



## A Critical Analysis of Riaz's Story *The Daughters of Aai* from Subaltern Perspective

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper analyses Fahmida Riaz's The Daughters of Aai (2007) from subaltern perspective. This Pakistani English short story represents rural women of Sindh, especially the physically-challenged Fatimah as a victim of sexual assault, unwanted pregnancy, and the threat of honor-killing (Karo-Kari). Inspiring from Subaltern Studies' approach, we choose this story for analysis to examine the explicit and implicit aspects of marginalization of the target women at the socio-cultural level from Guha and Spivakian subaltern perspectives. We further examine the hegemonic factors conspiring against the suppression of the women in terms of binary opposition. By doing this, we attempt to create some space for the women (subaltern) in academia. Following text-based analysis, this paper first examines Fatimah's story which highlights different aspects of the women suppression in rural areas of Sindh. Next, we examine the relationship between male and female characters to disclose the multiple hegemonic factors against subalternity of the female characters in detail. Finally, this paper argues that the women is subaltern for the men consider them as the objects of honor, desire, and interest.*

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**Keywords:** Subaltern studies, subalternity, binary opposition

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This paper critically analyses a Pakistani English short story entitled *The Daughters of Aai* (2007) written by Fahmida Riaz. This narrative emphasizes on violence upon rural women of Sindh in the form of sexual assault, unwanted pregnancies together with the threats of honor killing. Throughout the story, the narrator shows her anguish and bitterness on the strange culture of the village. This is the anxiety of the narrator on the terrible life of the village women which compels us (the researchers) to reconsider the story from subaltern perspective. This research spotlights the aspects of marginalization of the women portrayed in the story. It follows Subaltern Studies approach with the special reference to Guha (1987) and Spivakian (1988) perspectives. This study attempts to answer the question how do the women get marginalized in their socio-cultural context?

To examine the women marginalization in their socio-cultural construct, we analyze the story in two ways. Following text-based analysis, we first examine the explicit aspects of marginalization of women especially

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Fatimah, the major character of the story. Next, the study examines the implicit aspects of women marginalization by reconsidering the relationship of male and female characters in terms of binary oppositions. By this, the study attempts to bring forth the voice of the women subalternity in academia. It further attempts to disclose the power politics behind the women subalternity. Now, the following section overviews the theoretical framework applied in this study.

### **Literature Review**

*The Daughters of Aai* (2007) is a heartrending story of violence upon women of a fictional village of rural Sindh. It represents the rural women of Sindh as the victim of sexual assault and hard physical labor who find rare space to escape from such viciousness of their culture. To break the silence of the suppressed and marginalized women, this paper takes support from Subaltern Studies approach. By this, the study explores the hegemonic factors working against the subalternity of the women.

### ***Subaltern Studies***

The term subaltern is used for subjugated (Varghese, 2009), downtrodden (Mashori and Zaib, 2015), inferior (Mandal, 2014), and lower-class people. Spivak (1990) delimits the concept by stating subaltern as the most suppressed class of a society whose members do not find access to the power politics of upper class people. Subaltern is the key concept in Subaltern Studies approach.

Subaltern Studies is a comprehensive critical approach which assists scholars to challenge hegemonic discourses against subalterns (Zaib, 2016). This approach is born from postcolonialism (Ludden, 2002; Roy-Chaudhary, 2014)). As postcolonial writers challenge the legacy of colonialism, in the same way the critics of subaltern studies (who are called subalternists) challenge the legacy of domestic or internal colonialism (Irum and Yaqoob, 2016, Zaib, 2017). Subalternists analyze the narratives of masses, downtrodden and subordinate to reconsider the power structure influenced upon them. By this, they attempt to create some space for subalterns in academia (Prakash, 1994; Spivak, 1988).

However, originated in 1970s by some South Asian and Western scholars, Subaltern Studies was first introduced in historiography (Ludden, 2002). Then, the approach became global to analyze the aspects of marginalization in different fields of study including language, literature, anthropology, and cultural studies etc. This critical approach extensively applied on South Asian context where Ranajit Guha, and Gayatri Spivak became its chief proponents. They got inspiration from Gramscian (1972) approach who examined Italian workers as subalterns, frustrated by the

conspiracy of Italian dominancy. Following Gramscian methodology, these scholars revisited Indian history “from below” (Biswas, 2009). They found Indian laborers, workers and slaves as the inferior class suppressed under the hegemonic webs of dominant people.

Concerning gender studies, Spivak (1988; 1990) propounded the concept of gendered subalternity by examining the subaltern subjectivity of South Asian women. Then, Guha also analyzed Indian women as the most suppressed subaltern class. In *Subaltern Studies V*, Guha published an essay entitled *Chandra's Death* wherein he reconsiders the historical record of the case of Chandra Chashini from subaltern perspective. In this essay, he highlights the aspects of domination of feudal lords and upper-caste men upon lower caste women and cruelties of community or Indian *samaj*. Chandra is portrayed in the essay as a pregnant rural woman who died following abortion of her three months' pregnancy. A feudal man from upper caste, Kalicharan Bagdi, makes her pregnant and claims that “I have been involved, for the last four or five months, in an illicit love affair (*ashnai*) with... Chandra,” as a result she is conceived (154). After her pregnancy, he forced Chandra's parents “to arrange some medicines to be administered to her [for the termination of her fetus]. Or else he shall put her into *bhek*” (154). Guha (1987) explains *bhek* as “the loss of caste by expulsion” or “the sentence of living death.” To hide his guilt Kalicharan proposes Chandra either abortion or renunciation from life and to go away in seclusion. Through this case of Chandra's death, Guha criticizes the upper caste and upper-class men as selfish and powerful for they consider the lower-class women as their “objects of lust” (p. 152). They easily approach them for sexual encounters and abandon them to suffer in life. Moreover, the men also estimated the women value based on their virginity, and chastity whereas they destroy these norms themselves. Like Chandra, such women find no place to resist against their marginalization and usually die in vain.

Spivak is more critical than Guha. She calls herself a deconstructionist-Marxist-feminist. Like Guha, she uses the word subaltern as a tool to “accommodate” the socio-political identities of post-colonial nations (cited by Morton, 2003, p. 45). She demonstrates that the word “subaltern” does not mean the suppressed person, only. It means the one who cannot stand against the hegemonic power (Spivak, 1988). In her essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), Spivak unveils different levels of conspiracies against the women. Herein, she discloses the colonial and national conspiracy by mentioning the case of Hindu Sati women (with especial reference to the case of Bhuvaneswari Badhuri, the sister of Spivak's grandmother). Spivak represented a sati woman as a hang up between patriarchy and politics. The woman loses her “self” and becomes “other”. She possesses zero value whose struggles, insurgencies and resistance go in vain. Finally, she claims the

“poor, black (and brown) women” (p. 294) as the most subjugated subaltern. By brown, Spivak refers to South Asian women.

However, following subaltern perspective proposed by Guha and Spivak in the analysis of Chandra’s case and the sati women, we analyze the selected story to spotlight the aspects of marginalization of selected rural women of Sindh. We also focus on the relationship of male and female characters of the story to examine the hegemonic factors from micro to macro level i.e., from home to state. Now, before going to the analysis of the story, the following section explains the methodology applied in this study.

### **Research Methodology**

Mackee (2003) claims textual analysis as a useful method for understanding some cultural patterns through careful interpretation and re-interpretation of the target text (see also Fairclough, 2003; Belsey, 2005; Brennen, 2013). To make the sense of the world (the culture) that the story re-presents, the study relies on text-based analysis.

The study proceeds the analysis process by excavating the character(s) of women from the story. Herein, we first focus on several emotional sentences and phrases to explore the aspects of subalternity. Then, by looking on the semantic details of the text, we attempt to unfold various roles of the men and the women in their social construction. Corresponding to the steps of analysis process, this paper first discusses the marginalization of Fatimah along-with the suppression of all the village women. Then, it discusses the diverse role of the men and the women in their social construction by applying the framework of binary oppositions.

### **Data Analysis**

#### ***Story of Fatimah: A Subaltern Analysis***

Subalterns are the downtrodden who cannot approach power politics (Spivak, 1990). The story under analysis, *The Daughters of Aai* represents women as suppressed due to several oppressive factors. Being born in an unknown village of Sindh, Pakistan, they are kept away from education, politics, and power-structures of their context. Their poverty along with illiteracy do not allow them to achieve high status in society.

The major character of the narrative is Fatimah (alias Fatu) who becomes the victim of multiple forms of oppression and finds no space to come out from her subjugated state. Her victimization starts through her rape. According to Guha (1987), usually poor and lower class rural girls are merely considered as “the objects of male lust” (152) while their social respect lies in their virginity, and chastity. If any woman either a maiden, a wife, or a widow, breaks such norms, she becomes a polluted woman. The

same case happens with Fatimah, who is represented as the object of lust of an unknown man of her village. As this rape makes her pregnant so she becomes a socially polluted woman. By this, she falls in the conflict of honor and desire of man.

However, to save Fatu from allegations against her moral and social respect, other women of her village (including Aai and Shahbano) suggest the solution of “abortion” of her pregnancy (Riaz, 2007, p. 34). This act of abortion reminds the case of Chandra who dies after the termination of her three months’ pregnancy by herbal treatment at home. Guha analyses Chandra’s case as the crime of state and community where extreme poverty and domination of upper class men trapped people in difficulty. Unlike Chandra, Fatu does not die after the abortion of her pregnancy, while she suffers from several health problems including abdominal pain.

The utmost tragedy befalls when the narrator states about Fatu that “not a year had passed and...Fatu was pregnant again” (Riaz, 2007, p. 35). In the first case of her rape, the women prefer abortion to save her from honor-killing (p. 34). In contrast, their silence against the cruelty of the man invites the same or another man to destroy her again. From Guha’s perspective, the lower-class women suffer in problems due to powerful domination of men which produces the concept of gender inequality. Here, the muteness of women against injustice reminds the remarks of Tehmina Durrani (1994), the Pakistani feminist writer, who claims that “silence causes injustice, and begets passiveness...” while in Spivakian sense, the voice of the target subalterns seems to disperse into shadows (Spivak, 1988; Varghese, 2009).

However, there occurs impossibility to protect Fatimah’s honor for this time her pregnancy passes “seven months” (Riaz, 2007, p. 35) and its abortion may cause mother’s and her baby’s death. Unlike the parents of Chandra, the mother of Fatima avoids abortion second time. Aai, the mother of Fatu, and other village women decide to “let the child be born”. In the meantime, Mummo, the second young wife of a deceased old landlord, immediately accompanies Aai and Fatu to keep away the “new born baby” (p. 36-37) of Fatu. Mummo registers the name of the child as the “son of Noor Mohammad Shah and Mumtaz Begum (alias Mummo).” Mummo plays this game to protect her own social rights. The story narrates the character of Mummo as a representative of hundreds of poor rural girls with whom aged and old landlords of Sindh forcefully marry without ensuring their rights and their (landlords’) death metaphorically bring the death of their poor wives also. Right after a year of Mummo’s marriage, the landlord dies. After this, the first wife and the sons of the landlord plan to exclude Mummo from his property by calling her one of the mistresses of Noor Mohammad. The story

of Mummo again reminds Guha's (1987) criticism upon upper class men with regards to suppression of lower class women.

Due to the cruel acts, the poor, innocent, beautiful Fatimah turns into a wild beast. She often "bays" in her village (Riaz, 2007, p. 38). The *baying* shows her impotency to bear the difficulties in which she has fallen. She is, in fact, a subaltern in the hegemonic discourse of the village. In Spivakian (1988) terminology her "self" disappears in the schizophrenic polarity of desire (physical desire) and (sham) honor of the men. This oppression clarifies her unapproachability to ever share hegemonic structure (Varghese, 2009).

This story introduces many other female characters including Aai, Fatimah, Shahbano, the writer, Mumtaz Begum (alias Mummo) and some more anonymous women of the village. The dumbness of Fatimah symbolizes the dumbness of all the village women in the case of their ravishment. Though they can speak, but like Fatimah they lose their power of speech. Now the following section examines the oppositional role of male and female characters of the story.

### ***Binary Opposition: Male Characters versus Female Characters***

#### *Responsible mother versus irresponsible father*

The first contradiction of the social organization of the fictional village lies in an inadequate role of parents towards the fostering of their children. The narrative states the role of mother as more responsible than father which proclaims gender inequality rooted at home level. Aai and her husband possess contrasted traits. According to the narrator, Aai works hard while her husband rarely works. He takes drugs (Riaz, 2007, p. 32). His *drug* habit presents before the reader his offending nature by which he may unconsciously harm to his own family members. However, Aai performs a role of devoted mother. She is not merely involved in household chores, but she also cares for the economy to nourish her seven children of poor health (p. 33) even she deserves her whole life for her abnormal daughter, Fatu. This inequality in the parental care of children proves the role of father as careless. In the construction of this family structure, Aai seems a subaltern. Without blaming her husband's role, she takes responsibility to care her children. By this, Aai accepts her marginalized role at home.

#### *Hard physical labor versus simple labor*

Secondly, we find a contrast between the labors of men and women of the village. The narrator mentions that these beautiful "butterflies" (women) start their works early in the morning (Riaz, 2007, p. 38). They do all hard labor in the month of "sowing and harvesting", (p. 33). They sow seeds in the fields and gather the crop themselves. Further the narrator

remarks: “[the women] jumping over small shrubs, picking flowers to sell in the market, reaping grass, hoeing the fields, separating the chaff from the corn...” (p. 38). Their works of *reaping grass* and *hoeing the field* indicate their bravery to handle the dangerous tools like sickle, scythe, and hoe. These tools generally use for cutting grass and removing weed from fields. Further their work of *picking flowers to sell in the market* illustrates their role in the business management. These women do fieldwork as well as marketing. All these traits represent the women as bold who are ready to face all the challenges of life.

The men, in contrast, do simple works. When the writer, the anonymous character of the story, sees the men of the village at rest and relaxing on their cots, inquires to Shahbano about their work. In response, a village girl says “Madam, the men halal the chickens” (Riaz, 2007, p. 33). This is the religious duty that the women cannot perform. The inequality of labor between the men and the women illustrates the subalternity of the women in the earning purposes. They accept hard physical labor to lessen the burden of their male partners.

#### *Fidelity versus hypocrisy*

The sentence, “the men halal the chickens” (Riaz, 2007, p. 33) embodies a contradiction. The anxiety of the narrator at the work of the men makes the statement equivocal. Here, an ambiguity arises in the reader’s mind why do the men halal chickens? Why do they not halal other halal animals (like goat or cow)? The word, *chickens* refers to the “domestic fowl.” It also employs for “young woman” (Webster, 2012). So, keeping in mind the synonyms of *chickens*, the sentence, *the men halal chickens*, can be re-phrased as “the men rape or kill young women as *kari* for the men consider the women as domestic fowls (animals)”. Now the re-phrasing of this sentence clarifies that sexual abuse and honor-killing of the women (e.g., Fatu and another unknown woman in the story) are the cultural norms to suppress the village women of Sindh.

Moreover, the word *halal* (which is rephrased here as killing of women as *kari*) demonstrates that the men consider that they have the religious authority to perform this duty. The men of the village of Fatu [mis]use religion for their purposes. Here, the reader can understand the inner hypocrisy and outer virtuous state of the men behind their simple labor. Their hypocrisy presents a contrast against the sincerity of women in the case of hard working and responsibility of household chores.

#### *Gendered imperialism: hunter versus prey*

The women unwillingly subordinate themselves in the heinous act of sexual assault. The living example of this case is Fatimah. She becomes two

times the target of the nameless men. The real oppressor(s), the anonymous men, do not appear in the story. Their absence gives the sense that there is no need to mention the name or to introduce their characters for all the men (of the village) have the same desires.

At a first glance, the village men willingly celebrate the culture of violation of women, then they employ the law of honor-killing upon them. In fear of killing, the village women never mention the name of their rapists. The author mentions the worry of the village women as: "It was important that they [men] not have an inkling of the catastrophe that had befallen on Fatimah. It would be a matter of their honor. They would come out with their axes and there would be several murders" (Riaz, 2007, p. 34). The fear of killing oblige the women to accept their cultural trend silently. At this instant, the reader can remind Spivak who argues that subaltern women remain subaltern (Spivak, 1990, Mashori and Zaib, 2015). They cannot approach the hegemonic power of the men. The narrator further narrates an event of honor-killing (i.e., Karo-Kari) as, "the last time an illegitimate pregnancy was discovered here...there were several killings, leaving behind... prolonged court cases which had drained the last rupee from the village." (p. 34).

Now, the case of honor-killing of women (along with sexual assault) becomes complex because at first, the target men make the woman black i.e., a Kari. Then, if she speaks against her seducer so they employ upon her the (illegal) law of honor killing (as Karo-Kari). Her voice against her master can be interpreted here as an attempt of the woman to be powerful like the man. In order to curb her power, the target men in the village threat to kill her. By this law, they prove themselves dominant and warn the women not to dare to come in their power-structure. This is the height of subalternity or the basic reason behind the silence of the women against violence. This case of Fatimah seems to have some semblance with the case of Chandra who is first raped by a man who forced her either to abort the child or to be caste-out. Finally, Chandra died due to administer high doses of local medicines for the termination of her pregnancy. Following Guha and Spivak, the instances of rape and honor killing of the women are considered as gendered based imperialism.

The paraphrasing of the sentence of the story as "the men halal (rape) women" ironically transfers the image of a woman into a beast. She becomes a simple prey for her hunter (the man). Moreover, the sentence that "they (men) would come out with their axes" (Riaz, 2007, P. 34) also shows the cruelty of the men upon the women. Generally, people use axe to cut trees and hard materials. But the target men of the village use this dangerous



tool to cut the women mercilessly. This is the cultural subalternity of the village women.

The brother of Mummo, the only male character, knows the evil. He comes with his sister to take away the illicit child of Fatimah. However, he keeps her plight in silence. He supports his sister to restore her share from the property of her deceased husband. The silence of Mummo's brother demonstrates that the woman is not merely the desirous object of the men, she can be an object of interest of the men in the case of property. Due to save property, Fatu's illegitimate baby boy becomes the son of "Noor Mohammad Shah (a big land lord) and Begum Mumtaz (alias Mummo)" and therefore an heir of thousand acres of lands (p.37).

### Findings

The present study finds that the subalternity of the village woman of the story especially of Fatu is mainly constructed due to the ideological politics of power, desire (physical desire) and interest (in case of property) of the men. The men in the village construct their superiority by sexually abusing the women. Then they threaten the women in the name of honor. Their law seems their (the men's) weapon to keep their victims silent and submissive forever. As a sati woman is known as a good wife, in the same way the story shows that the village woman is known as good only if she is voiceless. This is the challenging situation for all the thinkers to protect such subalterns. Through this story, Riaz gives a message to the (false) gods of the women's world to protect the women (as Fatimah, Aai, Mummo), and the humanity worldwide.

### Conclusion

*The Daughters of Aai* represents the women (viz, Fatu, Aai and Mummo etc.) of rural Sindh as subalterns. By creating the character of the dumb Fatu, the author first shows the reader about the common situation of the women suffering under such cases of sexual assault and honor killing in the rural villages of Sindh. Then, with the characterization of Mummo and Aai, Riaz attempts to give them an imaginary protection (in particular to Fatu). With the application of the concept of subalternity of Spivak along with textual analysis method, we explore here that how the women of the rural Sindh fall in the schizophrenic polarity of the man's desire and man's honor. By this, we conclude that the target case of Sindh based fictional Kari (i.e., Fatu) seems like the Spivakian referential sati women. Spivak's subalterns cannot speak but Riaz's subaltern can be heard by this research study. This study breaks the silence of so many suppressed rural women of Sindh and appeal to the world to solve such issues of women in real life.

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