Language, Power, and Resistance: A Study of Subaltern Voices

Elisa Romano
Institute for Environmental Humanities, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

* Corresponding Author: **Elisa Romano**

Article Info

Volume: 01
Issue: 03
May-June 2025
Received: 21-04-2025
Accepted: 15-05-2025
Page No: 01-03

Abstract
The concept of the subaltern, rooted in Antonio Gramsci's writings and developed in postcolonial theory, has become central to understanding the dynamics of power, marginalization, and resistance in literature and society. Subaltern voices—those of the socially, politically, and economically marginalized—have historically been silenced or misrepresented by dominant discourses. This article explores the intricate relationship between language, power, and resistance, focusing on how subaltern voices emerge, contest hegemony, and reshape narratives in literature and cultural history. Drawing on subaltern studies, postcolonial theory, and literary examples, the article examines the mechanisms of silencing, the strategies of resistance, and the transformative potential of reclaiming language for subaltern subjects.

Keywords: Subaltern Studies and Representation, Language and Power Dynamics, Dalit and Indigenous Literature, Postcolonialism and Subalternity, Digital Platforms and Marginalized Voices

1. Introduction

The term "subaltern" has gained prominence in the fields of postcolonial studies, history, sociology, and literary criticism. Originating from the Latin for "below all others," it was popularized by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci to refer to groups excluded from power and denied access to hegemonic institutions 12358. In postcolonial contexts, the subaltern encompasses colonized populations, peasants, women, lower castes, indigenous peoples, and other marginalized groups 245678.

The study of subaltern voices is fundamentally about the politics of representation: Who speaks? Who is heard? Who controls the means of expression? Language is not a neutral medium but a site of power struggles, shaping whose experiences are validated or erased. Subaltern studies and literature seek to recover and amplify the voices of the marginalized, challenging dominant narratives and creating spaces for resistance and agency.

2. Theoretical Foundations: Subalternity, Language, and Power

2.1. Gramsci and the Origins of Subaltern Theory

Antonio Gramsci first used the term "subaltern" to describe groups subject to the hegemony of ruling elites, lacking political voice and agency1358. In his "Prison Notebooks," Gramsci explored how cultural and linguistic hegemony maintained the subordination of these groups, emphasizing that control over language and discourse was central to the maintenance of power.

2.2. Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Theory

The Subaltern Studies Group, led by historians like Ranajit Guha, sought to rewrite South Asian history "from below," focusing on the agency and consciousness of peasants, workers, women, and other marginalized groups478. Influenced by Gramsci, they critiqued elite-centric narratives and foregrounded the everyday forms of resistance and self-expression among the subaltern.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", interrogated the limits of representation, arguing that subaltern voices are often doubly silenced—first by colonialism, then by postcolonial elites and intellectuals. Spivak's work highlights the complexities of recovering subaltern agency and the dangers of ventriloquizing or appropriating their voices.

2.3. Language as a Tool of Power

Language is not merely a means of communication but a tool of power and social control. Dominant groups shape language, discourse, and historiography to legitimize their authority and marginalize others. Subalternity is thus both a material and a discursive condition—rooted in economic, political, and social exclusion, but also in the denial of voice and narrative authority 23568.

3. Mechanisms of Silencing: How Subaltern Voices Are Marginalized

3.1. Colonialism and Linguistic Domination

Colonial powers imposed their languages, histories, and epistemologies on colonized societies, relegating indigenous languages and knowledge systems to the margins. English, French, and other colonial languages became markers of power, while local languages were stigmatized or suppressed. This linguistic imperialism was central to the project of colonial domination, as it shaped who could speak and be heard in the public sphere268.

3.2. Caste, Gender, and Social Exclusion

In South Asia and elsewhere, caste and gender hierarchies have historically silenced the voices of Dalits, Adivasis, women, and other marginalized groups. Literary canons, religious texts, and official histories were produced and controlled by upper-caste, male elites, while the experiences and expressions of the subaltern were ignored, distorted, or appropriated14568.

3.3. Institutional and Structural Barriers

Access to education, publishing, and public discourse has been restricted for subaltern groups, further entrenching their marginalization. Even when subaltern individuals gain access to dominant languages or platforms, their voices may be filtered, censored, or co-opted by gatekeepers.

4. Strategies of Resistance: Language as a Site of Struggle

4.1. Reclaiming Indigenous Languages and Oral Traditions

One of the most powerful forms of resistance is the reclamation and revitalization of indigenous languages, oral literatures, and storytelling traditions. By asserting the value of their own linguistic and cultural forms, subaltern groups challenge the hegemony of dominant languages and epistemologies.

Oral traditions, folk songs, and local dialects become vehicles for expressing subaltern experiences, histories, and aspirations. These forms often resist standardization and official codification, preserving alternative worldviews and modes of knowledge.

4.2. Code-Switching and Hybrid Forms

Subaltern writers frequently employ code-switching, mixing dominant and marginalized languages, dialects, and registers. This linguistic hybridity disrupts the authority of standardized language and creates space for new forms of expression. It also reflects the lived realities of subaltern subjects, who navigate multiple linguistic and cultural worlds.

4.3. Counter-Narratives and History from Below

Subaltern literature and historiography focus on "history from below," foregrounding the voices and experiences of those excluded from official records. Novels, poems, plays, and autobiographies by subaltern writers reconstruct histories of resistance, survival, and agency, offering alternative perspectives on national, social, and cultural identity45678.

4.4. Testimonio and Autobiographical Writing

Testimonio—a genre that blends autobiography, oral history, and collective memory—has become a key mode for subaltern expression. Through personal narratives, subaltern writers bear witness to oppression, assert their agency, and demand recognition. Such works challenge the boundaries between individual and collective voice, fiction and history.

5. Subaltern Voices in Literature: Case Studies

5.1. Dalit Literature in India

Dalit literature is a powerful example of subaltern expression, emerging from the lived experiences of caste oppression. Dalit writers such as Omprakash Valmiki, Bama, and Namdeo Dhasal use autobiographical, poetic, and narrative forms to expose the realities of untouchability, violence, and exclusion, while also articulating visions of dignity, justice, and resistance568.

Dalit literature often employs vernacular languages, oral traditions, and direct, confrontational styles to challenge dominant literary norms. It foregrounds the body, labor, and everyday life as sites of struggle and agency.

5.2. Indigenous and Tribal Literatures

Indigenous writers across the world—whether Native American, Adivasi, Maori, or Aboriginal—use literature to reclaim land, memory, and identity. Their works often blend myth, oral history, and contemporary experience, challenging colonial narratives and asserting the value of indigenous knowledge systems.

5.3. Feminist Subaltern Voices

Women from marginalized communities face double or triple layers of subalternity—due to gender, caste, class, or ethnicity. Feminist writers such as Mahasweta Devi, Urmila Pawar, and Baby Kamble document the intersecting forms of oppression faced by subaltern women, while also highlighting their strategies of resistance and solidarity.

6. Language, Representation, and the Politics of Voice

6.1. The Problem of Representation

A central question in subaltern studies is whether the subaltern can truly "speak"—that is, represent themselves authentically in dominant discourses. As Spivak argues, even well-intentioned efforts to recover subaltern voices risk reproducing structures of power, as elites mediate, translate, or appropriate those voices56.

Authentic representation requires not only access to language and platforms but also the transformation of the structures that shape whose voices are heard and valued.

6.2. Translation and Mediation

Translation plays a crucial role in making subaltern voices accessible to wider audiences, but it also raises questions of fidelity, authority, and power. Translators must navigate the tensions between preserving the specificity of subaltern experience and making it legible to dominant publics.

6.3. The Role of the Intellectual

Intellectuals and writers from dominant groups face the challenge of supporting subaltern voices without appropriating or speaking for them. This requires humility, reflexivity, and a commitment to creating spaces for subaltern self-representation.

7. Subaltern Studies: Impact and Critique

7.1. Contributions

Subaltern studies has transformed the study of history, literature, and society by centering the agency, consciousness, and resistance of marginalized groups. It has inspired new methodologies, interdisciplinary research, and activist scholarship478.

7.2. Critiques and Limitations

Critics argue that subaltern studies sometimes romanticizes resistance, overlooks internal hierarchies within subaltern groups, or fails to engage with material conditions. Others question the feasibility of recovering "pure" subaltern voices, given the pervasive influence of dominant languages and institutions.

8. Contemporary Relevance: Subaltern Voices in the Digital Age

8.1. Social Media and New Platforms

The digital age has opened new avenues for subaltern expression and activism. Social media, blogs, and online publishing allow marginalized groups to bypass traditional gatekeepers and reach global audiences. Hashtags, viral videos, and digital storytelling have become powerful tools for mobilizing resistance and demanding justice.

8.2. Challenges of Digital Divide and Surveillance

Despite these opportunities, digital platforms are not free from power dynamics. Access to technology, digital literacy, and algorithmic bias can reproduce or exacerbate existing inequalities. Surveillance, censorship, and online harassment pose new threats to subaltern voices.

9. Conclusion

Language is both a tool of domination and a weapon of resistance. The study of subaltern voices reveals the complex interplay between language, power, and agency, highlighting the ways in which marginalized groups contest, negotiate, and transform the structures that seek to silence them. Literature, oral traditions, and digital media all serve as sites for the emergence of subaltern voices, challenging dominant narratives and expanding the possibilities of representation.

The ongoing project of subaltern studies and literature is not only to recover lost or suppressed voices but to imagine new forms of solidarity, justice, and collective action. As the world confronts new forms of inequality and exclusion, the insights of subaltern theory remain vital for understanding—and transforming—the politics of language and power.

10. References

1. IJCRT. "Subalterns in Indian Literature: Changing Narratives." IJCRT2008452.pdf
2. Wikipedia. "Subaltern (postcolonialism)."
3. Literary Theory and Criticism. "Subaltern (Postcolonialism)."
4. ScholarBlogs Emory. "Subaltern Studies – Postcolonial Studies."
5. IJELLH. "Subaltern Literature."
6. IJCRT. "Subaltern Theory: Delineating Voices of the Victims." IJCRT2205759.pdf
7. Wikipedia. "Subaltern Studies."
8. Odisha Review. "Subaltern Studies: A New Trend in Writing History."