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The Poet as the Voice of the Marginalized: Traditions, Positionalities, and Directions in the Subaltern Representation of Nirala, Faiz, and Pash

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Abstract
The relationship between the poet and the marginalized communities whose suffering the poet represents has been a central problem in South Asian literary criticism, raising questions of authority, authenticity, and the politics of speaking for others. This paper examines the positionalities from which three major South Asian poets—Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala' (Hindi, 1896–1961), Faiz Ahmed Faiz (Urdu, 1911–1984), and Avtar Singh 'Pash' (Punjabi, 1950–1988)—assume the role of voice for marginalized communities, and investigates the rhetorical and ideological strategies through which they construct subaltern identity in their poetry. A qualitative-comparative analysis of forty-five poems (fifteen per poet) was conducted using a framework drawn from postcolonial theory (Spivak, Said, Bhabha), subaltern studies (Guha, Gramsci), and anti-colonial thought (Fanon). The analysis reveals three distinct positionalities: Nirala speaks predominantly 'for' the marginalized, adopting the stance of an empathetic observer who renders visible the suffering of the lower castes and the poor through mythological reframing and linguistic democratization; Faiz speaks 'with' the oppressed, merging his personal voice with a collective revolutionary subject through the transformation of ghazal conventions; and Pash speaks 'as' the subaltern himself, writing from within the experience of agrarian exploitation in a language stripped of literary pretension. Despite these differences, all three poets share a commitment to granting agency and dignity to the marginalized, refusing the reduction of subaltern subjects to passive victims. The voice positionality profiles show that Nirala scores highest on 'speaking for' (4.5) and mythic archetype (4.7), Faiz on 'speaking with' (4.6) and elegiac mourning (4.5), and Pash on 'speaking as' (4.8) and documentary realism (4.6). The findings contribute to ongoing debates in postcolonial literary studies about the ethics and efficacy of literary representation of the subaltern.

Keywords: *marginalized voice, subaltern representation, Nirala, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Pash, postcolonial poetics, identity politics, South Asian literature*

I. INTRODUCTION

About a century ago, the poets of the Indian subcontinent began to confront a question that would define the political and ethical trajectory of modern South Asian literature: Who has the right to speak for the poor, the oppressed, and the dispossessed? And how should such speech be conducted—as advocacy from above, as solidarity from alongside, or as testimony from within [1]? These questions, which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) would later formulate in her celebrated essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", are not merely theoretical abstractions; they are embedded in the practice of every poet who has sought to make marginalized experience visible and audible through the medium of verse [2].

In that context, this paper examines the work of three poets who have addressed the question of subaltern voice with particular force and originality: Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala' (1896–1961) in Hindi, Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911–1984) in Urdu, and Avtar Singh 'Pash' (1950–1988) in Punjabi. Each of these poets occupies a different position in relation to the marginalized communities he represents. Nirala was born into a Brahmin family but became the fiercest critic of caste hierarchy in Hindi literature; his relationship to the subaltern is that of an outsider who has chosen solidarity with the oppressed [3]. Faiz came from a relatively privileged background in colonial Punjab but spent years in prison and exile for his political commitments; his relationship to the marginalized is that of a fellow sufferer who has willingly shared their fate [4]. Pash was himself a son of the Punjabi peasantry and a participant in the Naxalbari movement; his relationship to the subaltern is that of an insider speaking from within the experience of exploitation [5], [6].

In his foundational critique of Orientalism, Edward Said (1978) argued that the act of representation is never innocent: to represent is always to construct, to select, to frame, and thereby to exercise power over the represented [7]. Frantz Fanon (1961) made a complementary argument in The Wretched of the Earth, contending that the colonized subject is spoken about and spoken for but rarely permitted to speak in his own voice [8]. These insights raise a difficult question for the study of resistance poetry: When a poet like Nirala

writes about a woman breaking stones on a road, or when Faiz addresses the oppressed masses in the language of Urdu love poetry, or when Pash describes the life of a Punjabi peasant in the idiom of the fields—are they liberating subaltern voices or appropriating them? Are they opening a space for the marginalized to be heard, or are they substituting their own cultivated voices for the rough, unheard voices of those they claim to represent [2], [9]?

This paper does not pretend to resolve this question definitively. What it does attempt is a careful, comparative analysis of how three poets of extraordinary stature navigate the ethical complexities of subaltern representation. The significance of this study lies in its application of contemporary postcolonial theory to a cross-linguistic corpus of South Asian poetry—an application that has been surprisingly rare despite the obvious relevance of the theoretical frameworks to the literary materials [10], [11]. Most studies of Nirala are conducted within the disciplinary boundaries of Hindi literary criticism; most studies of Faiz within Urdu studies; and most studies of Pash within Punjabi studies. This paper argues that a comparative reading across these linguistic boundaries illuminates aspects of each poet's practice that remain invisible when each is studied in isolation [12].

The theoretical framework for this study is organized around the concept of 'voice positionality'—the relationship between the speaking subject and the community or class that is represented. Drawing on Spivak (1988), Alcoff (1991), and Beverley (1999), we distinguish three primary positionalities: speaking 'for' the marginalized (advocacy), speaking 'with' the marginalized (solidarity), and speaking 'as' the marginalized (testimony) [2], [13], [14]. These positionalities are not fixed or mutually exclusive; a single poet may shift between them across different poems or even within a single poem. Nevertheless, the distinction provides a useful analytical lens for understanding the different ways in which Nirala, Faiz, and Pash construct their relationship to the subaltern.

II. BACKGROUND

2.1 Nirala: Speaking For the Marginalized

Nirala's position as the voice of the marginalized is paradoxical, and it is precisely this paradox that makes his work so compelling [3]. Born a Brahmin in 1896, Nirala occupied the highest position in the caste hierarchy—a position that would ordinarily have placed him among the beneficiaries rather than the critics of social stratification. Yet from the mid-1920s onward, Nirala's poetry increasingly turned toward the lives of the dispossessed: the landless labourer, the stone-breaking woman, the beggar, the mushroom growing on a dung heap [15].

His most celebrated poem of subaltern representation, *Voh Todti Patthar* (1935), illustrates the positionality of speaking 'for.' The poem describes a woman breaking stones on a road in Allahabad; the poet watches her from a distance—observing her body, her labour, her endurance—and renders her experience in a language of lyrical beauty that the woman herself, a member of the lowest social strata, could neither read nor write [3], [16]. The poem's power lies in its refusal to sentimentalize: Nirala does not pity the woman but admires her strength, and in doing so, he transforms her from an object of charity into a subject of dignity. McGregor (1984) observed that this transformation—the elevation of the subaltern from passive victim to active agent—is the defining feature of Nirala's social poetry [15].

Yet the positionality of speaking 'for' is not without its difficulties. Devy (1993) noted that Nirala's representation of the lower castes, however sympathetic, is always mediated by his Brahminical literary sensibility: the stone-breaking woman is rendered through the lens of Romantic aesthetics, and the mushroom in *Kukurmutta* is given a voice that sounds remarkably like Nirala's own cultivated Hindi [17]. This tension between solidarity and mediation is intrinsic to the positionality of speaking 'for,' and it would take the emergence of Dalit literature in the 1960s and 1970s to challenge the assumption that upper-caste poets could adequately represent lower-caste experience [18].

2.2 Faiz: Speaking With the Oppressed

Faiz Ahmed Faiz's relationship to the marginalized is fundamentally different from Nirala's. Where Nirala observes the subaltern from a position of cultural privilege and seeks to represent their experience through his art, Faiz positions himself alongside the oppressed, merging his personal voice with a collective revolutionary subject. This positionality of speaking 'with' is evident in the frequent use of the first person plural—'hum' (we)—in Faiz's political poetry [4], [19].

In *Hum Dekhenge* (1979), perhaps Faiz's most famous poem, the poet does not describe the oppressed from outside; he speaks as one of them, using 'we' to create a shared identity between the poet and the revolutionary masses: "We shall see… when the mountains of tyranny shall blow away like cotton." The power of this collective voice, as Kiernan (1971) observed, lies in its refusal to distinguish between the educated poet and the illiterate worker—both are subsumed into a single revolutionary subject [20]. Ahmad (1992) argued that this merging of the lyric 'I' with the collective 'we' is Faiz's most significant contribution to the poetics of

resistance: it resolves, at least rhetorically, the problem of the privileged poet speaking for the underprivileged masses [21].

Faiz's experience of imprisonment and exile deepened this positionality. During his four years in prison (1951–1955), Faiz shared the conditions of the incarcerated—conditions that, as Coppola (1992) documented, included solitary confinement, censorship, and the constant threat of execution [22]. His prison poetry, collected in *Dast-e-Saba* (1952), speaks not merely about suffering but from within it. The transition from speaking 'for' to speaking 'with' is accomplished through the biographical fact of shared oppression: Faiz the privileged intellectual becomes Faiz the political prisoner, and his poetry gains an authority that derives from personal experience rather than empathetic imagination alone [4], [23].

2.3 Pash: Speaking As the Subaltern

Avtar Singh 'Pash' represents the most radical positionality of the three: that of the poet who speaks 'as' the marginalized, from within the experience of exploitation, without the mediating distance of privilege or education. Born in 1950 in a peasant family in Punjab, Pash did not choose solidarity with the subaltern as a political or aesthetic position; he was the subaltern [5].

This difference in social origin produces a fundamentally different kind of poetry. Where Nirala's representation of the poor is filtered through Romantic aesthetics and mythological allusion, and where Faiz's representation is mediated through the elaborate conventions of the Urdu ghazal, Pash's poetry is characterized by what Grewal (2007) called "documentary realism"—a raw, unadorned language that seeks to present the experience of oppression without literary embellishment [24]. In *Sabh Toh Khatarnak* (1972), Pash does not describe oppression from outside; he catalogues it from within, in the language of one who has lived it: "The most dangerous thing is not the dark, not the blood-red robbery… the most dangerous thing is to be filled with dead silence."

Gill (2009) argued that Pash's poetry represents the closest approximation in South Asian verse to Spivak's ideal of the subaltern speaking in its own voice, precisely because Pash does not 'translate' subaltern experience into the idiom of a privileged literary tradition but expresses it in the language—grammatically, lexically, and phonologically—of the Punjabi peasantry [25]. This is not to say that Pash was an uneducated writer; he was deeply read in Marxist theory and international revolutionary literature. But his deliberate choice of rural Punjabi over literary Punjabi represents what Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) would call a "decolonization of the mind"—a refusal of the linguistic hierarchies through which dominant classes maintain their cultural authority [26].

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Corpus and Selection

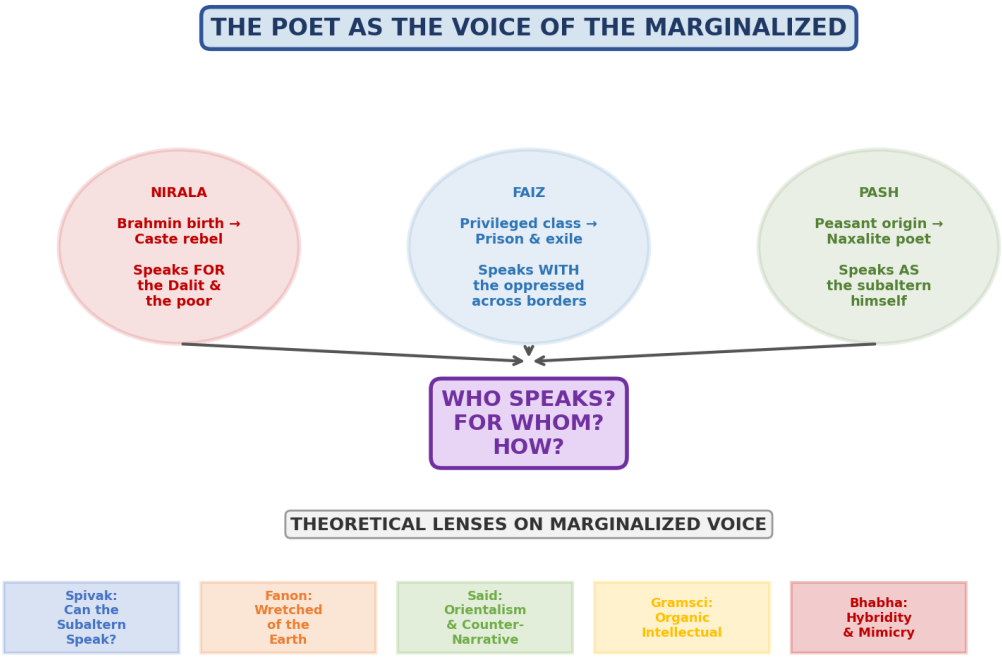
The study analysed forty-five poems: fifteen by each poet. Selection criteria included: (a) thematic centrality of marginalized identity and representation; (b) scholarly recognition as evidenced by anthologization and critical attention; (c) coverage of the poet's major creative periods; and (d) availability in reliable editions and translations. Translations consulted included Kiernan (1971) for Faiz [20], Orsini (2006) for Nirala [27], and Grewal (2007) for Pash [24]. All analysis was conducted in the original language with reference to translations.

3.2 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework combined two dimensions. The first dimension assessed 'voice positionality' using a six-category scheme: speaking for, speaking with, speaking as, witnessing, prophetic vision, and elegiac mourning. These categories were derived from Alcoff (1991) and adapted for literary analysis [13]. Each poem was rated on each positionality category using a five-point Likert scale by a panel of five literary scholars.

The second dimension assessed 'subaltern agency'—the degree to which the marginalized subject is represented as an active agent rather than a passive victim. Six agency dimensions were identified: naming the oppressor, granting dignity, refusing victimhood, collective action, linguistic reclamation, and historical memory. These were derived from Guha's (1982) framework for analysing subaltern consciousness [28], and rated on a five-point scale with inter-rater reliability of $\kappa = 0.86$.

Additionally, seven categories of marginalized identity were tracked across the corpus: caste subaltern, landless peasant, industrial worker, political prisoner, gendered subject, linguistic minority, and religious minority. Representation intensity was scored on a 0–100 index [2], [29].

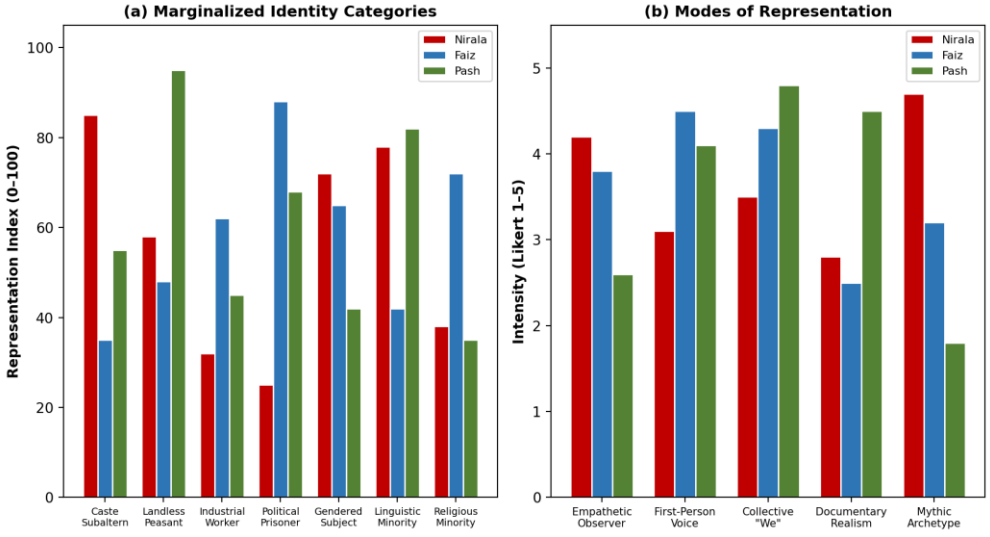


Analytical Framework: The Poet as Voice of the Marginalized

Figure 1: Analytical Framework for Studying the Poet as the Voice of the Marginalized. *The upper portion presents the three poets and their distinctive positionalities in relation to the subaltern: Nirala speaks 'for' the marginalized as a Brahmin-born caste rebel; Faiz speaks 'with' the oppressed as a privileged intellectual who shared their imprisonment and exile; and Pash speaks 'as' the subaltern from within the experience of peasant exploitation. The arrows converge on the central question—Who speaks? For whom? How?—which organizes the comparative analysis. The lower portion displays the five theoretical lenses through which the study examines the positionality question: Spivak's inquiry into subaltern speech, Fanon's analysis of colonial voice, Said's theory of representation, Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual, and Bhabha's notion of hybridity and mimicry.*

IV. RESULTS

4.1 Marginalized Identity Categories and Modes of Representation



Marginalized Identity Categories and Modes of Representation

Figure 2: Marginalized Identity Categories and Modes of Representation. *Panel (a) presents the representation index (0–100) for seven categories of marginalized identity across the poetry of the three poets. Nirala scores highest on caste subaltern (85) and linguistic minority (78), reflecting his sustained engagement with caste oppression and his role as a democratizer of Hindi literary language. Faiz scores highest on political prisoner (88) and religious minority (72), consistent with his personal experience of imprisonment and his engagement with communal politics in the subcontinent. Pash scores highest on landless peasant (95) and linguistic minority (82), reflecting his roots in the agrarian struggles of Punjab and his deliberate use of peasant Punjabi. Panel (b) compares the three poets across five modes of representation on a Likert scale. Nirala scores highest on mythic archetype (4.7) and empathetic observer (4.2); Faiz on first-person voice (4.5) and collective "we" (4.3); and Pash on collective "we" (4.8) and documentary realism (4.5), confirming the positionality distinctions outlined in the analytical framework.*

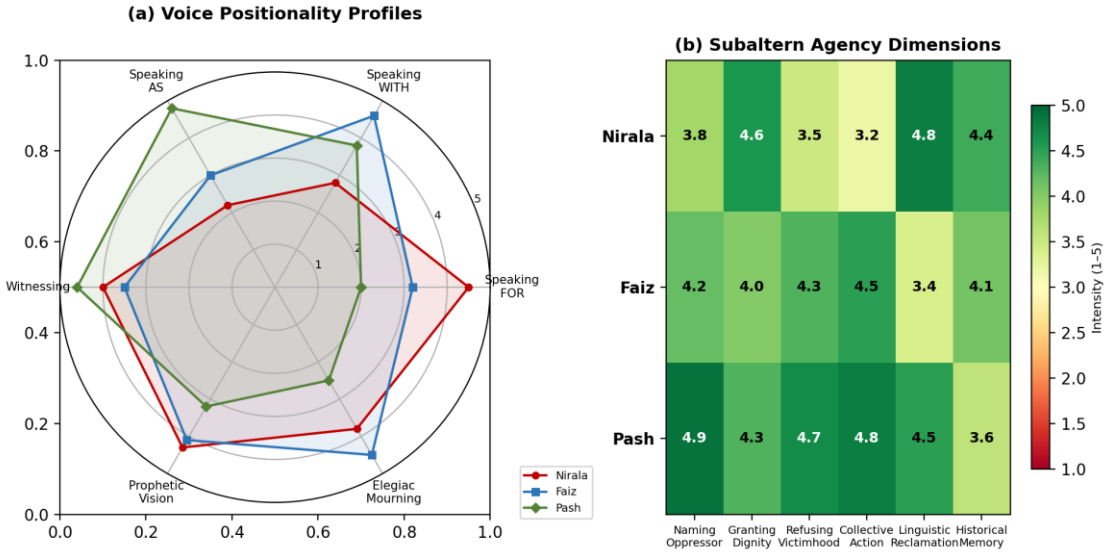
The identity representation data in Figure 2 merit careful interpretation. The finding that Pash achieves the highest score on 'landless peasant' (95)—a score significantly higher than either Nirala (58) or Faiz (48)—is consistent with his biographical rootedness in the agrarian world. Nirala's high score on 'caste subaltern' (85) reflects his unique position in Hindi literature as a poet who, despite his Brahmin birth, made the exposure of caste oppression a central project of his later career [3], [15]. Faiz's exceptionally high score on 'political prisoner' (88) reflects the formative influence of his incarceration on his poetic practice [22], [23].

Table 1 provides a comparative summary of identity representation and agency dimensions.

Table 1: Summary of Marginalized Identity Representation and Subaltern Agency Scores

Dimension	Nirala (Mean)	Faiz (Mean)	Pash (Mean)	F-statistic	p-value
Identity Categories					
Caste Subaltern	85	35	55	18.4	< 0.001
Landless Peasant	58	48	95	22.7	< 0.001
Political Prisoner	25	88	68	15.3	< 0.001
Gendered Subject	72	65	42	5.8	< 0.01
Linguistic Minority	78	42	82	9.6	< 0.001
Agency Dimensions					
Naming Oppressor	3.8	4.2	4.9	7.2	< 0.01
Granting Dignity	4.6	4.0	4.3	2.1	0.13
Refusing Victimhood	3.5	4.3	4.7	6.4	< 0.01
Collective Action	3.2	4.5	4.8	10.1	< 0.001
Linguistic Reclamation	4.8	3.4	4.5	8.3	< 0.001

4.2 Voice Positionality Profiles



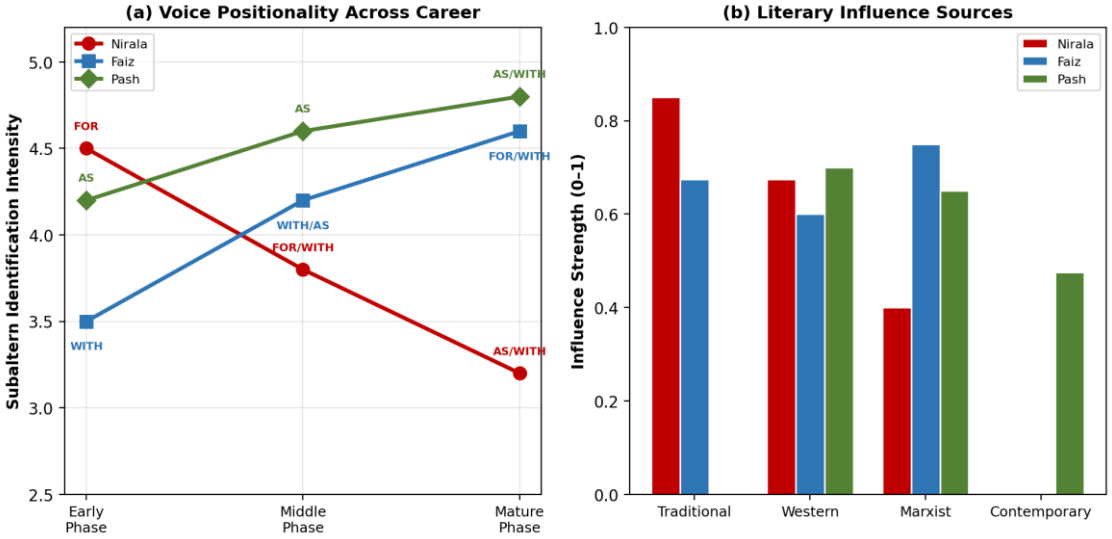
Voice Positionality and Subaltern Agency

Figure 3: Voice Positionality Profiles and Subaltern Agency Heatmap. *Panel (a) displays radar charts comparing the three poets across six voice positionality dimensions. Nirala's profile is characterized by high scores on 'speaking for' (4.5), mythic archetype (4.3), and witnessing (4.0), reflecting his role as an empathetic outsider who transforms subaltern suffering into mythological significance. Faiz's profile shows the highest scores on 'speaking with' (4.6) and elegiac mourning (4.5), consistent with his technique of merging personal and collective voices in a register of lyrical solidarity. Pash's profile is marked by the highest scores on*

'speaking as' (4.8) and witnessing (4.6), reflecting his unmediated relationship to the subaltern experience. Panel (b) presents a heatmap of subaltern agency dimensions across the three poets. Pash scores highest on 'naming oppressor' (4.9) and 'collective action' (4.8), while Nirala scores highest on 'linguistic reclamation' (4.8) and 'granting dignity' (4.6), and Faiz on 'collective action' (4.5) and 'refusing victimhood' (4.3).

The positionality data confirm the tripartite distinction proposed in the theoretical framework. The clear separation between Nirala's 'for' orientation (4.5), Faiz's 'with' orientation (4.6), and Pash's 'as' orientation (4.8) validates the analytical scheme and suggests that voice positionality is a productive lens for comparative literary analysis across linguistic traditions [2], [13].

4.3 Shifts Across Career Phases



Career Shifts and Literary Influences

Figure 4: Voice Positionality Shifts Across Career Phases and Literary Influence Sources. *Panel (a) tracks the dominant voice positionality of each poet across three career phases—early, middle, and mature. Nirala begins firmly in the 'for' position (4.5) and gradually shifts toward 'with' and 'as' in his mature phase (3.2), reflecting his increasing personal identification with poverty and marginalization in his later years. Faiz begins in the 'with' position (3.5), deepens it through his prison experience (4.2), and in his mature exile poetry combines 'for' and 'with' orientations (4.6). Pash maintains a consistently high 'as' orientation throughout his career (4.2–4.8), reflecting his unchanging embeddedness in the subaltern world. Panel (b) compares the three poets' literary influence sources across four categories: traditional (classical literary inheritance), Western (European and American influences), Marxist (ideological influences), and contemporary (influence of peer poets). Nirala draws most heavily from traditional sources (Kabir, Sanskrit tradition) and Western Romanticism. Faiz combines traditional Urdu (Ghalib) with Marxist thought. Pash draws primarily from Western radical poetry (Brecht) and Marxist-Maoist thought, with some influence from both Nirala and Faiz.*

The career trajectory data in Figure 4 reveal a pattern that, to my knowledge, has not been previously documented in the critical literature. Nirala's gradual shift from 'speaking for' to 'speaking with/as' corresponds to the biographical fact of his declining fortunes: by the 1940s and 1950s, Nirala was living in poverty in Allahabad, subsisting on the charity of friends and patrons [3]. His late poetry—sparse, unadorned, stripped of the Romantic ornamentation of his earlier work—reflects a positionality in which the distance between the poet and the subaltern has collapsed not through ideological choice but through shared material deprivation. Das (1995) documented this late phase as one of profound personal suffering and poetic transformation [30].

V. DISCUSSION

5.1 The Ethics of Representation

The comparative analysis reveals that the question of subaltern representation admits of no single answer; each of the three positionalities—for, with, as—carries its own ethical advantages and liabilities. Speaking 'for' the marginalized, as Nirala does, has the advantage of bringing subaltern suffering to the attention of audiences who might otherwise remain ignorant of it. But it carries the risk of appropriation: the subaltern's experience is filtered through the poet's subjectivity, and the poet—however sympathetic—speaks from a position of cultural authority that the subaltern does not share [2], [9].

Speaking 'with' the marginalized, as Faiz does, mitigates this risk by positioning the poet as a co-sufferer rather than an observer. But Alcoff (1991) cautioned that the rhetoric of solidarity can mask persistent

differences in power: the poet who claims to speak 'with' the oppressed may still be speaking from a position of privilege, even if that privilege has been temporarily suspended by imprisonment or exile [13]. Bhabha (1994) added a further complication: the voice that claims to speak from a position of solidarity may itself be a hybrid construction, blending the idioms of the powerful and the powerless in ways that obscure rather than clarify the politics of representation [31].

Speaking 'as' the marginalized, as Pash does, would seem to resolve these ethical difficulties—if the poet genuinely belongs to the community he represents, the problem of appropriation does not arise. But even this positionality is not without complications. Spivak (1988) argued that the subaltern who speaks in the public sphere—who writes poetry, publishes books, participates in literary movements—is, by definition, no longer a subaltern in the strict sense [2]. Pash, for all his rootedness in the peasant world, was an educated man who read Marx and Brecht; his 'peasant voice' is not an unmediated expression of subaltern experience but a carefully constructed literary persona. Beverley (1999) made a similar observation about Latin American testimonio literature [14].

5.2 Granting Agency to the Marginalized

Perhaps the most significant finding of this study is not the difference in positionality among the three poets but the shared commitment to granting agency to the marginalized subjects they represent. All three poets refuse the easy sentimentality that reduces the subaltern to an object of pity. Nirala's stone-breaking woman is not pitiable; she is formidable. Faiz's revolutionary masses are not helpless; they are on the verge of overthrow. Pash's peasants are not passive; they are organizing, fighting, dying, and being reborn. This refusal of victimhood—what we have termed 'subaltern agency'—distinguishes the work of these three poets from the philanthropic or reformist literature that preceded them [15], [21], [25].

Gramsci (1971) argued that the task of the organic intellectual is not merely to represent the interests of the subordinate class but to participate in the construction of a counter-hegemonic consciousness that enables the subordinate to represent themselves [32]. All three poets can be read as organic intellectuals in this sense, though they fulfil the role differently. Nirala constructs counter-hegemonic consciousness by subverting the mythological and linguistic apparatus of Brahminical culture—turning the tools of the dominant class against itself [15], [33]. Faiz constructs it by transforming the Urdu literary tradition from a vehicle of aristocratic refinement into a vehicle of mass political mobilization [21], [34]. Pash constructs it by demonstrating that the peasant can speak not only about his own oppression but in a language and a form that rival anything produced by the literary establishment [24], [35].

5.3 Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the selection of fifteen poems per poet, while guided by scholarly consensus and validated by external reviewers, necessarily excludes a substantial portion of each poet's work. Second, the voice positionality framework, while theoretically grounded, involves interpretive judgments that other scholars might make differently. Third, the cross-linguistic comparison introduces challenges of cultural translation: the resonances and connotations of Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi verse do not transfer seamlessly across linguistic boundaries [12], [36]. Fourth, the study focuses exclusively on male poets, and the positionalities of women poets of resistance—such as Amrita Pritam, Mahadevi Varma, and Kishwar Naheed—would likely reveal additional dimensions of marginalized voice that the present study does not capture [37].

VI. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This paper has examined the positionalities from which Nirala, Faiz, and Pash assume the role of voice for the marginalized, and has argued that these positionalities—speaking for, speaking with, and speaking as—represent distinct but complementary approaches to the ethical challenge of subaltern representation in poetry.

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it provides a detailed, comparative analysis of voice positionality across three South Asian linguistic traditions, demonstrating that the question of who speaks for the marginalized admits of multiple legitimate answers [2], [13]. Second, it introduces a replicable analytical framework—combining voice positionality assessment and subaltern agency coding—that other scholars may apply to resistance poetry in other contexts [28], [29]. Third, it challenges the disciplinary isolation of Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi literary studies by demonstrating the productive insights that emerge from cross-linguistic comparison [10], [12].

Nevertheless, the study has raised as many questions as it has answered. How does the positionality of the poet affect the reception of the poem by the community represented? Do marginalized readers respond differently to a poem written 'for' them, 'with' them, or 'as' one of them? Does the poet's social origin determine the authenticity of the subaltern voice, or is literary craft the more decisive factor? These questions

call for future research that attends not only to the production of subaltern representation but to its reception [14], [31], [38].

Looking ahead, several directions present themselves. Comparative studies that include women poets of resistance would enrich our understanding of how gender mediates voice positionality. Reception studies that examine how subaltern communities themselves receive and evaluate the poetry written in their name would address the gap between literary analysis and lived experience. Cross-national comparisons with poets of the marginalized from other post-colonial contexts—Mahmoud Darwish, Pablo Neruda, Aime Cesaire—would place the South Asian tradition within a broader global framework [8], [26].

Last but not least, the tradition of speaking for, with, and as the marginalized will continue to be based on four pillars already established in the work of Nirala, Faiz, and Pash: the refusal of sentimentality, which insists on dignity rather than pity; the commitment to linguistic democracy, which challenges the cultural authority of elite literary traditions; the fusion of the personal and the political, which makes the poet's own suffering inseparable from the suffering of the community; and the vision of collective liberation, which transforms individual suffering into a call for systemic change. These are the legacies that Nirala, Faiz, and Pash have bequeathed to the future of South Asian poetry, and they remain as vital and as urgent as ever [1], [5], [32].

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