustice and class struggle in India. Balram Halwai the protagonist represents the subaltern section of the society. He narrates the story of his life in an epistolary manner to the Chinese premiere who is on an official visit to India. In his letter he unlocks his heart and gives full description of his life story from childhood to adulthood and finally as a wealthy businessman.

The novel is replete with the description of the Zamindari system, corrupt political system, exploitation, rise of local insurgency, prostitution, etc. Balram, in course of time raises his voice and proves that the subaltern can/will speak. In Delhi he experiences two kinds of India with those who are eaten and with those who ate. He desires to break out the cage of bondage and to fulfill his great expectation of becoming a big bellied man. To realize it, he decides to kill his master.

Balram's Journey from a poverty-stricken villager to respectable businessman epitomizes the rise of the subalterns and subversion of social, economic and political structure. He rebels and asserts himself to get emancipated from the deep-rooted traps of class and caste in Indian society. He severs as the mouthpiece of the subalterns who were never allowed to speak. Balram speaks loudly and gives voice to the voiceless by taking bold and courageous steps.

Adiga in this novel creates an extraordinary picture of the subaltern protagonist and applies Spivak's theory in a different way. He employs the metaphor of the Rooster Coop to examine the never-ending oppressive system under which the subaltern groups suffer. Balram Halwai a post-colonial subaltern is a victim of oppression and feels the great disparity between the rich and the poor. And this gap creates in him a motive of revenge, revolt and resistance. Thus the novel can be taken as an articulation of rebellion.

CONCLUSION

To sum up the three Booker Prize novels discussed here invoke social justice, resistance, quest for freedom in an attempt to counter dictatorial structures of racial discrimination, prejudice and ill-treatment. The protagonists in all the three novels are subalterns who are victims of harassment and ill treatment. Nevertheless they are not the silent and suffering



subalterns who cannot speak, They are vocal and can speak louder. They are no more unheard, unnoticed suppressed lot. They are very much alert and make their presence felt.

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