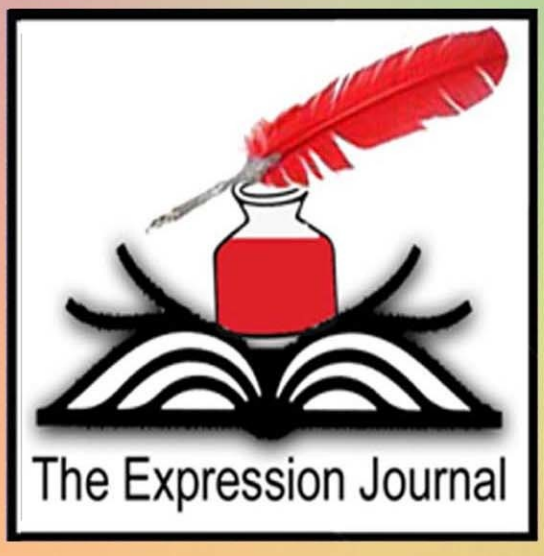
ISSN : 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

Bimonthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



Impact Factor 6.4

Vol. 11 Issue 4 August 2025

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

Email : editor@expressionjournal.com

www.expressionjournal.com

The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal
(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 6.4)
www.expressionjournal.com ISSN: 2395-4132

Women as a Gendered Subaltern in Postcolonial India

Dr. Priyanka Kumari
Ph.D.
Department of English and Foreign Languages
Central University of South Bihar, Gaya
Bihar, India

::

Abstract

This study examines the complex position of women as a gendered subaltern in Postcolonial India, analysing how they are doubly marginalised by the enduring forces of patriarchy and the persistent legacies of colonialism and nationalism. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory, particularly the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, this study interrogates the historical and contemporary silencing of Indian women's voices, arguing that their experiences are often obscured within both elitist national histories and hegemonic global feminist discourses. The analysis first examines how the figure of the 'Indian Woman' was co-opted during the nationalist movement as a symbol of 'Mother India'—a revered, yet largely passive, custodian of national culture. Post-independence India's state policies and patriarchal social structures have continued this subordination, often translating modern ideas of citizenship through a male-centric lens. Furthermore, the paper utilises an intersectional approach, focusing on how axes of difference—specifically caste, class, and religion—fragment the category of 'woman,' showing that Dalit, tribal, and minority women face amplified, multi-layered forms of oppression. While officially empowered with constitutional rights, the subaltern woman frequently confronts systemic violence, economic exploitation, and a lack of authentic political representation. The study, however, does not merely focus on victimhood, but also investigates the varied forms of everyday resistance and agency demonstrated by women in postcolonial literature, grassroots movements, and counter-narratives that actively challenge their imposed silence and subordination.

Keywords

Gendered Subaltern, Postcolonial India, Gayatri Spivak, Subaltern Perspectives, Patriarchy, Colonial Legacy, Nationalism, Intersectionality, Caste, Double Marginalisation, Resistance.

::

The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal
(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 6.4)
www.expressionjournal.com ISSN: 2395-4132

Women as a Gendered Subaltern in Postcolonial India

Dr. Priyanka Kumari
Ph.D.
Department of English and Foreign Languages
Central University of South Bihar, Gaya
Bihar, India

Indian history came to be seen in a new light with the arrival of post-colonial critical theory.The consequences of decolonisation mainly affect the political and cultural discourses of a nation. In this post-colonial era, subaltern theory is necessary to offer a valid critique of the social, economic, religious and almost every facade of life. Subaltern studies provide an understanding of the documentation of the oppressed, lower castes and subjugated sections of society who would have been rendered voiceless otherwise. These studies become important in formulating post-colonial literary theory and analysing various works of art ranging from verbal to visual. This paper attempts to understand women's position as a gendered subaltern among the subalterns in post-colonial India using Gayatri Spivak's insights from her famous essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" to analyse Govind Nihalani's film "Hazaar Chaurasi ki Maa", an adaptation of Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084.* The paper also looks at the literal baring of the corporeal self as a paradigm shift in the relationship between the body and the self in the refusal to be marginalised as seen in "Draupadi" when Dopdi counters her rapists in her naked form.

The term "subaltern", drawn from Antonio Gramsci's writings,refers to subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language and culture and is used to signify the centrality of relationships in history (25). In post-colonial theory, the term subaltern describes the lower castes and the social groups who are at the margins of a society. Yet, control, time and place determine who, among the people at the margins of a society, is a subaltern. The subaltern classes refer fundamentally, in Gramsci's words, to any "low rank" person or group of people in a particular society. Started by an individual editorial collective consisting of six scholars of South Asia spread across Britain, Australia and India, subaltern studies were inspired by Ranajit Guha. In the nineties, subaltern studies became a hot topic in academic circles on several continents for scholars ranging across disciplines from history to political science, anthropology, sociology, literary criticism and cultural studies.

Caste and gender become the decisive elements of social identity and the material reality of the Indian village. The gendered subaltern's condition of unimaginable misery and oppression of all sorts is presented through representative subjects in many contemporary Indian literatures. Many literary figures compiled their work, interrogating the subject and object of postcolonial theorising through the lens of gender representation. Women, the dispossessed, the subaltern among the subalterns, the invisible, have been subjected to the worst kind of oppression. Their voice is heard amidst the tumultuous uproar of voices. The woman as a subaltern gender has been depicted in many of the works of contemporary Indian authors, historians and literary theorists. Prominently, Mahasweta Devi's fictional narration has been widely read and critically theorised as powerful representational attempts from the marginalised. Questions of caste, gender and class are discussed and rethought. In *Mother of 1084*, there is a self-conscious reconfiguration of the Third World intellectual as a subaltern, and a subaltern woman at that. Again, it is helpful for us here to take to heart Gayatri Spivak's caution that the "subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow". Devi's work, even in the most general terms, is a powerful answer to this loss, to embody the "shadow" and to give it voice. The insurgency in *Mother of 1084* is claimed by the male gender, to be sure, but a woman narrates it.

Gayatri Spivak doesn't offer such a broad use of the term subaltern. She strictly constrains her subaltern theory. Anyone who has limited or no access at all to self-representation is a subaltern.Her idea of a subaltern being a subaltern is situational. She cites the example of Hindu widows in her essay, "Can the Subaltern speak?" to talk about the dynamics of power. All we hear about these incidents is mostly accounts of the British colonisers who claimed to rescue them. The lack of account of the women themselves makes Spivak question the voice of the subaltern. All in all, her initial discourse claims that the subaltern cannot speak. She cites examples of widows burnt at the pyre of their husbands in her essay. She emphasises the condition of women who are oppressed by patriarchy and colonialism. Spivak's presentation of the gendered subaltern creates a complete victim and, in turn, makes the oppressor an all-powerful force. A post-colonial critique of Hindu widows brings into light the voicelessness and disappearance of the subaltern caught between two polarities- traditional boundaries and modernisation. Women are subjectified by those in power and privilege, mainly by elitists who are male. A woman, as a differentiated gender and a subaltern among the subalterns, is even more profound in her role as a spectator and participant in patriarchy. As a feminist, Spivak turns our attention towards the subaltern woman.

In Govind Nihalani's 1998 movie, "Hazaar chaurasi ki Maa", a movie which deals with human relations and its depths, the meaning of justice to these relations while dealing with the predicament of individuality in the backdrop of 1970s Calcutta amidst the Naxalite movement,we see Sujata, played brilliantly by Jaya Bachchan, an educated and working woman from an upper middle-class family being a subaltern in her own home. Her ceasing to exist as such will be discussed later in the paper. Marginalised by her husband and her family, nobody truly understands her. Her son, Brati, loves her dearly, and it is this love that keeps Sujata oblivious to her son's identity and her own. Spivak's assertion of the subaltern being voiceless is clearly depicted in Sujata, who doesn't understand the right or wrong of the system; she is a mother and a wife, and she doesn't acknowledge her individuality. Even compared to Brati, whom the family already marginalises for not being similar, Sujata is the gendered subaltern. The sound of thunder at the very onset of the film seems to be a warning, to Sujata and the

audience, for the looming changes ahead; changes that will occur to her psychologically, socially and individually. In the Chatterjee household, we see the chauvinism and elitism that Spivak is so against while defining her gendered subaltern. Mahasweta Devi's excellent characterisation delights Somu's mother, who is portrayed fiercely by Seema Biswas, who is a stark contrast to Bachchan's calm and dignified Sujata. A long-time champion for the economically and politically challenged communities, Mahasweta Devi puts her activism into portraying Somu's mother's plight. She characterises these communities as "suffering spectators of the India that is travelling towards the 21st century" (*Imaginary Maps,* xi). Despite losing her son like Sujata, Biswas's character has seen more meaning and truthin motherhood. However, she is also a Spivakean subaltern torn between motherhood, poverty and having been branded an outcast for having a son involved in Naxal activities. Even though Mahasweta Devi's original book provides a backstory in which Sujata was made to get a job by her husband, not for economic independence but for a financial crisis, the film does plenty to assert Sujata's initial marginalized and mechanical state only being treated as an object of sex by her husband.

Gayatri Spivak claims that re-adopting a cultural uniqueness will only make the subalterns re-establish their already subordinate position. As a result, they will look to the more educated to advocate for their rights. Spivak gives us an opportunity to deconstruct our pre-existing ideology of representation and narrative to understand why the subalterns remain as subalterns. Her "bracketing" of Marxism and other pre-existing theories to construct the idea of subaltern allows her to criticise theorists like Foucault and Deleuze (Schutz). Towards the end of her essay, she makes it very clear that the subaltern does not have a voice. If the subaltern is not represented, they have to be their voice and would cease to exist as a subaltern altogether. The subaltern would have a voice; they will be heard when they stop remaining as a subaltern. Ultimately, it is up to them to save themselves. Sujata's rediscovery of herself in "Hazaar Chaurasir ki Maa" leads to her being an equal member of the family in the film towards the end.

Sujata's curiosity and refusal to accept her son only as a number on a corpse lead to the most essential character development not only as a mother, but as a woman. Her journey is not only a mother's quest to find out the truth about her son's death; his death initially questions her understanding of her child, whom she perceived to be very close. She resents that she is fooled by her son's smile and their love for one another; she blames herself for his death. She resents not knowing the mindset and circumstances that led her son to go down that path of revolution. It is at this point that she starts to question herself. Torn by grief, anguish and frustration, her questioning of her understanding starts to mould into a voice of her own, which Spivak has been talking about so earnestly. This voice becomes louder and louder until she is able to think for herself and develop her ideals. She not only discovers her son's sociological identity, but also re-discovers herself as a woman, more importantly, as an individual. Her meeting with Nandini acts as a catalyst for her to know her son honestly and realise that her loss is much smaller compared to the larger picture of life. Her refusal to apply sindur marks her rebellion and questioning of patriarchy and subalternity altogether. She moves more and more towards her self-realisation of alienation from her family. The engagement party at her house, an example of exceptional satire and mockery of the elitist and post-modern capitalist, is captured cleverly by Nihalani in a series of pretence and parody by the family members.

Engulfed by physical and mental pain of being rotten inside and outside, Sujata finally comes to terms with her dead son's ideology, even accepting it as her own when she realises that he had died so that the people around her, the society could continue to revel in its hypocrisy and snobbery, that he had died in vain; she cries out in pain and faints! It is the outstanding direction and craftsmanship by Nihalani that binds this emotional epiphany amidst the party, which clearly portrays the harsh reality of the capitalist system and shows the attitude of the elite class.Sujata's fainting marks the most critical moment of change in her life. As she realises the oddity of life, she is reborn. The scene ironically shifts to Sujata's memory of giving birth to her son, Brati. It is not only Brati who has come to life; it is Sujata who is reborn. It is she who brings her son back to life through herself. By embracing her son's sociological mindset because of her own choice, she establishes herself as an individual. She started with a mere corpse, but she manages to introduce her son to herself and the viewers again and manages to become Sujata, the individual, leaving behind her identity as mother of corpse 1084. The film ends with a more optimistic note than the novel, as Sujata died in the text, united with Brati only in death. The film gives us a stronger and realistic Spivakian Sujata that does justice to contemporary viewers. She is no longer a subaltern in her household, the society, or herself. The last scene of the film consolidates this thought. Her voice speaks for itself, now asserting that she thinks of herself as Brati's comrade, not his mother. The thunder cue from the opening scene plays again, this time with lightning, the light shining on her. The thunder seems to acknowledge her power as an individual, not as a mother or wife or even a woman.

The notion of a woman's individuality is put to question in relation to the physical body. The body acting as an agent to represent the individual self diminishes the line between the body and the self. Women have been known to react violently and strangely after physical assault. Some try to cover these situations up, clearly subjugated to the societal view of the body's relation to the individual. But as women, being a marginalised group even among the subalterns of the society, begin to question the relationship between themselves and their bodies, with increasing violence against them. Being violated physically leaves more of a mental mark on the psychology of the woman. Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" gives us a woman, Dopdi, who refuses to be clothed after being gang-raped. Her initial pain in the literal sense is described explicitly by Devi. We see the violence in Dopdi's conscience. This literally gives us a sense of anger, fury, and disgust towards the captors. Human beings clothe themselves out of respect and modesty for each other. When Dopdi is captured, Senanayak, the officer, orders his men to do the needful, and they do what they feel is needed. Does it mean that, Dopdi, a naxalite, should be subjected to physical violence just because she broke the law? They don't respect her and treat her as a human being; it is only the body that they see without any individuality. Dopdi understands this and returns the favour. She doesn't need to cover her dignity, for her dignity doesn't depend on her body; her individuality doesn't depend on her body. She goes through a paradigm shift during her multiple rapes and emerges as a powerful female. Disrobing gave her immense power, and she challenged the officer to counter her. Her refusal to be clothed is met with extreme shock and possible fear by the rapists and readers alike. It gives us a sense to think and rethink the body and the self as we know it. Dopdi doesn't let this inhuman act strip her of her individuality and dignity. The actuality of the horror that is sexual violence is depicted in the horror felt by the officer.

Unlike *Mahabharata*'s Draupadi, Dopdi's body and herself as a united front are the divine entities that save her. Her resistance and refusal to be clothed remain a means by which

she survives as herself. Devi makes us question the notion of femininity, nation, revolution and violation as a whole. In Dopdi, we have a subaltern woman who speaks, speaks loudly- literally and metaphorically, for her "voice is as terrifying, sky-splitting, and sharp as her ululation"- and makes herself heard (385). Like most voices of resistance emerging from Third World post-colonially, Spivak's interest lies in the issue of margins, or what she terms "the silent, silenced centre". She provides a poignant analysis and critique of attempts to speak for the subaltern. In doing so, she first directs her critique against French thinkers like Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, who believed that the oppressed, if given the chance, can speak and know their conditions. Using Marxist analysis, Spivak highlights that the exploited against the oppressor lie in structural dominion, which emerges from the international division of labour. More importantly, she calls for the subaltern to speak for themselves and thus, cease to exist as 'subaltern'.

Women's individuality and equality have been a little bleached in humanity's history. Their positions in history and literature alike have been marginalised. The contemporary era of post-colonialism offers a proper way of voicing and depicting women through appropriate agencies, which affects the society's reflection and moves them as a whole. Subaltern studies provide a critical insight into the position of women as a sexed subaltern in post-colonial India. Remaining silent will not help the subaltern in improving their status. If they stayedquiet for long, they would eventually accept and even grow to feel a sense of security in their difference and ignorance. The ghastliest outcome is when they recognise this difference to be the reason for their status as a subaltern. Spivak affirms that the task of an intellectual is to pave the way for the subaltern groups and let them freely speak for themselves. The subordination of women is always under a patriarchal ideology that stereotypes gender roles. Ultimately, it is this patriarchal ideology that must be confronted.

Works Cited

Devi, Mahasweta. *Breast Stories.*Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2002.

---. *Mother of 1084.* Trans. Samik Bandyopadhyay. Seagull Books, 1974.

Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, International Publishers, 1971.

Schutz, Alfred. *On Phenomenology and Social Relations*. University of Chicago Press, 1970.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *In Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture.* Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988.

---. "The author in Conversation". *Imaginary Maps*. New York: Routledge Books, 1995. ix-xxiii.

Hazaar Chaurasi ki Maa. Dir. Govind Nihalani. Utbhav, 1998.

Guha, Ranajit. "Preface." *Subaltern Studies*, *Vol. IV*. Oxford University Press, 1985.