



## Negotiating Gender and Marginality: Representation of Subaltern Women in Contemporary Indian English Fiction

Dr. Md Samiul Azim 

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Gazole Mahavidyalaya  
Malda, West Bengal, India, Email: [azimpremi40@gmail.com](mailto:azimpremi40@gmail.com)

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### Abstract:

This article examines the representation of subaltern women in contemporary Indian English fiction, exploring how literary narratives negotiate intersecting oppressions of gender, caste, class, and ethnicity. Focusing on select works by Meena Kandasamy, Arundhati Roy, Annie Zaidi, and Easterine Kire, this study employs an intersectional framework informed by postcolonial feminist and subaltern theories. The analysis unveils how these authors engage innovative narrative strategies to address Spivak's (1988) seminal question about subaltern speech, not by claiming transparent representation but by meta-textually foregrounding conditions of silencing while creating spaces for agency. Through close reading of texts, dealing with Dalit, tribal, religious minority, and transgender experiences, the article demonstrates how fiction serves as counter-history against dominant patriarchal and casteist narratives. This research contributes to feminist and postcolonial scholarship by bridging theoretical gaps between subaltern studies and Dalit feminist perspectives, while highlighting literature's potential as a tool for social justice and visibility. It ultimately argues that contemporary Indian English fiction performs crucial political work in imagining more inclusive social realities amidst persistent structural inequalities and injustices.

### Keywords:

gender representation;  
intersectionality;  
indigenous;  
epistemologies;  
postcolonial feminism;  
subaltern studies

### Introduction

Contemporary Indian English fiction serves as a critical site for interrogating the complex hierarchies of power that define the subcontinent's social fabric. Within this landscape, the figure of the subaltern woman—triply marginalized by the interlocking structures of patriarchy, caste, and class—occupies a particularly fraught position. Her voice, as Spivak (1988) famously argued, is systematically effaced, caught between the narratives of elite nationalism and Western imperialism (104). These texts not only depict marginality but actively reconstruct history by giving space to multiple subaltern voices and by incorporating documentary traces that problematize official narratives.

While postcolonial and feminist studies have robustly engaged with Indian literature, the specific intersection of gender and subalternity, particularly through the lens of caste and tribe, remains under-theorized within analyses of Indian English fiction. As Tharu and Niranjana (1996) noted, the "woman question" in India is inextricable from the "caste question" (234), yet literary criticism often treats these as separate analytical tracks. Dalit feminist scholars have emphasized the inseparability of caste and gender in

understanding women's experiences in India (Rege 49). This study builds upon that insight by integrating Dalit feminist thought with postcolonial feminism and subaltern studies.

Guided by this, the present article seeks to answer the following research questions: How are subaltern women represented in select contemporary Indian English texts? What narrative strategies are employed to negotiate historical silences and articulate agency? In tandem, how do these literary interventions contribute to a broader socio-political discourse on gender and marginality in India? Instead, the authors strategically employ metafiction, polyvocality, and the reclamation of myth to critique the very mechanisms of silencing and to stage a powerful resistance. By doing so, they make a significant contribution to feminist and postcolonial discourse, foregrounding narratives of resistance and insisting on the visibility of those rendered most invisible.

## Literature Review

The literary and theoretical engagement with subalternity and gender in the Indian context constitutes a rich, yet often fragmented, field of scholarship. This review synthesizes three critical domains: feminist studies in Indian English literature, subaltern and postcolonial feminist theory, and the application of intersectionality to the Indian socio-cultural landscape. By mapping these discourses, this section delineates the specific scholarly gap that the present study aims to address.

Feminist literary criticism in India has long been concerned with the representation of women and the deconstruction of patriarchal narratives. Pioneering scholars like Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (1991), in their seminal work *Women Writing in India*, undertook a monumental project of recovery, arguing that women's writing inherently challenges the "consolidated, normative, and authoritative 'great traditions'" of canonical literature (41). Their work, alongside that of Uma Chakravarti, who historicized the deep entrenchment of Brahmanical patriarchy, established a foundation for reading gender as a central axis of power in Indian society and its cultural productions. However, a significant limitation of early feminist criticism, as later scholars noted, was its occasional tendency to homogenize the category of "Indian woman," often centering on the experiences of upper-caste, middle-class, and urban women.

It is precisely this elision that postcolonial and subaltern theories sought to interrogate. The field was irrevocably shaped by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) profound and pessimistic provocation, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak argued that the subaltern subject—the person utterly outside the circuits of hegemonic power—is condemned to silence because any attempt to represent them is inevitably an act of appropriation by the intellectual elite. This thesis, while foundational, has been extensively critiqued and nuanced. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988), from a different angle, criticized Western feminism's construction of a monolithic "Third World Woman" as a singular, oppressed subject, thereby denying her agency and complexity. Scholars like Ranajit Guha (1983) and the Subaltern Studies collective, though initially focused on peasant historiography, provided the crucial methodological impetus to recover fragments of subaltern consciousness from the archives of elite discourse. However, as Bell Hooks (1984) emphasized, these oppressions are not sequential but simultaneous, demanding a theory that can account for their confluence.

This demand is met by the concept of intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to describe the unique discrimination faced by Black women in the U.S. Its application to the Indian context is not merely apt but essential. Dalit feminist scholarship has been at the forefront of this intellectual labor, vehemently arguing that mainstream Indian feminism has often failed to address caste, while Dalit politics has been predominantly male-centered. As Sharmila Rege (2006) powerfully contended, a Dalit feminist standpoint "rejects the homogenization of the category 'woman' and insists on the non-negotiability of both gender and caste" (49). Gopal Guru (1995) similarly critiqued the "exclusive discourse" of Indian academia, which often speaks *for* Dalits rather than creating space for their own theoretical interventions. This intellectual movement is not merely theoretical; it is grounded in empirical reality. The National Crime Records Bureau (2019) data consistently shows that Dalit women experience disproportionately high rates of sexual violence, a brutal manifestation of intersecting caste and gender oppression. Their vulnerability is statistically quantified, yet their voices remain systematically marginalized in public and intellectual spheres (Guru). Recent ethnographic work by Nair on the Dignity March—a grassroots speak-out movement led by oppressed caste survivors of sexual violence in rural India—demonstrates how these broader statistics are mirrored in situated experiences (Nair).

A critical synthesis of these bodies of work reveals a persistent lacuna. While studies on gender in Indian English literature are plentiful, and subaltern and Dalit studies have flourished, there is a discernible lack of

integrated analysis that applies an explicitly intersectional, postcolonial feminist lens to *contemporary* Indian English fiction. Many studies either analyze subalternity with a primary focus on caste and class, sidelining gender (Satyanarayana & Tharu), or analyze gender while undertheorizing the specificities of caste and tribal marginality. Dalit studies have focused on autobiographies, testimonials, and vernacular writings; its engagement with English-language fiction that centers subaltern women remains emergent

Therefore, this study positions itself at the confluence of these scholarly traditions. It argues that contemporary authors like Kandasamy, Roy, Zaidi, and Kire are engaged in a literary project that directly responds to the theoretical challenges posed by Spivak, Mohanty, and Dalit feminists. Their works do not naively claim to “let the subaltern speak,” but instead, through sophisticated narrative strategies, they meta-textually critique the conditions of silencing and imagine literary spaces for the articulation of agency. This research will fill the identified gap by offering a sustained, comparative analysis of how these texts negotiate the representation of subaltern women, thereby contributing to a more robust and integrated understanding of gender, narrative, and power in contemporary Indian literature.

## Theoretical Framework

This analysis is guided by a theoretical framework that integrates postcolonial feminism, Subaltern Studies, and intersectionality. This tripartite lens is essential for interrogating the multifaceted oppression and agency of subaltern women in contemporary Indian English fiction, moving beyond reductive analyses that privilege one axis of identity over another. Postcolonial feminism, primarily through the work of Spivak (1988) and Mohanty (1988), provides the foundational caution against epistemic violence. Spivak’s seminal question, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” is not a dead end but a methodological imperative, reminding us that representation is always an act of mediation fraught with power dynamics. Mohanty’s critique of the monolithic “Third World woman” directly informs our reading, pushing us to discern how the selected authors differentiate their characters from this homogenized construct. However, to apply Spivak’s formulation statically would be a conceptual flaw; it risks perpetuating the very silence it describes. Therefore, we engage with scholars like Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1993) who argue that the subaltern’s speech can be located in acts of resistance, in gestures, and in silences that are readable within their specific contexts. This allows for an analysis that looks for agency not only in direct discourse but also in embodied practices and narrative form. This study is further anchored by the Subaltern Studies collective’s project of recovering history from below. Ranajit Guha’s (1983) focus on the peasantry’s autonomous consciousness, distinct from the elite nationalist narrative, is pivotal. We extend this project from historical archives to literary texts, treating the novels as symbolic spaces where subaltern consciousness is *staged* and made legible, albeit through the author’s privileged mediation.

Ultimately, Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) theory of intersectionality provides the crucial synthesizing grammar, allowing us to analyze how caste, gender, class, and ethnicity co-constitute subalternity in the Indian context. This framework is operationalized through Dalit feminist thought, which insists that caste is inseparable from gender analysis. This integrated framework thus enables a nuanced examination of how the selected literary texts navigate the task of representation, not to “give voice” but to critically orchestrate narrative conditions where resistance, silence, and articulation can be meaningfully examined.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology centered on critical textual analysis, interpreting selected literary works through the integrated theoretical lens of postcolonial feminism, subaltern studies, and intersectionality. The primary corpus comprises four contemporary fictions: Meena Kandasamy’s *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014), Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), Annie Zaidi’s *Prelude to a Riot* (2019), and Easterine Kire’s *When the River Sleeps* (2014). The selection of these four authors is guided by three criteria. First, the texts foreground women or gender-marginalized subjects situated within distinct forms of subalternity, including caste, tribal identity, religious minority status, and gender nonconformity. Second, the novels employ innovative narrative techniques such as metafiction, polyvocal narration, and indigenous storytelling traditions that directly engage questions of representation and voice. Third, together they provide geographical, cultural, and social diversity across contemporary India, enabling a comparative examination of how different forms of marginalization intersect with gender. The corpus was therefore chosen not for representational completeness but for its ability to illuminate diverse configurations of subaltern experience within contemporary Indian English

fiction. The analytical process focuses on tropes of voice, silence, agency, and resistance contextualised within specific socio-political realities using empirical data from National Crime Records Bureau reports and Dalit feminist scholarship to ground the literary interpretations (Tharu and Lalita). This method allows for a rigorous exploration of how fiction negotiates the theoretical problematics of representing the subaltern, making it a potent site for ideological and aesthetic inquiry.

## Discussion

### *Silenced Voices and the Politics of Representation*

The literary negotiation of subaltern silence constitutes a primary site of ideological struggle in contemporary Indian English fiction. Authors like Meena Kandasamy and Arundhati Roy engage directly with Gayatri Spivak's (1988) seminal question, not by claiming to transparently recover the subaltern voice, but by meta-textually dramatizing the very conditions of its silencing. Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014), a fictionalized account of the 1968 Kilvenmani massacre of Dalit agricultural laborers, explicitly foregrounds the impossibility of adequate representation. The novel's narrator constantly interrupts the narrative to question her own authority, stating, "I am only a chronicler of a partial truth... the story is too bloody for any kind of subtlety" (47). This self-reflexivity is a direct literary response to Spivak's warning about epistemic violence. Kandasamy does not presume to speak *for* the Dalit victims; instead, she documents the mechanisms of their silencing, juxtaposing brutal descriptions of caste violence with official court documents and upper-caste newspaper reports that systematically erase Dalit subjectivity and reduce their murders to statistical abstractions. This narrative strategy highlights what Gopal Guru (1995) identifies as the "exclusive discourse" of dominant castes (p. 2549), which controls the means of knowledge production to render Dalit pain invisible.

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) expands this canvas of silence to include a multitude of marginalized figures—the transgender (hijra) Anjum, the Dalit revolutionary Saddam Hussain, and the Kashmiri resistance fighter Tilottoma. Roy's novel structurally embodies intersectional silence by weaving together these fragmented narratives into a fractured, polyvocal tapestry that resists a singular, authoritative perspective. Anjum's experience exemplifies this: born as Aftab into a male body, her true identity is silenced by biological and social determinism: "While treatment would surely help, there would be 'Hijra tendencies' that were unlikely to ever go away" (Roy 14). She finds voice only by exiting normative society and creating a *dargah*-community of the rejected, a literal and metaphorical space for those whom Spivak would designate as subaltern. Roy's portrayal of Kashmir is perhaps the most potent exploration of state-enforced silence. The narrative deliberately fractures under the weight of the region's unspeakable violence, mirroring the censorship and militarization that suppresses Kashmiri voices: "Its cruelties became as natural as the changing seasons, each came with its own unique range of scent and blossom, its own cycle of loss and renewal, disruption and normalcy, uprisings and elections" (Roy 154). This repetition underscores a political reality where trauma becomes the only constant, and history is actively erased by state power. The novel's fragmented structure similarly reflects the social realities of communities subjected to surveillance, exclusion, and violence, demonstrating how narrative form itself becomes a response to systemic marginalization.

However, a critical counterargument must be considered: does this literary focus on silence risk re-marginalizing the very subjects it seeks to champion? Could it be seen as perpetuating what Mohanty (1988) critiqued as the construction of the "third world woman" as a perpetual victim? The strength of these narratives lies in their avoidance of this pitfall. By making the *process* of silencing visible—through court transcripts in Kandasamy or fragmented narratives in Roy—these authors shift the reader's gaze from the subaltern's supposed voicelessness to the powerful structures that enforce it. They don't just depict silence; they accuse its architects. This aligns with the Dalit feminist standpoint. The persistence of such violence is reflected not only in social reality but also in narrative form. The National Crime Records Bureau (2019) recorded over 45,935 crimes against Scheduled Castes, a context that illuminates why Kandasamy's fragmented narration and documentary insertions refuse narrative closure. The formal disruptions of the novel mirror the continuing structural violence that reduces Dalit lives to statistics while simultaneously exposing the inadequacy of official records to capture lived suffering.

### *Agency, Resistance, and Reclamation*

If the first subsection explored the problem of silence, this section examines the literary solutions and strategies of resistance employed to reclaim agency. The authors move beyond diagnosing the problem to actively

constructing narrative modes that facilitate a form of subaltern speech, often by bypassing Western literary conventions and tapping into indigenous epistemic traditions.

Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014) exemplifies this through its sophisticated appropriation of Naga oral traditions and animistic cosmology. The protagonist, Vilie, a lone hunter on a quest, operates within a worldview where the spiritual and material are inextricably linked. His agency is not expressed through individualistic self-assertion but through a respectful negotiation with the natural and spiritual world. Kire's narrative style itself embodies this; it is lyrical, cyclical, and deeply embedded in the oral storytelling culture of the Naga people. By refusing to conform to dominant realist novel form, Kire asserts the validity of Naga ways of knowing and being. The novel becomes what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) might call a project of "provincializing Europe" in a literary context. The river symbolizes a latent historical power. Velie's journey to awaken it symbolizes a larger collective journey to reclaim a narrative sovereignty that colonialism and Indian nationalism have sought to suppress. This reclamation through myth is not a retreat into tradition but a strategic deployment of it to forge a contemporary identity and assert presence.

Annie Zaidi's *Prelude to a Riot* (2019) tackles agency in the volatile context of communal polarization. The novel is a tightly wound tapestry of internal monologues from a diverse cast of characters living in a town on the brink of violence (Buragohain & Pattanayak). Zaidi's key strategy for showcasing resistance is through the quiet, often internalized, dissent of her female characters. Their agency is not depicted in grand, revolutionary gestures but in subtle acts of defiance and moral clarity amidst the escalating hate speech of the men around them (Datta). For instance, one mother worries about her son's radicalization, her internal voice a counterpoint to the public communal rhetoric: "Muscle by muscle, atom by atom, we are being torn from within. We are our own bomb" (Zaidi, 124). Zaidi suggests that in a climate of overt violence, agency can reside in the refusal to hate, in the protection of inter-community friendships, and in the preservation of one's ethical universe (Piela). This is a nuanced form of resistance that challenges stereotypical representations of Muslim women as either passive victims or religious fanatics, directly engaging with Mohanty's critique.

Meena Kandasamy, meanwhile, employs a strategy of radical intertextuality and genre-bending to reclaim agency. *The Gypsy Goddess* is part historical novel, part political manifesto, part poetic lament. By fracturing the traditional novel form, Kandasamy mirrors the fragmentation caused by caste violence and refuses to provide a cohesive, easily consumable narrative for the upper-caste literary establishment. This formal rebellion is itself an agentive act. She reclaims the narrative not by pretending to give voice to the dead, but by violently disrupting the reader's comfort and forcing them to confront the raw, unfinished business of caste history. The agency lies in the telling, not just the tale. As the narrator asserts, this is not a novel. This is an invitation to a massacre (Kandasamy 99). This metafictional declaration positions the reader as complicit and challenges them to move beyond passive reading into active engagement, transforming the literary experience into a political one.

### **Intersectionality in Practice**

The theoretical concept of intersectionality, pioneered by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), finds its most potent literary expression in the layered characterizations and plot structures of these novels. The texts move beyond abstract theory to demonstrate how intersecting identities of caste, gender, religion, and tribe produce unique and compounded experiences of both oppression and resistance. As Herklotz emphasises, debates over Muslim personal law frequently function as crucibles where gender, minority identity and nationalism collide — a dynamic that helps explain why intersectional characters are placed under intense sociopolitical pressure in the novels (Herklotz).

Arundhati Roy's Anjum is a quintessential intersectional character. Her identity exists at the crossroads of gender (transgender), religion (Muslim), and social marginality (hijra community). The discrimination she faces from mainstream society is compounded by her gender non-conformity, yet she also finds strength and belonging within the historically marginalized hijra community. Roy meticulously shows how Anjum's Muslim identity intersects with her trans identity, particularly during the 2002 Gujarat riots, where the state's anti-Muslim pogroms directly threaten her fragile sanctuary (Roy 28). Her agency is forged precisely from this intersection: she uses the cultural capital and social structure of the hijra community to create a new kind of family, the Jannat Guest House, which becomes a refuge for other intersectional outcasts—abandoned babies, Dalits, political dissidents. This literary depiction empirically reflects the findings of organizations like the

National Council for Transgender Persons, which report that trans individuals, particularly from religious minorities, face disproportionate violence and economic exclusion, with limited access to justice (NCTP).

In *Prelude to a Riot*, Annie Zaidi explores the intersection of gender and religious identity. The Muslim women in the novel are triply bound: by the increasing communal hostility from the Hindu right, by the patriarchal expectations within their own community that demand they conform to a certain modest ideal, and by the class dynamics of their employment as domestic workers in upper-class Hindu homes (Bilal). Zaidi masterfully uses the lens of domestic work to reveal this intersection. The home, often romanticized as a private sphere, is revealed as a political contact zone where religious prejudice and class exploitation play out daily (Jain). A Muslim maid's fear of losing her job if her employer's communal sentiments harden is a direct result of the intersection of her class, religious, and gender identity (Zaidi 115). This nuanced portrayal challenges homogenized categories of "Muslim woman" or "working-class woman," demonstrating instead how these identities converge to create a specific lived experience of precarity.

Kire's *When the River Sleeps* introduces the critical dimension of indigeneity and tribal identity into the intersectional framework (Chücha). Velie's struggle is not just personal; it is emblematic of the Naga people's historical struggle for self-determination against the Indian state. His identity as a Naga tribesman is inextricable from his journey (Satapathy & Bhattacharya 115). The marginalization he faces is not solely based on class or gender but on the colonial and post-colonial oppression of tribal lands, cultures, and epistemologies. Kire shows how the Indian state's project of nationalism often seeks to erase distinct tribal identities, framing them as "backward" or anti-national (Das et al. 280). Velie's quest to awaken the river is thus also a quest to awaken and assert a Naga identity that is sovereign. This narrative aligns with the work of Virginus Xaxa on tribal displacement and alienation and with scholars of tribal women who demonstrate how the loss of land and livelihood disproportionately affects women (3592–94).

A comparative analysis across the texts reveals that while the nature of marginalization differs—based on caste, tribe, religion, or gender identity—the narrative strategies for asserting agency share a common thread: the creation of alternative communities. Whether it is Anjum's Jannat Guest House, the collective of Dalit labourers in Kandasamy's, the resilient Naga village community in Kire, or the fragile inter-religious bonds between women in Zaidi's novel, these spaces function as counter-publics. They are sanctuaries where subaltern subjectivities can be nurtured and sustained against the onslaught of majoritarian and patriarchal forces. These literary depictions illustrate that resistance for the intersectionally marginalized is rarely a solitary heroic act; it is often a collective project of survival and world-building.

## Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that contemporary Indian English fictions undertake a vital project of narrative and epistemic reclamation, moving beyond the theoretical impasse of Spivak's (1988) subaltern who "cannot speak" to explore how she might be heard. Through a nuanced intersectional analysis of texts by Kandasamy, Roy, Zaidi, and Kire, we have charted the sophisticated literary strategies—metafictional critique, polyvocal fragmentation, the invocation of indigenous epistemologies, and the forging of counter-publics—that these authors employ to negotiate the representation of subaltern women. These narratives do not simply insert marginalized figures into pre-existing literary molds; they fundamentally challenge the conventions of the novel itself to create spaces where multifaceted agency can be articulated against the grain of patriarchal, casteist, and majoritarian nationalism. Its main contribution is an integrated framework linking postcolonial feminism, subaltern studies and Dalit feminism. This study has shown how characters' experiences of oppression and resistance are shaped by the inseparable confluence of caste, gender, religion, and tribe. These counters homogenizing views, highlighting the inescapable link between gender and caste.

By bringing postcolonial feminism, subaltern studies, intersectionality, and Dalit feminist thought into a single analytical framework, this study addresses a significant gap in existing scholarship, where analyses of gender, caste, tribality, and minority identities have often remained fragmented. The comparative reading of Kandasamy, Roy, Zaidi, and Kire demonstrate that subaltern women's experiences can be more adequately understood only through an integrated framework that recognizes the simultaneous operation of multiple structures of power. Consequently, this article positions contemporary Indian English fiction as a crucial site of alternative historiography, one that documents the "small voices of history" (Chakrabarty, 113) often erased by official records and dominant discourse, and thus as a tool for social justice.

Future research should build upon this foundation through comparative studies with texts from India's vibrant regional language traditions, exploring how the politics of translation influences the circulation of subaltern narratives. Digital storytelling allows marginalized groups to share their own narratives, bypassing traditional literary gatekeepers. The enduring power of the novels analyzed here is their refusal of closure; they are, as Kandasamy's narrator suggests, "an invitation" rather than a conclusion—an invitation to continue listening, critiquing, and engaging with the ever-evolving struggle for subaltern representation.

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### Note on contributor(s)

**Dr. Md Samiul Azim** is an Assistant Professor of English at Gazole Mahavidyalaya. His research focuses on postcolonial studies, Indian English literature, and gender studies. He has published in several national and international journals.