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Reimagining Subaltern Agency: Gender, Caste, and Resistance in Contemporary Indian Writing in English

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Abstract: ***Indian Writing in English provides an important literary space for examining the experiences of marginalized communities and their struggles against social inequality. This study explores the representation of subaltern agency through the intersections of gender, caste, and resistance in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things and Bama's Sangati (English translation). It examines how these literary works portray caste-based discrimination, gender oppression, social exclusion, and the possibilities of individual and collective resistance. Particular attention is given to the ways in which marginalized characters negotiate oppressive social structures and express their agency through everyday experiences, personal choices, solidarity, and acts of defiance. The study adopts a qualitative comparative textual analysis, drawing upon postcolonial criticism, feminist literary theory, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of subalternity. It examines narrative voice, characterization, language, social power relations, and the representation of marginalized identities. The analysis considers how literary narratives make visible the experiences of women and oppressed communities whose voices are frequently silenced by dominant social and cultural structures. The study argues that subaltern agency should not be understood only through open rebellion or organized resistance. It can also emerge through everyday negotiations, expressions of solidarity, the assertion of identity, and challenges to discriminatory cultural practices. By bringing caste and gender perspectives together, the comparative study highlights the different ways in which Roy and Bama question established hierarchies and represent the struggles of marginalized communities. The paper contributes to discussions of subaltern representation, gender justice, caste inequality, language, and resistance in Indian Writing in English.***

Keywords: Subaltern Agency, Caste, Gender, Resistance, Indian Writing in English, Postcolonial Feminism

1. Introduction

Indian Writing in English has played an important role in representing the social realities of marginalized communities. Many Indian writers use literature to examine the unequal distribution of power, caste discrimination, gender oppression, and the struggles of people who remain socially and economically disadvantaged. Through their narratives, writers question established social hierarchies and provide space for experiences that are often ignored or silenced in mainstream society. The representation of subaltern communities is therefore an important area of study in contemporary Indian literary criticism.

The term *subaltern* refers broadly to socially marginalized groups whose voices and experiences are excluded from dominant structures of power. In postcolonial studies, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's discussion of subalternity raises important questions about representation, voice, and the difficulties faced by marginalized people in making themselves heard within powerful social and institutional systems. Her ideas are particularly relevant to the study of caste and gender because women from oppressed communities often experience multiple forms of discrimination. Their social position is shaped not only by gender but also by caste, class, education, and economic conditions.

Caste remains a significant structure of social inequality in Indian society. It influences access to education, employment, public spaces, social respect, and personal freedom. Women belonging to oppressed caste communities may experience discrimination both within the wider social structure and within patriarchal institutions. Their experiences reveal the relationship between caste-based domination and gender inequality. Literature becomes an important medium through which these interconnected forms of oppression can be examined.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* presents the consequences of caste hierarchy, social restrictions, and unequal power relations in Kerala. Through the experiences of its characters, particularly Ammu and Velutha, the novel questions the social boundaries maintained by caste and patriarchal authority. The relationship between Ammu and Velutha exposes the severe consequences of challenging established caste rules. The narrative also explores how family expectations, social conventions, and institutional power influence individual lives.

Bama's *Sangati*, translated into English from Tamil, offers a different but equally significant representation of caste and gender. The work focuses on the everyday experiences of Dalit women and presents their struggles within family, community, and society. It highlights discrimination, poverty, labour, violence, and the unequal treatment of women. At the same time, it portrays their strength, humour, collective identity, and efforts to challenge oppressive practices. The narrative gives importance to women's voices and experiences that are frequently excluded from dominant literary and social representations.

A comparative reading of these two works makes it possible to examine different forms of subaltern representation. While

Roy explores caste and gender through a complex fictional narrative involving family relationships and social restrictions, Bama foregrounds the collective experiences of Dalit women through a community-centred narrative. Both works question the structures that control marginalized lives and demonstrate the importance of voice, identity, and resistance.

The present study aims to analyse how gender, caste, and resistance shape the representation of subaltern agency in these selected works. It examines narrative voice, characterization, social power relations, and everyday acts of resistance. The study argues that agency does not emerge only through dramatic rebellion; it can also be expressed through solidarity, self-respect, personal decisions, and the refusal to accept discriminatory practices. By applying postcolonial and feminist perspectives, this paper seeks to understand how literature challenges social hierarchies and creates space for marginalized experiences in Indian Writing in English.

2. Review of Literature

The representation of caste, gender, and marginalized identities has received considerable attention in Indian English literary studies. Scholars have examined how literary texts expose social inequality, patriarchal authority, caste discrimination, and the struggles of marginalized communities. Postcolonial and feminist approaches have also contributed to understanding how literature represents people whose experiences are often excluded from dominant social narratives.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) provides an important theoretical foundation for the study of subaltern representation. Spivak questions whether marginalized people can express their experiences independently within structures controlled by dominant groups. Her discussion is particularly relevant to the study of caste and gender because oppressed women often experience multiple forms of social exclusion. The concept of subalternity helps examine the relationship between voice, representation, and power in literary narratives.

Research on Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* has explored the relationship between caste hierarchy, sexuality, family structures, and social control. Lucky Issar's (2021) study, "Reading the Materiality of Caste," examines how material objects and bodily boundaries in the novel reflect caste-based exclusion. The study connects caste hierarchy with the regulation of women's bodies and the social exclusion of Dalit communities. This approach is useful for understanding how caste operates not only through visible social divisions but also through everyday practices and relationships.

Margaret Herrick (2017), in "New Ways of Thinking Recovery from Trauma in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things and Two Other South Indian Narratives of Caste-Based Atrocity," examines the novel in relation to caste-based violence and trauma. Her study broadens the discussion of trauma by considering its relationship with South Indian histories and experiences of social violence. This scholarship helps situate Roy's novel within wider discussions of caste oppression and its lasting effects on individuals and communities.

María Valero Redondo's study, "Secrecy, Community and Counter-History in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things," examines the role of community, secrecy, and alternative histories in the novel. The study considers how caste, patriarchy, religion, and other social institutions influence human relationships. Its discussion of counter-history is relevant to the present research because it draws attention to experiences and relationships that challenge dominant social narratives.

Studies of Bama's *Sangati* have particularly emphasized the experiences of Dalit women and the relationship between caste and patriarchy. Aditya Ghosh (2021), in "Disciplinary Power and Practices of Body Politics: An Evaluation of Dalit Women in Bama's Sangati and P. Sivakami's The Grip of Change through Foucauldian Discourse Analysis," examines how patriarchal power controls Dalit women's bodies, behaviour, labour, and sexuality. The study uses Michel Foucault's ideas on disciplinary power to explain how social practices maintain gender-based domination. It also highlights the importance of awareness and resistance in challenging oppressive structures.

These studies demonstrate that both caste and gender are important in understanding the experiences represented in Indian literature. Research on Roy's novel has examined caste-based exclusion, sexuality, social institutions, and counter-history, while scholarship on Bama's *Sangati* has highlighted the everyday experiences of Dalit women and the operation of patriarchal power.

However, the present study brings these two literary works together through a comparative examination of subaltern agency. Rather than concentrating only on oppression, it considers how marginalized characters and communities negotiate social restrictions, express solidarity, assert identity, and resist discriminatory practices. It also examines how narrative voice and literary representation contribute to making marginalized experiences visible.

The present research therefore seeks to contribute to discussions of caste, gender, and resistance by exploring the different literary strategies through which Roy and Bama represent marginalized lives. It approaches agency not simply as open rebellion but also as a process expressed through everyday decisions, collective strength, self-respect, and the questioning of established social hierarchies.

3. Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on comparative textual analysis. It examines the representation of subaltern agency through the themes of caste, gender, and resistance in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Bama's *Sangati* in its English translation. Since the research focuses on literary representation, it does not involve human participants, surveys, or experimental procedures. Instead, it analyses the primary texts through close reading and relevant theoretical perspectives.

3.1 Primary Sources

The primary sources of this research are Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Bama's *Sangati* (English translation). These works have been selected because they represent different experiences of caste discrimination, gender oppression, social exclusion, and resistance in Indian society. Roy's novel explores caste-based restrictions and patriarchal authority through individual and family experiences, whereas Bama's work foregrounds the collective experiences of Dalit women and their everyday struggles.

3.2 Secondary Sources

The secondary sources include scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, research papers, and critical studies relating to subaltern studies, postcolonial criticism, feminist literary theory, caste studies, and Dalit literature. The theoretical discussion draws particularly on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of subalternity and relevant feminist perspectives. These sources provide the critical framework for examining the relationship between social power, marginalized identity, and literary representation.

3.3 Method of Analysis

The study uses close reading and comparative analysis to identify the major themes and narrative techniques in the selected works. Particular attention is given to characterization, narrative voice, language, symbolism, social relationships, and representations of power. The analysis examines how caste and gender influence the lives of marginalized characters and how they negotiate restrictive social structures.

3.4 Theoretical Framework

The research is informed by postcolonial criticism, feminist literary theory, and Spivak's discussion of subalternity. These perspectives help investigate questions of voice, representation, exclusion, and resistance. The study also considers the intersection of caste and gender to understand how multiple forms of social inequality shape women's experiences.

3.5 Comparative Approach

A comparative approach is employed to examine the similarities and differences between Roy's and Bama's literary representations. The study considers how individual experiences and collective narratives reveal different forms of subaltern agency. It also investigates how everyday acts of negotiation, solidarity, self-expression, and resistance challenge established social hierarchies.

Through these methods, the research seeks to understand how the selected literary works represent marginalized voices and question the social structures that sustain caste and gender inequality.

4. Results and Findings

The comparative analysis of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Bama's *Sangati* reveals significant representations of caste discrimination, gender oppression, social exclusion, and resistance. Both literary works portray the difficulties experienced by marginalized communities and question the social structures that restrict their freedom and opportunities. However, they approach these issues through different narrative methods and perspectives. Roy focuses on individual and family experiences within a caste-dominated social environment, while Bama foregrounds the collective experiences of Dalit women and their everyday struggles.

4.1 Caste Discrimination and Social Exclusion

Caste discrimination emerges as a central theme in both works. In *The God of Small Things*, the relationship between Ammu and Velutha exposes the rigid boundaries maintained by the caste system. Velutha's social position as a Paravan influences how other characters and institutions treat him. His relationship with Ammu challenges the accepted social order and reveals the violence through which caste hierarchy is maintained. The novel demonstrates that caste is not merely a matter of social identity; it also influences personal relationships, individual freedom, and access to dignity.

In *Sangati*, caste discrimination is represented through the everyday experiences of Dalit women and their community. The narrative describes the difficulties associated with poverty, labour, social humiliation, and exclusion. These experiences reveal how caste operates in ordinary social interactions and influences the lives of women from marginalized communities. The work makes visible the inequalities that are often treated as normal within established social structures.

4.2 Gender Oppression and Patriarchal Authority

Both works demonstrate that women experience oppression through patriarchal expectations and unequal power relations. In Roy's novel, Ammu faces restrictions because of her gender, marital status, and social position. Her choices are judged by a society that grants men greater freedom while controlling women's behaviour. Her relationship with Velutha becomes a challenge to both caste restrictions and patriarchal authority.

Bama's *Sangati* presents the multiple burdens experienced by Dalit women. Women are expected to perform domestic responsibilities while also participating in physically demanding labour. Their lives are shaped by unequal treatment, economic hardship, and restrictions on personal freedom. The narrative also questions the gender discrimination that exists within marginalized communities themselves. It therefore presents gender oppression as a complex issue connected with both caste and patriarchy.

4.3 Everyday Resistance and Assertion of Identity

An important finding of the study is that resistance is not always expressed through direct political rebellion. In both works, agency can be understood through individual

decisions, expressions of self-respect, the refusal to accept humiliation, and the questioning of restrictive social practices.

In *The God of Small Things*, Ammu's relationship with Velutha challenges the social boundaries imposed upon them. Velutha's character also represents the possibility of individual dignity and skill in a society that attempts to limit his social position. However, the consequences of their actions reveal the unequal power of dominant social institutions.

In *Sangati*, resistance is more closely connected with collective experiences and shared voices. Women express their strength through work, humour, mutual support, and the questioning of unfair treatment. Their experiences suggest that solidarity can become an important means of challenging oppressive customs and asserting personal identity.

4.4 Narrative Voice and Marginalized Experiences

Narrative technique plays an important role in presenting subaltern experiences. Roy uses a non-linear narrative structure, shifts in time, and the perspectives of different characters to reveal the emotional and social consequences of caste and gender restrictions. The narrative gradually exposes how family history and social expectations shape the characters' experiences.

Bama employs a community-oriented narrative that brings the everyday experiences of Dalit women into the centre of literary representation. The use of colloquial expressions, oral storytelling, humour, and collective experiences gives importance to voices that are frequently marginalized in mainstream narratives. This narrative approach contributes to the representation of identity and resistance.

4.5 Intersection of Caste and Gender

The comparative analysis demonstrates that caste and gender cannot be examined as completely separate forms of oppression. Women's experiences are influenced by their caste position, economic conditions, and social environment. Ammu's experience reveals the consequences of challenging caste and patriarchal boundaries, while the women in *Sangati* demonstrate how caste discrimination and gender inequality affect everyday life.

The two works also reveal different dimensions of subaltern agency. Roy presents the consequences of individual challenges to social restrictions through a fictional family narrative, whereas Bama emphasizes the collective strength and experiences of Dalit women. Together, these works demonstrate that marginalized people are not merely passive victims of oppression. They negotiate, question, and sometimes challenge the structures that restrict their lives.

Overall, the findings indicate that subaltern agency is expressed through both individual and collective experiences. The selected works question caste hierarchy and patriarchal authority while highlighting the importance of dignity, solidarity, identity, and resistance. They demonstrate how literature can provide visibility to marginalized experiences and encourage critical reflection on social inequality.

5. Discussion

The comparative examination of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Bama's *Sangati* demonstrates how literature can question established structures of caste and gender inequality. Both writers present the experiences of marginalized people and reveal the ways in which social institutions influence their identities, relationships, and opportunities. Although the novels employ different narrative approaches, they share an important concern with the dignity and agency of individuals and communities affected by discrimination.

5.1 Subalternity, Voice, and Representation

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of subalternity provides a useful framework for understanding the representation of marginalized characters in these works. Spivak's discussion draws attention to the difficulties faced by oppressed groups in making their voices heard within dominant systems of representation. This perspective helps explain why the experiences of marginalized women require careful literary examination.

In *The God of Small Things*, the experiences of Ammu and Velutha reveal how caste and patriarchal authority restrict individual freedom. Their relationship challenges the boundaries established by dominant social structures. However, the consequences they face demonstrate the unequal power relations that determine whose relationships and choices are socially accepted.

In *Sangati*, Bama gives importance to the experiences and voices of Dalit women. The narrative brings their everyday lives, struggles, and expressions into literary focus. Through collective experiences and community-centred storytelling, the work challenges representations that treat marginalized women merely as passive victims. It presents them as individuals capable of understanding, questioning, and negotiating their social conditions.

5.2 Caste and Gender as Interconnected Structures

The two works demonstrate that caste and gender operate together in shaping the experiences of marginalized people. Caste discrimination influences social relationships, economic opportunities, and personal freedom, while patriarchal expectations restrict women's choices and independence.

Ammu's experiences in Roy's novel reveal the consequences of being a woman who challenges established social expectations. Her relationship with Velutha becomes a challenge to caste hierarchy as well as patriarchal control. The social response to their relationship demonstrates how dominant institutions attempt to preserve established boundaries.

Bama's *Sangati* offers a community-based representation of these interconnected inequalities. It presents the difficulties

experienced by Dalit women in their homes, workplaces, and wider society. Their responsibilities, labour, and social position reveal how gender discrimination becomes intensified by caste and economic disadvantage. The narrative therefore encourages readers to understand women's experiences through multiple social conditions rather than through gender alone.

5.3 Everyday Resistance and the Meaning of Agency

An important contribution of both works is their representation of resistance beyond dramatic acts of rebellion. Subaltern agency can also emerge through everyday decisions, self-respect, solidarity, and the questioning of discriminatory customs.

In Roy's novel, the characters' attempts to cross socially imposed boundaries reveal the possibility of individual resistance. However, the tragic consequences also expose the limitations placed upon people who challenge dominant caste structures.

In Bama's work, resistance is closely connected with collective strength. The experiences of Dalit women reveal the importance of mutual support, shared understanding, humour, and the ability to question unfair treatment. Such expressions demonstrate that resistance can become part of everyday life. The assertion of dignity and identity is itself significant in a society that attempts to marginalize particular communities.

5.4 Narrative Strategies and Literary Resistance

The narrative methods employed by Roy and Bama contribute significantly to the representation of subaltern experiences. Roy's non-linear narrative, shifts in time, and complex characterization reveal the lasting effects of social restrictions on individual lives. By presenting events through different perspectives, the novel encourages readers to question the social judgments imposed upon its characters.

Bama's narrative approach gives importance to oral expression, colloquial language, humour, and collective experiences. These features help create a literary space for Dalit women's voices and everyday realities. The narrative challenges the assumption that only formal or dominant forms of language can express meaningful literary experiences.

Thus, literary form becomes an important part of resistance. The writers do not simply describe social inequality; they also question the ways in which marginalized people are represented and heard.

5.5 Comparative Significance

Although the two works differ in narrative structure and emphasis, both contribute to an understanding of subaltern agency. Roy examines caste and gender through individual relationships and the consequences of challenging social restrictions. Bama emphasizes the shared experiences and collective strength of Dalit women. Their different approaches provide complementary perspectives on the relationship between oppression and resistance.

The comparison also demonstrates that agency should not be measured only through visible success or complete freedom from oppression. Even when social structures remain powerful, marginalized people can express agency through personal choices, collective support, cultural expression, and the refusal to accept humiliation.

Overall, the discussion highlights the importance of reading caste and gender together in Indian literary studies. *The God of Small Things* and *Sangati* question social hierarchies and make marginalized experiences central to literary discussion. Their representations encourage readers to recognize the complexity of oppression while acknowledging the strength, dignity, and resistance of marginalized individuals and communities.

6. Conclusion

The present study examines the representation of subaltern agency through caste, gender, and resistance in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Bama's *Sangati*. The comparative analysis demonstrates how both writers expose the social inequalities experienced by marginalized communities and question the structures that maintain caste discrimination and patriarchal authority.

Roy's novel reveals the consequences of caste restrictions and gender-based control through the experiences of Ammu and Velutha. Their relationship challenges established social boundaries and exposes the unequal power relations within society. Bama's *Sangati*, on the other hand, highlights the everyday experiences of Dalit women and presents their struggles against caste discrimination, economic hardship, and gender oppression. Through collective voices and shared experiences, Bama emphasizes the importance of solidarity, self-respect, and resistance.

The study establishes that caste and gender are interconnected structures that influence the identity, freedom, and opportunities of marginalized individuals. It also demonstrates that subaltern agency is not limited to organized movements or dramatic acts of rebellion. It can emerge through everyday negotiations, personal choices, mutual support, cultural expression, and the assertion of dignity.

The comparative reading further highlights the importance of narrative voice and literary representation in making marginalized experiences visible. Roy and Bama employ different narrative strategies, yet both challenge dominant social perspectives and encourage readers to question established hierarchies.

In conclusion, *The God of Small Things* and *Sangati* demonstrate the significant role of literature in examining social injustice and representing marginalized voices. The study contributes to discussions of caste, gender, subalternity, and resistance in Indian Writing in English. It also suggests that further research may examine Dalit women's writing, intersectionality, and contemporary literary representations of social justice. Literature continues to provide an important space for questioning inequality and imagining a more inclusive society.

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