

# Subaltern Voices in Postcolonial Literature: A Study of Identity, Marginalization, and Neo-colonial Resistance

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**Abstract:** Postcolonial literature offers a critical narrative that seeks to reclaim and amplify the voices of marginalized communities who were once silenced by colonial structures. This study will investigate the significance of subaltern voices in postcolonial texts, focusing on how their identities and lived experiences challenge the historical imposition of power by colonial forces. Through the study of key works through the lens of postcolonial theories articulated by Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, and Homi Bhabha, the research will highlight the ways in which these writers decolonize language, thought, and social norms. The concept of the 'subaltern'—those who occupy the margins of society—will be central to this exploration, considering how their oppression intersects with issues of race, gender, and class. The study will explore how authors such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Arundhati Roy, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie use literature to give voice to the subaltern, reclaiming agency for those historically excluded from the dominant power structures. In doing so, the research will examine how these literary works resist colonial and neo-colonial ideologies, creating alternative narratives that resist cultural hegemony. The role of neo-colonialism in post-independence societies will be explored, showing how former colonial powers continue to exert control through economic, political, and cultural means. Studying the persistence of these neo-colonial dynamics, the study will argue that postcolonial literature is an essential tool in ongoing resistance, facilitating a broader understanding of identity, marginalization, and the need for decolonization in a contemporary global context.

**Keywords:** *postcolonial literature, subaltern voices, decolonization, identity, marginalization, neo-colonialism, colonialism, intersectionality, race, gender, class.*

## Introduction

Postcolonial literature has developed as a vital space for giving expression to communities whose voices were suppressed or erased during the colonial period. Central to this literary tradition is the idea of the *subaltern*, a concept first introduced by Antonio Gramsci and later critically redefined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to describe those positioned outside dominant structures of power and representation. Subaltern voices—shaped by intersecting realities of race, gender, class, caste, and colonial history—have historically been excluded from official narratives produced by imperial authority and, at times, nationalist discourse. As Spivak famously asks, “*Can the subaltern speak?*”, the question itself underscores the systematic silencing embedded within colonial knowledge systems. Postcolonial writers respond to this silence by re-centering marginalized experiences, transforming literature into a space where suppressed identities and histories are reclaimed and rearticulated.

This study explores how postcolonial literature functions as a mode of resistance, enabling subaltern identities to emerge against both colonial legacies and continuing neo-colonial pressures. Drawing upon Edward Said's critique of cultural domination, Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and ambivalence, and Spivak's interrogation of representation and agency, the research examines how literary texts contest imposed identities and challenge inherited power structures. Writers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Arundhati Roy, and

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie use storytelling as a counter-discourse to expose ongoing economic dependency, cultural imperialism, and political interference in post-independence societies. By foregrounding marginalized perspectives, postcolonial literature not only revisits historical injustice but also confronts contemporary forms of neo-colonial control, establishing itself as an essential tool for decolonization, resistance, and the ethical reimagining of identity in a globalized world.

## 1. Theoretical Framework of the Subaltern

The concept of the subaltern occupies a central position in postcolonial theory, providing a critical lens through which histories of marginalization, silence, and power can be examined. Originally introduced by Antonio Gramsci to describe socially and politically excluded groups outside hegemonic power structures, the term was later expanded by the Subaltern Studies collective and most significantly re-theorized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In her seminal essay “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*”, Spivak interrogates the possibility of representation itself, arguing that subaltern voices are often mediated, translated, or overwritten by dominant discourses, even within emancipatory projects. For Spivak, the subaltern is not merely oppressed but structurally denied access to self-representation within existing systems of knowledge.

This theoretical framework highlights how colonialism operated not only through economic and political domination but also through epistemic violence—the erasure and delegitimization of indigenous ways of knowing. Subalternity thus emerges at the intersection of class, race, gender, caste, and colonial history, making it a dynamic and layered condition rather than a fixed identity. The subaltern subject is often rendered invisible within both colonial archives and nationalist historiography, which tend to privilege elite voices.

Postcolonial literature engages with this theoretical challenge by attempting to create narrative spaces where subaltern experiences can be articulated, even while acknowledging the limits of representation. Writers often foreground silence, fragmentation, and alternative storytelling modes to signal the difficulty of “speaking for” the subaltern. Therefore, the theoretical framework of the subaltern is not simply about recovering lost voices but about questioning who speaks, for whom, and under what conditions. It compels readers and critics to remain ethically aware of the power dynamics inherent in literary production and interpretation.

## 2. Identity Formation and Marginalization

Identity formation in postcolonial contexts is deeply shaped by histories of colonial domination and social exclusion. For subaltern communities, identity is rarely stable or self-determined; instead, it is often imposed, distorted, or fragmented by colonial and postcolonial power structures. Colonial regimes classified subjects through rigid categories of race, caste, gender, and ethnicity, reducing complex human identities to administrative labels that justified domination. These imposed identities continued to influence post-independence societies, where marginalized groups often remained excluded from political power and cultural representation.

Postcolonial literature explores this fractured process of identity formation by foregrounding characters who exist at the margins of society—women, indigenous peoples, lower-caste communities, migrants, and the rural poor. Their identities are shaped by multiple layers of marginalization, where social exclusion intersects with economic deprivation and cultural alienation. Writers such as Arundhati Roy and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reveal how subaltern subjects struggle to negotiate between inherited traditions and imposed modern identities, often experiencing alienation from both. Marginalization also operates through silence and invisibility. Subaltern identities are frequently defined by what they are denied—voice, agency, mobility, and recognition. Postcolonial texts challenge this marginalization by allowing characters to articulate their inner lives, memories, and resistances, even when their voices remain fractured or constrained. Through narrative experimentation, authors show that identity is not a fixed essence but a contested and evolving process shaped by power relations. Thus, postcolonial literature does not simply portray marginalized identities; it exposes the

conditions that produce marginalization. By doing so, it emphasizes that identity formation for the subaltern is inseparable from struggles against social exclusion and historical injustice.

### 3. Decolonization of Language and Narrative

Language plays a crucial role in colonial domination, as it serves as a tool for shaping thought, culture, and identity. Colonial powers imposed their languages not only for administrative control but also to establish cultural superiority, relegating indigenous languages and oral traditions to the margins. In response, postcolonial writers have treated the decolonization of language as a vital act of resistance. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, in particular, argues that language carries culture, and reclaiming indigenous languages is essential to reclaiming cultural autonomy. Decolonization of narrative involves more than linguistic choice; it also includes challenging Western literary forms, genres, and modes of storytelling. Postcolonial writers often disrupt linear narratives, incorporate oral traditions, myths, folk tales, and local idioms, and foreground communal rather than individualistic perspectives. Such narrative strategies resist colonial literary norms that privilege realism, coherence, and universalism rooted in European traditions.

Writing back to the empire, postcolonial authors reshape the colonizer's language to express local realities. English, for instance, is often appropriated and transformed through code-switching, regional rhythms, and culturally specific metaphors. This hybrid use of language reflects the lived realities of postcolonial societies while subverting linguistic purity and colonial authority. Through these strategies, postcolonial literature creates space for subaltern expression within and against dominant languages. The decolonization of language and narrative thus becomes an act of reclaiming voice, memory, and identity. It asserts that marginalized experiences cannot be fully expressed through colonial frameworks and must be articulated on their own cultural and linguistic terms.

### 4. Neo-colonial Power Structures

Although many nations achieved political independence in the mid-twentieth century, colonial domination did not entirely disappear. Instead, it re-emerged in more subtle forms through neo-colonial power structures that continue to shape postcolonial societies. Neo-colonialism operates through economic dependency, political interference, cultural domination, and global inequalities maintained by former colonial powers and multinational institutions. These structures often reproduce the same hierarchies established during colonial rule, disproportionately affecting subaltern communities.

Postcolonial literature critically exposes how neo-colonial forces perpetuate marginalization in supposedly independent nations. Economic policies imposed by global financial institutions, unequal trade relations, and the dominance of Western cultural values continue to restrict the agency of postcolonial states. Subaltern groups—already marginalized by class, caste, or ethnicity—bear the brunt of these systems, experiencing displacement, exploitation, and cultural shows erasure. Writers such as Arundhati Roy and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o highlight how neo-colonialism infiltrates everyday life, shaping education, governance, and even personal aspirations. Literature becomes a site where these invisible structures are made visible, revealing how power operates beyond formal political control. By narrating the lived experiences of those affected by neo-colonial forces, postcolonial texts challenge the illusion of freedom promised by independence. Thus, postcolonial literature serves as a critical tool for understanding neo-colonialism not as a historical phase but as an ongoing condition. By centering subaltern perspectives, it questions global power relations and asserts the need for continued resistance, decolonization, and social justice in a deeply unequal world.

## 5. Literature as Resistance and Agency

Postcolonial literature functions as a powerful mode of resistance by challenging the historical narratives produced and sustained by colonial and imperial powers. Colonial discourse systematically erased or distorted the histories of colonized peoples, presenting empire as a civilizing mission while silencing experiences of exploitation, violence, and dispossession. In response, postcolonial writers employ literature to construct alternative histories that contest official archives and dominant ideologies. By foregrounding the lived experiences of marginalized communities—peasants, women, indigenous populations, and lower-caste groups—postcolonial texts destabilize the authority of colonial historiography. These alternative narratives do not merely revise history; they question the very processes through which history is written and remembered. Literature thus becomes an archive of resistance, preserving memories that would otherwise remain excluded from institutional record. Through storytelling, myths, oral traditions, and fragmented narratives, postcolonial writers assert that history is not singular or universal but plural, contested, and deeply political.

Beyond rewriting history, postcolonial literature empowers subaltern voices by restoring agency to those traditionally denied the power to speak for themselves. Agency in these texts does not always appear through overt rebellion or political revolution; rather, it often emerges through everyday acts of survival, refusal, and self-definition. Characters who resist through silence, storytelling, bodily autonomy, or cultural preservation challenge hegemonic structures in subtle yet profound ways. Writers such as Arundhati Roy and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie depict subaltern figures negotiating oppressive systems while asserting their humanity within restrictive social frameworks. Even when these voices remain fragmented or mediated, their presence disrupts dominant narratives that portray the subaltern as passive or voiceless. Literature provides a symbolic space where marginalized subjects can articulate desire, memory, and resistance, thereby reclaiming subjectivity from structures that seek to define them solely through oppression.

Moreover, postcolonial literature resists hegemonic discourse by exposing the continuing operations of power in post-independence and globalized contexts. Neo-colonial forces—economic exploitation, cultural homogenization, and ideological domination—often perpetuate colonial hierarchies under new forms. Postcolonial texts reveal how these forces shape education, governance, and cultural production, limiting the agency of marginalized communities. By critiquing these systems, literature challenges the assumed neutrality of global modernity and development. Importantly, postcolonial writing also imagines possibilities of solidarity, transformation, and ethical responsibility beyond imperial frameworks. In doing so, it moves beyond mere critique to envision alternative futures rooted in justice and inclusivity. Literature thus emerges not only as a reflection of resistance but as an active participant in decolonization, empowering subaltern voices to contest hegemonic discourse and assert their right to narrate their own histories and identities.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that postcolonial literature is an essential venue for expressing resistance and reclaiming agency in the context of colonial and neo-colonial domination. Postcolonial texts challenge the authority of imperial historiography and expose the mechanisms that have silenced and excluded marginalized communities by foregrounding subaltern voices. Literature serves as a counter-discursive practice that revisits suppressed histories and interrogates the power structures responsible for their erasure. Postcolonial authors challenge dominant narratives and reaffirm the dignity of marginalized identities by employing alternative narratives, fragmented storytelling, and culturally rooted forms of expression. In addition, the research emphasizes the capacity of postcolonial literature to empower subaltern subjects by facilitating their assertion of identity, memory, and resistance in the face of constraining social and political structures. The agency is often manifested not through open defiance but through daily actions aimed at survival, cultural preservation, and self-definition, as these texts illustrate. Postcolonial literature reveals the ongoing existence of global inequalities and questions the notion of post-independence freedom as it confronts the enduring realities of neo-colonialism. Ultimately, postcolonial literature acts as a continuous decolonization venture, promoting ethical consciousness and critical interaction with power. It validates literature's ability to counteract oppression,

rethink the past, and aid in creating a more equitable and inclusive global conversation by elevating the voices of those who are marginalized.

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