

A Study of Theme and Subject Matter of Manoranjan Byapari's *There's Gunpowder in the Air*

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Abstract: This research paper explores *There's Gunpowder in the Air* by Manoranjan Byapari, a significant contribution to Dalit and Indian political literature. Set within the confines of a prison during the Naxalite movement, the novel addresses themes of caste oppression, incarceration, resistance, and ideological awakening. Drawing from Byapari's lived experience as a Dalit, former prison inmate, and political activist, the novel presents incarceration not just as punishment, but as a site of self-discovery and transformation. The study employs a qualitative approach using textual analysis of Arunava Sinha's English translation, supported by secondary sources and critical theories including Dalit literature, Marxism, and subaltern studies. It highlights the impact of Naxalite ideology on the characters and explores the tension between violent and non-violent forms of resistance. The narrative's unique voice, shaped by the author's grassroots background, blends personal memory with political insight, offering a powerful portrayal of systemic injustice. Comparative references to works like *Karukku* and *Joothan* further position the novel within the broader spectrum of Dalit and prison narratives. The paper concludes that Byapari's work is a compelling testament to the transformative power of literature in exposing social realities and giving voice to the marginalized in contemporary India.

Keywords; Dalit Literature, Naxalism, Prison Narrative, Class Struggle, Political Resistance

Introduction

Manoranjan Byapari is a powerful voice in Indian literature, especially known for his contribution to Dalit writing. Born into poverty and denied access to formal education, Byapari worked in menial jobs and spent part of his life in prison. It was during this time that he discovered the world of literature and later went on to become a writer who spoke truth to power. His writings reflect the harsh realities of caste, class, and systemic oppression. Unlike many literary figures from privileged backgrounds, Byapari's work comes from lived experience, giving his narratives raw honesty and authenticity. One of his most significant works is *There's Gunpowder in the Air* (originally titled *Batashe Baruder Gandho* in Bengali). The novel is set in the late 1970s, during the Naxalite movement in West Bengal. The story takes place in a prison, focusing on the lives of five inmates who are planning a jailbreak. These characters come from diverse backgrounds—some are political rebels, while others are ordinary people caught in difficult circumstances. Through this setup, the novel explores themes like revolution, hope, disillusionment, and the social divisions that shape people's choices. The purpose of studying this novel is to understand its central ideas and examine how it captures the political and social environment of its time. It also allows us to see how personal suffering and collective resistance are deeply connected. By looking closely at the story and its characters, we can understand how Byapari uses fiction to highlight issues of injustice and marginalization. The novel does not romanticize struggle but shows its human cost and complex nature. This study is important because it brings attention to a critical period in Indian history through the lens of a Dalit writer. In a country where mainstream narratives often overlook the voices of the oppressed, Byapari's work stands out as bold and necessary. His novel challenges dominant political and literary

traditions by bringing marginalized experiences to the forefront. It also adds depth to the discussion around caste, revolution, and the role of literature in society. By engaging with *There's Gunpowder in the Air*, readers and scholars can gain insight into not only a unique literary voice but also the broader struggles for justice and dignity in contemporary India.

Objectives of the Study

Here are the revised objectives of the study, rewritten clearly in five concise points:

1. **To explore the socio-political themes** in *There's Gunpowder in the Air*, particularly how the novel reflects unrest, inequality, and the impact of political movements like Naxalism on both rebels and common people.
2. **To examine the portrayal of caste, class, and resistance**, analyzing how Byapari uses his characters to highlight social injustice, marginalization, and the fight for dignity and survival in an unequal society.
3. **To analyze Byapari's narrative style and technique**, focusing on his use of language, structure, and perspective to convey the emotional intensity and confined atmosphere of prison life.
4. **To understand the novel's position within Dalit and prison literature**, and how it reflects broader themes of oppression, identity, control, and rebellion rooted in lived experience.
5. **To compare Byapari's work with other similar literary texts**, evaluating its contribution to Indian literature and its role in expanding discussions around justice, freedom, and human rights.

Methodology

This study follows a qualitative research approach to understand the deeper meanings within *There's Gunpowder in the Air*. The focus is on analyzing the content, characters, and ideas presented in the novel rather than using numbers or statistical data. The English translation by Arunava Sinha is the primary text for this analysis, offering access to a wider audience while retaining the original tone and intensity of Manoranjan Byapari's writing. The study uses textual analysis to closely examine the novel's language, structure, and themes. This includes looking at how the author uses dialogue, setting, and plot to build the story and convey larger social messages. Alongside the main text, various secondary sources such as academic articles, book reviews, interviews with the author, and critical essays are used to support the interpretation. The research also draws from different theoretical perspectives, including Dalit studies, Marxist theory, and subaltern studies. These frameworks help in understanding the layers of power, oppression, and resistance depicted in the novel. An interpretive method is applied to explore literary elements like symbolism, imagery, and the narrative voice. This helps reveal how Byapari shapes the reader's understanding of social injustice, rebellion, and human dignity.

Theoretical Framework

The study of *There's Gunpowder in the Air* is grounded in a combination of literary theories that help uncover its deeper meanings and social relevance. At the center of this framework is Dalit literary criticism, which draws heavily from the ideas of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar's focus on social justice, equality, and the fight against caste-based discrimination offers a vital lens through which the novel can be understood. Byapari's writing reflects the lived experiences of the oppressed and speaks directly to the struggles Ambedkar aimed to address. Writers like Omprakash Valmiki have also shaped this field, emphasizing the need for Dalit literature to express pain, anger, and resistance in its raw form. This lens helps bring out how

the novel represents the brutal reality of caste in both prison life and society at large. The Marxist literary approach is also key to this study. It looks at how economic systems create divisions between the ruling and working classes. In Byapari's novel, characters are shown as victims of poverty, exploitation, and state power. The text explores how systemic inequality fuels rebellion and resistance, aligning with Marxist ideas of class conflict and revolution. The presence of Naxalite ideology in the novel further supports a Marxist reading, where revolutionary action is seen as a response to deep-rooted injustice. In addition, postcolonial and subaltern theories add another layer to the analysis. Scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Ranajit Guha have questioned how mainstream narratives often silence the voices of the marginalized. Their work helps in examining how Byapari gives space to people who are usually left out of literature and history—such as lower-caste individuals, political prisoners, and the working poor. These perspectives encourage readers to listen to stories told from the ground, rather than from positions of power. Finally, the study looks at the intersection of caste and class. In Indian society, caste and class are often closely linked, and this overlap plays a major role in shaping a person's identity and opportunities. Byapari's characters suffer not just because they are poor but also because of their social background. The novel reveals how these two forces—economic and social—work together to suppress certain groups. Using an intersectional approach allows the study to address how caste and class combine to deepen oppression and spark the desire for change. This blended framework offers a rich and layered understanding of the novel's themes and message.

Analysis of Themes and Subject Matter

Manoranjan Byapari's *There's Gunpowder in the Air* is a rich and layered novel that explores various social, political, and emotional dimensions through its intense setting and complex characters. The prison becomes a space where personal and political conflicts unfold. Through a sharp and honest narrative, Byapari brings out several significant themes which are explored below. One of the central themes of the novel is oppression and its link with the prison system. The jail is not just a physical space where people are locked up; it becomes a powerful symbol of state control and structural injustice. In this setting, people from poor and marginalized communities are disproportionately punished, often without fair trials or proper legal aid. The Dalit protagonist in the novel becomes a strong representation of how caste continues to shape people's lives even behind bars. Despite being in a place where everyone is under control, caste-based hierarchies still exist. The Dalit prisoner is treated differently—not just by the guards, but also by other inmates—highlighting how deep-rooted discrimination can be. Byapari presents the reality of state violence with brutal honesty. The story includes instances of police beatings, mental torture, and emotional breakdowns. Through these scenes, the novel shows how the state uses fear and force to maintain order. This portrayal is not exaggerated; rather, it reflects the truth of how prisoners—especially those without power or status—are treated in many jails.

Another strong element in the novel is the idea of political resistance. The presence of Naxalite prisoners within the jail introduces the theme of revolutionary ideology. These individuals do not see prison as the end of their struggle. Instead, they use it as a space to think, plan, and even recruit others to their cause. The novel dives into the influence of Naxalism on fellow inmates. Through conversations, shared hardships, and moments of reflection, some prisoners begin to understand and even adopt the ideas of resistance. This leads to moral questions: Is violence the only way to bring change? Can one fight injustice without using

weapons? The novel does not offer simple answers but shows the inner conflicts of the characters caught between non-violent principles and the urge to rebel. The Naxalite leader in the story plays a key role in guiding the minds of other prisoners. He is not only a strategist but also a thinker. He helps transform regular inmates into politically aware individuals, showing how resistance can begin even in the most hopeless situations. This leadership and ideological mentoring highlight how revolutionary thought spreads through human connection and shared suffering.

The prison experience becomes a turning point for the Dalit protagonist in terms of identity. He enters as someone broken by poverty and social rejection, but over time begins to question the forces that have controlled his life. In this dark and confined place, he finds clarity about who he is and what he stands for. One of the most empowering aspects of the novel is the emphasis on education and awareness. The protagonist's exposure to political ideas, books, and conversations with fellow inmates gives him a new sense of self. Literacy and knowledge become tools of self-realization and resistance. Byapari shows that even in a place designed to break people, minds can awaken, and change can begin. Still, the struggle between survival and belief is not easy. The protagonist is constantly torn between staying safe and embracing the risk of following a political path. This conflict adds emotional depth to the story, reminding readers that decisions about identity are never simple, especially for those who have always been denied choices. The storytelling style in *There's Gunpowder in the Air* adds great strength to the novel's impact. The use of a first-person narrative helps the reader connect deeply with the inner world of the protagonist. His thoughts, fears, and gradual transformation are presented in a way that feels real and personal. The voice is honest, direct, and free of artificial polish, which enhances the sense of urgency and truth in the story. One of the most powerful symbols in the novel is the idea of "gunpowder in the air." This metaphor captures the feeling of unrest and the potential for sudden change. It suggests that something dangerous but necessary is about to happen. It reflects the tension both inside the prison and in the larger society. The phrase also hints at suppressed anger and the possibility of revolution erupting at any moment. Byapari's use of local dialect and rough language adds authenticity to the narrative. The rawness in the speech and descriptions does not soften the reality but brings it closer to the reader. This linguistic style reflects the background of the characters and strengthens the bond between the story and its social setting.

Position of the Novel in Dalit and Indian Political Literature

There's Gunpowder in the Air holds a special place in both Dalit literature and Indian political writing. It stands out for its raw depiction of prison life, caste-based injustice, and revolutionary thought. Unlike many works written from an outsider's view, this novel draws from Manoranjan Byapari's personal journey. His background as a Dalit, former rickshaw puller, and political prisoner gives the story a rare depth and authenticity that few other writers can offer. When compared to other well-known Dalit narratives like *Karukku* by Bama and *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki, Byapari's work adds a new dimension. While *Karukku* focuses on the spiritual and social struggles of a Dalit Christian woman, and *Joothan* tells the story of growing up under caste oppression, *There's Gunpowder in the Air* places the reader in a jail during a time of political upheaval. It shifts the setting from village and school to a closed, tense space where ideas of resistance and transformation emerge under harsh conditions. What makes Byapari's voice unique is that he writes not just as a witness, but as someone who has lived the very reality he describes. His journey from prison to political awareness and finally to literature is

deeply connected to the larger Dalit struggle for dignity and justice. The novel doesn't only expose suffering—it also shows how pain can lead to awakening, and how even the most oppressed individuals can rise with purpose and vision. This book contributes greatly to Dalit writing by highlighting the links between caste, poverty, and state power. It also strengthens political literature by showing how revolutionary thinking can take root even in prisons, where freedom is limited but thought is still alive. By focusing on resistance and identity in a confined space, Byapari adds urgency and freshness to the conversation around caste and class. In the broader landscape of Indian literature, *There's Gunpowder in the Air* challenges readers to face the realities often hidden from mainstream storytelling. It builds a bridge between personal suffering and collective political action, making it a vital text for understanding the ongoing struggle for equality in India. Through this novel, Byapari has given a powerful voice to those who have long been silenced.

Findings and Discussion

There's Gunpowder in the Air by Manoranjan Byapari offers more than just a story set in a prison. One of the key findings of this study is that the novel views incarceration not merely as punishment, but as a space where deep thinking and political change can take place. For many of the characters, jail becomes a place to reflect, question, and even reshape their beliefs. In particular, the protagonist begins to understand the forces that shaped his life—caste, poverty, and exploitation—and starts to see himself as someone capable of resisting those forces. Another important aspect is how the novel presents Naxalism. The revolutionary ideology is portrayed in a layered way. On one hand, it brings hope for justice and equality, especially to those who have suffered under an unfair system. On the other hand, it raises difficult questions about the use of violence, the cost of rebellion, and the emotional toll on individuals. This dual view makes the narrative more realistic and avoids glorifying any one path.

The novel also gives a strong picture of how deeply rooted oppression is in society. Inside the prison, caste-based discrimination, police cruelty, and power hierarchies are clearly shown. But even in such a place, the story highlights the presence of resistance—through speech, thought, and the sharing of ideas. It shows that even when freedom is taken away, the human spirit still seeks justice and dignity. One of the most striking features of the novel is the voice it carries. Because Byapari himself lived through poverty, caste bias, and imprisonment, his storytelling comes from a place of truth. His personal journey adds weight to every scene, every conversation, and every moment of silence in the novel. The blend of lived experience with political insight makes the writing feel raw, real, and moving. Overall, the novel teaches that real change begins in the minds of people—even those society has forgotten. It proves that prisons, though meant to break people, can also become spaces where awareness and resistance take root. By telling this story with honesty and intensity, Byapari gives voice to those who rarely get heard in Indian literature and political debate.

Conclusion

There's Gunpowder in the Air by Manoranjan Byapari is a powerful literary work that offers deep insight into the realities of caste, class, and political struggle in India. The novel shows that prison is not just a place of confinement, but also a space where critical thinking, awareness, and transformation can happen. Through the journey of its characters, especially the Dalit protagonist, the novel explores how the most oppressed sections of society begin to question their reality and find the strength to resist. One of the key findings is the way the novel presents Naxalism—not as a one-sided ideology, but as a complex movement filled with both

hope and conflict. It challenges readers to think about resistance in all its forms, from quiet reflection to bold rebellion. The book also highlights the continuing presence of caste discrimination even in places where equality should be the norm, like prisons. Byapari's voice is unique because it comes from personal truth. His experiences bring honesty and urgency to the story, making it both politically significant and emotionally engaging. His narrative combines activism with literary strength, giving a face and voice to those often left out of mainstream stories.

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