



Can They Speak? Reading The Marginalized Women In Akhtar Mohiudin's Fiction

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Abstract

Inequality is the main source of marginality which led to insecurity, injustice and exploitation. Marginalized sections are always on the fringe and distanced from the power centers. For G. Spivak, the "subaltern" indicates that women in the Third World are disempowered and oppressed. Marginalized literature reflects various themes such as oppression, gender discrimination, subjugation of lower and working classes, disregarded women, deprived sections of society. In the realms of modern Kashmiri Literature, Akhtar holds a significant position as a rebel against the tradition of marginalization in Kashmiri society. The writings of Akhtar have candidly and outrageously voiced his wrath and reaction against the patriarchal superiority and dominance that begot sex discrimination and led to marginalization of women in their social, cultural and family relationship.

In 1955, he wrote first Kashmiri short story *Dandvazun (Tiff or Squabble)* which got famous, for it was about socially marginalized and downtrodden and was the real portrayal of same group. In the same year Akhtar published his first collection of short stories named *Sath Sangar (The Seven Hilltops)*. This contains six short stories and a translation of Maupassant's short story *A Piece of String*. In 1956-1957, Akhtar's novel *Dod Dag [Disease and Pain]* was published, although his first novel, which was published in 2011, is *Zaat Butraat [Earth and its Origin]*.

Key Words: Marginality, Sex, Female, Subaltern, Patriarchy, Society, etc.

Introduction:

Women have suffered for ages, and are still suffering, from discrimination and categorization within their societies. Throughout history women's organizations have fought to secure female essence. According to Simone, women have been viewed as the "second sex" and men as the "first sex". This binarity entails within its core a degree of diversity. Thus, members of the "other" sex find themselves deprived of their individualities and abilities. According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the state of being a subaltern is the

case of possessing no identity. She adds that it is a position “where social lines of mobility, being elsewhere, do not permit the formation of a recognizable basis of action”(46). For Spivak, the “*subaltern*” indicates that women in the third World are disempowered and oppressed. In *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Spivak proposed:

to give a collective voice to the subaltern group inevitably run into the problem of creating dependence upon intellectuals to speak for the oppressed condition rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. She pointed out that the purpose of postcolonial studies is to make Third World women gain their voice.(7)

Spivak also expands the concept of the subaltern in another way, whether in Gramsci or the Indian subaltern study group, the subordinate class is the male group, and women are ignored. Spivak focuses not only on the subordinate class but also on the subordinate female class. Spivak believes that:

Third World women generally lose the right to speak. Both hegemonic and patriarchal cultures generally oppress women in the Third World. The resulting double marginalization prevents Third World women from confirming their identities, resulting in a lack of identity. The right to speak is closely related to the identity of women in the Third World.(46)

Third World women have been portrayed as marginalized and oppressed, not only in the social milieu of colonial powers but also in literary classics. In search of their own identity and individuality, Third World feminists have experienced conflict over their place and role in their communities. Postcolonial feminism or Third World feminism has its roots in a critique of the mainstream by Western feminist theorists, which examines the image of women in literature and society. Akhtar too believes that women in Kashmir have been living under the debris of colonial oppression. Both hegemonic and patriarchal cultures in Kashmir have oppressed them therefore, women in Kashmiri culture are doubly marginalized.

Discussion:

Passing over the period of centuries Kashmir has the authentically recorded events of long successions of struggles, between, rulers and usurping uncles, cousins, brothers, ministers, nobles and soldiers. In the meanwhile the Moghuls finally established themselves in Kashmir. Akbar finally in 1856 merged Kashmir as his dominion which remained as a dependency of the Mughal emperor for nearly two centuries till British colonists came and took over the reins in their hands. British in turn did a very heinous and shameful act of selling the Kashmiris to the Dogra's as this again was a purely commercial act of profiteering. Akhtar Mohi-din, a Kashmiri writer, writes in his novel *Zaat-Butraat* (The Earth and its Origin) about all these agonies faced by the people of Kashmir under Dogra rule. He writes about the nature of sufferings and heinous exploitation that was so rampant during Dogra rule in Kashmir. Common people were suffering and were overloaded with the imposition of taxes. Life had become very difficult to live, peasants and artisans had to pay the taxes on their production and wages. The impact of world politics and the gradual

developments throughout the world had an influence on India and its literature as well. Kashmir being part of India was also influenced by these changes.

The influx of foreign adventurers from central Asia as well as from India had prepared the ground for Muslim rule, and when Shahmeer appeared there was a little change in the system of administration which remained as before in the hands of the traditional official class, the Brahmins. Akbar finally in 1556 merged Kashmir as his dominion which remained a dependency of the Mughal emperor for nearly two centuries till British colonists came and took over the reins in their hands. British in turn did a very heinous and shameful act of selling the Kashmiris to the Dogra's as this again was a purely commercial act of profiteering. The British demanded from Sikhs one and half crore rupees to the East India Company as compensation for the costs of war for which they were held entirely responsible. As Sikhs failed to compensate for the war costs they were compelled to conclude the Treaty of Lahore and surrender the territories between the rivers Beas and Indus including Kashmir. British were aware of the fact that Sikhs are unable to pay the indemnity and so decided to transfer Kashmir and other hilly regions to Gulab Singh unsurprisingly, Gulab Singh paid half the compensation demanded earlier from the Sikhs. The British used the inability of the Sikh rulers as a pretext to give Kashmir to a Dogra warrior Gulab Singh. Interestingly, Gulab Singh purchased Kashmir from the money and jewels he had looted from the Sikh treasury.

Akhtar Mohiudin very faithfully and realistically raises the voices of the communities in his fictional works. Akhtar Mohiudin shows man as a prey of circumstances, there is commonality of realistic portrayal of combination of natural and social conditions. His women characters are portrayed very low characters having no identity or voice. They live completely under the subjugation of Dogra rule, patriarchy and poverty. The story of the novel *Zaat Butraat* (The Earth and its Origin) revolves around the protagonist Kaba Shah and his family. Kaba Shah lives in a two-story house and by profession is a weaver. The writer narrates the story in the third person narrative. The novel deals with Kaba Shah and his miserable life. Mala Apa is a female character, who represents all women of her class. She got married to Kaba Shah when she was only thirteen years old with a very weak and pale appearance. They live a very hard life all through the novel because Kaba Shah could not earn even hand-to-mouth living. He had the responsibility for his two nieces Jaana and Faata. They were the daughters of his elder brother Rasool Shah. Rasool Shah was also a weaver and had five daughters. His wife was already dead. He did not want to take responsibility for his daughters:

Sages and fakirs could not kill Jaana and Faata but benumbed and deadened Rasool Shah's mind by inhaling opium (charas) he slit his thumb and got an escape once and for all from this prison he preferred to serve languid people in the opium den. He preferred to take opium himself and lived on alms, till he got the name of Rasool sahib ---a famed saint throughout Kashmir, who people thought would survive only on herbs and has become one with God. (34)

He would always pray for the death of his daughters to get rid of their responsibility. Three of his daughters died one by one but two remained. Rasool Shah was fed up with his profession as well. He would work day long in the factory but earned a very meager amount which was regulated by the amount of work done. The

sum thus realized by him was usually amounted from three or five chilkee rupees a month, inclusive of the amount deducted by the government for rice, which is sold to the weavers under certain conditions. Such a sum was not sufficient to support a family with any approach to comfort. The reality of social injustice is shown through the sufferings of Mala Apa who was now burdened with the expenses of the family and again to take care of Kaba Shah. She along with her nieces worked very hard day and night spinning in order to earn a livelihood. She would give the thread she and her nieces spun, to the trader (poiwunee) Manan Joo. As most Kashmiri women used to do to meet their expenses. Meanwhile, Kaba Shah's health deteriorates further, and finally, a day came when he breathed his last. Mala Apa is devastated, and now has to fight with poverty as well as with the authority that is the local government at that time. In the Indian sub-continent tradition, the validity of women is limited to their husbands. Women can only obtain legitimacy by attaching to the patriarchal centre. When the husband dies, the legitimacy of women is canceled. The widow's death "encourages" women to "freely choose" to dedicate themselves to their deceased husband in a ritualized way to regain legitimacy and recognition from the outside and use suicide to express loyalty to make people praise them. Even this free choice cannot be reversed.

The novel, *Jahanamuk panun panun naar* (According to Ones own Hell), Akhtar portrays the historical period of Kashmir, when the rule of Dogra regime was taken over by the democracy. *Jahanamuk Panun Panun Naar* (According to Ones Own Hell). This story revolves around a male protagonist who believes that woman is a property. Women who become victims and are sexually exploited by the authority as well as society. Mr. X has been brought up by his widow mother and has made him able to complete his graduation. He is working as a clerk in the office and leads a life wherein he can only enjoy a hand to mouth living with his meager income. He is married to an illiterate woman and is quite dissatisfied with his life. Mr. X in his office watches how corrupt officers by using their tactics earn money and enjoy their lives at their best. He also wants to get rid of this paucity but finds no. The narrator in the novel tries to say that how the new government had introduced the tuck-shops outside the educational institutes to lure girls for the interests of upper class. So that they can be used afterwards in order to promote business and monetary gains. Mrs. X while going to college is pursued by a boy, who is working in one of these tuck shops, who stops her near the police station. Police arrests them deliberately and all this lands her in the house of chief minister. Chief Minister's son Madanwaar lures her and then despoils her. She had to abort two times, the news spread like a fire in the whole city and nobody is ready to marry her.

Ultimately chief minister and his son want to get rid of her so managed and made Mr. X to marry her. Instead chief minister bestows him with a new job and is made an officer. Chief Minister's son gifts Mrs. X with a piece of land and a house. Mr. X before marrying her poisons his wife and shifts from the dungeon along with his mother to a new house, which he had received as a dowry. Mrs. X even after marriage cannot forget Madanwaar and thinks that she is not a parallel and, therefore, wants to earn more and more money. Mrs. X. after some time realizes that the house she lives in, is small and furniture too is shabby. While trying to realize her dream and to earn more money uses her beauty and body. She is not only friends with top officials but also with a journalist called Sheen:

Sheen is the journalist of new age, and had a great position in the society. He

would gossip in the coffee house, and in big functions people would break the rules of „guest control“ to please him. Sheen would make success possible for defeated Kartar Singh and defeat possible for Ghulam Rasool. He would write in his newspaper that Kartar Singh had eaten „Hallal“ and Ghulam Rasool had eaten Jhatka. (34)

Mr. X with the help of Mrs. X gets big contracts and eventually becomes more prosperous and rich. Being now rich and famous he is offered the chairmanship of a music center. In the music center girls were admitted by their parents to learn music so as to become professional artists in order to earn a respectable livelihood. Mr. X supplies them to big guns and in this way tries to earn more money. This novel is a satirical assault on those who glorify the horrors of sex.

Daisy was trembling with fear and darkness. She is scared of darkness, she is scared of darkness even at her home too. This seemed a hell to her. A small beam of light was entering the banglow. Daisy was gazing at the beam of light and it was the only source of life for her. Somebody entered the room. Mr. X came in and inquired: “Where have you kept the tape recorder?” Keep this under the bed and switch it on today I will see your presence of mind.(55)

The women’s struggle has become a general term in cases of gender inequality. Along with gender inequality, the position of women becomes a chance for men to do the oppression against them. Sexual violence against women is often seen as the most common and easily accessible instrument for men to hegemonize and subjugate women according to their interests and demands. It is often employed by men to either extract forceful bodily pleasures from women or as a vent for their aggression. Sexual violence, till today, remains one of the most effective tools in establishing patriarchy as a superior and authoritative institution.

Mr. X is not only using these girls for flesh trade but also for trafficking of opium. Meanwhile Mrs. X suffers from a mental trauma as she is still in love with Madanwaar and wants to marry him and bear his children only. But Madanwaar has already married a western lady. Mrs. X is shocked to see Madanwaar and his foreign wife. She tries to approach him but he does not even bother to receive her call. The incident leads her to mental stress and eventually she falls ill. In the morning Mr. X. goes to see her in her bedroom but finds her nowhere. In the meantime Mrs. X. has complained in the vigilance department about all the

bureaucrats, politicians, businessmen and all the people related to the upper strata of society. The vigilance department comes into action and started seizing all the records and proofs of these big guns. The news spreads throughout the city, and common people are now scared to send their daughters out. Mrs. X. comes back to her dwelling and commits suicide. Mr. X. after seeing her dead, locks the house, but vigilance officers break the lock of the house and cease all the documents and tapes which were the proof against, the officials and ministers, of their crime – felony, they expose their peccadillo. On the other hand chief minister in order to save his allies and others, dismisses vigilance officers for their honest and prompt action, which they had taken against the corrupt officials.

Ministers: allies come to the rescue of Mr.X for burial ceremonies of Mrs. X: Mrs. X

is given a ceremonial burial in Mr. X's house. Next day Mr. X was in a club bar

taking whisky and was thinking within that "how can he forget the favours done to

him chief minister. He only came to my rescue in this time of mourning.(56)

Akhtar illustrates that the people at helm were materialistic and money minded, they didn't even bother to make use of their women be their sisters, daughters or wives. Their whole being included their conscience, is corrupt. Akhtar portrays the negation of relations and says that only money and sex are the things that exist. Writer shows that, woman is victimized in each and every field even Sheen the journalist is earning money by the means of flesh trade. Through the novel Akhtar is blaming politics and politicians for moral degradation and decadence of the society. The fiction of Akhtar voice well the sentiments of women and their self-introspection's. Women have been exploited, victimized and marginalized by the society. Women in his novels fight for the freedom to live life on their terms. The protagonist a man decides the future of women in the society. Mr. X. in order to become rich and influential kills his wife and Mrs. X does not recognize him as her husband. He only seems to her as a plaything in the hands of Madanwaar, who has not any individual recognition. Mrs. X. even does not respect his aged mother. In new house Mr. X's mother was treated as a trash. Akhtar criticizes the modernity, he says that all artists be them writers, poets, critics, or sculptors are the silent spectators of the collapse of old values, who instead of correcting it gives the name of modern culture. They have themselves become the part and parcel of this so called modern society. He shows how the sculptor who is the sprout of this society wants to make a nude sculptor of his sister Daisy:

Sculptor says, "I had somehow finished Daisy's sculpture. I have to give it

finishing touches. Poet asked, "nude?" Sculptor says, "you are backward in this

matter, "she refused for a nude one" poet says, "How can you finish it without

having a model in front of you." Sculptor, boasting of his

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The theme of the novel *Jahanamuk Panun Panun Naar* is the degradation of modern society. Even in the modern times women are treated as commodities. The concept of sexual objectification, especially in the context of Simone de Beauvoir's theory in *The Second Sex*. The paper shows how Beauvoir's principle regarding the view of woman as the Other through her sexual desire and activity especially through being reduced to the body and being an instrument in men's hands finds its own expression in Akhtar's novel. Simone de Beauvoir defines a woman in terms of her objectification as Other which is the main idea that revolves throughout *The Second Sex*. In a patriarchal society, to be a good woman is to be feminine, which is to function excellently in the assigned social role for women; at least part of this social role is to be a sexual object for men to satisfy their sexual desires. Simone de Beauvoir declares:

[Woman] is nothing other than what man decides; she is thus called 'the sex', meaning that the male sees her essentially as a sexed being; for him she is sex, so she is it in the absolute. She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other. (26)

In another novel *Dod te Dag* (Disease and Pain) which is a story of two orphaned sisters, Faata and Raaja who live with their maternal uncle Qadir wani. He is very poor helpless and is also obedient to his wife. Qadir wani has no say in the family and is scared of his wife, his two nieces had some ancestral property which his wife wants to usurp. His wife wants to get rid of the two sisters and wants to marry them off, as soon as, possible. This eventually leads to the marriage of Faata in haste. Her husband Shama Sahab is a trader and trades in Namadas. After Faata's marriage, Raaja is living through, a sort of hell, in her uncle's household. They maltreated her more than before, and consequently, leaves that house. She goes to sisters home and Shama sahib her sisters' husband treats her as his daughter and takes good care of her. Shama sahibs accountant, Abdul Ghani is known for his debauchery in the whole vicinity. He saw Raaja, who was now living with her sister and tried to seduce her. He is trying hard to persuade her and make her a prey of his lust. While Raaja gets attracted to him Abdul Ghani marries another girl in whom he is more interested. As Abdul Ghani is a lecherous person after a while he wants to divorce his wife and raises the issues of dowry which she had not been able to get in her marriage. On the other hand Raaja is married to a widower who is older to her by fifteen years and at the same time has three children from his first marriage. He does not earn much to make his family to live comfortably. Raja is enduring all the difficulties that come across in her married life and has come to terms to live a normal life with her husband. r girl because of his lustful desires he again divorces this girl after some time.

Time keeps on changing, every minute changing the lives of the people either for the betterment or for the mishaps that may befall on them. Same happens Shama sahib as his economic condition gets worse and misfortunes fall on their happy lives and his business meets with some downfall due to the end of Second World War. All Europeans who had fled from their respective places now moved back and there was not much demand for Namdas, which eventually led to collapse of Shama sahibs business. With the passage of time Faata falls ill and is diagnosed with Tuberculosis. Instead of taking her to doctors, Shama sahib relies much on saints and sages which gave her charms to put on, Faata is now about to die. Meanwhile Raaja, when she comes to see her gets angry on seeing the miserable condition of her sister. Raaja retaliates and insists upon to take her sister to doctor which Shama sahib does not agree to. Raaja gets annoyed and takes the matter to Panchayat wherein she seeks divorce for Faata from Shama Sahib. After, divorce Faata now lives with her sister, but unfortunately Raaja's husband is not happy to have Faata in his house an extra burden for the family. He does not want to have diseased Faata in his home. Meanwhile Abdul Ghani who was interested in Raaja, persuades her to marry Faata to him. Raaja thinking and rethinking on the issue decides in favour of Abdul Ghani, because she is fed up of her husband's continuous bickering, who does not want Faata to be with them. Abdul Ghani is not interested in Faata, but through this marriage wants to get close to Raaja. One fine morning Raaja visits Faata and on her insistence spends a night with her. Abdul Ghani stealthily gets into the bed of Raaja and she without resisting his advances and remembering the past love for him responds and gets involved in a sexual intercourse. Akhtar through this act tries to reveal the human psychology because Raaja although being a faithful wife and caring sister could not resist her passion for Abdul Ghani. Coincidentally Faata witnesses all this and forebears it all as it had now become a routine. Faata gets depressed and Raaja is also not happy to deceive her sister: Faata while enduring all this and going through the agony of being deceived by her sister eventually dies.

Both the sisters were distressed, both wanted to give vent to their sorrows, their feelings, their emotions, but both were scared as if the moment they started giving vent, some calamity or some earthquake would befall and the world will finish.

This fear was not letting them to open up...(34)

After Faata's death Raaja frequently visits Abdul Ghani for no obvious reason, which creates doubt in her husband's mind which ultimately leads to her divorce. After being dejected and thrown out by her husband, Raaja marries Abdul Ghani. He being a Casanova and a flounder is always in search of a new body. Some months passed and Raaja became pregnant, but she never wanted to give birth to this child and subsequently manages to abort it. She got critically ill when she aborted the fetus and soon after was also diagnosed with consumption. Akhtar Mohi-ud-Din not only depicts the sexual thirst of Abdul Ghani but also shows the sufferings of two sisters in the particular Kashmiri society.

In "Red Silken Pajama", the character of Khotan Dyad is portrayed as a woman who gives complete subjugation to her husband. "She would set before him warm and toothsome batta and every now and then, arrange his hookah"(73). Her husband was a weaver of shawls, and would do embroidery on Pashmina shawls. Khotan Dyad would help her husband in picking spare hairs from Pashmina wool, working it with

flour and spinning on the wheel. Nabir Shaala her husband would tell her in his endearing lisp, “ I am your master and you are my apprentice”(73).

Even in his story “The Houri of Paradise” Fota the daughter of Zaildar is portrayed by Akhtar as a suppressed girl, who had an affair with the servant, and then had to marry a Zaildar. Her suppression had made her perverted to the extent that after her marriage, she flirted with the servant at in-laws. “ She spoke in low whispers. Do you know what has happened? Fota was caught flirting with the servant lad. What? Where? My throat went dry. At her in-laws, my wife stammered”(41). Fota had an affair with Samad Dar’s son, who was a servant in their house. Samad Dar’s son had to leave the village and most people thought he is dead. They blamed him for this offence, but later Fota developed affair with the servant at her in-laws. Fota would always be in purdah, and was not allowed to come out and mix up with other girls of the village. The patriarchal forces have distorted her personalty as her only existence was to not show any resistance.

“Dandvazun (The Tiff)” is a story of a family of lower class, who have prepared special dish which was boiling on stove, boiling and ready to be served but the husband and wife start a tiff because they are not able to spare some money for the clothes of their daughter which she was in need. Meanwhile the dish, which he had bought from the money received on the first of the month, is stolen by one of the hooligans of their neighborhood and when the matter is settled down they look for the dish that is to be seen nowhere. The whole story brings out the life lived by socially marginalized people, how they manage their expenses and how they meet their ends. All the characters of the story seem to be real: “With all his anger, yep! Breus the scavenger got up and slapped his wife, and hit her three or four times”(“ 2). The story is about a family of scavengers. The husband has got head meat and ordered wife to cook. Meanwhile wife is upset as her daughter needed clothes as winter was approaching. She cooked the dish, but as a mother she wanted clothes for her daughter. This agitated the husband and he kicked her and soon the argument got worst and the husband started hitting his wife. She screamed and people came to watch the incident and some miscreants took the dish and when the tiff settled and they saw that the dish was stolen by the neighbors. The scavenger slapped his wife and hit her three or four times. This brief dialogue reveals self-evidence that the wife has no voice and has no choice but to submit in the face of her husband’s rebuke; in an unequal gender relationship, men monopolize everything, thus further weakening women’s ability to participate even in their day to day life and become full-fledged social beings, and thus entrenching this power structure.

“The Frizz” is about the father of a daughter who is trying hard to make his daughters’ marriage possible. How a skilled and modest girl’s marriage doesn’t get matured. Kashmiri culture is very beautifully depicted in this story. The story starts in the household of Gafoor Khan and ends there only. In this story through go-betweens lie the marriage proposals. Through these go-betweens we have deep look into the materialistic in-depth and interests of the people, who have no consideration for the honesty, modesty or the good qualities in a person. They only think in terms of money only, that they can have in the name of dowry including the girl being employed.

Conclusion:

Subalternity is a crucial part in the fiction of Akhtar. Resistance comes from “*resist*” and “*ance*”, showing an attitude to defend, try to fight, oppose, or oppose efforts in general. This attitude is not based on or refers to a clear understanding. G. Spivak says “The word “*resistance*” is a complex heterogeneous phenomenon, which violates abstract and rigid subversion principles and cannot be unified and explained” . They proposed that there are many ways to resist the exercise of power. Resistance might be as excellent as power, and therefore if there is a power dynamic, resistance is possible regardless of how oppressive the system is. Kashmir is a strongly patriarchal society, and, generally, women have no resistance to marginalization since patriarchy strongly affects their submission to men. Akhtar portrays that the patriarchal lifestyle is characterized by authoritarianism and the marginalization of women. Women are second-class citizens who, to a certain degree, internalize their mindset. Women have no right to seek equality in all spheres of life under the strong and entrenched patriarchal system. They have no choice but to suffer social prejudice and interpersonal abuse and become victims of patriarchal society. Gender-based violence stems from a patriarchal system which is based on male supremacy. Women, considered as “subaltern(s are oppressed and assigned a secondary role in society. In fact, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. This discrimination and marginalisation based on gender constitutes the violation of women’s basic rights and the denial of human status to women. Far from being limited to a private sphere, violence against women permeates all the spheres of society (the workplace, the street, the public sphere, etc.). Moreover, gender-based violence is institutionalised and nurtured by religious and cultural institutions. Because women have no power in a male dominated society, the decisions concerning them are taken without their consent.

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