Chapter I

Introduction: On Theorizing the Subaltern

In Dalit Writings at least two different modes of narratives can be broadly identified - writings of the Dalit writer as an “insider” writing about the Dalit subject and the non-Dalit “outsider’s” discourse about the Dalit subject. The former may be classified as ‘Dalit’ and the latter ‘Dalitist’. It is indispensable to analyse how these divergent categories narrativize, textualize and problematise the subjectivity of the caste subaltern in order to understand the politics involved in the representation of the subaltern. This would enable one to identify those problematic representations that tend to misappropriate the voice and agency of the caste subaltern and gendered caste subaltern. The works that represent the socio-cultural margins of caste in various Indian languages, particularly Hindi, English, Bengali, Malayalam, Marati, Kannada and Tamil adequately posit these divergent concerns of the subaltern.

Jacques Derrida in *The Truth in Painting* emphasizes the multiple possibilities of presentation and representation (6). The act of representation is a complex process that involves the mediation of a subject in a given socio-cultural and historic context. It is not neutral and transparent but highly complex and contextual. It articulates the conflicts of subjectivity in particular discursive contexts of history under the influence of ideological formations and material reality. The analysis of the problem of representation and the issue of appropriation in representation opens up a wide range of new
problems and possibilities. It is important to analyse issues such as the socio-political and cultural implications and underpinnings of the representation of marginalization in narrative, the politics, ethics and aesthetics of such narratives and their subversive, consensual or complicitous nature.

Hindu society constructed the Dalit subaltern as its “Other.” It has always followed a policy of exclusion with regard to the representation of the voice of this subaltern “Other,” corresponding to their social exclusion by treating them “untouchables.” As opposed to classical literature, modern and contemporary writings follow a strategy of containment. Thus, the untouchables even when they appear in non-Dalit writings are still denied their voice, as they are not assigned any subject position. Dalit characters are not represented as speaking subjects in non-Dalit writings. Rather than subjects, they emerge as objects of representation. In this way, the Dalit subaltern is denied voice and agency in narrative. This calls for problematising those elite narratives that deny the Dalit subaltern its subjectivity in order to demonstrate how Dalit voice gets appropriated through their representations. Simultaneously it is crucial to show how through Dalit Literature the Dalit subaltern find their due voice and agency.

The concept of Subalternity has disturbed the doctrinal boundaries of contemporary discourses. The epistemic boundaries of various fields and disciplines such as Marxism, Feminism, Cultural Studies, Anthropology, Political Science, History, Media, Cinema and Literature are being radically
redrawn. The subaltern as a referent for the marginalized masses in history took its distinctive origin from Antonio Gramsci and the then political situation in Italy. As a theoretical venture, Subaltern Studies revises and extends the Marxian proletarian discourse as well as strengthen its positions based on poststructuralist concept of “difference.” This inbuilt dichotomous dimension enables Subaltern Studies to deconstruct all dominant discourses.

The Saidian notion of how colonial discourses of Orientalism helped the European colonial powers to establish their control over the Orient is parallel to the Gramscian view of how the dominant classes establish their hegemony over the subaltern classes. Edward Said draws on Gramscian notion of “hegemony” and Foucauldian notion of “discourse” in explicating how the “Orient” is constructed in the imagination of the West (Orientalism, 2-4). In a similar vein, the subaltern historians in India attempted to rewrite the elite versions of Indian historiography, giving the subaltern agency its own space, doing away with all misrepresentations. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has questioned this theoretical venture of the Subaltern Historians in the context of the problem of representing the voice of the gendered subaltern. These theoretical perspectives are tremendously usable in the study of the representation of marginality in regional narratives.

It is Gramsci’s accounts of the rural peasantry in the Italian history that has given the theoretical impetus for the subaltern historians in India to recover and rewrite the Indian history from the perspective of the peasant
insurgency and the subaltern resistance movements. The Subaltern Studies Collective tries to reclaim the Indian national history from the perspective of the people rather than from the viewpoint of the State. According to them, the national history is produced from the bourgeois perspectives with the elitist intentions and interests. In this context, Ranajit Guha in his article “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India” observes:

The historiography of Indian nationalism has long been dominated by elitism and bourgeois nationalist elitism. Both originated as the ideological product of British rule in India, but have survived the transfer of power and have been assimilated to neo-colonialist and neo-nationalist forms of discourse in Britain and India respectively. (Guha, I)

Elitism just as in History is also identifiable in Dalitist cultural representations. In this context, Sivkami, a Dalit feminist writer in Tamil, comments: “Non-Dalit writers emerge as self-styled autocrats passing adverse judgments on Dalit life, or they use Dalits as toys to tickle a few strange nerves of their regular readers. Else, they like to play the role of saviors; though in reality they are not” (Anand, 25).

The purpose of both the colonial and the bourgeois intervention in history, according to Guha, was the subordination of the lives and the role of the political agencies of the rural peasantry in the national history of the nation. The bourgeois elites in particular subordinated the localized
resistance of the peasants to the larger national project of decolonization. In both the colonial and the bourgeois historical representations, the complex social and political histories of the subalterns in India are not adequately recognized. Guha while delineating the trajectory of the Subaltern Studies clearly brings out the ideological character and the unhistoricality of the bourgeois history.

Subaltern Studies as a theoretical programme, based on Gramsci’s views, has reacted against and extended the field of Marxist Theory. The theory of Marxism is based on Marx’s reading of the development of capitalism in the Nineteenth century Europe. Hence, Marxism has been unable to theorize the exploitative relations in other social contexts. Gramsci also criticizes the classical Marxist thinking that culture and ideology are extensions and reflections of the economic reality. He disagrees with the Marxist approach to historicize reality solely based on the nature of economic production and class difference in society.

In Gramsci’s perspective, capitalism sustains its exploitation of the subaltern through the hegemony of culture. He also emphasizes the fact that the nature and structure of the subaltern consciousness vary from one social context to another, owing to the difference in their experience of capitalist exploitation and the subaltern responses to it. Frantz Fanon too has elaborated this point in *The Wretched of the Earth*, where he states that racial difference has intensifies capitalist exploitation in colonial situations:
“Economic reality, inequality and the immense difference of ways of life never come to mask the human realities. When you examine at close quarters the colonial contexts, what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging or not belonging to a given race” (40). He rejects class system, which he feels is an alien system that includes only the working class. The “the starving peasants” who constitute the bulk of the population, according to Fanon, remain “outside the class system” (61).

Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian constitution, rejects the class-based approach of Marxists in India as he believes that in the specific Indian context “caste,” and not “class,” is responsible for the Dalits’ marginalization and exploitation in the society (Dalits and the Democratic Revolution, 169). In fact, as Arundhati Roy observes, Marxism failed to address the issue of caste in the Indian society because of its alliance with Brahminism:

The real secret was that communism crept into Kerala insidiously as a reformist movement that overtly questioned the traditional values of a caste ridden, extremely traditional community. The Marxists worked from within the communal divides, never challenging them, never appearing not to. They offered a cocktail revolution. A heavy mix of Eastern Marxism and orthodox Hinduism, spiked with a shot of democracy. (36)
The reason for the cultural elitism of Marxism is the fact that it evolved as a logical extension of Humanist rationalism. Humanism as a western movement failed to uphold the dignity and worth of all human beings cutting across racial and cultural boundaries. Classical Marxism's valorization of the proletarian over the peasantry — the Gramscian subaltern — betrays its Humanist legacy.

Marx considered the European peasantry as backward, reactionary and having no "class-consciousness." Marx reflects in "Eighteenth Brumaire" that the French peasantry "fails to produce a feeling of community, national links or political organization; they do not form a class" (11). Responding to the question on the difference between the proletarian and the peasant, Marx and Engels in Communist Manifesto content that the peasant enjoys more freedom and security under feudal system compared to the industrial labourer who is impoverished and alienated under capitalism (86). Due to their privileged position, Marx contends that the peasantry is unlikely to develop revolutionary consciousness. This inherent bias of Marxism to the question of the marginalization of other non-working class groups is reflected in the policy and approach of the communists in India towards the caste subalternity of Dalits.

The contemporary Marxist exponents of Humanism such as Noam Chomsky, Frederic Jameson and Jurgen Habermas argue that Humanism holds out the possibility of conceptualization of a universal, progressive and
just social order based on rational thinking (Gandhi, 28). The poststructuralist and the postcolonial anti-Humanists, on the other hand, argue that any universal or normative postulation of rational unanimity is totalitarian and hostile to “difference” (Gandhi, 58). They contend that the very idea of rationality and human nature are historical constructs and hence open to challenge. Dalit thinkers demonstrate that Hinduism while upholding the essential oneness of all human beings, *Vasudeva Kudumbakam*, discriminates against the Dalits because of their caste difference.

The reason why the Gramscian theory of the subaltern is preferred to the Marxian proletarian discourse in the context of Dalits subalternity is the fact that Marxian concept of the proletarian excludes the socially and culturally underprivileged. According to Marx, only the working class can advance the cause of revolution. In other words, Marx idealizes the proletarian-working class. Opposing this view of the classical Marxists, Gramsci in *The Prison Notebooks* emphasizes the resistant nature of the subaltern consciousness. He holds that despite their being subjected to the hegemonic influence of the ruling classes; the peasants and other subaltern classes have retained their dynamic and revolutionary consciousness. Though he is aware of the limitations of the subaltern consciousness, as being inconsistent, fragmented and lacking in historic sense, he is nevertheless conscious of its insurgent spirit. Dalits in India while sharing in the social and economic backwardness of the subaltern classes have also been subjected
to caste discrimination, which deepened their experience of oppression. The disintegrated and subservient Dalit consciousness is also akin to the dynamic revolutionary resilience.

Said demonstrates through *Orientalism* how Gramsci’s analysis of the concepts of subalternity and hegemony as opposed to the Marxian class dialectics can come handy in the examination of the relations of domination and subordination in totally divergent political and cultural contexts. Said in criticizing Marxism shares the poststructuralist’s disbelief of universalizing grand narratives. With particular reference to the Palestinian situation, Said says that Marxism fails to accommodate the specific needs and experiences of the colonized subjects: “... the development of a theoretical Marxism in the Arab world did not seem to meet adequately the challenges of imperialism, the formation of nationalist elite, and the failure of the national revolution” (Sprinker, 261). Said seems to attribute the cultural inadequacy of Marxist theory to the blindness of Marx to the world outside Europe.

According to Said, the Marxist theories of socio-economic revolution are flawed from the perspective of the colonized world. This is because of the fact that the Marxian vision of progress is based primarily on the Nineteenth century assumptions of fundamental inequality between the West and the East that presupposes the superiority of the former over the latter (Said 14). It is obvious that, as Deepesh Chakrabarty elaborates, Marx had subscribed to the insidious logic of the colonial civilizing mission (29). It is because of this
inherent Eurocentric orientation of Marxism that it fails to address the problems of the culturally different subaltern groups like Dalits, Blacks, Aboriginals, tribals, ethnic communities, gender and linguistic minorities and other unorganized people in general.

Spivak prefers the model of the Gramscian subaltern to the Marxian proletarian as it provides more appropriate and flexible tools of analysis for the study of domination and subordination in power relations:

I like the word ‘subaltern’ for one reason. It is truly situational. ‘Subaltern’ began as a description of a certain rank in the military. The word was used under censorship by Gramsci: he called Marxism ‘monism,’ and was obliged to call the proletarian ‘subaltern.’ That word, used under duress, has been transformed into the description of everything that does not fall under strict class analysis. I like that, because it has no theoretical rigor. (Qtd. Stephen Morton, 46)

Ranajit Guha also finds the Gramscian concept of subaltern suitable in the context of South Asian history for studying “the entire people that is subordinate in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (Subaltern Studies 1, vii). This wide acceptance makes it inevitable to explore Gramscian arguments pertaining to subalternity, hegemony, and the role of intellectual further to highlight their aptness in the inquiry about Dalits social and cultural subalternity.
Although Gramsci, in the *Prison Notebooks*, uses the term “subaltern” as synonym for “proletarian,” he expands its scope by using it as a referent for any social groups, outside the established structures of political representation. With particular reference to the marginalized rural peasantry of southern Italy, he says that these subaltern groups have no social and political consciousness and is predisposed to the dominant ideology. According to Gramsci, in every class-divided society, the hegemonic and the subaltern classes are always in a state of conflict. Thus in a wider perspective, he uses the term subaltern to refer to the marginalized and oppressed groups anywhere in the world.

The bourgeoisie, Gramsci believes, enhances its power and control over the subaltern through the hegemony of culture, rather than through the exercise of repressive mechanism. Gramsci contrasts the rule by force (power) with the rule by consent (hegemony): the former is direct political control through coercive measures and the latter through the control and domination of culture. Thus in the Gramscian sense hegemony stands for a condition in which persuasion outweighs Coercion. Raymond Williams clearly defines Gramscian notion of cultural hegemony as “the whole lived social process as practically organized by specific and dominant meanings and values and believes of a kind which can be abstracted as a world view or class outlook” (101). The cultural hegemony legitimizes itself on self-certified notions of cultural refinement.
The Gramscian cultural hegemony gets a religious ratification in the ideology of caste system in India. The ancient Hindu texts like *Manusmriti* and *Dharam Sastras* played a vital role in legitimizing the cultural hegemony of Brahmanism. *Manusmriti* is the first document on jurisprudence in India. As a purist Manu sets up a caste based divine division of duties in order to sanctify the structural gradations that was in vogue in ancient India. Brahmins, the *Rig Veda* states, were created from the mouth of *Brahma*, the creator of the universe, *Kshatriyas* from his arms, and the *Vishyas* from his thighs. *Shudras* came, finally, from the feet for the subservient service of all other castes (Singh, 100).

The subaltern castes have been made to internalize this ideology of caste system through the innumerable tales of classical Indian literature and mythology. The religiously sanctioned cultural domination enabled the Brahmins to get the support of monarchy to enforce caste regulations in the society. The dissenting Dalit voices were silenced by physical coercion. The social, religious and political domination of the Brahmins in India extends further the Gramscian view that the hegemony of a social class manifests itself in two different ways: through domination and through intellectual and moral leadership:

... a class is dominant in two ways, i.e. 'leading' and 'dominant.' It leads the classes which are its allies, and dominates those which are its enemies...
a 'political hegemony' even before the attainment of government power, and one should not count solely on the power and material force which such a position gives in order to exercise political leadership or hegemony. (Gramsci, 55)

Kancha Ilaiah's views are relevant in this context. Ilaiah in *Why I am not Hindu* explains how Brahminism has sustained its dominance for centuries through various institutions. He remarks:

Through the ages, it has done this by two methods: (i) by creating a consent system which it maintains through various images of Gods and Goddesses, some of whom have been co-opted from the social base that it wanted to exploit; and (ii) when such consent failed or lost its grip on the masses, it took recourse to violence. In fact, violence has been Hinduism's principal mechanism of control. . . . Of course, one of the 'merits' of Hinduism has been that it addressed both the mind and the body of the oppressed. (71-72)

He further elaborates how the theoreticians of caste have worked out strategies to subject the subaltern consciousness to the consciousness of the Brahmins. They did this by teaching the subalterns a divine morality through the Hindu mythology. According to Ilaiah, the creation and perpetuation of Hindu mythology of Gods and Goddesses is a major achievement of Brahminism (72).
The cultural indoctrination of the subaltern to the ideology of the ruling class was counter productive to some extent. The structural resemblance of the subaltern cultural and religious practices to that of the elite is often deceptive of their subliminal voices of protest. The images, symbols, diction and tone of the subordinated castes spring from their centuries-old experience of exploitation and discrimination. Their apparent cultural integration has never led to a total assimilation and this in turn results in the production of the counter cultural formations. It is from these counter cultural formations, Gramsci argues, that the subaltern resistance finally takes its root (107). The deeply ingrained voices of defiance make Dalit Writings characteristically subversive of Brahminical cultural aesthetics.

In order to make it functional at the socio-political sphere, the subaltern cultural resistance has to come out of the accepted literary paradigms. They have to evolve their own cultural specific modes to register their subversive voices. The oral or folkloric tradition of Dalits, which includes their stories, epics and songs transmitted from generation to generation, gives a distinctive narrative aesthetic to Dalit writings. The oral narratives with their ahistorical continuity are capable of re-defining the present-day socio-political conditions from a Dalit perspective. In direct contrast to the Brahminical, Dalit response to life is more varied, flexible and open for modifications. The opposites lose their dogmatic divisions of right
and wrong, profound and profane, body and soul in a rather relative view of life.

Dalit literature is based on Dalit culture. It is marked by a rejection of the tradition, the aesthetics, the language and the concerns of a Brahminical literature. Brahminical literature carried within it the traces of the caste-based social and cultural order. Sharan Kumar Limbale in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* elaborates how Dalit Literature has formulated an alternative culture and aesthetics based on the tradition of the anti-caste ideology of Buddha, Kabir, Phule, Ambedkar and so on (40-59). Gunasekaran, a Dalit intellectual, playwright and critic in Tamil makes a strong plea for reclaiming all Dalit art forms. He distinguishes between classical arts and folk lore. “Dalit art forms,” he says, “do not depend on mainstream Hinduism, or on the Sanskrit Gods, the Puranic stories, nor the Sanskrit epics. They depend rather on local gods and heroes; they are closely linked to the performers’ mode of employment and production of goods” (Qtd. Holmstrom, xiv). The agenda he sets for Dalit writers is to “reclaim and to develop these art forms, retaining sharply and without compromising to maintain tastes, particular Dalit features of spectacle, mask, gesture and language” (xiv). This concept of Dalit culture sets up an alternate mode of classicism for the Dalit writer, a different poetics based on oral tradition.

This is similar to Fanon’s view expressed in *The Wretched of the Earth*, that native writers should revive native art and literary forms to offer a
counter cultural resistance to colonial culture. According to Fanon, the native intellectuals and writers should formulate a national literature that can positively contribute to nation’s ongoing struggle for decolonization. The literature thus created is a literature of combat. In this context, Fanon observes:

It is literature of combat, because it moulds the national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons; it is literature of combat because it assumes responsibility, and because it is the will to liberty expressed in terms of time and space. (193)

Cultural resistance also demands a radical revision of the dominant cultural formations. Dalit writers and critics constantly attempt to re-read the literary and religious artifacts of Hinduism. In *Why I am Not a Hindu*, Kancha Ilaiah re-examines the ancient texts of Hinduism and their cultural mythology to expose their in-built anti-Dalit polemic. Dalit writers use counter myths, heroic legends and narrative strategies to subvert the Hindu literary and cultural practices. In an attempt to construct a counter-discourse to the classical cultural forms, they disrupt the flow of language by incorporating folk and tribal narrative elements. In Bama’s *Sangati*, for instance, multiple voices from different strata of Dalit consciousness dispel the notion of a domineering narrative voice.
The Dalit religious experience fundamentally differs from that of the Brahmins. The cultural, economic and political ethos of Dalit gods and goddesses are, according to Kancha Ilaiah, different from Hindu hegemonic deities (91). Dalit Bahujan goddesses and gods are culturally rooted in various myths of production, protection and procreation. They do not distinguish between one section of society and the other as the Hindu gods and goddesses do. Rituals are simple and do not involve any economic waste. There is no distancing between Dalit Bahujan deities and the people as they can directly relate to them without any priestly mediation. Dalit Bahujan’s religious rituals are simple, the language is intelligible to all, and there are no slokas or mantras used.

The Dalit Bahujan’s tradition of gods and goddesses is diagonally opposite to the Brahminical tradition. In opposition to the dominant patriarchal gods, subordinated castes’ deities are predominantly female. Their traditional deities are localized and community-centric, as against the Hindu deities who are nationalized through classics: Ramayana and Mahabharata. Thus, Dalits have built up a parallel mythology of gods and goddesses to counter the oppressor’s tradition and mythology.

The cultural history of India is dotted with innumerable incidents of subordinated castes’ revolts against caste authority. Whenever they rebelled, the Brahminical authority invoked their gods to suppress the consciousness of the revolt. The clashes between Devas and Asuras were read as fights...
between Good and Evil by the upper-castes, Kancha Ilaiah argues that the Brahmins could succeed only to an extent in this attempt as multiple accounts of these stories are in vogue, especially in oral and folk narratives. Ambedkar translated these differing voices into a political movement, which came to be known in history as the Dalit Movement, where one finds a powerful and collective awakening of the consciousness of the subordinated castes against oppression and injustice.

The retrospective assertion of the identity of the subordinated castes happens in the wider context of the historical emergence of the subaltern. Taking forward the argument of Gramsci, that in every class divided society, there will be a division between the privileged and the subaltern classes, the subaltern historians speak of a central split in the political body of the nation. The nation is divided into two domains: the one occupied by the elites and the other by the subalterns. The first is a political domain characterized by citizenship, civic rights, liberty, security and social justice and can be called the mainstream. The other, situated outside the mainstream, is characterized by absence of all these and is marked by marginalization, struggle for existence, oppression and attempts for resistance. The latter has always been eclipsed by the former and is relegated to a marginalized position in the official discourses of the nation. In this regard Ranajit Guha states:

For parallel to the domain of elite politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics
in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the labouring population and intermediate strata in town and country—that is, the people. (Subaltern Studies 1, 4)

Thus according to Gramsci the politics of the people always existed as a counter discourse to elite politics in India.

Taking the cue from Gramsci, the Subaltern historians attempt to deconstruct the accepted trajectories of South Asian history from a subaltern perspective. As the official history of the state is the history of the dominant groups, Gramsci was interested in the historiography of the subaltern classes. He claims that the history of the subaltern classes is as complex as the history of the dominant classes, although it is the history of the latter that is being accepted as the official (52). In contrast to the elite historiography, the subaltern history is always fragmented and episodic due to the ambivalence in the subaltern consciousness with regard to the dominant culture. By privileging the latter, these historians, along with Gramsci, were trying to represent in history the voices of the subaltern hitherto unheard.

The subaltern historians argue that in the discourses of nationalism the role played by the subaltern has been down played. They are of the opinion that “the historiography of Indian nationalism has for long time been dominated by elitism — colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism.”
Both originated as the ideological product of British rule in India, but have survived the transfer of power and have been assimilated to neo-colonialist and neo-nationalist forms of discourse in Britain and India respectively" (Subaltern Studies 1, 1). According to Guha, both the varieties of elitist historiography—the neo-colonialist and the neo-bourgeois type—regard the making of the Indian nation as well as the consciousness of nationalism as the exclusive achievement of elitism. They are attributed either to the British culture or to the Indian elite personalities. The elite colonialist historiography describes Indian nationalism as a learning process. According to this view, that learning process enabled the native elites to get involved in politics and later in the cultural complexes of the various institutions of the colonialists.

In the opinion of Subaltern historians, it was not any lofty idealism, which prompted the native elites to take part in nationalism but absolute craving for wealth, power and prestige. The elite bourgeois historiography, on the other hand, regards Indian nationalism as an idealist venture in which the bourgeois elites liberated the people from the colonialist subjugation. The various versions of this historiography with varying emphasis eulogize the role of elite individuals, institutions and organizations as the motivating forces of nationalism. In this regard, Guha writes even more provocatively:

However, the modality common to them all is to uphold Indian nationalism as a phenomenal expression of the goodness of the native elite with the antagonist aspect of their relation the
colonial regime made, against all evidence, to look larger than its collaborationist aspect, their role as promoters of the cause of the people than that as exploiters and oppressors, their altruism and self-abnegation than their scramble for the modicum of power and privilege granted by the rulers in order to make sure of their support for the Raj. The history of Indian nationalism is thus written up as a sort of spiritual biography of the Indian elite. (*Subaltern Studies 1, 2*).

Thus, Guha is of the view that the history of Indian nationalism excluded the role played by the subaltern in the independence struggle: "The rebellious Subaltern often is excluded as the conscious subject of his (sic) own history" (*A Subaltern Studies Reader*, iv). The subaltern has contributed individually and collectively to the growth and consolidation of national consciousness during the struggle for decolonization. However, Indian nationalist historians ignored or simply glossed over the contributions made by subaltern masses towards the anti-colonial struggle. Even when attempt was made at historical representation of the subaltern classes and castes, it was framed in the terms and interests of the ruling power or dominant social class.

Guha questions the historical representations that privilege elite consciousness over the subaltern consciousness. Guha casts a very serious doubt about Indian history. His tone and attitude towards the official history
is that of serious critique and distrust. He argues for a radical revision of the very project of Indian historiography. It was in this context that the subaltern group attempted to write a parallel historiography, focusing exclusively on the subaltern experiences. In the subaltern histories, the subaltern reclaims the subject position of innumerable subaltern insurgencies denied to them until now. According to Guha, the official Indian history has always been trying to account for the mass articulation in terms of the charismatic leadership of some elite individuals. It has never accorded any value for the self-articulation and spontaneous response of the peasantry as well as the unorganized sections of the society against the colonial domination.

One important problem of recognizing the political voice and agency of the subaltern groups is the elites’ representation of the peasant movements as spontaneous acts of violence, with no political content or organization. Whenever references were made to subaltern revolts, they have been reported as law and order problems, as aberrations from the nationalist ideals. A typical example is the Chauri Chaura incident, which impelled Gandhi to promptly call off the civil disobedience movement. Shahid Amin, has reconsidered the *chauri chaura* event and shown that it was not an instance of anti-social subaltern insurgency; on the other hand, it was a natural repercussion of the charismatic exhortation of Mahatma Gandhi that led to the gruesome incident of burning alive of the policemen inside the police station (*A Subaltern Studies Reader*, 179-239). In the absence of reliable historical
materials, these historians need to recuperate the political agency and resistance through a critique of colonial and elite historical representations. The critique of the dominant historical representation has a clear and distinct political agenda. If the political voice and agency cannot be retrieved from the documentary evidences, it can be re-inscribed through a critique of the dominant historical representations.

The excavation and reconstruction of the subaltern ideology is an exercise in interpretation because the area lies between scarce articulations and rich every day forms of resistance. The Subaltern historians thus examine the nationalist and colonial archives to bring out the fissures, silences and anxieties of the subaltern people. They need to reconfigure the subaltern myths, cults, ideologies and revolts, which the nationalist elite historiography had appropriated and explained using the logic of cause and effect. Ranajit Guha's ambitious work *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in India* completely subverts the elitist notion of the peasant insurgency. Questioning the positivist methodology of conventional historiography, Guha introduces the methodological innovation of building history on the peasant consciousness, rumours, mythic visions, religiosity and bonds of community.

It was the tremendous success of the rural peasant revolt against the Indian National Government in West Bengal in 1967, which prompted the subaltern historians to rethink and reconstruct the Indian National Independence narrative from the subaltern perspectives. It motivated them to
reconstruct the various histories of the subaltern insurgency, which are autonomous and independent from the mainstream independence movement. In doing so, the Subaltern Studies historians fill the historic void left by Orientalism. They start from where Said stopped. One of the major criticisms against Orientalism has been that it never examines how the colonized resisted the Orientalist representations. In other words, in Said’s description, there is little scope for the agency of the colonized. In Orientalism, the colonized subject is depicted as constituted of colonial discourses, passively submitting to the colonizer’s views of themselves. Said has been accused by critics like Ijaz Ahmed of writing out the voice and agency of the colonized people from history as he never considers, their Counter- hegemonic actions (Gandhi, 70).

The Subaltern historians state that the elite and subaltern consciousness is not integrated to each other and they remain in a state of constant conflict. The mainstream historians while narrating the historiography of nationalism have ignored the conflict-ridden relationship between the elite and the subaltern classes. They represent nationalism as a monistic movement devoid of any internal contradictions. The domain of politics was naturally split and not unified and homogenous as elite interpretation had made it out to be (A Subaltern Studies Reader, xiv). The tendency in the nationalist historical discourses to sideline the Ambedkarite movement for the political rights of the subordinated castes, on the ground
that it was not directed against the colonial government, can be cited as an example. Though, not directly related to the anti-colonial nationalist movement, it was against caste and feudal authority, the local carriers of colonial power.

The meta-narrative of nationalism, the freedom struggle led by the congress party and its caste Hindu leadership, have always been puzzled by the pluralistic and multilateral nature of the subaltern, peasant and low caste movements that problematised the so called monolithic anti colonial liberation struggle of India. It was also an outcome of the political expediency of the hegemonic lords soon after independence to legitimize, narrativize, textualize, disseminate and manufacture consent and pedagogic consensus among the rural masses that nationalism and anti-colonial solidarity emerged as the only true, patriotic ideology and praxis. The nationalist elite also wanted to assert that patriotic cultural nationalism is the legacy of the martyrs and the republic; and those who questioned nationalism and its homogeneous discourse could only be termed as traitors of the motherland. In this hegemonic perspective, the people who experienced the most degrading slavery in human history for thousands of years under the internal imperialism of Hindu/Brahminic colonialism, and their liberation movements under the leadership of thinkers like Phule, Narayana Guru and Periyar became anti-nationalist and communitarian.
Guha argues that the elite historiography is bankrupt and unhistorical when it comes to explain the important mass upsurges, which happened in India during the colonial period. The inadequacy of the elitist historiography is a result of the parochial view of politics to which it is attached because of its class outlook. Guha states:

What is clearly left out of this un-historical (elitist) historiography is the 'politics of the people.' For parallel to the domain of elite politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of labouring population and intermediate strata in town and country – that is, the people. This was an 'autonomous' domain, for it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter. (Subaltern Studies 1, 4)

Thus in the view of Guha, parallel to the domain of elite politics, there existed the domain of subaltern politics in India during the colonial period. It was an autonomous domain as it was dependant neither on the elites nor on the colonialists for its existence. This domain had its roots even in the pre-colonial period.
While the elite domain of politics moved vertically, the subaltern domain moved horizontally and spontaneously. One important feature of subalternity was its resistance to the elite domination. However, the distinctive feature of this politics derived from the exploitation to which this group had been constantly subjected. The experience of exploitation and suppression had provided them with new idioms, norms and values, which are very distinct from the elite groups. The subaltern people actually lived in contradiction. According to Guha, the failure of Indian historiography is the failure to represent this major section of the Indian society and their autonomous domain of politics and life. He points out that “it is the study of this failure which constitutes the central problematic of the historiography of colonial India” (Subaltern Studies 1, 7).

Unfortunately, the Subaltern historians too are complicit in a different sense. While considering the subalternity of the subordinate classes, Guha does not take into consideration “caste,” which is at least three thousand year old institution that accounts for the social imbalances within the Hindu society. In India, social segregation, economic dispossession, cultural marginalization and political subordination were effected on the lines of caste and gender under the hegemonic ideology of Brahmanic Varnasramadharma. The vast majority of people outside the four-fold Chathurvarnya system, the Bahujans and the women of all castes were shorn of basic human rights for millennia under this ideological configuration and its repressive regime.
The Dalit Bahujan resistance movements in India could be contextualized in the historical, cultural and epistemological clashes between the hegemonic Brahmanic ideology and the counter-hegemonic Dalit Bahujan cultures from outside the margins of the Hindu world. In a larger democratic perception, it could be seen as a historically expelled and marginalized peoples’ moral struggle for social justice, democratic, and civil rights. The Brahmanic Varna system and caste hegemony are therefore key elements that should be critically analyzed in developing the consciousness that arises from a sense of historical suppression and past wrongs.

Brahmanism is analyzed contextually in this study as an ideology, a discourse and an institutional form of hierarchical discrimination and cultural subordination. The discourse of the Brahmin-centred religious obscurantism has its origin in the Vedic ages (Singh, 100). In his essay “Early Brahmins and Brahmanism,” D. D. Kosambi states that early Brahmanism propagated a belief that “Brahmin is a descendant of Brahma” himself and whenever Brahmanism is in peril “Vishnu is incarnated to protect it” (87-97). Buddhism was a critique and reaction against its decadent forms. As an ideology, Brahmanism creates a self-centered worldview and a consensual sense of cultural and racial supremacy. There is no equality and recognition of the “Other” in this discourse. And it was hierarchical in its appearance. It was one of the ancient forms of cultural elitism. Its basic practices can be discerned in the dominating and controlling of culture, writing and
epistemology. There is also an aspect of knowledge/power monopoly in the allied discourses. Purity-pollution practices, engendered categorization and hierarchization are its principal tenets. The divide and rule policy has been its primary diplomatic strategy in preserving the internal imperialism for thousands of years. The *Varna* theory is the instrument, which in the long run gave birth to the caste system. The Brahmin who tops the four-fold Varna structure is endowed with the duty of worshipping God. Below the Brahmin are the *Kshatriya*, *Vysia* and *Shudra*. Kshatriyas must ensure the safety of the Brahmin and the cow. The Shudras and the women must serve them as earthly gods. The *Chandals* and the followers of other religions are not given human status in the Brahmanic system of caste (Singh, 100).

The struggle of the caste subaltern was not directly against the alien colonial power but the caste and feudal hierarchies, their visual referents for the evils of colonial rule. It is here that the Dalit part ways with other subaltern groups. Caste subordination is a specific Dalit experience that stamps them with a distinct identity. In the studies of Subaltern historians, the Dalit identity gets effaced under the larger subaltern identity. For Ranajit Guha uses “subaltern classes” to signify “people” in general which include “those who did not comprise the colonial elite and such categories as the lesser rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants and upper middle class peasants. . . ” (*Subaltern Studies 1*, 8). The term subaltern is used in *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 in any other way” (Subaltern Studies 1, 9). The subaltern here consists of several voices, which are compressed in to a common identity. This concept of subalterns sharing a common identity is a romantic fallacy that fails to account for the untouchability of Dalits. It is interesting to note that the multi-volume series of Subaltern Studies does not contain even a single mention of the term “Dalit.”

The Dalit’s struggle for democratic rights, led by Ambedkar remains undocumented in history because, just as Guha argues, it had moved away from the ideals of a proper insurgency. However, Guha in particular and the subaltern historians in general, is concerned with the history of “class subalterns” and not “caste subalterns.” He says that the elite historians who produced the Indian history after independence interpreted and used the histories of the rural peasantry and the urban working class as mere “diversions” from supposedly “real” political process.

The anti-colonial movement led by the nationalist elites drew inspiration from the progressive ideas of the West. But Ambedkar’s movement centring on caste sprang from the native tradition and experience of Dalits: the caste discrimination and untouchability. Though influenced by colonial discourses of modernity and humanism, Ambedkar was also aware of their pitfalls. He perceived nationalism as a movement that reflects the parochial sentiments of the national mainstream. He did not differentiate
colonialism from a nationalism that did not envisage a casteless egalitarian society. As for Ambedkar, the liberation of Dalits was rather a pre-independent prerequisite, than a post-independent concession. It is precisely here that he had strong differences with Gandhi (Mukherjee, xx).

Ambedkar considered Dalits as constituting a separate category outside the fold of Hinduism. He called for the annihilation of caste, which he thought had worked against the interests of Dalits for several centuries. On the other hand, Gandhi considered Dalits as an integral part of the Hindu religion. He also justified caste system as a unique feature of Indian society although later on he was to change his stance (Singh, 209). Both Congress and the Left parties tried to establish a Western brand of democracy in India whereas Ambedkar's movement aimed at establishing a true democracy without caste or class distinctions. He anticipated that decolonization would merely result in the replacement of western colonial class with the indigenous ruling class.

The failure of the Subaltern Studies Group is their inability to address the concerns of the caste subalterns and gendered caste subalterns. Susie Tharu observes how they overlook the problems of Dalits and women. (Translating Subaltern Studies, 13) Gayatri Spivak in "Can the Subaltern speak?" critiques the theoretical position of the subaltern historians. Spivak tries to widen the scope of the subaltern studies by revising and widening the Marxist thought which forms the theoretical foundation of subaltern studies.
Robert Young suggests that Spivak is going beyond the narrow terms of class politics to include other forms of liberation struggles, such as the women's movement, the peasant struggles or the rights of indigenous minorities (Gandhi, 351).

According to Spivak, the Marxist interpretation of the Indian society as making a shift from feudalism to capitalism may explain how the middle class colonized subjects became national subjects after colonialism, but it cannot account for the lives and struggles of the subaltern classes: peasants, women and other unorganized indigenous groups. Against the Marxist approach of the subaltern historians, Spivak locates a series of confrontations between the dominant and exploited groups. Such confrontations need not have serious political or economic bearing on the state, but it does not mean that they have no political agency or meaning. Spivak's shift of the critical point of view from India's national liberation movement to the social movements and agency of disempowered people, helps us to understand how "the agency of change is located in the insurgent or subaltern" (In Other Worlds, 197). It is this shift in perspective, which prompts Spivak to deconstruct the subaltern historians and their methodology. The change in perspective is to be followed by a shift in the methodology, which informs that perspective.

According to Spivak, the revisionist historical writing of the subaltern group is at odds with their methodology. The subaltern writer seems to recover a pure subaltern consciousness following the Marxian notion of class-
consciousness. It creates a false coherence on the very complex and differentiated struggles of the particular subaltern groups. It has the effect of objectifying the subaltern. This is to fall a prey to the dominant structures of knowledge and representations. Rather than disavowing this risk, the subaltern studies historians should recognize the complicity and must acknowledge that their practice is “closer to deconstruction” (198).

Spivak does not agree with subaltern historians that the subaltern is a sovereign political subject. The sovereignty of the subaltern is only an effect of the dominant discourse. She argues that the political will of the subaltern is constructed by the dominant discourse as an after effect of elite nationalism. This dominant discourse includes the subaltern within the rubric of their grand narrative and completely disregards the different local struggles of particular subaltern groups, such as the Muslim participation in the 1857 mutiny, the industrial agitation of the Jute workers in the early 20th century in Calcutta, or the Awadh Peasant Rebellion of 1920 (Morton, 54).

The Postcolonial critics like Neil Lazarus consider Spivak’s notion of the subaltern subject as only an effect of the way in which the social and symbolic practice of the disenfranchised elements of the native population are represented (or more accurately, not represented) in colonialist-elitist discourse (112). By emphasizing how the subaltern subject is constructed through the dominant discourse of the elite nationalism, Spivak defines the
particular struggles of women, peasants and tribals as separate from, and supplementary to, the dominant historical narrative of bourgeois nationalism.

Spivak does not accept the attempt of the elite discourse to represent the nation as a coherent, objective structure. According to her, the Indian society is a terrain of social struggle, "is a continuous sign chain" or a network of traces (In Other Worlds, 198). This deconstructive vocabulary provides Spivak with a flexible methodology to accommodate all disenfranchised group of people. She also considers the literary text as providing an alternative rhetorical site for articulating the histories of subaltern women. Spivak's readings of the female subaltern characters provide an important counter point to the silencing and erasure of women in British colonial archives and elite nationalist historical writing in India. While the official historical discourse privileges men as the main actors in the revolutionary political struggles, Spivak finds literature providing a different space to articulate subaltern women's insurgency and resistance in the social text of Postcolonial India.

Spivak's critique of the subaltern methodology has created a great furore among critics and historians. They allege that Spivak is imposing another elite western language on the subalters. In this regard, Rosalind O'Hanlon observes: "Those who set out to restore the 'presence' of the subaltern end only by borrowing the tools of that discourse, tools which serve only to
reduplicate the first subjection which they effect, in the realms of critical theory” (Morton, 55).

However, what is distinctive about Spivak’s attempt at subaltern studies is that she includes within the subaltern resistance and agency the role of subaltern women who had not been paid much attention by the subaltern historians. She expands the term subaltern to include women from the upper middle class, as well as the peasantry and the sub-proletariat. What disconcerts Spivak is that the involvement of women in the history of anti-British colonial insurgency in India is excluded from the official history of national independence. In this context, Spivak observes:

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labour, for both of which there is ‘evidence’. It is rather, that, both as an object of colonial historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 287)

Spivak here very powerfully articulates the double marginalization and the denial of the agency of speech to the subaltern women. Her essay “Can the
"Subaltern Speak?" raises both deconstructive and philosophical objections to the straightforward project of "letting the subaltern speak" (66-111). It also criticizes the subaltern studies historians' notion of the subject for not taking into account the contemporary critique of the idea of the subject itself.

Thus, Spivak criticizes the subaltern historians' project of retrieving the consciousness of the subaltern subject from colonial archive. The question is how the writers and critics working in one context can gain access to the cultural, historical and social consciousness of people in another context. To put it differently, as Spivak interrogates in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" how can the historian avoid the risk of presenting himself as a representative of the subaltern consciousness? She undermines the assumption of the subaltern studies group that the writings of the intellectuals can serve as a transparent medium through which the voice of the "Other" can be heard. The subaltern historians, though they often speak 'about' the caste subaltern, they fail 'to' speak to them. Spivak's view that the subaltern cannot speak should be debated in the context of Dalits. Unlike women, Dalits have never been silent. The silence negotiates a space for the women, though it is yet to be heard while the unheard voices of the Dalits ditch them into permanent silence.

Spivak's view that the voice of the subaltern cannot be heard through elite representational modes diagnoses the central dilemma of the Dalit. The voice of Dalit cannot be adequately represented in Dalitist narratives: non-
Dalit’s writings about Dalits. The voice of the caste subaltern emerges highly appropriated in the elite discourses. The Dalitist writer is caught between his or her desire to be progressive by articulating the concerns of the subordinated castes and his/her own caste confinement. This ambivalence of the Dalitist writer often gets reflected in their representations. The Dalits are denied their voice; their identity is distorted, and deciphered into a different discourse.

Spivak’s argument that the subaltern cannot speak through the Dalitist representational modes is diametrically opposite to Gramsci’s position that the organic intellectual has a decisive role in articulating the concerns of the subaltern. The problem of representing the voice of the caste subaltern through Dalit and Dalitist writings arises here. The deconstructive perceptions of Spivak verges on denying a selfhood to the subaltern while the Dalits are always for experiencing a Dalit selfhood etched out of their own identity. The Gramscian intellectual mediation usurps the Dalit’s right to speak for themselves while his postcolonial theoretical perceptions make possible the articulation of alterity — to name the unnamed insurgencies of caste subalterns in history. It is in this context that the present attempt at analyzing specimens of Dalit and Dalitist fiction to see how they narrativize and textualize the Dalit reality becomes relevant.

Dalit Literature as a nativist postcolonial writing emerged as a derivative of Ambedkar’s political movement, which “decolonized” the minds of Dalits from their age-old subordination to Brahminical hegemony.
However, Ambedkar’s movement was not an isolated one. It could be related to the tradition of anti-caste movements in the history. It is the broader democratic movement led by the real majority of people who are outside the cultural geography of Brahmanic nation state that challenged the society and polity in India. Its origin can be traced back to Buddha. Kancha Ilaiah in *Buddha as a Political Philosopher* has elaborated how Buddha critiqued Brahmanism. It continued into subsequent Shramana critiques, including those of Kapila, Charvaka, Kabir, Ramananda, Ravidas, Eknath, Tukaram, Chaitanya, Guru Nanak and so on (Singh, 203). Later on Phule, Narayana Guru, and Ayyankali led a democratic revolution that emphasized social justice and human rights for the oppressed, downtrodden castes. Although, the critique of Brahmanism dates back to Buddhism, the consolidation of the collective political movement of the marginalized people took place only in the 20th century under the initiative of Ambedkar.

Ambedkar, influenced by Mahatma Jotiba Phule, a pioneering leader and social reformer of the untouchables, questioned the construction of individuals’ identities on caste lines. Ambedkar asks, “Can personal character make the maker of armaments a good man, that is, a man who will sell shells that will not burst and gas that will not poison? If it cannot, how can you accept personal character to make a man loaded with the consciousness of caste a good man?” (Qtd Thirumaavalavan, iv). He re-read the Indian history, religion, literature and mythology in order to expose the reigning Brahminical
ideology. Arjun Dangle, a well-known Marati Dalit writer and critic traces the origin of Dalit Literature to Ambedkar: “His revolutionary ideas stirred into action all the Dalits of Maharastra and gave them a novel self-respect” (239). Dalit Literature can be seen as an outburst of the new Dalit consciousness. However, the mainstream literary establishment distances itself from the bourgeoning Dalit Literature treating it as literary untouchable. According to Alok Mukherjee, “Indian literary history and theory, as well as the teaching of Indian literature are spectacularly silent about Dalit. Yet, Dalit cultural and critical productions make a significant critical intervention in the thinking and writing about Indian society, history, culture and literature” (4). The literary ostracism does not stop the Dalit literary endeavours. Though excluded from the mainstream, the Dalit writers continue to write from the borderline.

Dalit Literature is essentially subversive in character, bringing both content and forms which challenge received literary norms. Raj Gauthaman praises the Dalit’s use of language, which “exposes and discredits the existing language, its refinements and its falsifying order as symbols of dominance (Qtd. Holmstrom, xii). He further adds that “for it is according to these measures that the language of Dalits is marginalized as a vulgar and obscene language, the language of slums” (Qtd Holmstrom, xii). Today, as S. Anand observes, Dalit Literature has emerged as a self-sustaining literary movement, surpassing the Dalit who still face caste discrimination (4).