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Silencing of the Neo-Subaltern Voice: Historiography of the 'Oppressed'

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
History: Accepted 26 Nov 2020 Available Online 31 Dec 2020	<i>In conjunction with the modern ideas of neocolonialism and neo-imperialism, the present world is witnessing the occurrence of a relatively new and persistent state of neo-subalternity under which the men and women of the third-world countries and their diasporic communities are forced to live a life under socio-political duress. The present study concerns with the development of this state of affairs and has sought to locate the theoretical explanation of this phenomenon. It has been found that the neo-subaltern identifier can most aptly be attributed to the women of these effected postcolonial communities at home or scattered around the globe. They are subjected to the conditions of foreign coloniality as well as local patriarchal hierarchy. Most recent examples of this bias are witnessed among the diasporic communities in the western cosmopolitans where the post 9/11 nationalist sensibility, in reaction to an alleged religious terrorism, has given rise to a set of prejudiced policies and compulsive social behaviors that are against these subalterns' rightful interests. Among these diaspora communities, the Muslim women's symbols of modesty are especially portrayed with prejudice and a malevolent preconception. Under neocolonial and patriarchal control, these sunaltern women live as 'slaves of the slaves' in the Marxist sense of the word. The present study has sought to locate these paradigms of power at the subaltern theoretical level.</i>
Keywords: Subalternity, Neo-subaltern, Neocolonialism, Voicing, Resistance, Silencing	
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1. Introduction

The protracted discourse of postcolonial studies in recent years has entertained the basic questions related with the politically alienated segments of populace that do not have a voice in the

hierarchy of power. Academic debates in the area are related with a communicative lapse between those who control and those who, in turn, are controlled. This has given rise to issues like “Can the Subaltern speak?”, originally queried by Spivak (1988); and “Listening to the Subaltern” by Fernando Coronil (1994). To this debate J. Maggio (2007) has put a very pertinent challenge: “Can the Subaltern be Heard?”. All these questions are originally focused on the large masses of the postcolonial third world countries including men and women who have been denied a political voice due to their compromised socio-economic status, lack of education and employment and dysfunctional national institutions.

The focus of the present study is on the marginality of these neo-subalterns i.e., the subaltern men and women in the third world countries and those who have been pushed out of sight in the diaspora communities. As Spivak has asserted, the colonial influences and power structures of the ‘masters’ could not be surpassed even when the colonial rule was over. The anticolonial sentiment experienced by the colonial populations underwent an ambivalent bourgeois transformation of society by constructing their own structures of hierarchy even after attaining independence. They did it through a discriminatory remodeling of the pervasive socio-political inequalities formally exercised by the colonial control.

Gramscian concept of ‘subaltern’ refers not only to the socio-economic condition of the natives in a postcolonial environment where they are reduced to a perennial inferiority but also to their lack of representation that denies to them the very right to talk about themselves. These subalterns are supposed to tell their tales of sorrow to their colonial and patriarchal superiors so that they may retell this suppressed class about their true condition and also suggest whatever cure is suitable for them. Thus those who are in authority become the authors and the subalterns are relegated to be inert pieces of reported texts (Bell, 1990 p.241). The concept implies a group of people who are unrepresented, under-represented or simply marginalized in a given society. Spivak uses the term in the Marxist-historicist sense especially in the Indian context that gives it a particular situational significance. She believes that it signifies the description of a lower rank in the military setup which gives it a sense of mobility under duress. She stresses that it must be given a wider theoretical rigor (Morton, 2003 p.46).

In the wake of neo-imperialism that has continued well into the 21st century, the imperialist legacy has metamorphosized the conception of ‘colonial inferior’ and has added newer dimensions to the discipline of subaltern studies. The idea of neo-subaltern, is conventionally fashioned to be located within the oriental world. But it is not geographically constrained only to the countries of the southern hemisphere. There is evidence that a majority of the diasporic communities especially Muslims in the western world are leading the lives of neo-subalterns. For example, the marginalized Muslim women in the west are subjugated to an experience of life that amounts to physical and emotional torture for their orientalist identity signified through their hijab (veil).

In his article “Listening to the Subaltern”, Fernando Coronil (1994) suggests that the silencing effects of domination or power can only be challenged by recognizing, listening and understanding the suppressed voices. He refers to the situation in Venezuela where the IMF had forced the government to move from economic protectionism to the free-market capitalist economy causing a massive military genocide of the masses protesting against the newly introduced taxes coupled with austerity measures. Coronil refers to the implied complex of neocolonialism in which the subaltern agency and speech are silenced by all means to maintain the status quo of international domination.

Researching in the context of Haiti, Celyse Weller (2012) has unearthed a neocolonial dependence model where false paradigms of development underscore a center-periphery binary that perpetuates the political and economic power of the developed countries. Both of these researchers have reported the same models of neocolonial exploitation at a temporal narrative differential of almost two decades. The same degree of colonial subjectivity and epistemic violence is observable in other aspects of civic life in the western cosmopolitans. This is especially noticeable in the lives of women who are perpetually subjected to double patriarchy that wants them to remain silent and inactive all the time. This politics of silencing the colonial and diasporic female voice is directly proportional to the process of women's double subaltern status set during the prior colonial subjugation. Spivak (1988) desires to learn how to make the 'historically muted subject of the non-elite' to speak (p.271).

Social and political context of India is replete with several levels of marginalization in the name of race, colour, creed, ethnicity, citizenship, gender and even linguistic schisms. In such desperate socio-political scenario, at the symbolic level, Spivak upholds the trepidations of the women in India for being a subject to widow-sacrifice known as *Sati* (self-immolation in the husband's funeral pyre). The local practice of sati was specifically deliberated as an act of barbaric culture by the colonial masters. Was it done to highlight the significance of an innocent human life or to uphold the white man's burden? Spivak asserts that in the context of colonial production, "the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (p.287). She concludes her argument by responding to her own rhetorical question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" by retelling her perspective that "the subaltern cannot speak" (p.308). Erasing one social construct or tradition without offering an alternative promised nothing of value to these subalterns.

The speechlessness of the subalterns is in response to those who do not have the patience or intention to actually stop and listen to them. The pursuance of a progressive materialistic noise hinders all upward communication. Morton (2003) elucidates the wide divergence between articulation and interpretation of the voice of the marginalized women claiming that the conclusion drawn by Spivak focuses on the powerlessness of the subaltern who cannot speak because they do not have political agency to overcome the conditions that perpetuate their subalternity.

Morton believes that the concept of the disempowered subaltern women lies within the domain of historically and politically determined patriarchal systems that regulate their identities and offer them a limited and coerced representation. Racial segregation was also encouraged by the European colonial forerunners to divide and subdivide the societies while they intruded the colonial fabric with an attempt to establish uninhibited trade and taxation. This expansionism targeted various parts of the world for a long-lasting imperialist control for which a working social, educational and administrative setup and value-system was manipulated. They executed this plan by socializing and apparently cleansing the colonies of various forms of barbarity. But in the new social setup, subalternity was allowed to flourish in various disguises. According to Walia (2001), exploitation, annexation and conquest inherent in colonial hegemony rests on 'creating the binary opposition of self/other, white/black, good/evil, superior/inferior, and so on' (p.77). This way, the civilization-project confirmed white supremacy. It helped in establishing racial disparity between the pioneers (whites) and different ranks of the locals (blacks or non-whites).

The local elites in the colonies, attempted to align themselves with the white pioneers,

blurring the question of national identity in a diverse local community. These elites, were exploited by the colonizers in strongarming the local subalterns to conform to the new structures of political power, affirm the foundations of colony and submit to the new economic control. In the preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Sartre (1990) has pointed out the imperial process of manufacturing 'a native elite':

"They picked out promising adolescents; they branded them, as with a red-hot iron, with the principles of western culture; they stuffed their mouth full with high-sounding phrases, grand glutinous words that stuck to the teeth. After a short stay in the mother country, they were sent home, white-washed (p. 7)."

As the imperial domain expanded, the white settlers employed harder restrictions for the locals. In the wake of ensuing confrontation, the politically motivated local elites rebolstered their relationship with the lower classes causing the subalterns to feel a semblance of pride. But it was without any education, empowerment or wealth. While the general public was partitioned on the premise of racial discrimination, their world-view became distinctly compartmentalized, inhabited by two very different existences. According to Fanon (1990), "In the colonies the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich (pp. 30 - 31).

In the colonies, the foreign regimes were imposed and grounded by means of power and mind control. Despite their attempt of appropriations and successful transplantations, the settlers remained foreigners distinct from the original inhabitants. A two-way process of othering continued between the colonial and the subaltern groups. Because of the one-sided power equation, a silent and inert 'subaltern character' was affirmed and was marked by hybridity, and social polyvalency (Barry, 1999 p.198).

In this context, women in the colonies and later in the diaspora remained passive, dominated and isolated. They were subjugated by their coloured masters (men), and by the white masters (colonizers). They were excessively marginalized with a few defined chores and errands pertaining to the maintenance of the household. Liberal education was never aimed at for them and transfer of skills was never made a policy. They were told that their participation in public life was undesirable and therefore prohibited. They were subjects, others, auxiliaries and thus expendables.

2. Suppression of the neo-subaltern voice

In post 9/11 scenario, Muslim women's right to fulfil their religious obligations vis a vis their dress code was undermined. Wearing veils and head-scarves was dubbed as fundamentalism which was in turn equated with terrorism. At the same time, secularism was taken as the panacea for all the doctrinal disparities in the western world. Laws regarding wearing religious symbols were passed in European parliaments especially in France as early as 2004. The principal impact of this law was felt by the Muslim girls with some consequences to other religious symbols including Christian crosses, Jewish yarmulkes and Sikh turbans. It was thought that the display of religious identity in the public place would create discrimination among the multicultural western societies.

The ban on veil for the Muslim ladies was not a new phenomenon. Its roots lie deep in the history of French colonialization of Algeria (1830-1962). For the colonizers, the Muslim tradition of observing veil for the women was perceived as a threat to the colonial fantasy that sought free access

to all semblances of wealth and possession. Nothing could be put under cover. Joan Wallach Scott refers to the French fantasies of conquest, wealth and exploration prefigured as sexual subjugation (Scott, 2007, p.54). The veil hampered the *desire* of the French male colonists and they felt frustrated. The neo-subaltern could not even dress up in accordance with their culture and needs which refers to a consistent denial of their independent and complete identity. Hijab or veil, also called *purdah* is a matter of religious association and cultural-construct in Muslim societies across the globe. The Muslim women are told to observe a 'modest' attire which means hiding their physical dimensions from alien gaze (Siddiqi, 1983, vii-viii).

The connotations about the veil or Islamic attire in the west is scrutinized and taken as something unmistakably associated with a potentially threatening "religious fundamentalism". As far as the creed is concerned, there is no religious compulsion on the women in this regard. Various forms of veil are completely optional and are considered a matter of cultural identity and traditional adornment by Muslim women. The only coercion in this regard has ironically come from the west by the *colonial desire* to lift it by force. This amounts to putting aside all progressive thoughts that necessitate modern cultural inclusiveness.

Equating the act of wearing hijab with a politically charged 'Muslim identity' would naturally trigger bitter remarks and sometimes, acts of violence against these women in a western supremacist society. Sometimes the symbolic implications associated with widely accepted social emblems take the best of ethnic context and backfires. One such example is the case of Lindsay Lohan, the American actress and singer who tried to travel wearing a traditional Islamic scarf. Lindsay believes that she was 'radically profiled' at Heathrow airport and was intimidated by the airport security officials' double-checking and enforced removal of the head-cover before boarding the flight for New York (The Guardian, 2017).

Lohan acquiesced at the response but was 'scared' by imagining this to happen to those who would emotionally suffer when they are told to remove a part of their time-honoured cultural or religious identity. The hijab controversy has been turned into a powerful marker of character for political articulation and is often taken as an indication of Islamic fundamentalism that refuses to adapt to the standard norms of the western societies. It is even termed as a signification of oppression to women.

"Women's appearance is held as a powerful signifier of specifically female virtues such as modesty, chastity and obedience, and their honour acts as a surrogate for the identity of embattled communities of males: men shore up their humiliated sense of identity (and virility) through control of 'how their women look' (Bloul, 1996 p. 235)."

The interpretation of the feminist perspective in terms of locating fundamental concerns in religion, specifically patriarchal religious movement, has encouraged the spiritual leaders and the families of the Muslim origin to confirm the gender roles as honoured by their religion. According to Laborde (2006), the hijab ban 'unashamedly peddled Orientalist clichés about veiling and the backwardness and misogyny of Islam' (p.374).

Whoever assumes socio-political power tends to aim at cultural domination, spinning off the feeble attempts of the neo-subalterns for enfranchisement till it 'silences' them. Iqbal (2004) refers to this phenomenon in his poem *Khizr-e-Raah* (Teacher of the Way) in his book *Baang-e-Daraa* (Call of the Marching Bell) in these words: "As soon as the subaltern (*mehkoom*) starts breaking out of his

or her slumber, the magic wand of the imperialist master sends him back to sleep” (p.362). Later in the poem, Iqbal refers to the historical emancipation of the Israelites from the oppression of the Pharaoh who were able to break free only under the divine guidance that reached them in the form of Moses.

Coincidentally and ironically, the present era is a witness to Israeli colonial settlements in Palestinian lands where all forms of colonial oppression have been employed to crush resistance. Even snubbing the literary voices that carry a note of dissent is carried out through utmost censorship of all artistic and literary productions ranging from plays in local theatre and printed stories to occasional postings on the social media. One such case of neo-subaltern discrimination and ‘silencing’ surfaced from Haifa in October 2015 when the Palestinian poetess Dareen Tatour was imprisoned for several months for posting a poem of dissent on YouTube. After a hectic search of three months, while four military interrogations of Tatour had taken place, her family was able to trace her whereabouts (Jewish Voice for Peace, 2016). After seven months of incarceration, she was released with a compulsive electronic surveillance ring round her ankle that would relay her movement and other data to the Israeli agencies.

This real world ‘silencing’ is reminiscent of the fictional ‘thought police’ in George Orwell’s dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Both in fact and in fiction the neo-subalterns can only resist in their imagination to keep the tradition of their culture alive. Their imagination emanates from their collective memory. But this eroding mechanism denies the subalterns of even the least discursive control over their lives. These marginalized humans are not permitted to represent themselves and are imperiled to become diminutive pictures of their original free characters. They are made to feel powerless against the choices and sentiments of others. At the end of the day, they are talked about and not addressed to; they are not viewed as deserving or qualified enough of being allowed to reason. The neo subalterns have no sense of security in terms of their status as natives. The cost of their limited freedom of expression is unceasing circumspection. These minorities are consistently deprived of their right to voice their concerns and they remain only in the trajectory of their representation in media and literature.

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