

Subaltern Voice and the Politics of Representation

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(Received: August 19, 2024; Revised: September 22, 2024)

Abstract

Subaltern is a term coined after to discuss the state of marginalized and suppressed people existing in our society. They have been far away from the main stream discourse. They are fully controlled and suppressed by the elites. On the other hand, the subaltern has been the issued of various people to bring forward and create a ground for discussion. This term has come in existence since the postcolonial era. The wide discussion on subaltern has given a big platform to understand the underprivileged group. The society consists the subaltern but their voice is suppressed or they are totally ignored in mainstream discussion. Subalterns have been the stairs for the elites to grow and gain in the society. In the name of representation, again subalterns are dominated and others get benefitted.

Keywords: *Subaltern, Elites, Postcolonial era, Pegemony, Peasant proprietors, Resistant*

1. Introduction

The term subaltern has been a worldwide phenomenon for the discussion and interpretation. For ages it has been a significance issue for any conscious person to raise the issue about. They don't hesitate to create the discussion about the subalterns and the same group has been the issue for the social persons to talk about. People try to raise their problem and tackle about it. But neither they come forth to solve their problem nor they show their close attachment to work out the existing issue regarding subaltern. This term has been a challenge for the concerned persons. The subalterns are used in the text to make other elites dominant in the society. The purpose of this research is to focus on the existing condition of the subalterns in the literary texts not only in the wide context but also in the context of Nepal and Nepalese literary arts. How have they been mentioned and how the authors have been able to judge with the subalterns in the various aspects with the help of the literature.

Subaltern voice, as one of the most crucial discourses in postcolonial debates, is deeply rooted in the politics of voice and representation, which has shaped such discourse. The question of voice is central to the subaltern's status. Over time, as the subaltern emerges, the voice of the people is progressively silenced. The raised voice is rarely heard because it is not considered significant. Even the genuine concerns of the subaltern are often ignored. However, there exists a profound desire and power in such efforts. Spivak, (2023) writes, "The link to the workers' struggle is located in the desire to blow up power at any point

of its application”. In their struggle for identity and existence, the subaltern stands in opposition to the authority dominated by the elite of society. Spivak further asserts, “In so far as millions of families under economic conditions of existence that cut off their mode of life, their interest, and their formation from those of the other classes and place in inimical confrontation, they form a class”. The economic status becomes a primary cause of their fight, forcing them to alter their way of life.

These individuals contend with both the community and society to gain meaningful recognition of their existence. Socially, every group must acknowledge the existence of others for a meaningful life. Yet, the case of the subaltern is distinct. They are denied their rights and excluded from the mainstream of society. The hegemony of the upper class prevents them from standing independently. Green, (2010) explains, “The hegemony within civil society supports the leading group’s authority over political society, and the juridical apparatuses of political society protect the dominant group’s hegemony within civil society through coercive measures”. For Gramsci, both the state and civil society are the principal agents of mainstream culture, which hold negative attitudes toward the cause of the subaltern. Thus, the subaltern does not secure its rightful position within mainstream culture. At this point, the need for subaltern representation becomes apparent. Green and Ives (2009) further argues, “Subaltern historiography, a history of the subaltern classes, and a political strategy of transformation based upon the historical development and existence of the subaltern”.

Through various activities, the subaltern seeks attention from the dominant group. In their quest for recognition, they cannot represent themselves, as their voices are largely ignored. Consequently, this group remains dominated. Spivak, (2023) notes: “The small peasant proprietors cannot represent themselves; they must be represented. Their representative must appear simultaneously as their master, as an authority over them, as unrestricted governmental power that protects them from the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above. The political influence of the small peasant proprietors therefore finds its last expression in the executive force subordinating society itself”. Only the expectations of the elite class are met by the political society, which is also controlled and guided by the same group of people. Since their interests align, they remain united. Thus, Green and Ives (2009) states, “The historical unity of the ruling classes is realized in the state, and their history is essentially the history of the state and of the group of the state”. As a result, the elite group secures its rightful position in mainstream history, while the subaltern group remains marginalized.

The voice of the subaltern is ignored and dominated by the ruling elite, particularly in terms of representation. Mainstream discourses are products of the elite, where the issues of the subaltern are excluded. In their search for dignity, subaltern activities take the form of political bodies, striving to find a place within society. The subaltern group also forms a political body to express their voices meaningfully. Green and Ives (2004) writes,

“The subaltern group organizes a political formation that represents its concerns, expresses its autonomy and its will to participate in the established political framework. The subaltern group realizes its interests will not be met within the current socio-political system, so it organizes its own social and political formation that will eventually replace the existing one”. The subaltern class harbors a hidden agenda to abolish the hegemony of the elite group. They engage in a new political framework so that their issues are duly prioritized. The subaltern class faces difficulties in expressing their desires because of a fundamental communication gap. Their audience, the dominant group in society, neglects them. Although Asgharzadeh, (2012) introduces the idea of voice, where he suggests, “speaking truth to power, the ability to question, critique, and rupture through dialogue and communication”, the subaltern’s voice remains largely unheard and unacknowledged. Therefore, “the politics of voice is a universal concern, applicable to/in various cultures and environments” (Asgharzadeh, 2012). In this context, the purpose of the subaltern’s voice is largely overlooked by the dominant group in society.

The voice can be applied in various cultures and environments, including conflicts involving fundamental rights. Regarding the power relationships between the dominant and dominated groups in the politics of voice, Maggio, (2011) writes, “The subalterns are silenced even when attempting to speak. The subaltern is always framed as a quieting or as a resistant. Its own voice is never heard... The subalterns do not have culture. They cannot be truly human”. Silencing is the basic nature of the elite, which always maintains its status quo. Through this process, the dominated group is completely marginalized.

People who attempt to go against the social code of the ruling elite are marked as resistant. The powerful can create images to suppress the dominated group whenever it wishes. The subalterns are devalued. They do not have a culture in which they can stand with a solid voice, nor are they given a social identity. In general, human position is denied to them in society. They need to be heard and understood so that society can analyze their status. Maggio, (2011) further adds:

... to the extent that the subaltern never speak or are never heard, they do not participate in human culture. Hence, the silencing of the subaltern does not only shape the discourse. It also renders the subaltern without a subject being.

The silencing phenomenon is a horrible process in which the subaltern, as a group, loses their identity and human position. It is through this process that they are marginalized and their role in society becomes insignificant. The subaltern’s ignorance of human culture is a form of resistance, as they are ignored in society. Sati in colonial India can be seen as one of the best examples of the silenced subaltern. In colonial India, the status of women was deplorable. Widows were often forced to sacrifice themselves with their husbands and burn in the ‘noble Hindus’ versus ‘bad Hindus’ narrative, or as the civilized British versus

the primitive dark-skinned Indians. Spivak, (2023) observes that the widow's act is "never considered a form of martyrdom". After the husband's death, the wife had to kill herself in the burning pyre. Though a barbaric act, the widows accepted it and took their own lives. The discourses of the Hindu elite did not give the Satis due recognition, and the West began to understand them through translated texts. Thus, Sati was perpetually silenced and could never speak in the true sense.

A similar relationship can be found in the case of metropolitan and subaltern states. Coronil, (1996) examines:

Like metropolitan states, subaltern states speak – literally and metaphorically – through the languages that constitute them as central sites of authority, and their multiple forms of speech impact the daily lives of people within their societies.

According to Coronil, (1996), the state-provincial relationship is problematic, yet the province still has a voice manifested through the acts of the people living there.

When a community raises its voice, its status can be identified. The most important factor is the position from which they raise their voice. Regarding the subject position, Coronil, (1996) writes:

A subject position is not only a structural locus of enunciation, but a group partially defined by a positioned subject through speech, which in turn makes speech possible.

The role of subject position in meaningful communication is problematic because society often does not recognize these people as significant beings with social importance. The ruler/ruled binary plays a crucial role in determining subject position. These individuals are rarely acknowledged by the authorities—those in power who fail to recognize the meaningful existence of others. The subaltern consciousness, from the subject position, is victimized by the lack of opportunity for representation. Cherniavsky, (2004), attempts to draw a picture of subaltern consciousness by focusing on their status, stating:

Subaltern studies contributes to the understanding of sovereign subjectivity as a metalepsis or an effect (of a complex 'network' of history, ideology, productive and reproductive) that is mistaken for the prior cause of individual consciousness.

The elites consistently suppress subaltern consciousness. Their goal and social existence are to control and dominate the subaltern. This suppression often encourages the subaltern to rebel and fight against the elites, as it is in the consciousness where the desire to create a new reality is born.

The 1857 Indian Rebellion serves as a historical incident in which subaltern consciousness was suppressed. During British rule, the people were heavily tortured and oppressed. The rebellion of 1857 broke out, forcing the British rulers to lose their grip on many areas. The subalterns raised their voices against the colonizers. The colonized felt a great challenge

as they were enslaved, exploited, and dominated in their own country. Perusek, (1933) describes the mutiny:

The mutiny broke out the following evening, with one group of Sepoys freeing 86 convicted men from the goal, and another opening the doors of the old goal to let out 800 prisoners. The Sepoys were joined by surrounding villages, armed with whatever weapons they could lay their hands on.

Mass murder was not a significant issue for the elite class. In the struggle for meaningful life, the powerful could go to any extent. Under the leadership of Mangal Pandey, the Sepoys came forward to fight against British rule. In many states, they were victorious. The British had captured 86 convicts, sentenced to 10 years imprisonment with hard labor. This punishment angered the Sepoys, who attacked the jail, freed the 86 prisoners, and then attacked another jail to free 800 prisoners. This was an act of defiance, and civilians joined the Sepoys, helping with their might. They used whatever weapons they could find and supported the Sepoys in their cause. It was all due to the suppression of the colonizers over the colonized. The mutiny was a success because the colonized focused on overthrowing the British, regardless of religion. Perusek, (1933) writes, “Hindus and Muslims could reconcile their differences and combine to overthrow the British”. The colonized set aside their religious differences to unite and defeat the British.

Perusek, (1933) notes:

The Indian Mutiny of 1857 incorporates the victory of the British in the war into the larger history of British Victories: the spirit that had animated Raleigh, that had inspired Drake, that had given invincible force to the soldiers of Cromwell, that had dealt the first blow to the conqueror of Europe, lived in these men. It was that spirit born of freedom which filled their hearts with the conviction that being Englishmen, they are bound to conquer.

When the interests of two marginalized groups meet, they unite to defeat the powerful authority. Thus, subaltern consciousness plays a crucial role in making the voice powerful and effective. Before the emergence of consciousness, the subalterns are an unorganized group, lacking knowledge of their own social and political status. Green and Ives (2009) writes:

The subalterns are unorganized and do not often speak, meaning that they do not represent themselves politically or textually. Representation and organization are key to subalternity, and once they are achieved, the subaltern cease to be subaltern.

The emergence of the notion that their state must be transformed marks the beginning of this consciousness. Once they realize that they are socially, politically, culturally, and historically subordinated, they begin to understand their subject position. Green and Ives (2004) analyzes:

Gramsci is undoubtedly interested in a historical, political, social, and cultural transformation

that will produce human liberation, and he sees this transformation occurring from below, meaning that subaltern groups, who are subordinated and do not hold socio-political power, will attempt to overcome their subordination through a broad struggle that will affect every aspect of society and, in turn, their social being.

Consciousness gives the subaltern a different view of themselves. Thus, they become able to act and bring about social transformation. Only then does their voice become speech that is given due attention by the audience.

2. Representation of the Subaltern

The struggle of the subaltern continues against the elites, and this struggle is rarely included in mainstream discourse until the subalterns defeat the powerful group. Spivak, (2023) suggests, “One could assume a community of readers without troubling to look at the socio-political production of these communities or questioning the notion of hegemonic communities”. Any person who interacts with the hegemonized community must study and understand their status. The victimization of this group by the ruling class is often ignored in mainstream cultural discourses. This marks the beginning of the problem of representation. The oppressed group has historically been victimized and forced to live downtrodden lives. Spivak, (1990) is particularly sensitive to these issues when she declares, “We want to see the individual consciousness as a crucial part of effect of being a subject”. This is a crucial point regarding their status, as it has the potential to lead them toward salvation from their marginalized position.

The issues significant to the representation of the subaltern are often matched with material gains. Although they recognize the legitimacy of these issues, material greed turns the political, causing leaders to ignore the subaltern during crucial moments. Material concerns change the mentality of leaders, bringing the subaltern back to their original state, where they are only temporarily consoled. Spivak, (1990) analyzes an incident involving the status of a teenage girl and states:

What I was doing with the young woman who had killed herself was really trying to analyze and represent her text. She wasn't particularly trying to speak to me. I was representing her; I was reinscribing her. To an extent, I was writing her to be read and I certainly was not claiming to giving her a voice, there again this is a sort of transaction of the personality between the western feminist listener who listens to me, and myself, signified as a Third World informant.

The girl who committed suicide, for Spivak, represents the subaltern group—those oppressed and kept under strict social rules and regulations. Spivak is deeply affected by this incident and claims to express the girl's voice to highlight the real status of Third World women, who are forced to live in silence and are unable to express themselves

within society or even to their own families.

The significance of the subaltern issue is notable. Maggio, (2001) writes:

Theory, though powerful, cannot act as an elixir to the issues of the subaltern. Hence, the initial question is: What is the role of the academy, and whether there is a liberating place for the intellectual desires of studying the subaltern?

Theories can engage with texts, but in the case of the subalterns, they can only be understood and represented on behalf of society and social phenomena. Maggio, (2001) also highlights, “Marxists silence the subaltern by representing them in discourse in which they have no speaking role”. According to Maggio, (2001), academic discourse is prejudiced against the subaltern because it denies their potential for representation and voice within established discourses.

The subaltern group often becomes native informants. The ruling elite, with access to power, writes about the subaltern and continuously informs them of who they are and how they should act. Maggio, (2001) writes:

They are at best native informants for first world intellectuals interested in the voice of the other. Yet this native informant is always situated: it is always part of a vanishing point. This vanishing point makes it difficult to imagine an accurate access to the subaltern.

The dominant discourse perpetuates a distorted understanding of the subaltern class. This reasserts dominance and ensures that power relations remain in place.

The need for subaltern historiography has emerged to examine where and how the misrepresentation and underrepresentation of the subaltern group have occurred in the linear history of mainstream culture. Prakash, (1994) explains:

The term subaltern... refers to subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language, and culture and was used to signify the certainty of dominant/dominated relationships in history... the subalterns are always subject to their activity, its aim was to rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much research and academic work.

Subalterns represent the intersections of class, caste, gender, race, language, and culture because not everyone can be dominant. Society is built upon various hierarchies in class and caste, which have created different levels of power. In this context, the dominated groups represent the subaltern. The subaltern’s focus is on the priority of their issues.

Society is not static, and change inevitably occurs, leading to the establishment of new identities for social groups. Subalterns cannot be suppressed indefinitely, and they emerge in different forms over time. Prakash, (1994) argues:

The subaltern emerges with forms of sociality and political community at odds with nation and class, defying the models of rationality and social.

Despite suppression, the subalterns emerge in distinct forms with unique identities and representations. They establish new social identities and, in doing so, reveal the gaps in historical representation. Prakash, (1994) further argues, “The actual subalterns and subalternity emerge between the folds of the discourse, in its silence and blindness, and in its overdetermined pronouncement”. He continues:

This portrait of subalternity is certainly different from the image of the autonomous subject, and it has emerged in the confrontation with the systematic fragmentation of the record of subalternity. Such records register both necessary failure of subalterns to come into their own and the pressure they exerted on discursive systems that in turn, provoked their suppression and fragmentation.

The concept of subalternity differs from other societal issues. It represents the dominated groups whose voices must be included in discourse. The subaltern issues must be addressed to bring social balance. According to Prakash, (1994), “A sense of failure overwhelms the representation of the history of these societies. So much so that even contestatory projects, including subaltern studies”. Although the subalterns may be pushed to the margins, their existence and resistance persist.

The subaltern struggles for existence in society, but their voices are suppressed and often unheard. The elites dominate and prevent the subalterns from asserting their fundamental rights. Gavaskar, (2009) writes:

The profit-seeking drive has endangered the life chances of many, rendering them peripheral in its history march towards superabundance. These victims of progress have time and again thrown up incisive critiques of existing development paradigms and have appropriated their stories to mobilize their respective identities as sites of resistance.

The elite-dominated society prioritizes financial gain, neglecting the fundamental needs and rights of the subalterns.

Even the process of democratization has failed to include the subalterns. They remain excluded from enjoying their full rights in society and continue to suffer the scars of historical violence. Gavaskar, (2009) argues:

Democratization has taught various sections of the populace the language of rights so as to alleviate their deprivations. But democratization has also acquainted them with their specific histories of oppression and as a consequence has introduced diverse voices in their articulation of rights. In such circumstances, social movements need to give up their dogmatic insistence for a singular site around which all oppositions can be framed.

This indicates that the issues of the subalterns are often disregarded or less prioritized in the larger societal discourse.

Once subalterns gain their rights, they can no longer be considered subalterns because they

transform their position within society. They receive acknowledgment of their identity and lead meaningful lives within the community. Patnaik, (2000) states, “Subaltern praxis in the hegemony process is treated as a mere sedimentation of the dominant ideology”. As the subalterns develop a new identity, it represents a process of sedimentation within the dominant ideological framework.

The state, as a powerful institution, marginalizes the subaltern class. Green, (2010) argues, “Subalternity is directly linked with his conceptions of hegemony and state and civil society”. The subalterns remain tied to the social framework, as they cannot escape the influence of hegemonic forces in the political society. Green, (2010), writes:

The integral historian is not just a historian who documents historical developments in some sort of positivistic manner but is one who understands the socioeconomic, political, and cultural implications of such developments—how particular events relate to broader sociopolitical context.

Despite the imposition of laws, they primarily affect the subalterns, while the elite hegemony continues to control civil society. Green, (2010) explains, “Civil society, in this regard, is the sphere of the integral state ruling or dominant social groups manufacture, organize, and maintain consent by promoting their hegemony”. The elites reinforce their power through the civil society, maintaining the gap between themselves and the subalterns.

Historians and the sociopolitical landscape tend to favor the dominant elites. As all social aspects are controlled by the elites, historical documentation often ignores the subalterns. Therefore, cultural texts must be analyzed for how the subaltern’s voice has emerged in society, as literary texts, less affected by power relations, help reveal how these voices emerge.

3. Conclusion

A group of people existing in our society are voiceless and they are controlled by the elites. Even those elites try to speak in favor of the subalterns but still they remain silence and they are always suppressed and dominated in the present society. They try to raise their voice but they are again dominated and they have been the escape goats for some group of people to get socially and economically benefitted. Their voice should be raised so that they feel secured and realize living a secured and free life in the society.

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