

Situating Marginalized Female Subalterns in William Shakespeare's Selected Plays

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Subalternity as a concept, is basically set upon marginality and it is evident from the 16th century Latin word *subalternus* which derives its origin to *sub* ('next below') and *alternus* ('every other') meaning people of 'inferior rank', languishing in the margin. Subalternity is then associated with 'otherization' of a section of people in a society on the basis of class, race, community, religion. Literally, the position of the Subaltern is driven by 'dynamics of power' (Michel Foucault) and 'hegemonization' (Antonio Gramsci) of the dominant over the dominated. Although Subaltern Consciousness in the West is largely determined by class, race, hegemony, and power dynamics, in India, it is moreover guided by caste consciousness. Partha Chatterjee, a renowned subaltern scholar implies the fact that subaltern consciousness cannot be separated from caste consciousness. In terms of categorization, Subalternity can be indentified with regards to Old Subaltern, New Subaltern, Situational Subaltern, Racial Subaltern, and Gendered Subaltern. Gayatri Spivak in her groundbreaking essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) views that the subaltern has no history and that he/she is essentially voiceless. This substantiates the fact that the Old Subaltern is speechless and is destined to remain as the other pushed to the margins of the society. In this respect, the concept of hegemony and the politics of power can be studied with the exploitation and otherization of women who endure infliction of physical and mental torture under the serfdom of patriarchy and capitalism - an idea developed by French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* (1949) that promotes the discourse on women as subaltern (Gendered Subaltern). The present paper attempts to analyze how the female

characters such as Emilia in *Othello*, Ophelia in *Hamlet*, and Cordelia in *King Lear*, have been reduced to the state of oppression and marginalization in Shakespeare's plays.

Keywords: Subaltern, Hegemony, Patriarchy, Otherization, Power Dynamics

Introduction

In the Postcolonial theory, the word 'subaltern' specifically determines a gregarious cluster which is socially politically and geographically ostracized from the hierarchical power structure of the territorial homeland. The word mostly imparts to the "history told from below". And it is more apparent from the 16th century Latin word *subalternus* which owes its origin in early Latin *sub*('next below') and *alternus* ('every other'). Later on, the word gained momentum in the hands of the Italian Neo-Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci who in his monumental work *Prison Notebooks* registered the term to address the bucolic peasantry of southern Italy who are under hegemonic domination of the bourgeoisie capitalist class. In his article "Notes on Italian History: History of the Subaltern Classes: Methodological Criteria", he describes the subaltern classes saying:

The subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a "State": their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States."(1971:52)

Gramsci identifies with the fact, that the history of the working classes are as intricate as the history of the ruling classes and bears no obvious harmony among themselves, just because they are subjected to the dominion of the hegemonic classes. From Gramsci's perspectives, to keep something under firm control, the permanent triumph lies in a state of emancipation which assures the breakdown of master/slave pattern. This breakdown however, emphasizes the liberation of the subordinated consciousness of non-elite group from the cultural hegemony exercised by the ruling class. Gramsci's idea greatly influenced the historian of Subaltern Studies

Group(SSG) like Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Spivak, Gyan Prakash, Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakraborty who in a multi-volume series of essays *Subaltern Studies*(1997) attempted to recover a history of subaltern agency and resistance from the perspective of the marginalized people. Subaltern Studies thereby reinvented subalternity refashioning the concepts of dominance, subordination, hegemony, and revolt.

David Ludden in his introduction, 'A Brief History of Subalternity' of his anthology *Reading Subaltern Studies*(2002) uncovers a brief history of contextuality at the intersection of Subaltern Studies and determines the refashioning of the subject of subalternity in recent years. The connotation of subalternity in Subaltern Studies focused on the confrontation of unequal cultures under imperialism and the domination of primitive modernity over India's unyielding, indigenous culture. Subalternity is yoked with 'otherization' of a specific group of people in a society on the basis of class, race, community and religion. It possesses critical feature like Subaltern consciousness which puts emphasis on the consciousness of the Subaltern classes, specially peasants etc.

The concept of Marginality is defined only in relation to centrality. Without the center, there is no margin; just as there is no center without the margin. Marginality as such implies to the social-cultural process in which a person or a group, withering in the margin struggles to gain access to resources. It refers to the people who become relegated to the fringe of a society, usually as an effect of discrimination, making them stand out and look different from everybody else. Marginalisation ostracizes groups, individuals or communities from participation in social, political and economic spheres, which is all the more fundamental to amalgamate with the society. It also creeps into the mind of people due to various reasons. For instance:-the Africans were brought up as slaves, marginalised by the Americans on the basis of their colour, while the Indians were discriminated among themselves based on the community they are born into. It is from the margin of colonized subordination and oppression on the race, gender, class or religion that subsequently initiates the postcolonial writer and theorist to claim political and moral authority to contest or oppose the claims of a dominant Eurocentric imperial culture. Marginality can be connected to the term 'oppressed' used by Paulo Freire in his famous book *Pedagogy of*

the Oppressed (1970) in much the same way, like the term ‘subaltern’ used by Antonio Gramsci and ‘proletariat’ by Karl Marx respectively. Marginality and Subalternity is often determined by ‘dynamics of power’ (Michel Foucault) and ‘hegemonization’ (Antonio Gramsci) of the colonizer/dominant over the colonized/dominated. Postcolonial theorists like Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak contested by highlighting the cultural hegemony of the colonial mind. Said in his groundbreaking work *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) brilliantly develops an approach of binary opposition of dismantling the East/West dualism in relation to Eurocentric edifice and by otherizing the ‘orient’ as the other. Postcolonial intellectuals challenge the Eurocentric view by drawing attention towards the marginalized people of the decolonized nations in which the ‘other’ belonging to elite or bourgeoisie class of the society emerges as the neo-colonizers to marginalize or exploit the ‘other’ as subaltern(inferior rank) a term, conceptualised by Antonio Gramsci.

Gayatri Spivak defines the Subalterns as oppressed subjects of inferior rank and voiceless in her influential essay “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*”(1988). She opines that both as object of colonialist historiography and subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant, and female in deep ‘shadow’. Spivak has revisioned the notion of subaltern in “The New Subaltern: A Silent Interview” after receiving criticism for her comment on the Subalterns as essentially voiceless. Critics obviously came across two kinds of subalterns: ‘Old Subaltern’ the one who is weak and frail, and the ‘New Subaltern’ who is reborn with a spirit of resistance. Apart from Old and New Subaltern, there are another types of subaltern who can be categorised as a situational subaltern and racial subaltern, regardless of power and status respectively. The concept of hegemony and dynamics of power can be associated with marginalisation/otherization of women under the serfdom of patriarchy and ritual of torture extorted on women that facilitates the discourse on women as gendered subaltern.

Oppression and Marginalization of Female Characters

In the background of foregoing discussion, Willian Shakespeare’s Play can be discussed with regard to Female subalterns. Scholars like Ania Loomba, Alan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore (*Political Shakespeare*,1985) have made marvellous contribution to Postcolonial Scholarship by

drawing attention to the fact that British Imperialism has manifested the supremacy of the 'civilized races' by strengthening racial hierarchies, which holds the fact that "Shakespeare's play were used to establish colonial authority".(Viswanathan).Shakespeare's England at that particular period was an age doomed in patriarchy. Although Queen Elizabeth served as one of the powerful monarchs of England, yet it was the patriarchy society who set boundaries for women. Shakespeare's female characters throw light on the status and condition of women during Elizabethan Age. Shakespeare showcases the plight and predicament of some of the female characters and also the jeopardized and misogynistic tendencies that were deep seated in 16th century England which all the more crumbles the existence of female race in the male dominated society. Although his writings proves him culpable of racial prejudices, oppression and subjugation; yet he uncovers his delicacy in the fine portrayal of marginalized characters being pushed to the margins of a society, as subalterns in the play.

Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello*(1605) depicts an autocratic and patriarchal system where a biased male power sought to dominate and use the lives of women for own purpose. Emilia is a non-traditional women whose values do not align with those of Elizabethan women. She proves to be a loyal wife of Iago who defy rules and regulation but constantly receives maltreatment, affliction, at the hands of Iago. Even though women are portrayed as tragic victims in 'Othello', Emilia despite of being constantly used as an object, provides a good reason that women are far from tragic victims in the play. She challenges the social convention that women should be passive to their husbands. In opposition to Iago's words:

"Be wise, and get you home" (V.II.221-223)

Emilia opposes the model of a "good" wife who should be silent and marginalized. Even though Emilia reveals how corrupted the male dominated society is when she clear of Desdemona's "reputation", yet she is a victim in the play. Emilia's relationship with Iago loses its charms and affection, Iago deliberately mocks her, manipulates for his own purpose. Her victimisation could be interpreted through her satirical attitude towards men, when she defies society's expectation of women. Emilia criticises the way men behave, she asks,

“But I do think it is their husband’s faults

If wives do fall: say that they slack their duties,

And pour our treasures into foreign laps, (IV.III.82-84)

She claims that women’s needs are just the same as men, although it is acceptable for men to cheat on their wives. This is reflective of men’s treatment of women. Despite being an experienced character, she is a victim of patriarchy society because Emilia is in constant isolation and exclusion. Shakespeare clearly implicates Emilia in Iago’s plot because she commits the act that generates the strongest “evidence” against Desdemona’s-the missing handkerchief. Even though she steals why he want it:

“What he will do with it, Heaven knows, not I

I nothing but to please his fantasy” (III.III.341-343)

Emilia’s failure can be rationalized as her actions merely characterize a woman who although she has not lost her ability to discern right from wrong, finds easy to be guided by her husband’s moral code than her own. In this way, she is trapped by a patriarchal society which dictates that a wife defer to her husband wishes. Women are mere tools of manipulation and seen as property owned by men in Elizabethan Age. Thus, Emilia can be interpreted as a Situational subaltern who is made the victim following the orders of patriarchal society where women are used, misused and reduced to nonentity.

Gayatri Spivak rightly argues that the postcolonial attempts at reclaiming lost voices from historical archives and restoring them to history in an intricate issue, as even when the subaltern is incapable of articulation, her words are interpreted by scholars from within a patriarchal mode of discourse. Ophelia’s sweetest voice is silenced by the dominion of patriarchal society. In the play *Hamlet* (1601) Ophelia becomes maligned, struggling between her father and brother, obeying absolutely their objection against developing any relationship with Hamlet. This is reflective of the mental pressure and dominance which made her pushed to abstain herself from

Hamlet, though she loves him. She rejects his advances-which of course she believes to be genuine sorrow,

“And of ladies, most deject and wretched, that sucked honey of his music vows,

Now see that noble and most sovereign reason....Oh, woe is me” (III.I.158-164)

Ophelia, heartbroken subsequently slips into insanity. She was greatly impacted by Hamlet's feigned madness when he condemned vehemently a wretched woman to Gertrude, “Frailty thy name is woman” (Act I: scene II.146) and through Ophelia, he accuses all the womenfolk of faithlessness, hypocrisy and falsehood. Ophelia is characterised as “incapable of her distress”. Moreover she is caught between restrictive instructions and crushing demands and accusations, unable to free herself for being trapped in a choiceless existence. Ophelia's character can be analysed as Old subaltern precisely because being an innocent girl, she tragically died once her innocence is lost. Moreover she has no control over her life, and hence she is rendered as voiceless, subjected to men's psychological oppression. In recent years, theoretical discourses of representation in Shakespeare Studies as well, have been shaped owing to the views of such theorists like Elaine Showalter, Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva too who rejected the phallogocentric system and reacted against the woman's position as "Other" to man, represented either as a nonspeaking subject in patriarchal discourse or as an object of the "male gaze". Until the impact of feminist criticism on the reading of most canonical plays, mainstream critics of Shakespeare drew attention almost exclusively to the submissiveness and madness of Ophelia. Regarding Ophelia's submissiveness and oppression, William Hazlitt took Ophelia as "a character too exquisitely touching to be dwelt upon" and called her "a flower too soon faded"(Camphar,247). A.C.Bradley in *Shakespearean Tragedy*(1988) sums up in the twentieth century by representing Ophelia as "an element, not of deep tragedy, but of pathetic beauty, which makes the analysis of her character seem almost a desecration"(129). Ophelia's plight was ignored as a tragic story in its own being. She was portrayed as “poor wretch” who is totally "incapable of her own distress" by Gertrude which rightly projects her position as an, subalternized, speechless creature of little consequence of her innocence gone astray. R.S White in his book *Innocent Victims: Poetic injustice in Shakespearean Tragedy* (2000) argued "that

Shakespeare was uniquely concerned with the fate of the innocent victims"(23). He further observes that "In every tragedy by Shakespeare, alongside the tragic protagonist who is proclaimed by himself and others as a suffering centre, stand sometimes silently, the figure of pathos who is a lamb of goodness: Lavina, Ophelia, Desdemona, Cordelia and children"(24). Unlike Emilia, Ophelia too loses control of her life, fails to overcome the adversities enforced by patriarchy. Henceforth she is an "Old Subaltern" who is tantalizingly insufficient because of her immaturity, trapped in choiceless existence, by circumstances and patriarchal norms outside her control. William Shakespeare uncovers his delicacy in the fine portrayal of the silent marginalized character in form of Ophelia in *Hamlet* thus pointing towards the obvious fact that women were not free from the clutches of the male counterpart in 16th century patriarchal society of England. Even Shakespeare's other female characters like Cordelia, Maria, Portia trashes the noble saga of an integrity in which the noble man is superior and the woman is a subaltern. Shakespeare's greatest tragedy *King Lear* (1606) was written under the Elizabethan era, a period tremendously dominated by patriarchal structure. It was a society with numerous restriction for women. Cordelia represents the feminine other in *King Lear* who confronts the patriarchal structure with great understanding and action. Shakespeare's symbolic use of Lear as the universal patriarchal turns the daughter's battle with their father into a battle against the confines of the patriarchal family power structure. *King Lear* emphasizes the practices of destructive control over Cordelia and "take[s] advantage of her goodness and makes her part of his self-centred, escapist fantasy" (Erickson). Cordelia's reaction to Lear's request for parental devotion differs greatly from her sisters, her understanding of patriarchal power goes beyond the ovulation of the masculine self that her sisters engage in. Cordelia thereby, remains true to the underlying principle of feminine self and questions the extent of Lear's power. This stance sets the tragedy into motion because it ruins the stability of Lear's patriarchal power. In her first line in a play-

"What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent" (I.I.62)

She appropriately adheres to the traditional code of feminine principle of devotion and silence. She accepts that her answers must come from the true nature of her being. This denial of

patriarchal favour grants Cordelia “a release from the father’s structure and permission to pass out of it” (Boose, 63). Cordelia’s self-imposed figurative exile from cultural norms marks her as “other”. Although Cordelia refuses the patriarchy through the stance of the feminine other, she could not resist returning to Britain and to her father. She is a New subaltern precisely because after being banished, she never abandons the feminine principle in her life, which she does utilize the authority by gaining through her marriage to France. The feelings of her strong feminine nature causes the breakdown of Lear’s patriarchy and frees Britain from Edmund’s conquest. Even though Cordelia triumphs over Lear’s demands and returns to her own terms to undo the evil actions of her sisters, she still succumbs to the patriarchal world because she indirectly fulfils its conventional desires.

Conclusion

Last but not the least, Shakespeare’s subaltern characters can be also seen in his plays like *The Winter’s Tale*, *Titus Andronicus* and even in his history plays like *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Julius Caesar* etc. The Characters like Cleopatra, Calpurnia, Gertrude, Margaret are mere tools of manipulation or a product of exploitation at the hands of their male counterparts. In the case of each individual from lower class to wives to daughters who have undergone pain of suffering, the trials and tribulation, oppression, rituals of torture inflicted upon them highlights that the basic idea of ‘subalternity’ and ‘marginality’ was all the more evident in 16th Century England. Shakespeare’s play have revisited the female characters which highlights their social status in 16th century England. Although Shakespeare maintain ample space to his female characters, still his plays do not address the role of women in general. The socio-political issues of Elizabethan era were explicitly dramatized through the portrayal of characters like Gertrude, Lady Macbeth who represents passionate ambition for power. Gender anxieties are reflected and female leadership is questioned by Shakespeare. Shakespeare designed the male character powerfully, thus weakening the wit and strength of their females just because he was well aware of the prevalent society and was conscious of the uproar, chaos and turmoil considering the outcome of a particular play where women would be interpreted as the powerful and equal to male counterparts in every aspects. The female subalterns discussed not only defied stifling patriarchy

and defended their voices in asserting their defiance but also received unfathomable sufferings and torture, injustice, subjugation under the supremacy of male patriarchal power structure. Women are always considered to be 'inferior' and 'other' in the male dominated plays of Shakespeare, whether be it comedy, tragedy or history plays.

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