

Negotiating Caste and Class: Subaltern Voices in Bama's Short Stories

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of subaltern voices in Bama's short stories through the interconnected lenses of caste and class. Drawing upon Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern and the framework of Subaltern Studies, the paper analyses "The Grazing Fields", "This Man", "The Yellow Butterfly", and "Worldly Wisdom". These stories foreground the experiences of individuals who occupy marginalized positions within society and expose the social, cultural, and economic structures that perpetuate exclusion. Bama's narratives move beyond portraying victimhood by emphasizing resilience, agency, and resistance among oppressed communities. Through ordinary characters such as Kirukkan, Kaanchaarathan, Raju, and the school children of The Yellow Butterfly, Bama reveals how caste discrimination, poverty, hypocrisy, and social prejudice shape everyday life. At the same time, she demonstrates the ability of marginalized individuals to challenge dominant ideologies through wisdom, truth, compassion, and alternative ways of seeing the world. The paper argues that Bama's short stories function as powerful sites of subaltern expression that question hegemonic social structures and affirm the dignity of marginalized lives.

Keywords: Subaltern Voice, Caste, Class, Dalit Literature, Resistance

Introduction

Indian society has long been structured by caste hierarchies that determine access to social, economic, and cultural resources. The voices of those placed at the margins of this hierarchy have often been ignored or distorted in mainstream literature. Dalit literature emerged as a powerful response to this exclusion, providing a platform through which marginalized communities could narrate their own experiences. Among contemporary Dalit writers, Bama occupies a significant position because of her commitment to depicting the everyday realities of Dalit life.

Bama's writings are rooted in lived experiences and focus on ordinary individuals whose struggles reveal broader social injustices. Her short stories portray people who are marginalized not only by caste but also by class and economic deprivation. Rather than presenting them as passive victims, Bama highlights their humanity, intelligence, resilience, and resistance. Through simple yet powerful narratives, she exposes the contradictions of a society that claims to value equality while continuing to practise discrimination.

This paper explores the representation of subaltern voices in four of Bama's short stories: *The Grazing Fields*, *This Man*, *The Yellow Butterfly*, and *Worldly Wisdom*. Using the theoretical framework of Subaltern Studies, the paper examines how these stories challenge dominant narratives and create space for marginalized voices.

Theoretical Framework: Subaltern Studies

The term "subaltern" gained prominence through the works of Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies Collective. It refers to groups that remain socially, politically, and economically marginalized within dominant power structures. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" argues that the voices of the marginalized are often silenced or represented through dominant institutions.

Dalit literature can be understood as an attempt to answer this question by enabling the marginalized to speak for themselves. Bama's stories foreground experiences that are often excluded from mainstream literary discourse. Her narratives become spaces where the subaltern speaks, resists, and negotiates power. The stories under consideration demonstrate how caste and class intersect to create conditions of oppression while also revealing forms of resistance embedded within everyday life.

Caste, Class, and Resistance in *The Grazing Fields*

The Grazing Fields presents the character Kirukkan, a man whom society labels as mad. The title itself evokes open spaces associated with freedom, nature, and simplicity. However, beneath this apparent simplicity lies a profound critique of caste society.

Kirukkan's close relationship with animals and nature contrasts sharply with the prejudices of human society. While people dismiss him as irrational, his observations expose the irrationality of caste discrimination. The story challenges the assumption that social respectability is linked to wisdom. Those considered civilized perpetuate discrimination, whereas the supposedly mad Kirukkan recognizes the equality of all living beings.

The character occupies a subaltern position because he exists outside accepted social structures. His marginality allows him to perceive truths that others ignore. Through Kirukkan, Bama critiques caste ideology and questions the legitimacy of social hierarchies. His voice represents a form of resistance against dominant ways of thinking. The story also highlights class dimensions. Kirukkan's association with rural life and labour places him within economically marginalized communities. Yet his wisdom challenges the superiority claimed by privileged groups. Bama thus demonstrates that knowledge and dignity are not determined by caste or class status.

Marginalized Humanity in *This Man*

This Man centres on Kaancharathan, a wandering figure who is admired by children but misunderstood by adults. The story explores how society judges individuals based on social norms and expectations. Adults view Kaancharathan with suspicion because he does not conform to conventional standards of behaviour. Children, however, respond to him with openness and affection. This contrast reveals how prejudice is socially learned. Whereas adults impose labels and stereotypes, children recognize the humanity of the individual.

Kaancharathan represents those who exist at the margins of society. His exclusion reflects broader patterns of social discrimination. Although he lacks institutional power, his presence disrupts dominant assumptions about worth and respectability. The story suggests that marginalized individuals often possess forms of knowledge and creativity overlooked by mainstream society.

Through songs and interactions with children, Kaancharathan creates an alternative community based on joy and acceptance. His relationship with children symbolizes the possibility of a society free from caste prejudice and social exclusion. Bama uses this character to critique the mechanisms through which dominant groups define normality. The story argues that social value cannot be measured through status, wealth, or conformity. Instead, genuine humanity emerges through compassion, imagination, and connection.

Symbolism of Freedom in The Yellow Butterfly

Among the stories discussed, The Yellow Butterfly offers a symbolic exploration of freedom and captivity. The narrative focuses on a classroom lesson in which a butterfly becomes a means of teaching students about liberty. The butterfly functions as a powerful metaphor for marginalized communities. Like the butterfly, oppressed groups often find themselves trapped within structures beyond their control. The distinction between freedom and confinement becomes central to the story's meaning.

The educational setting is significant because schools are expected to promote equality and social transformation. Yet Bama frequently exposes how educational institutions reproduce social inequalities. In *The Yellow Butterfly*, however, the lesson encourages students to reflect critically on the value of freedom. The story suggests that liberation is not merely physical but also intellectual and emotional. The butterfly's desire for freedom mirrors the aspirations of marginalized communities seeking dignity and self-determination. Through this symbol, Bama invites readers to question all forms of oppression, whether based on caste, class, gender, or social status. The butterfly also represents hope. Despite barriers and constraints, the possibility of freedom remains alive. This optimistic vision distinguishes Bama's work from narratives that focus solely on suffering. Her stories acknowledge oppression while simultaneously affirming the human desire for liberation.

Truth and Social Hypocrisy in Worldly Wisdom

Worldly Wisdom examines the experiences of Raju, a young boy who is taught that honesty is a virtue. However, whenever he tells the truth, he is punished by those around him. This contradiction exposes the gap between moral ideals and social reality.

The story reveals the hypocrisy embedded within social institutions. Adults preach honesty yet reward conformity and silence. Raju's confusion arises because he takes moral teachings seriously. His experiences demonstrate how society often values convenience over truth. From a subaltern perspective, the story highlights the difficulties faced by those who challenge dominant narratives. Truth-telling becomes an act of resistance because it exposes contradictions within systems of power. Raju's honesty threatens social norms that depend upon silence and compromise.

The story also critiques educational practices that fail to prepare individuals for social realities. Children are encouraged to believe in moral principles, yet they encounter a world governed by inequality and prejudice. This tension reflects broader contradictions within

society. Raju's experiences symbolize the struggles of marginalized communities whose truths are often ignored or suppressed. By presenting the story through a child's perspective, Bama emphasizes the absurdity of social hypocrisy. The innocence of the child exposes the moral failures of adults.

Negotiating Caste and Class Across the Stories

Although each story focuses on different characters and situations, common themes connect them. The most significant of these is the intersection of caste and class. Bama demonstrates that social marginalization cannot be understood solely through economic categories or caste identities. Instead, caste and class operate together to shape lived experiences.

In *The Grazing Fields*, caste prejudice determines how Kirukkan is perceived despite his wisdom. In *This Man*, social exclusion affects Kaancharathan because he occupies a marginal social position. In *The Yellow Butterfly*, freedom becomes a metaphor for liberation from oppressive structures. In *Worldly Wisdom*, truth itself becomes a site of struggle against social hypocrisy. Another common theme is resistance. None of the protagonists possesses institutional power. Yet each character challenges dominant ideologies in subtle but significant ways. Kirukkan exposes the irrationality of caste discrimination. Kaancharathan creates spaces of joy and acceptance. The butterfly symbolizes aspirations for freedom. Raju's honesty reveals social contradictions.

These forms of resistance may appear small, but they possess transformative potential. Bama suggests that social change often begins through everyday acts of courage and critical awareness. Her stories emphasize the importance of recognizing humanity in those whom society marginalizes. The stories also challenge stereotypes about Dalit communities. Rather than portraying them solely as victims, Bama presents complex individuals capable of

reflection, creativity, and agency. This representation itself constitutes an act of resistance against dominant narratives that reduce marginalized groups to passive objects of sympathy.

Conclusion

Bama's short stories provide a powerful exploration of caste, class, and subalternity in contemporary Indian society. Through characters such as Kirukkan, Kaancharathan, Raju, and the students of *The Yellow Butterfly*, she foregrounds voices that have historically been excluded from mainstream discourse. Her narratives reveal the persistence of discrimination while simultaneously highlighting the resilience and agency of marginalized communities.

Using the framework of Subaltern Studies, this paper has demonstrated how Bama's stories challenge dominant structures of power and create spaces for alternative forms of knowledge and expression. The stories expose social hypocrisy, question caste hierarchies, celebrate freedom, and affirm the dignity of marginalized lives. Ultimately, Bama transforms literature into a site of resistance where the subaltern not only speaks but also reshapes the terms through which society understands justice, equality, and humanity.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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