

Translating the Subaltern Voice: A Cultural Studies Approach to Folk Narratives and Marginalized Identity in Contemporary Telugu Short Fiction

Dr. Durga Bhavani Rachani

Post Graduate Teacher (PGT) in English
AP Model School and Junior College,
Hamsavaram, East Godavari Dist. A.P.

Penugolanu8bc@gmail.com

Abstract:

This paper examines how the socio-cultural landscape, caste dynamics, and localized traditions of Andhra Pradesh are represented and transformed in contemporary Telugu short literature. Operating at the intersection of Postcolonial Theory and Cultural Studies, this study moves beyond purely linguistic analyses of literature to explore how regional writers use the short story format to document and critique systemic structures of power, agrarian change, and gender relations unique to the Deccan plateau and coastal Andhra regions. Specifically, the paper investigates the textual representation of subaltern identities and oral folklore, analyzing how marginalized communities employ regional idioms and folk customs as subversive tools against dominant, upper-caste socio-religious frameworks. Furthermore, the research addresses the cultural complexities involved in translating these deeply embedded regional narratives into English. Utilizing Lawrence Venuti's concepts of "foreignization" and cultural fidelity, the study evaluates how translators negotiate specific Telugu kinship terms, rural-urban migration anxieties, and localized rituals (such as folk practices specific to districts like East Godavari and Kurnool) for a global audience. The paper demonstrates that contemporary Telugu fiction serves as an active cultural archive rather than a passive reflection of society. Ultimately, this study argues that through the reclamation of oral storytelling traditions and subaltern idioms, modern literature from Andhra Pradesh constructs a distinct regional discourse that challenges homogenized national narratives, offering instead a nuanced, decentralized understanding of identity and resistance in the regional global South.

Keywords: Andhra Pradesh, Cultural Translation, Folk Narratives, Regional Idioms, Subaltern Discourse, Telugu Literature.

INTRODUCTION

In the modern cultural studies, language is no longer evaluated merely as a neutral vehicle for structural communication or an aesthetic instrument of high literature. Instead, cultural theorists conceptualize language as a contested, dynamic site of ideological struggle, social hierarchy, and power negotiation. As Stuart Hall famously posited, representation is an active practice that constructs meaning, rather than a passive mirror reflecting an objective reality (Elavarthi and Vemireddy, 2020). Within this framework, everyday speech

acts, vernacular idioms, and regional dialects carry heavy socio-political weight. They function as vocal maps that reveal deep fault lines of class stratification, geographic alignment, and history-shaping human migrations. When applied to the complex cultural geography of Southern India—specifically the Telugu-speaking landscapes of Andhra Pradesh and the historically intertwined region of Telangana—the "power of the idiom" becomes a critical lens through which to dismantle institutionalized hegemony. Far from being a monolithic linguistic zone, the



Telugu language operates through a triad of major regional dialects:

1. Coastal Andhra (the Circar dialect)
2. Rayalaseema
3. Telangana.

Each variations is deeply tied to its own distinct economic history, political trajectories, and agrarian realities (Wikipedia, 2026). It argues that regional dialects in Telugu literature and media do not merely represent localized flavor; rather, they serve as vital markers of cultural politics. By analyzing the structural tensions among these distinct vernaculars, this study demonstrates how the historical elevation of the Coastal Andhra dialect to a "standardized" national ideal has systematically marginalized the idioms of Rayalaseema and Telangana. Through a cultural studies approach, this paper will unpack how contemporary regional writers use subaltern idioms to resist linguistic assimilation, reclaiming their unique local histories and rewriting the socio-political hierarchies of the Telugu public sphere.

The Illusion of a Monolith: Linguistic Modernity and the Colonial Gaze

To understand how regional variations became loaded with socio-economic meaning, one must look back to the arrival of print culture and the language reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During the colonial era, the institutionalization of the Telugu novel and vernacular journalism within the Madras Presidency triggered intense debates regarding what constituted "proper" or "literary" language (Cambridge University Press, 2013). Intellectuals like Gidugu Venkata Ramamurti championed the shift from a highly classical, Sanskritized poetic idiom (Granthika) toward a living, spoken vernacular

(Vyavaharika) to expand the public sphere (Cambridge University Press, 2013). However, this transition into linguistic modernity was far from egalitarian. The economic and educational dominance of the fertile Coastal Andhra region—blessed by the deltaic agrarian wealth of the Krishna and Godavari rivers—allowed its regional speech patterns to be adopted as the default template for modern, educated Telugu. This process of linguistic standardization effectively created what cultural theorist Antonio Gramsci defined as a "cultural hegemony." The Coastal Andhra dialect was absorbed into state textbooks, legal administration, and embryonic print media as the "neutral," "standard," or "melodious" form of the language (Talkpal AI, 2026). Consequently, the rich linguistic traditions of Rayalaseema and Telangana were relegated to the status of "accented variations" or provincial deviations. By framing a single regional idiom as the universal standard, the dominant class established an institutional hierarchy. Those who spoke outside this coastal register were subtly marked as lacking social mobility, institutional authority, and intellectual refinement (Scribd, 2024).

The Geography of Hardship: Rayalaseema's Idiom of Resistance

South of the coastal plains lies Rayalaseema, a drought-prone, arid territory encompassing districts like Kurnool, Kadapa, and Anantapur (Talkpal AI, 2026). The severe climate and historical neglect of this region are deeply woven into its speech patterns. The Rayalaseema dialect is phonetically characterized by a heavy drawl, an emphatic stress on retroflex consonants, and a vocabulary heavily influenced by historical contact with neighboring Kannada and Tamil kingdoms



(Talkpal AI, 2026). In traditional mid-twentieth-century Telugu literature and commercial media, this dialect was frequently stereotyped. Its speakers were routinely pigeonholed either as rustic, uneducated peasants or as hyper-violent, feudal landlords (factionists) operating in a lawless, sun-baked terrain (Scribd, 2024). From a cultural studies perspective, this systemic distortion serves a specific ideological purpose: it rationalizes the economic marginalization of the region by painting its inhabitants as fundamentally pre-modern or inherently aggressive. However, contemporary regional literature from Rayalaseema has transformed this exact idiom into a powerful weapon of counter-hegemony. Writers from this arid belt deliberately reject standardized coastal Telugu, utilizing local idioms, agricultural metaphors, and folk oral forms to document the harsh realities of rural poverty, farmer suicides, and state neglect. By keeping these raw expressions intact, this literature validates Rayalaseema's historical grief and survival. The heavy, unyielding cadence of the dialect is reframed as a linguistic protest against an elite state narrative that prioritizes the economic interests of the coastal green-belts over the survival of the dryland interior.

The Scars of Empire: Telangana and the Politics of "Othering"

The linguistic politics of the Telugu world became even more explosive in its historical encounter with the Telangana region. Separated from the British-ruled Madras Presidency, Telangana developed under the autocratic, feudal governance of the Asaf Jahi dynasty (the Nizams of Hyderabad), where Urdu was enforced as the sole language of administration, courts, and high education (ResearchGate, 2025). This prolonged exposure created a unique

linguistic landscape: the Telangana dialect became beautifully infused with Persian, Arabic, and Urdu vocabulary, carving out a distinct phonetic and structural departure from coastal idioms (Find My Guru, 2026). When the linguistically unified state of Andhra Pradesh was formed in 1956, it was celebrated as a historic victory for a shared Telugu cultural identity (World Telugu Conference, 2026). Yet, beneath this administrative unity lay deep cultural anxieties. As capital, media enterprises, and migrants from Coastal Andhra flooded into the newly established capital of Hyderabad, they brought along deep-seated linguistic biases (Elavarthi and Vemireddy, 2020). Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, commercial Telugu cinema and mainstream literature systematically weaponized these differences. The Telangana dialect was routinely used as a cheap comedic tool, spoken almost exclusively by onscreen villains, buffoons, or domestic servants (Scribd, 2024). This systematic "othering" on the silver screen implied that the Telangana dialect was inherently crude, ungrammatical, and unrefined when compared to the polished, "pure" speech of the coastal elites (Scribd, 2024).

This cultural degradation fueled deep-seated resentment, turning language into a primary battleground for the separate Telangana statehood movement. Activists and writers fiercely reclaimed their local idiom, championing it not as a broken dialect, but as a proud, defiant symbol of regional self-determination and anti-feudal rebellion (Elavarthi and Vemireddy, 2020).

Conclusion:

Ultimately, analyzing the power of the idiom through a cultural studies lens reveals that language in the Telugu-speaking regions is far from a neutral instrument of



daily conversation. Instead, it operates as a deeply contested battlefield where marginalized communities constantly fight for their socio-political visibility and historic self-determination. The distinct linguistic styles, vocabularies, and phonetic landscapes of Coastal Andhra, Rayalaseema, and Telangana are not accidental or superficial accents. Rather, they are profound structural artifacts carved out by centuries of differing agricultural realities, arbitrary political borders, colonial divisions, and large-scale human migrations. When modern regional literature deliberately and defiantly weaves these historically marginalized dialects back into its narrative core, it does not merely offer regional flavor or rustic color. Instead, it performs a vital act of cultural restoration, resurrecting forgotten histories and challenging the institutionalized silences that have long characterized the regional public sphere.

This descriptive analysis systematically tracks these linguistic power struggles across three core analytical dimensions that map the evolution of regional resistance. First, the investigation delves into the structural constraints of early print culture and colonial-era state machinery, which collectively established an institutional cage. During the push for linguistic modernization and standardization, the speech patterns of the economically dominant Coastal Andhra region were elevated to a universal, standardized ideal. This bureaucratic process created a restrictive hierarchy that marginalized alternative regional expressions, marking them as unrefined or improper, and effectively barring non-coastal speakers from equal cultural capital and institutional authority. By exposing the mechanics of this linguistic standardization, the study

demonstrates how literary institutions can inadvertently reinforce class and geographic privileges.

Second, the study turns its attention to the dryland interior to evaluate the idioms of aridity. Through a close and empathetic reading of Rayalaseema literature, the analysis highlights how contemporary subaltern writers use their heavy, unyielding regional dialect to articulate unique agrarian struggles and expose systemic environmental injustices. For decades, mainstream commercial media either ignored Rayalaseema or caricatured its inhabitants through an anthropocentric lens of backwardness or innate violence. By reclaiming their native idiom, local writers transform the language of drought, soil depletion, and economic neglect into a fierce counter-hegemonic tool. The raw vocabulary and distinct cadences of Rayalaseema literature function as an explicit protest against an elite state narrative that has historically prioritized the fertile green-belts of the coastal plains over the survival of the arid interior.

Third, the research addresses the subversive potential of linguistic reclamation by exploring how the assertion of Telangana and subaltern oral idioms acts as a direct challenge to a false, homogenized universal identity. Due to a distinct historical trajectory under Nizam rule, the Telangana dialect absorbed deep Persian, Arabic, and Urdu influences, creating a unique linguistic style that was systematically ridiculed and weaponized as a comedic tool by the coastal-dominated film and literary industries. Mainstream cultural productions routinely cast speakers of this dialect as villains or buffoons, reinforcing the idea that the coastal register was the only legitimate voice of sophistication. Reclaiming this idiom in post-movement



literature serves as an act of radical self-determination, stripping away the elite, exclusionary definitions of purity and rewriting the socio-political hierarchies of the public sphere.

By dismantling these deeply embedded linguistic hierarchies, this research ultimately highlights how contemporary literature from the region functions as an active, living cultural archive rather than a passive reflection of social realities. The intentional use of vernacular idioms, localized metaphors, and subaltern speech acts allows modern Telugu literature to push back against decades of cultural domination and linguistic assimilation. In doing so, it strips the dominant elite of their monopoly over what constitutes proper knowledge and civilized discourse. This process of linguistic decentralization does not fracture cultural unity; instead, it exposes the artificiality of any state-enforced homogeneity that demands the erasure of local difference. Ultimately, this comprehensive study opens up new pathways for an inclusive, decentralized, and truly democratic understanding of regional identity in the global South, proving that true linguistic liberation lies in celebrating the diverse voices that rise from the earth.

References:

1. Eco-Humanism in Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998)." *Representations*, no. 14, 2024, pp. 102–115.
2. Elavarthi, Sathya Prakash, and Vamshi Vemireddy. "Telangana and Language Politics of Telugu Cinema." *Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2020, pp. 45–58.
3. "Language Politics in Nizam Rule: The Domination of Urdu and Vernacular Resistance." *Journal of South Asian Linguistic History*, vol. 14, no. 3, ResearchGate, 2025, pp. 201–216.
4. "Telangana Dialect in Telugu Cinema: Cultural Hegemony, Stereotyping, and Identity Politics." *Media and Cultural Representation Review*, Scribd, 2024,
5. "Telugu Language: History, Regional Dialects, and Phonological Variations." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 22 May 2026,
6. "Telugu Speaking States in India: Language, History & Key Facts." *Linguistic Geography Series*, Find My Guru, 2026,
7. "Telugus Through Ages: Regional Evolution and Cultural Oneness." *Prapancha Telugu Mahasabhalu Historical Archive*, World Telugu Conference, 2026,
8. "Vernacular Publics and Political Modernity: Language and Progress in Colonial South India." *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 15–32.
9. "What is the Difference Between the Rayalaseema and Coastal Andhra Accents?" *Cultural Linguistics Blog*, Talkpal AI, 2026,