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The Terms: The Subaltern and Dalit

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The subaltern theory flourished after Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist, used the word for oppressed group of peasants in Italy. Subsequently, the 'Subaltern Studies' made use of the word with the meaning "of inferior in rank" in terms of class, caste, and gender in Indian context. It is the essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak that has transformed the notion of autonomy of subaltern group proposed by Gramsci as well as the heterogeneity of the subaltern according to Guha and his associates. Hence, the term 'subaltern' is very essential in postcolonial context. Development of the subaltern theory can be studied with the help of the meaning of the word 'subaltern'.

The word 'subaltern' is derived from the Late Latin 'subalternus'. It originated from Latin as 'sub'-next below + 'alternus'- every other which means a subordinate position (COED1434). According to the Concise Oxford English Dictionary, it means:

1. (n) an officer in the British army below the rank of captain, especially a second lieutenant;
2. (adj.) of lower status (1434).

The Random House Dictionary has given the following interpretation of the word:

1. (adj.) lower in rank; subordinate.
2. (Mili. <Brit>) noting a commissioned officer below the rank of captain.
3. [Logic] [a] noting the relation of one proposition is implied by the second but the second is not implied by the first. [b] (In Aristotelian logic) denote the relation of particular position to a universal position having the same subject, predicate, and quality. [c] of or pertaining to a proposition having either of these relations to another.
4. (n) one who has a subordinate position.
5. (Brit. Mil.) a commissioned officer below the rank of captain.
6. (Logic) a subaltern proposition. (RHDEL1413)

So far as the grammatical category of the word 'subaltern' is concerned, the noun is used in the military context and the adjective in the social one. The adjectival level meaning is taken into consideration for denoting the status of a person in the social context.

In literature, the word 'subaltern' is used in the sense of lower status and subordination of any person or group in relation to class, caste, poverty, and gender. However, the word 'subaltern' was used, for the first time, as stated above by Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci in the social context for denoting the position of peasantry group of Italy in his Prison Notebooks. Gramsci used the word 'subaltern' in literary framework referring to proletariat to indicate their lower status and subordination in terms of state, location, race, and etc. Gramsci used this word for proletariat who were unorganized and politically unconscious groups of workers and rural peasants. M.A.R.Habib claims, 'the term was used by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci to refer to the

...writing was the model to be replicated. It was the intellectual and political...
...of the 1970s, 1980s, and the 1990s. Subaltern studies are produced by the Subaltern Studies Group at
...Education. The group published a series of books, volumes entitled as Subaltern Studies. Volume
...on South Asian History and Culture, edited by Ranajit Guha. Guha explains the use of 'subaltern'
...subaltern in the very first volume of

The word 'subaltern' is the title mark for the meaning as given in the Concise Oxford
Dictionary. It is, for subaltern, and it will be used in these pages as a name for the general
...of subalternity is that some extent whether this is expressed in terms of class
...the 'up' people and others is to be understood.

Peter Child and Roger Foster ultimately specify the group of the oppressed in which
they never include the elite class as... The term was first deployed by the Italian communist
...Antonio Gramsci to whom Spivak refers to the non-elite classes, including but not
...restricted to the proletariat (20). Afterward the term 'subaltern' is used by the postcolonial
...scholars in the context of marginalization and subordination. It is used to denote the persons or
...groups who are socially, politically outside the hegemonic power structure. The term describes
...the lower social status of groups that are at the margin of the society on account of class, gender,
and poverty.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critical essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' sets the foundation
of the subaltern theory. The main argument regarding the perception of autonomy of subaltern
group of Gramsci, heterogeneity of subaltern in the context of Subaltern Studies, and the use of
the term by postcolonial scholars is under scanner in the light of women in general and women in
Indian context in particular.

Spivak's main concern is to speak for the marginal and oppressed, especially the women
of 'third world countries'. In doing so, Spivak uses the deconstructive method for understanding
the ideological exchange of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. She states that
the networks of power... must attempt to disclose and know the discourse of society's 'Other' (264). Spivak does not find
one-to-one relation between... and Foucault. For them, if the oppressed are provided chance, they can speak and know
their situation in the contemporary politics. Spivak disagrees with the aforementioned opinion
and argues that the oppressed never get the chance to speak within the existing dominant structure.
Having said this, Spivak supplements the incident of Bhanuansuwan Bhaduri's suicide as proof
her point that the subaltern woman cannot speak. Spivak reads the tragic story of Bhanuansuwan
Bhaduri that happens to be the case study of the essay. Bhanuansuwan Bhaduri committed suicide
during non-cooperation period and her suicide had been an enigma for all. As usual it was concluded
the reason behind the act that might had been illicit pregnancy. However, it could not be so. She
committed suicide during non-cooperation period that makes it partly clear that she wanted to say
something without words. It was later discovered that she was involved in the armed struggle for
Indian independence movement. Hence with the help of this story Spivak as if strengthen her

point as the women as subaltern can neither speak nor her silence is properly interpreted and communicated.

This makes it clear that the women as subaltern have the capability to speak but the rigid patriarchal structure never allows them to speak. According to Spivak, the woman wants to speak but the subaltern as a female cannot be heard or read (311). The voice of the subalterns thus has been restrained by the male dominated society. She concludes: The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'women' as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish. (312)

Taking into account the discussions so far regarding the term 'Subaltern'- the dictionary meaning, the use by Antonio Gramsci, as well as Subaltern Study group of historians, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, it is clear that the term 'Subaltern' can be used for describing the circumstances of the people who are dominated and marginalized. Hence, the subaltern is not only subject to the existing social system, but also to the religious discourses, the patriarchal family, and the state.

All in all, the term 'subaltern' is not only referred to the women but to even those masses who are denied liberty, equality, fraternity and justice. Such deprivation and denied group of masses in the Indian society are known as Dalits. And generally, it is argued whether Dalit writing can be studied under the banner of subaltern literature. As Julian Wolfrey, et. al. say: Term, [subaltern] taken from the work of Antonio Gramsci and used initially to define proletarian and other working-class groups, subaltern is employed in postcolonial studies after Gayatri Spivak to address dominated and marginalized groups. (Wolfrey, et al 80)

Dalit in Indian context are dominated and marginalized group of ages are but the subaltern one. Hence their literature aptly nominated as a subaltern literature.

The word 'Dalit' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'dal' that means to crack open, split, crush, grind and so forth. The word Dalit has a synonym- Paddalit in Marathi which literally means 'under the foot of rich people' that can be understood as servant or slave of rich people. Moreover, the Dalit people were conventionally known as Untouchables. Later on Mahatma Gandhi used the term, 'Harijan' for untouchable meaning- 'God's people'. However, it was not broadly accepted many thought it was a derogatory word. The word has variety of meaning in social and political context: it means broken, oppressed, untouchable, downtrodden, and exploited, as Urmila Pawar says- 'Dalit' the means people who have been opposed by a repressive social system, and challenge the oppression from a scientific, rational and humanitarian perspective' (xii). These people come from the poor communities in the Indian caste system used to be known as the untouchables. Hence, Dalit in boarder sense is the word used for poor, untouchable, labour, worker, oppressed, women, tribes, etc. The word itself expresses the oppressed condition. It was Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who first use the term in Bahishkrit Bharat. But the term become prominent in Maharashtra in 1970 that was the period of literary upheavals. Many scholars consider it as the time of the birth of Dalit Literature. However, they are scholars who differ in

the use of the term like Kanha Ilaiah, an activist and Professor of Political Science, prefers the word 'Dalitbahujan' instead of 'Dalit'. For him, the term Dalit 'separates SCs from STs and OBCs'. By Dalitbahujan, he means 'people and castes who form the exploited and suppressed majority' (ix). There are many Dalit writers and critics who are not satisfied with the connotation of the word Dalit as dal- 'to grind' and they define it as:

Dalit means one who wants to destroy the system of Varna in the society along with its complete thought based... Dalit means one who wants to restructure this world and life... Dalit means one whose hands in this age have been made intelligent and transformative and for whom all 'weapons' and 'sciences' have been made available. (Nimbalkar 30)

The word 'Dalit' does not refer only to Buddhists and backward class people but to all those who toil and are exploited and oppressed. (Wankhade 317)

Exploitation is the caste of the exploited. The social, economic and cultural, etc. means of exploitation that have darkened all the relatives of the exploited, they are all Dalits. (Nimbalkar 29)

Bishop A.C. Lal, Dalit Solidarity conference remarks that the word 'embraces the suffering, frustration, and groaning of the entire cosmos' (Lal 1995-xii). Dr Ambedkar, on the other hand, preferred 'broken' which means the oppressed during movement of the liberation and uplift of these people. In fact, Dr. Ambedkar established Republican Party for the poor, untouchable labour, and economically deprived sections of the society. Another significant contribution to development of this concept comes from an outstanding writer and critic in the field Sharankumar Limbale. He expands the meaning of the word 'Dalit':

Harijans and neo- Buddhists are not the only Dalits, the term describes all the untouchable communities living outside the boundary of the village, as well as Adivasis, landless farm-labourers, workers, the suffering masses, and nomadic and criminal tribes--- people who are lagging behind economically will also need to be included. (11)

The term was coined on 2 March 1958 at the conference organized at Bengali High School, Dadar. Eleanor Zelliot, a leading figure in Dalit Studies, prefers the definition of dalit as given in the letter of Gangadhar Pantawane (founder-editor of Asmitadarsh):

To me, Dalit is not a caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economical tradition of this country. He does not believe in God, Rebirth, Soul, Holy Books teaching separatism, Fate and Heaven because they have made him a slave. He does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution. (268)

Hence one can claim that Dalit literature has emerged as a kind of revolt against oppression, depression, suppression and humiliation experienced by the subaltern on the basis of not only poverty but caste mainly. It is a revolt and negativism with the hope of freedom from the very cruel and inhuman social customs: it is struggle of equality, justice in social, cultural and economic ways of life. So the terms have been used to denote the subordination of people or group on account of caste, poverty, and gender. Dalit literature can be studied under the banner of Subaltern Literature.

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