

Gendered Resistance: Exploring Subaltern Voices in Ajeet Cour's *Koora Kabara*

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Abstract:

Women often face subjugation in various aspects of life, whether in the workplace or at home, where the gendered authority of men restricts their freedom and expression. When a woman shares her thoughts or feelings, she is frequently dismissed or labelled as "overthinking." In a world structured by patriarchal values, women endure a continual struggle to affirm their independence, confronting limitations on their autonomy and sense of belonging. This research paper examines Ajeet Cour's *Koora Kabara*, exploring how autobiographies become powerful tools of self-expression and resistance. It demonstrates how personal narratives address broader social issues, particularly the silencing of women based on gender and social status. The paper delves into themes of self-realization, confidence, and the challenges Indian women face in a male-dominated society. Cour's narrative critiques societal norms by addressing sensitive topics such as love, relationships, and sexual identity, offering a perspective on generally overlooked issues. Writing emerges as a transformative act, enabling her to reclaim her voice and resist patriarchal and colonial structures. The study argues that *Koora Kabara* deconstructs silence, presenting resistance as active and transformative. By giving voice to the subaltern, Cour's work challenges dominant narratives and advocates for women's individuality and rights. This paper highlights *Koora Kabara* for examining gendered resistance within postcolonial and patriarchal contexts. It contributes to postcolonial feminist discourse while showcasing the enduring relevance of autobiographies in challenging systemic inequities. A qualitative research methodology incorporating a close textual analysis of *Koora Kabara* has been employed while undertaking the research. Ajeet Cour highlights how society supports men's privileges while making life harder for women who choose independence. Writing serves as a tool of catharsis for her, enabling her to transform her pain into a source of strength. For her, true freedom is more than financial independence focusing on discovering selfhood beyond traditional roles.

Keywords: subjugation, patriarchy, resistance, liberation.

Introduction

The subjugation of women within patriarchal and postcolonial settings has been a universal issue, influencing the lives and experiences of women across generations. In the context of postcolonial India, societal structures give preference to patriarchal phenomenon, which in a way suppress women and restrict their independence and self-expression. Women in these societies are frequently subjected to perform designated gender roles that restrict them from expressing themselves freely and their opportunities for growth also get minimised.

In such a setting, autobiographical writing, for women, becomes a powerful medium for self-expression and resistance. The autobiographical genre, thus, helps and supports women to voice themselves particularly in postcolonial feminist literature against patriarchy and oppression through their life stories. Women resist the patriarchy imposed upon them. Women's autobiographies offer insights into identity formation, revealing the intersection of personal experiences with broader societal structures. In this context, autobiography is an essential tool for understanding the dynamics of postcolonial India, where gender roles are challenged.

This paper explores the theme of gender and resistance in contemporary Indian literature, focusing specifically on the memoir written by Ajeet Cour. Her autobiography, *Koora Kabara*, unfolds Cour's experiences of profound despondency and degeneration (Cour 237). She navigates societal pressures and struggles to define herself beyond the rigid, traditional roles assigned to her as a woman. Through her narrative, Cour offers a powerful critique of the patriarchal structures restricting women's identities, making her autobiography an important text in understanding the intersection of gender, resistance, and postcolonial feminist thought.

This research explores how autobiographies, particularly Cour's *Koora Kabara*, serve as a form of resistance against patriarchal restrictions and contribute to gendered resistance in Indian literature. By examining Cour's life narrative, this paper investigates how women's autobiographies challenge the silences imposed by traditional and postcolonial structures. The autobiographies of contemporary women bring out female subjectivity and the actual lives of women. More recently, one has seen the proliferation of life-writing as lives from the periphery of society are written in Indian vernaculars and subsequently translated into English (Sadhu 8). Autobiography is "the retrospective narrative in prose that someone makes of his own existence when he puts the principal accent upon his life, especially upon the story of his own personality" (Lejeune 4). This paper analyzes how Cour's autobiography exemplifies the power of life-writing as a tool for personal and political resistance.

Literature Review

Ajeet Cour is a prominent literary figure in Punjabi literature who has contributed to various genres including short stories, novelettes, memoirs, autobiographies, and travelogues. She was honoured with India's prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1986 for her celebrated memoir *Khanabadosh (Nomad)*, originally published in Punjabi in 1983. In 1997, Ajeet Cour wrote a second volume of her memoir, *Koora Kabara (A Heap of Garbage)*. These two autobiographical writings were combined and published as *Weaving Water* in 2018. Part one of this combined autobiography was translated into English by Meenu Minocha; whereas, a version of Part Two was translated into English by Masooma Ali and published as *Pebbles in Tin Drum* in 1998.

An autobiographical narrative written by women in the post-independence era of India probes into the life experiences of women as they face the challenges related to gender, class, and social expectations. It illustrates the struggle of a woman to proclaim her identity and autonomy within the limitations of patriarchal and postcolonial societal frameworks. *Koora Kabara* fits into this tradition by providing a personal account of defiance and self-definition in a context still deeply influenced by colonialism and patriarchy.

In colonized societies, women often faced dual forms of oppression - one rooted in the colonial system and the other in patriarchal traditions. Postcolonial feminism tackles this dual challenge, confronting both the colonial narratives that suppressed their voices and the patriarchal systems that restricted their liberties. The British colonial era significantly influenced the roles and identities of Indian women, as colonial beliefs strengthened patriarchal standards and restricted women's independence. Simultaneously, nationalist movements in India aimed to regain cultural identity and sovereignty, yet this effort frequently neglected the issues faced by women. *Koora Kabara* is written in this postcolonial context, where Cour reflects on the personal and collective colonial effects on women's lives. The text exposes how the postcolonial nation, while liberated from colonial rule, continued gendered inequalities and patriarchal structures.

Postcolonial feminism, as described by scholars like *Gayatri Spivak* and *Chandra Talpade Mohanty*, helps to understanding Ajeet Cour's *Koora Kabara*. Spivak's concept of the *subaltern* is particularly relevant in examining women's voices in postcolonial India. Spivak's famous question, "Can the subaltern speak?" becomes pertinent in the case of *Koora Kabara*, where Cour gives voice to females and their personal and collective experiences within a postcolonial society that carries the colonial and patriarchal oppression. Cour's autobiography offers a direct challenge to these structures, claiming space for women's self-expression and resistance.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty accuses Western feminism of over simplifying Third World feminism and viewing the debate through a lens of victimry, oppression, hegemonic patriarchy and violence. Mohanty's work on feminist solidarity and the global struggle against oppression also informs the analysis of Cour's text. By drawing attention to how women in postcolonial societies often face compounded struggles due to both colonial histories and entrenched gender norms, *Koora Kabara* exemplifies the challenges women encounter in postcolonial India. Cour's narrative becomes a critical tool to examine how these dual forces of oppression shape women's subjectivity, and how their personal lives intersect with larger social, political, and historical movements.

The subaltern studies framework offers a rich context for analyzing *Koora Kabara*. Cour not only narrates her personal experiences but also critiques the systemic structures that demote women in postcolonial India.

While scholarly attention on *Koora Kabara* is limited, several critical readings of Ajeet Cour's autobiographical works have examined her role in challenging gendered norms and patriarchal structures in postcolonial India. Critics have pointed out how Cour's writing provides an important intervention in postcolonial feminist literature.

Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative method, focusing on detailed textual analysis as the main approach. Close textual analysis entails a thorough and critical examination of the primary text, *Koora Kabara*, focusing on the subtle representations of gender, resistance, and identity that define Ajeet Cour's autobiographical narrative. The approach enables a profound comprehension of how Cour's individual experiences connect with the wider socio-political landscape of postcolonial India, especially concerning patriarchy, colonial histories, and gendered resistance.

Ajeet Cour's *Koora Kabara* is focused on its significant contribution to postcolonial feminist literature, where Cour's autobiographical writing provides a unique and impactful perspective to explore the complexities of identity and gender in postcolonial India. This study of Cour's narrative tells a woman's viewpoint in the Indian diaspora confronting the enduring patriarchal systems and colonial legacies in postcolonial society. A thorough examination of this text reveals how Cour leverages her personal experiences, through her autobiography, to challenge and undermine prevailing cultural and political narratives within postcolonial feminist frameworks and how it serves as a means of resistance and self-expression, especially for women at the crossroads of gender and national identity.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs postcolonial feminism to examine how Ajeet Cour depicts the complex collaboration of gender, identity, and resistance in her autobiography *Koora Kabara*. Postcolonial feminist theory examines the dual oppressions that women experience in their lives. The postcolonial society is considered responsible for their dual oppression — one rooted in colonial histories and the other in patriarchal structures. This framework examines how this power structure influences women's independence, identity, and existence.

Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, argues that gender is a social concept and that women are historically conditioned into playing subordinate roles. She asserts that “One is not born a woman but becomes one,” emphasizing how societal norms create the myth of women as inferior “Others” (Beauvoir 267). This notion of women as the “Other” perpetuates gender inequalities, a critique that resonates strongly within postcolonial feminist discourse.

Sarojini Sahoo builds upon de Beauvoir's insights, asserting that women can only liberate themselves by “thinking, taking action, working, creating, on the same terms as men.” However, she also emphasizes women's distinct identity and highlights how they often accept subjugation, consciously or unconsciously. These ideas are reflected in *Koora Kabara*, where Cour depicts women resisting traditional roles and reclaiming their sense of self.

Gayatri Spivak's concept of subalternity, as introduced in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, is crucial to understanding Cour's work. Spivak identifies subalterns as those marginalized by hegemonic power structures, including colonized women whose voices are often silenced. In *Koora Kabara*, Cour offers a counter-narrative that amplifies these silenced voices, challenging both colonial legacies and patriarchal oppression.

Resistance in postcolonial feminist literature encompasses not only outward struggles against societal and historical forces but also internal processes of reclaiming identity and agency. Cour's *Koora Kabara* exemplifies this resistance, portraying the narrator's journey of self-definition and autonomy. Through her autobiographical narrative, Cour addresses broader struggles faced by women in postcolonial India, transforming her personal story into a collective act of defiance against intersecting systems of oppression.

By engaging with postcolonial feminist concepts such as patriarchy, subalternity, and resistance, this study positions *Koora Kabara* as a critical text that challenges systemic inequities and contributes significantly to feminist discourse in contemporary Indian literature.

Analysis of *Koora Kabara*

Ajeet Cour's autobiographical memoir *Koora Kabara* delves into her personal experiences, encompassing themes of loss and gain, romance, migration from Pakistan, family, birthplace, and childhood nostalgia. The extensively detailed narration of her childhood memories enables readers to visualize them vividly. Cour explores the lives of her father and husband, and the consequences of their decisions on her family, spanning decades and reflecting on the lives of Cour, her mother, Candy, and Arpana.

Cour's life journey symbolizes the struggles of many women in postcolonial India. Her autobiography critiques the gendered power structures that oppress women, highlighting how patriarchal norms confine them to roles of service and sacrifice. Cour paints a nostalgic picture of her family and birthplace in Lahore, filled with rich and reminiscent details. She recounts her grandmother's treasured fabrics and the bed on which she was born, bringing her childhood memories to life. 'The bed was placed in the spacious, airy room in my grandmother's house in Lahore... made of strong wood,... supported by thick, round, carved legs.' (Cour 13)

Cour's childhood memories underscore the oppressive societal norms of her time. She begins her memoir by recounting the birth of her younger brother, emphasizing how sons were celebrated over daughters in patriarchal Indian society. She further narrated that by not getting a formal education when other children went to school, she 'was leading a life of recluse' (Cour 17). 'According to him (Daarji), decent, well-mannered girls turned into spoilt brats if they went to school.' (Cour 16). These incidents depict both patriarchy and gender discrimination.

Through childhood anecdotes, she reflects on the ingrained gender discrimination that shaped her feminist perspective. She narrates the story of Muan, a young girl suffering from tuberculosis who looks extremely pale, thin, and depressed. The indifference toward her treatment highlights the gender inequality of the time. Ajeet, a curious child, enquires her father about the lack of medical support for Muan. The father's stern response discourages her from discussing the matter further. Later, Ajeet overhears her parents' conversation which reveals that Muan's family chose not to treat her due to the high cost of injections, a decision influenced by her gender.

Beeji: "Why didn't they get her treated, then?"

Daarji: "There is only one cure – injections. And are very expensive."

Beeji: "But imagine.... a young girl...."

Daarji: "They probably did not want to spend so much money. It is a long-drawn-out treatment."

Beeji: "They would not mind spending money if one of their sons was ill. But for a girl..."

Daarji: "They would have had to spend a thousand of rupees on her treatment and she could have survived. But would it be easy to marry her off after that?..... They must have considered all that before deciding not to get her treated."

Beeji: "Waheguru!" My mother sighed deeply. (Cour 33 & 34).

This excerpt from Ajeet Cour's *Koora Kabara* highlights the societal disregard for women. This experience intensely impacted Ajeet's understanding of gender inequality and shaped her feminist voice.

Cour finds herself battling expectations placed upon her, grappling with the constraints of a patriarchal society that values her husband's social status over her well-being. She went through the trauma of bringing up her daughter without her breast milk because she was injected with some medicine by her husband to dry up the milk. She felt as if she was a puppet in the hands of her husband and was doing everything as he commanded. Her life 'seemed to be an unending race, without rhyme or reason' (Cour 152). She vividly narrates the harsh realities of marriage and family life, shaped by a patriarchal framework that prioritizes men's needs over that of women:

"Giving birth to daughters reduced my value to peanuts—this was my husband's verdict You should work and earn bread and butter for yourself and your children. This was also my husband's order." (Cour 186).

Ajeet Cour was made to realise that her existence was at the mercy of her husband. She had to face the anger of her husband in the shape of physical abuse. 'The Smallest mistake, and I would be at the receiving end of a hammer-like slap' (Cour 152). She felt that if someone spoke to her right from her birth till adulthood, 'it was usually to order' her 'not to do this or not to do that' (Cour 158).

The memoir reflects Cour's experiences with love and profound losses, particularly the death of her younger daughter, Candy. These losses deeply impacted her, but they also exemplified her resilience. Cour's life is a testament to overcoming tragedy and redefining her path. The tragic death Candy profoundly shaped her life and writings. Cour captures the emotional depth of this loss with heartbreaking honesty:

"Crossed over to this other birth! Arpana and myself. And Candy amalgamated into the two of us. From the ashes of the old Ajeet Cour rose Phoenix-like this contemporary independent Ajeet Cour. In one lifetime I have lived two lives." (Cour 236).

Cour recalls her experiences with domestic abuse, both physical and mental, which were overshadowed by her husband's social status. Ironically, she was the one villainized for her independent life choices. However, Cour argues that financial independence alone is insufficient for true liberation. Liberation, she asserts, involves dismantling societal expectations and finding one's unique identity. Through her journey of liberation from societal and internal patriarchal limitations, Cour defines liberation as letting go and defying societal restrictions.

"Liberation is not a name for the knocking down of outer walls. It's actually a name for the collapse of a dungeon-like, dark hole in your mind. The foundation of that dungeon has been filled with redundant customs and traditions of a bygone era." (Cour 206).

It is about finding one's true identity, beyond being a daughter, wife, or mother, but rather something uniquely self-crafted. Cour's memoir is also a narrative of resistance. Writing becomes an act of defiance against societal norms that seek to confine women within patriarchal expectations. She highlights how Indian women navigate and negotiate their identities within family structures dominated by patriarchal norms. She was a true testimony of bravery breaking her stigmas and

emerging victorious in proving her worth which was akin to the unimaginable thing to that kind of society in which she lived. Women in postcolonial era have been considered to be uncomplaining for everything happens to them. According to the accepted model of society she should be a perfect model of obedience for her husband and society.

“From such a simple-minded, timorous woman, controlled by her husband and accepting of whatever life meted out to her, when and how a fearless, bold woman, with the courage to take all the decisions pertaining to her life, was born, the story of this transformation.” (Cour 187).

Cour’s experiences are a reflection of broader societal issues affecting women in 20th-century India. The memoir discusses how women’s sexual desires and ambitions are often ignored in favor of traditional roles. Her decision to leave her abusive marriage and raise her daughters as a single mother highlights the societal judgment and challenges faced by women striving for agency.

Significance of Autobiographical Narratives

Contemporary Indian literature has experienced a notable rise in narratives addressing themes of gender, identity, and resistance, with female authors playing a pivotal role in this movement. The contemporary women’s life writings bring out the duality between female subjectivity and identity as a construct and the actual lived life of women (Sadhu 8).

Postcolonial life-writing is characterized by the concept of being decentralized. The process of forming an identity for women in postcolonial life-writings is always considerably complex. Sadhu points out in her research paper:

“Postcolonial life-writing is marked by the trait of decentredness; the colonized body bears signs of fragmentation to such an effect that it longs to recover its earlier unified existence. The process of identity formation in respect of women in postcolonial life-writings is always much complicated as they negotiate with dual forces of colonialism and patriarchy with the space of self-narration being almost denied to them” (4).

Ajeet Cour has established a unique voice within Indian literature, concentrating on the lived experiences, struggles, and subtle acts of defiance of women. Her works serve as a strong critique of patriarchal oppression and gender-based violence, offering profound insights into the ways women navigate societal constraints.

Ajeet Cour constructs narratives of resistance against deeply entrenched societal norms, with a particular focus on her autobiography *Koora Kabara*. Through her bold and radical writing, Cour challenges structures of domination, presenting a nuanced exploration of women’s resilience and agency.

Female authors have consistently demonstrated honesty in their self-expression, whether reflecting on their achievements or acknowledging their limitations. Women writer’s standpoints may be different but they always have woman-centered narratives. This is how they redefine the literature and highlight women’s voices and experiences.

Conclusion

Ajeet Cour's autobiography is not only a personal account but also an inspiring and motivating narrative that deeply holds readers' attention. Her life, though marked by double jinxes, is a story of relentless perseverance and resilience. The book introduces readers to a woman who, despite the hardships, emerged stronger and determined to live life on her own terms. Cour's journey serves as a lesson and a source of inspiration for women navigating similar struggles.

Koora Kabara is an emotional autobiographical memoir that accounts a life plagued by tragedies such as the death of a young daughter, an abusive and toxic marriage, an orthodox family, and the burden of being a single parent. Despite all these challenges, the autobiography serves as a ray of courage, hope, and happiness. It reveals the narrator's real identity as a bold and brave woman who stood up against injustice and discrimination at every stage of her life.

Through her narrative, Cour also contributes significantly to the postcolonial feminist discourse, giving voice to marginalized women who have long been silenced by societal norms. *Koora Kabara* is not just an individual story of survival; it is a profound reflection on women's autonomy, resilience, and capacity for transformation. This makes it a key work in contemporary Indian literature and an important tool for challenging systemic inequities.

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