

Silenced Desires and Subaltern Voices: A Postcolonial Feminist Study of Selected Short Stories by Abbasi and Sidhwa

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ABSTRACT

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This study is a postcolonial feminist reading of the silencing of female desire in selected short stories of Pakistani Anglophone writers Bapsi Sidhwa and Talat Abbasi, based on the concepts of subalternity, epistemic violence and discursive foreclosure as theorized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988). The study investigates *Breaking It Up*, *Their Language of Love*, *Sehra-bai*, and *Defend Yourself Against Me* from Sidhwa's fiction and *The Birdman*, *Simple Questions*, *A Bear and Its Trainer*, and *A Piece of Cake* from Abbasi's fiction, and how each story systematically forecloses a particular female desire. While Sidhwa, writing from within the elite Parsi community, highlights the paradox of the privileged subaltern. Abbasi's portrayal of working women and girls of the same class occupies the different social location. Both writers however emphasizes that female silence is structurally produced rather than naturally given and that internalized patriarchy is transmitted across generations.

Keywords: subaltern, silenced desires, postcolonial feminism, epistemic violence, Spivak, Sidhwa, Abbasi

INTRODUCTION

One of Pakistan's most well-known and internationally acclaimed novelists, Bapsi Sidhwa is best known for her skill at navigating the intricate intersections of history, communal

identity, and the female experience. Her short stories explore the personal and private sphere, and her novels often deal with the larger story of history. The stories used for this analysis are from her collection *Their Language of Love* (2013).

In these stories, Sidhwa explores the Parsi community and the broader South Asian diaspora, highlighting the complexities of negotiation and desire, and the social forces that shape women's lives.

Sidhwa's work is set in largely middle-class and diasporic settings, and Talat Abbasi offers another, but related, perspective, in the socioeconomic periphery. Abbasi is a rare talent in the short story genre in Pakistan, who is known for her focus on the underprivileged and marginalized and her simplicity. Her work is about the lives of the subaltern in the purest sense, about people on the margins of society, who struggle against social invisibility, poverty and displacement. The stories explored in this study are from her collection *Bitter Gourd and Other Stories* (2001).

Although these two authors employ different narrative registers, they have in common a commitment to documenting the unheard experience. Abbasi's narrative style is often flat or detached, highlighting the starkness of her characters' environments. Her stories are unique in that they are short and emotional. Abbasi focuses on the lives of domestic workers, bear trainers and lonely people, providing a counter-narrative to the idealized depictions of postcolonial identity. When combined, Sidhwa and Abbasi's writings provide a thorough discussion of the enduring systems of gender and class oppression, enabling a comparative analysis that covers the whole spectrum of the postcolonial female experience.

While the postcolonial aspects of South Asian literature have been well explored, the specific analysis of the subaltern voice in Sidhwa's and Abbasi's short story collections is lacking. The grand narratives found in major novels, like Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*, have received the majority of scholarly attention; however, the subtle depictions of gendered silence in shorter fiction have received less attention.

Furthermore, there is a lack of comparative studies which relate Abbasi's relentless focus on

the extreme socioeconomic margins with Sidhwa's focus on the Parsi community and middle-class domesticity. This study fills that gap by examining the ways in which both authors use specific narrative techniques to convey repressed desires. The study focuses on these eight selected stories to highlight the intersectional complexity of subaltern struggles, often lost in more general literary studies. The importance of this study is that it applies the theoretical research of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) on the illegibility of the subaltern voice directly to the context of Pakistani short fiction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Postcolonial feminism emerged in the 1980s as a result of the Eurocentric limitations of mainstream feminist theory. It challenges the process of homogenisation of non-Western experiences by analysing the interaction between colonial legacies and indigenous patriarchal structures to create unique forms of marginalisation. Postcolonial Feminism emerged in the 1980s and had its roots in Postcolonial Theory. Women who went abroad for education began to ask themselves why women's problems were viewed mainly from a western point of view. (Mert & Ünsal, 2022).

Silkü (2002) explored postcolonial feminist discourse in Flora Nwapa's *Women are Different* and argued that Nwapa, the first Nigerian woman to publish in English, is challenging the patriarchal and colonial ideologies through an alternative feminist discourse. Similarly, Zidan (2013) argues that Atwood's novels highlight the concept of double colonization, a comparison between Canada's political oppression and the oppression of women by patriarchy, as a means of reclaiming both national and personal identity. Ahmed (2013) argues that postcolonial feminism should be employed to analyse the representation of women in Pakistani fiction to better understand the specific challenges and struggles of women in Pakistan's postcolonial context.

The theoretical foundation of this study rests on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial feminist critique, which interrogates how institutionalized structures silence marginalized subjectivities. Nazar (2016) examine the subaltern's silencing in Muhammad Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*, concluding that Pakistani women's individuality and free will are threatened by this passive and victimized image of womanhood, which is marked by a politics of reliance on male counterparts. Sumra and Taseer (2018) provide a critical application of Spivak's theory by examining Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl that Broke Its Shell*, concluding that although the subaltern can and does speak, their voices are not heard because of a lack of communication but rather because society fails to understand them. Ashraf et al. (2020) examine Sabyn Javeri's *Nobody Killed Her* to find that both servant-class Nazneen and the elite Prime Minister Rani Shah are subaltern subjects who are repressed, dehumanized, and eventually silenced by the dominant structures of society. Finally, Rind et al. (2022) investigate how British Muslims are portrayed as subalterns through textual analysis and close reading of Kamila Shamsi's *Home Fire*. The researchers conclude that the Muslim British in the book are ultimately voiceless and unheard.

Sidhwa is a cornerstone of Pakistani English literature, with scholarships extensively documenting how her major novels expose patriarchal norms, nationalist violence, and identity crises. To begin with, Bokhari (2018) explored the feminist paradigm in post-colonial literature, asserting that the genre serves as a mirror reflecting the era's core concerns, including gender. Expanding on this critique, Mukherjee (2019) explored the portrayal of women in Bapsi Sidhwa's novels, *The Pakistani Bride* and *The Ice-Candy-Man*, providing a comprehensive postcolonial feminist critique. Similarly, Ghilzai et al. (2024) conducted a study on the silencing of female bodies and the exploration of female agency in postcolonial Pakistan through the lens of Bapsi Sidhwa's novel, *Ice-Candy-Man*.

In recent years, critical attention has actively extended this inquiry from her novel to her short fiction collection, *Their Language of Love*. Moving into this generic shift Khan et al. (2020) explored Sidhwa's short story collection *Their Language of Love* through a reader-response approach, highlighting the importance of female bonding and mother-daughter relationship as a source of strength for protagonists who maintain an individual voice. In a parallel study of same collection Khan et al. (2020) examine the mimetic representation of female characters, employing mimesis and Hegel's master-slave dialectic to argue that Sidhwa presents a balanced portrait of strong, active movers of stories. Furthermore, Rubab et al. (2021) examined the deconstruction of patriarchal structures in short story "A Gentlemanly War," utilizing Barbara B. Stern's three step analysis to reveal how the narrative uses oppositional binaries to expose embedded gender biases and elite class privileges.

Accordingly, Arshad et al. (2024) investigated the repression of female desires in the collection, using Sylvia Walby's theory of patriarchy to propose that Sidhwa's stories question social norms and promote female empowerment. Adrees (2025) provided an alternative materialist viewpoint by conducting a Marxist analysis of the short story "Sehra-bai," which showed that social hierarchies and power disparities create serious socioeconomic injustices that compel marginalized people to change and adapt. Lastly, Monish and Kannadhasan (2025) analysis of *Their Language of Love's* complex gender and power dynamics confirmed that the story thoroughly examines how women successfully reject patriarchy through the critical lens of intersectionality.

The short fiction of Talat Abbassi offers incisive, localized perspectives on domesticity and the socio-economic constraints of the subaltern experience in Pakistani literature. Ahmad (2017) explores the double colonization of women in post-independence Pakistan by critically analyzing the short fiction of Talat

Abbasi, concluding that her work highlights the distinct vulnerability of poor women to human trafficking and exploitative, unequal marriages. Building upon these concerns of marginalization, Kalsoom (2025) investigates the construction of womanhood in Abbasi's short stories through the framework of Simone de Beauvoir, demonstrating how her narratives reflect deep-rooted gender disparities and illustrate how female characters struggle to find individual selves within strict social boundaries.

Theoretical Framework

This study applies Spivak's theoretical approach to the analysis of female characters in the structures that regulate their speech and desire in a few short stories of Sidhwa and Abbasi. It looks into how their subjectivity is created within the stories and how their voices are silenced, restricted, or mediated. By doing this, the study transcends a broad feminist criticism and critically examines the circumstances that make women's voices understandable or unheard.

Consequently, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* provides a comprehensive and nuanced approach to the complex interrelationships between gender, power and representation in postcolonial literature. It gives a better insight into the lives of women and the realities of the texts in the selected short stories, as this study explores the tension between speech and silence, presence and erasure, and desire and repression.

The framework is then applied to the selected texts to examine if the female characters can speak for themselves or if their speech is mediated by dominant discourses of patriarchy, communal morality and cultural respectability, and if silence is not only the absence of speech but a meaningful social and textual condition, which can indicate repression, internal oppression, or fragmented resistance.

Research Methodology

The current study is a qualitative research because it is aimed at analyzing literary texts in detail and not measuring numerical data.

Qualitative approach is particularly suitable for literary research because it enables a comprehensive analysis of meanings, representations, emotions and symbolic structures that are contained in texts. The qualitative approach is the most appropriate methodological base as this study is intended to explore the suppressed desires and limited agency of the female characters in a set of short stories by Bapsi Sidhwa and Talat Abbasi.

Research Objectives

1. To explore how Bapsi Sidhwa and Talat Abbasi portray women's silenced desires and limited agency in their short stories.
2. To analyze the role of patriarchal and cultural structures in restricting female subjectivity.
3. To compare the portrayals of silenced women in the works of Sidhwa and Abbasi, identifying points of convergence and divergence within postcolonial Pakistani society.

Research Questions

1. In what ways do Sidhwa and Abbasi portray women's silenced desires and limited agency?
2. What role do patriarchal and cultural structures play in restricting female subjectivity?
3. In what respects do Sidhwa and Abbasi's portrayals of silenced women converge and diverge within the context of postcolonial Pakistani society?

DATA ANALYSIS

Using Spivak's (1988) postcolonial feminist framework, the analysis that follows how Sidhwa and Abbasi depict the suppression of female desire and the limitation of female subjectivity in eight chosen short stories in order to pinpoint the ways in which subaltern women are denied a legitimate discursive position. The three research objectives of the study are addressed by the organization of the analysis: the representation of suppressed desires and limited agency; the role of cultural and patriarchal structures in

limiting female subjectivity; and the similarities and differences between the literary representations of the subaltern woman in postcolonial Pakistani society by the two authors.

Sidhwa and Abbasi both create female protagonists in all eight stories whose desires are present but structurally incomprehensible due to the prevailing frameworks surrounding them. According to Spivak (1988), the lack of a discursive position from which the subaltern's words would be accepted as valid claims is what prevents her from speaking. This condition is applied precisely consistently in the stories written by both authors.

In Sidhwa's *Breaking It Up*, Feroza's yearning for romantic autonomy is methodically intercepted and reinterpreted as betrayal of the community. Zareen's weaponization of sacrifice, excommunication, and ancestral obligation overwrites every expression of her desire to wed David, supporting Spivak's (1988) claim that dominant structures constantly speak for the subaltern by claiming to be authoritative interpreters of her experience. In "Their Language of Love," Nav's dual authority as husband and teacher prevents Roshni from being acknowledged as a subject rather than a role. This is an example of Spivak's (1988) double bind, in which the subaltern woman is both required to be independent and maintained in a state of structural subordination. In "Sehrai-bai," the line "he was deaf when I spoke, he never heard me" precisely maps onto Spivak's contention that the listener's constitutive incapacity to identify the subaltern as a speaking subject renders her mute rather than the lack of words. The Ayah, a Partition refugee whose wish to be accepted as a victim rather than a source of dishonor is thwarted by the very family that ought to have shielded her, further broadens the story's scope and demonstrates how silencing simultaneously operates across registers of class, history, and social location. In "Defend Yourself Against Me," Sidhwa records the corpus's most historically grounded

manifestations of repressed desire. The desire for bodily sovereignty is carried by the women who store kerosene instead of being apprehended during the Partition riots, but as Spivak's (1988) analysis of sati shows, this desire finds no acknowledged discursive outlet and can only be expressed through the destruction of the very body it seeks to protect. The shout of "zenana for sale" from the street vendors depicts epistemic violence in its most extreme form, turning women into commodities whose desire for subjecthood is completely erased.

In Abbasi's "The Birdman," Shano's repressed longing is purposefully modest, a slight improvement from sweeperess to ayah. However, Ghulam's masculine framework is the only way to express this wish, supporting Spivak's (1988) claim that a male interlocutor's grammar of power always mediates the subaltern woman's desire. The most literal implementation of Spivak's argument in the entire corpus occurs at the end of the story, when the community projects conflicting narratives onto Shano's departing figure while she sits in the dark with a cloth stuffed in her mouth. In "Simple Questions," Abbasi simultaneously distributes suppressed desire among three female characters: the mother's desire for her daughter's safety is a colonized desire replicated as common sense, the ustani's desire to advocate is foreclosed by an unbridgeable communicative gap, and Halima's desire for education is foreclosed before it can be verbally articulated. The study's most succinct description of Spivak's (1988) epistemic violence is the ustani's claim that Halima is like a stillborn child, born in the dark, dead before she can live. In "A Bear and Its Trainer," Dolly's need for approval and reciprocity has been so completely subsumed by patriarchal conditioning that, even after the marriage has ended, she still acts like a loyal wife. With remarkable economy, Spivak's internalized conditioning argument is crystallized in the bear metaphor she uses to describe herself: a bear would never stop dancing. In "A Piece of Cake," Abbasi reduces the silenced desire of the subaltern woman to its

most elemental form. The servant girl's desire is not for romantic agency or social recognition but simply for a piece of cake, a desire so basic that its denial exposes the total erasure of her subjecthood within the domestic hierarchy she serves. Because her status as a servant renders even this elementary wish structurally illegible, she pursues it in secret and dies concealed inside the refrigerator. Spivak (1988) argues that epistemic violence does not merely suppress the subaltern's speech but dismantles the very conditions necessary for her desires to be recognized as legitimate human claims. The servant girl's death confirms this argument with brutal economy: the subaltern who cannot speak her desire openly is driven to pursue it in concealment, and the concealment itself kills her.

Sidhwa and Abbasi's fundamental agreement is that the subaltern woman is silenced rather than silent, and that this silencing is structural rather than accidental. The constitutive deafness of the structures that receive their speech, rather than their own incapacity, forecloses the subjecthood of the intelligent and desirous women created by both authors. Internalized colonialism is the most comprehensive form of subaltern silencing, as both authors further demonstrate. Spivak's (1988) claim that the subaltern replicates the logic of her own oppression as devotion, duty, or survival wisdom is supported by Sehra-bai's defense of Rustom, the mother's insistence that her daughter remain silent, and Dolly's unwavering devotion to Mr. Mirza.

The register of silencing that each author records is where the biggest differences are found. Sidhwa highlights the macro-historical aspects of gendered subalternity by placing female silencing within historically grounded and collectively experienced structures, such as minority communal politics and Partition violence. Abbasi, on the other hand, traces silencing through the personal, everyday aspects of household life, such as alarm clocks, laundry baskets, and a latrine where a girl sobs over her education that has been foreclosed. While

Abbasi presents moments of ambiguous embodied resistance, such as Shano's departure and Dolly's retaliation, that complicate without resolving the question of subaltern agency, Sidhwa's narratives tend toward conclusions that validate the structural completeness of silencing. Together, the two writers provide complementary literary voices that map gendered subalternity throughout the entire spectrum of postcolonial Pakistani women's experience, supporting Spivak's (1988) main contention that the subaltern woman is unable to speak because dominant structures have preemptively destroyed the prerequisites for her speech to be accepted as a valid human utterance rather than because she lacks words.

FINDINGS

The results of this study support Spivak's (1988) contention that the subaltern cannot speak not because she has nothing to say but rather because the dominant discursive framework lacks the apparatus to receive her utterance as a legitimate claim. Sidhwa and Abbasi both depict the silencing of female desire as a condition of structural unintelligibility rather than as a condition of muteness. Feroza's desire for romantic agency in "Breaking It Up," Roshni's desire for recognition in "Their Language of Love," Sehra-bai's desire to be heard in her marriage, the Partition women's desire for bodily sovereignty in "Defend Yourself Against Me," Shano's desire for socioeconomic elevation in "The Birdman," Halima's desire for education in "Simple Questions," Dolly's desire for reciprocal intimacy in "A Bear and Its Trainer," and the female protagonist's desire simply for a piece of cake in "A Piece of Cake." In each instance, the patriarchal, communal, colonial, and economic structures that control the terms of recognition within each story make these desires structurally incomprehensible. The study also discovers that the most complete foreclosure of female agency happens through internalization rather than external prohibition, when the female subject replicates the logic of her own suppression as common sense, duty, or devotion. This is best

illustrated by Sehra-bai's defense of Rustom, the mother's silencing of Halima in "Simple Questions," and Dolly's continued performance of wifely duty after her marriage has ended in "A Bear and Its Trainer."

The results also show that, at the domestic, communal, historical, and neo-colonial levels, patriarchal and cultural structures serve as the main mechanisms of subaltern silencing in both authors' narratives. At the domestic level, as demonstrated by Nav's eroticization of Roshni's dependence, Rustom's ideological deafness, Mr. Mirza's methodical conditioning of Dolly, and the in-laws' reduction of Shano to an economic mule, the patriarchal household continuously serves not as a site of protection but as the main mechanism through which female subjectivity is produced and simultaneously negated. From Zareen's weaponization of Parsi communal identity in "Breaking It Up" to the marriage economy's depletion of female worth in "Simple Questions," both authors document how vocabularies of honor, purity, communal survival, and reproductive duty preempt the female subject's ability to articulate her desires as legitimate claims at the communal and cultural level. The diasporic settings of "Their Language of Love," "A Bear and Its Trainer," and "Defend Yourself Against Me" confirm that, at the neo-colonial level, the Western environment does not liberate the female subject but rather intensifies her double colonization by adding the demands of the global North to the weight of indigenous patriarchal structures already in place. This enacts the exact double bind Spivak (1988) identifies as the defining condition of the postcolonial female subject.

The comparative results show that Sidhwa and Abbasi differ greatly in the register and scale at which they situate this condition, but they are most fundamentally similar in their insistence that gendered silencing is structural rather than incidental and that its most resistant form is internalized rather than externally imposed. From the devastating communal violence of the Partition in "Defend Yourself Against Me" to

the cultural politics of a minority diaspora community in "Breaking It Up," Sidhwa embeds the foreclosure of female desire within historically grounded and collectively experienced structures, proving that gendered silencing is ingrained in the biggest structures of postcolonial history. In contrast, Abbasi shows how the Spivakian condition of the subaltern woman is replicated in the most commonplace and unremarkable aspects of female experience by tracing the same condition through the intimate and everyday aspects of domestic life, from a laundry hamper arranged with exacting precision to a latrine where a girl sobs for her foreclosed future. Another difference is how resistance is handled: Abbasi presents ambiguous embodied resistance moments in "The Birdman" and "A Bear and Its Trainer" that complicate but do not resolve the issue of subaltern agency, whereas Sidhwa's narratives consistently affirm the structural completeness of subaltern silencing. Spivak's (1988) main claim that the subaltern woman cannot speak because dominant structures have preemptively destroyed the conditions required for her speech to be accepted as legitimate human utterance is confirmed by the two authors' complementary literary voices that map the silencing of female desire across the entire spectrum of postcolonial Pakistani female experience.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that Bapsi Sidhwa and Talat Abbasi's short stories represent a long-term literary engagement with the situation of the subaltern woman in postcolonial Pakistani society. The study demonstrates that the suppression of female desire in the narratives of both authors is structural rather than accidental through the examination of eight chosen short stories. It is permanent rather than transient. It is dispersed throughout the entire spectrum of postcolonial female experience rather than being limited to any one class or historical period. Feroza, Roshni, Sehra-bai, Shano, Halima, Dolly, and the unidentified women of Partition all have clear, valid, and frequently expressed desires. However, these aspirations are always

thwarted by overlapping systems of colonial legacy, communal tradition, patriarchal authority, and internalized conditioning. An additional significant difference is revealed when Sidhwa and Abbasi are compared within a single Spivakian framework. Sidhwa places gendered silencing in the context of diasporic minority politics and the macro-historical registers of Partition. Abbasi uses the personal and everyday aspects of domestic life to trace the same condition. They are complementary literary voices that together map the postcolonial

Pakistani female experience in a way that neither one could accomplish on its own. In the end, this study supports Spivak's (1988) main claim that the subaltern woman is unable to speak because dominant structures have preemptively destroyed the prerequisites for her speech to be accepted as legitimate, rather than because she lacks words or desires. This research further demonstrates that postcolonial Pakistani women's short fiction continues to be an analytically vital but critically understudied area for the ongoing study of gendered subalternity.

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