



# Beyond the Elite Gaze: A Comparative Study to Unveil the Subaltern Voices Through Gurdial Singh's *The Last Flicker* and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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**Abstract**— In every society, there are some segments of people who are wealthy and have supreme authority over the means of production. They tend to exploit those with limited or no access to socio-economic opportunities. In postcolonial terms, these people are referred to as subalterns who are systematically excluded from a society's established structures. It also speaks about those people who are discriminated against based on race, gender, caste, status, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or religious affiliations. Literature plays a pivotal role in subaltern lives by providing them assistance through which they can express themselves freely. The present study tries to explore the voices of subaltern subjects by bringing on surface the oppression, violence, and suppression through Gurdial Singh's *The Last Flicker* (1964) and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995). Though these writers come from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicities, their works depict the mutual concept of the inhuman treatment of the subaltern subjects. Their protagonists are unconventional and rebellious. They make their own identity even though consistently suppressed by dominant ideologies. The author's concern for the downtrodden and subaltern characters is visible through their writings. Both authors explore themes of marginalization, socio-political issues, and the impact of power structures on subaltern groups.



**Keywords**— subalternity, Subaltern Studies Group, postcolonial, discrimination, oppression, hegemony.

Postcolonial theory examines the power and ongoing authority of Western modes of intellectual inquiry and knowledge production. It aims to empower the colonized and those who have experienced social, racial, and ethnic discrimination. The subaltern study is one of the subdivisions of postcolonial literature which talks about the colonial inhabitants who are socially, politically, and geographically debarred from the pyramid of power by imperial authorities. Edward Said in his *Orientalism* (1978) speculatively negotiates how the oppressed subaltern natives are victimized by colonialism. Said explains how the Eurocentric viewpoint of Orientalism created the

ideological underpinnings and rationales for the colonial control of the Other. Before their valid expedition to The Orient, Europeans had concocted fictitious details about the geography of the Orient, even preconceived that the people of that particular region were uncivilized and toxic. "Orientalism is a way of seeing that imagines, emphasizes, exaggerates and distorts differences of Arab people and cultures as compared to that of Europe and the US. It often involves seeing Arab culture as exotic, backward, uncivilized and at times dangerous. The West construed the East as extremely different and inferior and therefore in need of Western intervention and rescue" (Said 12). This

binary relation of Us and Them prompted Europeans to take expeditions to Orient lands to make them civilized in Western ways because Europeans saw them as backwards, hence the Eurocentric perspective of Orientalism silenced the voices of subaltern natives.

Through the lens of Postcolonial theory, the term subaltern refers to those social groups who are pushed to the periphery of a society, in colonial dominion, it refers to a subaltern native without human agency. However, feminist researcher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak advised against using the term "subaltern" too broadly because, "subaltern is not just a classy word for "oppressed", for [the] Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie .... In post-colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference. Now, who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern" (Ariel 29). Spivak was also with the view that the subalterns cannot speak because if they can speak, they are not subalterns at all.

The concept of subaltern study substantially deals with the emancipation of the oppressed and subjugated strata of society. The word "subaltern" was handed-down by Antonio Gramsci to refer to the cultural hegemony that drives out particular individuals and social groups from society's socioeconomic institutions to deny them agency and a voice in colonial politics. It gained prominence with the emergence of the Subaltern Studies Group or Subaltern Studies Collective which was an attempt to give voice to the marginalized and allow them to be heard inside the pages of elite historiography. It was a collective effort of eminent Indian scholars which came into existence in the 1980s. The Subaltern Studies Group shed light on many controversial issues, including the problematic representation of subaltern subjects in Indian historiography. They put massive efforts into re-examining Indian history from the below by keeping in mind the perspective of subaltern subjects whose voices and contributions were neglected by elite groups. Guha asserts that the notion of the subaltern is an endeavour to investigate, "the history, the politics, the economics and sociology of Subalternity" (Guha 39).

The historical development of the concept of the subaltern seems unsteady and hard to define which stems from the deceit of critics and authors whose, "unscrupulous, instrumental, or merely selective readings of Gramsci have been animated by the impulse to make him appear relevant to the present time, particularly when he has been used to lend authority to or legitimize a specific political stance, ideological tendency, or theoretical position" (Francese, 2009). The notion of the subaltern was first mentioned by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist, in his piece *Notes on*

*Italian History*, which was published in his cornerstone work *Prison Notebooks*, written between 1929 and 1935. According to Gramsci, the word subaltern indicates a "low-rank" person or group of people in a particular society who are suffering under the hegemonic thumb of a ruling elite class that deprives them of fundamental rights. These "low-rank" people have no active participation in the construction of the local history or culture of the same nation due to hegemonic domination. The only folks Gramsci had in his head when he first used the word subaltern were the peasants and workers who were battling with the atrocities and discrimination at the hands of the leader of the National Fascist Party, Benito Mussolini and his envoys. Rather than depending solely on the state's historical narrative, which ultimately tells the story of the ruling and dominant classes, Gramsci developed an interest in the study of the subaltern classes of consciousness and culture as a potential means of having their voice heard. Gramsci plans to investigate the verified fact as follows in this study: "The subaltern classes by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a "State": their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States" (Gramsci 52).

Incongruously, Gramsci even stated that the subaltern classes and the hegemonic classes have been sharing somewhat the same and complex historical roots but surprisingly, the latter is more officially esteemed and accepted. The reason as Gramsci asserts that because the history of subaltern classes lacks unity. They easily succumb to ruling authority due to their irregular totality. This eventually leads to the absence of subaltern classes on social and cultural grounds where the lack of representation results in the non-accessibility of the means of their state. The only possible way to decimate the master/slave pattern in Gramsci's perspective was to get freedom through permanent victory.

To gain this decimation, non-elite groups have to realise their subordinated consciousness, which is being exercised by the cultural hegemony of the ruling class. His inclusion of the role of peasants as a distinct group within the subaltern division set Gramsci apart from the previous founders of Marxism. His carefully considered theories regarding the peasant classes as a social, cultural, and political force conscious of its unique consciousness of subalternity, especially those penned during his incarnation, prompted other 20th-century scholars to address the subject of Indian peasantry historiography to pick up where he left off. The group of academics known as the Subaltern Studies Group was founded and is chaired by Ranajit Guha. With its emergence in the early 1980s, the subalternity as a concept gained worldwide acknowledgement. Ranajit Guha established the group which consists of various social critics

and scholars. The group took inspiration from Gramsci's view. It was further expanded by Ranajit Guha, first in his 'manifesto' in *Subaltern Studies I* and later on in his renowned work titled *The Elementary Aspects of Peasants Insurgency in Colonial India*. In the aforementioned book, Guha attempted to showcase the impact of the Indian peasant's uprising on colonial authorities. By analysing the interactions between relations of dominance and subordination in the Indian context from 1783 to 1900, Guha aims to fairly represent the Indian peasantry.

Subaltern Studies were defined by Ranajit Guha as "a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way" (Guha 35). For him, that distinctly distinct entity (subalterns), consists of "the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the 'elite' (Guha, 1982)". The group also assumed that the Indian national history is dominated by colonial elitism as well as nationalist bourgeois elitism. Not only that, Guha also asserted that this type of historiography is unable to convey, evaluate or recognize the contribution of these common people. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was also part of that literary circle but she had issues because the group ignored the contribution of women. The subaltern as a female can hardly be heard as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* points out: "Sexual difference is doubly affected, if in the context of colonial production, subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in the shadow" (Spivak 287).

Many Indian writers made the world aware of the hardships of the underclass under the rule of the governing elite class through their literary works like Mulk Raj Anand, Gurdial Singh, Rohinton Mistry, Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpande, Prem Chand, Mahasweta Devi, Anna Bhau Sathe, Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Omprakash Valmiki, Aravind Adiga, Baburao Bagul, Bama, Baby Kamble and many more. The present research paper is a comparative study of subaltern narratives in the fiction of Gurdial Singh and Rohinton Mistry which reveals power dynamics and marginalized voices. Singh's work likely delves into the history of silenced and neglected masses, reflecting socio-cultural development and globalisation. On the other hand, Mistry's novels focus on the problematic representation of Parsis in the political realm, highlighting the struggles of common people amidst political power plays. Both authors explore themes of marginalization, socio-political issues, and the impact of power structures on subaltern groups. By analysing their works, one can uncover how these authors portray the complexities of power dynamics and the challenges faced by marginalized communities in their respective narratives.

Gurdial Singh is a notable writer of Punjabi Literature who is known for writing on the oppressed sections of society. His works are deeply concerned and celebrate the issues of the subalterns on a large scale. His fictional world spins around the stories of Dalits, poor peasants, the downtrodden, and various subalterns. His selfless devotion to Punjabi Literature has bagged him various awards like Sahitya Akademi Award in 1975, the Padam Shri in 1998, and the Jnanpith Award in 1999. Gurdial Singh's literary career spans from his debut novel *Marhi Da Deeva* (The Last Flicker), including other major novels like *Unhoye* (The Survivors), *Adh Chanani Raat* (Night of the Half Moon), *Anhe Ghode da Daan* (Alms in the Name of a Blind Horse), and *Parsa*. In the words of Rana Nayar, who has translated the majority of his works into English language, Gurdial Singh was the "messiah of the marginalised" (Nayar 25). In the preface to *Re-Readings of Gurdial Singh's Fiction*, Amar Tarsem and Kumar Sushil remark, "He is a novelist of the subaltern and downtrodden and captures the inner strife and struggles faced by the peasants and workers during the fall of the feudal era which in turn tries to generate social consciousness in low-class people" (Tarsem and Sushil 7).

Gurdial Singh's debut novel *Marhi Da Deeva* (The Last Flicker) focuses on the plight of downtrodden people who are being marginalized in a Punjabi rural society. They are systematically ostracized and discriminated based on their caste, class, status, gender, etc. Published in 1964, it presents the story of Jagseer Singh, a Dalit, who is compelled to face discrimination due to his low caste and poverty. This was an influential work in the fictitious Punjabi world because it was uncanny to have a Dalit in the pivotal role, as the Punjabi literary scene was controlled by elite-class writers who never considered portraying low-caste figures as protagonists. The character of Jagseer represents those subaltern people who have no say in the means of production. These people are treated as outcasts or untouchables. In the novel after the death of his father, Jagseer is kicked out of a piece of land by Bhanta, son of Dharam Singh, which Jagseer's family was rearing for ages. Jagseer's father Thola was very dear to Dharam Singh because due to the hard work of Thola, Dharam Singh was able to get so much profit from his land. But his son Bhanta does not consider the lifelong loyalty of Jagseer's family and discards him of that piece of land. Nandi's lamentation over the death of her husband Thola sheds light on the condition of untouchables in rural society, "Look Dharam Singh, my son, my two generations served your family. My old man died walking on snakes in your fields. Now my son works for you like a dark bullock. I have wiped your floors, cleaned out much all my life...and you! Curse on you! Is this how you pay us back? Is this...? You..." (Singh 79).

The novel also depicts the horrific image of the agrarian economy where only a handful of people have their authority on the means of production. These people are at the top of the hierarchy system and exploit their subordinates. The novel showcases how the Jat community in rural Punjab controls all the means of production. Due to that, Dalits like Jagseer are compelled to do bone-breaking jobs on petty financial assistance in their fields. In the novel, Jagseer's mother Nandi spits the fact about atrocities that these folks have to undergo at the hands of rich Jats by saying, "I knew these evil-ones would one day treat us like this for all the labour we did for them. What good can you expect from these Jat-boors who keep us at a distance and throw us a morsel whenever they please as if we were dogs" (Singh 95).

The novel also depicts the unrequited love of Jagseer with the wife of his friend Nikka. Hard to bear the pangs of one-sided love and the discrimination due to his low caste, drags him into the well of opium addiction. Opium seems to be the only narcotic providing some relief to his pain which is inflicted upon him as a member of an outcast community. The novel also highlights the lot of women characters who are double marginalized due to their gender and low caste status.

Rohinton Mistry is an Indian-born Canadian writer of Parsi descent. Mistry is a prolific writer who is known for his collection of short stories, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987), three novels, *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995), *Family Matters* (2002), and the latest one *The Screem* (2006). He has been the recipient of many awards including the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 2012. Although he left his homeland and migrated to Canada quite early in his age but his works represent the true picture and culture of India. He showcases the burning issues of the social, cultural, and political life of India through his works. His concern for the preservation of the Parsi community, which is a marginalized section of society, is quite evident in his works. His works focus on the day-to-day struggles of the Indian Parsi community in Bombay (at present Mumbai). They showcase the reality of the Parsi community which is treated as a 'subaltern' against the mainstream majority of Hindu culture. Mistry's fiction deals with the inequalities that are prevalent in the world between classes, genders, castes, and official hierarchies. His fictional works predominantly deal with the Parsi protagonist who is in a state of constant fight with himself and against his surroundings due to fears, anxieties, sense of insecurity, and helplessness because of political uncertainties. His works also shed light on the struggles of other minority groups like Muslims, Christians, women, Dalits, and elder people who are being marginalized in a caste-ridden society.

Khushwant Singh expressed his views regarding the demographic picture of Parsi in India, "It is a dying community; the rate of death is higher than the rate of birth. They admit no converts nor recognise the offspring of non-Parsi fathers as Parsi. An increasing number of girls now marry outside community" (Singh 87). Regardless of facing the fear of demographic extinction, the Parsis are still struggling not to suffer the loss of their identity and social purity.

*A Fine Balance* (1995) was set during the period of Emergency which was declared by the Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi in 1975. The novel shows the reality of India in the wake of political corruption, tyranny, exploitation, violence, and bloodshed. It also sheds light on the aspects of rural India which was struggling with injustice, cruelty, trauma, caste discrimination, and communal and religious disharmony. The story of the novel revolves around the collective and individual experiences of four characters who come from different backgrounds. The novel brings forth the difficulties of marginalized communities and their ill-treatment.

Dina Dalal, a Parsi by religion, Ishvar, Omprakash, and Maneck share a family bond in the novel but their lives are completely disrupted during the period of emergency when they bid adieu to each other due to some personal reasons. By the end of the novel, Dina Dalal has lost her freedom to her brother—Ishvar and Omprakash turn baggers after being crippled and castrated respectively. Maneck commits suicide by throwing himself in front of the train.

The novel also presents the wretched condition of low-caste people through the character of Ishvar and Omprakash, who belongs to the chamaar caste of tanners and leatherworkers. Mistry shows the tyranny of upper caste people through the character of Thakur Dharamsi who murdered the family of Ishvar because they raised their voice for their rights. Later on in the novel, Thakur uses his authority and operates Ishvar and Omprakash under a family planning scheme just to take revenge. As a result, Omprakash is castrated and Ishvar gets crippled. In one of the chapters, Narayan and Ishvar get punished by the school teacher for touching the instruments of learning. Pandit Lalluram justifies the horrendous act of beating to Dukhi by saying, "Your children entered the classroom. They polluted the place. They touched instruments of learning. They defiled slates and chalks, which upper-caste children would touch. You are lucky there wasn't a holy book like the Bhagavad Gita in that cupboard; no scared texts. Or the punishment would have been more final" (Mistry 113-114).

The condition of women characters is even worse in a patriarchal society. Dina is being tortured by her brother, Nusswan, after the death of her husband Rustom. She tries



to escape this torture by taking the profession of seamstress, which succeeds but for a short period of time. Another character, Roopa, wife of Omprakash's grandfather Dukhi, is sexually harassed at the hands of an upper-class Zamindar. A watchman even rapes her but she is quite helpless to tell anyone: "In the morning Roopa behaved as if nothing had occurred. So Dukhi said nothing, and they ate the oranges" (Mistry 99).

## CONCLUSION

The concept of subaltern has always been a pivotal part of world literature, specifically in the writings of postcolonial writers. They become the torch-bearers for the neglected sections of society by raising their voices against injustice, oppression, violence, exploitation, and social discrimination. Gurdial Singh and Rohinton Mistry are among those writers whose works echo the struggle of subaltern subjects as they are toiling hard to sail through the intricacies of life. Though their works concentrate on those characters who belong to different sections of marginalized society i.e., Dalits, women, and subjugated minorities, somehow collectively echo the condition of all those who are forced to live on the fringes of society. They try to delve deep into the psyche of different characters in different situations and with that show deep concern for the suffering humanity. Through the characterization of Jagseer Singh in *The Last Flicker* and Ishvar and Omprakash in *A Fine Balance*, the authors show the tyranny of upper-class people towards the Dalit community. In the face of such atrocities, they are still battling against the dominant ideologies for their economic upliftment.

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