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The Construction of Indian Booker-Prize Novels on the Peasant Subaltern's Strategy of Resistance against the Indian "Democratic" Hegemony

Yan Ziwei

Ph. D Scholar,
Foreign School of Studies,
University of Science and Technology Beijing.

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Abstract:

Since the 1970s, Indian novels in English have been consistently recognized and awarded the Booker Prize, which has established themselves in the international literary arena. In recent years, these Indian Booker-prize novels have shown a growing concern for the plight of the peasant subaltern in the context of the 21st century where the Indian government is unable to fulfill its promises regarding democracy to them, while their livelihoods are increasingly overshadowed by the forces of global capitalism. These novels shed light on the essence of Indian democracy, dissect the discursive practices that construct it, and provide strategies for the peasant subaltern to participate in Indian democratic politics. Even though these novelists, limited by their middle-class background, fail to truly represent the peasant subaltern and construct a community for their democratic participation in "political society," some traces of it can still be found in the novels. This community is expected to be grounded in the subaltern's history—their ordinary life with compromise and struggles, and their interaction with the Indian government, which paves the way for the space of "political society" in modern Indian society.

Keywords: Indian Booker-prize novels, peasant subaltern, Indian democracy, community.

Since the birth of Indian novels in English in the second half of the 19th century, it has been increasingly prosperous. Particularly, with V. S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie winning the Nobel Prize and Booker Prize in the last century respectively, contemporary Indian novels in English have gradually gained international recognition in the literary world.

So far, there have been 5 award-winning novels, 7 novels shortlisted, and 18 novels longlisted for the Booker Prize. Among the nominated and award-winning novels since the 21st century, we can observe the authors' attention to peasants, especially the peasant subaltern who are "removed from all lines of social mobility" (Spivak 2005, 475): In two consecutive years, the Booker Prize-nominated novels *The Lowland* (2013) by Jhumpa Lahiri and *The Lives of Others* (2014) by Neel Mukherjee both revolve around the Naxalite peasant uprising. In 2015, the novel *The Year of the Runaways* by Sunjeev Sahota continues to feature protagonists from the peasant subaltern. The caste system and Zamindar system, which had been abolished after independence, still remain main exploiting forces for the peasant subaltern. The attention given by these authors to the plight of this group becomes particularly important in the 21st century, where their livelihoods are increasingly overshadowed by the forces of global capitalism.

This article focuses on eight Booker Prize novels, namely, *A Suitable Boy* (1993) by Vikram Seth, *A Fine Balance* (1996) by Rohinton Mistry, *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy, *The White Tiger* (2008) by Aravind Adiga, *The Lowland* (2013), *The Lives of Others* (2014), *The Year of the Runaways* (2015) and *China Room* (2021) by Sunjeev Sahota, which attempt to represent the agency of the subaltern peasant. After revealing the essence of elitism in Indian democracy and its construction strategies, these Booker Prize novels¹ examine the existing form of resistance in Indian history—Naxalite movement—with the aim of exploring the complex relationships within the peasant subaltern, between the peasant subaltern and intellectual, petite bourgeois as well as landlords. Based on this, they offer their own strategic visions to restore the rights of the peasant subaltern as "citizens".

The hegemony beneath the facade of India's democracy

In *The Great Indian Novel*, Indian politician and writer Shashi Tharoor unveils the essence of Indian democracy through metaphorizing it as Draupadi Mokrasī, the illegitimate daughter of Dhritarashtra (Jawaharlal Nehru) and Lady Drewpad (Edwina Mountbatten, wife of the viceroy, Lord Louis Mountbatten) who was born on January 26, 1950, the Indian

¹ In this paper, the Booker Prize novels refer to Indian novels that were nominated for the Booker Prize and Booker Prize-winning Indian novels.



Republic day on which the Constitution of India came into effect, proclaiming India as a sovereign, socialist, secular, and democratic republic (Tiwari 120). The fact that Indian democracy is the illegitimate daughter of the last vicereine of India and Nehru—the first prime minister of India, “an imperious democrat” (1399), as evaluated by the narrator in *A Suitable Boy*, probably indicates that the essence of Indian democracy is difficult to erase the traces of bourgeois elitism and English colonial rule. After India’s independence, the indigenous elite class in India who were deeply indoctrinated by colonial logic unconsciously duplicated the power relations between the colonizers and the colonized. The modern colonial hegemony of the West was then transferred to the lower strata of society (Ma 110). During this process, Indian peasants and the underprivileged masses, who were integrated into the Anti-colonial nationalist alliance in the “passive evolution”² led by Indian bourgeois nationalists, are distanced from the power structures of the national democratic system and become subjects of strategies, exploitation and governance of the national power. (Chatterjee 1986, 125). This is clearly manifested in the Indian novels nominated for Booker Prize and Booker Prize-winning works.

In *The White Tiger*, the government official registers everyone in the tea shop as eighteen—the legal age to vote—before an election is coming up, and their fingerprints are sold by the tea shop owner (82). Balram’s father has seen twelve elections, and someone else has voted for him twelve times (84). In *A Fine Balance*, Thakur Dharamsi, a village landlord who takes charge of the voting process, delivers votes to the political party of his choice, and “his system with the support of the other landlords, had been working flawlessly for years” (183); during the mass sterilization drive of 1976, the police snatch people at random in the market to the sterilization camp, disregarding their resistance; ironically, in order to demonstrate the nation’s “democracy,” the police and government officials force people in the city jhopadpattis to see the prime minister in person, just for listening to her message that she is their servant. In *The God of Small Things*, Comrade Pillai uses his political opponent and the factory owner Chacko’s visit to impress local supplicants and party workers for his

² The concept “passive revolution” is put forward by the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci. It is completed through attempting a “molecular transformation” of the old dominant classes into partners in a new historical bloc and only a partial appropriation of the popular masses, in order first to create a state as the necessary precondition for the establishment of capitalism as the dominant mode of production.

political promotion; and he urges the workers of Chacko on to revolution just for bringing in a new labor union a beginning for his journey to the Legislative Assembly (126). In *The Lives of Others*, during the drought, CPI(M) cadres only distribute sacks of grains to hard-hit villagers who have always voted for them. Once they discover that they have voted for Congress, the cadres take away the rice from the starving farmers (103).

Mrs. Chatterji, the member of a bourgeois family in *A Suitable Boy*, complains that "democracy is half our trouble. And that's why we have all these disorders and all this bloodshed" (465). She ascribes the cause of social unrest to "democracy," which reveals her actual perception of the underprivileged that they are backward and violent, hence the need to be governed. This logic was inherited from the British rule. According to nationalists, British colonial rule undoubtedly impeded the development of Indian capitalism, yet the fundamental hindrance was attributed to its racial discrimination, rather than the underlying power dynamics of modern nation-state governance introduced by the British. In other words, they were more concerned about the fact that India was ruled by a foreign power, instead of the specific methods employed by the colonizers (Ma 36). Consequently, India is faced with the problem that Franz Fanon points out in *The Wretched of the Earth*: After the common enemy of colonialism disappears, the national bourgeoisie assumes a dominant position in shaping the new nation. In the process of seizing control of the state apparatus, they maintain close ties with the former colonial powers, turning the colony into a neo-colony, which means that they engage in "internal colonization" to assert their dominance over marginalized groups within the nation (qtd. in Chen 37) That's why the author of *A Fine Balance* shows his anxiety through the narrator Maneck that "a democratic omelette is not possible from eggs bearing democratic labels but laid by the tyrannical hen" (464).

Since India embarked on economic reforms in the 1990s and became part of the globalization process, the previously concealed markers such as "high caste," "Hinduism," and "middle class" that constitute the Indian citizenry have become more prominent. This has resulted in the increasing exclusion of the lower classes from the realm of "civil society" (Yin 32). In Indian villages where the caste system and Zamindar system are deeply ingrained, the power relations underlying the mask of democracy are most prominent. Even though the caste system has been officially abolished in India since the adoption of the Indian



Constitution in 1950, Dalits and the lower castes still live in a state of oppression. In *The Year of the Runaways*, Tochi, a Chamaar, is denied employment by landlords because of “the elections,” and his family are even slaughtered by religious extremists who vow to restore the purity of Hindutva; In *A Fine Balance*, Narayan, a tailor who trespasses his Chamaar caste of tanners and leather-workers, and his families are burned alive by Thakur Dharamsi, who wants everything to be like the old days, “when there was respect and discipline and order in our society” (187). In *The God of Small Things*, Velutha, a Paravan, is beaten to death by the police because he crosses the boundaries of caste and falls in love with a woman from an upper caste. In *A Suitable Boy*, a jatavs youth who went back to his home village after spending a couple of years in the city, behaves like a free man in front of the upper castes, and is thus humiliated and killed by a gang of men. Zamindari Abolition Bill has been legislated after independence, but because the Bill still had loopholes that could be taken advantage of, none of the untouchables own the “eventual guarantor of dignity and status, land” (*A Suitable Boy*, 1173). In *A Suitable boy*, Rasheed’s father bribes the patwari to cook the records, therefore, his tenants would not subdivide his land as the law stipulated. Rasheed attempts to make a change of ownership to Kachheru, a Chamaar tenant who has been working for Rasheed’s family for more than ten years, only to incur even more cruel retaliation from his father, which makes Kachheru a homeless farmer. In *The Lives of Others*, in indigent agricultural areas where feudalism is still the order of the day, the landlord and his legion of supporters arbitrarily increase rents, or kill the tenant’s bullock so that he cannot work the rented land efficiently enough, thus falling behind with the rent (104). In *The Lowland*, tribal peasants were manipulated by wealthy landowners. “They were pushed off fields they’d cultivated, denied revenue from crops they’d grown. They were preyed upon by moneylenders. Deprived of subsistence wages, some died from lack of food” (15).

The hegemony beneath the facade of India’s democracy hints at its conditionality. The idea of equal citizenship in the modern state was directly the product of an engagement with the challenge posed by the Haitian revolution (qtd. in Chatterje 2011, 22), which suggests that “citizenship” bears the imprint of strategy from its birth. For the ruling class, democracy thus become a choice: In the political community he regards himself as a communal being, but in civil society he is active as a private individual, treats other men as

means, reduces himself to a means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers (Marx 225). The term "citizen" used by the bourgeois elite refers not to all Indians, but specifically to educated, bourgeois, male individuals. Consequently, in order to justify its legitimacy, Indian "democracy" needs to be constructed through discursive practices.

According to Foucault, discursive practices are not purely and simply ways of producing discourse. They are embodied in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns for general behavior, in forms for transmission and diffusion, and in pedagogical forms which, at once, impose and maintain them. (Foucault 1972, 200) Indians' consciousness of democracy is strengthened through such forms of "transmission and diffusion" as posters, television, broadcast and speech. Some examples can be found in the novels: posters extolling the virtues of the Emergency are plastered on the sides of the pedestal of a "Guardian of Democracy" in *A Fine Balance*; unconscious gesture of television-enforced democracy (94) in *The God of Small Things*; little take-home pamphlets that contain a very large section on the splendor of democracy in India in *The White Tiger*; and different parties' various forms of speeches aimed at peddling their progressiveness to villagers in *A Fine Balance*, *The Lives of Others*, *The God of Small Things*, *A Suitable Boy*, *The White Tiger*. They promise to "provide houses for the people. Enough food, so no one goes hungry. Cloth at controlled prices. We want to build schools for our children and hospitals to look after the sick" (*A Fine Balance*, 332). In these speeches, Indian political parties claim that they can liberate peasants from oppressive forces, empower them to live like dignified citizens. However, while emphasizing their image as saviors and benefactors, the ruling power actually constructs peasants as passive objects. In addition, the Indian government attempts to bridge the gap between modern representative systems and their practical utility in India through school education. However, the concept of democracy here amounted to nothing more than the rulers' control and indoctrination of the underprivileged (Ma 110). In *A Fine Balance*, Om realizes that he has studied about the Guardian of Democracy whose statue he sees at the beach in his history class in the story of the Freedom Struggle; In *The White Tiger*, Balram gets a gift from the school inspector—*Lessons for Young Boys from the Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, and dreams to be the White Tiger in the jungle.

Apart from advertising their progressiveness, the Indian government also



engages in the construction of external “other” as its excuse to “suspend” the fundamental rights of the lower class. Michel Foucault, after examining the techniques of power in the West, pointed out that we construct ourselves indirectly by excluding others, such as criminals and lunatics (Foucault 2016, 359). Analogously, India’s bourgeois elite legitimize their dominant position by treating foreign powers as its enemies that require joint domestic confrontation. In *China Room*, anti-British revolutionaries, while advocating for freedom and democracy, went from village to village, farm to farm, taking by force valuables that weren’t offered willingly (90); In *A Fine Balance*, Nusswan, a successful middle-class businessman, deeply believes that democracy is relative:

Democracy is a seesaw between complete chaos and tolerable confusion ... to make a democratic omelette you have to break a few democratic eggs. To fight fascism and other evil forces threatening our country, there is nothing wrong in taking strong measures. Especially when the foreign hand is always interfering to destabilize us. Did you know the CIA is trying to sabotage the Family Planning Programme? (463)

Likewise, In *The White Tiger*, politicians take China as India’s opponent and appeal to all Indians to be proud of their “democracy,” as they may not have sewage, drinking water, and Olympic gold medals, but they can beat China through their great democracy. The traces of the lower classes are erased in domestic party strife and international power struggles. In these discourses, the ruling power thought of the peasantry “as an object of their strategies, to be acted upon, controlled, and appropriated within their respective structures of state power” (Chatterjee 1993, 159).

After examining the essence of Indian democracy, the reality behind it, and its ways of construction, the authors attempt to give their strategies for the peasant subalterns to open up a living space in India’s democratic system. They explore Indian history, particularly examining the most prominent form of resistance—Naxalite insurgency, with the aim of uncovering the underlying reasons for its failure, and paving the way for better strategies for resistance.

Reflection on the peasants' strategy of resistance—taking the form of the Naxalite movement

The fact that the bourgeoisie and large landowners dominated the state power after independence means that the new government of the nation-state, which has taken over colonial power, cannot truly carry out reforms that benefit the subalterns of India. The resistance against the Indian government, disguised in the cloak of democracy, was most directly manifested in the form of Naxalite uprisings, and their traces can be found in the novels. In *The Lowland*, Naxalbari was "an inspiration" and "an impetus for change" (16). Groups of sharecroppers began retaliating against the landlord's cruel oppression. They started burning deeds and records that cheated them. Forcibly occupying land. In *The Lives of Others*, "class uprisings were happening throughout the country, peasants were snatching their land and crops back from landowners, shaking off the yokes of their slavery" (176). The bloody killings of landowners and the seizure of land that spread across the country can also be seen in *The God of Small Things*, *A Fine Balance* and *The White Tiger*.

Nevertheless, the uprisings were soon suppressed by the government. From the mid-1970 onward, the central government increased the amount of troops, equipment, and coordination it provided to the states. The police and military were empowered by a series of laws, some which originated in the colonial period and others that were specially enacted to deal with the insurgents. The suppression was equally bloody and violent. As the rebellion spread, the police started patrolling the area. Imposing undeclared curfews, making arbitrary arrests. They searched the mud huts of the poorest villagers. They captured unarmed insurgents, killing them if they refused to surrender. Ruthlessly, systematically, they brought the rebellion to its heels (*The Lowland*, 15). The conflict between Naxalites and the Indian government still goes on, however, the victory of democracy remains a distant prospect. India in the first half of the 1970s faced high inflation caused by the 1973 oil crisis, which resulted in the cost of oil imports rising substantially, the cost of the Bangladesh war and the refugee resettlement, and food shortages caused by droughts in parts of the country, especially in the impoverished villages (Prashad 36). "Everyone knew that the famine that followed was a manmade calamity. The government is distracted by military concerns, distribution compromises, the cost of war turning rice unaffordable" (*The Lowland*, 82). The same thing:



war, drought, famine—which were important factors contributing to the uprisings—kept happening repeatedly. It is in such periods of turmoil that peasant subalterns endure the most severe exploitation. The droughts and crop-failure offered good excuses for the landlords and moneylenders to lower tenants' wages and cut their daily meals, yet secretly, they sold food grain hoarded in their barns at a huge profit on the black market (*The Lives of Others*, 130). Skin-and-bones beggars gradually proliferated all over the city in an attempt to escape the famine in the countryside. They searched for nourishment. Eating insects, eating soil, eating grubs that crawl in the ground (*The Lowland*, 82). Naxalite uprisings did not lead to a different outcome. The following Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi and her Congress (R) allowed the central government to assume sweeping powers to defend law and order in the nation. Strikes and public protests were outlawed in all forms.

The political crises India faced in the late 1970s prompted some intellectuals' concern about the country's future. Both hopeful occasions in the Indian political landscape—land reforms and secularization reforms, as well as the peasant uprisings led by CPI(M)—ended in failure, which led to introspection among the Subaltern School. Ranajit Guha, one of the early pioneers of the Subaltern Studies group, attempted to bring in the peasantry as a subject of history, endowed with its own distinctive forms of consciousness through his study of the elementary aspects of peasant insurgency. He identified six elementary aspects of the insurgent peasant consciousness: negation, ambiguity, modality, solidarity, transmission, and territoriality (Chatterjee 1993, 162). However, as we can see from the novels, there are differences and divisions within the peasantry, which are constructed through elements derived from the experiences of both the dominant and subordinate groups (Chen 7)

In *The God of Small Things*, Velutha, a communist who belongs to Paravan (Untouchable) finishes high school and becomes an accomplished carpenter. He bravely breaks the boundaries between castes and falls in love with an upper-caste woman, because of which he is dismissed from the factory. With no intention of surrendering, he claims that the days are gone when the upper castes can kick them around like dogs. In contrast, his father, Vellya Paapen is an Old-World Paravan who has seen the Crawling Backwards Days. He is frightened of his son's way of speaking and acting because it violates his identity as a

Paravan. He believes it is his responsibility to expose the "crime" his son commits to Mammachi, which leads to Velutha's death. The huge gap between generations inevitably destroys the unity of the peasantry. It is worth noting that this gap to a large extent originates from the government's discursive formation of "democracy," which should have been the legitimate mask for the dominant elite, yet planted the seeds of resistance in the minds of the governed. Likewise, in *The Lives of Others*, Madan, a cook in an upper-class family, who comes from a particularly impoverished village, feels his real life is with the Ghosh family. He asks his masters to punish his son Dulal, who leads labor unrest and unionism in the malls to break the black hands of the owners (20), but don't abandon him. In *The White Tiger*, Balzam compares the living environment of subalterns as the Rooster Coop. While he resorts to murder to break out of the coop, his family are content with the status quo. According to Balzam, even when he goes to jail for his employer, his family would go about bragging of his loyalty. Besides, Balzam's resistance is not thorough. After becoming a capitalist, he also resorts to corruption that he once despised to establish himself as a self-sufficient new middle class. As the subaltern studies' in-depth study shows, subaltern groups retained their autonomy, but at the same time they entered those domains of colonial rule and nationalist politics which thereby transformed themselves (Chen 6-7). Balzam only reverses the binary oppositions of the oppressed and the privileged, the poor and the rich, and fails to create a new subjectivity (Yin 38). In addition, both Balram in *The White Tiger* and Om in *A Fine Balance* complain that the Naxalite movement disturbs their normal life: "The fighting between the Naxal terrorists and the landlords was getting bloodier. Small people like us were getting caught in between" (*The White Tiger*, 73); "no consideration for people like us. Murder, suicide, Naxalite-terrorist killing, police-custody death—everything ends up delaying the trains" (*A Fine Balance*, 15). From their attitude, the divisions and complexity within the subaltern can be seen.

Spivak argues that to find a pure subaltern consciousness is to "bestow a false coherence on to the much more complex and differentiated struggles of particular subaltern groups" (Morton 53). By doing so, the Subaltern Studies historians are in danger of objectifying the subaltern, and thereby controlling "through knowledge even as they restore versions of causality and self determination to him" (Spivak 1996, 210). The struggle



between positive and negative forces, compliance and resistance, isolation and solidarity, fragmentation and coherence, is a constant and ongoing battle within the subaltern's history. Constructing the notion of a dignified and autonomous subaltern subject without considering their contradictoriness is actually falling into the trap of false representation by elite intellectuals. As a result, the intellectuals who aimed to speak for the subaltern actually comply with the existing hegemonic ideology of the dominant class. In addition, considering that the subaltern group came together not long after Mrs Gandhi's Emergency, it is reasonable to suspect that the reason of these historians to "reappropriate their own past" was out of frustration that many years after independence, the field was still in the 1970s dominated by what they saw as version of neo-colonialism and American orientalism (Bayly 112). Therefore, the transparency of their representation of the subaltern was doubtful.

Historically, the urban middle classes, in particular students, played an increasingly important role in the insurgency. From 1969 onwards, Mazumdar, drawing inspiration from the Chinese Cultural Revolution, encouraged students "to plunge yourselves into the revolutionary struggle here and now instead of wasting your energy in passing examinations" (4-5). In various texts, we can observe the participation and leadership of the petite bourgeoisie and intellectuals in uprisings, such as Udayan in *The Lowland*, and Supratik in *The Lives of Others*, and their progressiveness cannot be denied. With the lofty goal of forming a just society, Udayan goes to the countryside to indoctrinate himself. He'd been instructed to move from place to place, to walk fifteen miles each day before sundown. At night he and his companions are hidden on beds of string, on sacks of grain. They were tormented by mosquitoes, slow-moving swarms that bit them to the bone (15). Supratik evaluates CPI(M) as a self-interested, power-hungry and corrupt party, whose greater importance is in winning the elections. He leaves the city to work with landless peasants, sharecroppers, wage-laborers as well as impoverished tenants, and organizes them into armed struggle. However, their limitations are also evident. Instead of being motivated by direct oppression as the most impoverished peasants did, the urban component was mostly driven by frustration and anger towards the status quo. They are concerned more about unemployment, living conditions, the crisis of the academic system, rather than food shortages, capitalist farming, labour conditions (Bebetta 67). In *The Lowland*, we can see that

the concern about India's international position counts for more than winning democracy for the subaltern. Majumdar's article said that India had turned into "a nation of beggars and foreigners". He accused India of turning to the United States to solve its problems. He accused the United States of turning India into its pawn (16). Udayan despises the Tolly Club in the neighborhood where he lives, and he thinks it is proof that India is still a semicolonial country, behaving as if the British have never left (17). The reason why Udayan joins in the uprisings is because of those talk during labs, during meals at the canteen in the university, about the country and all that was wrong with it. They believe that half of India is still in chains (140). The "unbridgeable gap" (*The Lives of Others*, 241) between the lives of the subaltern and petite bourgeois predicts the failure of the connection between classes, and the movement, which started as an agrarian revolt, drifted towards urban terrorism. The wife of the French consul was murdered in her sleep. The Naxalites intimidated voters, hoping to disrupt the elections. They fired pipe guns on the streets. They hid bombs in public places (41). The movement degenerated into a destructive and nihilistic venture.

The intellectuals' appropriation of the subaltern can be further detected in their unconscious tendency to keep placing the subaltern in a lower position. "Udayan had wanted a revolution, but at home he'd expected to be served; his only contribution to his meals was to sit and wait for Gauri or her mother-in-law to put a plate before him" (57); besides, he makes his wife an indirect accomplice in the killing of a 7-year-old boy's father without her consent. Supratik and his comrades hide in the forest after leading the peasant subalterns to slaughter landlords, leaving the helpless villagers being beaten by the police with batons and then thrown into jail. Even worse, Supratik steals his aunt's jewellery to raise money for the bombing, yet he frames the cook Madan, who has been like family to him since childhood, simply because Madan belongs to the lower class. As Suprtik himself admits, "the large gap between being an activist out of the idealism that comes from books, conversations, the fire of youth, and being one because you have lived through the depredations that life has thrown at you" (43). The separation between the intellectuals' self and the peasant subaltern—the "other"—is only reinforced further, and the temporary community between both sides is so fragile that it can fall apart at any time. Therefore, peasant resistance is doomed to be futile.

Once the interests of the bourgeois and the intellectuals are threatened, the subaltern



becomes the convenient scapegoat, and it is not limited to the period of the Naxalite movement, but extends far beyond that. In *China Room*, Suraj is captured by the anti-British revolutionaries to join the fight for “complete self-rule”. In *The God of Small Things*, Velutha is abandoned by Comrade Pillai, when he tries to seek refuge from the communist party, in the name of that the “Party was not constituted to support workers’ indiscipline in their private life” (289), and “violating Party Discipline means violating Party Unity” (290). However, the truth is that Comrade Pillai worries that Velutha’s exclusion by all the other Touchable workers in the factory for “ancient reasons of their own” (127) would undermine the unity of the labor union he intends to organize for his elections. In *A Suitable Boy*, Rasheed, an intellectual and landowner, who hands over his land to a Chamaar tenant, justifies the purdah of his female family members as “a matter of honour”, because the Muslim women of the lower castes need to work in the fields, therefore, they can’t maintain purdah (594). Despite his anger towards injustice in the village, he believes that preventing villagers from turning out their elderly parents is the business of powerful patriarchs in the family, namely his grandfather and father. With the intention of breaking free from the old power system, Rasheed still acts according to its principles.

The Naxalbari movement threw a fierce light on the cobwebbed, discreetly shadowed corner of India’s socio-economic life—the world of the peasant subaltern whose life were full of oppression and exploitation, and the intellectual as well as petite bourgeois who were dissatisfied with India’s current situation. Some of the peasant subaltern join the uprisings to fight for democracy, some, like Madan and Velutha’s father, are too disciplined to conceive of resistance, and there are also some who have rebellious spirits, yet are unable to shake off the logic of “internal colonization”, and thus only reverse the power relations after successful rebellions, such as Balram in *The White Tiger*. We can see the divisions and complexity within the peasantry. In addition, the participation of the intellectual as well as petite bourgeois also demonstrates their limitations and appropriation of the subaltern. Compared with their activities in the city, which are targeted at corruption, unemployment, academic systems, little has been done among the peasantry. They mobilized the impoverished peasants against oppressors, yet left them alone to bear the consequences of murdering landowners, just like what Supratik and his comrades did. They believe killing is

"removing class enemies," and "only he who has dipped his hands in a class enemy's blood can be considered a true revolutionary" (302). Peasants' suffering become their excuse to achieve "self-worth" through murder. The noble ideals of moving remove the remnants of the colonial rule of India by using the pretext of fighting for the subaltern's democracy even dismissed the peasantry further from the main current of political struggles.

The exploration of Indian history indicates the infeasibility of violent riots in modern nation-states, and the fragile community between the petite bourgeois and the subaltern. Then, how can the subaltern strive for genuine democracy while overthrowing the narrative of "democracy" constructed by the elite bourgeoisie? the Booker-Prize novels attempt to offer their own responses.

The construction of a community within the subalterns through their participation in Indian democracy

As analyzed earlier, the ruling class constructs discourses about democracy in order to legitimize their power. They implant the idea of democracy in the minds of the subaltern through the means of symbolic production—media and school education. It is true that "the class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it" (Marx & Engels 61). It is the pervasiveness of ideological hegemony that normally suffices to "ensure social peace and to relegate the coercive apparatus of the state to the background" (Scott 316). We cannot deny the possibility that dominant classes persuade subordinate classes to adopt their self-serving view of existing social relations, and thus induce their "false consciousness," and the result will be ideological consensus and harmony that will in turn block the perception of conflicting interests (Scott 335). However, what is demonstrated in the novel is that the real ideological accomplice is in the minority, while the majority consists of the subaltern who believes, just as the ideological hegemony expects, that they are subjects of democracy, and they deserve a better life. As James Scott observes:

If it is to become an effective instrument of consent, it must meet two criteria. First, it must claim that the system of privilege, status, and property it defends operates



in the interest not only of elites but also of subordinate groups whose compliance or support is being elicited. To do this it must, in effect, make implicit promises of benefits for subordinate groups that will serve as the stake which they too have in the prevailing social order. Second, as Gramsci realized, the dominant class must make good on at least a portion of these promises if it is to have the slightest hope of gaining compliance. (337)

The Indian government keeps making promises of benefits for the underprivileged. “Every time there are elections, they talk of passing the same ones that passed twenty years ago” (*A Fine Balance*, 183). And it is this very process of attempting to legitimate a social order by idealizing it that provides its subjects with the means, the symbolic tools, the very ideas for a critique that operates entirely within hegemony (Scott 338). The authors also attempt to empower the subaltern by urging them to wield the weapon of “democracy”.

In *The God of Small Things*, Velutha, who is charged with crossing the boundary between castes to fall in love with an upper-caste woman, asks comrade Pillai for help, because the communist party promises to curb the practice of untouchability; and he also cites the Labor Laws to safeguard his rights when Mammachi wants to fire him. In *A Fine Balance*, Narayan asks to sign his full name on the ballot instead of placing his thumbprints on the register to let Thakur deliver votes to the political party of his choice, as he believes “it is our right as voters” (185). In *A Suitable Boy*, a tenant who was deprived of his rightful share according to the Zamindari Act, complains to kanungo—the immediate superior of patwari or village register and accountant. In *The White Tiger*, on the day of the election, a rickshaw-puller who actually believes all these posters and speeches and slogans on the wall, declares himself a citizen of the democracy of India, and he wants to cast his vote, “I’m supposed to stand up to the rich, aren’t I? Isn’t that what they keep telling us?” (85); a driver with sandals on his feet who is not allowed into the mall questions the guard at the door, “Am I not a human being too?” (123). Driven by their discontent with the gap between the promises that the Indian government makes and the failure of the social order to fulfill some or all of these promises, these marginalized people strategically employ the ideological hegemony of the government in order to achieve their subversive goals.

It cannot be denied that this resistance has met with successive failures. Velutha is

betrayed by comrade Pillai in the name of violating Party Unity. Narayan is tortured and slaughtered, and his family is burned alive; the tenant who claims his land is expelled by the landlord and becomes homeless; the rickshaw-puller is beaten by the police. "They kept stamping on him, until he had been stamped back into the earth" (86), and the driver who demands his basic right as a human being—to enter the mall—is still turned away by the guard. These subaltern peasants who resist the government's hegemony with the weapon of "democracy" often fight alone, and more of them choose to step away despite their knowledge of the fact that they are being deprived of their civil rights. The alliance has not yet formed among them, but the exploitative force, which takes the form of the "civic community", has constructed a tight alliance long ago. In a civic community, citizens have equal rights and obligations, participate actively in public affairs as well as in a dense network of civic associations, and bear feelings of respect, trust, and tolerance towards their fellow citizens (Chatterjee 2011, 200). "The more intensive the network of civic associations engaged in various collective activities and the stronger the norms of reciprocity between the members of these associations, the greater the stock of social capital" (ibid.). That's why we can see collusion between the police and landlords, between landlords and patwari, and between politicians and capitalists in almost every novel. Under such conditions, it is necessary to form an equally tight community among the subaltern peasants to fight against the oppression of the civic community. The loss of such a community is probably the reason why they fail in their struggles.

Meanwhile, we should be vigilant about the fact that the author is an ideological construct. These winners and nominated authors of the Booker Prize (seven authors mentioned in this paper) are all Indian middle-class elite: except for Arundhati Roy, all the other seven authors—Aravind Adiga, Vikram Seth, Sunjeev Sahota, Jhumpa Lahiri, Rohinton Mistry, Neel Mukherjee and Sunjeev Sahota had experiences of studying in English-speaking countries, mainly the UK and the USA. Therefore, they are supposed to face a huge cultural gap with the subaltern they are committed to representing. Furthermore, the novel genre itself, which originates from the West, has an inherent connection with the middle class that is difficult to bridge. Therefore, it is challenging for them to construct a new community from the perspective of the subaltern (Yin 37). In *The White Tiger*, the author, in the voice of the



narrator Balram, compares the subaltern in this country to “chicken”: They see the flesh and organs of recently chopped-up chickens—their brothers. They know they’re next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. The very same thing is done with human beings in this country (154). The author then conceives of the future of India that is dominated by entrepreneurs like Balram, a new middle-class. Analogously, in *The Lives of Others*, Supratik pays more attention to the passivity of the landless peasants. He records the extremely tragic experience of several tenants: One was pushed by the landlords and money lenders to the point of resorting to killing his entire family and then committing suicide; one vented his resentment towards the landlord on his wife, forcing her to throw herself into the well and kill herself ... In his view, “the embers of anger we had thought of fanning had burned down into the ashes of despair. They were already dead within their lives. They had no hope, no sense of a future” (144). Besides, when Shankar invites other farmers to participate in the murder of the landlord—which was plotted by Supratik and his comrades—who defrauded Shankar of his land, Supratik was afraid that other farmers would leak the plot out. The negative images of peasants run throughout the novel. In *A Suitable Boy*, which is difficult not to see this novel as an allegory of nationhood (Mee 136) Lata finally chooses her suitable boy—Haresh, a man who is foreign-returned, but from a British technical college, and represents the future of India as a secular, commercial society (ibid.). All these writers, to some extent, subconsciously undermine the agency of the subaltern peasants.

Even though all kinds of struggles finally move toward failure, we can still glimpse the community that is being formed in the process. According to Partha Chatterjee, most of India’s population are not “citizens” in the constitutional sense. They are outside the realm of civil society, but universal suffrage has granted them participation in political life. This leads to the connection between the population to government institutions with public administration through elections and governance. It is modern governmental techniques that allow the existence of an alternative political space, where the most population excluded from civil society creates their own democratic politics. Chatterjee names this field as “political society,” and participation in political society is not always consistent with the principles of association in civil society (Chatterjee 2011, 87). Actually, in these novels, there is still a

certain distance from the establishment of a "political society" among peasant subaltern. However, a community where they identify with each other does exist.

"Civil society is where corporate capital is hegemonic, whereas political society is the space of management of non-corporate capital" (Chatterjee 2011, 224). And peasant societies are "best understood as the marks of non-corporate society" (Chatterjee 2011, 221). In *A Fine Balance*, Narayan sets up in the village and saws for his own people after years of apprenticeship. He establishes a small workshop—only himself with an old hand-cranked sewing machine. Gradually, the Chamaar community finds the courage to become his customers, though they can rarely afford to have something new tailored. Narayan alters or mends the garments they find that were thrown away by the upper castes, and helps them to build confidence as well as self-esteem in this way. His business improves when word spread to neighbouring villages, and people come as much to see this courageous Chamaar-tailor. It is through this little workshop—a form of non-corporate—that Narayan not only earns his living, but also creates a better life for his family and the Chamaar community. This ability of self-sufficiency protects Narayan from the employers' exploitation, and empowers him to help the subalterns who have the same origin as him. They unite tightly through this little workshop, and they are quietly proud of Narayan, who is like a hero in their mind. Despite that the "political society" has not established, we can see the shape of it in the people who ask for their right to sign their full name on the ballot with Narayan, in the people that celebrate the return of Om—Narayan's son—like welcome a conquering hero. "They were happy that the line of one as remarkable as Narayan, the Chamaar-turned-tailor who had defied the upper castes, was not going to die out" (648). Besides, in *The White Tiger*, the power of the community can be perceived. Inspired by the driver who demands his basic rights as a human being, other drivers realize that "If all of us were like that, we'd rule India, and they would be polishing our boots" (123). The secondhand book market of Darya Ganj, with tens of thousands of dirty, rotting, blackened books on every subject, is a gathering place for the subaltern who look for freedom and democracy. Balram sees men discussing and talking and reading in the night, alone or in clusters around the streetlamps. By the dim lights of Delhi, he sees hundreds that night, under trees, shrines, intersections, on benches, squinting at newspapers, holy books, journals, Communist Party pamphlets (184). It is likely



that there will be a “political society” among these people who are prepared to demand the government to fulfill their promises.

From the “quilt” image in *A Fine Balance*, we can even detect a tendency to go back to the ignored history of the subaltern. Through rediscovery of the subaltern’s history—their ordinary life with compromise and struggles, the foundation of the community or its further shape as a “political society” in modern Indian society can be established. Ishvar and his nephew Omprakash, whose entire family were burned to death by Thakur Dharamsi, construct a tight community with Dina, a widow, who was treated by her brother as an unpaid servant, and Maneck, a boy whose home in a mountain village was destroyed because of partition. They spend a short yet happy time together, during which everyone also endures their own hardships—Ishvar and Om lose their shack due to the beautification project under the Emergency, and they are press-ganged into expanding irrigation project; Dina is threatened by her landlord to repossess the house because she uses the flat for commercial purposes. Dina collects every bit and rag from Ishvar and Om’s each job, and stitches them together. The “poplin” from their first job records Dina’s first impression of them; “yellow calico with orange stripes” reminds them of Om’s fighting and arguing with Dina; the cloth with “blue and white flowers” makes note of the day on which Ishvar and Om were kidnapped for the Prime Minister’s compulsory meeting; and a “cambric square” records the day when Ishvar and Om’s shack was destroyed by the government; and “georgette patch” is about the day when Beggarmaster saved us from the landlord’s goondas (562) ... These scraps of fabric witness the existence of their community after it falls apart. In a pointillist manner, it is made out of apparently meaningless “bits and rags,” which gain their coherence when seen together for “the whole quilt is much more important than any single square” (605). Because it makes their existence indelible and undeniable, and they will not just be lifeless statistic in official records. It also presents a whole picture of the democratic practice of the Indian government and its interaction with the subaltern. “The quilt is the equivalent of an eclectic historical discourse where voices, versions of histories and historiographies, official political records and silenced folk stories combine and compete” (Rogobete 138). History and politics, personal dramas and historic raumas, humour and tragedy along with various textures coming from their family history and Indian culture are weaved together. Moreover, it can also be

inferred from the quilt image that the community of subaltern and the government are intertwined, which have to be "patched" and "tailored" together. It possibly hints their future negotiation and interaction, considering India's deepening democratic process.

Conclusion

Six Indian novels nominated for Booker Prize and two Booker Prize-winning Indian novels reveal the essence of Indian democracy, which is born with the traces of bourgeois elitism and English colonial rule. In order to justify its legitimacy, the Indian government constructed a system of "democracy" through the means of symbolic production—media and school education. However, the huge gap between the promises that the Indian government makes and the failure of the social order to fulfill some or all of these promises, which is most prominent in the caste system and Zamindar system, planted the seeds of resistance in the minds of the governed. Nevertheless, the community within the subaltern peasants and that between the petite bourgeois and the subaltern is too fragile to fight against the hegemony beneath the facade of India's democracy. The real solution should be found within the subaltern group. Even though there is a huge cultural gap between the seven novelists—are all Indian middle-class elite, which makes the subaltern peasants represented by them more characterized by passivity, we can still find traces of a community where the subaltern identify each other. This community is expected to be grounded in the subaltern's history—their ordinary life with compromise and struggles, which paves the way for the space of "political society" in modern Indian society.

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