

Literature as Social Commentary: Depicting Marginalized Groups in Modern Indian English Fiction

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Cite this paper as: Dr P. Deepalakshmi (2024) Literature as Social Commentary: Depicting Marginalized Groups in Modern Indian English Fiction..Journal of Neonatal Surgery, 13, 2274-2276

ABSTRACT

Contemporary Indian English writing has emerged as a powerful medium for social critique, foregrounding the voices and experiences of marginalized communities long excluded from dominant cultural narratives. Writers engage with issues of caste, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, and sexuality to expose structural inequalities embedded within Indian society. This article examines how contemporary Indian English literature represents marginalized communities and functions as a form of social critique. Through the works of writers such as Arundhati Roy, Bama, Rohinton Mistry, Meena Kandasamy, Mahasweta Devi (in translation), and Amitav Ghosh, the study explores how literature interrogates power structures, challenges hegemonic discourses, and asserts subaltern identities. The article argues that contemporary Indian English writing not only reflects social realities but actively participates in the politics of resistance and transformation.

Key Words: Social Critique, Marginalization, Indian English Literature, Subaltern Voices, Contemporary Writing

INTRODUCTION

Literature has historically functioned as a mirror to society as well as a powerful tool for social critique. In the context of contemporary Indian English writing, literature plays a crucial role in representing marginalized communities and questioning systems of oppression rooted in caste, class, gender, religion, and ethnicity. Post-independence India, despite constitutional guarantees of equality, continues to grapple with deep-seated social hierarchies and exclusionary practices. Contemporary writers use fiction, poetry, and non-fiction to expose these contradictions and to amplify voices silenced by dominant narratives.

Indian English literature, once criticized for catering primarily to elite concerns, has undergone a significant transformation in recent decades. It has increasingly turned its attention to subaltern lives and social injustice. This article examines how contemporary Indian English writing represents marginalized communities and employs literary expression as a form of social critique, revealing the ethical and political responsibility of literature in a pluralistic society.

LITERATURE AS SOCIAL CRITIQUE: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Social critique in literature involves the examination and questioning of social norms, power relations, and institutional structures that perpetuate inequality. Influenced by Marxist criticism, postcolonial theory, feminist studies, and subaltern studies, contemporary Indian English writers challenge hegemonic discourses and foreground marginalized perspectives.

Thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emphasize the importance of cultural texts in shaping social consciousness. Literature becomes a site where power is contested and alternative narratives emerge. In Indian English writing, social critique is often embedded in storytelling, characterization, and narrative structure, allowing writers to address injustice without overt didacticism.

CASTE AND DALIT REPRESENTATION

One of the most significant areas of social critique in contemporary Indian English writing is the representation of caste-based oppression. Dalit writers and writers sympathetic to Dalit concerns challenge the historical invisibility of caste in mainstream literature. Works such as Bama's *Sangati*, Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* and *The Gypsy Goddess*, and translations of Mahasweta Devi's stories foreground the lived realities of caste discrimination, violence, and resistance.

Bama's writing offers a Dalit feminist perspective that exposes the intersection of caste and gender oppression. Her narratives reject victimhood and instead emphasize collective strength, anger, and survival. Meena Kandasamy's poetry and fiction adopt a confrontational tone, directly challenging caste hierarchies and the moral complacency of privileged communities. Through raw language and political urgency, these writers transform literature into a space of protest.

Gender, Patriarchy, and Marginalized Women

Contemporary Indian English literature also critiques patriarchal structures that marginalize women, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Writers such as Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Nair, and Kiran Desai portray women navigating systemic inequality within family, community, and state structures.

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy exposes how caste, gender, and class intersect to police women's bodies and desires. The character of Ammu represents a woman marginalized not only by patriarchy but also by rigid social norms inherited from colonial and feudal systems. Roy's narrative challenges the silence surrounding forbidden relationships and social transgression, making literature a site of ethical resistance.

Marginalized women in contemporary fiction are often depicted not merely as victims but as agents of change, whose struggles expose broader social injustices. Their personal narratives become political statements.

Class, Poverty, and Urban Marginality

Economic inequality and class marginalization form another crucial focus of contemporary Indian English writing. Rapid urbanization and globalization have intensified social divisions, creating new forms of exclusion. Writers such as Rohinton Mistry and Aravind Adiga critique economic disparity and the illusion of progress.

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* presents a harrowing portrayal of marginalized lives during the Emergency period, highlighting the exploitation of the poor, Dalits, and urban underclass. The novel exposes how state power and social apathy perpetuate suffering. Similarly, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* critiques capitalist excess and class inequality through satire, revealing the moral costs of economic ambition.

Through such narratives, literature becomes a means of exposing the human consequences of structural inequality and economic injustice.

Religious and Ethnic Marginalization

Contemporary Indian English literature also addresses the marginalization of religious and ethnic minorities, particularly in the context of communal violence and political polarization. Writers such as Amitav Ghosh and Salman Rushdie explore themes of displacement, identity, and historical trauma.

Amitav Ghosh's works, including *The Shadow Lines* and *Sea of Poppies*, examine how colonial history, borders, and nationalism have marginalized communities and fractured identities. Ghosh's emphasis on shared histories and cultural interconnectedness challenges exclusionary nationalist narratives.

By representing marginalized religious and ethnic communities, these writers critique the politics of othering and advocate for pluralism and historical empathy.

Language, Voice, and Narrative Strategies

An important aspect of representing marginalized communities is the use of language and narrative form. Contemporary writers often employ non-linear narratives, multiple voices, oral storytelling techniques, and regional idioms to reflect subaltern experiences. These stylistic choices resist dominant literary conventions and assert alternative ways of knowing.

The use of English itself becomes a site of negotiation. Writers Indianize the language, infusing it with local rhythms and cultural references, thereby challenging its colonial legacy. This linguistic experimentation allows marginalized voices to speak within—and transform—the language of power.

Literature, Ethics, and Responsibility

Contemporary Indian English writing increasingly emphasizes the ethical responsibility of literature to bear witness to injustice. Writers act as social commentators who document suffering, challenge complacency, and provoke critical reflection. This role aligns with the tradition of literature as a moral and political force.

By representing marginalized communities with empathy and complexity, writers resist stereotypes and simplistic portrayals. Literature thus becomes a space for dialogue, fostering social awareness and encouraging readers to confront uncomfortable truths.

Criticism and Challenges

While contemporary Indian English literature has expanded its engagement with marginalization, it also faces criticism.

Questions of authenticity, representation, and commercialization are often raised. Some critics argue that elite writers risk appropriating subaltern voices, while others point to the market-driven consumption of “poverty narratives.”

These debates highlight the need for ethical representation and inclusivity. Nevertheless, the growing presence of writers from marginalized backgrounds has enriched Indian English literature and diversified its perspectives.

Conclusion

Literature as social critique plays a vital role in representing marginalized communities in contemporary Indian English writing. Through nuanced narratives, innovative language, and political engagement, writers challenge structures of power and give voice to those historically silenced. The representation of caste, gender, class, religious, and ethnic marginalization underscores literature’s capacity to interrogate social realities and inspire transformation.

Contemporary Indian English writing demonstrates that literature is not merely an aesthetic endeavor but a powerful form of social intervention. By engaging with marginalization and resistance, it continues to shape cultural consciousness and contribute to the ongoing struggle for justice and equality in Indian society.

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