The SPL Journal of Literary Hermeneutics

A Biannual International Journal of Independent Critical Thinking

Double-blind, Peer-reviewed, and Open Access Journal in English

Vol. 6 Issue 1 Winter Edition 2026 e-ISSN 2583-1674 Page no. 130-140

www.literaryhrm.org

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Speaking the Subaltern in English: Language, Realism, and Social Justice in Indian Literature

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Research Article

Keywords: Subaltern studies; Indian English literature; realism; language politics; social justice; postcolonial theory

Article History
Received: December 14, 2025
Revised: December 27, 2025
Accepted: January 1, 2026

Abstract

Aims: *The study aims to interrogate the politics of language choice in Indian literature by examining how English, despite its colonial legacy, is appropriated, reshaped, and strategically deployed to articulate marginalized experiences.*

Methodology: *The paper adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach, combining postcolonial theory (Spivak, Bhabha), subaltern studies (Guha), and realism as a socio-political aesthetic. Close textual readings of selected Indian English novels and narratives are undertaken to trace linguistic strategies such as code-switching, testimonial realism, and narrative fragmentation.*

Outcome: *The analysis demonstrates that Indian English literature enables a form of mediated subaltern speech, one that does not claim pure authenticity but foregrounds structural silences, ethical witnessing, and representational limits. English emerges as a language of resistance when reshaped by local idioms and lived realities.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *The paper concludes that realism in Indian English writing functions not as mere mimesis but as an ethical practice that insists on social accountability. Subaltern speech, though mediated, becomes politically resonant rather than erased. Future research may extend this inquiry to digital narratives, regional-to-English translations, and comparative Global South literatures to further examine evolving modes of subaltern expression.*

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This paper examines how Indian writers using English negotiate the paradox of representing subaltern voices through a language historically associated with colonial power and elite privilege. It argues that Indian English literature has not merely appropriated English as a neutral medium but has strategically reshaped it through realism, vernacular inflections, and narrative experimentation to articulate histories of marginalization, caste oppression, gendered violence, and economic dispossession. Rather than silencing the subaltern, these texts reconfigure English into a contested ethical space where social injustice can be named, witnessed, and challenged.

The question of language occupies a central position in postcolonial literary studies, particularly in contexts where colonial languages continue to mediate cultural production, social critique, and global circulation. In India, English remains a paradoxical linguistic presence: it is simultaneously a legacy of colonial domination and a resource for intellectual mobility, political articulation, and literary visibility. This paper examines how Indian English literature negotiates this paradox by foregrounding English as a contested yet productive medium of social realism. Rather than treating English as a neutral vehicle of representation or as a sign of cultural alienation, the study argues that Indian writers strategically appropriate and transform English into a site of ideological struggle through which questions of caste, class, gender, and social justice are articulated.

The title phrase "speaking the subaltern" invokes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential provocation, which cautions against the assumption that elite discourses can transparently recover subaltern voice. This paper does not seek to resolve Spivak's question in affirmative terms. Instead, it reframes the problem by examining how Indian English social realism stages the conditions under which subaltern lives are narrated, mediated, and circulated. English, in this context, does not restore an authentic subaltern voice; rather, it exposes the structural constraints—linguistic, social, and ideological—that shape representation itself. Social realism thus becomes not merely a mode of mimetic depiction but a critical practice attentive to the politics of language.

By bringing together postcolonial linguistics, subaltern studies, and Marxist theories of realism, this paper situates Indian English social realism

within a broader debate about power, mediation, and ethical representation. Through close readings of selected texts by Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya, Arundhati Roy, and Rohinton Mistry, the study demonstrates how English is reshaped through indigenisation, hybridity, and heteroglossia to accommodate vernacular social realities. In doing so, the paper argues that English functions simultaneously as a language of dominance and dissent—capable of making visible structural injustice while never escaping the politics of mediation that attend subaltern representation.

Language is never a neutral medium; it is a form of social practice embedded within relations of power. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital underscores how languages acquire legitimacy through institutional authority, enabling some speakers while marginalising others. In colonial India, English accrued immense symbolic capital through its association with education, governance, and cultural prestige. Thomas Babington Macaulay's infamous Minute on Indian Education (1835) articulated a linguistic project aimed at producing colonial intermediaries— "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste"—thereby institutionalising linguistic hierarchy.

Postcolonial literary studies have repeatedly returned to this history to interrogate the ethical implications of writing in English. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's critique of linguistic imperialism remains foundational in this regard. For Ngũgĩ, language is inseparable from culture, and the continued use of colonial languages risks reproducing epistemic domination. Yet the Indian context complicates a simple rejection of English. Unlike many African postcolonial nations, India's extreme linguistic diversity has positioned English as a link language that mediates between regions, classes, and publics.

This mediation, however, comes at a cost. As Spivak argues, representation (Darstellung) cannot be disentangled from political re-presentation (Vertretung). When subaltern lives are narrated in elite languages, they are inevitably filtered through structures of privilege. Indian English social realism confronts this dilemma not by claiming linguistic transparency but by foregrounding the politics of mediation itself. Realism, in this sense, becomes reflexive rather than naïvely mimetic.

Scholarly engagement with Indian English literature has consistently foregrounded the problem of language, power, and representation. Early critical debates focused on the legitimacy of English as a literary medium in postcolonial societies. Critics such as Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan defended English as a practical and expressive link language, while later theorists framed its use within broader questions of cultural domination and resistance. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's seminal work Decolonising the Mind remains central to discussions of linguistic imperialism, arguing that colonial languages perpetuate epistemic violence by alienating writers from indigenous cultural worlds. Although Ngũgĩ's position has been influential, several scholars have noted that the Indian linguistic situation—marked by extreme multilingualism—renders a complete rejection of English neither feasible nor politically unambiguous.

Postcolonial theorists such as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin have instead emphasised the processes of abrogation and appropriation through which English is reshaped in postcolonial writing. Their intervention shifts the debate from linguistic purity to linguistic practice, foregrounding how English can be indigenised to articulate local histories and social contradictions. Homi Bhabha's theorisation of hybridity and the "third space" further complicates binary oppositions between colonial and native languages, suggesting that postcolonial meaning emerges through negotiation, translation, and difference rather than recovery of origins.

Subaltern studies have provided a crucial ethical framework for interrogating representation. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" remains foundational in cautioning against the assumption that elite literary or academic discourse can transparently recover subaltern voice. Subsequent scholars have extended Spivak's argument to literary realism, examining how texts may foreground the conditions of silencing rather than claiming authentic voice. In the Indian context, critics have explored how social realist fiction stages caste, class, and gender oppression while remaining aware of its own mediating structures.

Marxist literary criticism, particularly the work of Georg Lukács and Fredric Jameson, has shaped understandings of social realism as a mode concerned with historical totality and structural causality. Lukács's insistence that

realism reveals the logic of social systems rather than isolated experiences has been productively applied to Indian realist fiction dealing with labour, poverty, and uneven development. Jameson's controversial claim that third-world literature functions as national allegory has generated extensive debate, with scholars arguing that Indian English texts often complicate allegory through attention to intimacy, affect, and linguistic experimentation.

Together, these bodies of scholarship establish the critical terrain within which this paper intervenes. While existing studies have addressed language politics, realism, and subalternity in isolation, fewer works have examined how these concerns converge at the level of linguistic form in Indian English social realism. This paper contributes to the field by synthesising postcolonial linguistics, subaltern ethics, and Marxist realism to read English itself as a contested realist device.

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in close textual analysis and theoretical synthesis. Rather than employing empirical or sociolinguistic data, the paper situates itself within literary and cultural criticism, where meaning is generated through sustained engagement with texts and concepts. The primary method involves close reading of selected novels in order to examine how linguistic choices—syntax, diction, narrative voice, code-switching, and untranslated vernacular terms—produce realist effects and ethical tensions in the representation of subaltern lives.

Text selection is guided by three criteria. First, the novels chosen occupy a recognised position within the canon of Indian English literature and have been influential in shaping debates on social realism. Second, the texts explicitly engage with structures of social injustice, including caste oppression, class exploitation, gendered labour, and postcolonial inequality. Third, the selected works exhibit distinct linguistic strategies that illuminate different modes of appropriating English, ranging from Anand's restrained documentary prose to Raja Rao's oral-inflected syntax and Arundhati Roy's experimental fragmentation.

The analytical framework integrates insights from postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, and Marxist aesthetics. Concepts such as linguistic imperialism, hybridity, heteroglossia, symbolic capital, and cognitive mapping are not applied

mechanically but used as interpretive tools to illuminate how language functions within specific narrative contexts. Attention is paid not only to what is represented but to how representation is structured, mediated, and constrained by language.

Importantly, the methodology is reflexive in orientation. Acknowledging Spivak's critique of representation, the analysis does not claim to recover authentic subaltern voice. Instead, it examines how texts foreground mediation, silence, and contradiction as part of their realist ethic. By combining close reading with theoretical reflection, the study seeks to demonstrate how Indian English social realism operates as a politically self-conscious practice that negotiates, rather than resolves, the tensions between language, realism, and social justice.

Social realism, as theorised within Marxist literary criticism, seeks to represent society as a structured totality shaped by material conditions, class relations, and ideological forces. Georg Lukács famously argued that realist literature reveals the underlying logic of social systems by situating individual experience within historical totality. Indian social realism inherits this commitment to structural analysis but adapts it to the conditions of colonial and postcolonial modernity.

When articulated in English, Indian social realism occupies a paradoxical position. It speaks of the oppressed in a language historically aligned with privilege, yet it does so to expose precisely those structures of exploitation that privilege sustains. Rather than undermining realism, this paradox intensifies its ethical stakes. The reader is compelled to confront not only the social reality depicted but also the conditions under which that reality becomes narratable. Fredric Jameson's notion of "cognitive mapping" is useful here. Indian English realist texts often function as maps of uneven development, tracing how caste, class, and capital intersect across rural and urban spaces. English provides a narrative framework capable of traversing these terrains, linking local suffering to systemic forces.

Postcolonial theorists such as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin have described the twin processes of "abrogation" and "appropriation" through which colonial languages are reshaped in postcolonial writing. Indian English literature exemplifies this process. Writers reject the normative authority

of metropolitan English while appropriating the language to articulate local histories and social contradictions.

Raja Rao's Kanthapura offers a seminal intervention into this linguistic politics. In his preface, Rao famously asserts that English must be "bent" to convey the "spirit that is one's own." The novel's syntax, rhythm, and narrative structure draw heavily on oral storytelling traditions, producing a collective voice that resists individualised psychological realism. English here becomes a medium for communal consciousness rather than elite introspection. The realism of Kanthapura lies not in documentary detail but in its ideological representation of Gandhian mobilisation as a mass social process rooted in village life.

The representation of caste oppression marks one of the most ethically charged uses of English in Indian social realism. Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable (1935) remains a foundational text in this regard. Structured around a single day in the life of Bakha, a young Dalit sweeper, the novel deploys a restrained, unadorned prose that foregrounds material suffering. Bakha's body becomes the primary site of realist inscription—marked by labour, humiliation, and internalised stigma.

Language itself functions as an instrument of caste violence in the novel. The public cry of "Polluted!" operates as a performative utterance that enacts exclusion. Anand's decision to render this scene in English intensifies its ethical force. Caste discrimination is no longer confined to a culturally specific context; it becomes legible as a system of structural injustice within a global moral framework. The realism of Untouchable thus lies in its exposure of caste as a disciplinary regime rather than a mere social custom. From a subaltern studies perspective, Anand's mediation of Dalit experience through English raises questions about voice and authenticity. Yet, as Spivak reminds us, the absence of pure subaltern speech does not negate the political value of representation. Anand's English does not claim to speak for Bakha; it exposes the conditions that render Bakha's speech socially unintelligible.

Anand's Coolie extends social realism beyond caste to examine class exploitation within colonial capitalism. The novel traces Munoo's movement across diverse sites of labour—village, factory, plantation, and urban household—mapping the systemic violence of capital. English facilitates this narrative

mobility, providing a unifying framework capable of linking disparate social spaces.

Munoo's death, far from offering redemption, reinforces the structural inevitability of exploitation. In Lukácsian terms, the novel reveals the logic of the system rather than exceptional moral triumph. English, often accused of elitism, here becomes a language of exposure, rendering the violence of labour regimes visible to national and transnational audiences.

Women's writing in Indian English social realism foregrounds gendered labour, domestic precarity, and affective endurance. Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve exemplifies this gendered realist ethic. Narrated by Rukmani, a peasant woman, the novel documents agrarian dispossession, industrial intrusion, and maternal suffering. The restraint of Markandaya's prose mirrors the structural silencing of women's pain, producing an ethics of understatement. From a feminist-materialist perspective, the novel exposes how women's reproductive and productive labour is rendered invisible within nationalist and developmentalist discourses. English operates here as a language of testimony, transforming rural women's suffering into narrative evidence without romanticisation.

Indian English social realism frequently destabilises linguistic purity through hybridity. Untranslated vernacular terms interrupt the flow of English prose, resisting assimilation into metropolitan norms. Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia illuminates this practice: multiple social languages coexist within the text, reflecting the multilingual reality of Indian society. Homi Bhabha's notion of the "third space" further clarifies how meaning emerges through linguistic negotiation rather than direct translation. Hybridity does not undermine realism; it enhances it by preserving cultural specificity and exposing the limits of English itself.

The global reach of English-language social realism raises concerns about the commodification of suffering. Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things has been criticised for aestheticising trauma for Western audiences. Yet Roy's experimental English—marked by fragmentation, repetition, and temporal disruption—actively resists realist transparency. The novel forces readers to confront how trauma disrupts narrative coherence, complicating Jameson's claim

that third-world literature functions primarily as national allegory. English here becomes a language of resistance rather than consumption, unsettling global expectations rather than satisfying them.

This paper has argued that English, when deployed within Indian social realism, functions not as a colonial residue but as a contested site of critical praxis. Through appropriation, hybridity, and ethical reflexivity, Indian writers transform English into a medium capable of exposing structural injustice while foregrounding the politics of representation. Rather than resolving the tension between language and subalternity, Indian English social realism inhabits that tension productively, redefining realism as a politically self-conscious practice of social justice.

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