

The Role of Authority and Subaltern Identity in the Novel *Black Bird in a White Cage*: Spivak and Guha's Perspective

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Abstract

This study offers an examination of Pakistani English novelist Azhar Noorani's novel *Black Bird in a White Cage*. The concept of subjugation is predominant in all societies by means of power, oppression, and aggression. The word 'power' is present in one form or another. The core target of the researchers is to investigate how, amid authority, silence becomes not only women's identity but also exposes male members of society as subalterns. While employing Spivak's concept of subalterns, it is critically evaluated that subalterns can speak and know how to raise their voice, but they go unheard. Additionally, Spivak's concept of subaltern is further backed up by Ranajit Guha's observation on discernment in terms of class and gender. Following the close reading method, this paper concentrates on the experiences of Jannat and Dildar and other male and female characters as subalterns and their experiences, resistance, and consequences.

Keywords: Subaltern studies, Authority, Gender issue, Exploitation, Women's oppression etc.

Background:

Subaltern Studies Group emerged as a voice for 'subjugated, suppressed, and voiceless people in the 1980s. The prominent scholars among them were Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak (Louai, 2011, p. 5). Spivak's essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' is a rhetorical question to highlight that it becomes impossible to recover the voice of a subaltern oppressed subject as society is divided by differences of gender, class, and hierarchies. Her essay jumps from sati practice in India to a universal picture where women

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are dominated by patriarchal society. Guha introduced the agenda of the Subaltern Group to raise voice against the difference among people in terms of class, caste, and age (Chanchla Kumari, 2019, p. 1025). This current study applies the critical approach of Spivak and Guha to the Pakistani novel to examine the notion of subalterns, their experiences, and resistance among characters.

Introduction to the Novelist

Prominent figures like Bapsi Sidhwa, Hanif Qureshi, Mohsin Hamid, Nadeem Aslam, Tariq Ali, Kamila Shamsi, Bina Shah etc., have produced their great novels as Pakistani English novelists and exposed different facets of life (Naz, 2018). Among these great writers, our new Pakistani talent, Azhar Noonari, has presented his masterpiece, *Black Bird in a White Cage*. Born in a small village near Rohri, he possesses a comprehensive perspective after his voracious reading. He received his early education from village primary school, got matriculation from G.H.S. Kandha, and got an intermediate from Boys Degree College in Sukkur. He got his B.A. (honours) and M.A. in English literature from the University of Sindh Jamshoro. Currently, he is working as an assistant professor in English at Islamia Arts and Commerce College Sukkur.

Story of the Novel

Noonari's (2016) novel *Black Bird in a White Cage* is a social manuscript that exhibits all the undesirable and desirable individualities in a suitable way. It is the story of three friends, Dildar, Shahryar, and Raza, from Sukkur, Hyderabad, and Larkana, respectively. Their university life is not much talked about as compared to their practical life. They epitomise the three different facets of the society. Dildar has a self-effacing personality. Shahryar deals with life cleverly. Raza is the combination of rigidity and modernity. Abida, Dildar's sister; Jannat, as Raza's sister; Aiman, Shahryar's girlfriend like Alisha; and Neelam, is Shahryar's wife, are the female characters in the novel. In the course of the novel, it is revealed that Dildar dislikes corruption and therefore, his own ideas are challenged in society. In the police department, when he tries to help a so-called criminal prostitute, Roma, on the one hand, and claims the difference between commission and bribe, on the other hand, he loses his job. Among his two friends Shahryar hunts best for himself and cheats others. He does not hesitate to treat other girls as mere toys, and Neelam (his wife) is his real honor. Raza does not hesitate to kill his sister Jannat when she expresses her love for Irfan as a future husband, though he shows his love for a girl named Salma, who is his officer's daughter.

From the title to the narration and events of the story, the rampant nature of colonialism and post-colonialism can be spotted (Naz, 2018). This paper aims to explore the post-colonial notion of subaltern in *Black Bird in a White Cage* with reference to Spivak's theoretical insight. How women in the novels are dominated and treated by their own men in *Black Bird in a White Cage*. How men like Shahryar and other characters exercise their power to represent the rampant nature of colonialism. The researchers investigate how Noonari represents women like Jannat and other characters as subalterns. How does their subaltern identity make their own society a post-colonial society?

Literature Review

I-Post- Colonial Theories

Frantz Fanon, in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) rejects the notion of subjugation. He says that natives should violently resist colonial suppression. The nature of colonialism is damaging to the mental health of native people (p.250). *Orientalism* (2001) by Edward Said is the cultural representation generated with the binary relation (us and them) as social paradigms. Particularly, 'the West' formed the cultural concept of 'the East', and in this way, the Europeans started to suppress the peoples of the Middle East, the Indian sub-continent and Asia in general, from representing themselves as distinct people. The Oriental world is called retrograde, desolate, illogical, while Western Europe is measured as higher, rational, and broadminded (p. 25-28). In launching the post-colonial explanation of the term Subaltern, the philosopher and scholar Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak produced her great writing, "Can Subaltern Speak?". This is discussed in detail in this study because it is theoretical framework of the current research article.

II- Theoretical Framework

South Asian and English historians organised a group known as the Subaltern *Studies Collective (SSC)* and *Subaltern Studies Group (SSG)* in India. Spivak is one of contributors, who aimed to rectify the top-down, elite-centric South Asian history writing. The main idea of Subaltern is to recuperate the voices from the margins. This concept is associated with the works of three different thinkers, like Antonio Gramsci, Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravarty. Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci used this term in his *Prison Notebook* in the Marxian sense. To him, it is the depiction of those people who suffer under hegemonic politics. The basic rights of individuals are denied by the elite class. Ranajit Guha formed a "Subaltern Studies

Group”, and he extended it to the context of Indian peasants in terms of their class, gender, and caste etc.

- **Subaltern- A Space of Difference**

Subaltern originated from the Latin language ‘subalternus’, which refers to inferior people or those lower in rank. Those groups that are subjected to the hegemony of the ruling classes are subaltern. In history, this word has undergone many changes. Analytically, it means peasants and workers, while structurally, it represents marginalised groups of the community (Bill Ashcroft, 2007, p. 198). Spivak, in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” highlights that subaltern women are more exposed to coercion than men. Spivak explained that

Subaltern is not just a word for the oppressed. Everything that has limited access to cultural imperialism is subaltern- a space of difference. They must observe what the mechanics of discrimination are.... She quotes an incident, where a subaltern tries hard to speak, to the extent of making damned suicide into a message. What happened? One woman in her own family condemned her... so subaltern cannot speak. If they speak, they go unheard. (Kock, 1992, pp. 45-46).

Spivak’s concept of subaltern is discussed as a space of difference. Riach (2017) expounds that if people are not allowed to speak for themselves, make their own decisions of their lives, instead voice is raised for them by others, decisions are made for them by authority, this makes them subaltern (Riach, 2017).

- **Double Oppression**

Spivak clarifies that subaltern women come across two-fold domination. The term for this double domination is used by her as ‘double oppression’, which is further elucidated by Pandey in his study, *The Subaltern as a Subaltern Citizen* (Pandey, 2006). He contends that it refers to ‘patriarchal’ subjugation on the one hand and ‘political’ dominance on the other hand (p.4738). Spivak (1988) contemplates that subalterns undergo extreme suppression, due to which they are unable to speak. She elucidates further that subaltern voices cannot be heard by elites. Female characters in the novel face double oppression on the basis of their gender and class in a male-dominated society.

- **Subalterns Go Unheard**

Subalternity is a position without identity. In other words, the subaltern is defined by its difference. Spivak explains this difference in terms of class,

gender, and race in her essay. Spivak concludes her essay by saying that Subaltern cannot speak because other people who are in power speak for them and in this way, they are unable to represent themselves. When they speak, nobody pays attention to their statements.

III- Subaltern Studies

Various studies have been conducted by previous researchers about subalterns. The researchers collected articles from Indian writer Anand to Afro-American Toni Morrison and from Bengali writer Mahasweta to Pakistani writer Sidhwa's portrayal of characters on this idea of subalternity. All these studies are relevant to the current research. Every writer has highlighted subalternity in terms of hegemony, class difference, gender-based oppression, and, above all, the double oppression of women in the home, society, and the world. The researchers found very few studies that support the statement that the subaltern voice can be heard, but in general, it is not so. After colonialism, different writers from South Asia and North Africa presented this concept of subalterns as a tribute to subalterns. Among Indian writers, the most prominent is Anand, whose writings like *Untouchable*, *Two Leaves*, *A Bud*, and *Coolie* deal with not only *caste-based discrimination*, but also *class-based discrimination*. He depicts the resistance of the subaltern and explains that male and female characters of these stories as subalterns have their voices, but they are not paid attention to. The study concludes that the rights of male and female characters are ignored. Due to racial superiority, Americans overpower African Americans due to their differences in colour. The researchers agree with this study as it is relevant to the current study in the presentation of class-based and caste-based discrimination. Another study by Mahasweta Devi in *Rudali*, *Breast Giver*, *Drupdi*, and *Dhowli* portrays the voice of subalterns. Her main aim was to uplift the marginalised people in her society. The women in the story resisted following the norms of society as imposed by them but unfortunately, they are not heard. Their voices are rejected by the authorities. Sometimes women are oppressed by the authority in their own home, but other times they are overpowered politically (Louai, 2011). Spivak's concept of oppression in society is fully shown in this research, which is also assisting the present study. Toni Morrison is a great Afro-American author. She talks against racial perspicacity in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. She highlights the issue of colour-based subalternity on the one hand and the double oppression of women on the other (Velvizhi, 2019). This double oppression is also shown in the existing study.

Besides Indian and African-American writers, few studies are conducted by Pakistani writers about subalterns. Bapsi Sidhwa, in her novel *American Brat*, focuses on the problems of the subaltern in terms of their cultural dislocation, homeliness, and philosophy. Ahmed (2013) explains the representation of female characters with reference to Feroza who fights for her rights and identity. Similarly, Nazar (2016) highlights Alice Bhatti as a subaltern of post-colonial society. Alice Bhatti is oppressed at the hands of patriarchy, but she is also presented as a tortured woman. Alice Bhatti has read many stories related to women who are hacked and burned when they have ever raised their voice. Nazar (2016) concludes that women are a marginalised group, and Hanif has further silenced the female character of the novel. A lower-class Christian woman who is determined to exceed her subaltern status but she dies a brutal death. Muhammad Hanif has further demoted Alice Bhatti in his novel by silencing her voice through death. Saraswati (2019) agrees with the statement of Nazar that female characters are represented as oppressed on the basis of gender. Previous researcher Ali (2019) reviewed *Black Bird in a White Cage* and commented on the book as a representation of post-colonialism. However, the previous researcher has not substantiated the claim that this paper aims to investigate the role of authority and subaltern identity of male and female characters of *Black Bird in a White Cage* in light of Spivak's (1988) concept of subaltern.

Research methodology

This research paper follows textual analysis and the close reading method. The primary sources of Noonari's novel *Black Bird in a White Cage*, while the secondary sources include research articles and online resources used by the researchers of this paper. The researchers follow textual analysis while doing close reading. According to McKee Alan (2001), "textual analysis is a way of assembling evidence in a theoretical study" (p.140). This study, through the lens of Spivak's concept of subaltern, investigate the role of authority and subaltern identity after reading the mentioned text. In light of this methodology, the readers can comprehend the meanings of the text while concentrating on the message of the author, characters, narration, and symbols. In the current study, the text is evaluated within the theoretical framework of Spivak and Guha's notion of the subaltern. The study is anticipated to convey that rampant colonialism is still present in post-colonial society and that power is limited to the dominant. Women as subalterns suffer on the basis of gender and class, whereas men's suffering is based on class only. Hence, women are doubly oppressed.

The Role of Authority & Subaltern Identity: Analysis and Discussion

Gender-Based Subalternity

Spivak (1988) talks about subalternity and space of a difference. This is apparent in the treatment of women in *Black Bird in a White Cage*. Women are treated as inferior on the basis of their gender. Noonari (2016) depicted his novel through different characters like Abida and Jannat. In chapter 1 of the novel, Abida narrates: *"I have grown up; I am eight years old. I can't go there..."* (p.10). His brother squealed to his sister *"You are a girl, you don't come. Girls should not go far..."* (P.9). This is a perfect example of a subaltern woman. Women are weak, and there is discrimination between a girl and a boy. Abida could not get an education because she is a girl. Her only job is defined as housework, helping family members, and being subservient to her husband. She can only win heaven if she is always ready to make her family happy irrespective of her own mental torture. She is voiceless. On the one hand, she is a matter of honour for her own immediate family, and on the other hand, she is culturally threatened to preserve her relationship with her in-laws. Once, Abida visits her brother Dildar. *"Ada, can you do something for the job of your brother-in-law? He has his five-year education certificate, and he is eligible for the police constable."* (p.13). She tried to hide the marital fear, but she could not. Brother realised the marital pressure on her face. He understood the word 'divorce' as a judgment day in the life of a woman. Abida's voice is snatched by the harsh attitude of her own family. The threat of being shoved out of her own house where she sweeps and cleans without any queasy retch. His husband acts as an old king. This is a reference to the husband's dominance.

Jannat is one of the prominent characters of the novel. She scuds high above the clouds whenever she hears about her marriage. The most beautiful word in her dictionary was 'marriage'. Unlike other girls in the village, she thinks about her life partner in a grand way; after all, she is the daughter of a peon. She *thinks "husband is someone who would be of one's standard, and it is better to be unmarried than to live a life of a [sic] mismatch* (p. 61). She is the only girl who gets matriculation, though there is a difference between the education of Raza and Jannat. Raza gets a master's degree from the university, while Jannat is not allowed to get a college education. Raza falls in love with the daughter of his boss, but Jannat is killed in the name of honor. She loves Irfan, but her parents want her to marry her cousin. She sacrifices not only her love but also her life. She implores her brother to believe her.

'Listen Ada'

'I shall leave'

'I will go away'

'I shall never return.... Sell me somewhere but do not kill me... (p.29).

Jannat faces the bestiality of a brother and the cruelty of her cousin. "Noose was tightened around her neck and one end was tied against the fan" (Noonari, 2016, p.30). She remains subaltern because her controllers do not want them to be heard. Women suffered due to hegemonic politics. This attitude of family members towards women in their family makes them subaltern. They are represented by their family members.

Aiman and Alisha in the novel are doubly oppressed. Firstly, being women, they face class- based subalternity, and secondly, they suffer gendered subalternity. Aiman could not tell her mother the secret of her being upset, even after a continuous inquiry. She thought of a respectable life with Shahryar, but he spoiled the sanctity of their relationship. Neelam is the wife of Shahryar. On the one hand, she suffers at the hands of class-based subalternity, and on the other hand, she faces gendered subalternity. She has cherished all her home chores, and served her husband day and night but she has no matrimonial will. All the time, she thinks about her class differences on account of wealth and education. The standard of Shahryar was better than hers in terms of education and class. Ahmed's (2013) argument is in line with this study which considers that women are treated as inferior in Pakistani society.

Class-Based Subalternity

Spivak compares subalternity with her understanding of the strict definition of class. She argues that class is not a cultural origin; rather, it is a collective feeling of economic connection and solidarity that makes up the basis for action (Spivak, 1988). Ahmad et al.(2022) have traced ethnicity and power relations in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* where ethnicity is the reason of subalternity whereas the class-based subalternity is presented in the novel *Black Bird in a White Cage* through the male character Dildar. He suffers in society on the basis of his class. He is poor, so he is not trusted by his girlfriend, Aiman. On his visit to the brothel, Aiman gets angry and doubts Dildar's virginity (p.103). Dildar is from a meek background, so he is criticised and rejected for the action that he never took. On the other hand, Shahryar, who is of high status is involved in such adulteration and is never condemned by Aiman. Here, Dildar is lower in rank when he is compared to Shahryar's status. Aiman knows this well, and she is interested in the class of Shahryar. As a matter of fact, in

the course of the novel, she loses her own virginity for the sake of money. For Shahryar, "Neelam is not only his wife but also his honor" [sic] (p30). As a matter of fact, other women were playing objects for him. Aiman convinced Shahryar to marry her, and each time he excused himself. Here, Aiman is the subaltern who lacks access to the hegemonic power of Shahryar. Shahryar's fake love of Alisha in the beginning of the story and Aiman in the middle make these women subalterns. "He (Shahryar) was authoritative, a dictator and she was a poor, hungry, unemployed person. She did not utter a single word... (p.135). In short, Dildar is a subaltern on the basis of their class-based subalternity, while Shaharyar has power because he is from a well-off family.

Spivak, as inspired by social theorist Michel Foucault, estimates in her essay that subalterns have limited access to cultural imperialism, as already discussed in the theoretical framework. Cultural imperialism may take many shapes, like attitude, military action, and policies that underpin control (Maclean, 1996). We can evaluate this attitude of Uncle Sham, who puts himself on top of all inherited wisdom. Villagers think that he is the wisest. The impact of colonialism is seen in his language when he asks the question of his nephew Dildar. 'How is the relation [sic] with big sahib?... son keep it friendly and try to become as close to him as possible' (p. 17). In his view, Dildar can be used as a law- protection. He will be used as a power to threaten or kill the men of the opposite community. Dildar is transferred to the E- section, where he notices two different things. Firstly, Big Sahib had a relationship with a lady approximately at the age of forty. Small Sahib revealed the truth that sahib had not formally married her. Secondly, Big Sahib was angry with someone on the phone because he had not been paid monthly by the brothel that came under his jurisdiction. The researchers evaluate whether the policies of the police department work under the umbrella of power. A woman who runs a brothel in a specific area and offers only four thousand to Big Sahib makes him angry. He orders his police to raid the house when an old lady is captured. "Big Sahib becomes an oppressor, and the old lady oppressor" (p.71). Big Sahib exercises his power and controls the situation. Here the point is that sex is not a sin if sahib gets particular wages from brothels, but without paying monthly revenue, it is a sin. The title of the novel '*Black Bird in a White Cage*' presents the idea of oppression, imprisonment, and force. The word 'black' is attached to evilness and wickedness. 'White' is a reference to bright things and beauty. Interestingly, it can be observed that white men have always given this impression of savageness and darkness to the Eastern people, making them consider inferior. Edward Said's Orientalism

expresses this idea of difference in detail, and Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe has responded to Joseph Conrad's 'The *Heart of Darkness*' in '*Things Fall Apart*'.

The Price of Slightly Dark-Skinned Girl

Black Lives Matter was the slogan raised in the backdrop of George Floyd's Murder in America in 2021 and Jamil, M. B et al had called for a consideration of Americanism through a critical analysis of McCarthy's *The Road* (Jamil, M. B et al., 2021) so that the White Americans stop considering blacks as others. Noonari's *Black Bird in a White Cage* (2016) observes this concept of 'others' as 'subalterns' in characters, themes, situations, and events. Dildar and his friends Shahryar visit a brothel. An old woman, as the head of the brothel orders to "*call the girls*". Shahryar was aware of the cost of each girl but Dildar had never visited this location before. He asked the price while pointing to the white girl. Madam told '*five hundred*'. He asked for a slightly dark-skinned girl. Madam uttered, '*three hundred*' (p.50). This difference is not only the difference between '*white*' and '*black*'. It is a manifestation of racism. Everyone's thoughts are dictated by it. Pleasure women are suppressed in general, but black women are disregarded as subalterns. Dildar found nothing missing in that black girl and questioned, '*In what sense is she given a lesser amount?*' (Noonari, 2016).

After the raid on the brothel, the story of Shahan is painful. When she got married, her husband gave her a new name, Shabnam. He started his business in his house and ruined the life of his wife. She was an ATM machine for her husband (p.155). Here, subaltern woman Shahan tried to speak for her rights. She wanted to visit the doctor, but she was not allowed to say anything. '*I shall arrange education for her; she will be a doctor...*' (p.157). It was the dream of a mother for her younger daughter. One day, the principal of this little girl was informed that she was the daughter of a prostitute. She was called to the principal's office. The principal inquired of her mother's name and she learned to babble, '*Shahpara*'. The principal handed over a two-year education certificate in her hand. She told her mother that she would not go to school as her principal said that she had completed her education (p.157). This incident anticipates a marginalised group of subalterns. The little girl was deprived of education as she was lower in rank. The feelings of this little girl are similar to young girl Pecola in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* where young black girl Pecola suffers from parental hunger and is pushed to alienation (Ahmad et al. 2020)

Subaltern Go Unheard

Subalterns can speak for themselves if they are allowed to speak, but unfortunately, when they speak, they go unheard, as it is already discussed in the theoretical framework as the last point. Exactly the same situation is presented in the novel, in which Dildar speaks against bribery but is silenced by Sahib's power. His voice against the false system goes unheard. Chapter fourteen begins with the assertion that 'all men are not equal.' It is true in the context of this study too. In his probationary period of his job in the police department as a clerk, Dildar raised his voice against bribes against his officer, Sahib. '*Bribe is bribe. A Commission is a commission. Commission can never be bribe;[sic] bribe can never be commission*' (p.183). He resisted the system, which had strong roots, but Sahib showed his power by saying, '*You are a clerk, only a low-grade clerk, you dare to speak before your officer, just get out...*' (Noonari, 2016, p.185).

Dildar fights for his rights against the system as a subaltern. He prefers his own values to be dictated by Sahib's rules, but the result is terrible. Chatterjee (2003) explains that subalterns and elites fight for their consciousness and reality alike. In this novel, Dildar lives with his own perception to reject commission as a bribe, and Sahib's has his own authority to go with it. This is evident from the story: that Sahib is angry with Dildar, and he suspends Dildar. This is a pathetic scene when we see Dildar, as a subaltern, lose his job and go to his colleague Amjad to ask for any other job in his company. He hires Dildar in his firm for 2000 only. At the same time, he narrates the story of Sahib's anger and warns him about his voice against commission as a bribe.

Another example of resistance and power in the novel is the case of an old man's son. He comes to plead for his son in the goal. ASI, as a Sahib, rebuked him by saying that his son is a rogue. Dildar confirms with his colleague Shaban the sum and substance of the story. Shaban reveals the truth. The son of the old man is imprisoned by the order of a landlord. The landlord is interested in his wife. He has an illegal relationship with his wife. The stranger opposes the act of the landlord and the landlord offers fifty thousand to Sahib to lock him (p.214). A subaltern scholar repossesses their equal fight in the name of their resistance and supremacy. The Landlord uses his influence, but it is resisted by the wife of a stranger when he takes care of her husband and sends him meals in prison. The stranger is the winner, and the landlord is the loser despite winning the situation. But as a matter of fact, the stranger has no approach to the hegemonic power where he can reach his rights, and this is what Spivak explained in her

essay. To her, subalterns are unable to be powerful as they are oppressed by the oppressor.

Conclusion

Black Bird in a White Cage aptly presents the characteristics and features of Spivak's and Guha's perspectives of subalterns. The analysis of the novel shows that all female characters as well as male characters come under the threat of subalternity. They raise their voices for their individual distinctiveness, but their messages go unheard. The novel meets the essential criteria of Spivak's notion of subalterns. Guha's perception of the discrimination is also worth noticing in terms of class and gender. In society there is a space of difference (Spivak, 1988), and in that space exist the oppressed as subalterns, people of low rank. They are not voiceless, as in the course of the novel, the readers observe Jannat's voice to choose her life partner, but unfortunately, her voice went unheard by the oppressors. Abida wished to enjoy life like her brother and other children of the community, but it was suppressed. These characters faced gendered subalternity. Spivak's idea is that, till the end of the novel, Jannat and Abida remained unheard. Dildar, as the main character of the novel, observed each situation clearly. In the beginning of the novel, he was an oppressor, and Abida as an oppressed, but in the middle and end of the novel, he became Spivak's subaltern representation. Though he raised his voice against corruption, he was condemned by his officers. He lost his own position in the eyes of his officers. His voice is dampened by Sahib's power. He has limited access to cultural imperialism, according to Spivak. In fact, the whole novel, from the title to the characters, revolves around Spivak and Guha's concept of subaltern as inferior.

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