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## Politics of Subaltern Consciousness: The Substantive Representation of the Margins in Nehru's *Toward Freedom* and Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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### Abstract

*Despite being placed at the bottom of the society, Indian subalterns have always gained central position in the political sphere. This paper investigates the substantive representation of marginalized groups and the way they employ their consciousness to dismantle injustices by analyzing Jawaharlal Nehru's autobiography *Toward Freedom* (1936) and Arundhati Roy's novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). The subaltern struggle in the society in the quest of their autonomous self and it is achieved with the help of continuous resistance on their part. Colonized Indians display their resistance to counter the British Raj. In the like manner, Hijras, women and Dalits resist the conventional norms of the mainstream by developing anti-normative body and by adopting new roles in the society. Delving on Antonio Gramsci, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Ranajit Guha's ideas of the subaltern, this study analyzes the life of the colonized Indians, the transgender, and the untouchables located in the periphery of social, economic and political strata of the colonial and the post-millennial India. Besides the Subaltern Studies' scholars, Tamen and Garnett's notion on 'self,' 'interpretation,' 'agency' and 'resistance' have been applied to show the way subalterns overcome their subordination in the existing social order. From the standpoint of Nehru's promise, this study critiques the politics and the position of the subaltern in the first decade of the twentieth century as presented in Roy.*

**Keywords:** Agency, identity, new subaltern, representation, resistance, subjectivity, subaltern consciousness

### Introduction

Subalterns have become the victim of colonialism, classism, casteism and

gender discrimination during different time periods in India. Subalterns are those groups of people who are placed at the bottom of social, political and economic strata with little or no opportunities. This paper analyzes the representation of subalterns' struggle with reference to the social, political, economic and cultural issues present in the pre and post independent India. It also investigates the position of subalterns envisioned in pre-independent India and compares it to their present position in India after more than seven decades of its independence from the British Raj. Besides, the paper explores the way subalterns make themselves free from their subordinations through resistance in order to achieve their independent self as reflected in Nehru's *Toward Freedom* (1936) and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). The paper concentrates on the subaltern categories such as colonized Indians, Hijras, Dalits, women, Muslims, and untouchables' with its focus on their quest for independence and examines them against the backdrop of Nehru's promises for the marginalized made in his autobiography. The paper uses the theoretical insights of Antonio Gramsci, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Miguel Tamen, and Michael Garnett to analyze the life of the subaltern, role of their consciousness to resist injustices and the way their position differs in post-independent India from that of pre-independent India.

### **The Changing Notion of Subaltern from the 1890s to the Present**

The term 'subaltern' represents the group of people who are at the bottom or in the periphery of the society. They get limited opportunities in various spheres. Besides, they are the people with limited rights lacking agency of their own. They are ignored and neglected by the people at the center. Subalterns are under-represented, under-taught non-canonical groups in the society. Though they live at the bottom of the society, they can revolt against the mainstream. The concept of 'subaltern' was first developed and used by Antonio Gramsci in 1890 to represent those people in the society who were ignored during the historic transformation of the Italian state in the 1870s. In addition, he used the term to represent the lower rank military order who earn little. After Gramsci, South Asian scholars initiated the debate on Subaltern Studies. They wrote a series of volumes on Subaltern Studies since 1982 to let the historians know about the culture and existence of the marginalized people in colonial and post-colonial India.

By analyzing the concept of subaltern from Gramsci to Spivak, we find slight difference in the way they define 'subalterns.' Gramsci's standpoint regarding subalterns is instrumentally fundamental to each and every theorist who wanted to have an understanding of the notion of subaltern. In Gramsci's words, "the subaltern classes fundamentally refer to any 'low rank' person or group in a certain society" (66). Subalterns suffer under the hegemonic domination of a ruling class. Hegemonic domination of the elite denies them the basic rights of participation in constructing their local history and culture. They are not taken as active individuals of the nation. Gramsci used the term to refer to the workers and peasants who were oppressed and dominated by the members of the National Fascist Party, Benito Mussolini and his agents. Gramsci argues that "the history of the subalterns was as complex as the history of the dominant elite class" (67). The history of the subaltern is fragmented and they always become subject to the activity of the elite groups. Even if subalterns rise against elite groups, they

cannot make themselves completely autonomous because they lack history to define their identity.

The South Asian subaltern group which was guided by Guha attempted to give voice to the voiceless. This was a group of historians “who aimed to promote a systematic discussion of subaltern themes in South Asian Society” (Guha 34). Guha and his team aimed to analyze the general attributes of marginalization in South Asian Society in terms of class, caste and gender. Subalterns are different from elites. The feature that explains subaltern identity for Guha is ‘negation.’ To evaluate the peasant resistance as a subject of history, the event needs a corresponding epistemological inversion.

The term ‘subaltern’ became more debatable with the rise of post-colonial feminist critic, Spivak. In her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak,” Spivak highlights the problems of subaltern within new historical developments. She focused on capitalistic politics of ignoring revolutionary voices and divisions of labor in a current globalized world. She dismantles Gramsci’s concept of the autonomous self of the subaltern groups. Spivak excavates the history of deprived women, and elaborates on the original demarcation of the notion of the subaltern. The history of deprived women was first developed by Guha and the others through the exploration of the experiences and struggles of women either from the upper middle class, the peasantry or the sub-proletariat class. In India, the subaltern females are more marginalized than the males. As Spivak argues, “subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as a female is even more deeply in shadow” (113). Spivak deals with the realm of subalternity by taking into account the problems of gender especially of Indian women during colonial times. She sheds lights on the status of Indian women based on her analysis of Sati practices under the British colonial rule. Position of women under Sati practice differs from their position in the twenty-first century Indian society. Now, women hold better positions in social, financial and political spheres than they did under Sati practice. Thus, the subaltern as women at one time or place may not be subaltern in another place or time since the term ‘subaltern’ is relational.

Subaltern Studies focuses on the consciousness of the working classes. Spivak also emphasizes on subaltern consciousness. According to Spivak, subaltern consciousness is always subject to the people in power and never completely recoverable. Some dominant classes objectify the subaltern and they take knowledge as power. Dipesh Chakrabarty defines subaltern consciousness as the “peasant consciousness” (372). According to him, the religious consciousness of the subaltern is not subject to anything. He focuses on the two opposing forces like the elite and the subaltern, the feudal mode of power and the present communal mode of power. Chatterjee focuses on the relation between caste and the subaltern. He believes that Indian Society is based on hierarchy of caste not class. Hence, class is replaced by caste system in the Indian sub-continent. For Chatterjee, “Caste is a feature of the superstructure of Indian society . . . caste is in fact the specifically Indian form of material relations at the base with its own historical dynamic, caste in other words is the form in which classes appear in Indian society” (76). Chatterjee believes that societies in India have been fragmented not on the basis of economic condition of the people but on the basis of their caste. He opines that caste is more dominant than class in Indian society. Broadly, subaltern is a relative term and

there are layers of the subaltern. The determining parameters of subaltern and privileged class vary with time, place and economic status of an individual. Though caste and gender have become measuring parameters to locate the subaltern, they can never be the sole determining factors of the subaltern. Instead, financial and political status of people determine whether they are subalterns or elites.

### Critical Perspectives on Nehru and Roy

Multiple dimensions of Nehru's *Toward Freedom* and Roy's *The Ministry* have been explored by various scholars and critics by focusing on the representation of marginalized people's struggles and injustices. Basically, researchers have explored the representation of marginalized people's struggle in terms of social, political, economic and cultural issues. But no research has been carried out by making a comparative study between position of subalterns in pre-independent and post-independent India and the way they overcome injustices. Nehru's text focuses on the self-questioning of the subaltern in India and about their socio-economic position in the existing social order. It presents the struggle of Indians against the British Raj and the course of freedom movement. In this line, Abid Hussain points out, "Nehru's work presents the national history of India. By going through his autobiography, we come to know about his personality and how he shaped the destiny of other people. Nehru had a Buddha like heart that could respond to the poor and their sufferings" (63). Nehru, by writing an autobiography, informs people of India about the British rule and the struggle of Indian people under it. His text makes subalterns aware about their position in the society and gives them collective strength to fight against discriminations. He wants to see Indian society freed from discriminations based on class, caste and gender. The fundamental idea that dominated Nehru's autobiography is economic freedom and economic equality, the essence of socialism in India.

Nehru's autobiography includes his ideas and experiences on religion, secularism, national unity, socialism, and non-violence. His love for nature, animals, mountains and rivers is also beautifully presented in the text. He faced torture, depression and isolation during freedom struggle. In Humayun Kabir's words, "Nehru's Autobiography expresses the manifold aspects of his rich personality, more adequately than perhaps anything else he has done" (36). Nehru employs the strategy of an impersonal historian. Nehru questions Indian peoples' existence in the society. R. Nanda has rightly pointed out, "Nehru's text reflects his doubts, self-questioning and mental conflict" (19). After his visit to some villages in Pratapgarh district of the United Province and having observed the problems faced by subaltern in India, he decided to fight for them. Farmers were in critical situation in India in the 1920s and the 1930s. They were compelled to pay heavy tax to the government without getting any assistance from it in the 1920s.

These subalterns were especially farmers, women, political rebels and Muslims. Nehru played a leading role in the Lahore congress in 1929. He joined shouting crowds and public functions for the freedom of subaltern in India. He played a significant role in organizing no-tax campaign in U. P. Humayun Kabir writes, "*Toward Freedom: An Autobiography* expresses the manifold aspects of his rich personality, more adequately

than perhaps anything else he has done” (7). Nehru promises to make marginalized people free from various injustices prevalent in Indian society and wants to see them as independent as well as autonomous beings.

Roy's text *The Ministry* highlights the rapidly transforming Indian democracy with the rise of right wing political ideology. She focuses on the degrading situation of the marginalized groups who have been dominated in the name of class, caste, gender and religion. Roy attempts her best to erase the existing gap between the margin and the center. She wants to see Indian society as well organized and well connected. In this line, Syed WahajMohsin and Shasta Taskeen write, “Roy's text focus on the issues of national importance such as casteism in India, the pathetic condition of the marginalized sections of the society, rampant urbanization, consumerism and loss of natural resources, and dismal political atmosphere in the country” (264). It is the world where people like Anum, Daychand and Tilo are not given proper space. They are taken as ‘other’ in this world as they do not fit into it. These marginalized people have to struggle with social issues to make their place in the society.

Roy presents the prevalent discrimination based on class, caste and gender and gives voice to the voiceless people through her text. Gurpreet Singh explicates that, “Roy gives voice to the most condemned group in the world's so-called largest secular democracy” (13). He further argues, “Roy has specifically focused on the marginalized and socially excluded Dalits and Muslim community who are far away from socio-political system of democratic government” (81). Dayachand is a symbolic representation of the entire suffering of Dalits. Caste, in subcontinent, does not only states one's occupation, but also is linked with one's identity. Untouchables and Dalits are compelled to work as garbage removal and toilet cleaners. Lisa Lau writes:

The novel is inhabited by cohorts of others: *Hijras*, political rebels, the poor, women who will not know their place and abandoned baby girls. The narrative of Roy's latest political narrative romance shows these others carving out new spaces for themselves, defying convention, trying possible new lives and listing out new roles. And at last they become successful to do so. (11)

The subalterns in India are still reduced to objects. They are exploited, marginalized and dominated by the powerful. Roy raises her voice against the suffering of the suppressed class of women and other dropouts of the society including third gender, Muslims and lower caste people.

Roy has unearthed the discrimination prevalent in Indian society at present. She focuses on the critical condition of the poor, transgender and lower caste people in India. These marginal sections are the evidence of disintegrated India. These marginalities are binaries of Duniya versus Jannat, dissent versus consent, democracy versus revolution and so forth. Critique Swati Ganguly visualizes the prevailing unbroken marginalities in the novel. She argues, “the novel is an exploration of a grotesque hybrid existence that the Indian state has forced its people” (492). The text deals with the issues which are political in nature like Kashmir conflict, Manipur Nationalist Movement, displacement of Adhivasi, Maoist insurgency in Central Indian forests, and Gujrat Massacre 2002. Roy gives voice to the voiceless as major portion of the book is written from the marginalized people's perspective. The text treats them as the creator of the history.

### **The Struggle of Subalterns across the period: From Nehru to Roy in India**

Nehru presents the critical situation of all the Indians under the British Raj, whereas Roy unearths severe casteism and gender discrimination prevalent in India in the decade of 2000. Subalterns in pre-independent India suffered a lot under British colonialism. Indians were not taken as humans but as objects in the 1930s India. In the twenty-first century Indian society, women, transgender and Dalits are not given enough opportunities. During colonial period, Indians were exploited by the British and they were treated as animals. But Indians overcame the British colonialism with the help of overt and covert resistance on their part. Nehru depicts the political consciousness of marginalized people and their struggle for freedom. He represents the problems faced by colonized Indians, especially people of Kashmir and farmers of India during the 1930s in India. Nehru takes the real historical position of the subaltern and the strength of their self in the whirlpool of massive forces of historical change in India before its independence from cruel British Raj.

Subalterns in colonial India launched different campaigns to fight and get freedom from the oppressive British Raj. Three major campaigns in the Indian Independence Movement were launched by Gandhi. They were non-cooperation in 1919-1922, the civil disobedience movement and the Salt Satyagraha of 1930-1931. In addition, the Quit India movement from about 1940-1942 was also led by Gandhi. Satyagrahis suffered a lot during independence movement. They were beaten, imprisoned and backfired by the British rulers. With the help of their hard fought struggle, India finally achieved independence on 15 August 1947. Besides, the Salt Satyagraha was a heterogeneous campaign of civil disobedience. It included a range of strategic actions against illegal salt making. It focused on the boycott of British cloth and demand for complete and immediate independence. In addition, it set the stage for the Quit India Movement of 1940-1941 that led to Indian independence in 1947. The Salt March was against the British rulers' refusal to accept the INC's declaration of independence in December 1929. It was designed to challenge the injustice of the colonial rule.

Gandhi convinced many of his followers to follow the path of non-violent protests. They followed sit-down strikes. They refused to work and to pay their taxes. However, there were some people in India who wanted to use more extreme ways to go against British. The Government of India Act was introduced in 1935. The Act was introduced for Indian assembly to put their views regarding everything in India except defense and foreign affairs. The nationalists in India disagreed with this act as it failed to introduce dominion status. The major failing of the act was that it ignored the religious conflict between the Muslims and Hindus. As two-thirds of India's population was Hindus, the Muslims were afraid thinking that in an independent India, they will be treated unfairly. In provincial elections in 1937, the Hindus dominated the Congress Party under Nehru and won eight out of the eleven provinces. The Muslim demanded a separate state called Pakistan. Then the Indian Independence Act was signed on 15 August 1947. This act led the Muslim majority to leave India. Then they created the independent state of Pakistan. In the mixed provinces of the Punjab and Bengal, some people found themselves on the wrong side. Many people moved to the new frontiers. Hindus from Pakistan moved to India. In the like manner, Muslims from India moved to Pakistan.



Violence took place in places where these moving groups met. Violence occurred in Punjab where almost about 250, 000 people were murdered in religious clashes between Hindus and Muslims. Most of the people who were murdered in the clashes were Muslims, Muslim women and children. This shows that Indians struggled and suffered much in their own land before 1947.

On the other hand, Dalits, Hijras and women are struggling under patriarchy, casteism and gender discrimination in India at present. They have been given little opportunities in the society. Their private and public sphere is controlled by men and upper caste people. These people experience silence for reasons that are beyond their control including birth and social as well as cultural impositions. But they dismantle the discrimination in their own ways. Subalterns face identity crisis in some of the places of India. Though freedom is guaranteed by the constitution at present in India, people in the periphery still find themselves with no solid identity. They are treated as people from foreign land.

### Subaltern Consciousness in Nehru and Roy

Jawaharlal Nehru in his autobiography *Toward Freedom* presents the critical condition of colonized Indians who were not allowed to run any business in India and who had to follow the cruel British rule without questioning it. Nehru's main focus is on representing the life of subalterns in India who were victims of colonialism before 1947, i.e. in pre-independent India. On the other hand, Arundhati Roy in her text *The Ministry* presents the existing casteism and gender discrimination in India in the twenty-first century after seven decades of its independence from British Raj. Nehru focuses on the self-questioning of subalterns in India and about their marginalized position in the society. Nehru's increasing knowledge and understanding about the poor farmers and representatives of Indian people is taken as the growth of the self in his autobiography. Nehru's effort to give justice to the "collective others" like peasants, people of Kashmir and helpless Indians, shows his positive attitude towards the subaltern in India.

People of Kashmir and Pratapgarh were more exploited and dominated than the rest of the Indian people under the British Raj. Nehru writes, "people of Kashmir and Pratapgarh were not given opportunity to work in the offices. They were compelled to work as farmers and they had to pay heavy tax to the government" (34). Their public sphere had been compressed whereas some Indians had got good space to work in the offices in cities. As Spivak argues, "There are layers of subaltern. Those who are at the bottom are more subaltern than those who are in the layers" (173). Though all Indian people were powerless and were prohibited to run their business in India under the British Raj, some poor people and farmers were more in trouble than the rest. Nehru writes, "all our people suffered under the British Raj. But, the farmers of Pratapgarh suffered more than the rest; they encountered problems in the society as Indians and farmers" (446). The farmers were doubly exploited by the British: as farmers with no earning and as Indians with no civilization. After observing the critical condition of subaltern in India, Nehru involved himself more intensely in freedom movement and started speaking on behalf of the poor farmers as well as other marginalized people in India. He took subalterns' pain and suffering as his own suffering. Nehru started identifying himself with the life of the poor Indians.

Nehru established himself as a freedom fighter. Michael Garnett in his text “Agency and Inner Freedom” focuses on the idea that “if self-sacrifice is not there, awakening of agency is not possible. An awakened agency is one that hits on weak structures of the society” (6). Nehru challenged all the discriminations prevalent in pre-independent India and questioned all the flaws with Indian politics. Nehru played a leading role in the Lahore congress in 1929. Due to his hard fought struggle for the freedom of subaltern in India, Nehru became popular among all the Indian people. He engaged bravely in the freedom struggle and showed love for the marginalized people in India. He addressed various crowds and public meetings. He played a very significant role in organizing no-tax campaign in India and it became successful too. Nehru presents the relation between society and the self. He shows that Indian peasants’ self has been ignored by dominant British. According to Garnett, “subalterns’ public self is controlled by the people at the center” (8). In pre-independent India, all Indian people were limited to certain rights. They lacked their public sphere. In the same way, in the post-independent India, Dalits, transgender and the poor people are neglected from the society. They are positioned at the receiving ends. Thus, subalternshave to struggle hard to widen and strengthen their public self.

Roy presents the subaltern in India who have become victim not of colonialism but of capitalism, casteism and gender discrimination. Thus, they are taken as the new subaltern. According to Guha, “subaltern is a name for the general attribute of subordination . . . whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way” (27). Roy presents the life of women in India through two major characters: Anjum, a *Hijra* and Tilo, a girl born to Chamar family. She shows that women, lower caste people and *Hijras* are the most marginalized people in Indian society. In Roy’s text, the major character, Anjum, faces multiple discriminations in the society. Looking at all the discriminations done upon *Hijras*, Nimmo, a transgender who is a resident at Khawabgah asked Anjum:

Do you know why god made Hijra? ... It was an experiment ... a living creature that is incapable of happiness ... for us the price rise and school admissions, husband’s beatings, wives’ cheatings, Hindu-Muslim riots, Indo-Pak war ... all inside us. The riot is inside us. ... The war is inside us. Indo-Pak is inside us. It will never settle down. (23)

The transgender lack history even though they are there in the society. Their rights have been ignored by the people at the center. Subalterns are treated as a commodity by the dominant people in the society. The condition of *Hijras* in independent India is just like that of Indians under the British Raj in pre-independent India. They are not given opportunities in the society and it does not listen to their problems. They are taken as the people from other world with different identity. They lack their solid identity in the society at present in India.

Caste inequality is the most common social problem in South Asia and particularly in India in the twenty-first century. For Chatterjee, “Indian Society is fragmented due to excessive casteism than class discrimination... caste in other words is the form in which classes appear in Indian society” (174). Hence, class is replaced by caste system in the Indian sub-continent. Caste is more dominant than class in



Indian society. Societies in India at present are fragmented because of excessive casteism. Different clashes between people take place in Indian society because of caste discrimination. Lower caste people are taken as untouchables by the upper caste people. Some characters in *The Ministry* have become victims of extreme caste discrimination. As Roy narrates, “When Saddam started working at the hospital, he finds all the lower caste people working as a toilet cleaner. He also finds them working as garbage pickers” (177). Dalits lack their solid identity in Indian society. Saddam as a subaltern has no identity as he had to change his name from “Dayachand” to “Saddam Hossain” and his constant struggle to be fixed in a job indicate how subalterns are socially and economically deprived. He is neglected from the society because he is the son of Chamar. Subaltern in India are not strong enough to resist all the discriminations and injustices inflicted upon them. They are compelled to be sufferers without resisting the injustices.

Roy presents women as subaltern in *The Ministry*. The text revolves around a female character, Tilo, a half Dalit woman, who is doubly marginalized in Indian society: as a woman and as a Dalit. Spivak takes subaltern as “a gendered category in which women are doubly effaced” (96). Tilo can be identified as an obvious subaltern figure who is doubly marginalized in Indian society: as a woman and as a Dalit. Tilo is the daughter of Syrian Christian woman and the Indian man, who belonged to an untouchable caste. Roy writes: “Tilo’s father’s family disowned her mother because she was Christian” (155). Then, Tilo’s mother left Tilo because she is the daughter of an untouchable. Thus, Tilo faced a lot of problems in Indian society and she was bitterly exploited by the people at the center. Discriminating people and marginalizing them on the basis of their gender and caste is still prevalent in India. Lower caste women have been doubly marginalized: as women and as Dalits. They are at the bottom of the existing social order in India.

Subalterns have worked hard to overcome all kinds of discriminations but they are still unable to get complete freedom and independence in India. As Spivak argues, “No matter how much subaltern rebel and rise against discriminations, they cannot completely overcome them” (102). In India, subalterns became victim of colonialism before its independence and now there is discrimination on the basis of caste and gender. In addition, people in India at present are marginalized on the basis of their economic status and political access. Economically privileged women and Dalits get respect in the society whereas financially backward ones are ignored. These impoverished women and Dalits are at the bottom of the society with limited opportunities. As they are the victim of capitalism, they are considered as new subalterns in India. Thus, subaltern presented by Roy are new subalterns. Roy presents subalterns who have interpreted their position in the society and with the help of their deep agency they are trying to develop their autonomous self. They have to strive hard to dismantle various injustices done upon them. The subaltern, in India, still have to go far to develop their autonomous self.

### **Politics of/from the Margin: Subaltern Consciousness in India**

Subaltern in India dismantled colonialism with the help of their agency but now they have become the victim of capitalism. Financially well-established people who owns big companies and industries are at the center but the poor farmers still remain in the

periphery of social as well as political sphere. Moreover, the poor, transgender, Muslims and untouchables are still deprived of their rights in Indian society. They have got little or no opportunities in various spheres. Post-colonial India has not become successful to improve the critical condition of subalterns. Many political parties have emerged in post-colonial India but they failed to address the needs of subalterns. Untouchables and transgender in Indian societies are still at the bottom of the society, though the empowerment of women and untouchables is the main focus of post-colonial studies.

After analyzing the position of the subaltern reflected in Roy's *The Ministry* against the backdrop of Nehru's original vision manifested through his autobiography *Toward Freedom*, the study finds that though the position of subalterns has transformed slightly from empty state of powerlessness to the capacity of dismantling discriminations at present in India, they have still got marginal position in the society. Women, the poor, lower caste people and transgender in post-colonial India have not yet achieved freedom in the true sense. Though they have witnessed some improvement in their social, financial and political spheres, their condition still remains problematized as they continue to be at the receiving ends both in private and public spheres. Thus, they are new subalterns at present in India.

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