JSL, 9(6), June 2024: 794-803

Online ISSN: 2456-1495
CODEN (USA): JSLOBJ



A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SOCIOECONOMIC, CULTURAL, AND POLITICAL OPPRESSION OF SUBALTERN IDENTITIES IN AMERICAN AND DALIT LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines the socioeconomic, cultural, and political oppression experienced by subaltern communities through a comparative analysis of American and Dalit literature. Both literary traditions provide significant insights into the historical marginalization of socially disadvantaged populations and their struggles for dignity, identity, equality, and representation. African American literature explores the consequences of slavery, racial discrimination, segregation, economic exploitation, and institutional inequality, whereas Dalit literature highlights caste-based discrimination, untouchability, social exclusion, and cultural domination. Despite differences in their historical and geographical circumstances, both traditions reveal how dominant social structures maintain inequality through institutional practices, ideological control, and cultural representations. The study investigates literary expressions of resistance, self-assertion, collective consciousness, and the reconstruction of marginalized identities. Through a comparative and qualitative textual approach, it examines selected literary narratives as instruments of social criticism and transformation. It argues that American and Dalit literature challenge hegemonic structures while establishing alternative spaces for historically silenced voices.

Keywords: Subalternity, American Literature, Dalit Literature, Socioeconomic Oppression, Cultural Hegemony, Political Marginalization, Identity, Resistance, Social Justice, Representation.

Online ISSN: 2456-1495
CODEN (USA): JSLOBJ

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature has consistently functioned as an important medium for understanding social inequality, historical injustice, and the experiences of marginalized communities. The concept of subalternity provides a critical framework for examining individuals and groups who remain excluded from dominant political, economic, and cultural structures. The term gained theoretical significance through Antonio Gramsci's discussion of subordinated social groups and subsequently developed through Subaltern Studies and postcolonial criticism. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak further complicated the concept by examining the relationship between representation, political authority, and the silencing of marginalized subjects. From this perspective, American and Dalit literary traditions offer valuable opportunities to understand how systems of domination construct social identities and restrict the possibilities of individual and collective advancement.

African American literature emerged from historical experiences of enslavement, racial segregation, colonial exploitation, and continuing struggles for civil rights. Writers such as Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker have represented the psychological, social, and economic consequences of racial oppression. Their writings expose the mechanisms through which racial hierarchies determine access to education, employment, political participation, and cultural recognition. Similarly, Dalit literature developed as a powerful expression of communities historically subjected to caste discrimination, untouchability, humiliation, and social exclusion. Writers such as Bama, Omprakash Valmiki, Daya Pawar, and Sharan Kumar Limbale have documented experiences that dominant literary traditions frequently neglected. Their narratives transform personal suffering into collective testimony and political criticism.

Although American and Dalit societies possess different historical structures, their literary traditions demonstrate significant similarities in the operation of social domination. Race and caste function as historically established systems through which privileged groups maintain authority and reproduce inequality. Both systems influence social relationships, economic opportunities, cultural belonging, and institutional participation. However, these categories should not be treated as identical because racial oppression in the United States and caste-based discrimination in India have distinct historical foundations, ideological justifications, and social arrangements. Their comparison becomes meaningful when it identifies both shared mechanisms of exclusion and the specific conditions under which marginalized communities experience discrimination. Literary

E-mail: editor.jslsci888@gmail.com

Online ISSN: 2456-1495
CODEN (USA): JSLOBJ

representation therefore becomes a significant method of examining the relationship between identity, power, and resistance.

The present research comparatively investigates the socioeconomic, cultural, and political oppression of subaltern identities in American and Dalit literature. It focuses on the representation of marginalized communities, the influence of hegemonic institutions, and the literary strategies through which oppressed individuals reclaim their voices. The study adopts a qualitative and comparative approach based on selected literary texts and relevant theoretical perspectives. It examines how literature exposes social inequalities, challenges dominant historical narratives, and articulates alternative understandings of identity and citizenship. The central argument is that American and Dalit literary traditions do not merely represent oppression; they also create intellectual and cultural spaces through which marginalized communities question established power relations and demand social transformation.

II. SOCIOECONOMIC OPPRESSION AND THE STRUCTURAL MARGINALIZATION OF SUBALTERN COMMUNITIES

Socioeconomic oppression represents one of the most persistent mechanisms through which dominant social groups maintain their authority over marginalized populations. In American and Dalit literary traditions, economic inequality is closely connected with historical systems of racial and caste-based discrimination. African American communities experienced generations of economic exploitation through slavery, forced labour, discriminatory employment practices, and unequal access to property ownership. Even after the formal abolition of slavery, institutional racism continued to restrict opportunities for economic advancement. American writers have frequently represented these inequalities through narratives depicting poverty, unemployment, housing discrimination, and the psychological consequences of economic insecurity. Such literary representations reveal that political freedom does not automatically guarantee economic equality.

Richard Wright's *Native Son* offers an important literary examination of the relationship between racial identity, poverty, and social exclusion. The protagonist, Bigger Thomas, experiences a social environment in which racial discrimination and restricted economic opportunities shape his existence. His circumstances illustrate how institutional inequalities can influence individual consciousness and social behaviour. Similarly, James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* explores the relationship between race, class, family, and religious authority. These narratives demonstrate that socioeconomic deprivation cannot be understood independently of cultural and

Online ISSN: 2456-1495
CODEN (USA): JSLOBJ

political structures. Economic marginalization becomes particularly oppressive when individuals are denied the resources necessary to exercise meaningful freedom and participate equally in society.

Dalit literature presents another significant account of socioeconomic exploitation through the lived experiences of caste-oppressed communities. Historically, caste-based occupational restrictions limited access to education, landownership, employment, and other economic resources. Dalit communities were frequently compelled to perform socially stigmatized occupations while being excluded from institutions controlled by dominant castes. Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan* provides a powerful representation of these conditions. The narrative documents experiences of poverty, humiliation, educational discrimination, and the social consequences of untouchability. Economic deprivation appears not simply as an individual difficulty but as an outcome of deeply embedded caste relations. The text demonstrates how social hierarchy influences the distribution of resources and determines the everyday possibilities available to marginalized individuals.

Bama's *Karukku* similarly explores the relationship between caste discrimination, labour, gender, and social inequality. The narrative represents the experiences of Dalit women whose labour remains economically necessary but socially undervalued. Their exploitation emerges through the combined influence of caste hierarchy, patriarchal authority, and unequal employment relationships. The literary representation of Dalit women's experiences reveals that socioeconomic oppression operates through multiple interconnected structures. While caste determines social position, gender influences the distribution of responsibilities, opportunities, and vulnerabilities. Consequently, Dalit literature broadens the discussion of economic exploitation by highlighting experiences that cannot be adequately explained through class relations alone.

A comparative examination of American and Dalit literature demonstrates that economic inequality is frequently reproduced through institutional discrimination and unequal social relationships. African American narratives expose the consequences of racialized labour markets and residential segregation, whereas Dalit narratives reveal the influence of caste-based occupational hierarchy and social exclusion. Both literary traditions challenge the assumption that economic deprivation results exclusively from individual failure or insufficient effort. Instead, they demonstrate how historical disadvantages become embedded in social institutions and everyday practices. Their narratives emphasize that access to education, employment, property, and social mobility is closely connected with the distribution of political and cultural power.

Online ISSN: 2456-1495
CODEN (USA): JSLOBJ

Nevertheless, the comparison also identifies important differences between the two experiences. American racial oppression developed through slavery, colonial expansion, segregation, and racialized citizenship, while Dalit oppression emerged from the historical organization of caste, ritual hierarchy, and untouchability within Indian society. These systems possess distinct ideological and institutional characteristics. Their literary representations should therefore be compared without reducing one experience to the other. Both traditions ultimately establish that economic justice requires more than formal legal equality. It demands the transformation of discriminatory institutions, the redistribution of opportunities, and recognition of the dignity of historically marginalized communities.

III. CULTURAL HEGEMONY, IDENTITY FORMATION, AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Cultural hegemony operates through the ability of dominant groups to establish their values, beliefs, language, and social practices as accepted standards within society. Antonio Gramsci's theoretical understanding of hegemony explains how domination is maintained not only through direct coercion but also through the production of consent. In American and Dalit literature, cultural domination becomes visible through the representation of racial stereotypes, caste prejudices, religious authority, linguistic discrimination, and exclusion from established literary traditions. Dominant cultural institutions frequently determine which experiences are considered legitimate and whose voices receive recognition. Consequently, subaltern identities are often represented through external interpretations rather than through their own experiences and perspectives.

African American literature challenges cultural hegemony by questioning racial stereotypes and dominant definitions of national identity. During slavery and segregation, African Americans were frequently portrayed through dehumanizing representations that justified discrimination and social exclusion. Literary writers challenged these constructions by presenting Black individuals as complex human subjects possessing intellectual, emotional, cultural, and political agency. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* examines the traumatic legacy of slavery and its influence on memory, identity, family, and historical consciousness. Through its narrative structure, the novel reveals how the experiences of enslaved individuals are frequently excluded from conventional historical accounts. Morrison restores significance to suppressed memories and establishes literature as a medium for confronting historical silences.

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Dalit literature similarly challenges the cultural authority of dominant caste traditions. Conventional literary representations have frequently marginalized the experiences, languages, and cultural practices of Dalit communities. Dalit writers respond by presenting everyday experiences of discrimination, labour, humiliation, community life, and resistance as legitimate literary subjects. Their writings challenge the assumption that literary value must be determined by upper-caste aesthetic standards. Sharan Kumar Limbale, in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, argues for a critical understanding of literary expression grounded in Dalit experiences and social realities. This perspective questions the exclusionary standards through which marginalized voices have historically been evaluated and interpreted.

Language plays a central role in the formation and reconstruction of marginalized identities. African American literary traditions have employed vernacular expressions, oral storytelling, spirituals, blues, and culturally specific linguistic forms to challenge dominant linguistic hierarchies. Such expressions preserve historical memory and establish a distinctive cultural identity. Similarly, Dalit writers incorporate regional languages, community expressions, oral traditions, and everyday speech into literary narratives. Bama's *Karukku* demonstrates how linguistic choices can challenge dominant literary conventions and communicate the lived experiences of marginalized women. The use of community-based language becomes an assertion of cultural autonomy and a rejection of the belief that dominant linguistic forms possess exclusive literary legitimacy.

The politics of representation also raises questions concerning who has the authority to narrate subaltern experiences. Spivak's discussion of representation highlights the difference between speaking on behalf of marginalized communities and allowing them to articulate their own experiences. In American and Dalit literature, autobiographical writing, testimonial narratives, and community-based storytelling challenge the traditional authority of elite narrators. These literary forms create possibilities for self-representation while also exposing the limitations of external interpretations. Mantra Roy's comparative research on African American and Dalit literature demonstrates how hegemonic socioeconomic, cultural, and political structures influence the representation of marginalized identities.

Despite their transformative potential, literary representations cannot automatically eliminate cultural domination. Publishing institutions, educational curricula, translation practices, and academic criticism may continue to privilege dominant perspectives. Marginalized writers can also experience exclusion within movements that challenge oppression when gender, class, or

Online ISSN: 2456-1495
CODEN (USA): JSLOBJ

community hierarchies remain unexamined. A meaningful understanding of cultural resistance therefore requires attention to differences within marginalized communities. American and Dalit literary traditions demonstrate that cultural transformation involves not only the production of alternative narratives but also the creation of institutions that recognize diverse experiences, linguistic identities, and forms of knowledge.

IV. POLITICAL OPPRESSION, RESISTANCE, AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF SUBALTERN AGENCY

Political oppression represents the systematic restriction of the rights, participation, and institutional influence of marginalized communities. In American literature, racial discrimination historically affected citizenship, voting rights, access to public institutions, and participation in democratic processes. African American writers have documented the contradictions between democratic ideals and discriminatory social practices. Their narratives expose how political institutions may formally recognize equality while continuing to reproduce unequal social conditions. The literary representation of racial injustice therefore becomes an important method of examining the limitations of democratic systems and the continuing struggle for substantive citizenship.

James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* provides a critical examination of racial inequality, religious authority, and the political responsibilities associated with social transformation. Baldwin questions the moral foundations of racial discrimination and exposes the consequences of maintaining social divisions through inherited prejudice. Similarly, narratives associated with the African American civil rights tradition emphasize collective mobilization, community solidarity, and political resistance. Literature records the experiences of individuals whose demands for equal treatment challenge established institutional authority. These writings demonstrate that political agency develops through both individual consciousness and collective action.

Dalit literature presents political resistance through the rejection of caste hierarchy and the demand for constitutional equality, human dignity, and social justice. The intellectual legacy of B. R. Ambedkar has played a significant role in shaping Dalit political consciousness. His emphasis on education, organization, and agitation established an influential framework for challenging caste-based domination. Dalit literary narratives frequently connect personal experiences of humiliation with broader questions of democratic participation, representation, and citizenship.

Online ISSN: 2456-1495
CODEN (USA): JSLOBJ

Their political significance lies in transforming individual testimony into a collective critique of social institutions and inherited authority.

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* illustrates how autobiographical literature can become an instrument of political resistance. By documenting experiences of caste discrimination, the author challenges the social practices that normalize untouchability and exclusion. The narrative does not present suffering as an unavoidable condition; instead, it exposes the historical structures responsible for producing inequality. Likewise, Daya Pawar's *Baluta* examines the relationship between caste, poverty, social humiliation, and identity. These works establish the importance of autobiographical testimony in creating alternative historical records and questioning the authority of dominant social narratives.

The comparative study of political resistance in American and Dalit literature reveals that subaltern agency is expressed through protest, education, self-representation, collective organization, and cultural transformation. African American literary movements have contributed to the development of racial consciousness and demands for equal citizenship, while Dalit literary movements have challenged caste hierarchy and asserted the principles of social equality and human dignity. Both traditions demonstrate that marginalized individuals are not merely passive recipients of oppression. They actively reinterpret their experiences, construct collective identities, and challenge the institutions responsible for their exclusion. The emergence of alternative literary voices therefore constitutes an important dimension of political participation.

However, resistance remains a complex process because marginalized identities are internally diverse. Gender, class, religion, education, and regional differences influence the opportunities available to individuals within oppressed communities. Dalit women, for example, experience caste discrimination alongside patriarchal restrictions, while African American women encounter the interconnected effects of racial and gender inequality. Their literary representations challenge forms of resistance that address only one dimension of domination. Ultimately, American and Dalit literature establish that meaningful emancipation requires structural reform, democratic participation, cultural recognition, and the protection of equal rights. Literature contributes to this process by preserving marginalized memories and encouraging critical engagement with social power.

V. CONCLUSION

Online ISSN: 2456-1495
CODEN (USA): JSLOBJ

The comparative examination of American and Dalit literature demonstrates that socioeconomic, cultural, and political oppression remains closely connected with historically established systems of social hierarchy. Although racial discrimination and caste-based exclusion developed within different historical and institutional contexts, both have restricted the opportunities, identities, and public participation of marginalized communities. The literary traditions examined in this study reveal how unequal access to economic resources, cultural recognition, and political authority influences the everyday experiences of subaltern populations. They also demonstrate that oppression cannot be understood exclusively as an individual experience because it is sustained through institutions, ideologies, and inherited social practices.

The analysis of socioeconomic marginalization establishes that poverty and exclusion are frequently reproduced through discriminatory structures. American literature exposes the consequences of slavery, segregation, racialized labour, and unequal citizenship, whereas Dalit literature highlights occupational restrictions, untouchability, educational exclusion, and caste-based exploitation. The examination of cultural hegemony further demonstrates that dominant groups maintain authority by controlling representations, linguistic standards, and accepted forms of knowledge. Through autobiographical narratives, vernacular expressions, and alternative storytelling techniques, marginalized writers challenge these established structures and reclaim their identities.

The study also emphasizes the political significance of literary resistance. African American and Dalit writers transform personal experiences of discrimination into collective expressions of social criticism and democratic aspiration. Their narratives question institutional authority, preserve suppressed histories, and establish alternative forms of representation. Nevertheless, resistance must also address inequalities within marginalized communities, particularly those associated with gender, class, and social position. The experiences of women and other doubly marginalized groups demonstrate the importance of intersectional approaches to literary and social analysis.

Ultimately, American and Dalit literature function as important instruments of social awareness, intellectual resistance, and cultural transformation. Their comparative study expands the understanding of subalternity by identifying both shared structures of domination and historically specific experiences of oppression. Literature does not independently eliminate discrimination, but it contributes to the development of critical consciousness and the recognition of marginalized voices. The study concludes that social emancipation requires institutional equality, economic opportunity, cultural dignity, and meaningful political participation. By challenging hegemonic

narratives and asserting alternative identities, American and Dalit literary traditions contribute significantly to the continuing pursuit of justice, equality, and human dignity.

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