

**Subalterns’ Reclamation of Position as the
Ultimate Response of Postcolonial Mind in
Iranian Nights**

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Abstract:

This paper deals with the subalterns’ reclamation of their position as the ultimate response of postcolonial mind in the play entitled Iranian Nights by Tariq Ali and Howard Brenton. This re-appropriation of subalterns’ position, through the literature produced in the third world countries, is the counter attack on whites’ long hegemony in depicting them as uncouth, female-like, childish, brute, baboons, illiterate, and uncivilized. Subaltern, literally, refers to any person or group of inferior rank and station, whether because of race, cast, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion. By deconstructing the power structures and re-orienting the western taboos about the ‘Third World’ countries, this paper traces the process of re-Orientalism that is an attempt of the subalterns to renovate their history, reinstate their self-worth, and redefine their identity either through freedom of speech or writing back to the empire. In addition this research paper applies Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s notion of ‘Subaltern’ and extends its research compass in order to redefine the western thought about the portrayal of non-western woman.

Keywords: *Orientalism, Subaltern, Third World, Re-Orientalism, Colonialism, Post Colonialism*

1. INTRODUCTION

The objective of this paper is to identify the subalterns' re-appropriation of their position as the ultimate fruit of post-colonial mind in the play *Iranian Nights*. This reclamation of subalterns' position, through the literature produced in the third world countries, is the counter attack on whites' long hegemony in portraying the non-westerners as uncouth, female-like, childish, brute, baboons, illiterate, and uncivilized. Critiquing the power structures and re-orienting the western taboos about the 'Third World' countries, this research paper aims to explore the response of postcolonial mind in order to refigure the narratives about indigenous history, culture as well as identity. The study also investigates various aspects of marginalization and exploitation of subalterns. Moreover by using Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of the 'subaltern' with reference to her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" this article further extends its research scope by remolding the western thought about the position of non-western woman. In a nutshell, the result-oriented discussion criticizes the politics of religion as well as the white man's civilizing mission. By analyzing the play *Iranian Nights* this paper also examines the role of Tariq Ali and Howard Brenton in raising the subalterns' voice and giving a new life to the orient. Hence there is also a room for the future researchers to conduct research in the same field by selecting another literary piece.

In a critical postcolonial theory, 'subaltern' refers to the populations that are socially, politically and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure of the colony and of the colonial homeland. Literally, subaltern refers to any person or group of inferior rank and station, whether because of race, cast, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion. The theoretical voice of the subalterns is that they need to be found out as they are not always present in the society, culture and history. Even they are found, but that is from the perspective of hegemonic people. Generally, they are depicted in the history either as disorderliness, lawlessness or as dependent to any influential leader as Karl Marx says in *Orientalism*; "they can't represent themselves; they must be represented" (qtd. in Said n.p). Thus, for the revival of the subaltern's identity, the subjugated nations from the third world countries are resisting the power structures by writing back to the empire. The objective behind writing their indigenous history is to fight for their appropriate position in the postcolonial world. Till now worldwide literature has failed to represent the most dominated subjects the ones Spivak labels the 'subalterns' in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak is of the view that it is the moral obligation of postcolonial historians to make an effort to represent their people. She also claims that subalterns can regain their lost position in society if they speak out and reclaim

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a collective cultural identity.

Colonialism plays an imperative role in silencing the ‘natives’ in literary texts. The colonists show to the world that the subaltern can’t speak and therefore it’s the white man’s burden to represent the subalterns and make them civilized. But now in the postcolonial era, the subordinated ones are rewriting their history to discover their true selves. The journey of self-representation actually leads them to their self-discovery. Indian theorist Spivak says in an interview: “If the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern is not a subaltern any more” (qtd. in Chow: 35-36). As a result many writers from the Third World countries like Toni Morrison, Chinua Achebe, Ahmed Ali, Girish Karnad, Leila Aboulela, Wole Soyinka, and Tariq Ali are weaving subalterns’ voices into a collective net as a tool for struggle in addition to decolonize themselves.

Eurocentrism defines the world hierarchy according to which the ‘First World’ as developed, capitalist Western societies and the ‘Second World’ as the state-planned economies and communist societies of the former Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies meant that what was left over is the ‘Third World’. This hierarchy uncovers the fact that the ‘Third World’ is the last. They are bent upon believing that the culture of the west is monolithic, independent, self-reliant and superior. For that reason, the western scholars have the right to represent the barbarians of the ‘Third World’ in order to make them aware of their barbarousness. However, the postcolonial ‘Third World’ writers have challenged the Eurocentric assumption regarding the representation of the ‘Orient’ or non European people. Edward Said argues that one cannot feel an aura of superiority unless one makes the ‘other’ feel inferior. This representation of the ‘Orient’ is also seen in Walt Disney’s animated movies. Disney is a medium through which thoughts and idea of Americans are represented, though it is not as if all Americans follow the same idea of the orient and the occident but this is how things are passed to us. Disney’s *Aladdin* represents the highly sexualized ‘belly dancer’ as its one mode of representing Arab women, even Princess Jasmine is sexualized in similar terms. Her dark skin is what is represented in Disney as evil, manipulative and barbaric. Exotic belly dance and sexualized dresses of female is a concept that we come to know through the character of Scheherazade and the Harems that Muslim Emperors used to have. About Scheherazade, Gargi Bhattacharyya says in her book *The Tales of Dark Skinned Women* “But whatever she is, her skin is dark. And this is where our story starts” (5).

Generally, non-western culture is portrayed negatively in the Eurocentric narratives. As the westerners are unable to understand the cultural

beauty of the natives so they misinterpret many things and can't do justice while writing. They associate certain traits to the socially constructed term 'subaltern' that refers to the brown and black people of South Asia. Both low caste people and Indian women are also highly socially subordinate. In that case there is a dire need to redefine subaltern's identity on the postcolonial stage. So Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is a voice of Indian people especially the brown woman. In her essay, Spivak reveals the fact that our rituals represent our cultural glory which the Europeans are unable to understand and consequently they misperceive our cultural norms. Spivak discusses an Indian ritual, *sati*, and attempts to alter its existing narrative. She examines this ritual not as the brutality of indigenous culture as shown in the professional narratives but as escapism from the harsh reality. She demonstrates the fact that *Sati* means a 'good wife' and signals a duty; the duty of a wife to husband and religion. *Sati* widow believes in the escape from the present hell, patriarchal society, and may hope for happier birth in her next incarnation. On the other hand, the white Man who has a heavy burden to civilize the barbarians has banned the practice of *sati* in the subcontinent and claims to save the brown woman from the brown man. However Spivak is of the view that the white man is depriving the brown woman of her freedom of choice, judgmental power as well as indigenous roots. She is of the view that the brown woman, indeed, needs saving from the white men who came to their homeland India, lived with the Indian women and then left them thus taking the children away to Europe where they baptize the children and make them unaware of the maternal roots. Such mothers become stranger and not allowed to keep any contact with the children. So comparatively the brown man is not as brutal as they are portrayed by the white civilized man.

Previously the Eurocentric narratives represent the subaltern woman as the victim of patriarchal society where woman is extremely marginalized and most oppressed creature. Patriarchal society is a male dominated society where men rule over the women. However the things are not as painted since ages. Therefore the third world writers are rewriting about their culture in order to reinterpret the past narratives. They attempt to make the crystal clear that women are not oppressed rather they make choices. Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* describes the story of an Indian woman named Rani who although faces brutality of her husband yet her culture provides her an opportunity to prove her innocence. After being accused by her husband, she chooses public ordeal according to that she proves her fidelity by putting her hand in the snake burrow and taking a vow that she has not committed adultery. Her verdict empowers her and in this way she achieves the status of a goddess. This shows that the brown woman, somehow, has choices that help her in reclaiming her

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position and reestablishing her self-esteem despite all the razors of the patriarchal culture. Accordingly Karnad seems to advocate Spivak's argument that white men are not saving the brown women from brown men; rather they are hampering their freedom to speak. Likewise Ali and Brenton in *Iranian Nights* elaborate Spivak's debate about the status of non-European woman. Third world woman is not inferior, irrational and indecisive as depicted by the foreigners. Instead they are very witty and rule over men due to their brains. In the play *Iranian Nights*, a female character Scheherazade decides to marry the brown man, the Caliph who kills a virgin girl every night after having sex with her. Scheherazade is not murdered by the Caliph; instead she saves a lot of girls by her rational powers and witticism. By the wise decision she overpowers her husband mentally and physically and the secret behind achieving this power is her voice. She tells the tales every night and keeps her husband awake thus saving all the girls from the brown man.

One of the major aims of postcolonial literature is to challenge the universalism by reclaiming the subaltern's voice that has been previously denied. By telling the untold stories, the third world authors are refiguring the past narratives. A postcolonial novelist Leila Aboulela questions the universalism and challenges a literary tradition of very specific gendered western discourses about relationship between East and West. In her novel *The Translator*, Rae and Sammar are the representing the East and the West. Most narratives of cross-cultural relationships can be reduced to the claim: "white men are saving brown women from brown men" (284). However according to tradition Rae ought to save Sammar from her backward and primitive culture. On contrary, the postcolonial novel reverses the conventional rescue narrative and privileges a story in which a brown woman saves a white man from white woman. It is Sammar's soup that which restores Rae's health, and Sammar tells Rae that conversion to Islam "would be good for you, it will make you stronger" (89). Sammar doesn't need a white man to save her. Instead she saves Rae, both physically and spiritually. Hence Aboulela is re-orienting the western taboos about the 'Third World' woman.

Edward Said discloses the politics of power structures in *Orientalism*. He argues that ontological and epistemological distinctions, between the orient and the occident, resulted from colonial discursive structures devised for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the orient. Nowadays the orients have started to reclaim their lost position through a process called re-Orientalism. Taylor and Francis, in an article "Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics", argue that the concept of re-Orientalism maintains the divide between the 'Orient' and the 'West'. However, where *Orientalism is based on* <https://journalsriuf.com/index.php/IJLL/index>

how the West constructs the East, re-Orientalism is grounded on how the cultural East comes to terms with an Orientalized East. As Europe invented the ‘Orientalism’ for self-representation, likewise the orientals, in order to re-appropriate their position, go through the process of ‘re-Orientalism’ to challenge the power dynamics. Therefore the postcolonial writers are subverting the politics of power structure and revisiting their past in order to produce critical histories that bear witness to those voices which are silenced in the conventional historiography. Girish Karnad in the *Dreams of Tipu Sultan* attempts to explore the mini narratives which have been forgotten deliberately. In this play the conversation between Mackenzie and Kirmani throws light on the binaristic divisions in the discourse of history. Usually the binary relationship of strong-West-and-weak-East reinforces the cultural stereotypes invented with the literary, cultural, and historical texts’. However Karnad undermines all such binaries and re-interprets the story of Tipu Sultan who has often been represented as a fanatic. Thus Karnad fictionalizes history and as postcolonial playwright “struggles to recover 'marginal' voices and memories, forgotten dreams and signs of resistance, [considering history] to be anything more than a celebratory account of the march of certain victorious concepts and powers like the nation-state” (Didurn.p). Thus Karnad applies the concept of re-Orientalism to raise subaltern’s voice as well as to bridge the gaps in the historical accounts of East created by the West.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted for this research paper is systematically constructed. First, it explores the representation of the ‘subaltern’ (the orient or the people who belong to the ‘Third World’) that comprises all the colonized, female like, uncivilized people. Then in logical structural way it exposes all the reasons behind the incivility of these people. And ultimately, in the end it reclaims the lost identity of the subalterns with the re-appropriation of their position despite extreme difficulties. Moreover, this research paper reaches its desired goal by following five steps i.e. introduction, review of the previous body of knowledge, applied methodology, data analysis, and conclusion. With the appliance of Gayatri Spivak’s theory of the ‘subaltern’, the ideas are made more explicit to fit the contention of subaltern’s reclamation of position as the ultimate response of postcolonial mind to the colonial hegemony. Hence this paper seeks to explore the dynamics of power politics from a postcolonial point of view and destabilizes all the social constructions regarding the third world nations.

3. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This research paper attempts to explore different power structures that are used to subjugate women. Spivak, a postcolonial critic, has used the term ‘subaltern’ for women, colonized, oppressed, working class, blacks and the brown people whose voices have been silenced since ages. She proposes that any representation of marginalized voices can only be heard through the necessary mediating role of the female intellectual. It’s assumed that the subaltern cultures and western oppressors actively trade women as cattle, yoking them to their masculine owners, Spivak argues. She highlights the fact that the victimization of women is universal either by the rules set by the colonizers or the obligations imposed by the indigenous culture. However all these forced instructions are the politics of power structure intended to suppress woman, a weaker sex whose existence is defined by the dominant male. Instead of conventional literature, the postcolonial world has redesigned the situation and, now, even male writers are fabricating space for women in literature.

The objective of this paper is challenging the Eurocentric views about third world woman. For this purpose Ali and Brenton’s play *Iranian Nights* is taken for critical analysis. *Iranian Nights* revolves around the woman Scheherezade who tells the tales that weave the whole structure of the play. The whole play is based on the words uttered by Scheherezade, who narrates the stories and then gives her comments. Her voice enables her to confront the woman representation by western scholars as well as to invigorate her space in the indigenous culture. Till now the Europeans portrayed Scheherezade as an exotic, sex manic, and voiceless character just like Jasmine’s representation in *Aladdin*. Whereas in the postcolonial narrative *Iranian Nights*, Scheherezade is no more silent, rather she’s controlling men’s body and mind as well. By supervising the psyche of the Caliph, she saves many lives from his brutality and lustful nature. Omar tells about Caliph, Scheherezade’s husband in *Iranian Nights* as; “He found his wife in bed with a slave. Chopped her head off. Been revenging himself against women ever since. Fuck a virgin every night and have her killed, so no one else can do the same” (2). And then we see the shift of power to the opposite gender. Scheherezade overpowers the king absolutely and does not let him slumbering. Consequently she becomes successful in saving many lives. “This one’s survived, a young white slave girl, has to keep a drowsy Emperor awake, a good story a night or else” (2).

Post-colonialists deconstruct several stereotypes about gender representation. As it’s often considered that woman is a weak gender and irrational creature. However the situation is different now in the postcolonial world where she is rising again from the burnt ashes. In *Iranian Nights* when

Scheherezade speaks up and plays with the mind of the Caliph at the same time, in this way the woman is breaking the western taboos about feminine description. As head is superior and determines the action of the body, so the changed psyche of the Caliph is due to a woman. Hence woman is no more voiceless subaltern; instead she knows how to survive and re-appropriates her position by narrating the tales of brutality of the colonizers along with indigenous culture. Spivak also defies the so called characteristics of subaltern and redefines the term in an interview as: “If the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern is not a subaltern any more” (qtd. in Chow; 1993: 35-36). Thus Scheherezade achieves her subjectivity through her voice and exposes the politics of power structures that comprise of cultural or religious practices as a tool to deprive women of their choice. Consequently in postcolonial world, now, the women have started to reclaim their identity by raising their voice that has always been ignored.

It's commonly believed that power corrupts man and absolute power corrupts absolutely. When the word ‘power’ is spoken of, the first association is that of the power of man over man, of power as suppression of the free will by commands and obedience. Moreover power can easily appear in this connection as the root of all evils in human societies and as the opposite of freedom as such. Similarly in *Iranian Nights* the game of power is being played between the poet and the Holy Man. The poet is overwhelmed by the Holy Man whose powerful instrument is the religion for repressing the voice of the truth. For dominating the weaker ones, many people use religion as a tool and give misinterpretations of Islam for their personal interests. But the poet is a wise man. He, just like Scheherezade, opposes the religious discourse and regains his individuality through freedom of speech.

Many writers are writing about the misuse of power and uncovering the fact how people exploit others on the name of religion. These religious practices are common in every culture of the world. Gender discrimination is also the fruit of religious institution that is pictured in a realistic movie *Moolaadé* (2004), a film by the Senegalese writer and director Ousmane Sembène. This film is about, and against, the custom of female circumcision, practiced in many Muslim lands (although Islamic law forbids it). It addresses the subject of female genital mutilation, a common practice in a number of African countries, from Egypt to Nigeria. The film argues strongly against the practice, depicting a village woman, Collé, who uses Moolaadé (magical protection) to protect a group of girls. In this movie, death game is being played under the name of religion. Many girls died but the ‘purification’ is not banned because the villagers believe in the necessity of female genital cutting, which they call <https://journalsriuf.com/index.php/IJLL/index>

‘purification’. The whole idea behind this ‘purification’ is to deprive women from sexual pleasure and to maintain the power politics of patriarchy by misrepresenting Islam. All these binaries are manmade and socially constructed for gender discrimination. This politics of religion to undermine the weaker ones is also depicted in the conversation between the poet and the HOLY MAN in *Iranian Nights*. Without knowing the exact interpretation of Islam the HOLY MAN orders to execute the poet. Just like the ‘purification’ in *Moolaade*, the HOLY MAN preaches this ‘purification’ on the name of “Islamic execution” (6). He says;

One who corrupts a country, or a group, and is incorrigible, he must be eliminated for the sake of purifying and protecting the society; this cancerous gland must be removed from the society and its removal is done by executing him. Such are Islamic executions. Islamic executions are bountiful executions (6).

In *Iranian Nights*, the Holy Man is of the view that the “Islamic execution” demands the sacrifice of the individual (poet) for purgation of society in which that individual lives. This “Islamic execution” is actually the web spread by the power structure to entangle the prey, the poet, who considers his voice as the freedom of choice. He asks the Holy Man; “can you only spread the name of God by chopping off head?” (8) Since the poets have always been the part of criticism and Plato, too, is of the opinion to banish them. The Caliph in the plat also concludes that “the tongue of every poet should be plucked out by birth” (8). So it’s clear that most people use religion for personal gains. In *Iranian Nights* the poet’s questioning of religion and the Holy Man is an attempt to reclaim his position by revealing the real face of the power structures. The poet gives the example of Galeleo Galilei who was accused by the Catholic Inquisition for ‘Heliocentrism’, the astronomical model in which the Earth and planets revolve around the Sun at the center of the Solar System. Speaking against the powerful is the humble attempt for his self-discovery. He argues that history is replete with such examples where church was a thunderstruck to the people who discovered truth. He also gives the example of Darwin and Spinoza. The sole purpose behind this counter questioning is to show the science of politics and the reaction of the victimized.

Till now, politics of religion, gender, colonization, patriarchy, war, and science are the tools to manipulate the others who are inferiors e.g. woman, colonized man, common man etc. Postcolonial theory aims to analyze the ideological forces that, on the one hand, pressed the colonized to internalize the <https://journalsriuf.com/index.php/IJLL/index>

colonizers' values and, on the other hand, promoted the resistance of colonized people against their oppressors, a resistance that is as old as colonialism itself. The authors of *Iranian Nights* are depicting the postcolonial situation in which the weaker (subaltern) the poet is speaking whereas the Holy Man, who symbolizes power structure, is mute instead of answering the poet's questions. His invention of "Islamic execution" by "chopping off head" has also been accomplished by another writer in the literary piece of writing entitled *Tughlaq* in which Girish Karnad depicts the sultan who plays the game of politics on the name of God.

Orientalism was devised in order to have authority over the Orient and it expounds the Eurocentric labels of superior West and inferior East. However subalterns' reclamation in order to assert their position is called re-Orientalism, the term introduced by Taylor and Francis, in an article "Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics", in which they argue that the concept of re-Orientalism maintains the divide between the Orient and the West. However, where Orientalism is based on how the West constructs the East, re-Orientalism is grounded on how the cultural East comes to terms with an Orientalized East. A postcolonial Nigerian playwright, Wole Soyinka, assumes re-orientalism in his play *The Lion and the Jewel*. By replacing Eurocentricity with Afrocentricity, Soyinka applies a postcolonial approach and an Afrocentric point of view by arguing that postcolonial literature is a by-product of degradation and pressure from colonial powers onto colonized people, as a result, they have decided to confront the external powers of colonialism by writing back to the empire. In *The Lion and the Jewel*, the author mocks the colonial education just like Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* makes fun of the "Englishness".

Though the western colonizers have left the colonized physically but they have captured their psyches leaving deep impact. The 'Third World' young generations go the land of decent people to get themselves civilized. With the purpose to alleviate the 'White Man's Burden', unconsciously Third World' young generations become the victim of cultural imperialism. A person either changes his views about his own culture and becomes hybrid, or attempts to proclaim his indigenous culture on foreign land. Being alienated on the western land, the Son, in *Iranian Nights*, decides to revive his identity as well as his culture. The Father sends him to London to get higher education. Going against his father's expectations, the son becomes disillusioned of western civilization, when he is raped by a group of civilized people. He says that "...they were six of them. They stripped me naked, they spat, they kicked my balls, called me a circumcised pig" (12). He presents that particular moment as; "how could I <https://journalsriuf.com/index.php/IJLL/index>

think about Bertrand Russell or Wittgenstein? I had no identity. I was a shivering, stranger, beaten, and battered” (13). What kind of civilization is this? The son questions himself and his father. None of the civilized scholars saved him from those white savages. At the spot, he changes his mind and finds security in “reciting the creed of my faith” (12). In order to decolonize himself and to reclaim his position on the land of white people, he took action to restore his identity. He says; “I threw their books in a college dustbin, and turned to ours ... the country can be saved. We mustn’t despair” (13). Hence, he revives his identity by re-appropriating his position in London, the land of the decent people. His burning of books shows his ‘nervous condition’ as Frantz Fanon says in *The Wretched of the Earth* that the condition of the native is nervous condition.

Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, also, delineates the impact of colonial education and ‘nervous condition’ of the native, the subaltern. Baba mukru becomes the agent of the colonizers for propelling their philosophies by motivating children (of his family) to study in the mission school and imposing Christian tradition of marriage. Tambu, just like the Son in *Iranian Nights*, goes to the land of civilized people but after reaching there she feels herself alienated due to her skin color and develops ‘nervous condition’. The dichotomy of Nyasha’s identity leads her to suffer from ‘nervous condition’ and she develops severe anorexia. Being a postcolonial mind, their ‘nervous condition’ leads them to identify their cultural values and define their identity by accepting the fact that *black is beauty*. Consequently they discover themselves and explore their roots. Moreover Nyasha’s shedding of history books between her teeth, in *Nervous Conditions*, and the son’s burning books on the roads, in *Iranian Nights*, show their mental and violent rage towards the colonizers and a step to accept whatever they are. Hence they come to terms with themselves following re-orientalism, an attempt for reclamation of the subalterns’ position by defying the western ideas and raising the voice that has been kept mute since ages. In short the chief objective to destroy the history book is to eliminate all the lies about the misrepresentation of the ‘Third World’.

4. CONCLUSION

To sum up, this paper identifies the subalterns’ re-appropriation of their position as the ultimate response of the postcolonial mind in the play entitled *Iranian Nights* by Ali and Brento. This reclamation of subalterns’ position, through the literature produced in the third world countries, is the counter attack on whites’ long hegemony in depicting them as uncouth, female-like, childish, brute, baboons, illiterate, and uncivilized. Deconstructing the power structures

and re-orienting the western taboos about Third World countries, this paper further traces the struggle of subalterns in restoring their history and redefining their lost identity through the process of re-Orientalism. Using Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of 'Subaltern' with reference to her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" this article concludes that if the subaltern speaks, he is no more subaltern and the power of voice helps women to rise again just like phoenix. In a nut shell, this study attempts to re-orient the western taboos about the non-western woman and challenge all strategies of power dynamics.

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