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Subalternity and Silenced Voices in Na D'Souza's Dweepa

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Abstract

This article undertakes a critical examination of subalternity in Na D'Souza's Kannada novel *Dweepa* (1993; English translation 2005), focusing on the intersecting axes of displacement, gender, ecology, and silenced agency. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's foundational inquiry into subaltern speech, Antonio Gramsci's theorisation of the subaltern as a class excluded from historical self-representation, Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, and the feminist political ecology of Bina Agarwal, this study argues that D'Souza constructs subalternity not as a fixed condition of victimhood but as a dynamic, contested terrain in which marginalised communities negotiate the simultaneous erasure of their land, identity, ecological knowledge, and voice. The analysis proceeds through five thematic axes: the question of subaltern speech and structural silence; the nexus of land, displacement, and cultural memory; gender and double marginalisation; ecological dispossession as an expression of subaltern condition; and the possibilities and limits of subaltern resistance. The article contends that *Dweepa* makes a distinctive contribution to Indian regional subaltern fiction by rendering visible the mechanisms through which development discourse silences those it ostensibly serves, and that the novel's critical and cultural circulation — including its celebrated 2002 film adaptation directed by Girish Karnad — demands sustained scholarly attention in English-language postcolonial studies.

Keywords: subalternity, Na D'Souza, *Dweepa*, Kannada literature, displacement, slow violence, feminist political ecology, ecocriticism, postcolonial studies

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Introduction

Na D'Souza — the pen name of Nagaraj D'Souza — is among the most significant voices in postcolonial Kannada literature. Born in coastal Karnataka, D'Souza writes from within a tradition of regional Indian fiction that has long engaged with questions of caste, gender, ecology, and the legacies of colonial and postcolonial governance. His novel *Dweepa*, originally published in Kannada in 1993 and translated into English by Ramachandra Sharma for the Sahitya Akademi in 2005, narrates the story of a small island community — led most memorably by the figure of Nagi — whose world is obliterated by a government dam project. The novel achieved wide cultural resonance in Karnataka and beyond, a reach extended further by Girish Karnad's award-winning 2002 film adaptation. Yet despite its literary and cultural significance, *Dweepa* remains underexplored in English-language postcolonial scholarship, particularly in terms of its engagement with the intersecting categories of subaltern identity, gendered dispossession, and ecological loss.

This article argues that *Dweepa* constitutes a sustained literary interrogation of subalternity — understood here not merely as social marginality but as the structural condition of those excluded from the dominant discourses through which history, development, and citizenship are narrated. D'Souza represents the island community as subaltern in the precise Gramscian sense: as a social group denied the institutional and discursive resources required for historical self-representation (Gramsci 52-55). At the same time, the novel advances beyond a straightforwardly victimological account of dispossession. Through its detailed rendering of Nagi's interiority, its attention to the ecological textures of island life, and its tracing of the partial, circumscribed acts of resistance that subaltern characters manage to articulate, *Dweepa* presents subalternity as a contested site of memory, knowledge, and selfhood.

The central argument of this article is threefold. First, D'Souza deploys a narrative strategy that simultaneously gives voice to subaltern experience and exposes the structural conditions that prevent that voice from being heard within the dominant public sphere — a dynamic that resonates directly with Spivak's analysis of the conditions under which the subaltern speaks and fails to be heard (Spivak 308). Second, the novel articulates displacement from land not merely as economic loss but as the destruction of an entire ontology — a way of knowing, relating, and being in the world that the language of development cannot accommodate. Third, ecological dispossession in *Dweepa* functions as what Rob Nixon terms 'slow violence' — a form of violence that is gradual, attritional, and largely invisible to the dominant media and political culture, and that falls disproportionately upon those already marginalised by structures of caste, gender, and class (Nixon 2-3).

Existing scholarship on *Dweepa* has largely focused on its narrative realism and its regional cultural significance. Little sustained attention has been paid to the novel's theoretical implications for subaltern studies, postcolonial ecocriticism, or feminist political ecology. This article addresses that lacuna, situating *Dweepa* within a broader theoretical conversation and arguing for its importance as a text that anticipates and enacts many of the concerns that now animate environmental humanities scholarship in the Indian context.

The Subaltern and the Question of Voice

Spivak's foundational essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988) poses a question that is at once epistemological, political, and ethical. Drawing on Foucault and Derrida, Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot speak — not because subaltern subjects lack the capacity for speech, but because the discursive formations that constitute the public sphere systematically render subaltern utterance inaudible or unintelligible. The subaltern who enters the space of dominant discourse is not heard as a subaltern but is assimilated into, and transformed by, the categories of the dominant (Spivak 308). This distinction —

between the production of subaltern speech and the conditions of its audibility — is crucial for reading *Dweepa*.

Nagi, the novel's central subaltern figure, is a woman of the island community who resists displacement with a tenacity that the narrative renders with remarkable psychological depth. She speaks — to officials, to her husband Gangu, to the community, to the river and land themselves. Yet her speech consistently fails to register within the institutional frameworks that determine the fate of the island. The dam project is authorised by state development discourse — a discourse that speaks in the language of national interest, hydraulic engineering, and modernisation — and within this language, Nagi's attachment to the island is legible only as backwardness, sentimentality, or ignorance (D'Souza 34-38). Her knowledge of the island — its seasonal rhythms, its ecological interdependencies, its sacred geographies — constitutes what Agarwal terms 'gender-differentiated environmental knowledge' (Agarwal 22), but this knowledge possesses no currency within the dominant episteme.

The novel's formal strategies reinforce this dynamic of speech and structural inaudibility. D'Souza employs a third-person limited perspective that grants the reader intimate access to Nagi's consciousness while simultaneously rendering visible the gap between her inner world and the institutional world that is dismantling it. The officials who survey the island do not speak to Nagi; they speak about the island and its inhabitants in a technical register that reduces them to factors in a hydraulic calculation (D'Souza 29). This formal arrangement — interiority denied external audibility — enacts precisely the condition that Spivak theorises. Nagi speaks, abundantly and with force, within the space of the narrative; but the narrative simultaneously demonstrates that the structures of power within which her life is determined have no mechanism for hearing her.

Gramsci's account of the subaltern adds a historical dimension to Spivak's epistemological argument. For Gramsci, the subaltern classes are characterised not only by their exclusion from economic power but by their fragmented, episodic relationship to historical agency: their history is 'necessarily fragmented and episodic,' interrupted by the continuous pressure of dominant-class initiatives (Gramsci 54-55). *Dweepa* dramatises this fragmentation with precision. The island community possesses a rich oral history — songs, stories, ritual practices that encode centuries of ecological knowledge and social memory — but this history has no institutional archive, no legal standing, and no means of asserting itself against the paper authority of the dam project's documentation (D'Souza 61-63). The community's historical existence is, from the perspective of the state, literally unrecorded.

Land, Displacement, and Identity

In *Dweepa*, the island is not merely a geographical location or an economic resource; it is the material and symbolic ground of the community's identity. D'Souza renders the island with an almost phenomenological attention to its sensory textures — the quality of its soil, the behaviour of its river, the specific trees and birds that constitute its ecological signature — and in doing so establishes the depth of the community's ontological investment in the land. To be displaced from the island is not to lose a house or a livelihood; it is to lose the very ground of one's being.

Agarwal's feminist political ecology provides a conceptual framework for understanding why this loss falls with particular severity on women. For Agarwal, women in South Asian agrarian communities maintain a relationship to land that is qualitatively different from that of men: women's work — gathering, cultivation, water management, the tending of household economies — inscribes them into the land's ecological processes in ways that make their dependence on, and knowledge of, specific landscapes particularly intense (Agarwal 19-24). Nagi's bond with the island is not merely affective; it is constituted through decades of labour that has shaped and been shaped by the island's particular ecology. Her displacement is thus the destruction not only of her home but of her competence — the specific forms of knowledge and skill that make her a productive, capable, dignified human being.

The dam project's logic of displacement operates through what one might call, following Mukherjee, a 'developmentalist erasure' — a discursive manoeuvre by which the cultural and historical meanings attached to a landscape are systematically rendered invisible in order to clear the conceptual ground for its transformation (Mukherjee 78-82). The officials in *Dweepa* do not deny that the island community has a meaningful relationship to its land; they simply translate that relationship into the language of compensation — a monetary value that is declared equivalent to, and substitutable for, what is being taken (D'Souza 44-47). This translation is itself an act of epistemic violence: it imposes a market ontology upon a community whose relationship to land is fundamentally non-market in character.

The cultural memory encoded in the island's landscape — its sacred trees, its ancestral burial sites, its festival grounds — cannot survive displacement. Unlike moveable property, these dimensions of the community's identity are literally grounded; they cannot be transferred to a resettlement colony. D'Souza's narrative attention to these features of the island serves a critical function: it makes visible precisely what the development discourse's language of compensation cannot see. The novel insists that there are forms of value — ecological, cultural, mnemonic, spiritual — that resist quantification and that the subaltern community has no institutional language in which to assert them against the state's authority.

Gender and Double Marginalisation

One of the most analytically important features of *Dweepa* is its insistence on the gendered dimensions of subaltern dispossession. Nagi occupies a position of double marginalisation: she is subordinated as a member of a community that the state treats as an obstacle to development, and she is subordinated within that community by the structures of patriarchal authority that govern its internal life. D'Souza does not romanticise the island community's internal social relations; he renders with unflinching honesty the ways in which Nagi's agency is circumscribed not only by the state but by her husband, her community, and the gender norms that structure her world.

Nagi's relationship with Gangu is central to this analysis. Gangu is not a villain; he is a man whose own agency is severely constrained by the forces bearing down upon the community. Yet his response to displacement — a progressive withdrawal into passivity and, ultimately, alcoholic resignation — contrasts pointedly with Nagi's sustained, if ultimately unsuccessful, resistance (D'Souza 55-58). It is Nagi who maintains the household, tends the land, preserves the community's ritual practices, and refuses to accept the legitimacy of the displacement. Yet it is also Nagi whose resistance is least legible to the institutional actors who determine the community's fate, because she occupies the lowest rung of the social hierarchy they recognise.

Tharu and Lalita's mapping of women's writing in India illuminates the broader literary-historical context within which D'Souza's representation of Nagi should be read. They argue that Indian women writers and the women characters they create have consistently negotiated a double bind: they must speak within the terms of a social order that defines them as peripheral, or they risk being rendered entirely inaudible (Tharu and Lalita xix-xxiii). D'Souza, writing as a male author representing a female subaltern subject, navigates this bind with considerable care. He does not grant Nagi a feminist consciousness in anachronistic terms; rather, he renders the texture of her experience — her love for the island, her grief, her anger, her moments of defiant agency — with a specificity that resists both romanticisation and condescension.

The gendered dimensions of dispossession extend beyond Nagi's individual experience to the community's collective life. The island's domestic and reproductive economies — cooking, childcare, the maintenance of ritual observance — are organised primarily by women, and it is these economies that are most radically disrupted by the threat of displacement. The uncertainty generated by the dam project falls disproportionately on women because they bear the primary responsibility for managing the conditions of daily life (Agarwal 31-35). D'Souza's narrative attention to these domestic realities is itself

a political act: it refuses the developmentalist narrative's abstraction of the community into a homogeneous unit of population and insists on the differential, gendered distribution of the costs of progress.

Ecological Dispossession as a Subaltern Condition

Dweepa belongs to a body of Indian literature that Mukherjee identifies as engaging with what he calls the 'postcolonial environment' — a landscape shaped simultaneously by the legacies of colonial extraction, the imperatives of postcolonial developmentalism, and the ecological knowledge systems of communities that inhabit and depend upon specific natural worlds (Mukherjee 3-15). Read through the frameworks of postcolonial ecocriticism developed by Huggan and Tiffin, the novel's representation of the island's ecology is not merely descriptive or atmospheric; it is epistemological and political.

Huggan and Tiffin argue that postcolonial ecocriticism must attend to the ways in which 'the environment' is itself a contested category — one whose meanings are shaped by power relations that determine whose knowledge of nature is recognised as knowledge and whose is dismissed as folklore, superstition, or sentiment (Huggan and Tiffin 3-12). In *Dweepa*, the island community's ecological knowledge — their understanding of the river's seasonal behaviour, the soil's qualities, the interdependencies of plant and animal life that sustain their livelihoods — is precisely the kind of knowledge that the dam project's technical epistemology renders invisible. The engineers and officials who survey the island see a hydraulic resource; the community sees a living system of relations that has sustained them for generations (D'Souza 30-33).

Nixon's concept of slow violence is particularly productive for reading the ecological dimensions of *Dweepa*. Nixon defines slow violence as 'a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all' (Nixon 2). The dam project's destruction of the island's ecology is precisely this kind of violence: it does not arrive as a sudden catastrophe but as a slow, bureaucratic process of surveys, hearings, notifications, and ultimately inundation that is experienced by the community as a prolonged assault on everything they know and value. The violence is real and devastating, but its gradual tempo makes it difficult to represent, to resist, and to mourn.

D'Souza's narrative technique responds to this challenge of representation by dwelling in the island's ecological detail. The novel's descriptive passages — its accounts of the river's moods, the island's flora, the rhythms of agricultural and fishing life — are not ornamental; they constitute an act of ecological witness that insists on the value and complexity of what is being destroyed. This act of witness is itself a form of resistance to the developmentalist narrative's erasure of subaltern ecological knowledge. By rendering the island's ecology with such particularity, D'Souza makes it impossible for the reader to perform the same abstraction that the dam project's discourse requires — the conversion of a living world into a flooded reservoir.

Resistance and the Limits of Agency

Any serious engagement with *Dweepa* must reckon with the question of subaltern resistance. The novel does not present its characters as passive victims of forces they cannot comprehend; Nagi, above all, is a figure of remarkable tenacity and resourcefulness. Yet D'Souza is equally insistent on the structural constraints that circumscribe subaltern agency, and the novel refuses any easy consolation of heroic resistance triumphant over power. The tension between agency and constraint, between the desire to resist and the structural conditions that limit resistance, is one of the novel's deepest and most searching themes.

Nagi's resistance takes multiple forms. She refuses to sign the displacement papers, insisting on the community's right to remain on their ancestral land (D'Souza 71-74). She mobilises the community's women to protest against the officials who arrive to survey the island. She tends the island's sacred sites with particular devotion as the threat of inundation intensifies, as if the performance of ritual could assert a counter-claim to the state's legal authority. These acts of resistance are meaningful; they constitute what James Scott, in a related context, has called 'weapons of the weak' — the quotidian practices through which the powerless assert their dignity and refuse the terms of their subordination.

Yet D'Souza is careful to trace the limits of these acts. Nagi's refusal to sign the papers delays but does not prevent the displacement. Her community solidarity is eroded by the differential pressures that the dam project exerts — some families accept compensation and leave, others are paralysed by uncertainty, and the community's collective capacity for resistance is gradually worn down by the attrition that Nixon identifies as a characteristic feature of slow violence (Nixon 13-16). The novel's conclusion does not offer the catharsis of successful resistance or the pathos of simple defeat; it offers, instead, the more unsettling image of a community that continues to exist but in a form from which the animating substance of its identity — its land, its ecology, its collective memory — has been drained.

This refusal of easy resolution places *Dweepa* within a significant tradition of subaltern fiction that, as Spivak argues, must resist the temptation to construct the subaltern as a heroic subject of a redemptive narrative — because such constructions risk reinscribing the very structures of representation that subaltern studies seeks to challenge (Spivak 276-280). D'Souza's Nagi is not a Dalit superhero or a feminist icon; she is a woman whose agency is real, meaningful, and deeply constrained, and whose partial resistance constitutes the most honest account of subaltern possibility that the novel's ethical realism can offer.

Conclusion

Dweepa is a novel of extraordinary ethical seriousness. Through its representation of Nagi and the island community's encounter with the developmental state, Na D'Souza constructs a sustained literary argument about the nature of subalternity — its structural conditions, its gendered dimensions, its ecological entanglements, and its partial, constrained possibilities of resistance. The novel does not permit the reader the comfort of a resolution; it insists, instead, on the irreducible complexity of subaltern experience and on the inadequacy of any single theoretical or political framework to encompass that experience fully.

Read through the theoretical frameworks deployed in this article, *Dweepa* makes several significant contributions to the field of postcolonial subaltern studies. It extends Spivak's analysis of subaltern speech into the domain of ecological knowledge, demonstrating that what the dominant episteme cannot hear is not merely the subaltern's political claims but the subaltern's alternative ontology — her way of knowing and inhabiting the world that the language of development is structurally incapable of recognising. It enacts Nixon's concept of slow violence with a narrative precision that illuminates the temporal and affective dimensions of attritional environmental destruction. And it deploys Agarwal's feminist political ecology to reveal the gendered distribution of dispossession's costs, insisting that gender is not a secondary consideration in subaltern analysis but a primary axis along which its effects are differentiated and compounded.

The novel's cultural circulation — its translation into English, its adaptation into an award-winning film by Girish Karnad — itself constitutes a form of subaltern mobility, carrying the concerns of a marginalised regional community into wider discursive spaces. Yet this circulation also raises questions that further research might productively address: How does translation transform the subaltern textures of D'Souza's Kannada original? How does Karnad's film negotiate the tension between cinematic visibility and the structural inaudibility that the novel theorises? How might *Dweepa* be read alongside

other texts of Indian subaltern environmental fiction — Mahasweta Devi's writing on tribal dispossession, for instance, or Bama's accounts of Dalit ecological labour — to produce a more comprehensive map of the field?

These questions point toward a scholarly agenda that this article has sought to initiate rather than exhaust. What it has attempted to demonstrate is that *Dweepa* richly rewards the sustained theoretical attention that English-language postcolonial studies has not yet adequately brought to it, and that Na D'Souza's novel belongs not only to the canon of Kannada regional fiction but to the broader corpus of world literature that thinks seriously and honestly about what it means to be excluded from the language in which one's fate is decided.

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