

RETHINKING SUBALTERNITY OF THE RURAL WOMEN OF SINDH: A HISTORICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

To re-conceptualize the process of construction of subordination in the lives of the women of rural Sindh, this paper analyses two contemporary stories (both fictional and real stories) of the women with reference to the history of Sindh. These stories represent the women as second sex who willingly or unwillingly subordinate to the male dominated society. To reconsider the power-politics working behind the women subordination, this study takes support from Guha and Spivakian subaltern-based theoretical argumentations as a framework. Following textual analysis, this study applies close reading method to analyse the issue of subalternity. Finally, the paper finds gender, age, class, culture, and law as some eminent factors cause subalternity in the lives of the selected rural women of Sindh. This study further argues that the issue of subalternity is constructed/developed due to assimilation, domestic colonialism, and baseless power-structure in rural areas of Sindh.

Keyword: Subaltern studies, Pakistani context, rural Sindh, *The Daughters of Aai*.

INTRODUCTION

Women in rural areas of Sindh have been marginalized since ages (Zaib, 2017). Their marginalization and gender discrimination have been analysed by several scholars, researchers, thinkers, and activists in the light of numerous critical theories particularly

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grounded on the concepts of poverty, hard work (Rais, et. al, 2015) and economic issues etc. This paper reconceptualizes such issues of women' subordination in the light of Subaltern Studies.

Subaltern Studies is a critique of Marxist and Cambridge schools of history (Biwas, 2009). Commencing in 1980s, the approach has become multidisciplinary about which Ludden (2002) states:

...Subaltern Studies became a hot topic in academic circles on several continents; a weapon, magnet, target, lightning rod, hitching post, icon, gold mine, and fortress for scholars ranging across disciplines from history to political science, anthropology, sociology, literary criticism, and cultural studies.

A very few scholars from Pakistan including Azad, (2014), Mashori and Zaib (2015), Zaib (2015), Zaib (2016), Zaib (2017), Zaib, et. al (2017) have applied this subaltern approach on Pakistani subalterns. Despite all these studies, there is still a need for more research on Pakistan-based subalterns (See Boivin, 2016). Therefore, to further propagate this research trend and to widen the scope of this study, this present paper intentionally merges history with fact and fiction. This paper analyses the lives of the fictional women (namely Fatimah, Aai and Mummo portrayed in Riaz's *The Daughters of Aai*, 2007) and real women (namely Kamla, Zainab and Marvi) of rural Sindh. Following Guha and Spivak, this study answers the following question:

1. How does subalternity develop in the lives of some selected fictional and real rural women of Sindh, Pakistan?

The paper first critically analyses subaltern subjectivity of the women in the light of selected subalternists' perspectives and then reconceptualises subalternity in Spivakian way. Through this dual analysis, this study sums up the process of construction or development of subalternity in the lives of the target women. The

following section presents an overview of subalterns, Subaltern Studies along with Guha and Spivakian critical concepts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Subalterns are the inferiors (Dharmaraj, 2014) and dispossessed. They are psychologically constrained, emotionally suppressed, culturally voiceless, socially degraded, economically weak, politically powerless, and so internationally marginalized groups of people (Varghese, 2009; Choudhry, 2011; Zaib, 2017). Having zero or null position in society (Spivak, 1988), these *others* remain subalterns (Kock, 1992; Spivak, 1990; Roy Chowdhury 2013).

It is Antonio Gramsci who introduced the term “subalterns” in *The Prison Notebooks* (1929-1935) in Marxian logic to classify the economical inferiority of Italian labourers working under the leaderships of the National Fascist Party’ elite, Benito Mussolini and his followers (Zaib, 2015). Gramscian subaltern-approach inspired to some South Asian and English historians who introduced “Subaltern Studies” as a new historical school to re-write the history from the “below” (Ludden, 2002). Being dissatisfied with the historiographic trends of “Nationalist, Cambridge, and Marxist schools,” the three central approaches of history, the South Asian historians emerged as the critique (Biswas, 2009, p. 200) of all these schools. According to them (South Asian historians), the historiographers of Nationalist and Cambridge school re-conceptualized British Empire from imperialist views while Marxist produced modern concepts of nation. As amid imperialism and modernity, the voice of downtrodden seemed to disappear, so, the South Asian historians felt a need to justify with downtrodden by writing their insurgencies and struggles in history (Roy Chowdhury 2010).

Inspired by South Asians, some Latin American historians also re-examined subalternity in multicultural societies. However, from 1990s, states Ludden (2002), “the idea of subaltern became a

weapon, a tool, and a method to recover the voices from margins.” It has acquired a global significance because of its praxis in cultural, Latin American, African American, feminist, and post-colonial studies. Moreover, it has applied in multiple disciplines of knowledge namely history, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and literature (Dharmaraj, 2014).

In consensus with this social trend, most of the literary writers have started to celebrate subaltern themes in their works. Arundhati Roy (1997), Mulk Raj Anand (1935, 1936, 1937) and Mahasweta Devi (1988, 1990, 1998 2002, 2003, 2010) speak for Indian subalterns. Similarly, Toni Morrison (1987, 1988, 1992, 1993, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 2003, 2009) from America, Alice Walker from Africa along-with some contemporary writers from Pakistan (Shahraz, 2001, 2003, 2013; Riaz, 2007; Durrani, 1994) are also breaking the silence of downtrodden through their writings (Zaib, 2015; Zaib, 2017).

Literature on subalterns demonstrates that to voice the voiceless people and to reconsider the history from below has become the sole objective of subaltern studies. Keeping up with this approach, this present study attempts to give voice to the marginalized women of rural Sindh by reconsidering the phenomenon of subalternity against oppressive factors through history. The study follows Guha and Spivak’s theoretical concepts which are summarized in the following section.

Concept of Subalternity by Guha and Spivak

Subalternity is defined as an opposite to hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) or domination in general (Guha 1982). It is also considered against power-politics (Spivak, 1988). Herein, the terms “hegemony and power-politics” create an image of dualism, or inequality of power-distribution between the haves and have-nots, upper class and lower class, dominated and subordinate, centre and marginalized people at socio-cultural, political, and economic level. This concept of subalternity can be further understood clearly in the light of the

theories of Guha and Spivak, the chief proponents of Subaltern Studies.

It is Guha (1982) who generally defines subalternity as a construct of demographic differences. In demographic differences, he points out culture, cast, class, and age as the eminent factors (Guha, 1983) causing subalternity in people. The factor of class based subalternity is also evident from Gramscian theory when he compares Italian labourers with authorities. However, in Gramscian description Italians were subalterns, while for Guha Indian peasants are subalterns. In the context of post-colonialism, this concept of class based subalternity is applicable for several colonized contexts where there had been a controversy among colonials and colonized. However, the concept of caste-based subalternity is peculiar to Indian context (Roy Chowdhury 2016). As Hindu society usually divides into Brahmins and Shudras, so their caste difference persuades the lower caste people to remain subaltern (Dharmaraj, 2014). Dalit history proclaims that all power goes to the upper caste lords i.e., Brahmins (Zaib, 2015). Further, in terms of age-based subalternity, Guha (1983) categorizes children as the more suppressed class of subalterns. Fahanlander (2011) supports this concept by stating children as a neglected group in society. The absence of children's voice from history claims children as subaltern. All these theoretical concepts of Guha are supposed to assist this study to understand the subalternity of women of rural Sindh demographically.

Taking Guha's concepts of subalternity, Spivak (1988) further specifies the theme of gendered subalternity. She sets her discourse in postcolonial society and challenges colonialism as it produced negative impacts on colonized. According to her (Spivak) among all subalterns, women are at the most challenging state of marginalization. Further, if the woman is black (or brown), she suffers most. The colour difference proclaims racial subalternity which produces the contradiction of white women and black or

brown women. This concept when amalgamates with gender specification so it makes the colonized women as doubly subalternized (Walia, 2015). Spivak analyses a few historical cases of subaltern women including sati woman portrayed in *Can the Subalterns Speak?* (1988), and a breast-feeding woman (Jashoda) portrayed in *Breast Giver* (1998) by Devi. In dealing with the case of Sati woman, Spivak (1988) highlights the conspiracy of elite against women. In colonial India, sati women were treated as scapegoat for colonial and colonialized masters. For the white masters, sati ritual was a crime against the women, while, for the nationalists it was the religious matter. In the polarity of nationality, imperialism, and religion, neither English men, nor Indian men ever asked to the sati women about their own will. Spivak concludes her essay as that subaltern woman cannot speak. Her voice has been neglected and dispersed in shadows. Because this voice is not heard as the discourse in which it speaks is incommensurable therefore they can only be represented through somebody else in text or in politics. This analysis of sati women further provides us the lens to reconsider the case of subaltern women of Sindh in terms of gender-produced marginalization. This study attempts state of subalternity developed in the lives of the selected women.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study analyses the issue of subalternity of rural women of Sindh portrayed in a fictional and real story. The fictional story entitled *The Daughters of Aai* (Riaz, 2007) is chosen for analysis as it represents real life of rural women of Sindh. Then, in consensus with theme of the fictional story, we collected a real story through life story interview of Kamla, a rural woman of Sindh. This life story interview is used as an instrument because it helps interviewers to collect rich data. Then, following Atkinson (2002), the life story interview is transcribed in the form of a story.

Next, to understand the process of construction of subalternity in

the lives of our participants, the method of text-based close reading is applied to the selected stories. This method assists the readers in discovering and assessing textual meanings (Cuddon, 1999). Following this method, the data is closely analysed in the light of Guha and Spivakian perspective. Now, the findings from the data are discussed in the following section.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

This section divides into two sub-sections. At first, the study presents the themes of subalternity found in the lives of rural women. Herein, we found gendered subalternity as the central theme embodied in the stories which further correlates with the factors of age, caste, and culture based subalternity. Then secondly, following Spivakian methodology, this paper reconceptualizes all the themes of subalternity through history of Sindh. Through this method we found the themes of assimilation, and domestic colonialism as the causes of women's subalternity in rural areas of Sindh. All these findings are analysed below in detail.

Subalternity: Fictional and Real Rural Women of Sindh

This section presents the themes of subalternity embodied in the stories entitled *The Daughters of Aai* (2007) and *The Story of Kamla* (2015). As all the participants (women portrayed in the stories) of this study (namely Aai, Fatimah, Mummo, and Kamla) are from the rural background of Sindh, so due to their nationality, and ethnic identification they fall in the category of brown i.e., the Asian women. In terms of Spivakian (1988) criticism, black or brown woman is always found at the most challenging state of subordination. Her marginalization proclaims her gendered subalternity which she experiences at dual level. She is considered as a doubly colonized woman. Such concepts of gendered subalternity are also found in the lives of the rural women of Sindh. The women portrayed in the selected stories are gendered subalterns who further experience age-bound, class bound, and law bound

subalternity. All these major issues of their subalternity initially develop and strengthen with the cases of their rape and sexual abasement. The women also threatened to kill in the name of Karo-Kari or honour killing. Now, the following table explains the themes with reference to the textual lines.

Themes of Subalternity		Fictional Women	Real Women
Major	Minor		
Gendered Subalternity	a. Age based Subalternity (Child Marriages)	Aai was married in her teenage. Mummo was also married so early.	Kamla was married at the age of 4 or 5 years. Sidori, Kamla's sister in law, was married at the age of 10 months. Zainab, Kamla's elder daughter marries at the age of 6 years.
=	b. Class based Subalternity (Sexual Assault/ Rape of the Women and Landlords)	Fatimah, an unmarried handicapped, was sexually assaulted by some unknown men. The narrator claims that "Fatimah was a beauty, growing up so fast the hand-me-downs from the landlord's house could hardly keep up with..." (p. 33).	Kamla was raped by PirBux, the landlord of Zainab's village. Marvi and Kamla unwillingly worked in the fields of PirBux.
=	c. Law based Subalternity (Honour Killing)	Fatimah was portrayed as a Kari woman whose Karo never appears.	Zainab was killed as a Kari without any Karo.

This above mentioned briefly states the sufferings of the women in their male-dominated society. Their marginalization starts from their home wherein they are considered useless and second sex. The menfolk of their families neglect their (women') household responsibilities. As Aai unquestionably cares her all seven children without any support of her husband (Riaz, 2007). She does all household chores as well as field work (Zaib, et. al., 2017). Their subordination basically starts from their early ages (that can be interpreted as their age-based subalternity) where marriage is considered the most suppressing factor for them. Aai, Mummo, Kamla, Sideri, and Zainab- all these fictional and real women are married at early ages. Kamla starts her story as "when I was a child, I was put into Nikkah". Though, Pakistani law (Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1990) abides such early marriages, yet this illegal act is badly committed in rural Sindh. After marriage, the women become a kind of domestic animal. Kamla (2015) devotes her whole life for her daughters while her husband divorced her and illegally sets himself free from the responsibilities of father. Moreover, as Spivak (1998) mentions that the worth of the women depends upon their fertility and reproductivity. While a childless woman is considered a curse as well as a bad omen for her family. The childless Mummo was badly treated in her socio-cultural construct. After the death of her husband, she was blamed as "the mistress [or lover] of Noor Mohammad Shah" (Riaz, 2007). Though, she was his legal wife but being a childless woman, the society denounced her as she is a useless and nameless object.

Next, class based subalternity also embodied in the stories with their gendered subalternity. Aai and all the women of her village subordinate to their landlords. They do all household chores in the months of sowing and harvesting (Riaz, 2007). Their hard labour is another neglecting work which seems a tool of landlords to make the women physically weak. As compared to these women, the menfolk of their village do simple works as Zaib et al. (2017) states that the men only halal chickens. Further, this case becomes so

complex when the landlord suppresses the women through rape, and sexual assaults. Fatimah, Kamla, and Marvi all become the target of sexual assaults of landlords. Fatimah is portrayed by Riaz (2017) as the dumb girl whose dumbness signify the silence of all these women in such cases of rape and sexual assaults. Further, when Kamla speaks against this crime so her voice disperses in shadows (Varghese, 2009) because Spivak (1990) claims that the authority does not find time to listen subalterns.

Now, the following section reconceptualizes the themes of subalternity from historical perspective. This analysis is done in the light of Spivakian methodology used in the analysis of a sati woman.

Reconceptualization of Subalternity

Karo-Kari, an honour-Killing is also found as an example of gender and law based subalternity of the target rural women of Sindh. Fatimah, a handicapped fictional woman, two times becomes the target of sexual assault (Zaib, et. al 2017). However, to protect her from the law of honour-killing, other women of her village construct sisterhood and rebel against her first pregnancy through the act of its abortion. Further, when their silent revolt disperses in shadows and Fatimah again becomes pregnant so Mummo, a widow of landlord from poor background, comes to adopt her child. She registers the name of Fatimah's son as the son of "Noor Mohammad Shah and Mumtaz Begum (alias Mummo)". Though, the fictional women secure Fatimah from honour-killing but the fear of implementation of this law psychologically degrade all of them and warn them to be silent forever. In contrast, the villagers of the selected real story kill Zainab in the name of honour for despite of being wedded she played with boys in her childhood. Instead of enquiring about Zainab's guilt, her in-laws arrange a Jirga in two to three hours of her marriage and restore their honour by killing Zainab as a Kari without any known Karo.

Contrary to the present fictional and real cases, the historical myths of Shah Latif (1689-1752) namely Umar Marvi, Sassi Punnoh, Leela Chanesar, Noori Jamtamachi, etc. testimonies that the true culture of Sindh was to love and be loved where the women were not merely darlings of their husbands and lovers, but they were also venerable for their feudal lords (Jamal and Shah, 2015). Shaikh (2013) proves this fictional history by claiming that up to 16th century the women of Sindh were considered respectable. There was no violence against them but their degradation in Sindhi society was started from 17th century due to the assimilation of different cultures. Especially with the arrival of Arabian migrants in Baluchistan with their barbarous custom of honour-killing of women. This culture influenced on the social psyche of Sindhi community (Patel and Gadit, 2008; Jamal and Shah, 2015), and the women of Sindh became the victims of honour-based crimes.

While, Jamal and Shah (2015) claim that Sindhi people started the praxis of honour-Killing in influence of Hindu ritual of Sati. Particularly, before the partition of Pakistan, when Sindh was joined with Bombay, Muslim people adopted several customs of Hindu people. Therefore, as Hindus admired Sati and called it an honourable ritual, similarly, Sindhi related the notion of *Izzat* with the body of woman. Now, when a Sindhi woman misuses her body (either intentionally or forcefully) so her relatives admire the killing of that woman to restore their honour. These historical facts clarify that the target women suppression for the restoration of fake honour is nothing but a heinous crime against humanity.

Feudalism, the postcolonial system of Rural Sindh and an example of class-based oppression of *waderas* or landlords upon the target women, reminds the reader about the time of colonialism in Sindh (1843). As colonial masters perceived themselves superior to the nativists of Sindh, in the same way the present feudal kings i.e., the landlords and *waderas* (being imitators of their colonial masters) perceive themselves superior to the lower-class peasants and

labourers of postcolonial Sindh. They maintain their power in rural areas of Sindh through the exploitation of the lower-class people. They mainly destroy the lives of the poor innocent women of their contexts by using them as their maid, and sex workers (Zaib, 2017). Fatimah's story and Kamla's story testimony this trend of rural areas of Sindh. The narrator of *The Daughters of Aai* (2007) envisages that Fatimah becomes the victim of sexual assault by an unknown landlord of her village. The poor and young Mummo becomes the wife of an old landlord, Noor Muhammad Shah. His death, right after a year of his second marriage with Mummo, degrades Mummo's social status and subsequently she becomes a subaltern.

Pir Bux forcefully makes Kamla a sinner as a reward of her boldness to speak in behalf of her innocent daughter Zainab, who never played with boys after her marriage. Kamla and her second daughter Marvi unwillingly work in the fields of Pir Bux. As these landlords destroy young girls, therefore, rural people of Sindh prefer women's marriages at their early ages. Here, the age based subalternity of women amalgamates with the class based and gender based subalternity. Comprehensively, it can be said that this sort of feudalism appears as an example of domestic colonialism.

The selected rural women also seem subalterns in their houses. Their male dominated society compel them to suppress their feelings and emotions and to be voiceless forever. Aai performs the role of a devoted mother. She does not merely provide her children motherly love but also supports them economically. In contrast, Aai's husband seems careless and dependant. Despite of her marginalisation from her family, Aai never blames her husband. In real story, the birth of two daughters and the breakage of her sister-in-law's (Sidori's) marriage compel Kamla's husband to divorce Kamla. Kamla accepts her marginalisation and is still performing a role of devoted mother. The women suffer from baseless power structure at micro level.

CONCLUSION

This paper analyses the selected stories from subaltern studies perspective. Following Guha, and Spivakian perspectives this study clarifies that the rural women of Sindh are subalterns at socio-political and economic level. According to Guha, Gramsci, and Spivak, the target women suffer most due to her gender, age, class, and caste differences. Gender identification at social level proclaims subalternity of the women in all the fields of life. They become an object of play for the authorities.

Then, the reconceptualization of these cases through history states that subalternity mainly constructs in the lives of the women due to assimilation and domestic colonialism along-with their power-based family system. It is assimilation of Arabian, and Balochi culture that effect on the social psyche of Sindhi people. Then, the imperialistic attitude of colonial masters seems to apply at the domestic level. This mimicry appears as a kind of domestic-colonialism where the women are treated as *others*. Further, the web of power-politics behind the phenomenon of patriarchy debilitates women at micro level. From micro to macro level, all the women subordinate to the authorities in several ways. Therefore, this is the highest time to re-think about subalterns and to restore their identities by keeping aside dominant rules.

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