

**Manifestation of Subaltern Voices and Social Exclusion in Anosh Irani's
*The Parcel***

Uttam Baliram Sonkamble¹ (M.Phil. Ph.D.)

Dept. of English, BYK College of Commerce, Nashik
Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune (M.S.)

Mr. Gulab Yusuf Shaikh²

Research Scholar, Dept. of English
S. N. Arts, D. J. Malpani Commerce and B. N. Sarda Science College, Sangamner
Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune (M.S.)

Paper Received on 17-10-2025, Accepted on 21-11-2025
Published on 23-11-25; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.10.4.292

Abstract:

The subaltern voices of society represent the marginalized sections that have been mostly debarred from social, political, and economic participation. Though they are capable human beings, their existence is often questioned by dominant power structures which denies equal opportunity. These marginalized sections struggle for their identity, dignity and equality. Their expectation is not merely for inclusion but it's for justice. These voices emphasize their existence and challenge the inequalities that lead their marginalization. The present research paper deals with subaltern sections of the society and their exclusion from the mainstreams of the society with reference to Anosh Irani's novel, *The Parcel* (2016). It revolves around Madhu, a transgender who lives in Kamathipura, the red-light area in Mumbai. Born as a boy to middle-class parents but finds himself uncomfortable in his male body and becomes a part of Hijra transgender community which remains the part of sex-labour and beggar. The protagonist's journey in the novel initiates her upbringing with exploitation and oppression of Hijra as well as prostitutes.

Keywords: subaltern voices, marginalized sections, transgender, sex-labour, Hijra, oppression, prostitutes.

Introduction:

Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci introduced the term *Subaltern*¹ from the Latin *subalternus*, meaning 'subordinate'. The term combines Latin word 'sub' for under and 'alter' for other. Here, the term 'Subaltern' is used to denote the rejection of basic human rights to many individuals. It was first used in military to describe anyone with lower rank. The term denotes an individual or groups who are socially, politically and economically oppressed or excluded from dominant systems. In the context of post colonialism, the term 'subaltern' describes those individual or groups whose rights or voices are silenced or ignored by dominant powers because they occupy a position of subordination. In Postcolonial Study, the term widely gained the importance through the work of historian Ranajit Guha² who writes Indian history from the perspective of the oppressed rather than elite; and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who raises questions through her seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* whether marginalized voices can truly be heard within dominant structures. She asserts, "The subaltern's voice, when it appears to emerge, is often mediated through dominant systems of representation."⁵ which denotes that subaltern voices are heard but it is ignored by the authority as they are being socially excluded. In similar way, an Indo-Canadian novelist Anosh Irani portraits subaltern voices and their exclusion from the society in his fourth novel *The Parcel* (2016) which connect to themes of power, identity, and systemic marginalization.

Irani is also known for his other literary treasury including; *The Cripple and His Talismans* (2004), *The Song of Kahunsha* (2006) and *Dahanu Road* (2010) and His anthology *The Bombay Plays: The Matka King & Bombay Black* (2007) and his another play *The Men in White* (2018) were critically acclaimed plays.

Manifestation of Subaltern Voices and Social Exclusion:

In the beginning of the novel, *The Parcel*, Irani portraits suppressed feelings of protagonist Madhu who is born as boy but does not find himself solace in his male body. He realizes that his family doesn't accept him as it is because of his girlish actions which cause his new life as transgender Hijra. The question of acceptance is not only at his father's home but also everywhere in the society. Being eunuch Madhu experiences various forms of oppression; gender, social class, ethnicity, and economic exploitation. Madhu states,

"I GO BY MANY names, none of my own choosing. I am called Ali, Aravani, Nau Number, Sixer, Mamu, Gandu, Napunsak, Kinnar, Kojja—the list goes on and on like a politician's promise. There is a term for me in almost every Indian language. I am reviled and revered, deemed to have been blessed,

and cursed, with sacred powers. Parents think of me as a kidnapper, shopkeepers as a lucky charm, and married couples as a fertility expert. To passengers in taxis, I am but a nuisance. I am shooed away like a crow. Everyone has their version of what I am. Or what they want me to be. My least favourite is what they call my kind in Tamil: Thirunangai. 'Mister Woman'." (p.1)³

Here, the author emphasizes societal disrespect for a transgender and their struggle for identity in Indian society. The society gives different labels whether stereotypes or sacred or shameful. Labelling an individual is a kind of suppression of their voice. The Hijra community is misunderstood and excluded by the hypocrite society. Because of the physical and psychological existence, the protagonist Madhu feels barren life. She considers herself that she is "neither here nor there, neither desert nor forest, neither earth nor sky, neither man nor woman" (p.2)³. As she has transformed into Hijra which means migration. The Urdu word '*Hijr*' is a 'migration'. In the context of Madhu, migration is nothing but a physical transformation. She accepts- "I am indeed a migrant, a wanderer. For almost three decades, I have floated through the city's red-light district like a ghost". (p.2)³

The protagonist's journey in the novel highlights her upbringing and early encounters with exploitation and oppression. She is raised in poverty, her childhood is shattered by familial ill-treatment and neglect, leading her to be the part of Hijra Clan and fits into sex work. The novel communicates the story of her experiences within the brothel industry, where she is at the mercy of male clients and the authority of pimps and madams. Irani's depiction of a prostitute, along with other characters in similar situations, brings attention to how the combination of gender and class pushes these individuals to the outskirts of society.

"It was dhanda time, and one of the women on sale,....

.....The bodies of the women were all more or less of equal mileage, but what set a woman apart, and Madhu knew this better than anyone else." (p.20)³

The novel also explores the lives of sex workers, considering how they are trapped within a system that treats their bodies as commodities. The women in the brothel are treated as objects of sexual desire and economic transactions. The individuals who visit the brothel perceive the women as mere objects of commodities and bargain for less money. In such cases prostitutes are doubly oppressed from brothel owner as well as clients. Sometimes they show their furies against their suffocation. "No, no, not two hundred," Salma said. "Three hundred is fixed rate, yaar.

What a miserly prick you have. Kanjoos lauda!”(p.20)³ Even their suppressed feelings come out suddenly while watching movie in cinema hall. “She turned around, faced the audience, took off: “these bhenchoth randies came here to teach me- me- about sex? I have swallowed more sperm than they have drunk water!” (p.54)³. The fact that these women are often depressed because of engaging in prostitution, emphasizes their lack of identity beyond their occupation as sex workers. “*on average, each sex worker services ten men in one night*” (p.54)³. They have adjusted their life hugely. It's too difficult to get rid of this profession. They have to adjust their kids by giving opium and would place under the bed only bedsheet adjusted in such way children cannot see their mother. Even they are forced to work during their menstrual circle.

Irani examines the emotional impact of sex work and their marginalized status with the feelings of shame and self-hatred. A prostitute desires a different life, but her aspirations are constantly stuck by the societal structures. In the context of Mumbai, a city is overloaded with significant wealth inequality, sex work and social and political upheaval which leads exploitation of individuals. Many individuals are forced into engaging in sex work due to unacceptance in the respective families or sex trafficking. These women find themselves trapped in a cycle of poverty, abuse, and shame that makes them voiceless to the rest of society. Maybe that is just my view. Once you are imprisoned, things take on a different meaning. “Vaneeta told the TV people that she cannot listen to any kind of music.

‘For you, when you hear a song you want to dance,’ she said. “But each time men raped me, they played music so that my screams could not reach anywhere..... She doesn't pray at all.” (p.253)³

According to John Stuart Mill, “The legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement.” declares the subjugation of women is ethically unfair and it's destructive. He proclaims that gender inequality hinders the progress of all humanity.

The political and legal frameworks also contribute to the marginalization of sex workers. In India, engaging in sex work is not considered a crime, but certain activities associated with it are illegal like opening brothel, sex trafficking etc.. Sex workers are troubled by police harassment or exploitation by pimps or abuse by clients. Padma: the brothel owner, Gurumai: owner of Hijra clan: and Bindu nayak: supreme commander of all Hijra clan are politically involved for their existence. when, Madhu denied sex work, she was punished by making her bald and changes her profession to sex worker to magti Hijra, common beggar. “Hijra gurus also made

pojeetives do begging work. It was an unsaid rule: when hijras were too sick and ugly to fuck, too weak to sing and dance, begging was their only recourse" (p.75). Eventually Madhu gets job from Padma to train sex trafficking girls that generally called parcel, '*chhoti batti*' or new names for each time. When sex workers become old enough, they are given cleaning tasks in the brothel.

Irani also shows the exploitation of women, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. It is seen at both axels including brothels as well as in the society as a whole. The deeply rooted patriarchal culture assigns women subordinate roles and objectifies them for male pleasure. Madhu said, "I used to be a boy once. But in my heart, I was always a girl. And it is men who fuck us up, it is men who make us who we are." (p.79)³.

In the novel, this regulation is evident that how characters like prostitutes are treated as if the object for their sexual pleasure. Even the sexual cruelty is seen due to fantasies in Indian patriarchal structure. Madhu is asked to give the training to Kinjal (Parcel) and make her ready for sex happily though she is just ten years old innocent girl because; "The man who's buying her, he's very rich. He is also pojeetive. His pundit told him that if he takes young virgin, he will be cured". (p.236)³

The Parcel masterfully conveys the severe impact on the *Hijra's* and prostitutes. It is a powerful commentary upon marginalized communities and their suffering due to the societal indifference. The novel emphasizes how gender, social status, economic exploitation, and cultural expectations contribute to the marginalization of certain groups. By portraying characters like a prostitute, Irani emphasizes the complicated relationship between internal and external factors that shape the subaltern condition. Being Hijra, Madhu suffers internal conflict because of the treatment given by her family members. She is not accepted because of her abnormal behaviour. Her father always worried about her girlish actions and tries to teach the stories of masculinity. She is also not accepted by the society and labelled her mocking by different names. Her entire life remains at periphery and cannot get justice till her death. On the other hand, Kinjal; known as parcel in the novel, also encounters the part of social exclusion because she is deceived by her aunt through sex traffic which causes her to travel from Nepal to Mumbai due to other's greedy acts. In such situation Madhu's true friend Gajja releases her to see her parents in Nepal but her existence was denied by considering her impurity in brothel.

"I wanted to see the look on my aunt's face. Her eyes would melt out of shame... I had not expected my aunt to bring the entire village to gather outside my house. She had told them where I had been. They objected to my

coming back. The whole village was against me... I had no choice but to come back.” (p.250)³

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak proclaims in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* “The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry-lists with woman as a pious item. Representation has not withered away.” (p. 313)⁵ With the context of the novel, Kinjal’s voice is not heard in the dominant power structure. She is defeated and socially excluded by her own people.

Conclusion:

Anosh Irani weaves a heart-touching narrative that deal with the voices of marginalized individuals, with a particular focus on the unheard women and transgender in Mumbai’s brothel system. Through his careful characterization, narrative style, and exploration of the socio-political-economics dynamics that shape these women’s lives. Author provides a platform for the voiceless characters with both personal and collective accounts of exploitation, identity, and survival. The novel emphasizes on the lives of sex workers, who, in the Indian society, are often treated as mere commodities for sexual gratification. Such characters reside in a society where their bodies are treated as objects where rights are disregarded and voices are suppressed.

The protagonist’s role as a prostitute is the focal point of this narrative transformation. Irani does not want to be defined solely as a victim of the brothel system, instead, he humanizes her by the intensity of her pain, her aspirations and her existence. Through the novel, the author provides a voice for the oppressed sections of the society.

Works Cited

- Gramsci, Antonio. Selections from the Prison Notebooks. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, International Publishers, 1971.
- Guha, Ranajit, ed. Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society. Oxford University Press, 1982.
- Irani, Anosh. The Parcel. Noida-Uttar Pradesh: Harper Collins Publishers. 2016.
- Mill, John Stuart. The Subjection of Women. London: Longmans, Green, Reader & Dyer, 1869.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 66–111. 14 April 2025
<https://voidnetwork.gr/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Can-the-subaltern-speak-by-Gayatri-Spivak.pdf/>