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Voices Beneath: Exploring Female Identity and Marginalization in Asian Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intersections of gender, subalternity, and literary resistance in two narratives, Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi and Nora Okja Keller's Comfort Woman. It argues that fiction provides a critical space through which the gendered subaltern emerges not simply as a victim of structural violence, but as an active agent of resistance. Drawing on feminist and subaltern theories, the study foregrounds how women's bodies and voices disrupt dominant historiographies and expose the limits of official narratives. Through comparative literary analysis across South and East Asia, the paper highlights how caste, colonialism, patriarchy, militarism, and nationalism converge to render experiences by minority groups structurally inaudible. Yet it also demonstrates how such forces are contested through narrative, dialogue, and affect. By placing these literary works in dialogue, the paper interrogates the limitations of dominant epistemologies and Asian fiction as a mode of historiographical intervention. In doing so, it argues that subaltern women's narratives not only resist the erasures of history, but redefine what it means to witness and remember from the margins.

Keywords: Asian Fiction, Marginalization, Subaltern, Silence, Resistance

INTRODUCTION

In *Draupadi*, an officer asks, "What's this, a tribal called Dopdi? The list of names I brought has nothing like it!" (Devi, 1997). In *Comfort Woman*, Soon Hyo asserts, "I know what I speak, for that is my given name" (Keller, 1998). In both texts, women emerge from the margins, asserting their voice to confront dominant power structures within their societies. Unlike mainstream historiography, which legitimizes elite voices, such fictional narratives often foreground the experiences of women from minority groups. Moreover, marginality is not depicted as a static or passive condition here, but one that is actively negotiated and contested. Such stories, then,

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become a critical epistemological site, where the multiple pressures that gendered subalterns exert are revealed through characterization, dialogue, narrative, affect, and imagery.

At the same time, a comparative literary lens further deepens the understanding of women's marginalization across different yet interconnected contexts in Asia. While present discourse on subalternity, gender, and postcoloniality remains largely centered on South Asia and Southeast Asia, its interdisciplinary turn has expanded the scope to engage with oppression beyond these regions. For instance, Kennedy (2013) argues that East Asia, while relatively underexplored, is also marked by its own internal erasures. One such shared marginalization is between the invisibilization of Dalit women in India (Thapar-Bjorkert, 2006) and Korean "comfort women" who were forced into systematic sexual slavery under the Japanese Imperial army (Tanaka, 2003). Both groups are subjugated through intersecting power relations—casteist, patriarchal, colonial, imperial, and militaristic—that extend beyond gender alone, rendering their voices structurally inaudible.

Hence, by adopting an expanded frame, this paper places South and East Asian fiction in dialogue through a close literary analysis of representations of subaltern women in the aforementioned two fictional works—Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* and Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*. By drawing attention to how silence, resistance, and identity are narratively and affectively articulated by the protagonists, it reveals how negotiations of female identity in these stories serve as powerful and resonant counter-narratives. In doing so, it positions fiction not merely as a site of representation, but as a mode of resistance that goes beyond the limits of dominant discourse.

BACKGROUND

The figure of the subaltern woman is a complex one. It is often flattened within dominant epistemic formations: colonial, nationalist, patriarchal, or caste-based. Euphemisms like "comfort women," for instance, exemplify how language itself can function as a tool of erasure, sanitising the systematic sexual violence endured by as many as 400,000 women and girls, a majority of whom were Korean (Hata, 2018). Similarly, in the Indian context, Dalit women have long been the most vulnerable section of society due to the caste system, yet they are partly or entirely erased within broader narratives of caste reform or nationalist unity (All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch, 2021).

Subaltern Studies emerged, in part, to interrogate precisely such silences within formal systems of knowledge production. Originally used by Gramsci, it described those excluded from state power, and was later applied to colonial and nationalist historiography. Spivak's foundational critique, that the subaltern cannot speak, expands on this to point not to a literal muteness but the

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structural incommensurability of subaltern experience in such contexts (Spivak, 1988). Moreover, if the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, she notes that the subaltern as female is "doubly effected" (Spivak, 1988).

Yet, as Kamala Visweswaran (1999) notes, this theorization of gender encounters two crucial pitfalls: it either absorbs gender into caste and class or separates it from them altogether. Her call for an intersectional approach urges for an understanding of gendered subalternity as the product of overlapping structures, where colonialism, caste, patriarchy, and militarism, are read in convergence with gender rather than in isolation. Spivak too clarified that her intention was not to deny subaltern agency, but to critique the tendency to treat the subaltern as a homogenous or legible political subject (Spivak, 1990). In other words, the same complexities of identity, subject formation, and voice must be applied to the subaltern as to any other subject. This paper also adopts such a framework to examine how gendered subalternity is articulated through the body in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* and Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*.

In both stories, the body is not simply a site of subjugation. As Kate Millet (2016) asserts, sex is a status category with deep political implications. This understanding of the politicized body is further informed by Foucault's argument that wherever power exists, resistance also emerges (Foucault, 1978). This resistance does not arise from outside, but within the very structures of power itself. Since power is not solely coercive but embedded in everyday relations, it produces its own counterforces. Hence, in contexts where speech is silenced or rendered illegible, the body becomes a critical medium through which resistance is enacted and articulated. By adopting this intersectional lens, the body emerges not merely as a site of victimization, but as a terrain where power is negotiated, contested, and transformed through acts of resistance.

DISCUSSION

In Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*, 27-year-old Dopdi Mejhen is a tribal woman and political activist. As Festino and Marins (2021) note, she is triply colonized not only as a woman and a colonial subject, but as one racialized by upper-caste hegemony. After being captured by state forces, she is brutally tortured and raped under the orders of Senanayak, an Army officer. However, in an act of defiance, she refuses to cover her bloodied and bruised body. Instead, she walks naked towards Senanayak, challenging his authority with her violated and bruised body. Her nakedness becomes a direct confrontation to her rapists and the patriarchal notions of dignity and victimhood. She asks, "What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again?" (Devi, 1997).

This moment is significant as it collapses the binary between victim and agent, a division often imposed upon subaltern women. Other instances in the text further reinforce this rupture. While

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Dopdi "[walks] toward [Senayak] in the bright sunlight with her head high," the guards trail "nervously" behind (Devi, 1997). Similarly, Senanayak "simply cannot understand" her indomitable laughter and is "terribly afraid" by an unarmed target for the first time (Devi, 1997). This reversal of the victim-agent axis makes Dopdi, in Spivak's words, a "terrifying superobject," exceeding the frameworks that seek to contain her (Spivak, 1997).

While it is precisely the gendered nature of violence inflicted upon Dopdi that renders her a historical subject for Spivak, it is worth noting that Dopdi's resistance does not solely emerge at the moment of final confrontation. As Majumdar (2017) rightfully notes, this risks reducing Dopdi's agency to a few lines at the very end of the text. Returning to Kamala Visweswaran's critique, wherein no single axis of power can adequately account for subaltern women's experiences, the pressures that Dopdi exerts as a political activist are equally nuanced. This is embedded in the narrative from the outset too, where Dopdi is introduced as a seasoned guerrilla—"long wanted," "the most notorious female"—trained in survival, skilled in concealment, and already positioned as a threat to state power (Devi, 1997). Even at the moment before her capture, Dopdi "ululates with the force of her entire being," to warn her comrades. This same power returns when she confronts Senanayak, in "a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation" (Devi, 1997). The body, here, is not just a passive site of inscription, but an active force that resists and reclaims multiple power structures. For this reason, Dopdi's resistance too, is not only characterized and registered when Senanayak is afraid, but is consistent and vocal throughout the story.

In *Comfort Woman* too, Soon Hyo's revelation to her daughter, that she was once held in a Japanese military comfort station, functions not merely as a personal confession, but as an act of counter-memory. Her testimony confronts long-standing national and transnational silences surrounding the comfort women system during Japanese occupation. Lines like "I speak of laying down for a hundred men," express the affective weight of her lived experience, wherein the body becomes central to her testimony (Keller, 1998).

This witnessing, however, does not always take the form of rational, linear speech. Beccah, Soon Hyo's daughter, recalls how her mother would often fall into trance-like states, her body seemingly overtaken by spirits. These episodes, marked by hallucinations, visions, and ritual dances, allowed Soon Hyo to commune with the dead and other victims. This is significant for two reasons. First, her speech exceeds coherence, echoing Spivak's formulation of the subaltern's unhearability, where the subaltern voice, when it does emerge, often does so through non-normative registers that dominant epistemologies fail to recognize. Second, these communions with the spirit world include Induk, the previous "Akiko" at the camp. After Induk's death, Soon Hyo assumes both her name and role, becoming the "new Akiko" (Keller, 1998). However, the narrative does not treat this as a mere loss of self, but as a rupture through

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which a dispersed network of subjectivities emerge. In other words, “Akiko” no longer denotes a single woman but becomes a vessel for a multiply violated, yet multiply resistant, subjectivity. This becomes strikingly clear when Soon Hyo recalls how Induk “denounced the soldiers, yelling at them to stop their invasion of her country and her body” (Keller, 1998). As with Dopdi, resistance here emerges not solely through gendered violation but through a politicized articulation of the body, where both are explicitly entwined. Moreover, this memory does not solely belong to Soon Hyo or Induk. In voicing it, she performs what Marianne Hirsch terms postmemory, a form of inherited witnessing that collapses the boundaries between past and present, self and other (Hirsch, 2012). This transmission continues as Soon Hyo narrates her own experiences to Beccah, creating a generational archive of trauma and resistance. Unlike conventional testimony, her voice is fractured, affective, and often inaccessible, even to her daughter, yet functions as an equally powerful mode of resistance. Together, both texts underscore how subaltern testimony often resists neat narrative form, insisting instead on complexity and ambiguity. The same networks that regulate the subaltern body enables fissures through which resistance can be expressed. In doing so, they expand the archive of political agency, wherein silence, resistance, and witnessing, all become powerful sites of subaltern voice.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has examined how gendered subalternity is not merely a marker of victimhood but a site of complex agency and resistance. Drawing on feminist and subaltern theories, it explored how the female subaltern, often silenced by nationalist, colonial, and patriarchal structures, reclaims voice and agency in ways that challenge dominant historiographies. Through a comparative literary analysis of two South and East Asian texts, the paper traces how women’s bodies become both the terrain and the medium of subversion. The use of the body as testimony and the affective representations of lived experiences all serve to unsettle the fixity of historical truth.

These narratives do not always yield clarity or closure. Instead, their ambiguity resists the assimilative logic of dominant historical discourse. Such resistance is not only political but epistemological, questioning who gets to produce knowledge and whose voices are deemed legible. Ultimately, this paper contributes to the growing body of scholarship that seeks to rethink the boundaries of history, voice, and representation. It addresses the gap between official historiography and lived experience, between what is recorded and what is endured. By centering such narratives, the paper posits an alternative archive that gestures toward a people’s history not as a supplement to dominant discourse, but as a necessary disruption. In doing so, it reimagines historical recovery not as a search for completeness, but as an ethical engagement with silence, absence, and resistance.

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