

Tracing the Voice of the Subaltern: A study of Namita Gokhale's '*Things to Leave Behind*'

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Abstract:

Namita Gokhale is a well-known figure amongst Indian women novelists. Her works explore the supposition that females continue to liberate themselves from patriarchal structures and challenge those structures. This paper analyzes Namita Gokhale's *Things to Leave Behind* from the perspective of post-colonialism, employing the concepts of "voice" and "subaltern" from Spivak's work. "Things to Leave Behind" represents the voice of the subaltern and its significance in the context of Indian society. The paper examines how the novel contributes to a broader understanding of the subaltern condition and the importance of giving voice to marginalized groups. The book was published in 2016, and in the extensive corpus of the writing of Gokhale, it has a position of prominence. It is defined as her most ambitious work. Since the Indian subcontinent gained its independence from colonial rule, postcolonial theory has always been considered a fascinating academic subject to study. The concept of "subaltern" is the by-product of the postcolonial situation that has spawned mountains of literature. Due to the improvements in socioeconomic conditions, the meaning of the word "subaltern" and its characteristics have undergone significant changes.

Keywords: Gender, Indian English Literature, Indian Women, Postcolonial, Patriarchy, Subaltern

Introduction

There are twenty-one books of fiction and non-fiction written by Namita Gokhale. For her book *Things to Leave Behind*, she was given the 2021 Sahitya Academi Award. She has won various accolades for her efforts. She has written numerous well-acclaimed books. Her fiction includes *Paro: Dreams of Passion*, *Gods, Graves, and Grandmother*, *A Himalayan Love Story*, *The Book of Shadows*, *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, *Priya: In Incredible Indyya*, *The Habit of Love*, *Things to Leave Behind*, *Lost in Time: Ghatotkacha and the Game of Illusions*, *Betrayed by Hope: A Play on the Life of Michael Madhusudan*

Dutt (co-authored with Malashri Lal), *The Blind Matriarch*, published in 2021. Her works of non-fiction include *Mountain Echoes – Reminiscences of Kumaoni Women*, *The Book of Shiva*, *The Puffin Mahabharata*, *In Search of Sita* (co-edited with Malashri Lal), *Travelling In*, *Travelling Out* (edited), *Himalaya: Adventures, Meditations, Life* (co-edited with Ruskin Bond), *The Himalayan Arc: Journeys East of South-east* (revised), *Finding Radha: The Quest for Love*. Her works are distinctive and have made significant contributions to Indian English literature.

Gokhale, through her bold women characters, talks about a society where a woman is not free to lead her life in her style. She depicts the double standard treatment for males and females, upper and lower class, and the hypocrisy of society. Alongside oppression in the name of gender and religion, the most intuitive form of social injustice in India is the caste system. Caste and gender inequality formed as prominent themes in *Things to Leave Behind*.

Concept of the Subaltern

Postcolonial philosophy is a broad term with many facets. As a result, there needs to be a clear definition for this idea. In a nutshell, post-colonialism is concerned with the beliefs, cultures, and socioeconomic conditions of those subjected to imperialism and those subjected to veiled imperialism. McLeod (2011), in his treatise *Beginning Post Colonialism*, the word "post-colonialism" is not the same as "after colonization," Rather, it is an attempt to depart from a colonial discourse and the "challenge of knowing the colonial ways."

Subaltern refers to an officer holding a military rank just below that of a captain in the British army. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci initially used this phrase as a political word in his essay "Notes on Italian History," which was later incorporated into his widely read book *Prison Notebooks*, published between 1929 and 1930. Gayatri Spivak, a postcolonial theorist, claims that Antonio Gramsci coined the term "subaltern," initially referring to a lower-ranking military official, to substitute the word "proletarian" to avoid having his writing censored (Spivak, 1990). Gramsci wanted to give them (the subaltern) a voice and preserve their culture because they were excluded from the primary ruling classes' historical narrative. Gramsci (1971) stated: "The subaltern classes by definition are not unified and cannot unite until they can become a "state": As a result, their history is entangled with that of civil society and, thus, with the records of individual States and groups of States. Gramsci's book included six steps to explore the history of the subaltern group and the hegemonic classes, arguing that they both have a complicated past. Gramsci's unique and innovative concept of subaltern established a new footing for the peasant and recognized their position as a distinct class.

“Subaltern Studies” Group

Preoccupied with Gramsci's idea of the subaltern, other 20th-century scholars working with Indian peasantry historiography extended the definition of the subaltern. Ranajit Guha, who had written on peasant uprisings in India, was this literary movement's first and most prominent leader. The group also comprised many South Asian historians, social critics, and researchers, including Touraj Atabaki, Shahid Amin, Dipesh Chakrabarty,

David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee, David Hardiman, and Sumit Sarkar, who dissented from the group due to its disappointing turn to postmodernism. Guha defined Subaltern Studies 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 any other way (Guha, 1982). The group members started studying the subaltern groups as an 'objective assessment of the role of the elite and as a critique of elitist interpretations of that role' (Guha, 1982). The members of this group were historians and scholars who practiced new ways of reading Indian history to restore the subaltern whose roles had been erased and wiped out from the history of India's struggle for independence. A member of the Subaltern Studies movement named Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak later opposed this initiative to revive their voices in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1999). Spivak critiques the group's attempt to resuscitate subaltern voices by pointing out that the idea is flawed. She contends that the group that attempts to rewrite history for the subaltern robs them of their autonomy. As a result, according to Spivak, the subaltern cannot speak.

Spivak evolved her idea of the subaltern in her revolutionary essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). Here Spivak questioned the assumptions made by radical French theorists Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze that the voice of the peasants can be presented by saying, 'we must now confront the following question: On the other side of the International divisions of labor from socialized capital, inside and outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialistic law and education supplementing on earlier economic text, Can the Subaltern Speak?'(Spivak, 1988). She also suggested that the combining force of patriarchy and colonialism doubly effaces women. Roaming about the concrete and conceptual definition, Spivak has continued her analysis of subalterns. With the advancement of technology, globalization, and capitalism, the condition of the subaltern, Spivak discussed, has changed its face, identical to Gokhale's socio-political concerns. Spivak claims, 'Today, the subaltern must be rethought. S/he is no longer cut off from lines of access to the center. The center . . . is altogether interested in the rural and indigenous subaltern as a source of trade-related intellectual property or TRIPs' (Spivak, 2012, p. 326).

Subaltern Voices in Things to Leave Behind

In *Things to Leave Behind*, prominent Indian author Namita Gokhale demonstrates her sensitivity to marginalized voices. Gokhale draws the reader's attention to remnants of subaltern voices in this book. *A Thing to Leave Behind*, a historical book by Namita Gokhale, was released in 2016. It was a time when the range of genres represented in Indian writing written in English increased, including fiction, classics, and thrillers. The third volume of Gokhale's "Himalayan Trilogy" is the novel. *A Himalayan Love Story* is the first novel in the trilogy, and *The Book of Shadows* is the second.

In *Things to Leave Behind*, Gokhale transports the readers into the mountains of Kumaon during the British Raj. Each sentence carries with it the whiff of fresh mountain air, the colorful flutter of the Pichola, and the nostalgia for a bygone age. It is a journey into the heart of the Himalayas, a journey of remembrance and forgetting. Set in the pre-independence era between 1840-1912 timeline, the book portrays the impact of changing

political and social structures on the character's life. The author weaved a story with the characters who evolved, survived and broke against the double standard of society and the deeply rooted caste system and gender issues. The novel includes generations of women in the Kumaon region during the British Raj.

The voice of the subaltern refers to the perspectives and experiences of marginalized or oppressed groups not represented in mainstream narratives and discourse. Throughout the novel, experiences and struggles are portrayed through different characters, highlighting how caste, class, and gender perpetuate social inequality and reinforce the subaltern status of those who belong to the marginalized group. The novel highlights discrimination through various characters and gives voice to a group often silenced and overlooked in Indian society. The novel sheds light on the complex and interconnected ways caste, class, and gender intersect and interact to produce social inequality. The portrayal of Tilotamma's experiences highlights the importance of giving voice to the subaltern and the need to challenge and dismantle the structures of oppression and inequality that sustain the subaltern condition.

In this book, Gokhale illustrates the many sufferings of subalterns. In the story, however, Tilotama Uprety belongs to an upper-class Brahmin family, yet she suffers in one way or the other due to her gender. According to Spivak, the notion of the subaltern does not only include ethnic minorities or people from lower social groups.:

Simply by being postcolonial or a member of an ethnic minority, we are not "subaltern." That word is reserved for the sheer heterogeneity of decolonized space. (Spivak, 2207)

This concept argues that simply being a postcolonial subject is insufficient to be considered a subaltern. The condition encompasses anyone of any caste, class, or gender who is mistreated and cannot speak for himself/herself as a subaltern.

India's sociocultural environment has always been strongly influenced by caste and religion. Indian civilization had a robust caste system and other structures of superior intricacy, so it was not just the British that regarded Indians as untouchable. In this book, Namita Gokhale has chronicled several traditions that Brahmin households of the time practiced. The division of the kitchen from the rest of the house, the restrictions that must be observed when cooking, the restriction that women may not wander the marketplaces, and measures to even avoid the shadows of people from the lower castes are all examples of the split that exists in Indian culture. As Gokhale mentions:

Almora nurtured a complicated stepladder of caste and class: the long-dhoti and the short-dhoti Brahmins, warrior-caste, Rajputs and Thakurs, trader-caste Sahs, the artisan castes of the Shilpkars and Tamtas. The Doms, or outcastes, had their specified place in the scheme of things. (Gokhale,28)

The British had assimilated into this system made by the Indians and made a sub-caste of their own with their mysterious ways and customs.

The Upper Mall Road was meant to accommodate the Europeans, their wives, their children, and their horses, and the Lower Mall Road was for dogs, servants, and other Indians, both circling the lake. (Gokhale,32)

Indians have lived with the constraints of the caste system from time immemorial, and in nineteenth-century Kumaon, the divides and rituals were etched in stone. As we all know, society's rules are intended to mold everyone into the same mold. Individual wants and desires are given little consideration merely because society refuses to admit that the principles of physical attraction are never dictated by logic. Nonetheless, there have been those who have ventured to forge their paths. Tillotama, the matriarch, stands tall among them. Tilottama grew into a furious and influential figure. She sought consolation in reading and educated herself, which helped her maintain excellent mental health despite adversity. A well-educated woman, as they say, questions societal standards; Tilottama did the same; while being a devout woman who was never afraid to criticize superstitions. Her uncle Badri Dutt Uprety was executed for his involvement in the 1857 mutiny; therefore, she grew up with a rebellious streak. His whispered advice has left an indelible imprint: 'Never be afraid, and do what you want. Not what you like, but what you want.'. Tilottama heeds this counsel and extends her never-say-die attitude to her daughter Deoki. Mother and daughter attack Rosemary's beautiful Eden Ashram with vigor when Deoki's husband, Jayesh Pant, falls in love with the blue-eyed Rosemary Boden, the daughter of a missionary, and converts to Christianity. The *ménage à quatre* that develops with the arrival of the painter William Dempster is handled with remarkable grace and comedy, and Deoki finds sexual pleasure in this unexpected place.

Whether it is Tillotama Uprety's mother, Durga, who threw herself into the lake and committed suicide or her daughter Deoki, whom she neglects while reading novels and imagining herself as a *sahib*; Deoki, who is married off to Jayesh, who falls in love with the missionary's daughter Rosemary, and then Deoki determinedly sets about to win him back, but also in the meantime discovers how seductive she can be when she falls in love with a visiting artist who paints her in the nude; Rosemary, who single-handedly sets up her mission and displays fortitude at not falling into sin with Jayesh, the married man who shares her feelings — the novel displays women's agency, their emergence into their self, even as societal mores bind them. The work explores the flaws in the caste system, successful and unsuccessful marriages caused by imperialist desires, and the transition from imperialistic allure to nationalist consciousness.

There is no categorization even though there are several women characters in this novel, including Durga, Tillotama, Saruli, Deoki, and Rosemary. Therefore, it cannot be said that Deoki and Durga are immoral while Rosemary and Tillotama are moral. Instead, everyone possesses these qualities of purported virtue and vice, knowledge, and restraint. They all encounter the mechanics of desire and the tension between modernity and tradition, and each reacts in a very particular way. Though odd and inquisitive, Tillotama never becomes hysterical. Deoki is a devoted wife, but she is also the only one to indulge her cravings

openly. Rosemary is stern and ethically upright yet steadfastly impartial. All these women have quiet dignity and agency, and even when they come from a place of great oppression, they are still shown to be their masters. The story is looking in a feminine direction. When applying the idea of the subaltern, one question is inevitably raised: Can the subaltern speak? Based on the writings of Namita Gokhale, we can affirm that the subaltern does speak.

Conclusion

In her book *Things to Leave Behind*, Namita Gokhale recounts the struggle of women as subalterns. The research shows that Gokhale has examined subaltern women's exploitation from political, historical, and sociological angles, notably in rural settings of society. When a subaltern tries to speak up, she is silenced no matter what, as shown by the many overbearing masters and social structures, according to a close reading of the text.

A thing to Leave Behind purports to depict the intolerable circumstances of the subaltern. The primary goal of this study is to examine how marginalized individuals are portrayed. The development of the word "subaltern" and how subalterns are faring in this developed and globalized society are also examined in this study. It is evident from how the "subaltern" is portrayed that little has changed in their situation. They were the victims of colonialism during the colonial era and are Today the victims of a subtle and long-lasting social cycle of dominance governed by socialized capitalism. Most characters in *Things to Leave Behind* may be classified as subalterns in terms of gender, caste, and class.

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