

Representation of Gendered Subaltern in Post-Colonial Indian English Novels

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Abstract

The Post-colonial Indian English novels carry the spirit of post-colonial theories by shifting their focus on peripheral figures thrown on margin by the centrifugal force of hegemony. The period involves in revealing imperialism as Eurocentric and patriarchy as phallogocentric which subjugates the weaker sex as 'other' instigates the post-colonial writers to discuss the gender inequality in their fiction. Many other Indian women writers have used silence of the women as the motif to represent the dominance of the 'Self' on 'Other'. The post-colonial writing in Indian English concerns to bring in focus the suppressed spirit of subalterns to get equality and their deprived agency in societal narratives. This urge of downtrodden and marginalized has been claimed by Indian English writers through creating literary canons of subaltern. These Indian women writers gave voice to the gender inequality and subordination of women as fairer sex. The real subjugation of women which was left without in fiction by Indian male authors that is brought on the surface by women authors in Indian English such Kamala Das, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Mahasweta Devi, Manju Kapoor with the perspective of woman as gendered subaltern.

Keywords: gender, subaltern, post-colonial, English novel

Introduction:

The rhetorical question 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' asked to Subaltern Studies Group by post-colonial critic Gayatri Spivak especially for Third world women which shattered the concept of subaltern as oppressed male only. Writers of Post-colonial period forcefully represented the woman as a colonized, deprived and oppressed in the sense of class and gender. The term 'gendered subaltern' became consequential in the latter half of twentieth century literature implying that women have been doubly marginalized in the Third World, first on the basis of nationality and other on the basis of gender. Her identity as other, fairer sex is critically discussed within the parameter of her relationship with men.

Her violence and suppression are glorified under the name of tradition, respect for rituals, suffering as her duty and fear of *karma*. She is still placed at periphery to the center of subaltern man.

The real subjugation of women which was left without in fiction by Indian male authors that is brought on the surface by women authors in Indian English such Kamala Das, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Mahasweta Devi, Manju Kapoor with the perspective of woman as gendered subaltern crushed by the hands of patriarchy and colonialism in India. Their deprived agency in the society is given by these women writers through the skillful delineation of their sufferings and their natural right to speak, to take lead and to

bring change in the customs is attributed them through literature with shifting the norms for protagonist of the novel as a female and not a male.

Mahasweta Devi is the rare combination as a writer and activist to epitomize the subaltern. She subverts the superiority of upper caste male dominance over tribal and lower caste female taking her as a commodity. Devi is proficient in using tribal setting for her novels where the ironical aspects of democracy are reflected in her plot. She concerns about the otherness of women in the dual politics of presenting woman as a sacred and enduring mythical character like Sita and Draupadi and on the other hand a figure without self-identity destined to be governed only as a slave. Spivak has translated her stories related to breast under the name 'Breast Stories', intensifying the brutality of patriarchy to dishonor female's esteem with her breast as only the device to exploit subaltern women. In *Draupadi*, protagonist of the novel is a female Naxalite *Dopdi Mehjen* who is gang raped by the police to get the information of her colleagues. Finally, she uses those bare and bruised breasts as a weapon to reveal the real cowardice of patriarchy challenging the power of autocrat police with her nudity.

Actually, Draupadi is the mythical character in the epic *Mahabharata* who is saved from unclothing in front of court which claims credit for the male to dishonor any woman to show their power; Devi reverts this subordination of women epitomized in this epic by presenting her protagonist armed with her nude body. Dr. Nazneen Khan in her essay '*Resistance of the Subaltern: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi"*' asserts that Draupadi is a

defiant militant heroine who confronts and challenges her oppressors even unarmed. She is the representative of the "gendered subalterns" who ultimately resist and speak when pushed to the margin.

The protagonist of *Standayini* (Breast Giver) is Jashoda, poor woman who earns her means of support by breast feeding to the children of rich Haldar family. She delivers about seventeen children of her own and breast feedings for many children of Haldar family. This resulted in her deteriorated health which was ignored by her husband and others due to poverty and as subordinate figure of family. When nobody cares her disease, she dies with the breast cancer. The breasts of Jashoda raise a question on the patriarchal duality, boasting code of conduct prepared to mean exploit the subaltern. Spivak speaks on Mahasweta Devi's expertise in unveiling the other side of society,

"Indeed, Mahasweta uses Jashoda the subaltern as a measure of the dominant sexual ideology of "India." (Here gender uniformly is more encompassing than class difference) Over against this is a list of Western stereotypes, where a certain Western feminism (Simone de Beauvoir serves Mahasweta as a metonym) is also situated." (Spivak 265)

The third story *Behind the Bodice* (Choli ke Peeche) Gangor's breast feeding photograph by Upin causes series of tragedy including imprisonment, torture and rape by authority with a fury for her disgracing the Hindu image of a woman. In the Name of Mother Devi exposes the traditional portrayal and concept of women and their link to motherhood, concealing the

communal abuse and restricting her to their socially prescribed roles. The Indian epic *Mahabharata* is restated in *After Kurukshetra* from the eyes of marginalized, dispossessed and Dalit. Mahasweta Devi poses questions about constitutional rights of tribal, Dalit and women as subaltern delineating their suffering, oppression on all level by police and government of India.

Arundhati Roy, the great champion of downtrodden has thrown light on post-colonial cultural and caste politics of India in her *The God of Small Things*. It highlights the double standard policy of the patriarchy and gender discrimination towards the weaker section of society. Ammu the central character is discriminated on the basis of gender, not welcomed after her failure of love marriage. She is denied her right in property, forced to work in Chako's factory, humiliated on her affair with an untouchable and finally forced by the system to commit suicide. The church also refused to do rituals on her dead body because she has crossed the rigid laws of religion and fall in love with a pariah, Velutha.

“*The God of Small Things* highlights Arundhati Roy's opinion of the status of women folk in India. It represents before us the constant struggle of women against their incessant exploitation, torture and struggle which they undergo because of a male dominant orthodox, dogmatic environment.” (Dr. Dhand 61)

Bharati Mukherjee, one of the post-colonial strong writers focused on the theme of migration, alienation, subordination, exclusion from agency of nationalism and subaltern women in her novels *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, *Leave It to Me*, *Days and*

Nights. Class consciousness is an essential theme of Kamala Markandaya's novels which depict the sufferings, poverty, and failed aspiration of downtrodden. Her *Nectar in a Sieve* presents the peasants in rural ruined due to poverty, landlordism and illiteracy. The poor peasants devastated totally by industrialization that pushes them into a vicious cycle of natural and artificial problems and finally their surrender to the destiny is portrayed pathetically by Markandaya. Rukmani loses her sons and her daughter Ira, becomes prostitute but she is shown strong after catastrophic situations came in her life. Rukmini and Ira accepted sufferings to follow the expectations of society being good woman. Her novel *A Handful of Rice* depicts the ill effects of migration and unemployment. Her characters fight against the destiny and discrimination but finally lay down of their arms to survive in the world of agony and subjugation. Her *The Coffer dam* portrays the submissiveness and docility of tribal to colonial British authorities and vacates their land, the only source of their life without any questioning or resistance. She has focused gender inequality in her *Silence of Desire* represents the silence of women in general suffering mutely. The story between Dandekar and Sarojini reveals the post-Vedic considerations of Indian society about women.

Shashi Deshpande has contributed massively in the sector of gendered subaltern by portraying through her novels the plights, problems, trials of middle-class Indian women who feel oppressed by the norms of the patriarchal society. Almost all her novels revolve around the pathetic and heart-rending suppression, suffocation of women between tradition and freedom. In

her *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980) she tells the story of Saru, the protagonist's mental and sexual suffering only because she belongs to the weaker sex. Unwillingly she surrenders herself in her parental house and in her husband's house also. The novel focuses on women's-imposed compromise to sustain the secure life under patriarchy.

If I Die Today (1982) is based on common predicaments of woman in marital life in which they are expected to sacrifice so many things. Manju, a career oriented young woman is trapped in the conflict of culture, tradition, patriarchal system, expectations, compromise on one side and freedom, self-identity, education and modernity on other side. Her *Roots and Shadows* (1983) is a symbolic representation of man-woman relationship and power struggle. *Indu* is an educated young woman who favors her liberty than being confined in the shackles of Hindu tradition. *The Binding Vine* (1983) depicts Urmi, a clever, educated woman working as a lecturer entangled in dual identity of a woman in the family and worker. She suffers a lot in the conflict of values because she is married against her choice due to parental aspiration leading to a failure of matrimony. Her submission to patriarchy and matrimonial customs symbolizes her binding herself like a vine to seek a secure and standard life given only by the marriage.

Her *That Long Silence* (1988) presents the realistic image of a middle class educated woman Jaya, caught in the contrast of tradition and self-realization. Jaya compromise with her self-identity indicates her submissiveness to patriarchy which catches her mind with fear of the being blamed by the patriarchy and accepts to

remain silent about Mohan's indifference towards her. Shashi Deshpande in her *A Matter of Time* (1996) fictions the pitiable condition of women. She expertly presents a realistic picture of a lot of problems of marginalized and suppressed women under patriarchy. The novel represents harshly the sufferings and exploitation of women in the name of tradition and culture. Deshpande explores the feminine world of suppressed feelings and reconstruct them into a female standpoint to empower the feminine urge for equality. Her *Moving On* also presents Manjari, who subverts the patriarchy system and finds her own way of living. The novel covers the span of four generations of relationship. The spirit for moving on confidently in the patriarchal family is the theme of the novel. Manju seems initially obedient girl who later become rebellious when acknowledged the subjugation of women in her orthodox family.

Nayantara Sahgal has brought new look to virtuous image of woman, who stands for their rights by embracing modern values of liberated modern woman. Sahgal's novels centered on exposing woman's boldness in reverting traditional constraining norms and sets new criterion of liberated woman with values and considerations for others. In *Rich Like Us* (1985) Sonali is sensible about her capacity, as an I.A.S. officer resigned her post instead of compromising with her principles or surrendering herself to the customs and patriarchal authority. She is portrayed as a modern Sita striving to achieve self-respect in the male dominated society. Her women like Laxmi and Devika in *A Time to be Happy*, Mira in *This Time of Morning*, Gauri in *Storm in Chandigarh* are Sahgal's other new women in her novels who fight for their

rights going through a lot of oppression and confront with to pop out the shell of customs and traditional images of woman in patriarchal system. Her *Day in Shadow* focuses on new woman's predicaments and fights against social cruel conventions. The protagonist *Simrit* divorced her husband *Som* to free herself from the seizing system of marriage. The novel is an epic in Indian literature projecting the struggle of gendered subaltern against patriarchal supremacy and identity crisis.

Anita Desai is a prolific writer who introduced psychological novel to India with feministic perspectives. She focuses on the women's inner chaos of suppression, humiliation, anger for patriarchy and their search for self-respect and freedom. Her *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) depicts the household drudgery of Maya, married with Gautam much older than her, who leads a frustrated marital life. In her *The Voices in the City* Manisha wedded with an insensitive husband, Jiban is desperate due to their relationship which is devoid of communication, mutual understanding and expressing feelings leads to ruin their relationship. Her inner craving for being respected and not to be taken into consideration by her conventional joint family led her to suicide. Her *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) is a story of Nanda Kaul, an old woman caught in self-contradictions, hardly considers her husband's infidelity towards her resulted in her isolation and detachment from her husband Raka. Raka's father, an educated officer underestimates her mother and treats her badly symbolizing as an elite male in Indian society. Ila Das a social worker who fights against child marriage but her campaign to save girl child from this custom triggered her for being

raped and killed by villagers, to silent her voice against patriarchy.

The problem of gender discrimination is the central theme of Anita Desai's novel *Fasting, Feasting*. The protagonist *Uma* is deprived of many individual and social rights by her conservative parents, who pamper Arun, the only male child in their family. The novel portrays the inner conflict and quest for freedom of women characters like Uma and her cousin Anamika. Uma is fasting for her natural rights by sacrificing her desires to study and to work with Dr. Dutt. Her parents represent the typical middle class patriarchal set up with conservative desire for a male child. Despite of two grown up daughters, Papa insists on third pregnancy for his wife denying her right even on her body. Subaltern is the prominent theme in post-colonial writers criticizing colonial treatment and its effect on individual's psyche. Among post-colonial women writer in India Manju Kapur achieves higher status in the literary canon of Indian English. Her debut novel *Difficult Daughters* (1988) is a story of three daughters Kasturi, Virmati and Ida who are projected as subaltern in different periods of Indian politics. It covers the relationship between mother and daughters over a three generation, Kasturi represents complete acceptance of tradition, Virmati represents adjustment after conflict and Ida revolted against tradition for her self-identity. She explores the shifts in social dynamics with the protagonist's quest for identity where sentiments have no place in their rigid patriarchal family. Virmati is marginalized at every step in her life. In her *Married Woman*, Manju Kapur gives voice to subjugation, disappointment and frustration of women. It tells a story of

Astha, a married woman who revolts against the patriarchal customs and rises herself as an independent woman. *Custody* by Kapur depicts the theme of alienation and frustration arranged marriages which are specifically arranged by parents.

Anita Nair is a contemporary woman writer whose fiction reflected the social and cultural background of women. Her *Ladies Coupe* becomes the voice for women of second class and gives the space for their inner world. Her heroine in *Ladies Coupe* (2001) Akhila undertakes a train journey to avoid the burden of different roles and commitment in the family. The journey is for self-discovery and realizing oneself which includes stories of six women in the coupe who have forgotten their feminine rights struggling to balance the family life and their granted roles. They are turned into a docile and submissive living thing by surrendering themselves to different roles of wife, mother, and daughter.

Bama's *Karukku* (1992) represents subaltern woman victimized by caste discrimination. Her *Sangati* (1984) is the biography of the subaltern class. Mariamma, a Dalit character in *Sangati* epitomizes the disparity from upper class as marginalized and again exploited in family and society as

a woman, a weaker sex. As a woman she becomes the voice of her doubly marginalized sex with depiction of feminine consciousness, experiences of inferior class, gender inequality and misery of gendered subalterns. Jumpha Lahiri in *The Namesake*, Gita Hariharan in *In Times of Siege*, *Fugitive Histories*, Ismat Chughtai in her *The Hearts Breaks Free*, Rama Mehata in *Inside the Haveli*, Monika Ali in *The Brick Lane*, Attia Hosain in *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, delineate the story of oppressed women in the male dominated society in the name of tradition, religion, culture and idealized characters set by tradition like Sita and Draupadi. Daxa Damodar in *Shosh* skillfully manifests uninterrupted rejection of woman's identity.

Conclusion: The Post-colonial Indian English novels represent gender subaltern in Indian society. Women are expected to remain in silence about their torture and suffering identifying it as their duty for second-rate gender. Patriarchal hegemony created her image as vulnerable, submissive, inferior, powerless and empty-headed incapable for any intellectual acts. The marginal and peripheral identity of women is dexterously explored by the Indian women writers.

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