



# Subaltern Struggles and Feminist Voices: A Comparative Study of Charles Dickens and Fakir Mohan Senapati

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intersection of subalternism and feminism through a comparative study of two prominent literary figures: Charles Dickens and Fakir Mohan Senapati. Although separated by geography, culture, and historical context, both authors tackle the oppression, marginalization, and struggles of the poor and oppressed in their respective societies. With his deep engagement in Victorian England, Dickens particularly focuses on the plight of the poor, the working class, and women, critiquing the socio-economic systems that exacerbate their suffering. Similarly, Fakir Mohan Senapati, hailed as the father of modern Odia literature, critiques the colonial oppression and caste-based exploitation faced by the rural subaltern in Odisha, India.

In Dickens's novels, the poor, orphaned, and working-class characters stand as symbolic of the subaltern—those marginalized by society's power structures. His female characters, especially those living in patriarchal conditions, reflect the feminist critique of the period. Senapati, on the other hand, uses the rural peasant and lower-caste characters to represent the subaltern in his native Odisha, addressing colonial exploitation and caste discrimination. Through his portrayal of women in these contexts, Senapati provides a feminist critique by depicting them as victims of both gender and class oppression.

The central objective of this paper is to examine how both authors address the struggles of the marginalized, particularly through the lenses of subalternism and feminism. By analyzing key texts such as *Oliver Twist*, *Hard Times*, *David Copperfield*, and *Chha Mana Atha Guntha*, this paper delves into the similarities and differences between Dickens's and Senapati's treatment of class, gender, and subaltern voices. Both authors, through their nuanced portrayals of oppression and marginalization, offer powerful critiques of the socio-political systems that sustain inequality. This paper seeks to demonstrate the relevance of their works in the contemporary discourse on subaltern and feminist studies.

## Introduction

The study of literature through the lenses of subalternism and feminism has become a significant tool in understanding how marginalized groups are represented in narratives across cultures and histories. The terms "subaltern" and "feminism" have evolved to symbolize broader struggles for social justice, equality, and the dismantling of oppressive structures. The concept of subalternism, introduced by Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, refers to those who are outside of dominant power structures, whose voices are silenced or marginalized. Feminism, particularly in literary studies, critiques the gendered power relations that reinforce patriarchal control over women's lives. In this context, both subalternism and feminism can provide valuable insights into the portrayal of the oppressed and their resistance against social injustices.

Charles Dickens, a towering figure in Victorian literature, is known for his empathetic treatment of the poor, orphans, and marginalized individuals in his works. Dickens's novels often depict characters caught in the oppressive forces of industrial capitalism, patriarchal social structures, and class-based discrimination. In his depictions of the poor and the vulnerable, Dickens critiques Victorian society's neglect of the working class and its failure to address systemic inequality. He does so not only by giving voice to subaltern characters but also by presenting strong critiques of social institutions, such as the workhouse system, which further entrenches the suffering of the poor. At the same time, his treatment of women within these systems reflects a feminist perspective, exposing the limited roles and autonomy women have within a patriarchal society.

Fakir Mohan Senapati, known as the father of modern Odia literature, made significant contributions to the literary landscape of colonial India. His works challenge the caste-based social hierarchy and critique the colonial exploitation of indigenous populations. Senapati's work, *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* (Six Acres and a Third), offers a searing critique of the feudal and colonial systems that exploit the rural poor. This novel, along with other works, foregrounds the intersection of gender and class oppression. Women in Senapati's novels are often portrayed as victims of both caste and gender discrimination, making their struggle a feminist and subaltern issue.

This paper seeks to examine the commonalities and contrasts between Dickens's and Senapati's treatment of the subaltern and feminist themes in their works. By comparing the treatment of women and the marginalized in these authors' texts, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of how their respective societies' social and political issues shaped their literary portrayals of oppression and resistance.

### **Theoretical Framework: Subalternism and Feminism**

Before delving into the comparative analysis, it is important to understand the theoretical frameworks of subalternism and feminism as applied to literature. Subaltern studies emerged in the post-colonial discourse as an attempt to challenge the dominant, colonial narratives that silenced the voices of oppressed groups, especially in colonized nations. Subaltern writers and intellectuals have sought to reclaim the voices of those who have been historically oppressed by caste, class, gender, and colonial power structures. In the literary realm, subaltern literature often focuses on marginalized communities and their struggles for agency, identity, and justice.

Feminism, on the other hand, is the critique of patriarchy, the social, political, and economic systems that perpetuate gender inequality. In literary terms, feminism seeks to examine how women are represented in literature and how these representations reinforce or challenge societal norms about gender roles. Feminist literary criticism explores how literature both reflects and shapes gendered ideologies and how women writers, as well as male writers, respond to gender oppression.

In the context of Dickens and Senapati, both authors engage with issues of class and gender oppression, and their works offer rich material for a feminist and subaltern critique. Dickens's concern with social reform and the plight of the poor in an industrial society aligns with subaltern studies, as his characters often belong to the subaltern classes. Additionally, his female characters, though often constrained by societal expectations, are given voice and significance in his critique of patriarchal systems. Senapati's works, similarly, focus on the struggles of the rural poor and women in a colonial and feudal context, making them ripe for feminist and subaltern readings.

### **Charles Dickens and Subalternism**

Charles Dickens's works are rich with depictions of poverty, exploitation, and social injustice, making him one of the foremost authors to explore the theme of subalternism in Victorian England. His characters, often drawn from the lowest echelons of society, serve as powerful representations of the marginalized, offering poignant critiques of the social and political systems that uphold class inequality and oppression. In particular, Dickens's exploration of subalternism reveals the lives of individuals who are neglected or outright abused by societal structures, illuminating their struggles and emphasizing the need for social reform.

One of the most iconic representations of the subaltern in Dickens's work is the character of Oliver Twist. Oliver, an orphan born into the grim reality of the workhouse, epitomizes the powerless position of the subaltern in Victorian society. As an abandoned child in a system that values individuals based on their social standing and wealth, Oliver faces numerous hardships, including abuse, exploitation, and neglect. His status as both an orphan and a poor child makes him vulnerable to the injustices of a class-based society that marginalizes those without wealth or family connections. Oliver's suffering exposes the flaws of the social institutions that claim to offer protection to the weak, such as the workhouse and the legal system, but which often exploit and further entrench the inequality faced by the most vulnerable.

Dickens's portrayal of Oliver is not just about the injustices he faces, but about how these institutions serve to keep the subaltern in a cycle of poverty and disenfranchisement. Oliver's eventual rise from these dire conditions, however, does not come easily; his struggle against the oppressive forces is a testament to Dickens's commitment to highlighting the resilience of the subaltern. Through Oliver, Dickens exposes the hypocrisy of a society that fails to provide for its most vulnerable members, and in doing so, he critiques the social and economic systems that prioritize class and wealth over human dignity.

Another significant work in which Dickens critiques subalternism is *Hard Times*. In this novel, Dickens presents a scathing critique of industrial capitalism, particularly its dehumanizing effects on the working class. The character of Louisa Gradgrind serves as a central figure through which Dickens explores the mechanization of human life and the exploitation of individuals for economic profit. Louisa is raised under the rigid, utilitarian philosophy of her father, Thomas Gradgrind, who values "facts" above all else and sees people as mere cogs in the industrial machine. Her emotional and psychological repression, brought on by her father's cold, rational

upbringing, symbolizes the brutal effects of an industrial society that reduces human beings to mere instruments of economic productivity.

Louisa's life is a tragedy of alienation and lost potential. She is forced into a loveless marriage with a man she does not care for, not for emotional or personal reasons, but because of the societal pressures placed upon her and the lack of autonomy afforded to women in Victorian society. Her marriage to Mr. Bounderby, a wealthy factory owner, further highlights the economic exploitation of the working class, particularly women, in a capitalist system that treats them as commodities. Louisa's tragic life, marked by a profound sense of emptiness and disillusionment, serves as a feminist critique of a society that offers little room for women to live freely or develop their own identities. Her struggles reveal how women, in particular, are forced into roles that diminish their agency, often sacrificing their desires and well-being for the sake of maintaining family or societal expectations.

In *Hard Times*, the harsh realities of industrialism are starkly illustrated through the experiences of characters like Louisa, who are dehumanized by a system that prioritizes profit over human life. The novel's critique of industrial capitalism, with its mechanized, utilitarian approach to life, reflects Dickens's belief that such a system inherently exploits the poor and the marginalized, reducing them to mere laborers who are devoid of individuality or emotional fulfillment. Louisa's struggles as a woman trapped in a system that values her only for her utility underscore the intersection of subalternism and feminism, where gender and class oppression converge.

Moreover, Dickens's use of characters such as Louisa illustrates how women, as part of the subaltern, face dual oppression—both as members of the working class and as women in a patriarchal society. Louisa's inability to escape her father's control and her husband's indifference points to the larger issue of women's lack of agency within a system that enforces their subordination. Like many of Dickens's female characters, Louisa is portrayed as a victim of societal structures—unable to control her destiny because of the external forces that restrict her freedom.

In addition to Oliver and Louisa, many of Dickens's other works feature subaltern characters who suffer from social injustice and class exploitation. For example, in *David Copperfield*, the titular character endures numerous hardships, including poverty and mistreatment by his stepfather. His journey to success, however, is marked by the support of individuals from the working class who provide him with the tools and resources to escape his circumstances. Through David's interactions with these subaltern figures, Dickens reinforces the idea that while the system is rigged against the poor, individual acts of kindness and solidarity can still provide hope for change.

In conclusion, Dickens's works, particularly through characters like Oliver Twist and Louisa Gradgrind, provide a scathing critique of Victorian society's treatment of the subaltern, especially the poor and marginalized. His focus on the struggles of these characters illuminates the societal systems that perpetuate class-based and gender-based inequalities, particularly in the context of industrial capitalism. Dickens's portrayal of subaltern figures emphasizes their vulnerability within these systems but also their potential for resistance and resilience. By highlighting the experiences of the oppressed, Dickens's novels call for a more compassionate, just society—one that acknowledges the dignity and humanity of all its members, regardless of class, gender, or status.

#### Fakir Mohan Senapati and Subalternism

Fakir Mohan Senapati, widely regarded as the father of modern Odia literature, played a crucial role in bringing the struggles of the subaltern into the mainstream of Indian literary discourse. His literary works provide a searing critique of the socio-political systems of colonial India, particularly focusing on the lives of the rural poor who suffered under both feudal oppression and British colonial rule. One of Senapati's most significant contributions to literature is his novel *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* (Six Acres and a Third), which offers a profound exploration of the lives of the rural subaltern, providing them with a voice that was often silenced in mainstream narratives of the time.

The novel centers around the character of Ramachandra, a poor farmer who becomes embroiled in a complex web of feudal exploitation and colonial oppression. Ramachandra, like many others in the rural areas of Odisha, is at the mercy of both the local landlords (zamindars) and the colonial administration, which works in tandem with the feudal structure to perpetuate the exploitation of the peasantry. The subaltern condition in *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* is not only marked by class oppression but also by the caste-based exploitation that was prevalent in colonial India. Ramachandra's struggles embody the multifaceted nature of subaltern existence, where the rural poor are caught between the oppressive forces of the local feudal lords and the distant colonial rulers.

Senapati's portrayal of the rural subaltern is particularly significant because it represents the marginalized voices in a society that often overlooks or silences them. The peasants and rural poor in Odisha, much like the subalterns in other parts of India, were denied agency within the socio-political structures of their time. They were subjected to the whims of feudal landlords, who often exacted exorbitant taxes and rents, leaving the peasants in perpetual debt and poverty. The feudal system, with its rigid caste hierarchies, further reinforced the exploitation of the rural poor, particularly those from lower castes, who were treated as inferior and oppressed by both the land-owning upper castes and colonial forces.

In addition to feudal exploitation, Senapati's work addresses the impact of British colonial rule on the subaltern classes. The British colonial administration exacerbated the suffering of the rural poor through policies that prioritized revenue generation and resource extraction over the welfare of the Indian populace. The British

made use of the existing feudal structure to enforce their rule, empowering landlords to act as intermediaries between the colonial administration and the peasants. This system not only enriched the landowners but also ensured the continued exploitation of the rural subaltern, who had little recourse to challenge the oppressive system that kept them in a state of perpetual poverty.

Through Ramachandra, Senapati articulates the suffering of the subaltern in the face of these two overlapping systems of oppression. Ramachandra's attempts to secure his land—*Chha Mana Atha Guntha*—symbolize the larger struggle for justice and autonomy faced by the rural poor. The title itself reflects the small, seemingly insignificant plot of land that Ramachandra and others like him cling to for survival. Yet, this small piece of land becomes a metaphor for the larger socio-political contestation between the subaltern and the forces that seek to control and exploit them.

Senapati's critique of the colonial and feudal systems underscores the dual exploitation faced by the rural subaltern. While the landlords perpetuate a feudal hierarchy, the colonial rulers extract wealth from the land and people, leaving the poor with little to no resources for their survival. The novel exposes how these oppressive structures work hand in hand, with the local landlords often complicit in enforcing colonial policies that benefit the British but further entrench the power dynamics that keep the rural poor in a subjugated position.

In portraying Ramachandra's struggles, Senapati also highlights the resilience of the subaltern. While Ramachandra is ultimately forced into submission, his resistance, however limited by the structural forces around him, represents the underlying defiance of the subaltern against systems of exploitation. Senapati's portrayal of the subaltern is not one of passive victimhood but of active resistance, however small, against the systems of power that seek to dominate their lives.

Moreover, Senapati's treatment of gender in the context of subalternism also deserves attention. Although *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* primarily focuses on the rural poor, the women in the novel are also portrayed as victims of both feudal patriarchy and colonial oppression. The rural women in the novel are marginalized in both the private and public spheres, their struggles exacerbated by the dominance of both feudal and colonial powers. The female characters, much like their male counterparts, represent the intersectionality of subaltern existence, where gender, class, and caste intersect to exacerbate their oppression.

Senapati's *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* is a landmark in Odia literature not only because of its depiction of the subaltern but also because it offers a nuanced critique of both colonialism and feudalism. Through his portrayal of Ramachandra and the rural poor, Senapati exposes the intertwined nature of these two systems of power and the impact they have on the lives of those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. His writing challenges the dominant narratives of his time, providing a voice to those who have been silenced by the forces of colonialism, feudalism, and patriarchy.

In conclusion, Fakir Mohan Senapati's *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* is a crucial text in the study of subaltern literature, particularly within the context of colonial India. The novel's portrayal of the exploitation faced by the rural poor under feudal and colonial rule offers valuable insights into the complexities of subaltern existence in Odisha. Senapati's work gives voice to the marginalized, highlighting the intersectionality of subaltern struggles while critiquing the oppressive systems that perpetuate their suffering. Through his empathetic and critical lens, Senapati challenges the status quo and calls for a more just and equitable society, where the voices of the subaltern are not silenced but heard and respected.

### **Feminism in the Works of Dickens and Senapati**

Both Dickens and Senapati engage with feminist themes in their works, though in different ways. Dickens often portrays women as victims of patriarchal structures, but also presents them as agents of change. Characters like Nancy in *Oliver Twist* and Louisa in *Hard Times* reveal the limitations and struggles of women in a patriarchal society, but they also embody a resistance to the structures that confine them.

Senapati's portrayal of women in *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* and other works highlights the oppression they face due to both caste and gender. The women in Senapati's novels are often seen as subjugated, marginalized figures who must navigate both patriarchal oppression and the societal norms that confine them.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, a comparative study of Charles Dickens and Fakir Mohan Senapati through the lenses of subalternism and feminism reveals the universal nature of oppression and the commonality of struggles faced by marginalized groups. Both authors provide powerful critiques of the socio-political systems that perpetuate class and gender inequalities, making their works valuable in understanding the intersectionality of subaltern and feminist struggles across different historical and cultural contexts. Their literary contributions continue to resonate today, offering insights into the enduring fight for justice, equality, and human dignity.