UNIVERSITY OF CHITRAL JOURNAL OF LINGUISTICS AND LITERATURE
VOL. 6 | ISSUE I | JAN – JUNE | 2022 ISSN (E): 2663-1512, ISSN (P): 2617-3611

Surviving Subjectivities: Negotiating Subaltern Agency in *The God of Small Things* and *Brick Lane*

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Abstract

This paper critically analyses *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy and *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali with Spivak's work as literary practice. This enabled the understanding of both the problems and possibilities that Spivak's work holds while the paper also extends and repositions South Asian women's writing. While interrogating the subaltern agency and subjectivity within the dominant ideological paradigms, the paper engages with the politicised readings of the South Asian novel written by women which is brought into dialogue with attention to literary form. This research also highlights the need for further investigation of literary forms used by postcolonial women writers to develop a deeper understanding of the interconnections between realist and postmodern styles and the representations of female experience. The different conclusions of the chosen novels suggest diversity and complexity not only in methods and strategies of representing women but also in degrees of agency, discrimination, oppression and choice of action among the leading female characters. This results in interpretive diversity and variety in the texts which resist simple conclusions about homogenous subaltern oppression which the readers make. Through characters like Ali's Nazneen, Roy's Ammu and Rahel, the selected authors succeed in creating complex models of women with heterogeneous experiences, where a woman is modern and traditional, marginalised and resistant, silent and resilient. Postcolonial women writers depict female characters that showcase the social problems as well as their solutions.

Keywords: Subaltern, Spivak, South Asian fiction, resistance, and subjectivity

Introduction

This paper focuses on the relationship between death and subalternity through the characters of the postcolonial South Asian novel authored by women writers. The integration of the subaltern populations into the capitalist globalisation of the twenty-first century has significantly altered the concept of subalternity. The resultant emergence of "new subaltern" "who are not outside the circuits of power but are integrated into it in problematic ways" (Nilsen & Roy 11) calls for investigation of the factors that have made the figure of subaltern visible. Spivak's intervention in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" attempts to understand the heterogeneous consciousness of the subaltern that cannot be read along with the dominant structures of visibility like religion, nation, patriarchy, imperialism, colonialism and so on. The polemics of the essay and its static positionality of the subalternity can be narrowly summarised in the lines "On the other side of the international division of labour from socialised capital, inside and outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text, can the subaltern speak?"(37). So, the subaltern sections of the global south, constituted by heterogeneous conditions and factors that remain uninscribed along with the frames of visibility

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such as nation-state, colonialism and globalisation and denied access to the structures of the global north, can be relieved and read across the international division of labour. Furthermore, attention must be given to the question: in this heterogeneous constitution of subaltern consciousness, can theory, History, and Novel claim neutrality?

Postcolonial South Asian women writers like Monica Ali and Arundhati Roy, foreground the faultlines within the postcolonial nation-states that result in social denigration. Forces of colonialism and neo-imperialism cannot be solely held responsible for social disintegration in South Asia. "Small stories" are strategically occluded from the "grand narratives" of secularism, democracy and nationalism that postcolonial nation states of South Asia proudly sell to the world. The dominant discourses marginalise its subjects on the pretext of caste, class, and gender, whom consequently go through Spivakian moments of "fade out". The marginalised section of society only strategically appears in the official narrative when needed, like Rani of Sirmur. This paper explores how Roy and Ali foreground the multiplicity of subaltern voices. By focusing on the various layers of complicity with and resistance to colonialism and patriarchy, the chosen texts negate the notion that the subaltern characters are devoid of any voice and women in postcolonial nations form a homogenous invisible group. The gendered subaltern body marginalised and inscribed by the colonial, national and patriarchal forces becomes a powerful site of resistance within the novels.

Theoretical Framework

The modes of resistance and subjectivity that this paper explores in the Subaltern characters of South Asian fiction have been mobilised through its engagement with Spivak, which emphasises the importance of cultural specificity. However, like many others, this study finds an unresolved and unaddressed contradiction in Spivak's conceptual approach. She criticises White feminism for its one-dimensional approach towards non-western women, which renders them passive and devoid of agency. Yet, in her own work, she forecloses the possibility of subaltern speech due to the obtrusiveness of receptive frameworks. Representation of subaltern subjectivity and its voices takes many forms, yet it gets lost in translation and negates the possibility of being heard. This calls for understanding the gestures of *speaking about, speaking for, and speaking to*. Spivak finds *speaking for* most problematic with its assumption of knowing and understanding all. This response assumes the complications and particularities of female subjectivity. Bhubaneswari Bhaduri attempts to create a narrative of resistance, but the forces to silence the subaltern are interwoven within the cultural specificity of the historical moment. The discursive debate sparked by "Can the Subaltern Speak?" illustrates how the dominant discourse within the society affects what might be spoken and how different forms of subjectivity may be considered. The particular ways in which Spivak's conceptual approach has been engaged within this work is not just for locating the possibilities of agency but also in locating an informed understanding of different

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forms of resistant subjectivities, which is an attempt to mobilise Spivak's silent subaltern model and problematise its associated epistemologies.

Spivak's critical and deconstructive approach interconnects the practice of literary criticism with the practices of radical politics in which dominant structures are questioned. Spivak's deconstructive approach demonstrates the need to replace the regionally situated frameworks of analysis with transnational models that explore differentiated analyses of global relations between power and domination. The literary works studied in this study replicate this move to demonstrate the interconnections of local, national and international structures of power that are gender-specific. The use of Spivak's theory to study the fiction written by South Asian women has a two-fold effect in this study. First, it results in more contextually informed readings of the selected novels that are critically conscious of the style in literary and cultural theories that are attentive to politics of representation. This methodology has also considered the specific social, cultural and political peculiarities within postcolonial South Asian contexts vis-a-vis the contents of the works examined. Second, an engagement with Spivak's work signals the need for transnational feminist politics and theory which is attentive to relations between gender and power that is context-specific and which is also aware of the complicated networks of global power structures.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subaltern theory maps out and encompasses various contexts and conditions of subalternity. The dialogic potential of her theory does not stem merely from its universal applicability to various national and cultural hegemonic paradigms but it arises from its potential to foreground the productive possibilities of interrogation and engagement even if it reveals the impossibilities of doing so. If the theory aims to locate the voice of the subaltern through the "uncoercive rearrangement of desires", it is indeed the pursuit of unattainable possibility (Spivak 230). For Spivak, this rearrangement of desire can be achieved by accepting the subaltern fixed positionality as normal; however, as the example of Bhubaneswari indicates, when the positionality of the subaltern is brought to crisis, then the voice is dependent on the receptivity of interpretive frameworks. Where her relatives fail to read Bhubasnewari's narrative, Spivak's subsequent questioning of the dominant discursive networks "make[s] her" speak by default (Spivak and Morris 230). This paper focuses on the receptivity of the interpretive frameworks, which tends to ignore the resistance and subjectivity of the doubly marginalised characters in the South Asian fiction authored by women by focusing on the female protagonists of *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy and *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali.

Analysis

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Arundhati Roy problematises subaltern boundaries through the character of Velutha, Ammu, Rahel and Estha in her critically acclaimed novel *The God of Small Things*[1]. She deals with issues ingrained in repressive societies that perpetuate occlusions and abuse. Such mechanisms of occlusions can be observed in terms of gender and race in the context of postcolonial and caste-based Indian Society. The novel subtly engages with the politics of subaltern and emphatically denounces it by questioning the inscription of gender and race in the social and cultural semiotics of the postcolonial Indian Society. Through writing and active politics, Roy challenges the repressive social and cultural system that hegemonises individual freedom, forecloses any possibility of social mobility and controls the natural expression of the body and discourse of desire. My argument here focuses on how Roy creates a narrative that highlights the hegemonic ideological discourses work for and through the subjection and subordination of the subaltern and oppressed but fails to inscribe their spirit of resistance. It is through this unbreakable spirit of the disenfranchised characters inhabiting the margins of the society that I assert the subjectivity of the subaltern who even in the face of persecution and execution refuses to be inscribed by authoritative discourses.

Arundhati Roy is the voice of the voiceless and the ostracised. Not only does her fictional writing (consisting of two novels) but also her non-fictional work is driven by the urge to re-assign the social and geographical boundaries that exist to perpetually segregate humans in distinct hierarchical compartments. These compartments are controlled by centuries-old ideological paradigms of society. The social reality of the disenfranchised echelon of society is formed of silences, occlusions and erasures. In her novel, Roy attempts to unmask those forces that control and shape this social reality. She says:

> The theme of much of what I write, fiction as well as nonfiction, is the relationship between power and powerlessness and the endless, circular conflict they're engaged in. Though it might appear otherwise, my writing is not really about nations and histories; it's about power. About the paranoia and ruthlessness of power. About the physics of power (Roy and Zinn).

In the novel, she exposes the networks of power that divide society and perpetuate these divisions. Along with lending voice to the voiceless, she also exposes the invisible ideological paradigms of the society that layout the structural configuration of the society. These predetermined societal maps are primordial and haunt the lives of individuals in unfathomable manners and ways. Roy's politics, in both her fiction and political writings, is essentially the same. She has a dissenting voice that speaks against the forces of capitalist globalisation which economically and politically exploit the disenfranchised section of society in this era of

[1] Hereafter referred to as *TGST*

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neocolonialism. Spivak shares the same perspective of globalisation when she writes, "The general culture of Euro-US capitalism in globalisation and economic restructuring has conspicuously destroyed the possibility of capital being redistributive and socially productive in a broad-based way" (Spivak 30). The critics who believe in the economical and political inequalities exacerbated by globalisation, a postcolonial standpoint offers a critical perspective that questions human relations in a globalised world. In Krishna's view,

> If neoliberal globalisation is the attempt at naturalising and depoliticising the logic of the market, or the logic of the economy, postcolonialism is the effort to politicise and denaturalise that logic and demonstrate the choices and agency inherent in our own lives. (Krishna 2)

Ammu and Velutha, through their inter-caste transgressive relationship, and Rahel and Estha through their alternative mode of subjectivity, challenge the network of values, set of norms, patterns of binaries upon which the normative understanding of nationalism, subjectivity and belonging are rested in an oppressive society. The novel portrays a primordial struggle of the "small things" against the totalitarian forces of "big things" such as nationalism and globalisation. The relationship between the subaltern characters Ammu and Velutha, and Rahel and Estha questions the hierarchical structures of postcolonial nationalism and challenges the occluding patterns of capitalism and globalisation. It further looks into the narrative as it questions the normative values that inscribe and regulate human lives. Thus, with the assumption of postcolonial subjectivity as a form of resistance; it also reads how Roy's novel confronts the ways and structures in which human lives are inscribed by master narratives of the dominant. Roy's novel aligned with Spivak's critique of postcolonialism, and neo-imperialism exposes the practices in which the local, national and international understandings of being and belongings inscribe human lives. The novel highlights how the inscribed and marginalised lives and their associated "small things" resist and confront the "big" forces of nationalism and capitalist globalisation to offer new modes of alterity and different notions of subjectivity.

Velutha, being a Paravan and hence an easy target is falsely accused of many things: the drowning of Sophie Mol, the disappearance of the twins, and the attempted rape of Ammu. The scene in which he is murdered foregrounds the inability of the subaltern to speak. The silence of the subaltern body in torture and pain is contrasted with the Touchable Police who acts as an apparatus of the power structure of the society, to keep it intact after being challenged. The plight of the Untouchables in the novel is shown from every possible angle, which in turn, reflects on the lives of Untouchables in Indian society, as the novel hinges on "historiographic metafiction". Not only is the upper caste Ipe family land and factory owners, but they also own the labour of the Untouchables. Velutha is a skilled craftsman of furniture; his skill is reflected in "Bauhaus dining table with twelve dining chairs in rosewood and a traditional Bavarian chaise longue in lighter

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jack" which he crafted *(TGST* 75). Not only is he skilled in making furniture, but also knows to fix all kinds of electric appliances in the Ayemenem house. Mammachi acknowledges his skills and with her Touchable logic observes that had Velutha not been a Paravan, he would have been an engineer. Yet he does not possess the skill to carve a future with Ammu. How Untouchables are forced to live in a small bleak hut draws a sharp contrast to the colonial-like mansion of the Ipe family. The lives of Untouchables as shown through Velutha and his family is a perpetual cycle of physical, emotional, and mental trauma and abuse. The Untouchables inhabiting the margins of the society are invisible, despite their visible pains and miseries. Velutha's mother dies a slow miserable death, Velutha's father has lost one eye, while his brother Kuttapen is not only socially but also physically impaired, as he silently awaits his death enduring stifling heat, hunger, and bits of thatch and grit falling onto him. The silent, claustrophobic hut "terrorise him with the spectre of his own insignificance... insanity hovered close at hand like an eager waiter at an expensive restaurant" (*TGST* 207). The hut has four corners: "one for cooking in, one for clothes and blankets, and one for dying in" (*TGST* 298). The social and political marginalisation of the subalterns is evident from their geographical marginalisation.

The novel dextrously uncovers the layers of occlusions, binaries, and contradictions that exist between the Touchables and the Untouchables. The novel humanises the subaltern by portraying the pain, misery, and insignificance of the lives of the Untouchables and by expressing the pain of their "mortgaged" bodies (*TGST* 37). When the affair of Velutha of Ammu discloses; the helplessness of Velutha is shown after he is first betrayed by his father and then by the Communist party. Comrade Pillai, the professional omeleteer responds to Velutha's pleas for help by saying "you should know that Party was not constituted to support workers' indiscipline in their private lives" *(TGST* 287).

Ammu despite hailing from the upper caste is the victim of patriarchy. She faces multiple levels of oppression at the hand of all her male relatives: her father, her husband, and her brother. Outside her family, the English boss of her husband wants to sleep with her while the police inspector humiliates her and calls her "Veshya" (*TGST* 5). Despite all these oppressions, she audaciously nurtures her desires and refuses the dictates of "Love Laws". Ironically, even the women fail to comprehend her rebellion against the laws of established order. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan suggests in "*The Scandal of the State*" that Indian women are "so deeply embedded in the structures of family, neighbourhood, and religion, which offer them their primary identity, that these would claim their loyalties in a situation of competing rights" (Rajan 167).

Her transgressive relationship with Velutha is a bold assertion of feminine desire in a society where the expression of such desires outside the frame of marriage and wifehood is gravely problematic. Similarly, Velutha's desire for Ammu is his desire for re-arranging the social geographies in which he can be embraced and accepted as equal by Touchables. His participation

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in the communist rally is reflective of his anger over the social cartography of Indian Society. He like Ammu is dissatisfied with his marginalised existence and wants to break the shackles that tie him down to the untouchable status. Gender and religion are important pretexts based on which the power paradigms regulate social transactions in Indian society. Rao analyses the intersections of caste and gender in "Understanding Sirasgaon", and says that a social order that runs on the bifurcations based on caste, considers marriages critical in maintaining caste divisions. Consequently, women and their desires are kept under check to ensure caste purity (228). Within this backdrop, Ammu and Velutha enter into a forbidden and transgressive relationship. They both subvert the gender and caste restrictions of oppressive patriarchy. The controversial and oft-debated love-making scene between Ammu and Velutha highlights the dominant role of Ammu both in the initiation and the consummation of her relationship with Velutha. Brinda Bose writes by "asserting her own 'biological' desire for a man who inhabits a space beyond the permissible boundaries of 'touchability' it appears that Ammu attempts a subversion of class/caste rules, as well as the male tendency to dominate by being, necessarily, the initiator of sexual act" (64).

The ending of the novel focuses on Ammu and Velutha's first moment of intimacy, highlighting thereby its significance in terms of Ammu's assertion of her subjectivity. The triumph of this moment is, however, undermined by the realisation that readers get early on the that the price of Ammu's erotic engagement with Velutha is "Two Lives. Two children's childhoods. And a history lesson for future offenders" (*TGST* 336). Arundhati Roy has commented, "The novel ... ends with Ammu and Velutha making love and it ends on the word 'tomorrow'. And though you know that what tomorrow brings is terrible, the fact that the book ends there is to say that even though it's terrible it's wonderful that it happened at all" (On Writing) [2].

Ali in *Brick Lane* succeeds to create a productive space that creates possibilities for transformation of the limiting structures. She engages her readers with questions of the possibility of a transformative agency exercised by a gendered subaltern located on the margins of a middle-class subaltern space. Nazneen never fully realises her sense of self in the novel, neither she effectively articulates her voice consciousness; but her character displays a comprehensive agency. Before further dwelling upon the agency and voice consciousness of Nazneen, it is important to understand the author's contextuality which also provides the rationale and justification for her inclusion in the study of Postcolonial South Asian women writers. Though Ali had the privilege of graduating from Oxford University, her location within the lower-middle-class fragment in Bolton gives her a different transnational experience from that of Shamsie and Roy. She received a hybrid legacy from a Bangladeshi father and English mother and spent earlier years of life in

[2] Roy, Arundhati "On Writing." 6 May 2004 <http://website.lineone.netHon.simmons/ roy/tgost4.htm>

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Northern Mill Town witnessing multiple generations and influxes of poor immigrants from South Asia, which gives her a different perspective from Roy.

The subaltern sisters, Nazneen and Hasina, are trapped within the multi-layered intricate matrix of religion, culture, tradition, race, class and caste. I further problematise their situatedness within the lines of subalternity by studying it in relation to the emotional and cultural shock of migration, both outside and within Bangladesh, and the parallels between Britain and Bangladesh. Monica Ali is part of the contemporary Anglophone writers who writes about the questions of multiculturalism which includes the differences between the first and second-generation migrants, cultural differences, dysfunctional families, and issues of identity within multicultural frames. Ali's work also deals with how conservative values and Western influences intersect to create new discursive spaces for unique identities. Ali's text discusses the conflicting familial relationships due to the collusion of traditional patriarchal mindset within modern, progressive values that encourage liberty and nourish individualism.

Nazneen's mundane life in London is haunted by her constant yearning to be back in Gouripur (35). Her day starts with memories and longing for home, which give her a feeling of loss. Ali is focused more on migrants' experiences and feelings from a gender perspective. Chanu and Karim are migrants as well, yet despite their enabling material positionality as men at the centre of the dominant discourses, they appear more fragile in comparison to Nazneen who is doubly marginalised in London. Chanu and Karim are typical products of the historically and culturally specific patriarchies which mobilise their positioning in diasporic space through their negotiation of gender. their characters also serve to offer alternative meanings of consciousness that Nazneen needs to acquire in her eventual transformation and attainment of subjectivity.

The transatlantic journey of Nazneen and the change of setting leave little or no impact on her psychological makeup. She is conditioned by the socio-cultural paradigms in Bangladesh and confronts the same paradigms when she arrives in Britain. She cuts the corn out of her husband's feet, cooks food, looks after her children, and walks a step behind her husband whenever they go out of the home. She could not fulfil her desire to pursue English classes and is denied the right to get employed. The purpose of her existence is to look after her husband and children. When she asks Chanu if she could go to English classes with Razia, his response is "you're going to be a mother … will that not keep you busy enough? And you can't take a baby to college … it's not so simple as that, just to go to college, like that" (62).

This early account of her life illustrates that by the age of thirty-four she has experienced the climax and is moving towards the denouement of her life which holds both potential and possibilities. Ali renders the character of Nazneen that symbolises a journey of Bildungsroman, a journey of passivity towards the promise, as even the act of falling for forbidden love is shown as being predestined for her. Nazneen as compared to her sister is more passive as she believes in her

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mother's logic of "How You Were Left To Your Fate" which shows her complying nature in contrast to her sister Hasina who from an early age "listened to no one" (10-11). Nazneen's journey from her village in Bangladesh to central London is not described in detail and the change in setting appears sudden and rushed. The novel opens in the village setting which moulds the novel into postcolonial contours. Nazneen nostalgically remembers Bangladesh in her new life that is both literally and metaphorically cold and claustrophobic. Letters from Hasina, also keep her connected to Bangladesh. The narrative moves in a linear fashion in line with the realist form of fiction which teases and tests the possibilities and limitations of the postcolonial space of a novel to trace and explore the effects of the gendering of Nazneen by dominant ideological structures to explicate the agency within a cultural context

The narrative voice registers descriptions of Nazneen's new environment. Nazneen is incapable and ill-equipped to negotiate her position and assert her subjectivity in this new transnational home and society. Her desire to learn English reflects her desire to carve possibilities in which she can assert her subjectivity and attain some level of agency. Chanu thwarts such attempts of her as he becomes the agent of those patriarchal structures in Britain that continue to oppress Hasina in Bangladesh and hence clips the wings of Nazneen so that she remains subservient and dependent on Chanu even in her daily life dealings. His statement that "her soon to be role of mother would keep her busy" reflects how the patriarchal structures allow only limited space and predetermine limited roles for women (62). Chanu gives the irrational rationale behind the restrictions imposed on Nazneen's desire for learning. He explains to Nazneen those ignorant people of the community will tell him they saw her walking on the street and consider him a fool. This rationale not only reflects on the diasporic community that is still stuck in the patriarchal register of Bangladesh but also gestures towards Chanu who is a graduate from Dhaka and can quote Chaucer and Hulme but is ignorant and irrational in true sense. Nazneen's silence on one hand not only in this conversation but in many others with Chanu on the surface shows expectant deference that a dutiful wife is supposed to show in patriarchal societies like that of South Asia, but also signals a muted resistance. Chanu reminds her that in Bangladesh she would be unable to go out without her husband, which suggests how dislocated and displaced Chanu is. Hasina's letter discusses the social change regarding purdah. Avtar Brah comments on such social rules that limit women's involvement in public life. Brah argues "how purdah varies enormously from one historical period to another, from one country to another and from one social group to another" (137).

Conclusion

Ali and Roy discuss the representations of the cultural locations of South Asian women within the national and international contexts. They interconnect the issues of dislocation, migration, and alienation with the construction of the identities of women. The novels, therefore,

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become an archive as they give an insight and perspective of the lives of women who have to undergo various kinds of migrations and dislocations both within and outside the country. Spivak also argues about the importance of fiction as alternative site to explore the lives of women as the archives are designed and planed according to vested interests of those in power. Nazneen does not form affiliations with Britain. For Nazneen it fails to provide the warmth and security she experiences in Bangladesh. Hasina and Nazneen both choose to remain single after they attempt to adjust to unfulfilling relationships with men. In Hasina and Ammu's cases, their transgressive acts lead to further invisibility as they are ostracised by their families, friends and communities, whereas the more covert but conscious resistances of Nazneen are empowering and lead to new dialogic possibilities for the subaltern to know and speak herself. These novels by South Asian women writers negotiate subaltern space and delineate an altered form of subjectivity and notion of resistance that do not necessarily conform to Western expectations of resistance. Roy and Ali effectively intervene in the religious and cultural paradigms to disrupt and challenge the patriarchal interpretations that oppress the gendered subaltern. South Asian women writers are also mindful of the generalisation that exists about South Asia and therefore refuses those generalisations. These writers attempt to produce a discourse that offers an alternative mode of agency and resistance that the South Asian women exercise in their specific religious, cultural, political and social contexts. The fiction by postcolonial South Asian women shows how the dominant ideological discourses dictate the lives and choices of women. This hegemony of dominant ideological discourses and the resultant subjectivities is the central question in this paper and is examined through a deconstructive, cultural reading of the texts. Deconstructing readings of the texts and identities result in reading and understanding various strategies of resistance rather than freezing them in passive, monolithic, generic categories of subordination and subjection.

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