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**Gendered Violence, Subaltern Silence, and Feminist Resistance in V. Balakrishnan's *God's Will***

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**Abstract**

This paper explores V. Balakrishnan's *God's Will* using the dual paradigms of feminist theory and subaltern studies to address the economic-political underpinnings of gendered violence, institutional complicity, and the effects of silencing and refusal of representation. The play, which concerns the murder of a young girl after an incident of sexual harassment on a private bus, demonstrates how patriarchal violence is not the exclusive product of individual actors, but is enabled by broader social, political and institutional structures of hierarchy, power and complicity. The story prioritises the perspectives of Dheera, the dead girl's mother, whose pursuit of justice emerges as an important mode of resistance to both public violence and private control. Her rejection of compensation, her call for remembering, acknowledging, and suing the perpetrators upends the normative roles of women and, in particular, those from financially poor backgrounds.

The paper acknowledges Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of women's social status as "the Other"; Judith Butler's conceptualisation of gender as performative and governed; and Kate Millet's understanding of patriarchy as a political system, to show how the play draws attention to the gendered nature of power. Concurrently, the paper draws on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critique of subalternity and representation to demonstrate that, despite her power, Dheera's speech is interpreted, constrained, and edited by the state, the law, and patriarchal family relations. Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony also helps to explain how social order is produced through consent, coercion and persuasion. The paper concludes that *God's Will* ultimately offers a damning indictment of the systemic factors that render women vulnerable to violence while stifling their access to justice, speech, and agency. At the same time, the play not only retains the minimal but vital resistance to this silencing in the face of power.

**Keyword:** Gendered violence; patriarchy; subaltern studies; V. Balakrishnan; *God's Will*

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**Introduction**

V. Balakrishnan's *God's Will* emerges from a contemporary Indian theatrical tradition that blends social realism with political critique, often foregrounding the lived experiences of marginalized communities within oppressive institutional frameworks. It offers a haunting and unsettling depiction of sexual violence and institutional injustice in modern society. Like the works of playwrights associated with political theatre movements in India, Balakrishnan's dramaturgy resists spectacle and instead relies on the slow unfolding of ethical conflict, institutional coercion, and emotional fragmentation.

The play is set around the death of a young girl who is sexually molested and pushed from a moving bus, and the subsequent struggle of her parents (Dheera and Satya) to seek justice within an inherently fractured system. At the individual level, the story of grief, loss, and ethical dilemmas unfolds in a personal context; however, at the societal level, the play exposes underlying structures of patriarchy, social complacency and complicity at a level of state and administration, that normalise violence and suppress resistance.

Ultimately, the play interrogates the circumstances under which women's bodies are made vulnerable, and their voices are systematically ignored. The public nature of this violence, the apathy of passers-by and the coerciveness of legal and political systems, reveal and show a society in which gendered violence is pervasive and normalised. Feminist theory offers an essential framework for understanding these observations, particularly with regard to the ways in which women's agency, mobility and subjectivities are regulated by patriarchy. At the same time, the play invites engagement with subaltern studies, as it highlights the challenges of raising marginal voices within dominant structures that continuously mediate and distort them.

Dheera's character stands out as a central site of resistance in this context. Her refusal to accept the compensation and demand for justice resists the ideological and material attempts that seek to silence her. Nonetheless, her eventual manipulation into meekness demonstrates the constraints on such resistance in a system aimed at neutralizing dissent. The tension between her defiance and her silencing simultaneously invites questions about the possibility of agency under conditions of oppression.

In this paper, we examine how *God's Will* illustrates the role of patriarchal and state violence in silencing subaltern women's voices, while simultaneously exposing the tenuous and constrained position of feminist resistance. Through the intersection of feminist and subaltern theoretical frames of analysis, the paper demonstrates that the play *God's Will* is not just a dramatisation of personal tragedy but a striking critique of the

conditions that determine voice, agency and justice in the modern world.

### **Feminist Analysis: Gendered Violence and Patriarchal Power**

A feminist reading of V. Balakrishnan's *God's Will* reveals how deeply entrenched patriarchal structures operate to control the experiences, bodies and voices of women within the narrative. The text illustrates not just direct references to sexual violence, but also the systems of ideas that justify such violence, and constrain women's power. The play's narrative of Dheera and her daughter highlights how physical and symbolic levels of gender oppression intersect, creating an echo to major feminist theorists.

Most obviously, the play demonstrates that the body is the site of patriarchal oppression and violence. The assault on the bus in which Dheera and her daughter are "subject to verbal abuse, sexually harassed and groped" exemplifies what Kate Millett identifies as the political function of patriarchy—where power is exercised through the control and violation of female bodies (Millett 23–24). In *Sexual Politics*, Millett suggests that patriarchy is perpetuated by the oppression of women often through sexual passivity and violence. The violence in the play, therefore, is not one random act of individual violence, but part of a systemic mechanism used in the assertion of male power through the sexual violation of women. The violation of women in public spaces (for example, it happens on a bus with a passenger audience) highlights its normalisation within society.

This aspect is also reinforced by the treatment of public space as masculinised and hostile to women. The space of the bus, ostensibly a neutral and shared space, becomes a place where gender roles and hierarchies are acted out with impunity. The limitations on women's mobility and behaviour to prevent violence, discount the role of women in asserting their rights and highlight Beauvoir's notion of woman as socially produced within restrictive norms. Satya, in the play, exemplifies this as his victim-blaming attitude asserts that the circumstances leading to the incident could have been avoided. Satya says, "Why step out of the house after dark? Why step out of the house at all? Don't I earn us food? That day I told you not to go out in the evening... You dragged the children with you... My daughter was sacrificed. How many times have I told you not to fight with men? Keep yourself covered... keep our daughter covered" (Balakrishnan 54, scene 6). Such logic exemplifies patriarchal reasoning that transfers blame from the perpetrators to the victims, thus perpetuating gender inequality.

Further, the play illustrates how patriarchal control is maintained not only through physical violence, but also through internalised beliefs and familial dynamics. Satya's transformation from a grieving father to a pragmatic figure who advocates for compromise with his wife Dheera illustrates how patriarchal values play out in the family. His

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acceptance of compensation is not merely pragmatic but reflects what Antonio Gramsci describes as “consensual domination,” where individuals align with oppressive systems due to lack of viable alternatives (Gramsci 145). This choice of favouring family survival over justice is underpinned by socio-economic constraints, but it also reaffirms a gendered belief that women's suffering can be negotiated or silenced for the sake of family unity. This resonates with Millett's view that patriarchy is deeply embedded in social structures, such as the family, which normalise and perpetuate these power relations.

In contrast to Satya, Dheera emerges as a figure of resistance who resists and challenges these patriarchal structures. Her rejection of the minister's offer of compensation and her insistence on justice, place her as a subject who resists both ideological and material pressures. Her poignant question, “what kind of compensation can be paid for negating one's memories...” underscores her opposition to the commodification of female suffering (Balakrishnan 49, scene 5). This act of resistance can be understood through the lens of Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. Butler defines gender as constituted through repeated acts that conform to the gendered norms of the world. Dheera's refusal to act in accordance with the role of the obedient subservient wife and a grieving compliant mother challenges the performance of the subservient woman in the face of tragedy; rather than being silent or obeying the patriarchy, she asserts her agency and demands accountability for her daughter's death. And in so doing, she exposes the constructed nature of gender roles and challenges the norms that seek to confine her by going to the police station to record her statement

However, the play also shows the limitations of such resistance within a rigidly patriarchal system. Despite Dheera's determination to get justice for her daughter, she is ultimately isolated and coerced into submission. Her forced submission in the courtroom, where she recites "rehearsed statements", symbolises the dismissal of her voice and the reassertion of patriarchal power. This trajectory of Dheera outlines the tensions between individual resistance and the dominant structural powers, suggesting that while feminist resistance is possible, it can be undermined by institutional structures that perpetuate gender hierarchies.

The play also highlights the role of social complicity in maintaining gendered violence, another integral element in perpetuating gendered violence. The apathy of bus passengers, who “remain entirely indifferent... continue watching the onboard television,” while Dheera and her daughter are harassed, mirrors a societal desensitisation to the plight of women. This indifference can be seen as a form of passive participation in patriarchal violence, in which silence and inaction allow abuse to continue. Feminist theory has rightly

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emphasised the role of cultural attitudes in sustaining oppressive practices, and the play vividly illustrates the impact of this indifference in marginalising women's experiences.

Furthermore, the differential treatment of male and female bodies within the same incident underscores the gendered nature of violence. Although Dheera and her daughter experience sexual harassment and physical abuse, the son, although there, is not targeted in the same way; rather, he is asked to get down after a few metres. This disparity highlights the way women's bodies are specifically targeted and objectified as potential targets in patriarchal settings. The violence that they suffer is not random but part of a system that objectifies and devalues women.

In this context, the play also critiques the socio-political environment that reinforces gender inequality. The participation of political and law enforcement agencies in repressing justice reflects how patriarchal power is institutionalised. The policewoman's advice to Dheera, "justice is not the best option here. Cremate her and let things be amicable" (Balakrishnan 16, scene 1) reflects how systemic structures favour social harmony over women's rights and dignity. Such attitudes reveal the complicity between patriarchy and state power in regulating and subjugating women's agency.

In the end, *God's Will* offers a powerful feminist critique of a world where gendered violence is normalised, resistance is contained and justice is systematically denied. Through its portrayal of Dheera's struggle, the play draws attention to the possibilities as well as the constraints of feminist agency within oppressive structures. Through the work of Beauvoir, Butler, and Millett, it is clear that the narrative not only highlights incidents of violence but also the ideological, political and institutional structures which underpin them. The play thus compels readers to reflect on the impact of patriarchy and the need to challenge the social structures that maintain gender inequality.

### **Subaltern Studies: Expression, Suppression and Power**

The play also invites a reading through the lens of subaltern studies, as it portrays marginalised voices struggling to be heard within dominant power structures. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal question, "Can the subaltern speak?" becomes pertinent in the narrative. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's assertion that the subaltern cannot speak within dominant structures without being mediated (Spivak 283). Dheera occupies a subaltern position as a lower-class woman and, while attempting to voice her demands for justice, her voice is systematically mediated, distorted and ultimately silenced by institutions like the police, the judiciary and the political system. She is forced to convert her testimony into a "rehearsed statement" exemplifying how subaltern speech is appropriated and neutralised within hegemonic discourse. This also aligns with Antonio Gramsci's concept of

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hegemony, where Power is maintained not solely through coercion but through the normalization of consent (Gramsci 12–13).

A subaltern analysis of V. Balakrishnan's play *God's Will* illustrates how dominant social and political structures consistently silence marginalised individuals and deny them voice, agency and justice. This isn't merely a story about the struggles of a lower-class family, but also an exploration of how power works to control and suppress subaltern voices. Satya fears for the reputation of his dead daughter and his wife. He is aware that the public and the minister in power can concoct an alternative story about what happened; portraying his daughter and wife as prostitutes on the bus and when confronted by the bus staff they tried to escape by jumping from the moving bus. Through Dheera and her family's struggles, the narrative illustrates the complex dynamics concerning voice and representation which are central to subaltern studies.

At the core of this approach is Spivak's contention in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in which she posits the idea that the subaltern can not speak within dominant systems - not because of literal muteness, but because of the structural impossibility of being heard on their own terms. This is key to Dheera's experience in the play. As a lower-class woman, she is doubly marginalised, both economically and socially and occupies a subaltern position. Her voice to demand justice is constantly filtered, twisted and ultimately denied by institutional processes. While Dheera initially speaks out against the offenders, her voice is subsequently turned into "rehearsed statements", crafted by those in power. This shift illustrates Spivak's point that subaltern speech is often appropriated and rearticulated in hegemonic terms, thus losing its truth and efficacy.

Silencing of Dheera's voice is not just an individual issue but this is a systemic issue. The political and judicial institutions responsible for upholding the law and justice function as tools of oppression. The police, rather than being allies of the oppressed, also actively participate in suppressing and silencing Dheera. The police officer's response that "justice is not the best option" represents the extent to which the police officers align with dominant power structures. This resonates with Gramsci's concept of hegemony in which power is exercised not only through coercion but also through the consent and complicity of those within the system. As discussed in *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci stresses that for hegemonic control to function, a certain set of beliefs is made to appear as common sense, creating a passive acceptance of social inequality and an apathy towards its challenges. In the play, the multitude of references to compromise and "settlement" is emblematic of this ideological education, the pursuit of justice is constructed as impractical or even dangerous.

The theme of subaltern invisibility is also reinforced by the reaction (or absence of

reaction) of the public. The bus passengers, who “remain entirely indifferent...continue watching the onboard television” act as a powerful metaphor showing public indifference. The apathy of the passengers stresses the invisibility of subaltern suffering in the public sphere. This is not an accidental indifference, but created by a social order that devalues the lives of marginalised individuals. The old woman insightfully comments on Dheera’s condition and says, “There are too many of us... to be counted and accounted for... too many... too many of us to be taken care of... What balance of this world gets tipped if a lamb is slaughtered? It’s only food... Only the killing of a tiger will catch the attention of everyone... from poets to politicians... We are worse... too many in number... living in squalor... there to be fed upon... left to rot... to die in oblivion. Now, you have a chance... a chance to escape all this...” (Balakrishnan 60, scene 7). This dialogue captures the condition and invisibility of the poor. Her metaphor comparing the killing of a tiger and a lamb demonstrates the result of the unequal valuation of lives, where the plight of the poor is normalised and overlooked.

Another key element of subalternity in the play is the role of economic vulnerability in shaping the family’s choices. The gifts from the minister, including money, a job, land and the symbolic statue, function as mechanisms of control rather than restitution. When the minister’s wife says, "It's not about whether you agree or not... it's about whether you agree with all the gifts we are offering you," she highlights the coercive aspect of this transaction. For the subaltern, whose existence is marked by precarity, such offers are hard to resist. This exchange demonstrates the way material needs limit the agency of people and compel them to act in accordance with established power relations. In this context Satya's final acceptance of the compensation does not point to immorality but a response to structural injustice. His fear that "those men will go free and then they will come for us" indicates his understanding and awareness of the risks associated with confronting power.

The judicial system portrayed in the play also highlights the structural barriers faced by subaltern subjects. The courtroom is not a space for truth and justice but for manipulation and injustice. Dheera's forced statement in which she is made to retract her previous statements, and even feign mental instability as advised by the minister’s assistant, shows how the legal system is used as a weapon against the subjects that it claims to protect. This distortion of truth resonates with Spivak's assertion that subaltern experiences are mediated through dominant epistemologies, leading to their distortion or deletion. The insistence on Dheera feigning insanity to invalidate her own claims is especially noteworthy as it not only silences her voice, but also delegitimises her as a

rational subject who is unable to articulate her experiences.

The drama also showcases the role of political power in perpetuating the subaltern marginalisation. The minister and his representatives, who are directly implicated in the incident, exploit their power to absolve themselves from the responsibility and construct an alternate narrative that exonerates them. Their theatrics of sympathy, which include arranging a staged visit to Dheera's house and having food with the family, all act as a mask to cover up the underlying reality of exploitation and oppression. This performance of benevolence can be seen as an attempt to control them ideologically which is used as a means to retain the public trust for the upcoming elections while suppressing dissent. In Gramscian terms, it represents attempts to maintain hegemony by portraying the ruling class as good and benevolent while it engages in oppressive practices.

Moreover, the minister's wife reframes the accident as "God's will" adding another layer to the discourse of subalternity. She says, "When this whole tragedy occurred... I was greatly upset. Then I went to the temple and prayed and meditated... I came back and told my husband with resolve, whatever happened was God's will..." (Balakrishnan 44, scene 5). By attributing the incident to "God's will" she effectively removes the incident from human accountability, thus reinforcing the status quo. This rhetorical strategy aligns with hegemonic practices, which seek to normalise and legitimise inequality by framing it as natural or preordained by God. For the subaltern subjects, such narratives can be particularly disheartening, as they discourage resistance and promote acceptance of suffering.

In conclusion, *God's Will* offers a nuanced and critical representation of the subaltern life in an unjust and corrupt world. Dheera's struggle is a representation of how marginal individuals are prevented from being heard and thus they are unable to achieve justice. Through an examination of the ideas put forward by Spivak and Gramsci, it is clear that the narrative is not only about individual suffering but also about the systematic powers that create and sustain subalternity. Therefore, the play challenges readers to reflect on the nature of power, representation and silence, and on the mechanisms that persistently marginalise and exclude the most vulnerable members of society.

#### **Dheera vs. Satya: The Ethics of Difference, Gendered Power, and Systemic Limits**

In V. Balakrishnan's *God's Will*, the central tensions of ethics and emotions are embodied in the conflict between Dheera and Satya, whose differing approaches to coping with their daughter's death reflect not just their individual personalities but also the broader pressures of gender, class, and institutional power. The play depicts the relationship between them as one that is complicated by the tensions between survival and resistance in a structurally

unequal system.

Dheera is a resistance figure, committed to the cause of justice and memorialisation. Her rejection of the minister's compensation emphasizes the idea that justice is more than economic. The question, "What compensation can negate memory" reflects a deep moral rejection of the monetisation of life. The conflict between Dheera and Satya can be read as a clash between performative resistance and hegemonic accommodation. Dheera's refusal to accept compensation represents a refusal to participate in what Kate Millett would identify as the transactional logic of patriarchy, where women's suffering is commodified (Millett 58). In this regard, Dheera's stance coincides with feminist claims to power in that women must resist the forces that aim to silence and objectify them. Butler's concept of performativity suggests that gender is not a fixed identity but a series of repeated acts that produce the illusion of stability (Butler 191). Dheera's failure to fulfil her position as the compliant grieving mother is a disruption of this kind, and positions her as a subject of resistance to patriarchal power.

At the same time, Dheera's story can be seen through the prism of subalternity. Her lower-class status greatly limits her power to challenge and sustain resistance due to the unsupportive institutional framework and the overwhelming power of the political and legal structures. Her eventual coercion into reciting a "rehearsed statement" in court exemplifies the limitations of her power, as posited by Spivak that the voice of a subaltern is mediated and eventually, monopolised by the dominant. Dheera's resistance, while noble, is undercut by the combined pressures of institutional coercion and social ostracism.

In contrast, Satya's trajectory depicts a transition from idealism to realism. He starts on the same path as Dheera in pursuit of justice, over the course of the play, he exhibits acute awareness of the dangers posed by opposing those in power. His statement, "those men will go free and then they will come for us" shows his fear, founded in the complexities of economic inequality. Satya's motivations are also distinct from Dheera's; his actions are motivated by his role as the family's protector. This role affects his choices, as he seeks to ensure the safety and well-being of his remaining family members over the pursuit of justice.

Satya's attitude also demonstrates the internalisation of hegemonic norms as outlined by Gramsci. His willingness to accept the minister's compensation is an example of consent in a system that restricts options and justifies compromise. In this sense, his actions are not merely a testament to his moral weakness but rather are dictated by the systems that limit his agency. Therefore, the play refuses to present Satya as a villainous character; rather it presents him as one trapped within a system that compels people to

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make impossible decisions.

The tensions between Dheera and Satya are also complicated by patriarchal attitudes toward women. Satya's tendency to blame Dheera implies that the incident could have been prevented had she not stepped out of the house at odd hours, which reflects the victim-blaming attitude. This view shifts blame away from the perpetrators and onto the victim, reinforcing gendered norms which restrict women's behaviour and mobility. As Simone de Beauvoir notes, women are often positioned as women are often constructed as "the Other," whose actions are subject to scrutiny and control (Beauvoir 26). Satya's comments exemplify this point, uncovering how patriarchy works not only at the institutional level but also in households.

Though Dheera and Satya are different, they are both products of the same oppressive system. Dheera's act of defiance illustrates the possibility for moral resistance but Satya's pragmatism demonstrates the socio-economic constraints faced by the marginalised. So, their conflict is not just a personal disagreement but a reflection of the larger conflict between justice and survival, agency and constraint, defiance and resignation.

The playwright's refusal to side with either character is noteworthy. By depicting Dheera and Satya as multifaceted characters, it challenges the simplistic idea of black-and-white morality and offers an insight into the systemic factors that contribute to human behaviour. Their struggle demonstrates that in a society marked by inequality and corruption, the quest for justice comes at a profound personal cost, and survival of the subaltern subjects often demands moral compromises.

In conclusion, the tension between Dheera and Satya exemplifies a microcosm of the larger dynamics at play in *God's Will*. In their different responses, the play examines the contradictions of gender, class and power, and how individuals respond to the pressures of an unjust system. Through the lens of the theoretical insights of Butler, Spivak, Beauvoir and Gramsci, it is clear that the conflict between Dheera and Satya is not just about their personal choice, but is about structural conditions that limit and define their lives.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, in *God's Will*, V. Balakrishnan provides a powerful exploration of the intersections of patriarchal violence and institutional power in the silencing of subaltern women. It functions as a critical intervention in contemporary debates on gendered violence, justice, and representation. The play does not simply depict injustice; it exposes the structural conditions that make justice nearly unattainable for marginalized women. By bringing together feminist theory and subaltern studies, it reveals that violence operates not

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only through physical acts but through epistemic control, institutional mediation, and ideological normalization.

The play's most significant intervention lies in its refusal to offer resolution. Dheera's silencing is not presented as closure but as indictment. Through her failed resistance, the play forces audiences to confront the limits of existing legal and social frameworks. In this sense, *God's Will* aligns with politically engaged theatre traditions that seek not to comfort but to unsettle, transforming spectators into critical witnesses.

At the same time, the play insists on the importance of resistance, however fragile. Dheera's defiance, though ultimately contained, disrupts the illusion of inevitability that sustains hegemonic power. Her insistence on memory—on refusing to forget—becomes a form of political resistance that exceeds institutional boundaries.

Thus, *God's Will* does more than represent gendered injustice; it interrogates the very possibility of justice within a system structured to deny it. Its intervention lies in exposing this contradiction and compelling audiences to recognize that the struggle for voice, agency, and accountability must extend beyond the stage into broader social and political action.

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