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# Subaltern Women: Shadows of the Other in In Other Rooms Other Wonders

#### Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the status of women as subaltern and the denial of voice and agency that they suffer due to the patriarchal set up in the society as represented in In Other Rooms Other Wonders. It investigates in detail the processes involved in creation of women as subaltern in the light of Gyatri Spivak's theory. Spivak's definition invites us to look in detail at how the subaltern is separated from the mainstream and the mechanics involved in their discrimination. Men maintain the powerful position of the controller of resources, while women suffer as the "Other", and are treated as "subaltern". We can see the dynamics and machinations of this relationship within the master-slave dialect, where women are important only insofar as they serve and obey their master.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Subaltern, Patriarchy, voice, agency

# INTRODUCTION

The society presented in the award-winning collection of short stories by Daniyal Mueenuddin *in Other Rooms Other Wonders* is congested and vicious, rooted in its postcolonial, patriarchal setup. With the rural backdrop of southern Punjab and Lahore and Islamabad as the urban centers, this collection portrays the realities of life for each character impartially. The framework that Mueenuddin has selected to tell his stories demands an inherent understanding of the social and cultural inhibitions of Pakistani society. The characteristic male centered society where women may not have the right to choose their partners but men can keep two at the same time is not comprehensible for the readers in the western world. The world Daniyal Mueenuddin has depicted is peopled by persons with a firmly set schema of the social order and their position in it. Hannan Jim (2009) captures the idea in these words:

In each of these stories set in Pakistan, somebody needs something from someone else, as Mueenuddin's characters work various forms of influence in pursuit of a desired end. Suggesting the uneasy juxtaposition of residual

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feudalism and modernity, Mueenuddin portrays an unequal social hierarchy marked by self-interest and corruption, in which characters depend upon the whim of other people for jobs, a place to live, social approval, and the calculated dispensation of love and sex. (2009, p. 68)

All the stories in the collection show the characters' constant struggle—largely futile but still commendable—for upward class mobility. Mueenuddin shifts the focus from center to the margin, highlighting the lives of the servants and workers—the "subaltern" group, which is usually left in the periphery, unexplained at best or pitied when they are noticed. In postcolonial criticism the term "subaltern" is used to refer to such groups which are socially and economically outside the hegemonic power structures of the elite or influential groups. Antonio Gramsci, Italian Marxist thinker, coined the term subaltern to refer to such groups which are denied voice due to exclusion from society's powerful and established institutions. "In Gramsci's conception subalternity is constituted through exclusion, domination and marginality in their various forms" (Green, 2011, p. 387, Gramsci, pp. 202-7). The differences among subaltern groups based on class, race, religion and gender need a separate analysis of the processes involved in subordination and the construction and maintenance of power in specific contexts. This study focuses on women's status as subaltern and the denial of voice and agency that they suffer because of the patriarchal set up in society.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

Zia Ahmed in his review of Pakistani feminist fiction "Pakistani Feminist Fiction and the Empowerment of Women" states that along with the issues of displacement, struggle for independence and culture, feminism is a major issue that Pakistani writers discuss in the context of post colonialism. They portray that the colonial enterprise doubly affects women. It deliberately kept women outside the main flow of activity and denied them their due rights: "They are colonized and declared to be the 'others' and silent majority (subalterns). This subaltern status also dates back to past traditions of the subcontinent ... The postcolonial men re-colonized the bodies and minds of their women as a reaction and in an effort to preserve their cultural values" (Ahmed, 2009, p. 94). Ahmed surveys Pakistani fiction from Zulfikar Ghose to Mohsin Hamid to see the roles and portrayal of women by these writers. He concludes that the writers portray women in various hues ranging from poor and suffering to educate as independent, from struggling to survive in the face of marginalization to those winning their fight against powerful patriarchy. His purpose was to investigate how Pakistani writers are contributing to the cause of feminism. Nighat Pervaiz (2010) notes that women in In Other Rooms Other Wonders appear to be the most battered of the lot of the various marginalized sections of the society presented in the work. They highlight the patriarchal system prevalent in the third world countries. They do not have a status as an independent entity but are defined by their association with a man. Pervaiz states:

His stories show how poor women are the most deprived members of the population . . . all classes of women are disenfranchised . . . Mueenuddin showcases the double standards for men and women. In religion, education, tradition, customs and everyday reality, men are considered to be "breadwinners" and women are perceived as a "burden" on the family. (2012)

Pervaiz looks at the three main themes present in Mueenuddin's stories: the effects of patriarchy, the oppression women face in family system and the relationship between class and gender. Reviewing Daniyal Mueenuddin's stories, Arifa Akbar (2009) states that these stories take the readers from the outwardly glorious and sophisticated rooms of Lahore to the mud villages and beyond, showing the interconnected lives of masters and servants. Mueenuddin unveils the complicated power structures of master-servant, parent-child, husband-wife and lover-beloved relationships. The victims are not only the economically disenfranchised women, but women of the elite class also, struggling to gain control over their lives.

The reviewed articles discuss oppression of women and the relationship of men and women in Daniyal Mueenuddin's stories where women occupy a prominent position in all the stories but they are insignificant members of the society in which they live. Women's subjection and exploitation is a dominant thread that unites all these stories. This paper endeavors to study these stories through the lens of Gayatri Spivak's conceptualization of the "subaltern". Spivak argues that subaltern is denied representation. "In post-colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference" (Kock, 1992, p. 45). Spivak's definition makes a case for a detailed look at how the subaltern is ousted from the mainstream and also at the mechanisms involved in the discrimination against them.

#### Theoretical Framework

Subaltern studies have meant different things for different groups of people. While the US view of subaltern studies is a means of reading Indian while in India it is a means of exposing and opposing dominance. So the present study skirts the debate and sets its directions by Ludden's observation that in subaltern studies the "internal coherence has been less intellectual than personal" (p. 2). It is the critic's context and personal affiliation that determines their inclination. So instead of looking for some agreed-upon framework the study looks towards theorists in the field for its theoretical underpinnings and a study like the present one, calls out for the work to be done in the backdrop of Gayatri Spivak's work. Spivak considers economics as a key

factor and a major determinant or "transcendental signified" in creating the "other as self's shadow" (Spivak, 1994, p. 75). According to her it is the economic control over resources that grants power to the West to control and suppress the weaker nations. When this attitude manifests itself in the scenario of gender relations by positioning men as powerful and controller of resources, women suffer as the "Other" and are relegated to the status of the "subaltern". One can see the dynamics and machinations of this relationship within the master-slave dialect: "When we come to the concomitant question of the consciousness of the subaltern, the notion of what the work cannot say becomes important" (Spivak, 1994, p. 82).

The relationship between women and silence can be traced in the study of women as subalterns. She argues that the west, owing to its intellectual and economic power, speaks on behalf of the ruled other. Hence the other is silent and treated as voiceless. This silence on the part of women allows men to repeat the colonialists' violence, which views women important only insofar as they follow their dictates and confine themselves to the superstructures of patriarchy. "The narrow epistemic violence of imperialism gives us an imperfect allegory of the general violence that is the possibility of an episteme" (Spivak, 1994, p.28). When power resides in men they become the decision makers and writers of women's destiny. Hence, they replicate the colonialist practices. "The ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant ... in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow..." (Spivak, 1992, p. 83). Spivak's ideas were grounded in a good understanding of the Indian culture; another key Indian figure Nehru too drew inspiration from the Indian societal structure to expose the nexus of economic structure and foreign occupation against powerless women. He was ahead of his time when he used his intensive scholarly reading to link poverty to not just foreign occupation but to the "economic structure of society, which the alien rulers support so that their exploitation may continue" (Zaidi, 1985, p.54). In other words, foreign rulers not only exploited the locals economically but also strengthened the mechanisms through which the higher local classes exploited the lower classes. Although Nehru was involved in his political objectives he did sow the seeds of linking economic status with exploitation and subaltern studies caught on to this idea. In the years to come, globalization and its economic spin-offs became central debates in subaltern studies and saw subaltern studies take a stance against the financial hegemony of the powerful states (Ludden, 2002).

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paper uses textual analysis as a research method to carry out analysis and interpretation of the selected text. Since the paper involves the study of women as subalterns, in the light of Spivak's theory, who have been denied voice and agency in

Mueenuddin's stories, the characters' interactions, dialogues, thoughts and behavior will be analyzed through textual analysis. Catherine Belsey arguing about the significance and relevance of textual analysis states that "textual analysis is indispensable to research in cultural criticism, where cultural criticism includes English, cultural history and cultural studies, as well as any other discipline that focuses on texts, or seeks to understand the inscription of culture in its artifacts" (2013, p.160). Keeping in view Belsey's statement as to how textual analysis can draw meanings that are informed and plausible, evidence from the text, will be supplemented with secondary sources such as critics' comments and the theoretical assertions of Spivak. In order to avoid being carried away by the opinion of others, we intend to analyze the evidence within the texts to find answers posed by the study. Secondary sources will be incorporated only in order to support the authors' critical interpretations.

# **RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

In the first story of the collection, "Nawabdin Electrician", Nawabdin's wife is not given a name but is defined through her relationship with Nawabdin. She is nobody but "Nawabdin's wife". That her value for Nawabdin is that of a consumable is brought out in his use of the pet name for her "my chicken piece" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 18). She is just something to be ravished and enjoyed till the goodness lasts and satiation achieved. The most significant aspect of her identity, her role as a mother and homemaker, does not grant her any identity. She only plays the role of domestic help and mother to thirteen children. In this setting, her one achievement is bearing Nawabdin a "looked for son" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 18). Her subordinate position as Nawabdin's wife is clearly stipulated in the manner they have dinner where "Nawab ate first, then the girls, and finally his wife" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 18). She is almost always found bent on the stove trying to light the fire wood to prepare food for her husband or sitting at his feet on the bed. The colonial rulers' practice of imposing obedience on the natives is at work here but under the garb of cultural norms. The context is different but the normative nature of the interaction is the same: the ruler commands undying loyalty and blind allegiance and obedience and the silent, voiceless wife is the subaltern void of agency and the ability to offer a dissenting view.

When it comes to the other women in the house, i.e. Nawabdin's eleven daughters, their status is inferior even to that of Nawabdin's wife. While his wife is somehow a companion the daughters are a mere encumbrance which he cannot wait to get rid of. Moreover, Nawabdin uses them as justification for his bribery. Because he has to pay for their dowry to marry them off he, like many others in the society, feels that he can adopt corrupt practices. Nawabdin emerges as a desperate father trying to do right by himself while his daughters remain just dark figures in the shadows of poverty and

the reasons for his desperate actions. Neither Nawabdin's wife nor his daughters have voices. The wife has no say in what the husband does. His decision to indulge in corruption is not debatable, nor is the form in which it takes place. For something as mundane as lighting a fire—something that falls squarely in her domain—she cannot have an opinion or competence. One aspect of the lack of the female voice is the denial of voice but there is another probably more important aspect too i.e. her ignorance of the fact that she has been suppressed. Nawabdin's wife and daughters do not have a say in any affair but there is evidence to suggest that that these nameless characters are oblivious to the fact that they are being denied something. Nawabdin's wife has been assigned the place "primarily at his feet" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p.19) and she has no issue with it. She is the other to Nawabdin who must reside in the shadows and become a shadow self. The lack of voice assumes a more heightened pitch in the form of Husna's silence in the story named the same as the title of the collection "In Other Rooms, Other Wonders". She is "not a guest, not even really a presence, but a recourse for the old lady, to fetch and carry" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 101) and perceived as "...unfortunate little thing sat without saying a word, just listening, like a frog in the corner" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 125). Her silence is deafening and brings out the fact that the shadow self is voiceless even as it goes about serving the master.

Nawabdin's wife is not unique in her namelessness or in having an identity that is derived from her husband's. Other female characters in the collection such as Rafik's first wife in "Saleema", Jaglani's first wife in "Provide, Provide" and K.K. Horouni's estranged wife in "In Other Rooms, Other Wonders", are not independent entities. They draw their identity from that of their husbands and in some cases this dependence continues even after the husband's death. The wrath of the husband in "Provide Provide" proves itself to be stronger than the living female. The crime of killing a girl by setting her on fire is presented in the most detached manner in "About a Burning Girl". The narrator being a judge, who is inconvenienced because of the involvement of his servant saves him and perpetuates the victimization of women. The title "About A Burning Girl" points to the insignificance of the burning girl, as it is just about "a girl", another unnamed character. Spivak expanded the narrow classbased definition of the term "Subaltern" by including women in it. Subalterns cannot speak because the voice and the agency of these women are inscribed in patriarchal codes. Spivak notes the cruelty to the widow who is stripped of her ornaments by women set to the task by the male relatives. They tear hair as they take out any gold ornaments from the hair, fracture wrists as they break bangles off the arms and tear the flesh and tender bones of the nose as they take out earring and nose pins. In all this the female has only the identity of a widow, not of a human being who can feel pain or an individual who has rights over what to wear or who to be. The burning girl too ceases to be of value, or an entity even, as she is bracketed in the narrow category of a sinner. Mueenuddin's contention in the book that women are just powerless

objects of men's desires, greed and quest for power is captured in the epigraph of the book which states, "Three things for which we kill - land, women and gold." Mueenuddin thus prepares the reader from the start for the objectification of women as the key strain in this collection of stories. This proverb states women to be 'things' and possessions for which men can fight or even kill. They are not given any mental or emotional capacity. They are "weak, very weak in the head" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 97) or as Jaglani sums up his first wife, have a "slow mind and [an exclusive] preoccupation with household" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 61). Instances of blatant objectification and ownership are found in each story ranging from seemingly mild, but actually vitriolic, flirting by Nawabdin who calls his wife "Hello, my love, my chicken piece," (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 18) to blatant harassment that Saleema faces from the other servants. The leer evident in "Give us some of that black mango. It's a new variety ... No, it's smooth like ice cream, I swear to God my tongue is melting" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 18) shows how the men view Saleema as just an object to satiate their sexual desires.

This objectification creates a fear in the women and limits their agency. Their actions are determined by the idea that certain actions would make them appear more explicitly as objects of sexual gratification and they attempt to stay away from those actions. Zainab, in "Provide, Provide" expresses her fears: "If you dropped me they would call me a whore out loud as I walked down the street" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 18). It will not be incorrect to say that it is being called out in front of others that Zainab minds because she has accepted her objectification as a whore. Keeping in mind how oblivious Nawabdin's wife is to her low status it is not a farfetched idea that Zainab is not offended by men reducing her to a whore but to being called a whore in the street. Thus she accepts her status as an object of indulgence. This is another instance of silent obedience that Spivak asserts is a marked characteristic of the subaltern. That fact that women accept their objectification has an implication that it gives them some degree of power over men. Zainab knows men lust after her and decides to use this to her advantage. It is debatable whether using her sexuality is an advantage in her otherwise lost situation or manipulation whereby she is trying to trick men into awarding her a higher status. Sofer observes that the "women in these stories often use sex to prey on the men, and they do so with abandon at best and rage at worst — in this patriarchal, hierarchical society, it is their sharpest weapon." (2009). We believe "sharpest weapon" is an exaggeration and it would be better to say that in their bleak situation sexual lure is the only weapon these women have. Mueenuddin also accepts that his women are not sexually exploited as much as they themselves use it to attain some power.

They are victims but they are victims who are trying to work to empower themselves and often in misguided ways and failing miserably, this is the

thing with being powerless ... power through men whenever that affection is withdrawn they lose everything they have gained. (ndtvprofit, 2010)

Hai also interprets the women's actions in the same way:

Saleema's opportunism is not something we are asked to condemn. Instead it invites understanding, as we see her struggle against humiliation and exploitation... Like all of Mueenuddin's servant protagonists, Saleema makes choices within her limited options. Determined to find another "protector" and aware that only a man can deflect other male predators. (Hai, 2014, p. 20)

Husna, being the servant in Harouni's household, dreams of a better and higher status by learning typewriting and looking for a job. She makes herself appear beautiful by wearing "too much makeup and clothes too bright" and this is the outcome of her "determination to rise" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 114). In the same story the rich Begum Harouni is also powerless. She tried to control her husband through various means but ends up alone "in a state of suspended equilibrium, hoping to be recalled to her husband's side" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 115). Although she belongs to a higher class but she does not have any agency or control over the situation. Husna, aspiring to become rich, "sensed that all this might come to her through Harouni, if she became his mistress" (Mueenuddin, 2009, pp. 114-116). She has no other means to enhance her status so she chooses to seduce the old man. That she fails is another topic and does not detract from the point that she used her sexuality as a weapon.

Despite all their attempts, Husna, Saleema and Zainab cannot be called powerful or independent agents on the basis of their attempts to use their sexuality to gain power over men. We have pointed out that the women have some degree of power as and when they use their sexuality as a tease and as a weapon to attain a high status. But we contend that this exercise of so-called power is too limited, too narrow and too trivial to be of any consequence. Zainab, Husna and Saleema are doing just what the powerful men in their lives want them to. Men look at them as objects of gratification and they are being those objects even in cases when men do not think of them primarily as those objects. Spivak says that the subalterns cannot construct their identity and this is exactly what is happening in the case of these seemingly powerful temptresses. They are fitting themselves in an identity that the powerful patriarchs created for them. Whether it is the seductress or the loyal wife waiting for the husband to see the light women are not branching out into an identity of their choice but remain confined into the strict compartmentalization men have enforced on them.

It is worth nothing that sexual allure does not always lend female characters power. For instance, Zainab seduces Jaglani with the view to saving herself from sexual

exploitation and to gain a high social standing but this does not result in any power. She is able to get Jaglani to wed her but this is actually a trap. Ambreen Haq's comment is relevant here that:

Zainab is subject to Jaglani's actions and caught in a legal and cultural system controlled by ruthless men unscrupulous about how they position her. She is even kept ignorant of the fact that her marriage to Jaglani is technically incomplete. Jaglani takes care of the paperwork so that the legal documents to which illiterate Zainab "affixed her thumbprint" and that are signed by only one male witness. (2014, p. 25)

Zainab has a very weak standing. Her wedding is not legally valid and she is still vulnerable to exploitation. Jaglani can dismiss her at a moment's notice and she will be not just a scorned woman but also an adulteress who lived with a man outside marriage. The tag of mistress is always more damaging to the woman while the 'master' and his partnership in the sin is never talked about. The same strain has an eerie reflection in the death by fire of the unnamed girl where the perpetrator goes scot free because of the intervention of the powerful men. After all a nameless girl does not matter. Men move the women like players move chess pieces. It is obvious that women are only pawns. Zainab's move from one husband who tried to "starve her out and force her back to his home" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 57) to the one who wants to own her seems to be agency of some sort but it becomes obvious that it will not change her status as the decision is made for her by men. Though her declaration that she "was never for sale" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 61) seems to point to her independent nature, the fact is that the move was a transaction between two men. Her brother made the transaction with Jaglani and she was just a commodity exchanging hands without any say in the matter. Urged on by her brother, Jaglani demands divorce for Zainab by summoning her husband, "you can't seem to control your wife...you better divorce her" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 67). The transactional nature of the move of a female from one house to another is more obvious in "The Spoiled Man" where the writer depicts girls as cattle. The father "delivered the feebleminded girl. The girl's family had not come, and the two men did not celebrate the marriage... they were forced to lock her in the hut" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 235).

It is worth noting that the world Mueenuddin's women characters inhabit, is not free of sexual exploitation and sexual predators. Saleema as a working woman is harassed in a number of ways ranging from explicit demands for sexual favors to having to share the restroom with male staff. It is a similar sort of predatory behavior that forces Nawabdin's wife to seek security in a wedding match. Saleema however has to fight it out. The hold that the cook Hassan has over the lives of other servants and the harassment and assaults the female workers have to bear is depicted as customary.

In "Lily" it is evident that even for a more "self-sufficient" female who has "always taken care of herself financially" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 182) living in this society means bowing before its codes and constructs, no matter how stifling they may be. Matrimony is one such construct since it offers a (false) sense of security to the females. Lily is conditioned to believe in the reformative power of and falls for the first seemingly evolved Pakistani man she comes across. In stark contrast to all the previous marriages depicted in the collection, this one seems to be on most equal footing, where Murad came from a well-to-do family with foreign education and entrepreneurial streak, and financially independent Lily "felt it important that she brought this to the relationship, not the money, but the stance" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 190). However, despite the understanding and the apparent equality, the marriage falls apart as Murad's father had predicted, "he will be a good husband. And for you, I hope you'll keep the faith" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 193) because Lily's husband expected her to mold herself into the prototypical timidly obedient wife which Lily will not do. Similarly, in "A Spoiled Man" Sonya, a well-adjusted American, falls prey to the blackmail that is perpetrated in the name of marriage. Sohail cajoles her into coming back from America and into his servitude by using their son "the pledge of their love" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 228) as leverage. Sonya believes she is making a positive difference in the life of the people around her but is mistaken because she does not understand the system. Sonya's agency is similar to that of Rafia, since she has little control over her own life and is being exploited by men who are aided by the social constructs.

The economic dependence of Rafia, Sonya and to an extent Lily plays a part in their psychological subjugation, where intelligent, educated women are playing wife and using schemes and deception to achieve their ulterior purposes, just like their counterparts from the lower strata of the society. They may appear independent and in control but this patriarchal system has these educated women shackled in its traditions and requirements of passivity and obedience. It is like Spivak grants women agency "within...historically determinated systems" that render the women but "disempowered" (Varghese, 2009, p. 118) despite some form of agency that the women exhibit. Women in all these stories are constrained and controlled by the given gender role which oppresses them through limited opportunities and the inhuman treatment that they receive. Social, political and intellectual suppression makes them accept their position as inferior beings. This subjection denies them the very consciousness of being a human being and to ask for their rights or even to make a justified request on their own like Zainab who does not question any man whether it is her husband, her brother or Jaglani; she accepts whatever place they put her in and whatever they do to her. In all these stories not a single woman challenges the status quo, although each woman does use everything that she has, to manipulate men to rise in the hierarchical society but it is done through illegal means. The suppression

also makes them morally complacent. Loyalty or piety has little to do with them as they are trying to survive in this world of men by employing their bodies as a tool to lure men into sexual intimacy but like the passion their achievements are also very short-lived and they even lose what they had. Moreover this 'achievement' too is just playing into men's hands as the women never get real power. Men exclude them from all the major issues of life and bind them to their houses like an object. They cannot escape their fate and remain as long as men desire and can be discarded whenever the men want to. Women like the wife of Nawabdin, Saleema, Zainab or the burned girl all accept this perspective. They have no identity or voice and they follow the ideology to remain protected in the house and allow themselves to give everything that the men desire ofthem.

# **CONCLUSION**

This study endeavored to study the voices of the suppressed subaltern women in "In Other Rooms Other Wonders" in order to see how the status of women as subaltern is created, and what the mechanics of oppression are. These restrictions and oppression have been present in society for centuries through conditioning and men being the dominant group presented it as a natural division. Women are made to accept their position and the status of subaltern unquestionably, even though feminists claim that "Gender has to do not with how females really are but with the way that a given culture or subculture sees them, how they are culturally constructed" (Bertens, 2008, p. 98). The women in these stories like Nawabdin's wife, Saleema and Zainab accept everything that the society dictates to them regarding their place in society. They follow the constructed role that is given to them without a question. This is the result of patriarchal dominance and it is not only that the poor women like them are following the patriarchal "ideology [that] makes us see as natural, as belonging to nature, harmonious order of things" (Bertens, 2008, p. 67), do not question their unfair treatment but women of the upper class presented in these stories too display the same order like the absent wives of Jaglani, Begum K.K. Harouni and even Helen, who belong to a higher socio-economic group, yet suffer from economic and psychological oppression. The subalterns' stories are a revealing examination of contemporary Pakistani society where women have gained consciousness of their inferior status but the feudal and patriarchal filters muffle the voice of the subaltern through psychological and economic oppression.

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