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MARGINALIZED AS SUBALTERN: A STUDY OF SUBALTERNITY IN SARA SULERI'S "THE PROPERTY OF WOMAN"

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ABSTRACT

Sara Suleri is highly valued and illustrative writer of postcolonial era in Pakistani English Literature. She is highly appreciated for her thematic concerns in her writings. Subaltern is the appropriate term to break down the selected short story for new interpretation. This study focuses on the struggle of lower class. It also highlights the miseries of those who belong to lower class. 'The Property of Woman' portrays how the people of lower class especially women are marginalized. This study discovers the postcolonial concerns of the selected short story to find the concept of marginalization through the lens of the concept of subaltern. This paper focuses on the application of the concept of subaltern through two dimensions, that is, woman as a subaltern for being woman and woman as a subaltern for belonging to a marginalized group of society. The researcher has tried to apply these two concepts on the selected short story through the character of protagonist, Halima.

INTRODUCTION

Sara Suleri is one of the highly illustrative writers of postcolonial literature. She is known for highlighting many social and political issues like female subjugation and suppression, inappropriate interpretation of Islamic laws in the Pakistani society.

She also advocates the lower strata of the society. In her novels she tries to highlight the tragic events of her family, the issues of gender, religion, partition and postcolonial nation. She is also known for giving an image of marginalized group of people who always starve for their existence. She raises a voice for marginalized people of the colonized society who are always voiceless. According to Suleri, in Pakistan an easy breath is never allowed to lower class especially women. She highlights this issue in her *Meatless Days* (1989). Suleri is known for her memoirs *Meatless Days* and *Boys will be Boys*, but she has written many short stories including 'The Property of Woman' to give voice to voiceless. In this story Suleri presents a contrast between higher and lower class of the society to highlight the issues of poor class. For this purpose, she uses the protagonist of the story, Halima as a mouthpiece. She was of the view that in the present time of postcolonial era the problems of marginalized people and their plights have aggravated.

'The Property of Woman' is a short story that is written in the stream of consciousness to describe marginalization of poor class. Halima, the protagonist of the story, is a maid-servant who becomes the spoke's woman of the writer to describe the marginalization in details. Halima remains torn apart due to her unfulfilled social needs and emotional longings. To escape from the difficulties of life she imagines and idealizes Pather Nadi. She imagines him to forget the harsh realities of her life. She belongs to a social class that works hard from dawn to dusk but still unable to live a prosperous life. Her family lives in mud houses that are washed away in every rainy season. They lost their homes every year but they never lost their social position as a marginalized group. Through this story Suleri presents a clear image of majority of Pakistani folks who are bound to struggle throughout their lives.

Suleri highlights the concept of subaltern and marginalization in a postcolonial society. People who are not given equal rights in a society and who are continuously oppressed are the marginalized people. Gayatri Chakrovery Spivak used the term "Post Coloniality" that deals with the capitalistic strategies to marginalize the poor. Marginalization has been the topic of study for many postcolonial writers. They used marginalization as a tool to study the lower class of society who struggles to gain the resources to ensure an acceptable livelihood. The people of marginalized groups are never given equal rights in the society. They are always ignored, neglected and excluded from the society. The present research tries to study the concept of marginalization in "The Property of Woman" by keeping in focus all these factors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many postcolonial writers who have contributed to the welfare of Postcolonial literature. They tried to highlight every disregarded aspect of the lives of common men. Marginalization is one of the most important concerns of Postcolonial literature. The influence of colonization, the socio-political circumstances and the concern for marginalized groups are the major apprehensions of Postcolonial writers. Postcolonial literature is often named as the literature of the

marginalized people by the critics. The concept of marginalization is applied to depict the struggle of poor group of people to endure their participation in the social life. Sara Suleri focuses on the lives and struggles of marginalized strata of the society, unlike Mohsin Hamid who only focuses on the lives of the upper class. As in the "The Property of Woman" a complete image of marginalized strata of society is presented by Suleri. This story focuses on the status of woman and the problems of minority group that belongs to lower class.

Gilroy (1997) argues that 'people make their own identities, especially those people who are considered as marginalized, but not knowing that they will always be incomplete'. People who belong to lower class always try to escape from the title of marginalization but they remain in continuous struggle, as is the case with Halima. She tries her best to escape from the darkness of her existence by talking about Pather Nadi. Racism and Prejudice (1996) argues that "Discrimination is a manifestation of prejudice which can be both individual and systemic, and overt or subtle." In this story the discrimination is due to the systemic prejudice. The family of Halima and all the other people like her are left behind by the authorities like a past.

Ashraf (2014) in *A Message of Globalization: An Analysis of Contemporary South Asian English Novels* argues that 'marginalized community is destined to face hardship with no hope of happiness'. Same is the case with Halima, she is also destined to face hardship and suffer throughout her life.

The present study is an attempt to analyze the marginalization of poor strata of the society. The main focus of the study is on the character of Halima. She is representation of marginalization of poor class in a postcolonial society.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What is meant by 'Subaltern' under the light of the selected text?
- How Halima can be considered as a subaltern for being a woman?
- How Halima can be considered as a subaltern for belonging to a marginalized class?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this research paper are:

- To understand the concept of 'Subaltern' under the light of selected text.
- To study the character of Halima as a subaltern for being a woman.
- To analyze the character of Halima as a subaltern for belonging to a marginalized class.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of subaltern is a prominent feature of postcolonial literature. It is the process of suspension of a group of people from social negotiation and space. It is characterized by the inequality of people of lower class, especially women. There

is almost a very little opportunity for them in their society. Subaltern people are those who have a powerless position in the society. Marginalization is divided into two categories: societal marginalization and spatial marginalization. The societal marginalization is related to the issues of human population, culture, religion and social stratification. Social marginalization is very prominent in postcolonial literature. It is related to the problems of lower class on the basis of lack of opportunities. It is associated with the suppression of individuals at the social level. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is a key figure of postcolonial theory. She is known for her critical work *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (1987). This work is famous for her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In this essay she introduced the concept of subaltern by relating it to women. Basically subaltern is a military term, used to describe inferior people. Spivak has given new dimensions to this term by using it in postcolonial aspects. She used this term to describe the marginalization of women in a postcolonial society. According to Spivak women are 'doubly marginalized' first for being women and second for belonging to poor or disregarded class.

In "The Property of Woman", Halima, the protagonist is the clear depiction of the term subaltern. She has to suppress her emotional feelings and she has to work day and night. Her husband is a lazy person who is not able to give a good livelihood to his family so Halima has to work along with her children all day. In this way the researcher has used the concept of subaltern in two dimensions. First of all the researcher applied this concept on Halima for being a woman in a postcolonial society and then for belonging to a marginalized society, having no equal and basic rights.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive methodology of research is adopted for this research paper. The observational and analytical study of many articles and research papers is done for data collection, by keeping in mind the universality of the chosen topic. The goal of this study is to analyze the marginalization of poor class in the light of Sara Suleri's 'The Property of Woman'. The script of the short story helps to explore the concept of subaltern. For this research both primary and secondary source of data is used. The primary source is the text of the short story itself. The secondary sources consist on all the critical material that is relevant to the study, articles and reviews of different researchers. In this way this research paper consists on a descriptive, observational and qualitative method of research.

DATA ANALYSIS

'The Property of Woman' written in stream of consciousness is embedded with the concept of subaltern. It is a kind of Suleri's protest against the suppression of lower class, especially the suppression of women. Like all her writings she presents a contrast of higher and lower class in this story to highlight the issue of marginalization. Halima, the protagonist of the story is described as a person who belongs to the lower class of the society. She is a maid-servant and works in the bungalows of Gulberg V. Gulberg V is described as a fashionable and posh area of

Lahore where higher class live. It is located along the canal. On the other hand there are mud houses across the road. People like Halima work from dawn to dusk in the luxurious houses and then they are condemned to their muddy houses. They are not even given the opportunity to enjoy a permanent residence. Their houses are always washed away in the rainy season and they are left with no shelter. As Suleri quotes:

They themselves were far enough away, beyond the ken of those – whose houses did not vanish in the rain.....living in a city as a migrant worker in a group of homes that the rains most regularly washed away. (p. 11)

Here a contrast of higher and lower class of the society is presented. The people of higher class enjoy prestigious lives in their bungalows whereas poor people are unable to call anything as a home. They are in a continuous struggle but their reward is nothing. Unfortunately, Halima belongs to this marginalized group who don't even have the change to enjoy the basic necessities of life. She belongs to a class who works from dawn to dusk but their reward is nothing.

Their unceasing struggle for survival has suppressed their original identities. They are no longer themselves but mere workers who have to work whole day only to fill their stomach. Same is the case with Halima she has lost her real identity but she sometimes think about her abandoned self. As she asked the narrator (Sara) that if she had ever missed a body. Upon which the narrator replied "there are many people for whom I long" (p. 6) but Halima did not meant missing of any person. She only meant missing of her own identity. She is considered as an ordinary worker, who works in the houses of higher class. She belongs to the social class which is given no right to ask for the questions like 'who am I'. This instance highlights her marginalization at an individual level where she is not even given a chance to know her real self.

It is a custom of many postcolonial countries that if anyone from the poor class wants to get out of the label of marginalized group they must have a relative in the gulf countries. It is not possible for them to earn a livelihood in their own countries. So to survive in a capitalistic society they must have some foreign support. But it is not the case with Halima. She does not have any such support. Therefore she is destined to never change her social status. As Suleri quotes:

For Halima had no son or brother in Kuwait or the Gulf states to ship home his income as did others more fortune. (p. 7)

People of lower class are marginalized in almost every aspect of the life but the most important of them all is the marginalization on the basis of literacy. The higher class is given the prestige and right to speak because of their literacy. On the other hand the lower class is not only marginalized for not having right to speak but also due to not having any right to get education. In fact the words literacy and education are associated to the higher class. Halima always wanted to express her feelings

and emotions. But she never finds any opportunity to express herself. In this way her feelings are marginalized due to her illiteracy. Her illiteracy forces her to think that she could express her feelings and her thoughts if she was literate. She asks the narrator, "Tell me, Bibi- would it help if I could read?" (p. 8) This instance also highlights that internally she quests to her position in the society. She quests to remove the label of subaltern from herself. She thinks that she can only get a voice in the society if she is educated and as she is not educated, she does not have the chance to express her feelings and thoughts. This instance highlights the marginalization of poor class at the educational level.

In this story Halima is described with a feature of storytelling. She is a great fond of telling stories to her master Sara (the narrator of the story). She tells Sara the story of Pather Nadi who is a mysterious character and she claims that he visits Lahore after every seventeen years. She seems to be in love with him. But as the story progresses we come to know that Pather Nadi is not a person but a mere imagination. She imagines him to forget about all the miseries of life. Pather Nadi is like a source of peace for her. As she says:

When I work hard and my bones ache at night, I like to think that his eyes are the sun. (P. 15)

Pather Nadi is like an escape from reality for Halima. Every time she is frustrated by the worldly affairs, she imagines him. He is like a ray of hope for her, a hope that someday she will succeed to escape this world of marginalized group. But now she is tired of hoping. As she says, "My eyes are tired of looking for Pather Nadi" (p. 16). Here we see that her hope is dying with the passage of time and she is going to except her marginalized existence. It is a bitter truth of our society that the lower class is marginalized to starve for its existence.

If we talk about the title, the title itself is ironic because it says 'The Property of Woman' but in the story we have seen only the sufferings of Halima and her exploitation for being a subaltern. She is the breadwinner of her family. She is responsible for fulfilling the needs of every member of her family. She works all day every day but her reward is only suffering. In this way we can say that her real property is her exploitation and suffering in the hands of a postcolonial society. Hence, we can say that the struggle of Halima for survival and her social experiences for existence are the real property of a woman.

CONCLUSION

This research paper tries to study the concept of subaltern in 'The Property of Woman' by Sara Suleri. By the analysis of the text we can conclude that Suleri presents a very clear image of marginalization and the concept of subaltern in her short story. It tells us that marginalization not only affects the social status of the individuals but also their thoughts and feelings. Suleri being a postcolonial writer portrays the position of lower class in Pakistani society through this story. According to Suleri the emotions, nostalgias, social experiences and struggle for

survival are the real property of subaltern group of society. This research paper also presents a detailed study of the character of Halima, the protagonist of the story, as a subaltern for being a woman in a postcolonial society. It also related the concept of subaltern to the character of Halima for belonging to a marginalized group of workers who work from dawn to dusk but still are unable to fulfill even their basic needs. To conclude we can say that the short story 'The Property of Woman' by Sara Suleri is a clear representation of the concept of subaltern.

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