

LITERATURE OF RESISTANCE: SUBALTERN NARRATIVES IN THE WORKS OF BAMA, SARA ABOOBACKER, AND PRATHIBHA RAY

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Abstract:

The literature of resistance serves as a potent tool for challenging societal norms and systems of oppression, giving voice to marginalized groups. This paper explores subaltern narratives in the works of three prominent Indian writers—Bama, Sara Aboobacker, and Prathibha Ray—whose works embody the struggles of Dalit, Muslim women, and tribal communities. Through their writings, these authors resist dominant power structures by highlighting the intersecting forms of oppression related to caste, gender, and religious orthodoxy. Bama, a Dalit writer, exposes the brutal realities of caste-based discrimination and gender oppression in her autobiographical work *Karukku* and other narratives. Her stories reveal the resilience of Dalit women, challenging the caste system while addressing the internalized oppression within her community. Sara Aboobacker, a Kannada writer, portrays the experiences of Muslim women caught between religious orthodoxy and patriarchal societal structures. Through works like *Chandragiri Teeradalli*, Aboobacker critiques the ways in which religion is often used to perpetuate gender inequality, highlighting the subtle yet powerful acts of resistance employed by her female protagonists. Prathibha Ray, a writer focused on the tribal experience, explores the marginalization and resistance of indigenous communities in works like *Adi Bhumi* and *Aranyaka*. She exposes the exploitation and cultural erosion faced by tribal populations, particularly women, while celebrating their strength and agency in resisting outside forces.

Each of these writers uses language and style as a means of resistance, reclaiming cultural narratives and disrupting hegemonic representations. The paper examines how these subaltern voices challenge social hierarchies and contribute to a broader conversation on identity, justice, and empowerment in contemporary Indian literature. Through their powerful narratives, Bama, Aboobacker, and Ray exemplify how literature can serve as an act of resistance, giving voice to the voiceless and advocating for social change.

Keywords: Literature, Resistance, Subaltern Narratives, Works, Bama, Sara Aboobacker, and Prathibha Ray.

INTRODUCTION:

Literature of resistance refers to creative works that challenge oppression, injustice, and marginalization. It emerges from contexts of social, political, or cultural domination, giving voice to the silenced and exposing the mechanisms of power. Rooted in lived experiences, such literature often critiques systemic inequalities, be it caste, class, race, gender, or colonialism. Writers of resistance employ storytelling as a tool for subversion,

using language to question dominant narratives and reclaim identity. This form of literature is transformative, urging readers to confront uncomfortable truths and inspiring action toward justice and equity. By illuminating the struggles of the marginalized, it disrupts complacency and redefines societal values. In India, the works of writers like Bama, Sara Aboobacker, and Prathibha Ray exemplify the literature of resistance, as they bring to light the experiences of Dalits, Muslim women, and tribal communities, challenging systemic hierarchies and advocating for dignity and rights.

The Concept of the Subaltern

The term "subaltern" refers to individuals or groups marginalized by social, political, and economic systems, often denied a voice within dominant power structures. Originating from Antonio Gramsci's work and popularized in postcolonial studies by scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the subaltern encompasses those excluded from hegemonic discourses, such as the oppressed classes, castes, indigenous peoples, and women. Subaltern studies challenge historical narratives that prioritize elite perspectives, emphasizing the need to amplify voices from the margins. In literature, subaltern narratives reclaim agency by articulating the experiences and struggles of the disenfranchised. These stories resist the erasure of identity and history, exposing oppression while celebrating resilience. In the Indian context, the term gains particular relevance in addressing caste oppression, gender inequities, and the silencing of tribal and minority communities, as seen in the works of Bama, Sara Aboobacker, and Prathibha Ray, who foreground subaltern perspectives.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

This paper explores subaltern narratives in the works of three prominent Indian writers—Bama, Sara Aboobacker, and Prathibha Ray—whose works embody the struggles of Dalit, Muslim women, and tribal communities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study is based on secondary sources of data such as articles, books, journals, research papers, websites and other sources.

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Resistance literature has been a powerful tool for voicing the struggles of marginalized communities and challenging oppressive social systems. Writers like Bama, Sara Aboobacker, and Prathibha Ray have used their works to illuminate the lives and experiences of subaltern groups, particularly women, the oppressed castes, and religious minorities. Their narratives explore resistance against caste discrimination, patriarchal norms, and religious orthodoxy, offering a space where the silenced can reclaim their agency.

Subaltern Studies and Resistance Literature

The concept of the subaltern, popularized by thinkers like Antonio Gramsci and the Subaltern Studies collective, refers to groups excluded from hegemonic power structures. Resistance

literature focuses on these marginalized voices, creating a counter-narrative to dominant ideologies. It challenges established norms by presenting the lived realities of oppression and mobilizing a call for social transformation. The works of Bama, Sara Aboobacker, and Prathibha Ray fall within this paradigm. While Bama critiques the caste system and its intersection with gender, Sara Aboobacker exposes the plight of Muslim women in patriarchal settings. Prathibha Ray examines tribal life, particularly the struggles of tribal women against both internal and external oppressions.

BAMA: RESISTANCE AGAINST CASTE AND GENDER OPPRESSION

Bama Faustina Mary, popularly known as Bama, is a renowned Tamil Dalit writer whose works serve as a powerful critique of caste and gender oppression in Indian society. Her narratives, rooted in the lived experiences of Dalit communities, expose the intersections of caste and gender, and celebrate the resilience and agency of the oppressed. Through her autobiographical and fictional works, Bama challenges systemic discrimination and highlights the transformative potential of education, collective action, and identity reclamation.

The Context of Bama's Work

Bama's writing emerges from her identity as a Dalit woman in Tamil Nadu, a state with a deeply entrenched caste hierarchy. The Dalit community, historically ostracized and subjected to systemic discrimination, has long been denied access to education, land, and social mobility. Women within this community face compounded oppression, as they are marginalized not only by caste but also by gender. In this context, Bama's literature becomes an act of resistance. Her works break the silence imposed on Dalit lives, particularly Dalit women, and offer a platform for their stories to be heard. By writing in Tamil, employing colloquial speech, and drawing from everyday experiences, Bama ensures her narratives remain authentic and accessible, resonating deeply with the people whose struggles she portrays.

Karukku: An Autobiographical Testament

Bama's *Karukku* (1992) is a landmark text in Dalit literature. The title, which translates to "palmyra leaves with serrated edges," symbolizes the pain and resilience of Dalit life. The work is a blend of autobiography, social critique, and spiritual reflection, chronicling Bama's journey from a marginalized Dalit village girl to an empowered writer and activist.

Critique of Caste Oppression

In *Karukku*, Bama vividly depicts the caste discrimination she experienced during her childhood. She recounts incidents of humiliation, such as when Dalits were made to carry water in separate pots or were barred from entering certain spaces. These early experiences shaped her awareness of the pervasive nature of caste-based oppression. One of the most striking episodes in the book describes how Dalit laborers, including her family, were exploited by upper-caste landlords. This exploitation was not limited to economic deprivation but extended to social ostracization, as Dalits were treated as untouchables and denied

dignity. Bama's portrayal of these injustices underscores the systemic nature of caste discrimination and its dehumanizing effects.

Gender and Caste Intersections

Bama's narrative also highlights the intersectionality of caste and gender. Dalit women, she observes, bear the dual burden of caste-based exploitation and patriarchal oppression. Despite their vital roles in sustaining families and communities, they are often relegated to the margins, denied education, and subjected to violence. Through her own experiences, Bama illustrates how Dalit girls were discouraged from pursuing education, as their labor was deemed more valuable to the household. However, she also emphasizes the resilience of Dalit women, who, despite these challenges, manage to carve out spaces of resistance and assert their agency.

Critique of Religious Institutions

As a Dalit Christian, Bama offers a sharp critique of the Catholic Church, exposing the caste-based hierarchies and hypocrisy within religious institutions. She recounts how Dalit Christians were segregated even during worship, contradicting the Church's professed ideals of equality and love. This critique underscores the complicity of religious institutions in perpetuating caste oppression and challenges their moral authority.

Resistance Through Education

Education emerges as a central theme in *Karukku*. For Bama, education is not only a means of personal empowerment but also a tool for collective liberation. She describes how her schooling allowed her to recognize the structural nature of caste discrimination and inspired her to challenge it. However, she also critiques the limitations of an educational system that often reinforces caste hierarchies rather than dismantling them.

SARA ABOOBACKER: MUSLIM WOMEN'S STRUGGLES IN PATRIARCHAL CONTEXTS

Sara Aboobacker, a prominent Kannada writer, is renowned for her nuanced portrayal of Muslim women's struggles within patriarchal structures. Her literary contributions primarily focus on highlighting the intersection of gender, religion, and societal norms, providing a voice to marginalized women who are often silenced or overlooked. Through her works, particularly *Chandragiri Teeradalli* (1981), Aboobacker explores the multifaceted oppression faced by Muslim women and critiques the religious and patriarchal norms that confine them to subjugated roles.

Patriarchy and Religious Orthodoxy

Central to Aboobacker's writing is a critique of the intersection of patriarchy and religious orthodoxy. In many Muslim communities, women face dual layers of oppression: gender-based discrimination that is deeply embedded in societal practices and the rigid structures of religious traditions that dictate their roles. Aboobacker's characters are often caught in this intersection, navigating the complexities of being both women and Muslims in a patriarchal

context. In Chandragiri Teeradalli, the protagonist is a young Muslim woman who finds herself trapped between the oppressive expectations of her family and the larger community. While the religious traditions promise spiritual fulfillment, they simultaneously impose restrictions that limit her freedom. Aboobacker's portrayal of these struggles serves as a critique of how religious norms are often manipulated by male-dominated structures to reinforce gender inequality. Women, within these contexts, are expected to fulfill traditional roles—being obedient daughters, wives, and mothers—while their desires, dreams, and aspirations are often sidelined.

Resistance through Subtle Defiance

Although Aboobacker's protagonists are constrained by oppressive structures, they resist in subtle but significant ways. Unlike more overt forms of rebellion, the resistance in Aboobacker's works is often quiet and introspective. Her characters may not directly challenge the societal norms through public defiance or rebellion, but their internal resistance is a powerful act of agency. For instance, in Chandragiri Teeradalli, the protagonist's moments of quiet rebellion, such as her internal questioning of religious practices or her secret desire to break free from the rigid gender roles, represent forms of resistance. These acts demonstrate that resistance does not always have to be loud or dramatic; sometimes it is the subtle defiance of deeply ingrained norms that leads to change. By portraying these nuanced moments of resistance, Aboobacker suggests that women, even in the most restrictive environments, possess the strength to challenge patriarchal structures, even if only in their minds or hearts.

Gender and Religious Identity

Aboobacker's works delve into the complexities of gender and religious identity, particularly the way Muslim women's lives are governed by both religious doctrines and patriarchal societal expectations. The social positioning of Muslim women often requires them to navigate between religious teachings, which may appear progressive in their core but are often manipulated for patriarchal gain, and a society that insists on their subjugation. In many of Aboobacker's stories, women are portrayed as seeking a space where their religious identity and their gendered experiences can coexist without one overpowering the other. However, the societal and familial pressures often create tension in this delicate balance. Muslim women's identities are frequently shaped by an amalgamation of religious and patriarchal expectations that prioritize male dominance, resulting in feelings of guilt and shame when women attempt to step outside prescribed roles. This dynamic is skillfully explored in Chandragiri Teeradalli, where the protagonist's experience of faith is often at odds with her desire for independence. She must reconcile her need for personal freedom with the expectation that she adhere to the traditional role assigned to her as a Muslim woman. Aboobacker's portrayal of this inner conflict highlights the tension between religious orthodoxy and individual agency, showing how women navigate the restrictions placed on them both by their religion and their gender.

The Role of Education and Empowerment

One of the most important themes in Aboobacker's works is the potential of education as a tool for empowerment. In a society where girls and women are often denied access to education, Aboobacker's narratives emphasize the importance of knowledge in breaking the cycle of oppression. Education, particularly when it is coupled with critical thinking, allows women to question the very structures that limit their lives. In Chandragiri Teeradalli, the protagonist's journey towards self-awareness is significantly shaped by her education. It is through learning and exposure to new ideas that she begins to question the rigid gender norms and religious doctrines that have governed her life. Aboobacker highlights how education becomes a form of resistance, as it opens up new possibilities for women and allows them to challenge patriarchal authority. Her work suggests that without education, women remain trapped within a limited framework of choices, but with knowledge, they can forge their own path and assert their autonomy.

Solidarity Among Women

Aboobacker also emphasizes the role of solidarity among women in resisting patriarchy. While her protagonists often feel isolated in their struggles, they find strength in connecting with other women who share similar experiences. This solidarity provides emotional and psychological support, allowing women to collectively resist patriarchal norms. In Chandragiri Teeradalli, the protagonist draws strength from the relationships she forms with other women who also resist patriarchal structures in their own ways. These relationships demonstrate the power of collective resistance, as women share their struggles, offer each other encouragement, and work together to create spaces where they can express their desires and assert their rights. This solidarity challenges the idea that women's oppression is an individual issue and reframes it as a collective struggle that requires cooperation and mutual support.

Social Critique of Gender Norms

Aboobacker's literature functions as a social critique, interrogating how gender roles are socially constructed and reinforced. She critiques the social systems that enforce these roles, particularly those that limit the autonomy and freedom of women. Through her portrayal of Muslim women's lives, Aboobacker critiques the patriarchal structures within both the family and the broader community. These structures often dictate how women should behave, what they should aspire to, and how they should interact with men, all while framing these expectations as a natural part of religious and cultural life. Her critique of these norms is not an attack on religion itself, but rather a call for a reinterpretation of religious teachings in ways that promote equality and justice for women. She challenges the patriarchal interpretation of religious doctrines that often suppress women's voices, advocating for a more inclusive and progressive understanding of faith that allows women to flourish.

PRATHIBHA RAY: TRIBAL NARRATIVES AND MARGINALIZED VOICES

Prathibha Ray is a renowned Indian author who has made significant contributions to literature by amplifying the voices of marginalized tribal communities in India. Her works,

particularly *Adi Bhumi* (1996), *Aranyaka* (1999), and *The Last Song of Dusk* (2009), focus on the intricate realities of tribal life, their social struggles, and their relentless resistance against exploitation. Through her narratives, Ray offers a critical perspective on the oppression and erasure faced by tribal communities and highlights their resilience, culture, and sense of identity in the face of overwhelming forces of modernization, colonialism, and mainstream cultural hegemony.

The Struggle for Land and Identity

One of the primary themes in Ray's writings is the struggle of tribal communities for their land, cultural identity, and dignity. In *Adi Bhumi*, Ray explores the tensions between indigenous tribal cultures and the encroachment of dominant social and political systems that attempt to assimilate or suppress them. The novel delves into the deep connection that tribal communities have with their land and the devastating impact when this bond is threatened by external forces, including landlords, government policies, and religious institutions.

For tribal people, land is not just a source of livelihood but an intrinsic part of their cultural and spiritual identity. This connection to the land is often contested in the context of state-sponsored projects like industrialization, mining, and displacement due to development activities. In *Adi Bhumi*, the protagonist's struggle to preserve his tribal land from government control and exploitation becomes a metaphor for the broader fight for identity and survival. Ray portrays tribal people as resilient warriors who fight for their land not only out of necessity but also to protect their culture, traditions, and ways of life, which are constantly under threat from modern forces.

Cultural Erosion and the Threat of Assimilation

The threat of cultural erosion is another recurring theme in Ray's works. Tribal communities in India, especially those in remote and forested regions, have faced centuries of cultural and social assimilation, which often leads to the erosion of their traditional lifestyles. Ray's novels express concern about the loss of tribal languages, customs, and spiritual practices due to the encroachment of mainstream cultures and the imposition of alien systems of governance, education, and religion. In *Aranyaka*, Ray addresses the displacement of indigenous populations due to industrialization and the loss of their ancestral forest lands. As these communities are forced to relocate and adapt to urban environments, they face a profound crisis of identity. The novel portrays the psychological and cultural alienation that results from these forced assimilations, as tribal people are separated from the very essence of their lives: the forests, their ancestral lands, and their communal way of living. Through her writing, Ray underscores the significance of preserving indigenous cultures, languages, and traditions. She argues that tribal identity is deeply tied to the land and culture, and any effort to erase these aspects of tribal life contributes to their marginalization. By giving voice to tribal experiences, Ray not only highlights their plight but also calls for the recognition and preservation of their unique cultural heritage.

Gender and Tribal Women's Struggles

In Ray's work, tribal women emerge as complex figures who navigate the multiple layers of oppression they face—not just because of their gender, but also due to their tribal identity. In a patriarchal society, tribal women often occupy a subordinate position within their communities and experience further marginalization from both mainstream society and within the tribal structures themselves. Ray's portrayal of women in *Adi Bhumi* and *Aranyaka* underscores their strength and resilience, despite the multiple forms of oppression they face.

In *Aranyaka*, the female characters are portrayed as the backbone of the tribal community, responsible for maintaining the family, managing resources, and protecting the cultural values of their people. However, their roles are often invisible in the broader narrative of tribal struggles. Ray's work draws attention to the need to acknowledge the contributions of tribal women in the fight for land and identity. These women are not just passive victims of oppression but active participants in resisting forces that seek to uproot their traditions. Ray also critiques the double oppression faced by tribal women—both as women and as members of marginalized communities. In a society where patriarchy and caste-based hierarchies dictate social relations, tribal women often face discrimination both within their own communities and from the larger, mainstream society. By focusing on the experiences of these women, Ray gives them agency, highlighting their role as resistance figures in the tribal fight for justice and dignity.

The Role of Myth and Tradition in Resistance

Ray's works often draw on the rich mythological and spiritual traditions of the tribal people, using these elements to frame their resistance. In *Aranyaka*, the character's connection to forest life, mythological stories, and spiritual practices becomes a means of survival and a form of cultural resistance. The novel reflects how tribal communities rely on their mythological traditions to navigate the complexities of modernity and maintain their resistance against external forces. For Ray's protagonists, mythology and tradition are not just relics of the past, but living, breathing forces that help them make sense of their world and resist the destruction of their way of life. These myths provide tribal people with a framework for understanding their relationship to the land, the environment, and each other, thereby enabling them to resist the assimilation efforts of dominant societies. By invoking these mythological narratives, Ray's work foregrounds the importance of cultural memory in the fight for justice and identity.

Tribal Resistance and the Politics of Development

The politics of development is a key area of critique in Ray's writing. Industrialization, modernization, and state-led development projects have often been imposed upon tribal communities in the name of progress, with little regard for their well-being or consent. In *Adi Bhumi* and *Aranyaka*, Ray critiques the destructive effects of these development policies, which often lead to the displacement of tribal populations and the destruction of their habitats.

The tribes in Ray's novels, therefore, become symbols of resistance against the politics of development that prioritize economic growth over human rights and ecological sustainability. By focusing on the lives of these communities, Ray draws attention to the devastating consequences of such development policies and advocates for an alternative form of progress—one that respects indigenous cultures, the environment, and the rights of marginalized communities.

CONCLUSION:

The literature of resistance, as exemplified in the works of Bama, Sara Aboobacker, and Prathibha Ray, plays a crucial role in challenging the systemic structures of oppression that marginalize various communities in India. Through their subaltern narratives, these writers not only give voice to the silenced but also interrogate the deeply entrenched systems of caste, gender, and religious patriarchy that shape societal power dynamics. Bama's exploration of Dalit experiences, Aboobacker's critique of the intersection of gender and religious orthodoxy, and Ray's portrayal of tribal struggles all reveal the multi-dimensional aspects of oppression and the resilience of marginalized groups. By foregrounding the struggles of Dalit women, Muslim women, and indigenous communities, these authors reclaim agency for those who have long been voiceless in mainstream narratives. Their works disrupt hegemonic discourse and provide a powerful counter-narrative that challenges the dominant social order. Moreover, their innovative use of language, style, and cultural specificity further strengthens their resistance, allowing these subaltern voices to resonate deeply with both local and global audiences.

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