



Subaltern Women's Labour and Agency in Thomas Hood's "*The Song of the Shirt*"

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to explore the intersectionality, exploitation, resistance and reclamation of voice within the frameworks of global capitalism and colonial legacies. With a particular emphasis on the poetry and agency of subaltern women, the research examines Thomas Hood's *The Song of the Shirt* through the lens of Subaltern Studies. The poem serves as a powerful socio-economic indictment that foregrounds the lived experiences of a seamstress who remains marginalized within both public and private spheres. Hood's portrayal exposes the lack of autonomy, economic precarity and social invisibility of women in his society. It also simultaneously reveals subtle and subliminal modes of resistance embedded in their endurance and expression. By analysing the intersections of gender, class and labour, the study demonstrates how working-class women are subjected to layered forms of oppression under the capitalist system. The research situates the female labouring body within broader global and colonial structures of exploitation. The poem captures the psychological and emotional experience of the marginalised woman of relentless labour, exhaustion, despair and alienation as consequences of capitalist exploitation. The study also highlights how *The Song of the Shirt* critiques the dehumanizing mechanisms of industrial capitalism by rendering visible the otherwise ignored contributions of subaltern women. Through poetic representation, Hood restores a measure of voice to these women, transforming suffering into



testimony. Ultimately, the research positions the poem as an early articulation of subaltern resistance, drawing attention to women's agency within the oppressive socio-economic systems.

Key words: Oppression, Intersectionality, Agency, Marginalised, Subaltern, Resistance

Introduction

Literature is a powerful medium through which social inequalities, economic exploitation and marginalized voices are articulated and preserved. In the nineteenth century, the rapid expansion of industrial capitalism in Britain radically transformed labour structures, affecting the working-class poor. Women were employed in unregulated, low-paid, and physically exhausting forms of labour. Thomas Hood's *The Song of the Shirt* (1843), written during the height of the Industrial Revolution, emerges as a poignant poetic response to the systemic exploitation of female labourers. Thomas Hood is most recognized for his moving and socially conscious writings that criticized the economic and social traditions of his day. He was born in London on January 23, 1799 and started out as a writer and poet before attaining a reputation in early Victorian England's literary groups. His significant concern for social justice and compassion for the underprivileged, especially the working class, were frequently expressed in his writings. His dedication towards bringing attention to the suffering of the oppressed is demonstrated by *The Song of the Shirt*. It was first released anonymously in *Punch* magazine's Christmas issue. This poem was later identified as having been written in memory of Mrs. Biddell, a widow and seamstress who was living in dreadful conditions.

The poem foregrounds the lived experience of a working-class woman whose labour sustains capitalist production while her humanity remains invisible. Though Hood writes from a position that is external to the working-class female experience, the poem nonetheless provides a crucial textual space in which the suffering, endurance and muted resistance of subaltern women are articulated. When examined through the lens of Subaltern Studies, a theoretical framework concerned with marginalized groups excluded from hegemonic power structures; the poem gains



renewed relevance in contemporary discussions of global capitalism, gendered labour and colonial legacies of exploitation. The working-class woman is often reduced to a passive victim rather than recognized as a subject whose suffering itself functions as a form of protest against exploitative systems. The poem's relevance within contemporary theoretical frameworks such as Subaltern Studies, feminist criticism and critiques of global capitalism necessitates this research endeavour. This study addresses this gap by re-reading Hood's poem as a subaltern text that exposes capitalist exploitation while simultaneously reclaiming a marginalized female voice.

Subaltern Studies, originally emerging from postcolonial historiography, seeks to recover voices that have been silenced by dominant political, economic, and cultural narratives. Applying this framework to "The Song of the Shirt" allows for an exploration of how working-class women occupy a doubly marginalized position—oppressed by both class hierarchy and patriarchal norms. The poem thus serves as an early literary articulation of subaltern consciousness, revealing how capitalist systems extract labour while erasing the subjectivity of those who produce value. It emphasizes themes of poverty, exploitation and the dehumanizing effects of work while realistically capturing the terrible realities experienced by a poor seamstress. Hood's work is particularly important to subaltern studies because it represents marginalized voices. A subaltern woman, a seamstress whose labour is exploited and whose existence is neglected in both public and private spheres, is given voice in *The Song of the Shirt* as an example of this. The poem highlights the intersectional nature of working-class women's subordination by questioning social norms and criticising the economic structures that support their exploitation.

The study also enriches feminist literary discourse by highlighting the gendered dimensions of labour and poverty. The poem underscores how women's work, though essential to capitalist production, remains undervalued and invisible—a condition that persists in contemporary global labour markets. By foregrounding the psychological and emotional costs of labour, the human consequences of economic systems that prioritize profit over dignity are often overlooked. Finally,



the research holds pedagogical and interdisciplinary value. It demonstrates how canonical texts can be re-read to recover marginalized voices, making the poem relevant to contemporary discussions in postcolonial studies, labour studies, and gender studies. In doing so, it challenges dominant literary canons to account for voices historically pushed to the margins.

This paper is structured into five sections. The introduction provides the theoretical and historical framework for the study. The second section reviews relevant literature on Subaltern Studies, feminist criticism and Victorian labour poetry. The third section offers a close textual analysis of *The Song of the Shirt*, focusing on themes of exploitation, invisibility and resistance. The fourth section discusses the poem in relation to global capitalism and colonial-industrial legacies. The final section concludes by summarizing the findings and reflecting on the continued relevance of subaltern voices in literary and social discourse.

Literature Review

Thomas Hood's *The Song of the Shirt*, first published in *Punch* in 1843, stands as one of the most powerful and enduring examples of literary social protest in the Victorian era (Hood). The poem was immediately recognized not for its aesthetic novelty, but for its profound political and humanitarian force, setting an unprecedented standard for literary engagement with the era's stark social inequalities. Critical discourse from Hood's contemporaries to modern postcolonial theorists unanimously affirms the poem's status as a foundational text for understanding the intersection of early industrial capitalism, gender and social invisibility.

In the Victorian period, critics like William Michael Rossetti praised Hood for "giving poetry a conscience," acknowledging that the work successfully dragged the brutal realities of urban poverty and the exploitation of the "needlewomen crisis" into the literary mainstream (Rossetti 112). Charles Dickens similarly admired Hood's ability to combine lyrical beauty with a clear mandate for social reform, viewing the poem as an exemplary model of humanitarian writing (Dickens 54). This early reception validated Hood's own intent, he strategically chose the figure of



the female seamstress, symbolic of the lowest economic class, to awaken public empathy toward women who were structurally invisible to the period's political, legal, and social power structures. The poem's immediate ability to ignite national discussion about labour and moral hypocrisy confirms its initial success as an act of calculated literary activism.

Transitioning to modern perspectives, *The Song of the Shirt* is critically interpreted as a pioneering text in British labour rights advocacy. Marxist social historian E. P. Thompson noted Hood's singular ability to document "the human toll of early industrial capitalism with rare emotional accuracy," situating the poem within the broader narrative of workers' resistance (Thompson 204). Scholars analyse the poem as documentary evidence, vividly illustrating the destructive conditions of piecework labour, poverty wages, and the chronic physical and mental hardship that defined the lives of working-class women. Critics also highlight Hood's deliberate use of rhythm, particularly the relentless repetition of "Work work work!" as a poetic representation of mechanized and alienated labour, effectively communicating the psychological burden imposed upon industrial working women (Hood).

Early critics viewed the poem primarily as a humanitarian appeal, emphasizing its role in exposing the harsh working conditions of seamstresses during the Industrial Revolution. Critics such as Isobel Armstrong and Raymond Williams have noted how Victorian poetry functioned as a vehicle for social critique, foregrounding the suffering of the working poor and drawing public attention to the moral failures of industrial capitalism. Hood's poem has been read as an emotionally charged indictment of economic injustice and unregulated labour practices. It also occupies a central position within Feminist and Gender Studies. Feminist scholar Elaine Showalter identifies the seamstress as a proto-subaltern figure marginalized by the intersection of poverty, gender, and lack of legal protection under a capitalist patriarchy (Showalter 89). Similarly, Sandra.M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar situate Hood's poem within a broader literary tradition in which women's voices are structured through symbolic protest or lament, arguing that the seamstress's



“song” functions as a deeply political lamentation that destabilizes patriarchal values (Gilbert and Gubar 341).

The poem’s themes connect strongly to foundational works in feminist theory. Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of woman as “Other” (Beauvoir 267) and Mary Wollstonecraft’s critique of economic and educational inequality (Wollstonecraft 56) illuminate the systemic gendered oppression seen in the poem. Feminist movements worldwide have drawn from such theories, offering frameworks through which subaltern women reinterpret their lived conditions.

Feminist literary criticism has offered more nuanced insights by focusing on the poem’s representation of women’s labour and domestic suffering. Critics argue that the seamstress occupies a liminal position between the public and private spheres, producing commodities for the market while remaining confined within domestic spaces. Feminist scholars have highlighted how Hood’s poem exposes the gendered nature of poverty, emphasizing women’s vulnerability to exploitation due to patriarchal norms, lack of economic independence, and social invisibility. However, these readings often remain limited to gender analysis without fully integrating class and global economic structures.

Despite the breadth of scholarship on Victorian labour poetry, several critical gaps remain. First, while class-based and feminist analyses have been applied to *The Song of the Shirt*, hardly any attention has been paid to the poem through the lens of Subaltern Studies. The seamstress, though central to the poem, is rarely examined as a subaltern subject whose voice is mediated, constrained and partially silenced within dominant discourses. Existing studies often focus on the poet’s sympathy rather than interrogating the politics of representation and voice. Most analyses remain historically bounded within nineteenth-century Britain, overlooking how the structures of exploitation depicted in the poem continue to operate in contemporary global labour systems, particularly in postcolonial contexts. This absence limits the poem’s relevance to present-day discussions of transnational labour, sweatshop economies, and feminized workforces. The



emotional and psychological dimensions of labour which are central to Hood's poetic representation, remain underexplored. While critics acknowledge physical exhaustion and poverty, fewer studies examine how sustained labour produces trauma, despair and loss of identity, especially for women whose suffering remains socially unrecognized.

Modern scholarship also links Hood's seamstress to the global histories of women's labour. African-American women's experiences under slavery and its legacy serve as a parallel case of female labourers trapped within intersecting systems of racism, patriarchy, and economic inequality (Spivak 287). Dalit women in India similarly face caste-based exploitation, low wages, and conditions that mirror the structural oppression of Hood's seamstress (Spivak 289). Contemporary research emphasizes the gendered nature of labour conflicts and highlights how women's participation influences social movements across the world. To overcome extensive structures of power, subaltern women often use subtle forms of resistance to demonstrate their agency. Hood uses the seamstress's "song" as a symbol of resistance, emphasizing her pain and calling for justice (Hood). By giving voice to their experiences and challenging social norms that marginalize their contributions, this narrative technique empowers subaltern women. Across nations, subaltern women have reclaimed their voices through cultural expression, activism, and feminist discourse, such as South American and Indian feminist groups advocating openly for structural change (Spivak 304). Examining the labour and agency of subaltern women in *The Song of the Shirt* situates the poem within a broader scholarly conversation that spans historical, theoretical, and global frameworks, enabling a deeper understanding of the intersectional structures of oppression and resistance.

The present study is informed primarily by Subaltern Studies, feminist theory, and critiques of global capitalism. Subaltern Studies, associated with scholars such as Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, seeks to recover marginalized voices excluded from dominant historical and



cultural narratives. Spivak's seminal question, "Can the subaltern speak?" is particularly relevant to Hood's poem, as the seamstress's voice is both articulated and constrained through poetic mediation. The poem raises critical questions about representation, agency, and the ethics of speaking for the marginalized.

Industrial Context and Exploitation

Subaltern women's labour was significantly impacted by the major economic and social transformations that distinguished London's history, especially during the Industrial Revolution. London developed as a centre of industrial activity as capitalism grew, attracting labourers from the countryside to urban factories. As a result of this change, an enormous poverty among workers, including women was created and exploited for their labour at low prices. Thomas Hood's *The Song of the Shirt* highlights the class dynamics of this time period, emphasizing the humiliating circumstances that working-class women had to endure. The poem depicts the continuous hard work of a seamstress, highlighting both the psychological toll of her work and her lack of agency. This story illustrates larger socioeconomic challenges in which women were trapped in jobs with low salaries with limited social status.

Given the colonial heritage, the poem's ideas of marginalisation and exploitation are relatable to those of colonised peoples, who endured comparable types of social and economic oppression. A crucial component of subaltern studies is the intersectional character of oppression, which occurs where gender, race, and class converge. Echoing criticisms of colonial institutions that similarly exploited underprivileged populations for financial benefit, Hood's portrayal of the seamstress challenges social norms that devalue women's labour. The poem's criticism of capitalism structures that prioritize profit over people's welfare is consistent with criticisms of colonialism, which frequently used economic advancement as a justification for exploitation. Irony is used to



highlight the hypocrisy of different countries that maintain exploitation while claiming moral superiority, as in the comparison of the seamstress's life to that of a slave. A crucial approach in subaltern studies, which aims to emphasize the agency and experiences of oppressed groups, is Hood's *The Song of the Shirt*, which gives voice to the voiceless. By questioning their marginalization and invisibility in both historical and modern contexts, this method of narrative empowers subaltern women. The poem's influence goes beyond its current historical setting since it focuses on the continued hardships faced by subaltern women as a result of global capitalism and colonialism.

Resistance and Reclamation of Voice

Poetry challenges social norms that undervalue women's contributions and provide voice to their hardships, Thomas Hood's *The Song of the Shirt* plays a crucial role in empowering and shaping women. This 1843 poem, which highlights themes of economic hardship, social injustice, and the degradation of human dignity, is a powerful rebuke of the exploitation that working-class women endured throughout the Industrial Revolution. Hood illustrates a seamstress's unrelenting toil through the metaphor of the "Song of the Shirt," highlighting her weariness and the psychological effects of her job. By questioning women's oppression and invisibility, both historically and currently, this method of narrative empowers them. The poem highlights how social standards that restrict women to domestic responsibilities worsen their exploitation by criticizing these expectations. As it challenges patriarchal standards and emphasizes the need for economic fairness, the poem's depiction of women as active actors rather than passive victims has resonated with feminist groups. Hood's work highlights the complexity of women's lives and confronts societal indifference by highlighting the intersectional nature of oppression, where gender and class overlap leading to exploitation. *The Song of the Shirt* makes significant contributions to feminist



literature and social activity by showing how poetry can empower women by giving voice to their hardships, questioning conventional standards, and promoting social justice.

The protagonist of the poem, a seamstress who has been exposed to unrelenting labour, comes to represent everyone caught in the merciless routines of industrial capitalism. In lines like "A bed of straw, A crust of bread and rags," Hood criticizes the obvious difference between the worth of her job and her pitiful pay, highlighting the working class's economic exploitation. The poem links her labour to mortality by using metaphors and symbolism, such as stitching "A Shroud as well as a Shirt," to illustrate the dual effects of her work on the living and the dead. Hood highlights the absurdity of a culture that maintains exploitation while claiming moral superiority and confronts societal indifference by providing a voice to the voiceless.

The poem calls for social transformation and economic justice by appealing to empathy and highlighting the human cost of cheap labour. The marginalization and invisibility of subaltern women's efforts are highlighted by *The Song of the Shirt* through its depiction of the seamstress's challenges, showing the need for justice and acknowledgment for those whose labour is frequently disregarded and undervalued. The poem's critique of capitalism systems that put profit ahead of people's welfare is what gives it its lasting relevance; this critique is still relevant in today's debates about social justice and labour rights.

Emotional Cost of Labour

The degrading impacts of constant work on the seamstress's mental and physical health are highlighted by the psychological and emotional costs of labour. With lines such as "Work! work! work! Till the stars shine through the roof!" highlighting the overpowering exhaustion that makes it difficult to distinguish between wakefulness and sleep, the poem eloquently captures her weariness. In order to illustrate the mental toll of her profession, this unrelenting cycle of labour is shown as a type of psychological despair in which the seamstress's mind starts to "swim" from the weariness



and exhaustion. The contrast between her poverty and the comfort of those who take advantage of her labour stresses the psychological cost of her work even more. As an analysis of social injustice, this obvious economic inequality shows how the working class is exploited not only economically but also psychologically. The seamstress's fight to preserve her dignity in the face of degrading circumstances is symbolized by her song, which is both a lament and a request for justice. With expressions like "fingers weary and worn" and "eyelids heavy and red," the poem vividly depicts her emotional and physical weariness.

Discussion

The poem also criticizes society's disregard for the misery of the working class, highlighting the conscious ignorance of those in positions of authority about the terrible circumstances endured by labourers such as the seamstress. Because they feel invisible and underappreciated, those who are working poor are further burdened psychologically by this ignorance. Hood urges readers to push for change and acknowledge the human cost of cheap labour in his art, which challenges this indifference. *The Song of the Shirt* emphasizes the psychological and emotional consequences of labour as a crucial component of social justice by depicting the seamstress's condition and the need for empathy and reformation.

Conclusion

Thomas Hood's *The Song of the Shirt* is an effective demonstration of how poetry can transcend its genre of literature and be an influential tool for social change, especially when it comes to uplifting women under restrictive systems. Hood highlights the interconnections of working-class women's oppression through race, gender, and class by giving voice to the frequently marginalized and invisible working-class women through the seamstress's labour. The poem critiques society's disregard for these women's condition while exposing the psychological, emotional, and bodily costs of oppressive capitalist institutions. Hood demonstrates how subaltern



women regain their agency through minor yet effective approaches, challenging the established order and demanding justice, by utilizing the song as a metaphor for resistance. As *The Song of the Shirt* demonstrates, poetry is a tool of resistance that elevates the voices of the oppressed in addition to being an aesthetic form. It showcases women's intersectional struggles and questions patriarchal conventions, making it a powerful tool for social justice movements. In the larger struggle for equality and empowerment, poetry plays a crucial role by providing voice to the oppressed women, enabling them to challenge power structures, reclaim agency, and demand respect and recognition.



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