



From Living Dead To Warrior Widow: The Evolution Of Female Agency In Meira Chand's *Sacred Waters*

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Abstract: *Sacred Waters* by Meira Chand is a compelling and multi layered exploration of female agency within the overlapping frameworks of patriarchy and colonial rule in South and South East Asia. This paper analyses the evolution of that agency through the life of the novel's protagonist Sita. She was a victim of the oppressive traditions created by patriarchal institutions that treated female body as subordinate. She goes on to become a war veteran who served in The Rani of Jhansi Regiment, through the medium of literacy and her sheer passion. Drawing on the theory of subaltern by Gayatri Spivak, the paper discusses how the 'grammar of nothingness' was employed by the society to reduce the women to a worthless and voiceless object. The analysis then applies Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to portray the social transformation of the naive girl into a self-reliant woman by disrupting the gender normed roles. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of the monolithic 'Third World Woman' is deployed to resist the reduction of the novel's female characters to a singular condition of victimhood. It throws light on the differential axes of class, caste, and colonial privilege that fracture the category of women in the novel. Finally, the intergenerational transmission of agency from Sita to her adoptive daughter Amita through Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory. The paper argues that *Sacred Waters* presents female agency not as a single event but as an ongoing process of claiming the voice, body and narrative that is incomplete yet quietly insistent.

Index Terms - Female Agency, Sacred Waters, Meira Chand, Patriarchy, Rani of Jhansi Regiment, Subaltern, Gender Performativity, Third World Women, Postmemory, Intergenerational.

I. INTRODUCTION

Female agency can be defined as the capacity of women to act independently, set their own goals, and gain control over their actions, bodies, and social identity. The question of agency is not merely a philosophical abstraction. Rather it is rooted in the lived reality of patriarchal structures that have systematically subordinated women by denying them the very conditions necessary for autonomous selfhood. From its earliest articulations in Enlightenment thought to its sophisticated reformulations in postcolonial and poststructuralist feminism, the concept of female agency has undergone profound theoretical evolution. It transformed from the liberal emphasis on individual rights and rational self-determination to more complex, and structurally embedded understandings of how women act, resist, and reconstitute themselves within the constraints of power. Both feminist social and political philosophy and feminist ethics presuppose such a theory of women's agency as an account of their capacity for individualised choice and action. Without it, the feminist project of dismantling oppression would lack its most essential foundation: the recognition that women are not passive objects of history but active, meaning-making subjects who shape their own destinies even under the most adverse conditions.

The earliest wave of feminist theory on agency drew heavily from liberal political philosophy, particularly from Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). She argued that women possess the same rational faculties as men and are therefore equally entitled to the rights of self-determination, education, and public participation. For Wollstonecraft and the liberal feminist tradition she inaugurated, agency was fundamentally a matter of access as women were capable of full rational autonomy. But patriarchal institutions from marriage law to the denial of education prevented the exercise of that capacity. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries extended this framework into the domain of political agency, as suffragist movements across Europe, North America, and the colonised world demanded the right to vote as the most fundamental expression of female self-determination. Even as these movements achieved significant institutional gains, feminist theorists began to recognise that the liberal model of agency was insufficient. It presupposed an idealised, sovereign, and atomised individual whose freedom was measured by the absence of external constraint, while failing to account for the deeper, internalised, and culturally reproduced forms of subordination that conditioned women's choices from within.

The second-wave and poststructuralist feminist theory embarked on a fundamental reconceptualization of agency; one that replaced the liberal subject's illusion of sovereign freedom with a more honest and more powerful account of agency as something produced, contested, and enacted within and against structures of power. The most consequential contribution to this reconceptualization came from Judith Butler, whose *Gender Trouble* (1990) dismantled the foundationalist assumption that gender is a natural expression of biological sex, arguing instead that gender is a performative achievement created through the repeated and regulated enactment of bodily and social practices. Agency, in Butler's framework, does not require an escape from power or a position outside social structures; it emerges from within them, through the creative and disruptive repetition that can transform the very norms it cites. The body is thus not merely a surface upon which patriarchal power inscribes its codes. It is a site of potential resistance, a medium through which the regulatory scripts of femininity can be challenged and rewritten.

Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak's intervention in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) added an indispensable dimension to female agency by foregrounding the question of representation. She argued that the colonial and postcolonial woman, particularly the subaltern woman who exists at the margins is not simply excluded from social and political institutions but is epistemically dispossessed. They are denied access to the very frameworks of language and knowledge through which subjectivity is recognised and validated. For Spivak, the deepest form of oppression is not material deprivation but the internalisation of the view that renders the subordinated subject complicit in her own erasure. Subaltern has absorbed the dominant culture's definition of her as nothing, as invisible, as unworthy of voice. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, writing in *Under Western Eyes* (1988), extended this critique by interrogating the homogenising tendencies of Western feminist scholarship. She argued that the production of a monolithic 'Third World Woman' uniformly victimised, passive, and lacking agency was itself a form of epistemic violence that reproduced colonial power relations within the domain of feminist theory. For Mohanty, the category of woman cannot be treated as a universal or undifferentiated subject. It is always differentiated by race, class, caste, colonial history, and geographical position, and feminist scholarship must attend rigorously to these differentials rather than subsuming them under a singular narrative of oppression. Together, Spivak, Butler, and Mohanty produced a postcolonial feminist framework for understanding agency that is at once theoretically rigorous and ethically exacting which insists on the structural, embodied, and discursively conditioned nature of women's capacity to act, resist, and constitute themselves as subjects in a world that has historically conspired to deny them the means of doing so.

Meira Chand carefully curated these ideas into the character of Sita, through which she explained the process that are needed to attain agency. Sita's success is not attained in a single day, rather it is a long process spanning her life. Meira successfully constructed agency as historically conditioned, relationally enabled, symbolically enacted through the body and intergenerationally transmitted.

II. ABSOLUTE SUBJUGATION AND THE GRAMMAR OF NOTHINGNESS

The novel opens with one of its most tragic episodes; little Sita watching her mother give birth and drowning a new born into the river Yamuna. 'She was just a girl', the mother explained 'her voice thick and strange', the only justification for the heinous crime she committed. (Chand 9) This prologue establishes the novel's central theme i.e., the systematic erasure of female life and voice. It was not even a rare incident, it happened throughout her childhood where Sita had seen her mother repeatedly visiting the river with a protruding belly and coming back with an empty one. The symbolic representation of water, here swallows the female

life can be seen radically reversed towards the end of the novel, making it a symbol of reclamation and new beginning.

Sita's life takes a big turn when she is orphaned and alone and this makes her understand that there is a whole lot of oppression she has yet to witness. She is then taken to her aunt's house where she is treated like a servant. She is mocked for her colour and her inability to even speak properly. She is then married off to a man in his late fifties when she is at her tender age of thirteen. She was not even informed about his name and was asked to address him as 'he'. She is then ridiculed by her cousins as they suggest the names her in-laws will give her. This truly shows the pathetic situation of women and how easily their identity can be altered.

The word that haunts Sita across the decades is mentioned in its rawest form when her husband dies nearly after their ceremony. She is named as animal by the relatives of her in-laws who ate her husband. Sita is reduced to 'nothing but a mere surplus'. This grammar of nothingness accrues throughout Sita's childhood. When she expresses her desire to study in the village school, her father hits her shouting, 'And who will marry you if you go to the school? What in-laws will want an educated girl who will bring death to her husband?' (Chand 73-74) her mother shields her from the beating, both of them realising that they were worthy of this treatment because they were women. Gayatri Spivak identifies this as the mechanism of internalisation of oppression through which the subaltern is denied the opportunity to speak. When Sita becomes a child widow her mother in law labels her as nothing. On her journey to the bhajanashram in Vrindavan her mother in law retorts: 'Only in that place can widows hide their shame. Just as my son is dead, you too are now dead to the world.'

Later in the *bhajanashram* she is even denied the basic necessity of food. She is asked to wear white and only eat food once that too without any spices. In the ashram, Billi and Menaka tells her they are 'living dead' of the society from whom everyone will run away if approached. Then she discovers the absolute terrifying truth about the ashram where they are used as prostitutes at night. She even develops a fever because of this nightmare that her life is. She understands the rue meaning of the word 'nothing' which her life is reduced to. The word even haunts her throughout life as she is referred to by her second husband, and the Japanese soldiers. 'Nothing' acts as the discourse that carves the position of subaltern, when repeated often becomes the part of their identity. Despite all these circumstances, Sita is not completely destitute. She registers, observes and remembers everything as a quiet form of resistance against the trials of her life.

III. AWAKENING THROUGH VOICE AND LITERACY

The key catalyst for Sita's emerging agency comes neither from individual heroism nor from external pressure but from the transformative encounter with language. Shiva, her second husband questions her passive and mute existence with the rhetorical question: 'Have you no voice?' this inquiry initially an expression of frustration borne from needing a literate wife with whom he can share his ideologies, paradoxically becomes the means for Sita's emancipation. When he starts to teach her to read and write, the narrative expresses the experience as cognitive liberation. Initially Sita found it difficult to grasp what he was teaching but her sheer will of impressing her husband made her to go on. She started to imagine the letters as dancing figures through which she was able to acquire it gradually. Sita started to look forward for the evenings when Shiva will be back from the School. As Sita started to recognise the words, she started to go through his writings and books or even newspapers which gave her a great sense of satisfaction. For Sita, 'It was as if holes had been punched in a thick curtain, revealing the light beyond. Somehow she had passed through an invisible membrane into another world.' It also opened opportunities for her to teach the letters and some drawings to orphaned kids in the Ramakrishna Mission School who waited impatiently for her every day. Literacy, thus opened to her a new realm of life, full of intellect that was once denied to her because of her gender.

The character of Dr Sen who helps Sita to elope to her brother in Singapore is also an excellent example of what literacy can do for a woman. As a female physician and Medical Director, she commanded respect even from male doctors who despised her powers. When Sita was even denied to have tasty food because of her social status as a widow, it was Dr Sen who gave her laddoos and insisted her to have it. From the harijan janitor in the clinic Sita learns that the doctor is unmarried and is the one who takes care of her ailing widow mother like a son does. Through all these Dr Sen stands as the representative of the power and knowledge that can be attained by a female within patriarchal structures. Dr Sen can also be considered as the best example of Mohanty's warning against producing a monolithic 'Third World Woman'. Dr Sen is part Anglo-Indian and is unmarried having spent a considerable amount of her life in Gandhi's ashram as

his disciple. She has a privileged life because of her caste and class that was unattainable for Sita because of her status as a widow or as others called her 'living dead'.

In Singapore, Sita was able to acquire even a one part of what Dr Sen has acquired through her learning. She even started to ask questions to Shiva about his ideologies and how he became a part of it. Her nights were spend listening to Shiva's ramblings about Mahatma Gandhi and Subash Chandra Bose and how they are fighting against the British. Literacy gave her a chance to know about her country and her people. It also instilled the spark of nationalism and patriotism in her which plays a large part in her next stages of life. She also learned that there was a world beyond genders which was curbed from her till now.

IV. MILITARIZED AND COLLECTIVE AGENCY IN THE RANI OF JHANSI REGIMENT

The most dramatic shift of female agency happens when Sita enlists in the women's wing of Subash Chandra Bose led Indian National Army, formed in Singapore in 1943 and led by Captain Lakshmi Sahgal. Historically, the Regiment recruited women from Singapore's expatriate community and the Tamil plantation workers from Malaya offering them military training to have an institutional role in the independence struggle. Scholars described it as 'a landmark experiment in gendered resistance' in which 'Bose's vision of total mobilization fundamentally redefined the gendered language of nationalism'. For Sita, stories about Subash Chandra Bose enthralled her. His idea of 'violence can only be fought with violence. Blood must be shed for us to gain our freedom' which Shiva has told her made her an enthusiast of him. Even during the days after she lost her child and Shiva was not talking to her, what she missed was the talks about Bose and the war. She even started to do her work hearing Bose's speeches available in the radio. When Shiva informs her about him enlisting into the Army, she is filled with the curiosity of whether he can meet Bose or not. She envisioned him like the god Varuna, with the sun forming a halo behind him. The first time she witnessed his speech, 'her pulse quickened as she gazed up at the man'. His speech was to encourage his fellow countrymen to fight. As the speech ended, she too was on her feet following the women chanting 'we will fight' repeatedly. Subash Chandra Bose's words 'Give me your blood and I will give you freedom' fuelled in her a fierce spirit that she hasn't experienced till then.

The moment of Sita's enlistment is portrayed as a private revolution. After a few days, when two girls knocked on her door, the author notes: 'the words rushed from her as if someone else was speaking. I will join. I will fight.' The novels clearly notes that it was the first time she was making a decision of her own about her life. It was the beginning of many decisions she is yet to make. Even Shiva's disapproval deterred her from the decision. This is the novel's explicit statement of emerging agency. It was not a gradual accumulation of small choices but a singular decisive act that Sita herself recognised as unparalleled.

Judith Butler's idea of performativity i.e, the idea of gender as an act or performance finds practical embodiment in Sita's transformation. The transition from a sari to military shorts carries an experience of both shame and liberation at once. Sita acknowledges that even her has never seen her naked body even if he has felt it and it adds to the evolution of agency. Sari, the only garment she was familiar with and also the symbol of femininity and humility is changed into a pair of khaki shorts and boots. The uniform renegotiates bodily shame; legs that were the site of gender enforced concealment becomes the visible sign of new identity. By changing what she is wearing, Sita begins to change who she is. Sita also finds a bunch of girls from rubber estates as her troops. When Major Pandey asks them their names we learn that they are all called the same name Muniamma, meaning girl. This shows the identity crisis experienced by every women in one way or another. When Major Pandey orders their hair to be cut as there will be no time in oiling or combing in the warfront Sita gets memories from her widowhood where she was forced by her in laws to cut down her hair. But Sita realises that that: 'This time the severing of her head was not a death or neutering, but a rebirth'. This makes her realise hoe the same physical act can have opposite meanings depending on the circumstances and consent.

Agency in the military is collectively decisive. They were a team who decided to fight against the enemies alongside their male counterparts. They trained, laughed and shared their life stories together. They were one. Sita finds herself a friend among them, a girl named Muni who was brave and believed in ghost stories. Sita developed a close relationship with her considering Muni as her own sister. They travelled to Maymyo as a union. During the stay, when the sirens for air raid are heard they scrambled on their foot and dropped, squeezing into the crowded trench. When they are asked to treat the wounded soldiers instead of fighting amongst them, the Rani of Jhansi Regiment decides to compose a blood petition, a letter signed in their own blood demanding frontline deployment. It is one of the most powerful scenes in the novel showcasing the collective voice. 'We are reduced to being nurses. You gave us the name of the brave Rani of Jhansi. We beg you to send us to the front.' The women reclaimed the very symbol of martial courage that nationalism

instilled rhetorically and insist its material demand. They employed their bodies to authorize speech, an inversion of the novel's existing pattern in which the female body was used to deny rather than validate voice.

Despite everything the novel does not allow this militarized agency to stand as uncomplicated triumph. Sita privately acknowledges that she wants to reach the front to find her soldier husband Shiva and not purely for India. More importantly, Netaji's refusal to send the women to the forefront reveals the fundamental patriarchy embedded in the nationalistic structure. Women are trained as soldiers but ultimately treated as fragile things to be protected. Nationalism is willing to mobilize female bodies for its purposes but stops short of full recognition of female agency when it conflicts with the logic of masculine protection. The structural tension between feminist and nationalist agendas remains unresolved in the novel's wartime sections.

V. POSTWAR SELF DETERMINATION AND TRANSGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION

Most radical act of agency in the novel comes towards the end of the novel. She loses two of her platoon mates in the fire attacks during the return journey to Bangkok. After their arrival, they are informed that the Rani of Jhansi Regiment is disbanded and they have to surrender their weapons. At that moment, Sita realises: 'Her weapon had become a part of her, an extension of her being.' At that moment she remembers the man she killed at the battlefield and how he was shocked to find a female soldier and how she took that moment of shock for her own benefit. During that time, she worked at a hospital to inquire about Shiva. She finds a wounded soldier who informs her that Shiva has been declared dead. Sita became a widow, the second time. Before leaving Bangkok, Netaji called the remaining troop and asked: 'Promise not to go back and hide in the kitchen! Keep the fire of freedom burning in your hearts and pass it to your children.' Muni was afraid to go back to the plantation for the fear of marriage. Sita assured her they can go back and live together. But they are soon informed that they are not allowed to do that.

After returning, despite her brother's insistence to not live alone, Sita establishes a routine. 'Tomorrow I will go home' she repeated to her brother. Once her brother had taken charge of her life, but now things were different and she was confident to live her life independently. She started working at Ramakrishna Mission earning wages, tutoring children, managing her own household. She even travels alone to the plantations to see Muni, where she learns Muni is married and pregnant. On her second visit, Sita learns Muni has died giving birth to a daughter. Sita learns from the neighbours that Ramaiah, Muni's husband had tried to kill the child by drowning it in a bucket of water. Ramaiah then gives the child to Sita declaring that it was Muni's last wish along with a knitted sweater and Muni's ancestral pendant.

Sita adopts the baby in spite of the future being substantial, she knew it would be something of her own making. Here, Sita was able to fulfil something she was not able to do in her childhood; saving a baby from its dead. Sita named the baby 'Amita, for it meant boundless; without a limit, and she would set her firmly upon the path she must follow if she were to fashion her own special universe.' This is not the heroic, uniform-clad agency of the regiment but something more durable; the quiet insistence on self-determination in ordinary life.

Amita grows up to become the living embodiment of that determination. An academic at the National University of Singapore, a scholar of gender and migration, a woman who has deliberately chosen not to marry, Amita represents agency that has been institutionally, intellectually, and personally consolidated. Sita reflects that 'it was better if a woman could be more like a man, self-sufficient, one-in-herself, relying on no one' and sees in Amita's fierce independence the fulfillment of that vision. Amita's conference paper on 'Complicity and Resistance: Gender in the Politics of Migration' is itself an act of agency. An academic speech that recovers silenced women's histories, a direct continuation of her mother's unspoken story. The transgenerational transmission of agency connects to what Hirsch calls 'post-memory': the condition of those who carry the weight of experiences that preceded and shaped them but were never directly communicated. Amita must uncover Sita's suppressed history before her own agency can be fully grounded. She insists: 'your life is my history, it's part of me. I have a right to know.' The recovery of the mother's story is a prerequisite for the daughter's completed self-authorship; a feminist epistemological act as much as a filial one.

The novel comes to a full circle with Amita's resolution to return to the river, the very site of the prologue, where

the female infant was drowned. The symbolic return transforms the river from a site of female erasure into a site of reclamation. The waters that once swallowed the unnamed sister now hold the potential for a new beginning. Female agency is not a destination arrived at once and secured but an ongoing, generational, and always incomplete project of claiming voice, body, and story.

VI. CONCLUSION

Female agency refers to the capacity of women to act independently, make autonomous choices, and exert meaningful control over their own lives within social, political, and cultural contexts. It challenges the traditional narratives that have historically positioned women as passive, dependent, or acted upon rather than as active subjects who shape their own destinies. In contemporary postcolonial literature, female agency carries an added dimension of complexity because women are subjected to a double marginalisation, by both colonial power and patriarchal structures making their negotiation of selfhood uniquely layered. Postcolonial women writers from Africa, South Asia, and the Caribbean use literature itself as an act of agency; their narratives undercut dominant discourses, reinvent ideas of the self, and bypass restrictive social norms through fragmented storylines, and multilingual expression.

Sacred Waters is the painstaking, conflicting and at times contradictory yet a powerful journey of a subaltern woman in the quest for selfhood. Sita is not a victim in this novel. She is a woman who fought against everything that life threw at her with intellect, determination and belief. From being the child widow who was addressed as an animal to the fierce mother who looked after a daughter, she is an inspiration for a lot of people. She forgave everyone but never forgotten what was happened to her. Through Sita Meira Chand portrayed female agency as an ongoing process rather than an event. Sita's evolution was not sudden; it happened in every stage throughout her life. This gave an understanding that women's resistance is neither triumphalist nor defeatist, but quietly hopeful.

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