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Liberation And Devotion: Exploring Subaltern Perspectives Of Women In Bhakti Movement Through The Booker Novels Of Arundhati Roy And Aravind Adiga

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Abstract: Liberation appears to be an unconvincing task in the life of marginalized communities. Literature can produce a substantial change in a society when it is construed as an artifact of realities. This study intends to analyze the significance of the Bhakti ideals embraced by the women saints of India. They played crucial role in opposing irrational ideologies. Their preaching focused on the intersection of religion, female subalternity, literature and social resistance. Their rejection of traditional women's role resonates in *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy and *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga. Many writers focus on the historical and religious aspects of women saints, but an in-depth study of their subalternity is missing. The aim of this study is to compare the historical defiance of women saints of the Bhakti movement with the rebelliousness of modern subaltern women in the novels. This paper tries to pour light on the gap, especially in evaluating how spiritual and cultural legacies reflect in social resistance.

Index Terms: Bhakti movement, subaltern perspectives, hierarchy, liberation, hegemony, and social resistance.

Liberation appears to be a compelling task for rational individuals. Rational citizens aspire to be freed from irrational dogmas. Liberty is not only a private affair of the individual but a collective effort involving a significant number of people. The massive transformation of a country largely depends on the power of literature, which leaves a lasting impression on the minds of readers. Literature is universally regarded as a mirror of society, as it tends to reflect the realities of social life. It often serves as a persuasive medium to spread ideologies. Fredric Jameson states, "Genres are essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact" (106). Literature unveils the existing societal system by exposing the flawed ideals of society and the issues faced by subalterns without any embarrassment. It has focused on the marginalized voices of subalterns who are excluded from the dominant power structure.

Antonio Gramsci coined the term 'subaltern' in his theory of 'cultural hegemony' to refer to the proletariat. He argued that working-class people, or proletariats, have no voice of their own within the power structure and are subjected to the authority of the ruling class. Spivak, one of the pioneers of Subaltern Studies, brought the concept into the limelight through her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* She states, "The subaltern has no history and cannot speak; the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (287). Subalterns in India face triple subjugation due to caste, class, and gender. Indian fiction

often attempts to expose the social evils of Indian society by addressing subaltern issues that are inseparably tied to the problems of caste, class, and gender. Arundhati Roy and Aravind Adiga have revitalized subaltern concerns in their debut novels, becoming the voices of the subalterns in India.

Reviewing the scholarly perspectives, the present study analyzes and synthesizes various insights on the subaltern perspectives in Roy and Adiga, alongside the radical notions of women saints who interrogated orthodoxy and caste systems. Chandra (2017) describes how the protagonists in Roy's and Adiga's works resonate with the spiritual and social resistance of Bhakti saints. Nayar (2014) analyses how the defiance of Bhakti saints towards caste system resonates in the debut novels of Roy and Adiga. Patel (2019) evaluates orthodoxy and social hegemony of Bhakti period and examines the challenges of the subaltern individuals in the novels. Bhat (2017) compares the caste-based violence described in the novels and contrasts the descriptions with the subaltern perspectives of the Bhakti movement. Kumar (2017) analyses the transformation of subalterns in Indian literary works. He further examines how the subaltern male protagonists of Roy and Adiga represent the role of Bhakti saints. Sengupta (2015) portrays how the novels represent rebelliousness of Bhakti saints who struggled in the oppressed social order. Venkatesh (2019) examines how the subaltern perspectives of the novels intersect with the ideologies and consequences of Bhakti movement.

The limited scholarly perspectives in this area encourage exploring the gap, i.e., comparing the legacy of Akka Mahadevi and Mirabai of the Bhakti movement with the disobedience of Ammu and Pinky Madam, the female subalterns, in the novels of Roy and Adiga. Roy portrays a society where the upper class men intend to establish their dominance over women. The female members are treated as commodities and nobody respect the emotional state of women. Adiga pours light on the moral depravity of a democratic society that shows social injustice to Pinky Madam. Pertinent questions arise in this context: How do the novels reflect female subalternity of women saints? Do the female subalterns of the novels encounter patriarchy and caste hierarchies of post-colonial India? Didn't political liberation make the underprivileged Indians to understand what liberty means?

Bhakti Movement emerged as reformation movement in South India during the eighth and ninth centuries AD. It gradually entered into the North India in the medieval period. The main contributions of this movement were that it made the devotees to reach God irrespective of their caste, class and gender. Rajagopalachary and Rao mention this as, "Defying the religion and ritual, it assumed the form of protest against the divisive barriers of caste, community and gender...craving for liberation, spontaneity, personal devotion as well as communal worship are at the root of Bhakti movement and literature" (1). The traditional forms of worship were controlled by the upper caste people in the Vedic Period. Bhakti saints who came from oppressed communities rejected Brahmanical hegemony over religious practices and worship. Lower caste people and women advocated for social equality regardless of their social stratification. They composed their hymns and poetry in regional languages rather than Sanskrit, making their teachings accessible to all. Pillai mentions this in his book *The Bhakti Movement: Renaissance or Revivalism?*, stating, "The Bhakti movement succeeded in bestowing a new respectability and competence to regional languages spoken by the common people, in contrast to the aristocratic but dying Sanskrit, which had served as an instrument for Brahmanic caste domination" (6).

In the ancient Indian society, women and lower caste people were conditioned to accept restrictions. They were not allowed to enter into the temple. Severe punishments were given to them if they tried to hear the mantras of God. They were prevented from learning Sanskrit language as well. Marriage was considered as the ultimate aim of women and the husband was supposed to be her God and the husband's home was supposed to be her abode. Emphasizing devotion to a personal deity as the path to salvation, women saints rejected rituals, caste hierarchy, and priestly dominance.

Several remarkable women saints played a significant role in the Bhakti movement by challenging the traditional set up. Spiritual liberation through the Divine was their central concern. They strongly believed that liberation could not be attained through rules and regulations, but could be accomplished by bonding the soul with God. They relied on the notion that "Among the devotees of God, there is no distinction of birth, learning, appearance, family, wealth, religious observances, and the like, since they all belong to Him. Bhakti is love for God in all. It is affection and compassion for all..." (qtd. in Rajagopalachary and Rao 50). They struggled to carve out spaces for female agency within religious life, offering a radical alternative to

the norms and social structures of their time. These women, expressing their devotion through poetry, songs, and teachings, defied societal norms. Karaikkal Ammayar, Andal, Akka Mahadevi, Tarigonda Vengamamba, Lal Ded, Mirabai, Janabai, Rami, Bahinabai, and Gangasati highlighted social equality through spirituality.

Women saints often met unbearable challenges as they shunned societal customs and norms. Their involvement in the Bhakti movement was undeniably perceived as a revolt against patriarchy. Instead of focusing on social injustices and patriarchal structures, they were more concerned with the immortality of the soul and its union with God. They sought to lead simple lives on their journey toward spiritual liberation. Their sheer devotion to God, exceptional poetry, and persistent assertion of spiritual equality were unwillingly acknowledged and accepted.

Akka Mahadevi, for example, abandoned her husband and family, wandering through the vast forests of Karnataka and Andhra before joining the Virasaiva poets. Known for her extraordinary beauty and long, flowing hair, she was coerced into marrying a local king who was captivated by her appearance. Although the king promised to adopt Shaivism after their marriage, he failed to keep his word. Disillusioned and frustrated, Akka Mahadevi left her marital home, discarding everything. She “wandered alone naked, her long disheveled hair covering her nudity” (Rajagopalachary and Rao 50). Unusually radical for her time, Akka Mahadevi expressed her profound love for Shiva through poignant, lingering, and memorable poetry, which continues to resonate with readers today.

Mirabai, the renowned saint of the later medieval period, was the embodiment of absolute devotion to Krishna. Meenakshi Jha writes, “Mira cared nothing for family, honour or shame and sang and danced fearlessly for her mountain-lifting lord and lover, Girdhar” (150). She refused to commit sati after her husband’s untimely death. Despite facing opposition from her in-laws when she sought to accompany wandering poets, she remained resolute. Mirabai rejected her royal status and chose to live in a temple dedicated to Krishna. While she suffered greatly for her devotion, she remained defiant. Her life was characterized by “steadfastness in the face of every kind of opposition and independence and strength that meet criticism at every turn” (151).

Women saints of the Bhakti movement achieved liberation through their devotion. Karaikkal Ammayar defied her society of wealthy merchants in order to join with the kapalikas in the wilderness. Similarly, Andal, Lal Ded, and Vengamamba renounced their family in search of God. These women saints, often marginalized by their gender and social status, used their poetry and spiritual practices as tools of resistance against societal oppression. Saints like Akka Mahadevi and Mirabai rejected traditional roles and boldly challenged societal expectations, prioritizing their spiritual connection with God over familial, societal, or royal obligations. Their lives and teachings embodied a radical assertion of equality, autonomy, and the immortality of the soul, offering a transformative critique of the dominant patriarchal order while inspiring movements for social and spiritual liberation.

In *The God of Small Things*, Ammu was victimized by the deception and rudeness of patriarchy. Her resistance stayed as a feeble struggle against social injustice. Ammu bravely endeavoured to escape from the pain of hopelessness and solitude. Her lover, ‘the God of Small Things’, stood there on the other bank to quench her lust. Ammu badly wanted to get autonomy from her frustrations and she violated the rigidity of the societal structure to attain her pleasure. Ammu did not show any respect towards the family customs and values. After her divorce she found her sexual pleasure with a lower caste man. She did not bother about the reputation of the rigid Christian family. Roy severely criticizes the outdated patriarchal approach of the society in the following words. “That a married daughter had no position in her parents’ home. As for a *divorced* daughter—according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a *divorced* daughter from a *love* marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma’s outrage” (45-46).

In *The White Tiger*, Pinky Madam’s subalternity was evident in the limitations imposed on her as a woman within a patriarchal and class-driven society, despite her well-off status. She was often treated as unimportant in critical decisions, her desires frequently overshadowed by the interests of her husband and his family. Her discomfort with the oppressive environment of traditional India and her clash with its customs reflected her marginalization. Her eventual departure from her marriage could be seen as an act of

rebellion against these societal constraints. She expressed her disgust towards the traditional norms of her in-laws. In the hit-and-run case, she expressed her strong disagreement towards her in-laws when they revealed their crooked plan of putting the blame on the innocent driver. She felt outrageous and showed her sympathy towards Balram. Balram wonders, "Who would have thought... that of this whole family, this lady with the short skirt would be the one with a conscience?" (180). She left her husband and his family to lead a life on her own with complete liberation.

In conclusion, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy and *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga pour light on the subaltern perspectives of liberation and devotion through nuanced portrayals of marginalized voices. Devotion becomes a transformative force, enabling the women saints to transcend conventional boundaries. By linking themes of devotion and subalternity, both novels offer profound insights into the resilience and agency of those being marginalized. This research work gives ample space to future researchers who aspire to gain a deeper understanding of how liberation and devotion intersect in the lives of women in postcolonial Indian literature.

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