Introduction: On the Margin

Marginality, a suspicion that what is at the centre often hides a repression.

Gayatri Spivak, “Explanation and Culture: Marginalia”

As a product of post-enlightenment democratization and capitalist development, fiction is linked to its discursive context, across languages and cultures. With its dialogic potential and plurality of perspectives, it also uniquely signifies the multiplicities and complexities of the narrated realities. As a narrative mode of enquiry it is concerned with the peripheries and margins of the represented reality and the signified world of human experience, as it expands its boundaries further on and on into the less known and the less represented. A profoundly ethical and democratic concern and subversive radicalism could be identified at the core of fiction’s representational politics. The present study attempts an analysis of the representation of socio cultural margins of caste and gender in Indian contexts in works of fiction written in various Indian languages, taking
representative samples from Hindi, Bengali, Kannada, Malayalam and English.

Using the classic metaphor of Don Quixote, Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things* problematizes the margins and boundaries of similitude, resemblance and representation in an attempt to make an epistemological critique of the act of representation. Foucault says that Quixote is both writing and representation. Quixote reads the world in order to prove the texts and the proofs that he gives are the glittering reflections of resemblances. His whole journey is a quest for similitudes and signs. “The signs of language no longer have any value apart from the slender fiction which they represent. The written word and things no longer resemble one another. And between them, Don Quixote wanders off on his own.”

Commenting on Cezanne’s well-known statement on the act of representation - “I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you,” - Jacques Derrida says that the act of representation is a “highly precarious” one since truth could only be understood in terms of “presentation, representation, unveiling or adequation.” This complexity would only result in unlimited possibilities of presentation and representation. Thus the act of representation is a complex and problematic one that involves mediation by a subject in a given context of history, culture and locality. It involves intervention and doctoring in sign systems as well as in modes and media of communication. It requires potential coding, decoding and recoding across
semiological frontiers and ideological and discursive paradigms. It is not neutral and transparent, but is highly complex and contextual. It articulates the tensions and conflicts of the subjectivity in particular discursive contexts of history, under the influence of prevalent ideological formations and the compulsions of material reality.

Taking up the question of literary representation in his conversations with Edward Said, Raymond Williams observes that “representations are part of history, contribute to history, are active elements in the way that history continues; in the way that forces are distributed, in the way people perceive situations, both from inside their own pressing realities and outside them.” He adds that the method of analysis of representations could be tested historically and politically in diverse situations. For him analyzing the text is a way of finding new methods of discovering the relation between its constituents and its contexts, and is intimately wedded to the project of cultural studies. All these once again tell us about the socio cultural, political, economic and historic forces that determine this precarious act of mediation involved in representation; of shading and emphasis, of foregrounding and back grounding, of veiling and exposing, of the autonomy and tyranny of narration, and the need for its cultural, historic and contextual analysis. Narrative representation of the material reality and its hermeneutics are therefore fundamentally and finally political and positional.
Redefining the pedagogy of the humanities as the arena of explanation that questions the (legitimate) explanations of culture, where culture is a process rather than an object of study, Gayatri Spivak observes that marginality is a suspicion that what is at the centre often hides a repression. According to her, deconstruction teaches us to question all kinds of transcendental idealism and repressive violence, especially in hegemonic discourses and ideological narration. The models of legitimate and dominant culture are often hegemonic and repressive, engaged in othering and excluding sites of contesting and subversive cultures. Thus the act of narration, whether it is historiographical or fictional, is highly problematic in the contexts of marginalization. In India social exclusion, economic deprivation and cultural and political marginalization/subordination were effected on the lines of caste and gender under the hegemonic ideology of Brahmanic Varnasramadharma. The vast majority of people outside the fourfold Chathurvarnya system, the Bahujans, the Dalits and the women of all castes, were denied basic human rights and elemental human status for millennia under this most perverted and fascist ideological formation and its repressive regime. Even after fifty years of constitutional democracy the hegemonic potential of this ideology still holds and the Dalit Bahujan and women’s question remains unresolved. The situation becomes worse when new kinds of cultural and spiritual nationalist avatars of Neo Brahmanism make their second coming in the late twentieth and early twenty first
centuries. The present attempt at analyzing specimens of fiction to see how they narrativize, textualize and problematize these vital socio cultural and political questions of our times and contexts therefore is not just an academic exercise, but is a cultural emergency and part of an inevitable cultural studies initiative.

The Dalit Bahujan resistance movements in India could be contextualized in the historical, epistemological and material conflicts between the hegemonic Brahmanic ideology and praxis and the counter-hegemonic Dalit Bahujan cultures from outside the margins of the Hindu world. In a larger democratic perspective it could be seen as a historically excluded and marginalized people’s ethical struggle for social equity and democratic and civil rights. The Brahmanic Varna system and caste hegemony are therefore key elements that should be critically analyzed in developing a subaltern consciousness that arises from a sense of historical suppression and past wrongs, which continue to be relevant even today.

Brahmanism is analyzed contextually in the study as an ideology, a discourse and an institutional form of hierarchical inequality and cultural subordination. The discourse of the Brahman-centred religious obscurantism has its origin in the Vedic ages. In his essay “Early Brahmans and Brahmanism,” D D Kosambi says that, early Brahmanism propogated a belief that “Brahman is a descendent of Brahma” himself and whenever Brahmanism is in peril “Vishnu is incarnated to protect it.” Buddhism was
a critique and reaction against its decadent forms. As a parasitic ideology it creates a self-centred world/view and a consensual sense of cultural and ethnic supremacy. There is no egalitarian space and acknowledgement of the other in this discourse. It is another name for hierarchy in its social manifestations. It is one of the ancient forms of priestocracy and cultural elitism. Monopolizing and policing culture, writing and epistemology are its fundamental practices. There is also an element of pedantry and knowledge/power monopoly in the related discourses. Purity-pollution practices and engendered and embodied classification and hierarchization are its chief tenets. The divide-and-rule strategy has been its chief diplomatic agenda in maintaining the internal imperialism for thousands of years. The Varna theory is its instrument for social stratification which eventually gave birth to the caste system. The Brahman heads the fourfold Varna structure and below him are the Kshatriya, Vysia and Shudra. Kshatriyas must ensure the safety of the Brahman and the cow. The Shudras and the women must serve them as earthly gods. The Chandals and the followers of other religions are not even given human status in the Brahmanic imagination.\textsuperscript{16}

The plural and broader movements of the real majority of people who were always outside the cultural geography of the Brahmanic nation could be placed and understood as the cultural and democratic revolution that has changed and is still changing the society and polity in India. This began with the historic critique of hegemonic Brahmanism in Buddhism and
continued into the subsequent Shramana critiques, including those of Kapila, Charvaka, Kabir, Phule, Narayana Guru, Periyar and Ambedkar. Any related epistemological attempt naturally aims at the development of a subaltern hermeneutics and praxis that emphasizes social justice and the voice of the suppressed, with elaborate and ground level deconstruction and reconstruction of epistemological and methodological systems and processes including historiography and pedagogy. It should again be seen in the light of the radical and historic critiques of homogenizing and hegemonic nationalist discourses that patronized and represented the country from the days of the Gandhian nationalist movement onwards, suppressing the inevitable, irreducible signification of the diversity and plurality of people/cultures in this country.

Though the critique of Brahmanism dates back to Buddhism, the consolidation of the collective political formation of the marginalized people in India is a fairly recent phenomenon. It is a post-Mandal, post-Ayodhya and also post-Gujarat development. The Mandal commission report which came up for consideration and national debate in 1990 radically exposed the immensity of the exclusion of Bahujans from the corridors of power/political representation and the monopoly of hegemonic groups in the high altars of constitutional state and democracy. This confirmed the warning of Ambedkar expressed more than half a century ago that transfer of power to the nationalist elite and the political mode of nationalism would only be a
transfer of power to the regional Savarna hegemony.\textsuperscript{22} The Anti-Mandal barbarism and riots unleashed by the status quo groups once again proved that internal colonization and sustenance of hegemony is an everyday reality.\textsuperscript{23} The demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya in 1992 saw the pro-fascist mobilization of Bahujans by the same advocates of cultural and religious nationalism who eliminated the father of the nation soon after Independence. 2002 saw the culmination of this Hinduization drive in the Gujarat genocide in which thousands of Muslim minorities were literally burned alive. The coming of age of Indian Hindu fascism has therefore a historical itinerary of sustained hegemony and internal colonization over the Bahujan masses at the cultural and religious levels, with its ideological and discursive underpinnings in Brahmanism and its Varna, Caste systems of social stratification.

As was suggested earlier, the resistance to Brahmanism too has a long history which now converges on the polarization of the others and outcastes of hegemony against the cultural nationalism led by the Brahmanic elite, the nation state and its apparatuses monopolized by historically advantaged Savarna groups and their legitimized cultural nationalist discourses. The rise of the lower castes in North Indian politics and the emergence of Dalit Bahujan politics along with a nation wide alliance of minorities, women and low castes, both Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Communities, could be situated in this larger
emancipatory political formation, which could only be termed as a
decentering, inclusive and rethinking critique of democracy from below. The
old and inadequate (often Brahmanic/hegemonic in effect) conceptualizations
of ‘identity politics and Sanskritization’ are contested and overruled here in
the material and historical contexts of the peoples’ struggle for social justice
and equity as well as for democratic, civil and basic human rights. The
homogenizing reductionism and stereotyping of the Hindu/Brahman-centered
and referential gaze, that looks upon the collective movements and mobility
of the historically marginalized for equal rights and historical shares in a
democratic society as mere ‘identity politics and ethnic mobility’ is itself
hegemonic, totalitarian and fascist since it silences/evades and oversteps
profound questions of ethical, democratic and historical implications in the
contexts of unlimited and unimaginable barbarism and shameless brutality
for centuries. It is the old weapon that the ‘secular and liberal’ Savarna
spokesmen of the ancient hegemony still use against the victims of history.
This strategy uses the weapon of caste itself to defuse the subaltern classes’
radical consolidation and dissociation from the hegemonic value sphere and
meta-referential structure, by marking resurgence and dissociation as
conformist caste craving for upward mobility within the hegemonic social
structure. This is the significance of theorizations like “Sanskritization” that
explain mobility within the Hindu caste/Varna order. They do not explain
the dynamics of human communitizations.24 Such theorizations can only be
seen as attempts from the top to explain the hegemonic and totalitari
potential of colonized and appropriated epistemological processes that
multiply inequality and sustain hegemony and even monopolize the whole
discourse of human sciences practices in India,\(^2^5\) providing striking
resemblances to the knowledge/power discourses of Brahmanism.

Such an epistemological impasse created by the appropriation of the
humanities and the academia for purposes of power and perpetuation of
consensual hegemony, demands radical readings of social texts that are
resisting and subversive, and which take position with the people and
intervene radically in cultural politics and are liberative in the material sense.
An analysis of the representation of marginality on the lines of caste and
gender in fictional narratives across the country is taken up as a counter
hegemonic task of resistance under these premises.

Socio-cultural categories of caste and gender in the Indian context of
Brahmanic patriarchy are so inseparable in their material manifestation that
they cannot be analyzed in exclusion.\(^2^6\) The vital questions of the gendered
subaltern and subaltern patriarchy complicate the whole picture.\(^2^7\) The older
approaches isolating caste and gender inequalities have already come under
scathing criticism.\(^2^8\) The new political agenda being articulated by Dalit
Bahujan feminists also demands the exploration of their shared and entangled
histories and cultural contexts.\(^2^9\) New inter-disciplinary enquiries by Dalit
Bahujan theorists and Dalit Bahujan feminists raise complex questions on
how we might understand the vital history of caste as a form of identification and as a structure of disenfranchisement and exploitation and on how we can revisit the forgotten and repressed histories that would contribute towards the development of a Dalit Bahujan feminist critique and subaltern hermeneutics that could radically address questions of inequality and repression. The demand for historicizing the structures of forgetting and exposing the hidden histories of hurt and humiliation animates the contemporary claims for including caste as a significant category of social life, as an intimate and embodied form of sociality.

In the current conjuncture feminism in India responds to the gendered manifestations of caste inequality through its reorientation towards social transformation on an egalitarian basis. According to scholars like Anupama Rao this would involve a reexamination of gender and caste relations in such a way as to suggest that understanding the changing manifestations of caste is fundamental to the understanding of the particular forms in which gender inequality and sexed subordination are produced and grounded. The objective is not a mere inclusion and rehabilitation of the marginalized, but involves a broader struggle for democracy, equality and social justice that would reinstate agency and mobility for the historically marginalized.

The current exploration also identifies caste as gendered and embodied under these complex discursive and analytical paradigms. The
notion of patriarchy is also pluralistic with all sorts of socio economic and capitalist manifestations and role shifts in the present. Caste is also seen as sexed and connected to desire and defilement with its base in the purity-pollution practices of Brahmanism. It is also contextualized as a form of institutionalized inequality, a legitimate means of socio political control and regulation of kinship, a religio-ritual form of identity and subjectivity, a form of social engineering through taboos and the metaphysics of purity and touch. It even controls sexuality and love. The conceptual categories of the gendered subaltern, and the new subaltern as formulated by Gayatri Spivak, her own extension of the whole debate of Gramscian hegemony and the notion of Brahmanic patriarchy advanced by Uma Chakravarty, are also important in the following analyses.  

The focus of analysis in the present study would be on the narrativization of these questions in representative texts of fiction. What are the socio political and cultural implications and underpinnings of the representation of marginalization in the medium and genre of fiction? What could be the politics, ethics and aesthetics of such narration? How far such representations are subversive or consensual/complicit? What are the limitations and pitfalls of such intervening radicalism in fictional narration? All these questions are taken up in detail in the analyses. In a broader sense this enquiry is also a critique of modernity and its discontents, as it analyses the dialectics of modernity, its radical as well as reactionary aspects.
problematic premise of contextualizing the text and textualizing the context would also be prominent in the attempt.

Fictional texts from five Indian languages including English (two texts from each language) are incorporated in the study to ensure regional and linguistic representation within the limits of the availability of works in translation. Since the Malayalam works chosen do not have published translations in English, I have translated the quoted extracts myself. In order to ensure adequate and just explication of the texts chosen and to avoid the mix-up of linguistic, literary and contextual elements of these five languages/literatures/cultures, works in each language are analyzed in separate chapters. A series of cross-textual and inter-textual significations, references and comparisons also provide linkages and coherent continuity to the connected episodes that sustain and develop the major arguments and themes.

A brief overview of the chapters would be appropriate here. The first chapter “Caste in Religion: Godan, Song of the Loom” analyzes the Hindi/Urdu works Godan by Premchand and Song of the Loom by Abdul Bismillah. The close textual/contextual reading focuses on the representation of caste inequality that exists across religions, whether majority or minority. The purpose of the enquiry is to identify the hidden ideology and hegemonic discourse that perpetuate this hierarchical inequality. Premchand was the first major and mainstream novelist to take up the question of the
untouchables and Dalits in the North Indian Hindi/Urdu context of rural and feudal Brahmanism in the early decades of the twentieth century. His representation of the Bahujans and peasant women, toiling and struggling for survival under caste lords and their repressive regime in the rural hamlets and darker sub realms of this vast country, was a socialist-realist attempt to voice the voiceless and to represent the unrepresented reality of the times. One might wonder why the product of such a pioneering attempt as Godan prefers to be content with a complicit resolution? The first chapter asks this question that connects the caste issue with culture and religion and explicates the dynamics of the Brahmanic caste hegemony in Godan. Examining the problem of caste and gender inequality among the minority Muslims of North India, especially among the Bahujan Muslims represented by the Ansaris of Benaras, in Abdul Bismillah’s Song of the Loom, the chapter uncovers how the hierarchical ideology of Varnadharma has colonized all religions and cults in India. Even the new religion is of little help in countering this ancient hegemonic discourse that is in place in all walks of social and domestic life. The chapter also looks closely at the problematic and potential of narrating the plurality and inter linkages of the margins and subalternity, for the purpose especially of identifying the new and radical significations of liberation and resistance it opens up in contemporary political formations.

The second chapter “Brahmanic Patriarchy: Rudali, Woodworm” that deals with two Bengali texts (Rudali and Woodworm), traces the
engendered and embodied premises of hegemony and an anticipated emergence of a new mode and praxis of articulation from the marginalized within the marginalized. The subaltern woman is the gendered embodiment and ultimate victim of Brahmanic patriarchal ideology and its various material manifestations, the margin within the margin. By representing and anticipating the complex and puzzling premises of the possibility of a subversive and counter-hegemonic speech from this newly awakened subaltern, Mahasweta Devi intervenes in the debate with her lifelong legacy of struggle and resistance to caste-patriarchy with a class perspective. The chapter also tries to explore critically the limits and liabilities of class analysis and theories based on mere economic determinism. The analysis of the sovereign subjectivity of Brahmanic patriarchy in \textit{Woodworm} develops the caste/gender praxis of enquiry and further explicates the fascist, oedipal core of Brhamanism through a radical rereading of Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay's novel. The chapter exposes the disguised and metaphoric presence of patriarchal and casteist ideology in operation in a modernist text that only peripherally deals with questions of identity crisis and alienation. What was literally repressed and silenced in the text resurfaces with a vengeance to overshadow and engulf the whole narrative. The critique also foregrounds the repressive and exclusivist politics of masculinist and casteist practices dominating Indian narrative modernism.
The third chapter “Revisiting the Village: Samskara, Gramayana” attempts to read the canonical Kannada novels Samskara and Gramayana to expose the working of the caste-Swaraj Indian village, mythicized and celebrated in narrative representations. U R Anantha Murty’s novel Samskara is analyzed by placing it in its historic and cultural contexts. Despite its depiction of the decadence of Brahmanism, the text of Samskara reiterates an ideological agenda of cultural elitism and textualizes the obscurantist metaphysics of the superior second birth, present at least in the subconscious stream of the narrative. The critique of the representational politics of modernism is continued here. It is also argued that the text narrativizes a male Brahman-centred worldview, which excludes women and Bahujans as “others.” The reading of Rao Bahaddur’s Gramayana that follows breaks apart the stereotypes of the polyphonic rural narrative after placing it in the context of the caste system and rural patriarchy. The totalizing discourses that categorize the whole feudal peasantry and village communities as subaltern in dominant and fashionable postcolonial deliberations, monopolized by the third world elite, too is contested here. The grass root level, micro-operations of Brahmanic hegemony that works in tandem with religion and gender politics become visible in this textual analysis. It also exposes the violence involved in such reductive characterizations as ‘village epics and rural mythologies.’ The chapter reveals the plight of the really marginalized and eternally subjected within
this so called periphery, problematizing the whole debate of subaltern and village post-coloniality.

The fourth Chapter “Community and the Tribal: Thalamurakal, Mavalimantam” reads the two Malayalam novels Thalamurakal and Mavelimantam and looks in detail into the narrativization of the processes of communitization that leads to an erasure of sub caste divisions and Dalitization, a movement that cancels the hierarchical desire of caste and Varna. Both movements are discussed here as counter-hegemonic and emancipatory movements from below, especially in the contexts of peoples’ resistance and the democratic politics of Mandalization. While narrativizing the plurality of struggles of a family in Palghat in eastern Kerala across generations against caste inequality, O V Vijayan’s novel interrogates vital issues ranging from Brahmanism, nationalism, the Dalit Bahujan movements, Dalitization, conversion, communitization and ‘Sanskritization.’ The analysis places the fictional text in its discursive context to specifically look at the novel’s handling of the caste question. The strategies of representing and articulating the subaltern subject and the politics and history of the subaltern resistance to meta-narratives and hegemonic discourses are dealt with in detail. The chapter also provides critiques of Sanskritization and Hinduization. The association between the caste question and the Adivasi question and the representation of tribals in K J Baby’s Mavelimantam are also discussed in this chapter. Against the prevalent eco-tribal activist
discourse the Adivasi crisis is situated right in the heart of the larger ideological and historical formations of Brahmanism. The analysis of this Malayalam narrative that claims to represent the tribal from closer quarters is also meant as an explication of the politics of the tribalism discourse and its primitivizing and genocidal intentions. The discussion lights up the problematic of fictional representation, narrative intervention and the erasure of historical contexts.

The fifth chapter “Nation Versus Conversion: Kanthapura, The God of Small Things” provides a critical account of imagiNation and the margins of imagination as they impinge upon the process of narration. It also attempts a critique of the representation of caste in conversion, because caste is often the un-representable in the process, especially when one converts to a “casteless” religion. In the larger sense conversion could be read as a critique of the Nation and its homogenizing narratives. Conversion is writing back from the margins of the modern nation and its meta-narratives of erasure and totalizing order. It is an act of defiance that threatens the cultural nationalist/pro-fascist foundations of the Nation. A pioneering narration of the nation, Kanthapura, by Raja Rao is reread here. The patronizing and paternalistic ideology of Gandhi’s “Harijanodharana” and the related legitimizing discourses of nationalism are identified in the narrative text. The nationalist agenda is identified as the redeeming Brahmanic agenda that operates through the iconic character of the protagonist and his experiments with
spiritual/religious/cultural nationalism. The dilemmas and splits of the nationalist Brahmanic subject in representing the nation, overstepping the real majority of people, too are decoded from the textual surface here. As a politically significant act narration assumes the monopoly of the unconscious of the common people, the subaltern classes, and could become a cheap weapon of cultural neo-nationalism/s or even of fascism. For the Bahujans in India from the time of the Buddha, alternative religions have been liberation theologies that provide some kind of an asylum from the forces of cultural elitism and nationalism. The Dalit Bahujan converts constitute the vast majority of Indian minorities. Even the Constitution upholds conversion as part of one’s religious freedom. But the key question is not of religion but of caste. What happens to caste in conversion, can one change caste as one’s religion? What is your caste status after conversion to a new faith and a new community? All these are peripheral questions articulated, once again, touching upon the harsh reminder that there are only caste Hindus, caste Christians, caste Muslims, caste Sikhs and so on in this society.

The concluding chapter takes up the major thematic concerns of the previous chapters and attempts a cognitive and summative evaluation of the ideas presented and lists out the major arguments and implications of the study. The material and historical reality of the experience of hegemony and marginalization on caste and gender lines that is continuing and worsening in the present would be taken up in detail. Questions of class analytical
perspectives in the context of Brahmanic patriarchy would be explicated and critiqued. The need for a subaltern hermeneutics and the urgency of epistemological democratization would also be discussed as a political and emancipatory outcome of the study in conclusion.

Notes


“Discourse” is used in the Foucauldian sense of language practice or language in social praxis that implies power relationships intervening in practices of representation. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1994) 79-81.


The conceptual category of “Dalit Bahujan” carries all the socio cultural and political significations employed in its development and use in Gopal Guru (“dalitbahujan”), Gail Omvedt (“dalit bahujan”) and Kancha Ilaiah, as well as in the
dalitbahujan feminists. The use of the word by political leaders like Kanshi Ram and Mayawati can also be considered in this regard.


16 See Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the 18th c. to the Modern Age*.


23 Bipan Chandra, “Reservations and Development” (164-70) and Omvedt, “Twice Born Riots against Democracy” (6-25) in Engineer, *Mandal Commission Controversy*. 


27 See Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”


30 Kumkum Sangari and Uma Chakravarty, eds., *From Myth to Markets: Essays on Gender* (New Delhi: Manohar and IIAS, 2001); Vasantha Kannabiran and Kalpana


33 Antonio Gramsci, Selections from Prison Notebooks, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and G N Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971) 12. Gramsci sees hegemony as the power that “the dominant group exercises throughout society” in contradistinction to “direct domination or command exercised through the state and juridical government.” Regarding the subaltern he adds, “the subaltern classes by definition, are not united and can not unite until they are able to become a state’…

34 This notion of the dialectics of modernity is developed from P P Rave Indian Literature: Readings from the Margin (Forthcoming) 5-17.