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VOICES FROM THE MARGINS: SOCIAL JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE NOVELS OF AMIYABHUSAN MAJUMDAR

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ABSTRACT

Amiyabhusan Majumdar (1918-2001), recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award for his novel *Rajnagar* and widely regarded within Bengali letters as a “writer’s writer,” occupies a distinctive place among twentieth-century novelists who engaged questions of social inequity without resorting to overt polemic. Unlike contemporaries associated with the explicitly progressive social-realist tradition, Majumdar embedded his critique of feudal privilege, caste hierarchy, gendered subjugation, and displacement within a formally experimental, often elliptical narrative style rooted in the socio-geography of North Bengal. This paper undertakes a structured textual analysis of social-justice and human-rights motifs across a representative corpus of Majumdar’s novels — *Rajnagar*, *Garh Srikhanda*, *Nirbas O Aranya Rodan*, *Dukhiyar Kuthi*, and *Mahiskurar Upakatha*. Drawing on a qualitative-interpretive framework informed by human-rights literary criticism, subaltern studies, and the capability approach to justice, the study identifies four recurring thematic clusters — land and economic dispossession, caste and social exclusion, gendered subjugation, and displacement — and examines the narrative strategies through which Majumdar renders these concerns without didacticism. An illustrative analytical instrument, the Textual Justice Index, is proposed to support structured comparison across texts. The discussion situates Majumdar’s fiction as a rigorous, understated engagement with human dignity, arguing for his fuller recognition within the broader literature of social conscience in the Indian subcontinent.

KEYWORDS: Amiyabhusan Majumdar; Bengali literature; social justice; human rights; subaltern narrative; postcolonial fiction; literary textual analysis.

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature has long served as a vehicle through which societies interrogate the distribution of dignity, entitlement, and voice among their members. Within the specific context of Bengali fiction, the mid-twentieth century produced a cohort of novelists who confronted the erosion of feudal structures, the persistence of caste-based exclusion, and the trauma of Partition-induced displacement. Amiyabhusan Majumdar, born in 1918 in the Cooch Behar region and active as a writer for over four decades until his death in 2001, belongs to this cohort, yet his engagement with social inequity differs markedly in method from that of his more overtly political contemporaries [1], [2].

Majumdar spent much of his working life outside the literary establishment of Kolkata, earning his livelihood as a clerk and publishing chiefly in little magazines rather than mainstream periodicals [1]. This positioning at the margins of institutional literary culture appears to have shaped a fiction that resists easy classification: critics have long noted the difficulty of situating him within established categories of social realism, and his narrative technique — marked by textual gaps, non-linear chronology, and reticent characterisation — has been read as an internalisation of European modernist form within a distinctly Bengali rural sensibility [2]. Recognition came comparatively late, culminating in the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1986 for Rajnagar, yet his readership has remained comparatively specialised [1], [2].

The broader academic field of law and literature, and more specifically the study of human rights in fiction, has established that narrative form itself can function as a mode of ethical argument, shaping readers' capacity to recognise the claims of others to dignity and entitlement [3]. Amartya Sen's comparative approach to justice further suggests that literary particularity — the rendering of lived experience in its specificity — offers a distinct and complementary route to understanding injustice alongside formal legal or institutional analysis [4]. Despite this, sustained scholarly attention to the human-rights dimension of Majumdar's fiction remains limited; existing commentary is largely biographical or focused on questions of craft and modernist technique, with comparatively little systematic treatment of the social content his narratives encode.

This paper addresses that gap. It proposes a structured, replicable method for analysing social-justice and human-rights themes across Majumdar's novels, applies that method to a

representative textual corpus, and discusses the distinctive narrative strategies through which the author articulates concerns of dignity and entitlement. The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: Section II reviews relevant literature; Section III articulates the problem addressed; Sections IV through VII describe the proposed methodology, conceptual framework, analytical workflow, and corpus; Section VIII presents results and discussion; Sections IX through XI consider advantages, limitations, and future scope; and Section XII concludes the paper.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of literature as a site of human-rights discourse has developed into a recognised interdisciplinary field. Slaughter has argued that the modern novel and the human-rights framework share a common narrative grammar of individual development and claim-making, such that fiction can be read as both a reflection of and a contributor to human-rights consciousness [3]. Sen's comparative theory of justice explicitly makes room for literary and narrative evidence as a legitimate basis for identifying manifest injustice, distinguishing this approach from purely institutional or contractarian theories of justice [4]. Nussbaum extends this reasoning through the capability approach, contending that narrative art cultivates the reader's capacity for empathetic imagination, a faculty central to recognising the capabilities and entitlements of others [5].

Within postcolonial and subaltern studies, Guha's foundational work on subaltern historiography emphasised the recovery of voices excluded from elite nationalist narratives, a concern later extended by Spivak's influential interrogation of whether and how the subaltern can be represented in dominant discourse [6], [7]. Said's analysis of the entanglement between narrative and empire further demonstrated how fiction can either reinforce or contest structures of domination [8]. These frameworks collectively inform contemporary approaches to reading regional-language fiction, including Bengali literature, for its engagement with structural inequity.

Within Bengali literary history specifically, critics have long recognised a lineage of socially engaged fiction, exemplified by writers such as Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay and Manik Bandyopadhyay, whose novels directly address the decline of rural feudal order and the exploitation of peasant and fisherfolk communities [9]. Majumdar is frequently distinguished from this lineage precisely because his social critique is conveyed obliquely: rather than adopting the documentary realism and authorial commentary characteristic of the progressive-writers tradition, he constructs narratives in which social hierarchy and its

consequences must be inferred from structure, silence, and the accumulation of ordinary detail [1], [2]. Available English-language commentary on Majumdar, including translator and critical prefaces accompanying anthologised English translations of his short fiction, notes that his work resists straightforward ideological classification and that critical opinion on him has remained sharply divided [2].

Reference works on modern Indian literature situate Majumdar among the significant but comparatively under-translated regional novelists of his generation, whose formal innovation has sometimes obscured the depth of their social engagement for readers outside specialist Bengali scholarship [9]. What emerges from this review is a consistent pattern: while Majumdar's craft has received serious critical attention, and while the broader theoretical apparatus for reading literature as human-rights discourse is well developed, the two strands have not yet been brought together in a sustained, structured study of his novels. This paper attempts that synthesis.

III. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Two risks attend any reading of Majumdar's fiction for its social content. The first is a purely formalist reading that treats his modernist technique — textual gaps, narrative indirection, multiple and unreliable perspectives — as an end in itself, thereby underplaying the social and ethical substance those techniques carry. The second is an over-determined ideological reading that imposes a programmatic social-justice narrative on texts whose meaning is deliberately unresolved, thereby flattening the interpretive openness that defines his craft. There is, at present, no structured analytical method that allows a researcher to hold both dimensions — form and social content — in view simultaneously, and to compare their relative salience across different novels in a transparent and replicable manner. This paper addresses the specific problem of designing and applying such a method to Majumdar's major novels.

IV. PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative-interpretive methodology, supplemented by a light structured content-analytic layer in the manner increasingly common in digital-humanities-inflected literary research. The method proceeds in five stages. First, a representative corpus of Majumdar's major novels was selected on the basis of critical prominence, thematic diversity, and availability of secondary commentary (Section VII). Second, four thematic dimensions grounded in human-rights and social-justice discourse were defined: Land and Economic

Justice, Caste and Social Exclusion, Gender and Bodily Autonomy, and Displacement and Statelessness. Third, each novel was subjected to close reading, with passages and episodes annotated against these four dimensions; because the primary texts are in Bengali, discussion in this paper proceeds through paraphrase and critical description rather than direct quotation, consistent with standard practice for comparative literary scholarship conducted across languages. Fourth, an illustrative scoring heuristic, the Textual Justice Index (described in Section V), was applied to enable structured cross-text comparison. Fifth, interpretive findings were triangulated against existing biographical and critical scholarship on Majumdar to guard against idiosyncratic or unsupported readings.

It is important to state at the outset that this method is interpretive rather than statistical in character. The numerical index introduced in Section V is a heuristic device for organising qualitative judgment, not a validated psychometric measurement, and its scores should be read as structured critical opinion rather than empirical fact.

V. CONCEPTUAL / ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed framework models the reader's encounter with rights-related content in a Majumdar novel as mediated by two layers: a thematic layer, comprising the four dimensions defined above, and a narrative-strategy layer, comprising the formal devices — irony, deliberate omission, shifting perspective, and understated symbolism — through which those themes are conveyed. Figure 1 (suggested) would depict this relationship as a two-layer diagram, with the four thematic dimensions as inputs converging on a central node labelled “Rights-Consciousness Reading,” filtered through a surrounding ring representing narrative strategy.

Figure 1. Suggested conceptual diagram: four thematic dimensions (Land, Caste, Gender, Displacement) feeding into a central interpretive node, mediated by a surrounding layer of narrative strategies (irony, omission, perspective-shift, symbolism).

To support structured comparison across novels, the study introduces an illustrative Textual Justice Index (TJI), computed as a weighted average of interpretive intensity scores assigned to each of the four dimensions on a zero-to-five scale, where zero indicates thematic absence and five indicates sustained, central engagement:

$$TJI = (w^1 \cdot L + w^2 \cdot C + w^3 \cdot G + w^4 \cdot D) \quad (1)$$

where L, C, G, and D denote the interpretive intensity scores for Land and Economic Justice, Caste and Social Exclusion, Gender and Bodily Autonomy, and Displacement and Statelessness respectively, and w_1 through w_4 are weighting coefficients summing to unity.

In the absence of a principled basis for differential weighting, equal weights ($w_i = 0.25$) are adopted in this study, yielding a simple unweighted mean. Researchers applying the framework to other corpora may adjust weights to reflect a specific analytical emphasis, for instance privileging displacement in a study focused on Partition literature.

VI. ANALYTICAL WORKFLOW

The analytical process follows a six-stage workflow, suggested in Figure 2 as a linear flow diagram with feedback loops between the annotation and validation stages.

Figure 2. Suggested workflow diagram: Corpus Selection → Close Reading and Annotation → Thematic Coding (L, C, G, D) → Cross-Text Comparison → Interpretive Synthesis → Validation against Secondary Scholarship, with a feedback loop from Validation back to Annotation.

- Stage 1 – Corpus Selection: Identification of novels representative of Majumdar's major creative periods and thematic range.
- Stage 2 – Close Reading and Annotation: Systematic reading of each novel with annotation of episodes relevant to the four thematic dimensions.
- Stage 3 – Thematic Coding: Assignment of interpretive intensity scores for each dimension based on annotated evidence.
- Stage 4 – Cross-Text Comparison: Tabulation of scores and identification of patterns across the corpus.
- Stage 5 – Interpretive Synthesis: Development of a coherent critical argument linking thematic patterns to narrative strategy.
- Stage 6 – Validation: Comparison of findings against existing biographical and critical scholarship, with revision of earlier stages where discrepancies arise.

VII. TEXTUAL CORPUS AND ANALYTICAL SETUP

Table I lists the five novels constituting the primary corpus for this study, selected to represent Majumdar's range across setting, period of composition, and thematic focus. The selection favours novels with an established critical profile, including Rajnagar, his most widely recognised work, alongside four further novels chosen for their engagement with distinct rights-related concerns.

Table I. Primary textual corpus and dominant social-justice themes.

Novel	Primary Setting	Recognition / Notes	Dominant Rights-Related Theme
Rajnagar	A declining feudal township, North Bengal	Sahitya Akademi Award, 1986	Erosion of zamindari authority; historical memory and structural inequity
Garh Srikhanda	A lineage-bound rural estate	Considered among his major long novels	Caste hierarchy, genealogical claim, and social exclusion
Nirbas O Aranya Rodan	Forest and frontier communities	Frequently cited for its ecological and tribal settings	Displacement, exile, and marginal community rights
Dukhiyar Kuthi	An impoverished rural household	Shorter novel form	Poverty, domestic subjugation, and gendered labour
Mahiskurar Upakatha	A riverine folk community	Blends myth with social chronicle	Land, custom, and community self-determination

VIII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Applying the framework described in Sections IV through VI, illustrative Textual Justice Index scores were derived for each novel in the corpus through the annotation and coding process described above. These scores, presented in Table II, are offered as a structured summary of critical judgment rather than as measured data, and are intended to illustrate the framework's comparative utility rather than to establish definitive rankings.

Table II. Illustrative Textual Justice Index scores across the primary corpus (0-5 scale; interpretive, not statistical).

Novel	Land (L)	Caste (C)	Gender (G)	Displacement (D)	TJI (0-5)
Rajnagar	4.5	3.5	2.5	3.0	3.4
Garh Srikhanda	3.0	4.5	3.0	2.0	3.1
Nirbas O Aranya Rodan	3.5	2.5	2.5	4.8	3.3
Dukhiyar Kuthi	2.5	2.0	4.7	1.5	2.7
Mahiskurar Upakatha	4.2	2.8	2.2	2.6	2.9

Several patterns emerge from this comparative reading. Rajnagar registers the highest composite score, consistent with its critical reputation as Majumdar's most sustained engagement with the decline of feudal privilege; the novel's treatment of land tenure and inherited authority is inseparable from its meditation on the historical erosion of a social

order, rendering the Land and Caste dimensions particularly prominent. Nirbas O Aranya Rodan, by contrast, foregrounds displacement and exile above all other dimensions, situating its human-rights concern within the experience of frontier and forest-dwelling communities whose relationship to land is mediated by custom rather than title — a concern that resonates with contemporary human-rights discourse on indigenous and tribal entitlement, even though the novel itself predates that discourse's formal articulation.

Dukhiyar Kuthi presents the most concentrated engagement with gendered subjugation among the five novels, its narrower domestic canvas allowing sustained attention to the intersection of poverty and gendered labour within a single household. Garh Srikhandra, meanwhile, offers the corpus's most developed treatment of caste and lineage, exploring how genealogical claim operates as a mechanism of social exclusion independent of formal legal status. Mahiskurar Upakatha occupies an intermediate position across dimensions, its blending of folk material with social chronicle distributing attention more evenly across land, custom, and community identity than the more thematically concentrated novels.

A recurring finding across the corpus is that Majumdar rarely allows a single dimension to dominate a novel entirely; even his most concentrated works retain traces of the other three concerns, suggesting an underlying authorial recognition that structural forms of injustice — economic, caste-based, gendered, and territorial — are mutually reinforcing rather than discrete. This intersectional quality distinguishes his fiction from more single-issue social-realist writing and aligns his work more closely with contemporary theoretical accounts that treat entitlement and dignity as multidimensional [4], [5].

Comparison with the more overtly social-realist tradition represented by writers such as Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay is instructive at the level of narrative strategy rather than thematic content. Where the social-realist novel typically resolves its critique through authorial commentary, explicit character testimony, or a clearly signalled moral arc, Majumdar's narratives withhold such resolution: episodes of exploitation or exclusion are frequently presented without editorial framing, requiring the reader to supply the ethical judgment that a more didactic text would state outright. This narrative reticence, read through the lens of Slaughter's account of fiction and human-rights claim-making, can itself be understood as a rights-conscious strategy: by declining to speak on behalf of his marginalised characters, Majumdar arguably resists the appropriation of subaltern voice that Spivak's critique warns against, instead constructing a textual space in which the reader must actively reckon with the limits of representation [3], [7].

IX. ADVANTAGES

- Provides a structured, replicable framework for reading regional-language fiction through a human-rights lens, complementing existing impressionistic criticism.
- Draws renewed critical attention to an under-translated and comparatively under-examined major Bengali novelist.
- Bridges the theoretical vocabularies of law-and-literature, subaltern studies, and Bengali literary criticism within a single analytical apparatus.
- Offers a transferable methodology, including the Textual Justice Index and the six-stage workflow, applicable to other regional-language authors and corpora.

X. LIMITATIONS

- The analysis relies on close reading conducted in relation to a limited corpus of five novels; Majumdar's broader body of novels, short stories, and essays remains unexamined within this study.
- Interpretive scoring, including the Textual Justice Index, reflects informed critical judgment rather than an independently validated measurement instrument, and is susceptible to reasonable disagreement among readers.
- Discussion of primary texts proceeds through paraphrase rather than extended direct quotation from the Bengali originals, which constrains the granularity of textual evidence presented within the scope of this paper.
- Secondary scholarship on Majumdar available in English remains comparatively limited, restricting the extent of cross-critical triangulation possible at present.

XI. FUTURE SCOPE

- Extension of the corpus to Majumdar's complete novelistic output and major short-story collections, enabling a more comprehensive application of the proposed framework.
- Comparative studies situating Majumdar alongside contemporaneous regional-language novelists across South Asia engaged with similar themes of dispossession and displacement.
- Application of computational and corpus-linguistic methods, including sentiment and thematic analysis of digitised Bengali text, to complement and cross-validate close-reading-based scoring.
- Reader-response and translation-studies investigations examining how the rights-related content identified in this study is received and transformed across English and other translations.

- Refinement of the Textual Justice Index through structured inter-rater assessment involving multiple independent readers, to strengthen the reliability of the heuristic.

XII. CONCLUSION

This paper has proposed and applied a structured analytical framework for reading the novels of Amiyabhusan Majumdar through the lens of social justice and human rights. Across a representative corpus of five major novels, the analysis identifies four recurring and mutually reinforcing thematic concerns — land and economic dispossession, caste and social exclusion, gendered subjugation, and displacement — and demonstrates that Majumdar articulates these concerns through a distinctive narrative reticence that withholds authorial judgment, thereby positioning the reader as an active participant in ethical interpretation rather than a passive recipient of ideological instruction. This narrative strategy distinguishes Majumdar from the more overtly social-realist tradition within Bengali fiction while nonetheless situating his work firmly within a literature of social conscience. The proposed Textual Justice Index and six-stage analytical workflow offer a transferable method for future comparative study, both of Majumdar's wider corpus and of other regional-language authors whose engagement with human dignity has similarly been obscured by an emphasis on formal innovation. Fuller recognition of this dimension of Majumdar's craft, this paper argues, is warranted within both Bengali literary studies and the broader interdisciplinary field of literature and human rights.

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