

**“SHE CANNOT SPEAK, IT’S BLASPHEMOUS!” FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF
DURRANI’S BLASPHEMY”**

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Abstract

Decolonization is still a far cry from liberation and freedom of masses with the rank and file members of the former colonies still languishing in oppression of one form or the other even after the traumatic era of colonization. Gayatri Spivak’s essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ takes into consideration many oppressive networks left by the colonizers after they finally departed from the colonies. Such apparatuses include the power of local elite which they had acquired from their colonial predecessors. Women in this scenario are doubly oppressed and colonized. On the one hand, they are oppressed at home by tyrannical tools of patriarchy while on the other they are faced with oppression at a higher level in shape of foreign and local elites thus, as per Spivak, losing their agency or voice. The research work aims at analyzing the voicelessness of Subaltern women through the lens of Tehmina Durrani’s masterpiece Blasphemy to expatiate on how the Subaltern women can or cannot speak.

Keywords: Subaltern, Third world, Muslim, Colonization, Feminism, Religion

INTRODUCTION

In the decolonized Indian subcontinent, various movements, authors and theorists have flourished after decolonization. In the recent years, there has been uproar in the English literary works and specifically fiction about the various social issues and especially those

related to the former colonizers. Subaltern studies are generally rooted in Postcolonial scholarship and thus it is a widely explored ground in research. Spivak combines this aspect with the agency of women Subalterns in her seminal work 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1989). The said research work and approach has been widely criticized and debated upon. The present study aims to view Tehmina Durrani's novel *Blasphemy* in the light of Spivak's framework to analyze whether the Subaltern really has no voice or is the voice suppressed by the tools of patriarchy and elitism. So this study aims to shed light on this novel from a different perspective and doing so, explores the various questions raised by Spivak as they generally concern most of the female Subaltern population of the Indian subcontinent and Durrani's characters only present a microcosm of the real scenario.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Colonization is not a simple process as it subjugates the masses at various levels including physical, emotional and psychological levels. After decolonization, when the foreign masters leave they leave a class of local elite behind to rule the oppressed masses. So for the Subaltern masses, only the color and nationality of the colonizers change and otherwise they are again colonized by the local elite. In both cases, women suffer the most as according to Spivak, (1989) they are colonized at more than one level. At home, they are internally colonized by the male members of the society and outside they are under layers of oppression at the hands of foreign and local elite. Therefore, maintaining this Subaltern status, Spivak claims that they lose their voice or agency as they are silenced. Thus according to Spivak, the Subaltern woman cannot speak. *Blasphemy* by Tehmina Durrani revolves around the lives of such Subaltern oppressed women fettered in the shackles of patriarchy and feudalism/elitism. However, we see a spark of resistance or voice in this novel. This study aims to analyze this problem of Subaltern agency through *Blasphemy* to unveil if the Subaltern can speak and what happens if the Subaltern tries to speak.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research finds its foundation in Postcolonial studies and specifically in the area of Subaltern studies. Subaltern studies kicked off as a revisionist historiography of movements in colonial India. The Subaltern Studies Group was formed in 1979–80 under the guidance of historian Ranajit Guha at the University of Sussex, England. The first edition of a volume of

Subaltern Studies was published in 1982 (Amin and Bhadra, 1994). It was a group of heterodox South Asian historians and they criticized the prevalent bourgeois-nationalist” and “colonial” mode of writing history because versions of history distorted the real historical representation of the Subalterns or the common “people” and underrepresented their role in the anti-colonial struggle.

Ranajit Guha brought into limelight the role of Subaltern subjectivity in the history of Indian anti-colonial struggle. Guha challenged the nationalist historiography, which endorsed the idea that nationalist leaders drove the Indian “masses” from their ignorant pre-political past to nationalist present, converting them from subjects of colonial tyrants to respectable citizens of the modern state. On the other hand, it is obvious from the postcolonial Indian state that, rather than being compassionate, Indian elites were extremely oppressive to all forms of peasant or tribe mobilization (Guha, 1983).

The South Asian Subaltern studies project was unique because of its reconceptualization of Subalternity, in a markedly different way from its original Gramscian usage. According to Guha, Subalternity signified a hierarchical relation of super ordination and subordination between the elite and the Subaltern sections in colonial India. He defines the “elites” as dominant indigenous and foreign people with power who controlled the rest of the society. In this division, there were superior national-level elites and relatively less significant regional elites. Moreover, he defined the Subaltern classes as the “demographic difference” between the elites and the rest of the Indian population. Thus the Subaltern classes were given the status of a residual category. In this polarized social categorization, the Subalterns are oppressed and suppressed by the elites in their everyday life. Guha however maintained that amidst all this oppression, the Subalterns do have their outburst of resistance. However, Spivak did not agree fully to the notion. (Guha and Spivak, 1988).

One of the contested issues in this field was that of Subaltern agency. Spivak (1988), in her now well-known paper, problematized the notion of Subaltern agency. She pointed out that it is impossible for the Subalterns to speak for themselves and so the Subaltern cannot speak. It is important to note here that Spivak specifically mentioned this scenario in case of a female Subaltern because she is colonized at more than one levels owing to her gender in the patriarchal society. The death of the Subaltern voice at the end of Gayatri Spivak’s pivotal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” has had a deep effect on scholarship in various fields like

politics and literature. Scholars in postcolonial studies have attempted to revive the Subaltern, and instil a voice in her. Alternatively, they have constructed arguments as a consequence of this essay for example Rosalind Morris' recent book *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea* reinterprets Spivak's essay and underlines the possibilities of recovering the voice of the Subaltern.

Fundamental to Spivak's argument is the predominance of narrative as a means of subsuming Subaltern agency. She argues: "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the "third world woman" caught between tradition and modernization. (Spivak "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 306)

The narrative of Subalternity is always subsumed by the powers of patriarchy, nationalism and imperialism which constantly represent (in terms of politics) and re-present (in terms of artistic renditions) the Subaltern subject. This study is built on this notion put forth by Spivak and analyses the position of doubly colonized Subaltern women in Durrani's *Balsphemy* to see whether they have a voice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Oppression of colonized masses including women is not a novel phenomenon and is exhibited through various pieces of literature in different hues and colors. However, when this phenomenon is taken in the context of post-colonial scholarship and silencing as discussed by theorists like Bhabha (2004) and others, it takes a totally different shape. That is one of the general aspects of viewing oppression through the typical lens of the colonizer and the colonized, homogenizing all the colonized as one monolithic category. On the other hand, with the tilt shift towards Subaltern studies by people like Guha (1983, 1997, 1998), the lens and perspective of viewing this struggle slightly changed. With this, theorists like Chatterjee (1989) and Gayatri Spivak (1988) came up with their own perspectives.

Spivak's work holds a seminal importance here as it is rooted in Marxism, Deconstruction and Helene Cixous's works like *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976). Spivak basically outlines various aspects of Subaltern ity and in the end relates them with womanhood, maintaining the doubly oppressed status of a marginalized Subaltern woman living in the third world with

no education or awareness who is silenced by not only the foreign and local elite but also by the members of her own social group on the basis of her gender, thus she is oppressed at multiple levels and loses her agency or voice. Her widely acclaimed essay has been widely criticized as well and different theorists like Chakrabarty (2002), Rajan (2010) and many others like the ones in Rosalind Morris's compilation came up with their responses to her essay (2010). Whatever revisions and debates were done on her essay, it is still one of the most widely-discussed works when it comes to the discussion of agency in Subaltern women.

Tehmina Durrani is one of the very vocal feminists and advocates of women's voice in Pakistan. She is not only a social activist but also a widely read author. She came up with her first autobiographical novel *My Feudal Lord* (1994) after her abusive marriage to one of the most powerful feudal lords of the country. Thus she spoke up for the rights of oppressed women and gave them a voice through her own narrative. This study is based on her second novel which is also based on a real story called *Blasphemy* (1999). This novel proved to be a ground breaking work as it was written on the much tabooed topics of feudal and Pir system of religion, incest, prostitution and child marriage in the name of religion. Durrani's novel was a brave first step to expose the heinous crimes being committed in the name of religion in various unaware parts of the country.

Pir system exists as an offshoot of the Sufi saints (Subhan 1999) and their teachings but has now become a cancerous sore for the society as Ansari (1992) explains in his *Sufi Saints and State Power: The Pirs of Sind*. The Pirs leave no bound untouched to abuse the powers conferred upon them in the name of religion. Tehmina Durrani took up the job to speak up against this oppression specifically against women by this feudal and Pir system.

The novel was an instant hosteller and became very popular. Along with praise for the selection of such a brave topic, it was heavily critiqued and blamed to malign the name of Islam. Many aspects of this novel have been explored by various people. Iqbal, Arshad and Zaib (2014) discussed the Deterioration of Self, Emotions and Islamic Values in the light of this novel. Yaqoob (2015) discussed the novel in feminist light in her paper 'Consciousness-Raising in South Asian Women's Fiction In English: A Feminist Critique. Similarly, Kesarewani (2012) analysed the novel through a similar lens in his paper 'Patriarchy, Religion and Women: An Analysis of Tehmina Durrani's Blasphemy'. Kumari and Waheed (2016) reviewed the novels through the lens of patriarchal apparatus in their work 'Inner

Voice of the Insurgent Women in Patriarchal Ethnicity.’ Although all major characters of Tehmina Durrani’s *Blasphemy* reflect oppressed conditions of Subalternity, the novel has not been viewed in the light of Subaltern theories particularly through the lens provided by Spivak as the work mainly revolves around voiceless and marginalized women.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Blasphemy revolves around the daily lives of women living together in a village and especially in the harem of a local Pir (clergyman) who also acts like a feudal lord. The novel is set in South of Pakistan where most of the population is uneducated and unaware of basic human rights. The novel is based around a female protagonist Heer who is married off to the Pir Saein as his third wife after the death of his first two wives. The very beginning of the story opens painful chapters of child marriage and marital rape. Heer is just fifteen years old when she is married to the Pir Saein who is almost double her age. Because of the wealth and status he has Heer’s mother happily declares this change of status when Heer is engaged to Pir Saein, saying “What an honour. We are not worthy of so much. Our destiny has taken a turn. We are now among the privileged few” (Durrani, 1999).

According to Spivak, this change of status holds great significance. Heer’s family was previously oppressed because they held the Subaltern position in the society, while the Pir Saein was an ultimate symbol of wealth and power. Thus he belonged to the category of the local elite that oppresses the masses after decolonization. Change of status here signifies a desperate attempt to leap out of the Subaltern position and gain voice on the basis of material wealth, but as Heer is a woman and so is doubly colonized, so we see that even after getting out of her Subaltern position at one level, she is further oppressed inside her home by her monstrous husband.

Heer’s character is an ideal Subaltern character throughout most of the novel. She tries in vain to raise her voice or to make a difference but every time she is clutched back by the shackles of patriarchy. When Heer receives her first beating, she is reminded of her otherwise caring father who used to beat her mother sometimes. Her mother always defended her husband by saying “Employment frustrations, financial worries, social pressures and misunderstandings trigger off his outbursts”. (Durrani, 1999 p.43). Thus

being a man, he could use his power inside home anytime and would be given an excuse on the basis of financial pressures. This shows that in the Subalternity of women, class is not the only thing that is involved. Spivak's concept of doubly-colonized women is very apt here because a Subaltern woman is colonized, on the one hand, by the materialistic powers (colonizers or local elite), and on the other, she is also colonized inside her home no matter what class the tyrannizing man belongs to. Thus, a Subaltern woman is not given a voice and even when she does speak she is so conditioned that she only ends up in replicating the language of patriarchy.

Heer undergoes all sorts of physical, verbal and psychological abuse in her marriage with Pir Saein. She is beaten through all means of torture and is emotionally tortured when she has to see her husband's incestuous eyes find her daughter. Here the young protagonist in Heer becomes a tool of her husband's oppression and keeps providing him little girls to satiate his pedophilic needs. When he has not enough of that, he forces Heer into prostitution and homosexuality to satisfy his own whimsical fetishes. She is silenced by her own thoughts and her daughter Guppi also tells her to do the same when she discusses about the little girl Yathimri sacrificed for Pir Saein's wishes. "Amma when there is no choice, it is better to do nothing. Let it be as it is. However it is." (Durrani 1999). This is an ideal example of how the Subaltern voice is suppressed at all levels and the Subaltern loses her agency. She is not just quieted by the oppressive powers but is also advised the same by the oppressed because they are conditioned to believe that their voice would not be heard.

Heer's traumatizing solitariness is broken by her first partner in the community of women, Kaali or black. Unlike the other maid servants who are loyal to Pir's mother, Amma Sai, Kaali is Heer's confidant, sprightly, always laughing and full of light. So by the little comfort gathered by the combined company of Kaali and Dai, Heer is able to take all the pain around her as she can secretly share it with these women by simple exchange of smiles. Later on, she is able to see the old woman, Toti, who had suffered the wrath of an earlier Pir, and says that she arrives to meet the ghost of her lover long dead. Later, Heer learns that Toti had died fifty years ago but her ghost's company gives vigour to Heer's dying spirits and she sees a spark of little resistance. Here, it is important to notice that this little rebellion or resistance by the Subalterns is brutally killed by the local male elite as Kaali is killed and Toti was

snatched from her lover who was killed brutally as the union was not favoured by the Pir Saein. This again proves Spivak's point that the Subaltern lacks agency. All these tales of these women were suppressed and killed along with their physical deaths. So they suffocated their voice inside themselves and died with it as a punishment of resistance.

The patriarchal machinery works in collaboration with the oppressive apparatus of local elitism. The Pir Saein who assumes the position of a local god has both the powers. He is rich and powerful and is also the male member of the society. Therefore, there is no questioning his power. He does as he wishes and is answerable to no one. The women Subalterns of the household however are oppressed, family members and servants alike. Heer and Yathimri are once given beating together. Here it shows that even if a woman successfully comes out of the social Subaltern class which is one of the reasons for her oppression, she still cannot break free because of her gender. This also proves that women are in a constant Subaltern position regardless of their social status as reflected through the novel. Even Amma Saein, who is Pir Saein's mother, has no authority over her son or the male members of the household. She can only show her authority and power over servants and other women living in the same household. Otherwise, she is helpless before her son and other males. Therefore, no matter what social status a woman assumes in such a society, her voice is suppressed and being a Subaltern she cannot speak.

By the end of the novel, emboldened by the death of her husband, Heer decides to speak up against the tyrannies she has suffered in her life. She decides to leak the pornographic videos in which she was forced by Pir Saein to please other men. She throws off the veil of oppression and challenges the power of the Pir Saein by exposing his videos. However, being a Subaltern woman it is again proved that she indeed has no voice and is thus pushed back to where she belonged as a suppressed, silenced woman. This time, she is oppressed by her own son Rajjaji who assumes the position of the new Pir Saein and although every evidence is present, he abuses his mother and silences her. Heer's mother, who always acted as the sane voice beats her chest and wails, saying: "While your husband lived, we hide our sorrows behind his status and suffered in silence." Thus status was used as a shield to hide from the society and again as a tool to silence the Subaltern voice.

In the end, Heer is liberated after going through all these trials and tribulations of womanhood and the feudal system. She is silently united with her long lost lover Ranjha who takes her away from all the problems that she has faced. Here, it does seem like Durrani has ended the novel at a hopeful note as Heer has finally resisted and broken free. However, this is not the case. She has to pay a high price of her resistance and her resistance almost literally pushes her to death. Moreover, the bargain of her freedom is the exchange of her voice. She has to sacrifice her voice to obtain her treasured freedom. She is pronounced dead and in the closing scenes, she is praying at her own false grave under a veil with Ranjha. This shows that as a woman, she had to kill and bury her voice in a grave to finally procure her freedom and thus she cannot speak.

Heer's character is based on a real life story of a woman who suffered this ordeal. With this real story being now in print, reaching the masses one can challenge Spivak's notion that the Subaltern cannot speak as the novel put the Subaltern voices across. Nevertheless, it's an educated and aware elite and a pronounced feminist in Tehmina Durrani which is narrating a Subaltern woman Heer's ordeal. The author's narration is retelling which means representation. So Spivak's argument that the Subaltern indeed cannot speak but is rather spoken for by members of the local or foreign elites is still very much valid.

CONCLUSION

The novel summarizes experiences of average Subaltern women living in oppression. This study shows how a woman tries to raise her voice by not only changing her social class to be heard but also by using the exploitation of her womanhood to demand justice. However, the fate of the protagonist and other women in the novel clearly shows how the Subalterns are constantly pushed back to their original position especially if they are women. They are either not allowed to raise their voice and if they try to do so, their voice is immediately silenced. The only way to a successful and safe existence of a woman Subaltern is to stay quiet in the face of tyranny and oppression.

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