

## **Voicelessness of Pakistani Women: A Postcolonial Analysis of Bina Shah's *The Wedding of Sundri***

### **Abstract**

*Women are frequently portrayed as victims of religious, cultural, and institutional violence in Pakistani literature in English. Women are marginalized and most find themselves silenced and deprived of the ability to protest against their suppression. There are countless cases of women being victimized within the sanctity of their homes and ravished by their male relatives. This study focuses on the issues of women in the context of "The Wedding of Sundri" by Bina Shah taken from the book *Neither Night nor Day*, edited by Rakshinda Jalil. The protagonist in this story is a helpless, meek, individuated, voiceless minor girl. This study charts the course of voicelessness, suppression, and subalternity through a plethora of social and cultural norms and male chauvinism. The theoretical framework integrates the theory of subalternity by Gramsci and Spivak to show the women as silenced and voiceless figures.*

**Keywords:** *Pakistani Women, Suppression, Subaltern, Victim, Voicelessness*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Women in societies like ours are routinely treated as objects for use and abuse. They are shamelessly subjected to strenuous work with minimal financial reward, domestic torture, sexual abuse, and terminal harassment. However, in modern times women have started developing their political clout to register their presence in every walk of life. The Pakistani context is no different. The majority of women in our households run the entire family "show" but in return, are not permitted to develop their voices even in choosing life partners for themselves and one may call them the most marginalized component of our society. They bear children, cook food, and nurse family members but do not earn respect in any manner other than what their male counterparts decide for them. They are culturally, religiously, and socially oppressed and have nobody to speak for them. Literary critics like Gramsci use the term "Subaltern" to identify the social groups excluded and displaced from the socio-economic institutions of society to deny their political voices" (Abrams, & Harpham, 2009). Spivak (1992) says that "subaltern is not just a classy word for oppressed, for [the] other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie. . . In post-colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern — a space of difference" (p.45). In the case of women particularly, this phenomenon reinforces the oppression of women not only as a female component of society but they stand as the most voiceless beings whom even so-called progressive societies do not accord any voice. This is true in the case of Sundri, a character who exemplifies the suppression and voicelessness of women in our society. In this context, Sundri falls a victim to male chauvinism and is subjected to

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inhuman torture. She is a thoroughly silenced being who has been denied any right to defend herself. She is treated as a sinner although she has not committed any sin. The author of the story “The Wedding of Sundri,” Bina Shah herself is a woman and knows the pain of a woman who has no voice. Decisions for women are made by men without their consent and applied to keep them constantly under male domination which cannot be regarded as a respected position even in the remotest interpretation of social arrangements.

### **Thesis Statement**

If anything, Bina Shah’s character Sundri symbolizes the pathetic living conditions of women in our society. Not only are cultural and traditional norms responsible factors for their degradation, male chauvinism plays a significant role in making them the voiceless entity. The current study focuses on the issue of subalternity in “The Wedding of Sundri” to highlight voicelessness and the unjust treatment Pakistani women experience in the post-colonial era. This study also highlights how women fall prey to male domination.

### **Research Objectives**

The present study aims:

1. To analyze voicelessness as presented by Bina Shah in “The Wedding of Sundri.”
2. To reveal the suppression of women and male domination in “The Wedding of Sundri.”
3. To present the unjust treatment women go through in every walk of life as presented by Bina Shah in “The Wedding of Sundri.”

### **Research Questions**

1. In what ways does Bina Shah present Pakistani women’s experience of voicelessness?
2. How does the selected literary text portray the issue of subalternity in the case of Sundri?
3. How does Bina Shah present Pakistani men’s exercise of their privilege of depriving women of all rights?

### **Delimitation**

Although other researchers have touched upon issues like subalternity, suppression of women and male domination in their respective works, the issue of female voicelessness and male chauvinism has not been attempted before as is the case with *Wedding of Sundri* by Bina Shah.

### **Significance of the Study**

There is a marked rise in awareness about the living conditions of women across the globe. Similarly, the world knows a lot more about the tools of discrimination that are used against women mainly by men under different garbs. The social effect of feminism has started moving writers and researchers to focus exclusively on the plight of women in order to mobilize public opinion in their favor. The present study too is an effort to broaden the horizon of this awareness.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Women are represented as victims of religious, cultural and social violence in Pakistani literature. Nazar (2016) is of the opinion that Pakistani women are the victim of religious,

social and cultural violence. Pakistani women are treated as subalterns—as if they are meek and helpless creatures who are unindividuated and lacking in all agency. This is a sorry state of affairs in postcolonial Pakistan where there are many calls for a radical change but the change is nowhere (Nazar, 2016).

Dodhy (2014) notes how subordinated groups are portrayed in Daniyal Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms Other Wonders* as well as the postcolonial practices exercised by men, showing that in postcolonial society, brown men have taken the place of white men. For example, in Mueenuddin's short story "Saleema" there is a detailed representation of the subjugation of women and the story argues that the subjection of women in Pakistani society is a matter of everyday life, and it is exacerbated by the class hierarchy. The tools of their subjugation are the same which once were used by the white sahibs. The people of the upper strata enjoy a life full of luxuries whereas the people of the deprived classes are penniless and live a life in hell. The upper classes mimic the role of colonizers to demonstrate and cement their privilege (Dodhy, 2014).

Bhuvanewari highlights the concept of marginalization of women in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. She asserts that the analyses of Roy and Audrey Thomas have made it clear that male hegemony, ruined marriages, suppression of women, voicelessness and identity crisis are prevalent in contemporary society. Both authors have highlighted the problems faced by women who yearn for freedom and emancipation (p.354).

Millet (2000) writes in *Sexual Politics* that women are puppets in the hands of their husbands and they do not have their own personalities, since the institution of marriage is a tool of exploitation controlled by men. In postcolonial societies, women are considered the weaker sex as compared to men. Millet's view that the plight of women becomes worse after marriage applies to the character of Sundri who is given the death penalty by her husband and his family. Millet further says, "the wife can be used as her husband desires" (Millet, 2000). Men in our society have no scruples in exercising their dominance to subjugate women. They feel no qualms about depriving women of their human rights and our society supports the standard of male chauvinism which adds fuel to the fire.

Patriarchalism is a historical reality and is the cause of women's subjugation. Habib (2016) says that women are being treated as 'others' and are not allowed to take active part in social activities. This phenomenon has become a paradigm which is responsible for interpersonal, political and social subjugation of women. These factors have turned women into marginalized creatures who have no say over their own life and no representation in the world of men (p.175). The issues of marginalization, subjugation, male domination and search for identity have been discussed by researchers. Habib has also discussed the theme of patriarchy, marginalization and suppression in "The Wedding of Sundri" and "The Fair Way" but the issues of voicelessness and subalternity have not been touched upon by these researchers.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study offers a close reading of the short fiction “The Wedding of Sundri” by Bina Shah taken from the collection of 13 short stories *Neither Night nor Day* edited by Rakshinda Jalil. The story focuses on the plight of Sundri, a voiceless character whose voicelessness further worsens her condition. “The Wedding of Sundri” is the story of a fourteen year old village girl. She was affianced to Ghulam Farid, a relative of Sundri’s father when she was just seven. The story starts with Sehbagi working in the kitchen on the day of Sundri’s marriage. Mohammad Karim, the father of Sundri, has already decided on her wedding without her consent; even her mother is not allowed to object. Mohammad Karim orders his wife to make the necessary arrangements for the wedding. Sehbagi dresses Sundri for the wedding and the people of the village are gathered for Sundri’s wedding. When the bridegroom enters and the nikah is performed the parents give their daughter the lesson to remain dutiful and obedient to her husband and have sons. The story ends with the ruthless murder of Sundri who is pronounced as Kari (amoral) because she used to play with boys when she was a child. The punishment of kari is death according to the laws of patriarchy.

The method chosen for the study is textual analysis, and this, along with the tenets of feminist post-colonial theory, will be used to examine her subalternity.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Spivak and many other scholars like Edward Said base their concept on Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and the concept of subalternity. Gramsci first described both these concepts. . In postcolonial theory, “the term *subaltern* describes the lower social classes and the other social groups displaced to the margins of a society; in an imperial colony, a subaltern is a native man or woman without human agency, as defined by his and her social status”(Gramsci, 1971). He asserts, “subalternity is a condition marked by the absence of a will or project on the part of a social group to achieve an integral organic critical self-consciousness” (Gramsci, 1971). According to Gramsci, subaltern is the class “lacking in or deprived of historical force” (p. 203). Spivak (1993) holds that “subaltern has been redefined to encompass all subordinated populations oppressed by colonial/postcolonial regimes .... to which the supplement of resistance acts as a contrapuntal chord” (p.203). She further says “between patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object formation. The figure of the woman disappears....there is no place from where a sexed subaltern can speak”(Spivak, 1988a). The same is true in the case of Sundri who is not given a chance to speak for her virginity as she does not have any tongue to articulate words in her support. Spivak describes this condition as the “silenced Centre or Margin”. Just as in the colonial era the colonizers’ power rested largely on subordinating the subaltern—in society’s margins, in the postcolonial period, formerly colonized societies have created their own subalterns. Pakistani society is no exception: men have created their own subalterns by suppressing women and depriving them of their voices. Spivak’s concept of “Subaltern” is apt when it comes to analyzing the character of Sundri. Bina Shah presents the character to highlight the condition of Pakistani women and the treatment meted out to her by society in general and men in particular.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The grossest example of the voicelessness of Pakistani women is evident in the rampant practice of minor girl marriages. The compound effect of these marriages leaves no space for the girls' consent even after they grow up. Another impregnable tradition is the forced marriage of adult girls; parents seldom, if ever, bother to take the girls into confidence before choosing their life partners. They are just sold out into an unbreakable bond which is called marriage. Newspapers routinely carry stories about girls who are victimized only because they tried to choose their own life partners. It is deplorable that society at large hates such girls and demands increasing restrictions against them. The case worsens if even a minor girl is caught randomly playing with boys of her age in the street. This proves true when we study the case of Sundri. Besides Sundri, we come across many such examples when girls are raped and the male elders impose death penalty on the raped girl calling her a 'Kari'.

Sundri's father decides her life partner without her consent since men consider themselves the ultimate authority in the patriarchal society. They treat women as subalterns, considering them so weak that they are incapable of making decisions. Tyson (2006) says, "patriarchal is a term that shows power relations. In such relations, the desires and choices of women are subservient to the interests of male members of society. Such relations result in the creation of biological difference between males and females"(Tyson, 2014).

Mohammad Karim, the father of Sundri, orders his wife Sehbagi to make the required preparations for the marriage ceremony. All the villagers gather at Mohammad Karim's house for the wedding ceremony, Sundri is dressed up in wedding attire with garlands of roses around her neck giving her the feeling that she was visiting a saint's tomb. Unfortunately, she did not know that the same flowers would be thrown on her grave also. Being only fourteen, Sundri is confused and finds her situation unusual. Her mother is there to provide her consolation and she constantly tells Sundri that everything will be fine. Instead of understanding her situation, the mother gives her the lesson to be obedient to her husband and her family: "'Be good,' said Sehbagi to her daughter, who had already started to cry. 'I will Amma'. 'Obey your husband's family. Do not bring shame upon our heads. Work hard and have sons'" (p.145). It is striking that Sundri's mother, being herself a woman, does not have sympathy for her daughter and speaks the language of male parlance.

From a feminist perspective, Sundri's mother is an antagonist and furthers the interests of the men of her society. This shows that women collude in the all-pervasive plight of subalternized women. We confront a similar situation in Mueenuddin's short story *In Other Rooms Other Wonders* (2009) where the daughters of K.K Haroni are not ready to give Husna, her due share. Husna breaks into tears and asks, "'Did Uncle say anything about me before... before....?' Sarwat broke in. 'No', she answered with finality. 'There was and is nothing for you' (Mueenuddin, 2009) showing that every woman does not qualify as a feminist and that in a stereotypical patriarchal society, even women are patriarchal. They advocate the idea of male dominance unconsciously and do not promote the cause of women's emancipation.

Another example of female collusion with patriarchal traditions is Sehbagi's sister Naseema. She is often physically beaten by her husband but still she never tries to break the bonds of patriarchalism and keeps on supporting the social standards set by the men. Her support for the institution of marriage continues. Her enthusiasm is also seen at Sundri's marriage when she tackles her by saying the things related to marriage. No one cares for the feelings and emotions of Sundri who remains quiet most of the time. All this shows that Sundri is a voiceless character who is not given any importance, and is forced to obey the tradition of marriage for the sake of maintaining her family's reputation in the society.

The Nikah is performed in the presence of villagers, sweets were distributed among the guests and all prayed for the happy life of Sundri. It is ironic that the prayer was said so that she would have a happy and protected life but only too soon prayers would be uttered at her funeral by the same people who were gathered for her wedding. Finally, the ceremony ends and Sundri is sent to her husband with her family advising her to remain submissive to her in-laws. The story ends with the murder of Sundri who is declared Kari (amoral) by the villagers, since she used to play with boys of her age, in her childhood, she is considered impure now. This is the reason her in-laws declared her immoral, and the punishment for a Kari girl is death in her community. Sundri's in-laws issued the decree of her execution in order to preserve their cultural norms and traditions. The worst thing is no one even considered Sundri's self-defense, nobody ever tried to investigate if she had committed adultery nor was she given any opportunity to tell her side of the story. As Spivak says, "there is no place from where a sexed Subaltern can speak" (Spivak, 1988b).

It is clear that in a patriarchal society, the women folk collude with men to uphold the standards of traditional morality and when tested they themselves turn against female victims, thus proving that a woman can be the enemy of other women. This is substantiated in the character of Banoo Mai in the story who is the mother of five daughters and in the past had wanted Ghulam Farid to marry one of her daughters because he belonged to an affluent family and intended to open a petrol station in the near future. It was out of jealousy that Banoo Mai conspired against Sundri to get her declared immoral and she finally succeeded in marrying her daughter to Ghulam Farid after Sundri's death. In all the phases of this tragic drama, Sundri remains voiceless and becomes the symbol of female marginalization. Nayar (2008) signifies subalternization in the following words, "if the native was the subaltern in colonial era, post colonialism created its own Subaltern, 'women', 'lower castes', and classes, ethnic minority rapidly became the Others within the postcolonial nation state" (Nayar, 2008). Against this backdrop, Sundri is triply marginalized; she belongs to a poor community, she is a woman and therefore has no voice and keeps on bearing the burden of traditional and moral values imposed on them by their male overseers. Also, Sundri's, character, is not supported by other women. Rather, the entire conspiracy hatched against Sundri is the fancy-work of the women in Sundri's community.

## CONCLUSION

The study of "The Marriage of Sundri" throws light on the voicelessness of women in Pakistan's postcolonial era. The problem starts with the life of a female at home. She is constantly taught to obey the moral, traditional and social values of society and is

brainwashed to adopt these values and maintain them throughout her life. Unknowingly, her “self” becomes a secondary thing since women in the postcolonial era rarely realize their importance and worth. Bina Shah’s Sundri is the symbol of women’s subjugation, female voicelessness and their marginalization in postcolonial societies. Lastly, the tools used to keep the women in check are propagated as religious and moral duties of women. Sundri’s case testifies that she is a victim without agency and because of that is fated to die. Bina Shah has successfully portrayed the voicelessness of women in Pakistani society, with the study covering the issues of voicelessness, subalternity and the condition of Pakistani women in the current postcolonial period.

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