

Exploration of Marginalized Characters in “The Search”: Subaltern Voices

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ABSTRACT: *Shaheen Akhter's The Search is a novel that gives insight to how the 1971 liberation war was perceived by various groups of people, from the people of power to the powerless and the victims of that power. It also explores the theme of marginalization, subalternity and cultural hegemony particularly through its portrayal of women, who were not only victims of war and oppression of the enemy but also by their own people and kins. Through the lens of subaltern theory and by using a qualitative approach, this paper aims to expose how the characters of the novel became subalterns, were marginalized by the enemy power and the very society that they themselves belonged to. While focusing on the possible causes that are responsible for their silence, this paper tries to be the voice of the unrecognized whose voices often go unheard, misheard and ultimately muted. Even if they attempt to express themselves, their words are never truly acknowledged.*

KEYWORDS: War Victims, Subaltern, Oppression, Marginalization, Cultural Hegemony

INTRODUCTION

In the labyrinth alleys of the city where the sun seldom shines its light upon the streets, below which lies a world hidden- a world where the voices of the marginalized echo like whispers in the wind, where hope is a fleeting dream and sacrifices are unrecognised. Amidst the roar of dominant voices, lie the stories of subaltern women who have been pushed to the margins, denied the rights and the opportunities that are taken for granted by others. These women are the subalterns, the oppressed, the forgotten. They are someone’s mother, sister, daughter who have been told that their voices do not matter. This brings to mind “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, an essay written by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 1988 where the author delves into the question of whether individuals of degraded groups, identified as “subalterns”, possesses the ability to advocate themselves before the power dynamics that suppressed their voices through patriarchy, male-egoism and various forms of torments. *The Search* by Shaheen Akhtar (2004) becomes a mirror reflecting the profound truth that war is not just about

politics and strategy but about the human cost, the human toll, the human tragedy. Specifically, what does the liberation war bring to women? Only untold sufferings, loss of close relations, threats to life, fleeting of one's dignity and even aftermath of war they are described as "trash left behind by the army" (Akhtar, 2004, p.250).

Like Misbah Khan said,

"Is there any deeper grief than unheard, unsaid stories?"

(Blanks and Blues)

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in exploring the experiences of marginalised characters in literature. This growing interest has created an urge in literary works that seek to give voice to those who are on the margins of society. Many recent studies have highlighted the significance of subaltern theory by intertwining its concepts in various novels. In this section of the paper, we would like to discuss the noteworthy perspectives of research scholars that are not only significant but also mentionable.

The term 'subaltern', "drawn from Antonio Gramsci's writings, refers to subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race language and culture and was used to signify the centrality of dominant relationships in history" (Prakash, 1994, p.1477). Gramsci not only described cultural hegemony and made people aware of exclusion in a society through norms and power but also coined the term "subaltern" to describe "inferior rank, which refers to those groups in society which are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes" (Manggong, 2019, p.136). In linguistic terms, "subaltern" is a borrowed word from British military that combines two Latin roots- sub meaning "under" and alter meaning "other" (Abrams 307). Women as subaltern struggles to break the shackles of male-oriented societal and cultural norms. Bangladesh's founding prime minister, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman claimed that, during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, approximately 200,000 Bengali women were subjected to rape, assault and murder at the hands of West Pakistan. (Murthy, 2017). But estimates of the 'War Crimes Fact Finding Committee' show that around 468,000 women were abused in 1971(Lamisah). Shaheen Akhtar reveals the agony, sufferings and pain of all these raped women who suffered in the military camps after twenty-years after the war through her novel *The Search*. In the novel, a researcher Mukti, meaning 'liberation' in Bengali, was digging deep into the history of Birangana and wanted to write a novel on wartime rape survivors. She was born on the night of March 25,1971. In the history, that night is known as "Operation Searchlight" as mass population of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) were killed at that time. Similar with Salman Rushdie's novel "Midnight's Children", published in 1981, where Mukti is a child, whose life is personalised with the life of a nation. In *The Search*, Shaheen Akhtar has "recapitulated the search of woman in all considerable diversity" (Sharma, 2023, p.4). Furthermore, Belga Marriya Berk assert that, *The Search* has served its purpose

to be a disturbing take on the pseudo-pride and confidence of independent Bangladesh as it throws light on the ever-ignored case of Biranganas, who have sacrificed their honour, life and everything for the sake of the country's freedom (Berk, 2015, p.1). Moreover, Rizwan Bashir pointed out various symbols, their significance in this novel, and how they shape the narration (Bashir, 2023, p.1). In an interview for The Daily Star, Shaheen Akhtar, while talking about symbolism in her novel *The Search*, said-

Indeed, *The Search* has a lot of metaphors. The use of symbolism in these images reflecting the horrifying memories of the war without depicting explicit scenes of violence. Additionally, the contrast between light and darkness highlighting depth and significance that even surpassing the impact of reality itself. The last Chapter of the novel is metaphoric from beginning to end. (The Daily Star, November 12, 2020). However, we will make an effort to trace the subaltern voices that are metaphorically disabled under cultural hegemony, a topic that has not yet been addressed.

THEORITICAL OVERVIEW

This research is conducted through Analytical methods of research. This study is based on data collection from secondary sources. Secondary data has been collected from published books, various journals, reports published in newspapers, research works and so on. Data analysis process is qualitative in nature. In this paper, we have mainly used subaltern theory by Spivak and metaphorical disability.

Subaltern theory: In her groundbreaking essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak circles the ability of subaltern voices to be heard due to their dependence on dominant practices. She challenges the claim by Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze that disfranchised individuals can speak for themselves without the need for representation. Spivak's analysis of colonialism affirms the contemporary relevance of Marxism through deconstruction. She defines subalterns as individuals who are removed from all lines or social mobility within a dominant hegemonic order and who do not have political say or views. Spivak argues that the structure of colonialism prevents any speaking by subalterns through both patriarchy and colonialism. She uses the story of a woman's suicide during early twentieth-century India as an example of how these two different kinds of powers works as oppressors. Spivak's work connects to that of Paulo Freire, who was also influenced by Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, the dominance of one group over another, often supported by legitimating norms and ideas.

As to talk about subaltern, it is important to talk about the power that makes them subalterns, comes the discussions of oppression, oppressors and oppressed. "The struggle for humanization, for the emancipation of labor, for the overcoming of alienation, for the affirmation of men and women as persons would be meaningless. This struggle is possible only because dehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is not a given destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence

in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed.” (Freier, 2005, p.44) The novel, *The Search*, shows how the voice of the subalterns are ignored and how the oppressed can become the oppressor, and take part in oppressing the subalterns. All subalterns are oppressed but it is not the case the other way around and we find this notion of oppression of the oppressors and even oppression of the oppressed through various texts, like Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1968), where he talks about how the oppressed and the oppressors are affected by the act of oppression, also warns about oppressed becoming oppressors, we are considering- West Pakistan as ‘oppressor’, Razakar as ‘sub oppressor’, General people of East Pakistan as ‘oppressed’ and Rape victims as ‘subaltern’.

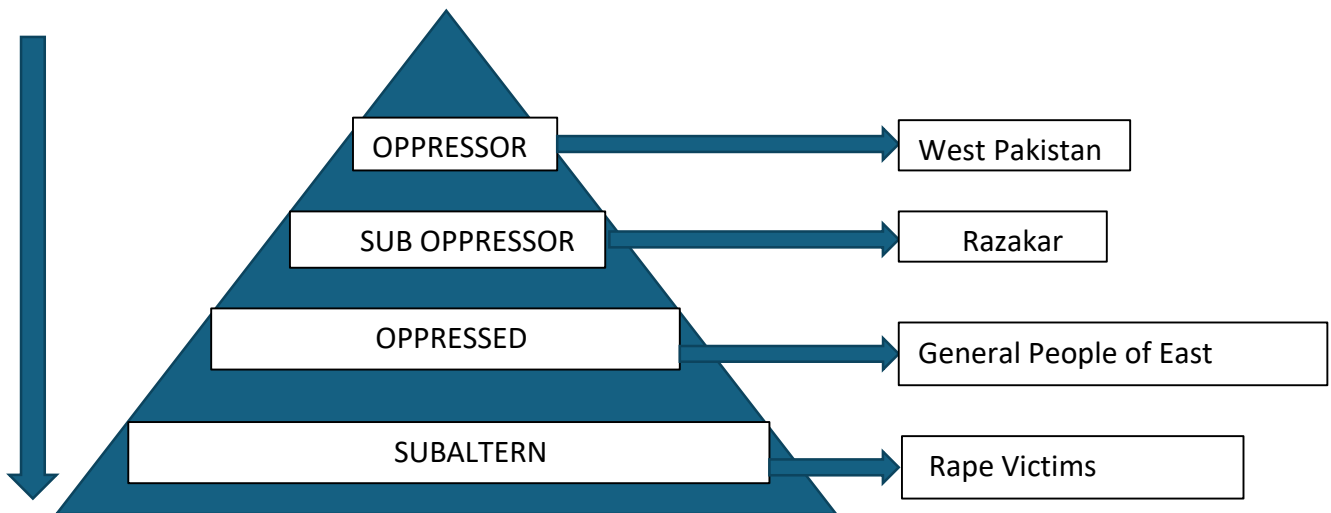


Figure- Sketch of Power

Metaphorical disability: Metaphorical Disability is a literary device that uses disability as metaphor or a symbol for something else such as social, psychological or moral condition. One way to interpret the novel from the perspective of metaphorical disability is to consider how the women who were raped by the Pakistani army, known as Biranganas are treated as disabled or defective by their own society.

Subalternity in *The Search*:

The Search by Shaheen Akhter stands as a powerful example of subalternity exploration. Through vivid subaltern voices, the novel delves into the lives of marginalized characters, offering an intimate portrayal of their silenced struggle and sacrifices. War and conflicts render women as “spoiled objects”. War time rape victims even in the aftermath of war, the voices of raped and silenced women tell a harrowing tale that demands to be heard like Anuradha’s ‘invisible dairy’ where she used to weave her untold stories through her imagination in the darker shadow of her suppressed voice.

In the novel although, the rape victims were considered as warrior of the war in the surface, in pages and inks, in the speech of the beloved leader of the country, called them “mother” and gave the name “Birangana” - means the “war heroine” in Bengali, their voices inside the society was never given importance, was never heard, whether it was the time before war, when no one asked if anything happened between Mariam and Jahsim, or after war when, she like many other rescued women became pregnant and their children were either aborted or given up for adoption, nobody asked if they wanted to return to their family, in their society, if they wanted to abort babies or give the babies away, no one asked that the women who suffered most in the hands of Pakistani Army, wanted the forgive Pakistan for what they did to them or not, they were pardoned, without any repercussions.

Birangana women have faced stigma, trauma and discrimination from society, even from their own families. Many of them struggled to find justice and recognition for their sufferings, which interconnect the words of Spivak. According to Spivak, the subaltern is doubly silenced and erased when they are women and in a deeper shadow than subaltern men because they are affected both by colonial and the patriarchal structure of oppression (Spivak,1988, p.82). In the novel we can see, characters like Mariam, Anuradha, Nasim Banu, Tuki were oppressed both by oppressors and sub-oppressors. Pierre Macherey's formula for interpreting ideology suggests that- "What is important in a work is, what it does not say" (Macherey, 1978, p.87) but rather what it omits or fails to express. By examining these silences, we can gain a deeper understanding of the ideological framework that underlies the work. In Biranganas or ‘rape survivors’ case, their shared experience in the novel highlights the tension and conflicts between East and West Pakistan. These topics were encapsulated through a twenty-eight-year-old researcher named Mukti, who interviewed Biranganas throughout the novel. All these rape victims in the Bengali society were subalterns, as without hearing their opinions decisions were being made for them, just like “Sati Pratha”, a practice that Spivak gave her example from which was stopped by the British people, where brown women were being “saved” from brown men by the white men, without asking if the women in question even wanted to be saved.

Mariam aka Mary, the protagonist of this novel, whose desires were similar to other girls of her age, was not only a victim of West Pakistan but also of patriarchal structure. Her life of subaltern started when West Pakistan dragged her into the whorehouse, where she was captivated and physically and sexually abused. Her treatment in hands of the Pakistani Army and later in Major Ishtiaqs place was both inhuman and degrading. Mariam was brought out and flung at the feet of Major Ishtiaque. Before bringing her the instructed soldier already raped her twice in the car and he was about to perform a third time when the car had entered the courtyard. When Mariam described the car incident to Major, He shouted on Mariam and called her a "Bloody whore".

Her experience of being treated as an object made her a subaltern in a society where women were already suffering under patriarchy, had no voice or say in the society, the tag of rape victim made her lose her voice even further, when she went back into the society.

Women bore heavy burden of unspeakable trauma at the time of liberation war of Bangladesh. Bindubala, daughter of Jogen Bainya explained their situation like this-

“If we asked for water, they would fill green coconut shells with piss and if we wanted to piss, they would fill the green coconut with water and bring it in” (Akhtar, 2004, p.111).

This ongoing inhuman behaviour was increasing day by day. Not only by Pakistani armies but also by Razakars.

The story of Bindubala makes her a subaltern, as she was oppressed, tortured and raped by both Pakistani army and the Razakars who themselves were Bengalis. She, as a subaltern did not have any say, views and even if she resisted her oppressors, her pleas were completely ignored. As a subaltern she was oppressed by two groups of power where one group controlled another. They cease to see Bindubala as a human being and just a mean to satisfy their lust and spoils of war which have only one purpose to serve.

The Chowdhury family’s domestic help in Notungaon, Tuki shared her experience with Mukti by saying that-

“I was called a prostitute even though I wasn’t one. What is the purpose of my life? What did I gain by remaining a virgin all my life?” (Akhtar, 2004, p.313)

Here, Tuki was such a pure character who didn't know the meaning of virgin, but still as she was a victim of the abuse of west Pakistan, she was called a prostitute by the society, treated like the prostitutes by the society when she never sold her body to anyone. This is the future Anuradha saw for herself and the other girl's captive in whorehouse with her. As a victim, no one had a voice of their own and neither the society was ready to listen to them. This marginalization also makes them subalterns.

The Search does not only present the plight of Biranganas but also many other women, who did not escape the cruel fate of being excluded from the society even after not being a Birangana. Such a character is Nasim Banu, a Bihari woman who became a refugee in Tanbazar where she was subjected to a brutal gang rape by Bengalis. In the interview with reporter Mukti she said-

“What did I gain out of this? I was a Bihari; I became a Bengali. The Sheikh’s people are trying to oust even me” (Akhtar, 2004, p.270).

Even after discarding her identity as a Bihari and gaining no advantage while the west Pakistan was in power or through the war, she was subjected to hatred of the Bengali people solely because of her previous identity. No one listened to her voice even though she claimed to be a Bengali, having no connection with Pakistan. Her pleading voice had no power over the people in power at that time, who were blinded by the hatred for Pakistani Army for their inhuman torture and thus hated anything related to them. No one heard her voice, claims and injustice, nor the Bengali people who also suffered similar fate like hers, or the other Bihari people, who her abusers claimed to be her kins, which also makes her a subaltern. Here, the oppressed also became oppressors, a fact that aided in the creation of a subaltern woman.

Cultural Hegemony in *The Search*:

One of the possible reasons for silence of the subalterns in the novel is cultural hegemony, that excluded them physically and metaphorically making it impossible to be heard even if heard, they were still ignored, as their voices to the ordinary became forbidden, unutterable and made them oppressed by both oppressors and the ones who used to be oppressed.

Mariam's real imprisonment began after being freed from the hell called whorehouse. She was imprisoned by shame and disgust. Shame of being touched by the enemy, shame of her family in front of the society. Mariam faced uncountable obstacles and humiliation after being freed, along with difficulties in finding employment. Even when she did find jobs when people found out of her past, they were extremely critical, judgmental and verbally abusive.

This is an example of cultural hegemony in the Bengali society in the post war situation, where Biranganas were rejected, ignored, abused and excluded by the same group of people who were also victims of the destructive war. These victims who were oppressed by West Pakistan, after war came to power and oppressed the Biranganas by ousting them from society and deprived them from normal life. Thus, the oppressed people became oppressors in a different way than their previous oppressors, making the Biranganas ultimate marginalized, powerless, voiceless subalterns, including Mariam. Debashish Dutta who forcefully had to convert his religion to marry Mariam and became her second husband, was named "Abed Ishtiaque" by Mariam. This forceful marriage by society which is also a hegemonic of asserting dominance of abiding by the norms set by the society, killed the friendship among them and things only became worse.

After the war ended both Tuki's father and mother wanted her as dead and saw her only as a 'dishonoured woman'. Her mother mixed poison in water and forced her to drink it. Even when she went back to her village after twenty-six years, people started questioning her-

“Ah! Tuki Begum, when did you come from the brothel?”

(Akhtar, 2004, p.313).

She just wanted to buy a piece of land for her own grave, but nobody wanted to sell her a piece of burial land since-

“Home was not a place for a woman whose body
was used by hundreds of men” (Hasanat, 2017).

Tuki too as other Biranganas were dehumanized during war and was deprived of basic human necessities and respect, even after the war she did not get any less humiliation. Her exclusion from society was so severe, that even her corpse was not allowed a piece of land in her hometown, another example of cultural hegemony at its worst.

Metaphorical Disability in *The Search*:

Metaphorical disability, a term that refers to the condition of being limited or excluded by the dominant ideology in society. It is often used to analyse the experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups or voice which intertwining the characters of women depicted in the novel *The Search*. As the novel portrays how the female characters are disabled by the trauma of war, the stigma of rape, the oppression of patriarchy and the silence of history.

Mariam’s dreams were not only crushed by West Pakistan but also by patriarchal structure. She had to leave her village and moved to the city as a cost of going out to watch a movie at Mohua Cinema Hall with Jashimul Haque. Coming home after three days was like “fall from the paradise” for this young girl. She had to leave her village and her own people, just because someone saw them holding hands while this atrocity never affected Jahsim. The metaphorical disability in this context lies in the societal restrictions for which Mariam had to abandon her village and people. This act highlighting unequal burden placed on Mariam within the patriarchal framework. Momtaj, the first husband of Mariam, slowly took the role of rapist just like the Pakistani army. The relation of Mariam with Momtaj was mostly like marital rape. He used to “bite into Mariam’s wounds of 1971”. Using filthy words, pouring whisky on his wife’s genitals had become a regular occurrence. This brutality goes beyond physical, extending into psychological and emotional trauma. Soon Mariam figured out that a loveless physical relation was a kind of rape even if the man was a husband and to Momtaj, Mariam was a prostitute. Except that- “she was polite, educated, cultured. And she did not work in the park but slept at home” (Akhtar, 2004 p.220). Here, Mariam becomes a victim of patriarchy again, where she married for the

sake of a name, her family assuming marriage to a man could help her hide the wounds that the Pakistani army inflicted, her battle scars that society only saw as the blackest stain any woman could ever have but again this only made her metaphorically disabled.

LIMITATION

The only limitation of this paper is-

The inability to conduct interviews of real Biranganas, the women whose story in this novel tells the tale of.

CONCLUSION

This research provides an outlook that how the identity of women is shaped and manipulated by sociopolitical and cultural factors. Our analysis of subalternity, cultural hegemony and metaphorical disability through female characters in the novel is endowed with a pattern of oppression that takes its course through a control over female body. The central conclusions that this paper drew is- *The Search*, novel by Shaheen Akhtar mirrors that search is never over but rather a continuation of the struggle of women, who are often marginalised and silenced under male gaze society. In a society where they are given the name, "Birangana", became victims for a second time by society and were excluded by the very people who also faced oppression in the war. These voices once silenced by the oppressive forces of society are now given life through Shaheen Akhtar's *The Search*. That is why Spivak concludes that "the subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak, 1988, p.104). Because "they are always spoken for by those in positions of power and are never able to represent themselves. Further, if they do speak, they are not heard" (Riach, 2017, p.12).

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