

A Comparative Study of Subaltern Voices and Social Justice in Arundhati Roy and Aravind Adiga

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Abstract

This paper, “A Comparative Study of Subaltern Voices and Social Justice in Arundhati Roy and Aravind Adiga,” examines the representation of marginalized communities in contemporary Indian English literature through the works of Arundhati Roy and Aravind Adiga. The term “subaltern” refers to socially, economically, and politically marginalized groups whose voices are often excluded from dominant discourse. It explores how Roy, through her politically engaged essays, foregrounds issues such as displacement, environmental injustice, and state oppression, giving voice to communities affected by unequal development. In contrast, Adiga presents the experiences of the urban poor through fiction, using narrative realism, irony, and first-person perspective to depict class divisions, corruption, and limited social mobility. Adopting a comparative approach, the paper highlights both similarities and differences in their treatment of social justice. While Roy’s writing is direct and activist in tone, Adiga employs storytelling to reveal systemic inequalities from within. The study concludes that both authors effectively foreground subaltern voices and critique social injustice, demonstrating the role of literature as a powerful medium for representing marginalized perspectives and questioning dominant social structures.

keywords: Social Justice, Marginalization, Class Inequality, Postcolonialism, Social Criticism

Introduction

The term “subaltern” refers to groups of people who exist on the margins of society and are excluded from dominant structures of power, representation, and privilege. These groups typically include the economically disadvantaged, lower castes, tribal communities, women, and other socially oppressed sections whose voices are often unheard or ignored. The concept was first articulated by Antonio Gramsci, who used it to describe subordinate social groups that lack access to political and cultural dominance. In the Indian context, the idea was further developed by the Subaltern Studies Group, which aimed to reinterpret history by focusing on the perspectives and experiences of marginalized communities rather than elite narratives. Thus, the notion of the subaltern is closely associated with voicelessness, exclusion, and systemic oppression. Closely linked to this is the concept of social justice, which emphasizes

fairness, equality, and the protection of human rights within a society. Social justice seeks to ensure that all individuals, regardless of their socio-economic or cultural background, have equal access to opportunities, resources, and dignity. It challenges structures that perpetuate inequality, such as class hierarchy, caste discrimination, economic disparity, and institutional bias. In this sense, social justice is not merely an ideal but an ongoing process of addressing and correcting social imbalances.

In literature, these concepts play a crucial role, as it often serves as a powerful medium for representing marginalized voices and exposing social realities. Writers use their works to highlight the struggles, aspirations, and lived experiences of subaltern groups, thereby questioning dominant ideologies and power structures. In this regard, the writings of Arundhati Roy and Aravind Adiga provide significant insights into the conditions of the marginalized in contemporary India. While Roy's essays foreground issues of displacement, state violence, and environmental injustice, Adiga's fiction captures the harsh realities of class division, urban poverty, and limited social mobility. Therefore, this conceptual framework establishes the foundation for analyzing how both authors engage with subaltern voices and critique the lack of social justice, offering a deeper understanding of inequality and resistance in modern Indian society.

Subaltern Voices in Arundhati Roy:

Arundhati Roy's engagement with subaltern voices goes beyond literary representation into the realm of political intervention. Her work can be read alongside the concerns of Subaltern Studies, particularly its emphasis on recovering marginalized histories and challenging elite narratives. However, Roy departs from purely academic discourse by embedding her critique within activism and public debate, making her writing both literary and insurgent.

Roy's portrayal of tribal (Adivasi) communities is marked by a refusal to reduce them to passive victims. In essays such as *Walking with the Comrades*, she situates them at the center of resistance movements against state intrusion and corporate extraction. By documenting their everyday lives, struggles, and political consciousness, Roy reframes Adivasis as active agents resisting dispossession. She exposes how state narratives often criminalize these communities by labeling them as insurgents or extremists. Roy counters this by contextualizing their resistance within a history of exploitation, thereby questioning the legitimacy of state violence. Her writing destabilizes the binary between "development" and "backwardness," revealing how tribal ways of life are systematically erased.

Roy's critique of displacement is one of her most sustained interventions. In essays like *The Greater Common Good*, she interrogates projects such as large dams, arguing that they disproportionately impact the poorest sections of society. Here, displacement is not merely physical relocation but a form of cultural erasure and economic marginalization. She carefully documents how displaced populations, often lacking legal literacy or political representation, are excluded from decision-making processes. By foregrounding their testimonies, Roy

challenges official statistics and state narratives that justify displacement as necessary for national progress. Her work thus reframes “development” as a contested and deeply unequal process.

Roy’s attention to the rural poor reflects her broader critique of neoliberal globalization. She highlights how economic liberalization in India has widened the gap between urban elites and rural populations. Through vivid examples and sharp argumentation, she demonstrates that the benefits of growth are unevenly distributed, while the costs, environmental degradation, loss of livelihoods are borne by the marginalized. Her writing often juxtaposes images of urban affluence with rural deprivation, exposing the contradictions of a nation that celebrates economic success while neglecting its most vulnerable citizens. In doing so, Roy critiques not only economic policies but also the ideological frameworks that sustain inequality.

A defining feature of Roy’s work is her uncompromising critique of the alliance between state power and global capitalism. She argues that governments increasingly function as facilitators of corporate interests, often at the expense of democratic accountability. This is evident in her discussions of land acquisition, privatization, and militarization. Roy also interrogates the use of state violence to suppress dissent. Whether addressing anti-insurgency operations in tribal areas or crackdowns on protest movements, she exposes how the state delegitimizes opposition by branding it as anti-national. Her critique is not abstract but grounded in specific cases, making her arguments both credible and urgent.

Roy’s tone is deliberately provocative. She rejects neutrality, positioning herself openly on the side of the oppressed. This directness serves to unsettle readers and challenge complacency. Her language often blends irony, sarcasm, and moral urgency, creating a style that is both engaging and unsettling. Unlike detached academic writing, Roy’s voice is personal and interventionist. She frequently uses rhetorical questions, anecdotal evidence, and vivid imagery to draw readers into the lived realities of marginalized communities.

Roy’s primary focus on “essay writing” functions as a form of activism. Her essays combine investigative journalism, political analysis, and literary storytelling. This hybrid form allows her to reach a wider audience while maintaining intellectual depth. She also incorporates testimonies, field observations, and historical references, creating a multi-layered narrative that bridges the gap between fact and interpretation. Her argumentative structure is carefully crafted to dismantle dominant ideologies and present alternative perspectives.

While Roy powerfully amplifies subaltern voices, some critics question whether she “speaks for” rather than “enables” the subaltern to speak, echoing debates raised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. This tension adds complexity to Roy’s work: it highlights both her importance as an advocate and the limitations inherent in representing marginalized groups.

Arundhati Roy’s writing transforms literature into a site of resistance. By centering tribal communities, displaced populations, and the rural poor, she exposes the deep inequalities embedded in modern development and state power. Her direct, activist tone and argumentative essays challenge dominant narratives and compel readers to confront uncomfortable truths.

Ultimately, Roy does not simply depict subalternity, she politicizes it, making her work a crucial intervention in debates on social justice and power.

Subaltern Voices in Aravind Adiga

In the works of Aravind Adiga, subaltern voices emerge through a strikingly different strategy from Arundhati Roy's overt activism. Adiga does not speak for the marginalized; instead, he creates narrative spaces where the subaltern articulates their own experiences, often in raw, unsettling, and darkly ironic tones. His fiction, especially novels like *The White Tiger*, centers on individuals from the lower strata of society who narrate their lives in the first person, exposing systemic inequality from within.

Adiga's focus is primarily on the urban poor, particularly those who migrate from villages to cities in search of opportunity. He portrays the city not as a site of liberation but as a space of exploitation, where dreams of upward mobility often collapse into harsh realities. Through vivid, often brutal depictions, Adiga captures the everyday struggles of those trapped in poverty, navigating overcrowded spaces, precarious jobs, and social invisibility.

A major contribution of Adiga's work is his representation of servants, drivers, and domestic workers figures who are essential to urban life yet remain socially marginalized. In *The White Tiger*, the protagonist Balram Halwai, a chauffeur, offers an insider's view of servitude in a deeply hierarchical society. Through his narrative, Adiga exposes the psychological and physical constraints imposed on servants, including constant surveillance, humiliation, and lack of autonomy. By allowing such a character to narrate his own story, Adiga dismantles the traditional silence imposed on these roles. The servant is no longer a background figure but a critical observer of the elite class he serves.

Adiga also foregrounds the lives of slum dwellers, depicting their resilience as well as their vulnerability. These spaces are not merely backdrops but active sites of struggle, where individuals negotiate survival amidst scarcity, violence, and neglect. His portrayal avoids romanticization; instead, it highlights the structural conditions that produce and sustain such marginalization.

At the thematic level, Adiga's work revolves around the stark class divide in contemporary India. He contrasts the world of the wealthy marked by excess and privilege with that of the poor, characterized by deprivation and constraint. This divide is not static but enforced through social, economic, and cultural mechanisms. Corruption is another central theme. Adiga presents it as pervasive and normalized, affecting all levels of society from politicians to employers to the subaltern themselves. Importantly, he does not depict corruption as purely immoral but as a survival strategy within a flawed system. The overarching theme is the struggle for survival. Adiga's characters often face moral dilemmas where ethical choices are constrained by necessity. Survival, in his narratives, may require transgression, deception, or even violence, challenging conventional notions of right and wrong.

Adiga's primary technique is fictional narration, which allows him to explore complex social realities through character-driven storytelling. His use of first-person narration is particularly significant: it creates intimacy and immediacy, enabling readers to see the world through the subaltern's perspective. Irony and dark humor are central to his style. Balram's voice, for instance, is laced with sarcasm and wit, even as he recounts traumatic experiences. This irony serves to critique societal norms and expose hypocrisy, making the narrative both engaging and subversive.

Unlike writers who mediate subaltern experiences through an external voice, Adiga allows the subaltern to speak for themselves. The narrative is not filtered through elite interpretation; instead, it is shaped by the consciousness of the marginalized individual. This aligns with broader debates in postcolonial theory about representation and agency. Adiga's narrators are not passive victims—they are observant, critical, and often complicit in the systems they critique. This complexity prevents simplistic moral judgments and reflects the ambiguities of real social conditions.

Adiga's approach can be seen as responding to questions raised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak regarding whether the subaltern can truly speak. While Spivak highlights the structural limitations on subaltern expression, Adiga's fiction imagines a space where such voices can emerge albeit within the constraints of literary construction.

Aravind Adiga's work redefines the representation of subalternity by shifting narrative authority to the marginalized themselves. Through his portrayal of the urban poor, servants, and slum dwellers, and through his use of first-person narration, irony, and fiction, he exposes the deep inequalities of contemporary society. Ultimately, Adiga does not just depict the subaltern—he allows them to narrate their own story, making their voice central rather than peripheral to the narrative.

Comparative Analysis: Arundhati Roy and Aravind Adiga

A comparative analysis of Arundhati Roy and Aravind Adiga reveals both convergence and divergence in their treatment of subaltern voices and the question of social justice in contemporary Indian society. While both authors foreground marginalized individuals and critique entrenched systems of inequality, their narrative strategies, ideological orientations, and representations of agency differ significantly, offering contrasting visions of subalternity. Both Roy and Adiga seek to disrupt dominant narratives by centering characters who exist on the fringes of social, economic, and cultural power. Roy's *The God of Small Things* presents figures such as Velutha and Ammu, whose lives are circumscribed by rigid caste hierarchies and gender norms. Similarly, Adiga's *The White Tiger* introduces Balram Halwai, a servant navigating the brutal realities of class oppression in a rapidly globalizing India. In both cases, the subaltern is not merely a passive subject but a focal point through which systemic injustices are exposed. This shared emphasis aligns with the concerns of Subaltern Studies, which seeks to recover and foreground voices historically excluded from hegemonic discourse.

The two authors diverge sharply in their tonal and ideological approaches. Roy's narrative is deeply lyrical and imbued with a sense of moral urgency. Her prose evokes empathy and foregrounds the emotional and psychological dimensions of oppression. The tragic fate of Velutha, for instance, underscores the devastating consequences of transgressing caste boundaries. In contrast, Adiga employs satire and dark humor to critique social inequality. Balram's narrative voice is irreverent and often unsettling, exposing the hypocrisies of India's economic rise with biting irony. Where Roy seeks to move the reader toward ethical reflection, Adiga provokes discomfort and critical detachment.

A crucial point of comparison lies in the representation of subaltern agencies. Roy's characters are often depicted as constrained by overwhelming structural forces. Although moments of resistance do occur, they are typically met with severe repercussions, reinforcing the inescapability of social hierarchies. Velutha's attempt to assert his humanity ultimately leads to his violent demise, suggesting a tragic limitation on subaltern mobility. Adiga, on the other hand, presents a radically different model of agency. Balram actively rejects his subordinate position, even resorting to murder to secure his freedom. His transformation from servant to entrepreneur signals a form of empowerment, albeit one that is morally ambiguous and deeply unsettling. Thus, while Roy emphasizes structural determinism, Adiga foregrounds individual agency, raising complex questions about the ethical dimensions of resistance.

The authors also differ markedly in their narrative techniques, which shape their portrayal of subaltern voices. Roy's non-linear, fragmented narrative reflects the workings of memory and trauma, creating a layered and immersive reading experience. The multiplicity of perspectives complicates the notion of a singular subaltern voice, suggesting instead a chorus of silenced or suppressed experiences. In contrast, Adiga adopts a first-person, epistolary style, allowing Balram to directly address the reader. This confessional mode lends immediacy and authority to the subaltern voice, positioning Balram as both narrator and commentator. His unapologetic tone challenges traditional expectations of subaltern silence, presenting a voice that is assertive, self-aware, and strategically performative.

The question of social justice further illuminates the divergence between the two writers. Roy's work exposes the deep-rooted injustices of caste and patriarchy but offers little in terms of resolution. Her narrative remains open-ended, emphasizing the persistence of inequality and the difficulty of achieving meaningful change within existing structures. Adiga, by contrast, presents a more pragmatic, if controversial, vision of social mobility. Balram's success suggests that escape from subalternity is possible, but only through complicity in the very systems of exploitation he critiques. This paradox complicates the notion of justice, implying that in a corrupt society, moral transgression may be the only viable path to empowerment.

This tension can be further understood through the theoretical lens of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, particularly her question, "Can the subaltern speak?" In Roy's narrative, the subaltern voice often appears mediated or ultimately silenced, as seen in Velutha's fate. In Adiga's work, however, Balram not only speaks but dominates the narrative, reshaping his identity through storytelling. Yet his voice is not representative of all subalterns; rather, it reflects a

transformation into a new form of elite subjectivity. Thus, both authors complicate the possibility of authentic subaltern expression, albeit in different ways.

While both Arundhati Roy and Aravind Adiga engage deeply with issues of subalternity and social justice, their works offer contrasting perspectives on the nature of oppression and the possibilities of resistance. Roy presents a poignant critique of structural inequality, emphasizing the tragic consequences of defying entrenched hierarchies. Adiga, on the other hand, offers a more provocative and ambivalent portrayal, highlighting the potential for individual agency within a morally compromised system. Together, their works provide a nuanced and multifaceted exploration of subaltern voices in contemporary Indian literature, revealing both the enduring constraints and the complex possibilities of social transformation.

Conclusion

The works of Arundhati Roy and Aravind Adiga converge on a central concern: the persistent struggles of the subaltern in a deeply unequal society. Whether through Roy's focus on tribal communities, displaced populations, and the rural poor, or Adiga's portrayal of urban servants, drivers, and slum dwellers, both writers bring marginalized voices to the forefront of literary and political discourse. At their core, both authors demand social justice. They expose systems that perpetuate inequality, exploitation, and exclusion, revealing how economic growth and modernization often fail to benefit those at the margins. Their works challenge readers to confront uncomfortable realities about power, privilege, and the failure of institutions meant to ensure justice. However, their methods differ significantly. Roy adopts a direct, activist approach, using essays and political critique to speak against authority and advocate for change. Adiga, in contrast, employs fiction, satire, and first-person narration to allow the subaltern to articulate their own experiences from within the system. One confronts from the outside; the other reveals from the inside.

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