

VIOLENCE AND SILENCE: SUFFERINGS OF A FEMALE SUBALTERN IN QUDSIA'S *ANTER HOWAT UDASI*

ABSTRACT

The present paper investigates the causes and effects of the sufferings of a female subaltern character in Bano Qudsia's short story *Anter Howat Udasi*. Gayatri Spivak's concept of the silencing of the female subaltern in the Indian society is used as theoretical framework to uncover the psychological and physical violence and the ensuing silence of a female fictional character. The study sheds light on the treatment of women and their delicate and weak social standing in Pakistani society and the patriarchal structure of the society where women cannot express their thoughts and feelings even if they are given a chance to speak. An in-depth study of Hajra's, the protagonist of the story, plight reveals that women of the South Asian societies are both physically and psychologically oppressed and are subject to an domineering patriarchal system and a "systematic silencing" by the society which has deprived them of raising a noticeable voice against the violence.

INTRODUCTION

Bano Qudsia's *Anter Howat Udasi* is the story of a subaltern woman who suffers both physically and spiritually due to her subaltern status and obligations as a woman in a patriarchal society where males are much more privileged than females. The story provides a site for examining the violence against a female subaltern living in Pakistani society and the causes of her silence against the psychological and physical violence she faces quite frequently.

The protagonist of the story is a female named Hajra who lives in a society where women have a subaltern position in the household, their freedom is restricted to the boundary of their homes and they do not have a voice of their own; this state of affairs compels them to take a position of silence. Subaltern literally refers to someone 'of inferior rank' and is frequently used in post-colonial studies as a term denoting women's subordinate role in a male-dominating patriarchal societies. The term was "adopted by Antonio Gramsci to refer to those groups in a society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes[...] they have less access to the means by which they may control their own representation, and less access to cultural and social institutions." (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 314-315). Thus in Gramsci's terms subaltern stands for the proletariat or lower class people (Hawley 425). Hajra is the protagonist of the story under discussion and she is a female subaltern of her society, a voiceless proletariat. Her plight, however, can

better be defined through the concept of “the subaltern” brought forward by post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak, in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Spivak concludes in this essay that the subaltern, especially, the female subalterns cannot speak about or resist the violence levelled against them by the society. Giving the example of a Hindu cultural tradition called *Sati*, she argues that the widow willingly embraces her death after the death of her husband. She is so deeply influenced by religious and cultural values that she cannot represent herself even if she is given a chance and has to surrender herself to the prevalent cultural belief system which is responsible for the “systematic silencing” of the women subalterns (Spivak, 1988).

Spivak claims that the subaltern cannot speak because “between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-construction and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shutting which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development” (Spivak, 1999: 304). Thus the shutting up and silencing of women means making them believe that the status and the behavioral guideline assigned to them by the socio-cultural and religious environment they live in, has to be followed; they are made to believe that it is not any sort of imposition but something right and beneficial for them both in this world and the world hereafter.

METHOD

The study strives to analyse the psychological state of mind of female fictional characters in Bano Qudsiya’s short story *Anter Howat Udasi*. Keeping in view the depth of the psychological analysis, the researcher has delimited the analysis to only a single story. The analysis is based on post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak’s theory concerning silencing of the subaltern women. The theory posits that women in South Asian societies have systematically been made silent and they will not raise voice against their plight even if they are given a chance. This phenomenon refers to a deep level of unfaltering internalization among women regarding the rights and superiority of men. The researcher will endeavour to unveil the psychosocial complications of the protagonist Hajra in Qudsiya’s short story *Anter Howat Udasi*. The study focuses on the questions: How the male members of society violate rights of the females? And, why the female characters remain silent at the wake of violence even when they are given a chance to speak? Since the story is written in Urdu language, the researcher has translated all the quotable lines into English language.

Analysis

Hajra’s dilemma is that she lives in a society where women are considered to be the symbols of honour and their slightest moral imbalance can annoy men or other members of society and lead to some catastrophic tragedy, yet she thinks and acts differently. Hajra has been silenced quite systematically by the male patriarchal order of her society. In today’s societies, especially, in the third world societies, “women have been denied words in men’s world” and “silence belongs to those who are not allowed to speak and to

those who deliberately withhold their words [...] Every silence contains both oppression and rebellion” (Luis 223-24). Hajra’s silence is painful, oppressive yet it is not rebellious; being poor and helpless, she probably cannot afford rebellion. Thus, Hajra prefers a deep, most complex, and tragic *chup* (silence) over revelation of bitter truths of life. In a men’s world, moral perversion of a man can be tolerable but a woman’s moral perversion can be disastrous both for the woman and her family honour. Asian Development Bank’s paper *Situational Analysis of Women in Pakistan – an Overview* sheds light on the plight of Pakistani women in this regard:

Since the notion of male honor and *izzat* (honor) is linked with women's sexual behavior, their sexuality is considered a potential threat to the honor of the family. Therefore, women’s mobility is strictly restricted and controlled through the system of *purdah*, sex segregation, and violence against them [...] The nature and degree of women’s oppression/subordination vary across classes, regions, and the rural/urban divide. Patriarchal structures are relatively stronger in the rural and tribal setting where local customs establish male authority and power over women’s lives. Women are exchanged, sold, and bought in marriages. They are given limited opportunities to create choices for themselves in order to change the realities of their lives. (2).

Silence of the Subaltern Women

Hajra lives in a society where her subaltern position does not allow her to represent herself she is rather represented by others. These others, quite ironically, are not just the male members of the society – most often it is the female opinion or judgment that creates, breaks, and remakes Hajra’s image in a society that is patriarchal in general. The role of Hajra’s mother and her mother-in-law, in this regard, is of an active social instrument. When Hajra’s illicit relationship with Qadeer unveils in the beginning of the story, it is her mother who abuses her, beats her, and reminds her of how she toiled to raise her when she was an infant. Her father, on the other hand, remains silent. Silence of a man, however, seems quite unusual in a patriarchal society like that. Later, her mother-in-law behaves in the same manner when Hajra is caught in a suspicious condition at night. Men, on the other hand, are equally responsible for her ruin and ultimate silencing. Three men – Qadeer *khokhy wala*, Hajra’s father-in-law, and her landlord Sheikh *sahib* – take advantage of her position and seduce her, only to leave her on her own once their desire is fulfilled.

The story can be divided into four parts. Three among these are structurally similar since at the end of each one of these parts, Hajra faces a critical moment wherein she is asked a question that she cannot answer and prefers to remain silent. The question is always about what she was doing on the roof of the house, or who else was with her. The answer is always there in her mind but she prefers to remain silent since she is very well aware of the norms of the society; she has a very good idea that her truthful reply can seriously

offend, annoy, and even harm the people around her. This apparently self-silencing is not because of some guilty feelings. It is rather part of the ‘systematic silencing’ caused by the oppressive socio-cultural norms.

Violence and Silence: Phase-I

When the first incident occurred, her mother catches her while silently coming down from the roof, through a ladder, after being seduced by Qadeer. Her mother grabs her hair and abuses her while asking about what she was doing on the roof. Fearing the outcome of the revelation of truth she deliberately remains silent: “*Main chup rahi*”¹ and “*Main aur bhi gungi ho gai*”² (150-51)³. Hajra seems to be caught between tradition and modernism, her heart bends towards the libidinal desires but being trained as a subaltern, she is well aware that nobody will understand her feelings; no one around her seems to have the ability to comprehend her words, so she decides to remain silent like a “lock”. Hajra compares silence with the silence of a lock: “*Meri chup havaili kay sadar darvazy kay kadmon main giray us kufl ki manind hay jisay pichli raat chor kunday say utar kar phaink gay hun. Aisa tala bohat kuch kehta hay laiken kuch tafseel byan kernay say kaser rehta hay*”⁴ (151-52). Her defencelessness, her vulnerability and her subaltern standing in the society, like huge hurdles, stand in her way. She cannot understand why she let herself to be seduced by Qadeer. She cannot figure out what dragged her to Qadeer’s seductive snare; whether it was “*Abba ka dar*”⁵, “*Jawani main tanhai ka samp*”⁶, or simply “*Kuch kar guzarney ki khahish*”⁷ (151-52). It’s natural for a young and poor woman – who had to leave school because her mother could not afford the expenses, who had no means of pleasure in her life – to indulge into moral perversion. She didn’t have a strong desire to see Qadeer (157), her depravity, her sense of inferiority could be one reason. She was attracted by Qadeer’s beautiful house, having curtains on the windows, and later by the little gifts he brought for her (155). She couldn’t explain all these things to her mother because she was sure that her mother would not understand: “*Bachpan say mughay yun lagta tha k agar main nay kisi say kuch kaha to wo samghay ga naheen, ulta na samagh kar mera dushman ho ja’ye ga*”⁸ (152). Hajra’s depravity was two-fold; she

¹ Translation: I remained silent.

² Translation: I became even deafer.

³ All the textual quotes and page numbers of *Anter Howat Udasi* in this study refer to Qudsiya’s collection of short stories *Kuch aur Naheen* published by Sang-e-Meel, Lahore in 2004.

⁴ Translation: My silence is like a lock lying near the main gate of the house which has been thrown there by some thieves, last night. A kind of lock that expresses a lot but is unable to relate any details. It is aware of the whole larceny but cannot say anything in its defense.

⁵ Translation: Fear of her father’s [ghost].

⁶ Translation: The snake of solitude in youth.

⁷ Translation: Or [just] a desire to do something.

⁸ Translation: I Had a feeling from my childhood that if I expressed myself, nobody would understand me; Instead, by not understanding me, they would become my enemy.

had to live in a society but she cannot accept all its norms because she thought differently, even after knowing that nobody would understand or accept her thoughts.

Violence and Silence: Phase-II

The violence faced by Hajra accompanies silence again in the second phase of her life. She is seduced by three different men in each phase of her life, yet she likes none of them. Her unwillingly-willing surrender to three seductive men and later the verbal or physical violence by her mother, her mother-in-law, and her son is followed by a deep and deliberate silence. Her marriage with a deranged man was another act of violence against her. Her mother simply tells her that she has confirmed her marriage with a man called Guddu, without even seeing him, or letting Hajra see him. Her mother told her a lot about the great property her would-be in-laws have, their huge house, and all the luxuries of life Hajra would be enjoying after her marriage but she didn't say a word about the man Hajra was to marry. Hajra once again kept the silence. Her mother's last advice to Hajra, before her death and Hajra's marriage, is a very good evidence of the "systematic silencing" of women in a rural society:

*Dekh Hajra! Naseeb say jhagra na kerna. Aurat ki sari zindagi naseeb say chalti hay. Mughay dekh! Taira baras ki byahi aai thi. Aik din shohar ki kamai ka khota paisa tak naheen mila. Aik din is ghar kay malik nay mujhay seepi-bhar pyar bhi naheen dia. Par raniye! Main nay naseeb say jhagra naheen kia.*⁹(160)

The advice for such painful compromise is deeply held in Hajra's heart. That is why she recons women to be worthless and later in the story compares a woman's marital life with life in a main-hole (161). Spending life with someone who instead of working himself, depends on his wife's earnings, or living with a deranged husband, or a husband whom the wife has not even seen before marriage, is not considered to be violation of human rights in some strata of Pakistani society. These forced marriages are acts of violence against women which are never reported because the women keep silence considering it part of their culture or religious obligation. Many researchers believe that most of the violations of human rights against women take place within the privacy of home environment (Okin 33-36, Peters and Wolper 2, Friedman 20, and Charlesworth 72). Okin's critique of modern human rights concepts points to this problem: "discrimination on the grounds of sex is frequently justified as being in accordance with many of the cultures—including religious aspects of these cultures—practiced in the world today" (33). She considers home to be "a woman's most dangerous environment" because the international human rights legislations do not interfere into the private life of a family. She believes that:

⁹ *Translation:* Look Hajra! Never fight with destiny. Woman's whole life depends on [her] fate. Look at me! I was thirteen when I came [here] after marriage. [I] haven't received a single penny of my husband's earning even for a single day. The owner of this house has not given me the slightest amount of love even for a single day. But, [my] princess! I never ever complained about my fate.

If a husband pays a bride price for his wife or marries her without her adult consent; if he confines her to their home, forbids her to work for pay, or appropriates her wages; if he beats her for disobedience or mishap; these manifestations of slavery would not be recognized as violations of human rights in many parts of the world. (35)

In the second part of the story Hajra suffers from a heart-breaking shock when she comes to know that she has been married to a mad man who only occasionally comes to his senses; but Hajra says nothing, her silence grows even deeper and graver than ever. Recalling the words of her mother, she thinks: “Yay aaghaz tha Main-hole main girnay ka aaghaz Aik neem-dewanay shohar kay saath azdawaji zindagi ka aaghaz.”¹⁰(164)

Violence and Silence: Phase-III

A fulfilling physical relationship with Guddu was out of question. This situation provided a chance to her father-in-law to seduce her. The third part of the story contains the details of this seduction. He wept so bitterly in front of Hajra in order to beg her for a grandson that Hajra gave in and let him have her for that purpose, since he had told her that Guddu would never be able to impregnate her. When in the end of this part her mother-in-law sees her coming down from the roof in the middle of the night, she poses the same questions that were posed by her mother. She had nothing but silence with her. She could not tell her mother-in-law how her father-in-law took advantage of her by exploiting her emotionally. After hearing the abusive and threatening words of her mother-in-law she simply left the place and came back to her old house: *main apnay ghar chali aai—chup chaap.*¹¹

Violence and Silence: Phase-IV

This was, however, not the end of her sufferings. In the fourth part of the story, she arrives at her old home while she was pregnant, penniless and helpless. Here again a man came forward to help her in order to seduce her and to take advantage of her vulnerability. Her landlord, Sheikh *sahib* seduced her into his embrace and she spent twenty-two years under his seductive protection. This time she was caught by her own son while she was coming down from the first floor at night. Facing her son’s questions was most humiliating for her, yet, for the third time, she decides to remain silent. She could not tell her son that “*Beton ko palney main maaon ko kya kuch kar guzarna parta hay.*”¹²(171). Seeing the tears in her son’s eyes, she decides to break her silence for the first time and tells him: “*Maira kisi say kabhi koi nata naheen raha beta—mera kisi say*

¹⁰ *Translation:* This was the beginning, of falling down into a mail-hole. Beginning of living life with a semi-deranged husband.

¹¹ *Translation:* I came back to my [old] home—silently

¹² *Translation:* What price mothers have to pay to raise their sons

*kabhi bhi koi nata naheen raha—kisi say bhi naheen—kisi say bhi naheen—main is kabil na thee k koi mujh say rishta jorta—*¹³ (172).

These words further intensify the nature of depravity Hajra went through, all her life. She established relationship with three different men, yet none of these relationships was truly deep relation. Qadeer, husband of a beautiful wife and father of many children, seduced her, gave gifts to her for this service, and left her; Guddu's relationship with her was also humiliating and greatly disturbing for her; and in the end, Sheikh sahib, whose personality is not revealed by the author in detail, was once again a seducer, he took advantage of a helpless pregnant woman in order to satisfy his lust.

Conclusion

Anter Howat Udasi portrays the realistic character of a helpless subaltern rural-woman. The most tragic part of her story is that whatever sufferings, humiliations, and violence Hajra faced in her life remained in dark and silence. The violence she faces in her life always follows silence because, on one hand, she is made to accept the patriarchal order of the society; while on the other hand, she is well aware that even if she expresses her thoughts, considering her a subaltern outcast, nobody will bother to understand her. Thus, her inability to speak and freely express her feelings and ideas at the wake of the verbal, physical or spiritual violence is caused by the “systematic silencing” of the culture and society she lives in. Hajra's plight throws considerable light on the plight of women in the South Asian societies where women generally live under similar conditions and have not say in the society and the male dominating social norms are so deeply internalized by these women that even when they are given a chance to speak they cannot do so and consider it moral to remain silent.

¹³ *Translation:* I never ever had any relationship with anyone, my son—I never ever had any relationship with anybody—not with anybody—not with anybody—I was not worth it.

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