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“WHO SPEAKS FOR ME, WITH AND TO ME?”  
SUBALTERNITY AND REPRESENTATION IN THE WORKS OF MAHASWETA DEVI,  
BESSIE HEAD, AND ASSIA DJEBAR

BY

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## ABSTRACT

*“Who Speaks for, with and to Me?”* study how the gendered subaltern subjects of the global South are represented in the fictional works of three writers: Mahasweta Devi, Bessie Head, and Assia Djebar. Devi, Head, and Djebar write about disenfranchised groups of people whose ontological existences are marginalized and silenced by mainstream social and national discourses of postcolonial nation-states such as India, South Africa, and Algeria. The three chapters demonstrate the retrieval of subaltern agency by Devi, Head, and Djebar through their strategic and rhetorical shifting of attention from the spoken words of the gendered subaltern to the female subaltern’s *body-in-pain*, their experiences of living as social and political outcasts, and their relationships with lived spaces (home, nation, harem, prison). Devi represents female subaltern bodies as spaces exploited for the exertion of power and also as sites for resistance against gendered, class, and caste violence. I read Mahasweta’s use of pain as a narrative strategy to regard the female subject-in-pain as a dynamic being and not a passive victim. Bessie Head’s representations of subaltern agency relate subalternity to social and political conditions of living in exile. I contend that it is this lived experience that leads Head to articulate a completely new perspective for examining the elite-subaltern relationship, namely the subaltern’s inability to understand the elite. She turns the question —“can the subaltern speak?” — around to ask if the elite can speak (to the subaltern)? I explore the issue of lived experience further in Assia Djebar’s works. I focus on Djebar’s representations of subaltern agency through the marginalized space of the harem in postcolonial Algeria. Effectively, this dissertation problematizes Gayatri Spivak’s assertion that the subaltern cannot be authentically represented.

*To*  
*Dr. Meghbaran Mukherjee*  
*(Daddy)*  
*&*  
*Anjali Banerjee*  
*(Manta)*

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## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is about subalternity and representation. The three chapters, “Embodied Subjectivity,” “Living in Subalternity,” and “Gendered Space as Subaltern Space,” study *how* the gendered subaltern subjects of the global South “speak” through the fictional works of Mahasweta Devi (*Doulati*, “Draupadi,” and “Stanadayini”), Bessie Head (*A Woman Alone*, *A Gesture of Belonging*, and *When Rain Clouds Gather*), and Assia Djébar (*Ombre Sultane* and *Femme d’Algers dans leur appartement*). This dissertation does not seek to authenticate whether Mahasweta, Head, and Djébar adequately represent the subaltern. Rather, my aim is to examine their modes of production of the gendered subaltern subjects. In other words, I aim to delineate *how* the three writers (a) write about the subaltern subject and (b) write in a way that is understandable to the mainstream and yet does not put subalternity to crisis.<sup>1</sup> Simply put, this dissertation unravels the meaning of subalternity in the writings of Mahasweta, Head, and Djébar and the methodologies they use in representing subaltern agency (speech, action) and subaltern consciousness.

Mahasweta Devi (b. 1926), Bessie Head (1937–1985), and Assia Djébar (b. 1936) are contemporaries whose works are best read in the context of decolonization of their respective countries (India, South Africa/Botswana, and Algeria) and the sociopolitical crises that surfaced in each of these countries in the aftermath of decolonization. My choice of these three writers, however, is not guided by the fact that they are or were contemporaries. I am also not drawn to them because they are all “postcolonial” writers who poignantly capture the effects of decolonization in their countries. Instead, my interest in their works stems from the fact that they wrote about marginalized sections of their particular societies much before the “subaltern

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<sup>1</sup> Subalternity is put to crisis when subalterns are represented as “subjects of,” rather than individual subjects with distinct subject hood.

subject" became an analytical category in the Anglo-American academy. Their representations of the dispossessed, displaced, marginalized, and the poorest of the poor echo what Gayatri Spivak would later term the "gendered subaltern" (Spivak, "Can" 267). The subaltern, Spivak notes in her essay, is a subject alienated from the mainstream society. As a category, it exists at the margins and is a position devoid of identity. She further defines subalternity as a geopolitical location that is marked by its lack of access to mobility for class struggle, an absence which in turn determines the lack of class consciousness or identity of the subaltern. The subaltern lives on the margins of society outside the domain of mainstream discourses without any political, social, or economic rights. As I show in the following chapters, characters such as Doulati (in Mahasweta), Hajila (in Djébar), and "the Man who Never took the Train" (in Head) represent the category of the subaltern as Spivak talks about it. I study these authors and their writings in relation to Spivak's theory that challenges representations of the gendered subaltern subjects in and through institutionalized disciplinary practices. Accordingly, before introducing these writers, it is imperative to establish Spivak's theorization of the subaltern as a category and a subject.

Gayatri Spivak's work on the subaltern comes out of the subaltern studies project that was launched by Ranajit Guha and his colleagues at the Australian National University in the mid-1970s ("Homage" 288–95). Spivak has often stated that it was the work of Guha and not Gramsci that first directed her attention to the subaltern question. Though pivotal in the work of the Subaltern Studies Group, Gramsci was not, at least in the initial period, central to Spivak's theory (Spivak, "Subaltern" 476). Yet whenever discussing the subaltern, it is with Gramsci that one has to start.

Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) used the term subaltern in his *Prison Notebooks* (1929–1935) interchangeably with "subordinate" and "instrumental" to describe non-hegemonic groups or classes whose social and political consciousness are limited and political unity weak. While some believe that Gramsci used the word "subaltern" as a synonym for "proletariat"--the latter considered "Marxist" and hence open to censure--others including Spivak contend that Gramsci's use of the term "extends the class position and class consciousness argument isolated in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*" ("Can" 37). Equally important for my purposes here is Gramsci's argument about the role of the intellectual in the subaltern's cultural and political movement to the hegemony. Namely, intellectuals are to facilitate the eventual, and revolutionary, movement of the subaltern into positions of power. The intellectual is to determine the production of history as narrative (truth) as a way for facilitating this revolutionary movement (*Southern Question* 67). I pursue this line of Gramsci's thought to argue that certain spatial arrangements and experiential moments can indeed aid the mainstream intellectual's understanding of the subaltern and consequently allow the intellectual to represent the subaltern. But let me first elaborate the theoretical category of the subaltern further through a discussion of the work done by the subaltern studies collective and thereafter by Spivak.

Following Gramsci, the subaltern studies collective redefined subalternity in the South Asian context in terms of class, caste, and gender (Ludden, *Reading* 9). Formed out of a crisis in the project of Indian nationalist historiography, the group used the term "subaltern" to mean a general category of subordination. In the beginning, "subaltern," for the group, was the name of a space of difference (Guha, *Subaltern* 1). Their initial project was "to rethink Indian colonial historiography from the perspective of the discontinuous chain of peasant insurgency during the colonial occupation," and to "listen to the small voices of history" who were silenced from the

grand narrative of Indian independence (Spivak, "Can" 38; Beverley, *Subalternity* 15). Guha initiated a clean break with most Indian historians when he announced the project's ambition "to rectify the elitist bias" in a field "dominated by elitism" (Ludden, *Reading* 9). Guha argues,

The historiography of [...] the making of the Indian nation and the development of the consciousness—nationalism—which confirmed this process were exclusively or predominantly elite achievements. In the colonialist and neo-colonialist historiographies these achievements are credited to British colonial rulers, administrators, policies, institutions, and culture; in the Nationalist and neo-nationalist writings—to Indian elite personalities, institutions, activities, and ideas. (*Subaltern* 1)

Incidentally, the group's inquiry was not limited to history alone—the "limits of literature as representing/a representation of subaltern subject" was equally questioned (Beverley, *Subalternity* 8).

Gayatri Spivak inserted the category of the *gendered* subaltern in the discourse on subaltern representation. Her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1983), made two important points that challenged the ideological position of the subaltern studies initiative. First, "How can one touch the consciousness of the people [and] [w]ith what voice consciousness can the subaltern speak?" and, second, "If [...] the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow [and, therefore,] cannot speak at all" ("Can" 40–41).

In raising these fundamental questions, Spivak's essay also introduced into the discourse of subalternity issues such as the "s/Subject of history, the international division of labor, the contemporary relevance of Marxism, deconstruction, gender, [...] and capitalism's worlding of

the world” (Morris, *Reflections* 1). These, she insisted, are integral to any understanding of the subaltern as a product of sociopolitical and economic policies.

Spivak’s essay informs us about two kinds of gendered subaltern subjects: (a) the “true subaltern” whose subalternity is marked by a position without identity (class consciousness), and (b) the “not true subaltern” whose identity as a female, as opposed to her class position, determines her subordination. The latter is a subaltern by virtue of an identity in differential (*Critique* 64). In any case, it is the former or the “true subaltern” that is the main focus of Spivak’s work. Her arguments discuss the impossibility of writing about and formulating the gendered subaltern’s (or, true subaltern’s) agency in relation to mainstream representations. The important thing about Spivak’s argument is less the designating of a position for the gendered subaltern than the questioning its silence or absence from forms of history vis-à-vis representational politics of mainstream discourses. As she explains, the gendered subalterns remain unrepresented because the class-conscious Anglo-American liberal academy cannot acknowledge their subjective entity without reframing the subaltern’s identity and position within a history of class struggle. Case in point: Mainstream attempts at representing the subaltern do not take into account the international division of labor and the fact that there are women and children in the global South who work as daily wage laborers without access to or membership in any labor organizations (for example, workers in the sweatshops in Bangladesh and Jamaica). It is in this context of *our* inability to speak for or understand or represent the subaltern that Spivak’s statement—“the subaltern cannot speak”—must be read. It constitutes subalternity as a position lacking in class consciousness, that is, a position bereft of any agency for class struggle.

In an interview published in the journal *Polygraph* in 1989, Spivak said that she likes Gramsci's definition of the "subaltern" as a disenfranchised group because it is more flexible than the term "proletariat," which conventionally denotes the masculine working class of nineteenth-century Europe. In this regard, she also appreciates the initiative taken by the Subaltern Studies collective to move away from the use of the term proletariat and their emphasis on the term subaltern to define those classes dislocated from the mainstream. However, unlike Gramsci and Guha, she does not define the subaltern as a "group" or a "class"; instead, Spivak contends that the subaltern is better understood as a *singular* category. In other words, the subaltern is not an empirical social subject or group. Following Gilles Deleuze's use of the word "singularity" in the *Logic of Sense* (1969), Spivak defines subalternity and the subaltern as a singular position—a position that lacks identity, a presence that is unverifiable ("Scattered" 475, 476). Deleuze argues that singularity is "essentially pre-individual, non-personal and a-conceptual" (*Logic* 63). The singular is therefore different from and indifferent to the personal and the collective, personal and impersonal, and the particular and general. The subaltern's "lack of access to mobility," for Spivak, is "a version of singularity" as far as the subaltern since by virtue of the facts that its position is different from the mainstream and its actions are in spite of the mainstream ("Scattered" 475). The subaltern is unverifiable because it does not and/or cannot repeat its actions within the prescribed logic of the mainstream. Alternatively, the subaltern position and action are unrecognizable by the mainstream.

It is the subaltern's lack of access to the collective that prevents it from understanding and being understood with hegemonic logic. Its representation in discourse is thus always prone to failure. It is for this reason that Spivak is averse to the Subaltern Studies group's positivist methodology of understanding subaltern consciousness against the backdrop of larger political

events. Such an approach is both dangerous and reductive because it assumes that objective evidence of subaltern insurgency can be recovered from studying the colonial archives, analyzing rumors, and collecting data about peasant nationalism. This methodology reads political will and consciousness of the subaltern as “an effect of the subaltern subject-effect,” when, according to Spivak, a subaltern subject is constituted by an “immense discontinuous network of political ideology, economics, history, sexuality, language and so on. (Each of these strands, if they are isolated, can also be seen as woven of many strands)...Different knotting and configurations of these strands, determined by heterogeneous determinations, which are themselves dependent upon myriad circumstances,” contends Spivak, “produce the effect of an operating subject” (“Subaltern Historiography” 281). Simply put, mainstream, elite discourses fail to represent the subaltern *as it is*—subaltern representations are always mediated.

Spivak complicates the issue of subaltern representation in the mainstream further by introducing the gendered subaltern subject as a separate category. She has argued that the Subaltern group’s methodology is not only inadequate to describe the consciousness of the subaltern but it “keeps the male dominant” thus keeping the female subaltern “even more deeply in shadow” (“Can” 286). Representing the subaltern is impossible because the subaltern is radically heterogeneous—it cannot be subsumed by the dominant system of western knowledge and its meaning-making efforts. The subaltern not only refuses the authority of hegemonic historical writing but disrupts the philosophical logic that underwrites the system.

The publication of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” marked a pivotal moment in subaltern studies and postcolonial theory. The issue of misrepresentation of the East by the West was not new; Edward Said had already brought this to the forefront with his pathbreaking book *Orientalism* (1978). Spivak’s article, however, takes Said’s argument a step further to question

the ideological imperatives and the discursive practices of Western “liberal” intellectuals as well as postcolonial scholars as representatives and speakers for/of the “Third World” indigenous women. Using Foucault’s theory of knowledge and its relationship with power, Spivak argues that the “western Subject” of enunciation (writer, philosopher) is constituted via certain knowledge systems and consequently can only represent the others (“subject of the West”) through specific agencies like language, class, and speech that are comprehensible only to the West. Therefore, representation is almost always bound within certain definitive structures and the enunciated subjects are represented within those modes of production. Hence, for Spivak, the question of representing subaltern voice consciousness is an anomaly. In the context of Said’s theory of Orientalism, which challenged representation of the East at different levels, Spivak’s notion of the Subject-subject relationship becomes abundantly clear. For if the represented (subject) is fictional, then the existence of the representative (Subject) who derives his/her identity from its representation of the other is equally volatile. The fictional subject of representation jeopardizes the identity of both the Subject (writer) and the subject (text) because of the ideological position of the Subject. “Can the subaltern speak?” is a question about the First World scholar’s inability to understand or represent the subaltern. It points out the lack of an appropriate a proper methodology for understanding the gendered subaltern subject and puts the writer, the theorist, the philosopher, and the artist under direct scrutiny as subjects alienated from their own works (representation).

Spivak’s essay caused much anxiety, especially among scholars engaged in representing the gendered subaltern voice. Following the publication of the article, researchers from all across the Anglo-American academy engaged in heated debates over the question of subaltern representation and agency. In the last two decades, they have challenged Spivak’s theorization

and explored newer agencies for representing the gendered subaltern subject. While some, including Lata Mani, Ania Loomba and Benita Parry, for instance, have focused their attention on official documents, songs, poetry, paintings, and body arts as markers of subaltern speech, others such as Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan have directed their attention to theorizing a new methodology or agency for understanding subaltern speech. Sunder Rajan contends, for example, that both the Subject and the subject can understand each other through their ontological experiences of the “body-in-pain.” According to Rajan, when prioritized as the subject, the body-in-pain produces knowledge of a universal experience of pain that can unite the sufferer, the witness, and the writer alike. Likewise, as I show in my first chapter, experiences of bodily pain can be a medium via which subaltern representation becomes possible.

In recent years, Spivak herself has revisited the central premise of the essay to talk about possible ways to understand subaltern speech. In her 2003 lecture on “The Trajectory of the Subaltern in My Work,” she says that the traditional intellectual (that is, the Western Subject) and the organic intellectual (that is, the subject of the West) can indeed come together but only if the traditional intellectual *learns to learn by unlearning*. This argument is best understood by going back to Gramsci, for what Spivak is saying is simply that the hegemonic (knowledge) structure has to be dismantled before communication between the subaltern and the Other can begin. Coming twenty-five years after the “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” this “revisionary” rereading of Spivak by Spivak has again sparked a flurry of debates and research. These discussions, alongside questioning the agency of the traditional intellectual, have redrawn the definition of subalternity “as a position without identity.” The gendered subaltern subject is no longer restricted to the sati of the nineteenth-century Calcutta or the marginalized, uneducated, lower-caste women of India; it is now a broader category capable of accommodating even

mainstream and quasi-marginal positions. Spivak remains skeptical of this explosion of the category. However, in a 2007 article titled “Moving Devi,” she concedes that the subaltern position is essentially a relative one. As a position, it is no longer rigid, and it takes different meanings depending on the subject’s geopolitical and spatial location. A gendered subaltern subject can live in the center and still not be heard or understood.

What has remained constant through all these debates, however, is Spivak’s contention that unless validated by mainstream institutional recognition, subaltern action and speech remain silent. For Spivak, subaltern agency is not possible without the subaltern collectivizing and participating in the mainstream. The caveat: the subaltern cannot insert itself into the mainstream without risking erasure of its position as a subaltern. This, of course, begs the question: is the subaltern to remain forever in subalternity? And, alternatively, in seeking to participate in the mainstream, is subalternity being put to crisis? Spivak is of the opinion that the subaltern cannot participate in the mainstream without risking synecdochization—that is, without being reduced to a part of the mainstream. In effect, the subaltern remains silent—a subject of representation (*Vertretung*) but only as an object of re-presentation (*Darstellung*). Representation as *speaking for* the subaltern is complicit with re-presentation or portraying the subaltern as deemed correct by the mainstream. As Spivak observed in an exchange with Sarah Harasym, “speaking in the name of [...] is not a solution, the idea of the disenfranchised speaking for themselves, or the radical critics speaking for them; this question of representation, self-representation, representing others, is a problem” (Harasym, "Practical Politics" 63). What is necessary (and increasingly so in today’s globalized world) is a “persistent critique” of multiculturalism that seeks to construct “the Other simply as an object of knowledge, leaving out the real Others” (Gunew, "Multi-Culturalism" 59).

The three authors under discussion here, however, appear to think otherwise. Mahasweta Devi, Bessie Head, and Assia Djebar seek subaltern agency through the lexicalization of mainstream discourse at the level of subaltern action (physical resistance, and occupation of and negotiation with space), speech (verbal as well as nonverbal including silence), and suffering (body-in-pain). By lexicalization I mean the localization of something foreign into or alongside the native. Or, in this particular case, the addition of the mainstream discourse as a foreign frame to a localized subaltern action or vice versa for the purposes of excavating the structural relationship between subaltern and mainstream. In the context of the claim that subaltern agency is excised in (mainstream) representation, this approach allows for a study of how subalternity uses mainstream spatial precincts and hegemonic logic to enunciate their distinct positions as subjects of desire and/or desiring subjects in the works of Mahasweta, Head, and Djebar.

Mahasweta, Head, and Djebar write about disenfranchised groups of people whose ontological existences are marginalized in and silenced by mainstream social and national discourses of postcolonial nation-states such as India, South Africa, and Algeria. The primary focus of their work is the gendered subaltern subject and the representation of gendered subaltern voice consciousness. In their works, they variously challenge and deconstruct the notion of the impossibility of subaltern representation by reflecting on moments—experiences, articulations, and experiments—of subaltern agency. Reading the three together thus helps our understanding of the different types of subaltern positions and their access to class consciousness or the lack of it. Class, race, gender, political identity, as well as historical background shape the experience and existence of their subaltern characters. For instance, while Devi's characters are dislocated from the nation (India) due to economic and social oppression, Head's characters are forced to live in exile because of racial discrimination by the nation (South Africa), and Djebar's subjects

are alienated from the center for political and religious reasons. Though their positions are determined by a variety of reasons, they share with one another the ability to enunciate (albeit through different modalities) identity positions that are at once recognized by the center while remaining enigmatic to the logic of re-presentational hegemony.

In particular, this dissertation studies the gendered subaltern subject's voice consciousness in relation to spatial locations. For example, though the subaltern consciousness or subjectivity remains outside the purview of traditional intellectuals, the subalterns' spatiotemporal position (in a prison, refugee camp, or an asylum) can help them develop an agency to articulate their identity in relation to these institutional structures and their symbolic meanings. This, in turn, can allow restructuring the Subject-subject relationship (namely elite-subaltern communication), and the collision of these two subject positions can be further instrumental in representing the gendered subaltern voice. As I show in the chapters to follow, such elite-subaltern communications are facilitated by Draupadi's incarceration (in Mahasweta's short story "Dopdi"), Isma's experiences in the harem (in Djébar's *Ombre Sultane*), and the exile of the subaltern characters in Head's *A Woman Alone* (confined in refugee camps).

The first chapter, "Embodied Subjectivity: Female Body and Subaltern Agency in *Doulati*, 'Draupadi', and 'Stanadayini' (Breast Giver)," discusses Mahasweta Devi's novel *Doulati* (1985) and short stories "Stanadayini" or "Breast Giver" (1987) and "Dopdi" (1985). In these stories, violence and pain inflicted on the female subaltern bodies are presented as important markers for constituting subalternity and representing them as such. On the one hand, these bodies are portrayed as spaces exploited for the exertion of power, and, on the other, they are sites for resistance against gendered, class, and caste violence. Borrowing Elaine Scarry's argument about physical pain as a possible constituent of subjecthood, the female characters in

Mahasweta's stories are "embodied subjects" whose agency (voice) is represented through their suffering bodies. Mahasweta represents the gendered subaltern voice through graphematic images of bloodied, decaying, and diseased female bodies—bodies that have been rendered as such due to their incarceration within patriarchal societies and institutions. For the purpose of gaining recognition by the state and other mainstream institutions, there is a conscious effort on Mahasweta's part to represent gendered subalterns as subjects in pain. Like Scarry's notion of the radical subject of pain where "the knowledge of pain is based upon the universal experience of pain," Mahasweta too attempts to use pain as a shared knowledge and experience that unites sufferer, torturer, and helper (Rajan, *Women* 20). Pain as used by Mahasweta can be read as "a stage rather than a state [in order] to regard the subject in pain as a dynamic being rather than a passive victim" (23). As I argue, there are moments within these stories where it is possible to recover the female subalterns' independent voice through their utterance of pain and conditions that lead to the infliction of pain.

I focus on the role of death in understanding Doulati, Jasodha, and Dopdi's subalternity. Since we do not recover any voice consciousness and know of them only as victims of certain exploitative circumstances, it is their dead and decaying bodies that mark their agency. The causality and visibility of the mortifying bodies become symbolic of the violated subaltern space. Chapter 1 considers whether Mahasweta's representation of subalternity vis-à-vis death can be extended to read the subaltern's subject constitution as well. I hypothesize that if pain is the only thing that the female subaltern can claim as her own, then it is through pain that the female subaltern can express her voice consciousness.

My second chapter, entitled "Living in Subalternity: The Becoming of the Subaltern," analyzes Bessie Head's novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969), her autobiography *A Woman*

*Alone* (1990), and a collection of her letters published posthumously as *A Gesture of Belonging* (1991) to argue that Head's unique position—a prolific writer in the English language who is also a subaltern in terms of class and gender—gives her an advantage authors such as Mahasweta and Djébar do not have. Though not a subaltern in the strictest sense of the term (that is, without identity, class consciousness, agency), she was forced into occupying the marginal space of subalternity, and her writings articulate subaltern experiences from the locus of the subaltern. I refer to Head's struggle against poverty, alienation, and state-organized violence, all of which situate her as a marginalized entity within the social and political context of South Africa, to argue that her subjective experiences have a direct link with her works. As a first-generation biracial person forced to live in refugee camps in Botswana for almost ten years, Head's experiences of living as a social outcast made it possible for her to understand the gendered subaltern subject. In this context, Head's analysis of the elite-subaltern relationship is important. Head does not remain content with the elite's inability to understand the subaltern; rather, she ventures to explain the subaltern's inability to comprehend the elite as well. She turns the question, "can the subaltern speak?" around to ask if the elite can speak (to the subaltern).

My third chapter, "Gendered Space as Subaltern Space: The Coming Together of the Popular and the Marginal," studies Assia Djébar's narratives about harems and hammams in her novel *Ombre Sultane* (1987) and the novella *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1980). These spatial precincts are presented in her works as radical spaces of resistance in postcolonial Algeria. I analyze the modes of reproduction via which these spaces transform from marginalized subaltern spaces to active sites for resistances. Following Irvin Cemil Schick's argument that "the word harem denotes both a space and a category of people," I observe how in Djébar's narratives, the secluded female dwellers in these spaces play vital roles in transforming

them, and how, in the process, they change themselves to emerge as radical postcolonial female subjects of Algeria (Schick, "Harem" 69). Djébar's politics of location is central to understanding these phenomena of change that affect both the spaces and their female inhabitants equally. The harem and the hammam in Djébar's texts consequently surface as more than empirically measurable and mappable spaces. These are socially produced and change with use. As I show, these spaces are locations of radical openness from where counterhegemonic discourses and representations of gendered subaltern's voice consciousness are rendered possible.

Schematically put, beginning with Mahasweta and ending with Djébar, I chart a trajectory of elite-subaltern communication that argues the possibility of representing subaltern gendered subjects through shared experiences of spatial confinement and physical suffering. Both conditions, I claim, render subaltern speech (verbal as well as nonverbal) and subaltern agency (modalities for negotiating physical confinement and bodily pain) understandable by gendered subjects at the center. Subaltern subjectivity and speech can be represented via an understanding, occupation, and sharing of experiences endured by and spaces inhabited by the gendered subaltern.

## CHAPTER 1

### **Embodied Subjectivity: Female Body and Subaltern Agency in *Doulati*, "Draupadi," and "Stanadayini" (Breast Giver)**

I will focus on a figure who intended to be retrieved, who wrote with her body. It is as if she attempted to "speak" across death, by rendering her body graphematic... The woman in this [story] tried to be decisive in extremis, yet lost herself in the undecidable womanspace of justice. She "spoke," but women did not, do not, "hear" her. (Spivak, *Critique* 246–47)

The rhetorical question "Can the subaltern speak?" pivots on Spivak's telling of an anecdotal story: that of Bhubaneshwari Bhaduri who committed suicide by hanging herself in 1926 after failing to accomplish a mission on behalf of an anticolonial revolutionary group. Based on Bhubaneshwari's "graphematic" dead body, Spivak theorized the incisive question about the subaltern's speech. Simply put, Spivak's contention that the subaltern cannot speak and/or we cannot interpret the subaltern's speech rests on her argument about the circumstances of Bhubaneshwari's suicide. As Spivak observes, at the time of suicide Bhubaneshwari was menstruating. This, Spivak argues, was a deliberate choice on the part of Bhubaneshwari to indicate that she was not killing herself to hide an illegal pregnancy (a common presumption of the time about the cause of suicide by any young, unmarried woman). In fact, in her suicide note Bhubaneshwari went further and explained her failure to carry out a political mission as the real cause of her suicide. For Spivak, Bhubaneshwari's dead yet menstruating body attempted to erase the axioms that could have endorsed the reading of her death in any other way (Spivak, "Can" 228). Nevertheless, she failed to convey her message as her death was construed and continues to be discussed among family members (when it is spoken of at all) as a shameful outcome of an illicit relationship. This has led Spivak to conclude that neither Bhubaneshwari's

graphematic body nor her suicide note could give a *voice* to her. Bhubaneswari remains silenced in the absence of any “valid institutional vocabulary that can or will validate her actions” (228). Her identity as a political/public woman is suppressed, and her agency is lost. In the words of Spivak, Bhubaneshwari thus “became a subaltern in death [and that too] because of gender and class positioning” (Spivak, *Critique* 273).

Rajeswari Sundar Rajan has criticized Spivak’s use of Bhubaneshwari’s dead body (the causality and visibility of it) to the processes of silencing subaltern speech/action in the cultural practices and social idiom of mainstream discourses. In contrast, Sunder Rajan calls for adopting a theoretical methodology that can derive subaltern subjecthood through a reading of subaltern consciousness, agency, and speech. For Rajan “while the death of the subaltern is significant, it is not subject constitutive. Death surely, if anywhere, is where we might expect subalternity to come undone.” It runs the risk of constituting either a partial subject or nothing at all. Besides, if death of the subaltern is the only way of gauging whether the subaltern can or cannot speak (ability to interpret subaltern speech/action by hegemonic institutions, not ability of the subaltern to speak *per se*), then how can the consciousness, speech, agency, and action of the female subalterns who are alive be interpreted? (Sunder Rajan, "Death" 117).

Both Spivak’s and Rajan’s contentions about subalternity and death are useful for the arguments in this chapter. Female subaltern bodies play an important role in Mahasweta Devi’s stories: *Doulati*, (1985) "Stanadayini" or "Breast Giver" (1987), and "Draupadi" (1981).<sup>2</sup> While the dead bodies of Doulati (a bonded prostitute) and Jasodha (a professional mother) project the female subaltern’s identityless position, Maoist rebel Draupadi’s raped and mutilated body, on the other hand, is a “terrifying superobject” that challenges the class/caste politics of the mainstream (Spivak, "Translator’s Foreword" 252). Mahasweta draws on both the dead (Doulati

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<sup>2</sup> I will use Gayatri Spivak’s translation of all the three stories.

and Jasodha) and the alive (Draupadi) bodies of these female subalterns as an alternative route for representing their individual subjecthood (agency, speech, and consciousness). On the one hand, the female subaltern bodies are portrayed as spaces exploited for the exertion of power, and, on the other, these are sites for resistance against gendered, class, and caste violence.

The use of the subaltern body as a possible site for recovering subjectivity is, however, not unique to Mahasweta Devi. Contemporary feminist theories have also identified the body, and not mind, as an alternative locus for retrieving female subjectivity. Elaine Scarry, for instance, argues that female bodies in pain assume or “have certainty”—a consciousness otherwise absent in or denied to these subjects (*Body 4*). Physical pain serves as consciousness, but unlike any other state of consciousness it has no “referential content.” As Scarry puts it,

the recognition of our interior states of consciousness are regularly accompanied by objects in the external world, that we do not simply “have feelings” but have feelings *for* somebody or something, that love is love of *x*, fear of *y*, ambivalence is ambivalence about *s*... [this list will be interrupted by] physical pain, for physical pain—unlike any other state of consciousness—has no referential content. It is not of or for anything. (5)

Borrowing Scarry’s argument about physical pain as a possible constituent of subjecthood, the female characters in Mahasweta’s stories can be defined as “embodied subjects” whose agency (voice) is represented at the level of the narrative through their suffering bodies. It is my contention that if pain is the only thing that the female subaltern can claim to be her own, then it is through pain that the female subaltern can express her voice consciousness. Equally significant is Scarry’s other premise that *pain resists language* (5). This aspect of the subaltern’s relationship to pain is well evidenced in the three stories by Mahasweta that I discuss in this chapter. Mahasweta represents the gendered subaltern voice through the graphematic images of

bloodied, decaying, and diseased female bodies. There is a conscious effort on Mahasweta's part to represent gendered subalterns as subjects in pain. Like Scarry's notion of the radical subject of pain, where "the knowledge of pain is based upon the universal experience of pain," Mahasweta too attempts to use pain as a shared knowledge and experience that unites sufferer, torturer, and helper (Rajan, "Death" 20). Pain as used by Mahasweta can be read as "a stage rather than a state [in order] to regard the subject in pain as a dynamic being rather than a passive victim" (23). There are moments within the stories where it is possible to recover the female subalterns' independent voice through their utterance of pain and conditions that lead to the infliction of pain.

Subaltern theory most commonly associates the subaltern subject as a subject without class consciousness. In this, the subaltern theorists take a singular approach towards an uncoercive representation of "true subalterns" like Doulati, Jasodha, and Draupadi.<sup>3</sup> For the Marxist subalternists, class consciousness is integral to the construction of individual identity and agency (recognition of speech and action). Gayatri Spivak, for example, defines subalternity "as a position without an identity," where the subaltern is cut off from all lines of social mobility and has no access to hegemony or citizenship (Spivak, "Scattered" 476). Based on this logic, the subalterns are a classless category absent from all modes of production narrative. They become subalterns when the State and other powerful agencies exploit them and their resources for profit. At the same time, they are systematically alienated from the mainstream so that they cannot participate in any political activity and develop a sense of being part of a collective (majority, nation, and so forth). And since class consciousness is derived from association, it is absent in the subaltern people (476). Likewise, agency (recognition of speech and action) is gained through collective participation in actions that are validated by mainstream institutions.

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<sup>3</sup> The "true subalterns" are alienated because of class and caste position and not for gender identity alone.

Since there is no scope for association of the subalterns with political activism, there is no avenue to express their consciousness in a language comprehensible to the mainstream.

Individual identity is also intertwined with class consciousness. The lack of access to mobilization towards collectivity leads to alienation and prohibits the subaltern from developing a sense of consciousness, identity, and agency independent of the hegemonic class.

Mahasweta's representations of the body-in-pain, and pain as resistance to language, however, allow us to move beyond this straightjacketed reading and review subaltern subject positions as positions marked by bodily pains and sufferings. In this, Mahasweta occupies a precarious position in relation to the subaltern studies caucus and their understanding of subaltern subjectivity (consciousness, agency, action). It is evident that the subalterns in her stories lack class consciousness, which also marks them as vulnerable with no scope for resistance against the rampant brutality on their minds and bodies. However, there are moments within her narratives when expressions of pain substitute as the voice of these exploited female subjects. Mahasweta uses the female subaltern body not to dehumanize but to represent the conditions of gendered subalternity in decolonized India. Through this process of subject formation, she politicizes the female subaltern body as a site for power, exploitation, and resistance. The three stories show the violence inflicted on Doulati, Jasodha, and Draupadi, and the impact of pain on the identity formation of these women.

In what follows, I rearrange the chronology of the three stories to better illustrate my hypothesis that the subaltern speaks in and through the site of its body in pain. While *Doulati* describes the abject conditions of subaltern existence, Jasodha and Dopdi variously establish the possibility of subaltern voice consciousness. The first section on *Doulati* will serve, first, to explain how and why the gendered subaltern is bereft of speech and then to accentuate "minor"

textual moments when the gendered subaltern subject articulates a voice consciousness. The second section will examine Jasodha as a transitional figure who occupies an intermediary space between Doulati and Dopdi. Put differently, Jasodha like Doulati is not entirely bereft of voice consciousness, yet she is not as conscious about her sociopolitical existence as Dopdi. Finally, I will focus on Dopdi who transcends her gendered subaltern position by freely voicing her resistance against the state through the exhibition of her graphematic body.

### **Taking Doulati**

Mahasweta's literary work and her activism are intertwined: "a folding back upon one another—re-flection in the root sense" (Spivak, *Imaginary Maps* xxi). Her interest and understanding of tribal life comes from her experience of living among tribal populations, familiarizing herself with their sociopolitical and economic conditions and learning their languages and cultures (Ghatak, *Dust* xiii). She has traveled extensively across India advocating for tribal emancipation from the bonded labor system and right to equal economic opportunities. During her expeditions, Mahasweta witnessed the physical and psychological torture of tribal people and her novella *Doulati* is inspired by two such incidents. In Mahasweta's own words, the character of Doulati's father Crook Nagesia, "is inspired from a real life event" (Spivak, *Imaginary* xiii). She witnessed a tribal man's treatment when under the burning sun, the landlord loaded the bullock cart with paddy and ordered him to pull the cart to the local market. He could not do it and fell under it. He was crushed and became twisted and crippled for the rest of his life. When Mahasweta confronted the landlord, his reply was, "These bullocks are costly. If I send a bullock it will suffer in the heat and it might collapse. But these bonded labourers don't count for much. A man can be wasted, a bullock cannot" (xiii). One of the most intriguing aspects of *Doulati* is Mahasweta's differentiation between male and female subalterns'

experience of subalternity. As for the main protagonist of the novella, Doulati, Mahasweta models her story after a tribal girl she met in one of her trips to the Palamu area. The girl was sold into prostitution at a young age and was undergoing treatment for a life-threatening venereal disease when Mahasweta met her. The meeting made Mahasweta aware of the harsh realities faced by tribal women in decolonized India. She writes “the sale of [tribal] girls for rape still goes on. Doulati is still true, and true for the rest of India” (xiii).

Taking examples from real-life characters, *Doulati* pivots on the question of value and the negation of human labor with a singular focus on the commodification and dehumanization of tribal women as part of the bonded labor system. It tells the story of bonded laborers in modern India “whose only means of repaying a loan is hereditary bond-slavery” (Spivak, *Imaginary* 111). Therefore, the story of *Doulati* is not all fictitious; it also substitutes as the history of the female subaltern life. The character of Doulati is representative of all women who are exploited because of their gender, caste, and class identity. Doulati’s father Ganori or Crook Nagesia’s inability to repay the landlord's loan lands her in a brothel. She is sold into prostitution at the age of fourteen; from then on she is tortured and forced to live as a sex slave or *kamiya* (bonded) whore as long as she is alive. The story spans a period of twelve years, and it ends with Doulati’s painful death from a sexually transmitted disease.

The novella opens with Ganori Nagesia (Doulati’s father and a bonded laborer) daydreaming about eating “rice-lentils-puffed bread-stuffed bread” for breakfast. Soon after, the dream is interrupted with the realization that, with his economic situation, all he can afford is a little cornmeal or *kurthi* porridge and lots of water (*Doulati* 19). The dream sequence is followed by a quick comment by the narrator to exemplify the severity of subaltern existence in modern India: “No Nagesia gets such a menu...This is the talk of their deep despair. Or the talk of dream

that does not come true” (19). The desire to eat rice lentils or stuffed bread is not an extravagant one; in fact, it is a patent choice for most Indians. However, as a Nagesia (low-caste tribal), Ganori is born a bonded laborer, in a system whose recourse to loan is the general regulator of every aspect of life (63). He represents a section of the society that has remained enslaved even after India’s independence. They live in remote areas ruled by ruthless landlords and moneylenders, and where no economic or other benefits from the government reach them. To sustain themselves, the villagers are forced to borrow money from the landlords at an exorbitant rate. The high rates of interest on loans make it impossible for the poor tribals to repay the money; as a result, they are forced into the vicious cycle of bonded slavery. They are under "contract" to work in the landlord’s fields, house, or factory, under extreme conditions, with either exceptionally low pay or very little food. The landlords or the masters, as they are called, use these laborers as slaves or *kamiya* and make sure that even if they work for their whole lives, the money owed is never repaid. In Mahasweta’s novella, Ganori Nagesia became a *kamiya* after borrowing and failing to repay only three hundred rupees. And since then, he has “slave[d] from morning to night, carry[ing] sacks of paddy and wheat on his back” (63). Ganori cannot have the privilege that most Indians have, so much so that even dreaming about it is a crime.

Mahasweta represents Ganori, the male subaltern, as a reticent, vulnerable, and passive subject. In an imaginary conversation with a government official, Ganori defines himself as the landlord Munabar Singh Chandela’s “chattel slave” and acts as such (20). He does not question the landlord’s right to exploit his labor. Moreover, he does not think of being a *kamiya* as a “special misfortune.” Instead, Ganori believes that bonded slavery for a Nagesia man is a pre-given condition, “fate’s decree” that no one can alter (21). Consequently, when Munabar’s inhuman treatment breaks his back, Ganori does not challenge or resent it (36). Instead, he savors

his experience at the city hospital and is most grateful to Munabar for arranging his treatment at a hospital. Without expressing frustration over the treatment that left him disabled for the rest of his life, he tells a different tale to the other Nagesia men. He is more excited about the bed he slept in, the food he had, and the people he met. And ironically, Ganori's account made his friends envious of him: "You lived well [Ganori]. The hospital is a good place" (37). Therefore, even though Ganori is conscious of the landlord's oppression because he feels pain from the torture, psychologically he is complacent with the practice and enacts his role as the *other* of the Other (landlord). Ganori's inability to act independently is evident elsewhere in the text, as well. In an unrelated incident, when Munabar convinces him that Mishraji, the human trafficker, is the most suitable groom for his teenage daughter Doulati, Ganori accepts it without protest: "He said yes to whatever he heard. Because if the master says something the machine in Crook's head stops working out of fear. He hears the Master's gellows, but grasps nothing. To say 'Yes Sir' to the proprietor is a very long-standing habit" (49). Ganori is aware that no Brahmin would marry a Nagesia girl, yet he remains nonchalant when Munabar proposes Doulati's marriage to Mishraji. It is intriguing to note that even though Ganori is not oblivious to the practice of caste discrimination, his reasoning fails in the face of Munabar's malicious intentions for presenting Mishraji as a suitable groom for Doulati. He does not question Mishraji's intention of repaying the loan on his behalf to Munabar. He merely nods at everything that his "master" orders and agrees to let his daughter go with a complete stranger. Ganori presents himself as an obedient, un-desiring subject who remains passive about the whole affair. He believes everything that the landlord tells him without ever questioning his authority.

Ranajit Guha in *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* has discussed in critical detail the subaltern's unwavering dependence on the master. He argues that

the subaltern's tendency to identify itself as the *other* (bonded slaves) of the elite class is a "negative consciousness," whereby their subjectivity is reconstituted through constant exploitation, oppression, and alienation. "The subaltern," Guha notes, "learns to recognize himself, not by the properties and attributes of his own social being but, by a diminution, if not negation, of those of his superiors" (*Subaltern* 18). In other words, there is no independent association or ability to recognize oneself as anything other than the way he is constituted by the master. Moreover, the subalterns' identity as bonded laborers/slaves not only impacts them psychologically but forces them to exist as per the Other's (master) desire of them. As a bonded labor/slave is the only way Ganori can exist for both himself as well as the landlord. Ganori is not the only subaltern male in the story whose subjectivity is marked by a negative consciousness. In one instance, during a government census when an older villager is asked about his age, his answer is, "Write, write, may be ten, may be twenty, eh? What? I have grandchildren; I can't have so few years? ...No no how can I be sixty? I have heard that our brave master is fifty... How can I have more age than he? The master has more land, more money, everything more than me. How can he have less age? No, sir, write ten or twenty" (*Doulati* 31). The rationale behind the argument is absurd, yet the subaltern man accepts it as the truth. The villager cannot think of exceeding the master in any way, even when it comes to his age. This form of association leads to an "identity in difference," whereby the subaltern identifies himself as being different from his master. It must be noted that the elite or hegemonic classes are equally responsible for the constitution and perpetuation of this differential identity for purposes of exerting a systematic coercion of the subaltern classes (Guha 18). Thus men like Munabar Singh do not allow their *kamiya* slaves to lead an independent life even if the latter are capable of repaying the loan. Munabar, for instance, sets fire to their houses and forces them to

take another loan to erect another house, thus keeping the Nagesias entangled in the vicious cycle of the bonded labor system (*Doulati* 23). Landlords such as Munabar scrupulously create and maintain the conditions of subalternity in order to control minute aspects of subaltern life. In consequence, men like Ganori remain perpetually enslaved; they spend their lives as the property of the landlord (279).

Mahasweta takes a different position when it comes to representing the subaltern women. She clearly differentiates the male and female subalterns' labor within the economy of loan repayment to the landlord. The male subalterns' bondage to the landlords is limited to their manual labor. There is no job stipulation for bonded labor, but it entails physical labor like toiling the fields, working in factories, carrying heavy objects, cleaning the landlord's estate, and so forth. Therefore, when Ganori breaks his back and is no longer able to work, he becomes useless to Munabar and is released from the contract of bonded slavery. The situation of the female Nagesias, however, is far more wretched. They are inserted into the bonded labor system mostly through their male counterparts. The practice of bonded labor is hereditary. The entire family shares the burden of repayment when a male member borrows money. And if for some reason he is unable to work, the women members of the family are coerced into a life of absolute sexual and economic exploitation (Spivak, *Imaginary Maps* xiii). What is more, the female *kamiyas* are not documented on paper like their male counterparts who are at least bound by a contract that assures freedom (theoretically) upon the repayment of the loan. There is no such documentation for the female *kamiyas* because more often than not they are not the primary petitioners for the loan. So when Doulati is sold to the pimp Mishraji, Munabar receives money from Mishraji and gives Ganori back his contract papers, an indication that Ganori is free from bondage. Doulati replaces Ganori as a slave, but there is no record that states the condition of her

inclusion into the bonded labor system, and hence no clause assuring her freedom if she can repay the loan (*Doulati* 49). Ganori, the male *kamiya*, knows the exact conditions that make him a *kamiya* (after borrowing three hundred rupees), but Doulati has no such knowledge. She becomes a *kamiya* whore or bonded prostitute at the age of fourteen because her father cannot serve the master any longer. However, she herself is unaware of this condition (50). Unlike Doulati, Ganori can define himself as the landlord's "beth-begar, Seokia, Kamiya, everything" because he associates with a certain identity derived through his work (20). Even as a negative consciousness, the male *kamiyas* develop an identity as the others of the Other (landlord/master). They are psychosocially manipulated by a power equation whereby they know that as bonded laborers (other), they cannot have what the masters have. In comparison, the Nagesia women develop an identity that is different from their male counterparts. Their status as slaves is constructed via the male subalterns whose identity, again, is constituted as an identity in difference from the master or the landlord. Consequently, the female subalterns exist through a process of double negation, an identityless existence, as the other of the other (male *kamiya*). If the male *kamiyas* are recognized as lesser humans by the masters, the female *kamiyas* are further degraded; in fact, their being as independent subjects is nullified altogether. They are treated as pieces of flesh that are available for physical and sexual exploitation. There is a position without any identity.

Mahasweta's writing depicts this reality in the story when Kishan (another pimp) asks Mishraji if a frail young girl like Doulati can deal with her first client, merciless Latia, "who takes *aswagandha* root at night, and his sexual hunger is boundless":

"What Latiaji does with those girls. Even an elephant would die to suffer such manhood."

"These are the Mahatma's children of God (*harijan*). Hardworking people. They can lift

a forty pound bag of paddy” (51).

What follows is the regular exploitation and inhuman treatment of Doulati’s body at the hands of Latia: “He toils on her for hours till the effect of his medicine subsides. He declares her his property and will allow her to take other clients only after he is satisfied with her” (50).

At one level, Mahasweta’s representation of Doulati as a subject is not particularly different from Ganori. As a naïve, vulnerable teenager, she is unaware of the ways of the world and becomes easy prey in the hands of the upper classes like Mishraji, Munabar, and Latia (50). She is the perfect example of a true subaltern subject alienated from the mainstream because of her gender, caste, and class position. Her life and death mark a space of difference that is marginalized within an already marginalized community. Through Doulati’s predicament, Mahasweta brings to the fore a harsh reality: that Doulati can never be free of bond slavery and she will continue to be exploited until she is dead. In Mahasweta’s description,

The woman’s body is thus the last instance in a system whose general regulator is still the Loan [...] but it is also the last instance in the chain of affective responsibility[...] No Latia is her client, her body is tight. The going down and down Doulati will be a skeletal as Somni. She will repay the bond-slavery loan as a beggar. (Spivak, "Difference" 112)

Through the sad and pessimistic story of Doulati, Mahasweta seeks to draw attention to the subjugated subaltern women within the Indian nation-state. The novella ends with Doulati’s death on August 15, the day of India’s independence. Her diseased body breathes its last in a school compound on top of a map of India. According to Mahasweta, when the practice of bonded slavery is prevalent, Doulati’s diseased, dead body on top of the Indian map symbolizes the futility of words like "decolonization," "freedom," and "independence": “Doulati is still true

and true for the rest of India. That is why I have ended the story like that. Doulati's bleeding rotting carcass covers the entire Indian peninsula" (Devi, *Imaginary* xiv).

Much has been said and written about the ending of *Doulati*. Mahasweta has been criticized for the use of Doulati's diseased and bloodied body as a metaphor, reducing her to an allegory and silencing her forever (xxi). However, what has been overlooked in the debate is that Doulati is not the only female subaltern subject in the story. A closer reading of the text shows moments when female characters are not silenced; rather they are represented as independent subjects. A few Nagesia women are represented by Mahasweta as loquacious and rebellious, unlike the male subalterns. These women bear similar burdens as Doulati, but somehow they manage to survive the torture. Their physical and psychological experiences of pain have constituted their understanding of the *kamiya*-landlord relationship from an absolutely different point of view. Therefore, they are represented as intelligent and shrewd in comparison to the Nagesia men. For example, in the beginning of the narrative when an outsider asks Ganori how Munabar can keep bonded labor in an independent country, he cannot explain. In fact, Ganori is startled by the question. He points towards the women for an answer because, by his own admission, the Nagesia women are more knowledgeable than the men (*Doulati* 20). The reason is that, unlike Ganori and the other *kamiya* men, the Nagesia women are not initiated into bonded slavery through a negative consciousness. Their association with the landlord is based on pure exploitation of their bodies irrespective of the loan. In a heteronormative society like the one represented in the story, the sexual exploitation of a male subaltern is not permissible; therefore, they are spared such harassments. For Munabar, the female *kamiyas* exist as a corollary to the male subalterns like Ganori, a surplus commodity available for manual labor as well as sexual exploitation. In fact, the sexual exploitation of the female subaltern bodies is an excess that lies

outside of any bonded labor contract (use of manual labor). As a result, the Nagesia women's relationship with Munabar is based exclusively on bodily pain and degradation, with no recognition of their labor. If the male *kamiyas* are *others* of Munabar and identify themselves through a negative consciousness, then the female *kamiyas* exist as the *other* of the male *kamiyas*. As a result, the female *kamiya*'s sense of being is based on a double set of negation resulting in a position of no identity. Ironically, however, this identityless position is what helps them develop a subjecthood independent of the landlord or the male *kamiyas*. They hold on to the experience of pain because pain is what they have; something organic to their existence, it is not constructed or constituted for them. Pain marks their position in the society as a subaltern; it also makes them aware of the socioeconomic and cultural politics of the mainstream that work in cahoots with one another to marginalize their existence. Their bodies are the last instance for the generator of loan and are thrust together for absolute sexual and economic exploitation; they are connected to bonded slavery but are yet apart. Thus, the female *kamiyas* in the story always emphasize their separation from the male subaltern body:

“These are all Paramananda's *kamiyas*. Doulati, Reoti, Soumni. Fieldwork, digging soil, cutting wells is work. This one doesn't do it, that one doesn't do it, the other one doesn't do it—The boss has turned them into a land. The boss ploughs and ploughs their land and raises crop...They are all some people's *maat* [field, fertile land].” (61)

The use of the word “*maat*” emphasizes the commodification of their bodies at the hands of the pimps, landlords, and others. Instead of listing the nature of their work, they define it through a series of negations about what is not their work. Since they are identified as the *other* of the *other*, they explain the nature of their work through that of the male *kamiyas*. The need to define their work via the male subaltern's (digging soil, cutting, and so on), also means that since the

sexualized female subaltern bodies are not considered as laboring bodies, their work is not recognized either. To talk about it, they have to use an idiom that is recognizable by the elite class. Thus, the female *kamiyas* talk in metaphors. They are extremely intelligent and transform their bodily experiences into a knowledge system through which they understand the world. Their experience of pain, in a strange way, teaches them to be clever, shrewd, and suspicious of everything. Mahasweta provides ample examples to highlight the female subalterns' use of reason to criticize bourgeois notion of the nation or freedom. When a religious leader from Delhi preaches in Munabar's village that Nagesias and Munabar are the "off-spring of the same mother," Rajbi, one of the *kamiya* women, protests immediately. She does not understand that by "mother," the man means mother India, the nation. The concept of the nation is nonexistent for Rajbi because she has never been recognized as a legitimate part of it. On the contrary, as a member of a marginalized community, she has been subjected to systematic alienation from the mainstream. Therefore, her understanding of a country is limited to Soera (her village) and Munabar is the government or ruler of it. She adds sarcastically,

How can that be *Sadhuji* [Mr. Holy Man]?

No Sadhuj, untrue, untrue... If offspring of the same mother, we are all brothers and sisters, yes?... But Munabar doesn't know that. Munabar's children in my room.

Munabar's children in Mukai Dusadin's place as well, and all these boys are bonded labour. Tell me how this can be? ...

Hey, you are all independent India's free people, do you understand?

No, Sadhuji. (41)

The notion of freedom and equality that defines Sadhuji's India is alien to Rajbi. Her identity as a Nagesia woman is constituted through the marks of violence, exploitation, and ruthless

oppression of her body by Munabar. The children she bore are the product of rape. Munabar not only uses the female subaltern's body for sexual exploitation but through the act of rape perpetuates the conditions for reproduction of the vicious cycle of bonded slavery. So Rajbi can only relate to India as a place for the exploitation of the subaltern class and benefit of the elite class. The practice of bond slavery marks Rajbi's identity and the truth of her life; therefore, she cannot deny it to glorify the India of the hegemonic classes. If she belonged to India, then the India that Sadhuji is talking about is a myth; therefore, Rajbi denies its existence. Another woman, Jhari, understands Rajbi's point and agrees with her. She adds a powerful point to Rajbi's argument when she states, "They will never understand what we say, and we will never understand what they say" (41). Mahasweta through the female *kamiyas* not only represents them as conscious beings but, to quote Spivak, "invokes collectivity in the women's voice" (Spivak, "Difference" 61). Jhari's response to Rajbi is an indication of the association of pain that the Nagesia women share with each other. They are all survivors of Munabar's wrath and can relate to Rajbi's logical resistance to Sadhuji's rant. Ironically, the men do not understand Rajbi or Jhari's point: "Bhuneswar and the others look around and shut up" (61).

### **"Stanadayini" (Breast Giver)**

Like *Doulati*, in Mahasweta's short story "Stanadayini" (1987), the enunciation of the woman in pain can be analyzed to assess the gendered subaltern's subjectivity. It is the story of a poor Brahmin woman Jasodha and her breasts. It is a subversive narrative about reducing a woman into an object and stripping her of basic human attributes.

Unlike *Doulati* who is a caste subaltern (marginalized because she is a tribal girl, hence, untouchable), Jasodha is a class subaltern (marginalized because she is poor). She becomes a subaltern when her husband Kangalicharan is crippled in an accident and she is forced to become

a professional wet nurse or a professional mother for a wealthy family to support her husband and children. In order to maintain the conditions of her employment—nursing the master Haldarbabu’s grandchildren—she gives birth to twenty children. The villagers rename Jasodha as *Singhabahini* or the lion-seated mother goddess to glorify her lactational capability.

Unfortunately, Jasodha too embodies this new identity and believes it to be true. In due course, Jasodha is diagnosed with cancer and loses her reproductive capability. With the loss of fertility, she becomes a burden for the society and the title *Singhabahini* becomes obsolete. The story ends with Jasodha’s death in a government hospital with no one by her side.

The representation of Jasodha’s consciousness can be analyzed in two phases: the subject of the other and the subject of pain. In order to understand the first subject position, Jasodha as the subject of the other, it is helpful to consider the retrieval of subaltern consciousness by charting what Gayatri Spivak calls “the subaltern subject-effect” (“Deconstructing” 280). According to Spivak, a subaltern subject is constituted by an “immense discontinuous network of political ideology, economics, history, sexuality, language and so on. (Each of these strands, if they are isolated, can also be seen as woven of many strands.) Different knottings and configurations of these strands, determined by heterogeneous determinations which are themselves dependent upon myriad circumstances, produce the effect of an operating subject” (281). Incidentally, Jasodha’s subjectivity cannot be gauged using this theoretical paradigm. As a female subaltern, she is doubly alienated from all lines of social mobility and has no access to the myriad strands that constitute the male “subaltern subject effect.” Rather, Jasodha’s subjecthood is constituted via the male subjects who in turn are constituted by the innumerable sociopolitical and economic ideologies mentioned by Spivak. Since Jasodha is an *effect of an effect*, her subjectivity is based on a false consciousness. Therefore to represent Jasodha, Mahasweta takes

an antihumanist and antipositivist position where it is always the desire for/of (the power of the Other) that produces an image of the self. For example, the first paragraph of the story presents Jasodha as a sexualized and reproductive body, and a subject of the *Other's* fantasy:

It is as if she [Jasodha] were Kangalicharan's wife from birth, the mother of twenty children... Jasodha doesn't remember when there was no child in her womb, when she didn't feel faint in the morning, when Kangali's body did not *drill* her body like a geologist in a darkness lit only by an oil lamp. She never had time to calculate if she could not bear motherhood. Motherhood was always her way of living and keeping alive her world of countless beings. Jasodha was a mother by profession, *professional mother*. ("Breast Giver" 305–6)

Jasodha's is a position without identity; she exists as the other of the other, as Kangalicharan's wife and the mother of his children. Mahasweta uses words like "drill" and "geologist" to describe Kangali's exploitation of Jasodha's body. Just as a geologist excavates rocks and soil, Kangali does the same with Jasodha's body. For Kangali, Jasodha's voluptuous and sexualized body marks her importance in his life, reducing her to parts and discrediting her independent subjectivity. Ironically Jasodha does not protest against this objectification of her body; instead, she misrecognizes Kangali's fetish of her body, especially her breasts, as proof of his love for her. The narrative writes about Jasodha's response in two statements: first, "she doesn't remember" and second, "she never had time." In both instances, Mahasweta represents Jasodha through a series of negations; Jasodha's inability to recall or calculate marks her as a passive subject. The narrative also indicates that, during the course of her life, Jasodha's subjecthood is constituted multiple times by different people: Kangalicharan is not the only one to reconstitute her as a docile, voiceless, and dependent woman.

When Kangali loses his foot in an accident, the burden of supporting the family falls on Jasodha and she begs the landlord's wife for help. As a poor and uneducated Brahmin woman, Jasodha does not possess any professional skills; therefore, her expectations are limited. All she wants is to feed her family and make Kangali happy: "she wants to become the earth and feed her crippled husband and vulnerable children with a fulsome harvest" (311). Therefore, when the mistress (from a suggestion from her youngest son) offers Jasodha the job of wet nurse for the Haldar children in exchange for food and clothing, Jasodha gladly accepts it. She does not calculate either the benefits or the disadvantages involved, and once again, adopts a different subject position for the benefit of the other. The landlord's son sees use-value in Jasodha's body. Her reproductive and lactating capability becomes an avenue to earn freedom for the daughters-in-law of the house:

But today, hearing from his wife about Jasodha's surplus milk, the second son said all of a sudden, "way found."

"Way to what?"

"Uh, the way to save you pain."

...I have got a divine engine in my hands! You will breed yearly and keep your Body.

(313)

The "divine engine" turns Jasodha into a professional mother. Jasodha's reproductive labor moves her from domestic (her own house) to "domestic" (landlord's household). Since mothering and caring are considered to be natural labor, and do not need capital or produce surplus value, her production of milk (lactation/mothering) is not strictly capitalist. But in Jasodha's case, her body acts as both the capital and labor that produces surplus value. Her ability to reproduce and feed the children is in itself a source of surplus. But this surplus value is

not measured in terms of wage or immediate use-value. In fact, she has no consciousness about the use-value of her lactating ability or that her surplus milk is a source of capital. As a result, she uses her milk for exchange value only. She renders her service in lieu of food, clothing, and so on, but not cash. Jasodha does not have access to a knowledge system that can help her identify herself as an agent of production and add value to her lactating body. Of course, nursing children can be considered an investment, but, in Jasodha's case, it is the landlord's sons and daughters-in-law who benefit from her surplus production:

Jasodha's worth went up in the Haldar house. The husbands are pleased because the wives knees no longer knock when they riffle the almanac. Since their children are being reared on Jasodha's milk, they can be the Holy Child in bed at will. The wives no longer have an excuse to say "no." The wives are happy. They can keep their figures. (315–16)

Jasodha becomes a source of freedom for the women of the landlord's household, but she herself is trapped in a vicious cycle of bodily exploitation. What is more, Jasodha is made to understand the exploitation of her body as a "divine" service, and she fails to understand the rationale behind the spurious celebration of her lactating quality. She is renamed *Singhabahini* or the Lionseated, another name for the Mother Goddess, a sacrificing mother figure whose abilities superseded human imagination:

Otherwise who has ever heard or seen such things as constant pregnancies, giving birth, giving milk like a cow, without a thought, to others' children...Nabin too lost his bad thoughts...whenever he saw Jasodha, he called out "Mother! Mother! Dear Mother!" Faith in the greatness of Lionseated was rekindled in the area...Everyone's devotion to Jasodha became so strong that at weddings, showers, naming they invited her and gave her the position of chief fruitful woman. (351)

Jasodha embodies this new subject position and remains objectified. She does not realize that, under the garb of divinity and a false appreciation of her supernatural powers, her human emotions like pain and anger are ignored. She fails to recognize that what she claims to be is based on an incongruous existence (reproductive ability). Hence there is misrecognition. She considers her body as a whole but in reality she is appreciated for her ability to produce milk, and her breasts are fetishized into a "thing" or object by all. Ironically, Jasodha encourages this fetishization through her own fixation on the name *Singhabahini* and her belief that she is a mere vessel to whom has been given the responsibility of feeding the children of this world. She negates pain to live up to the reputation of the *Singhabahini*. Jasodha does this so successfully that she alienates her breasts from her body, suppresses the pain of recurrent pregnancy, and ignores the health hazards: "Where after all is the pain?... Does it hurt a tree to bear fruit?" (314). By comparing herself with a tree and objectifying her presence, Jasodha speaks in the language of the others.

The exploitation of Jasodha's body under the garb of glorification finds resonance with Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan's discussion on the practice of sati. According to Sunder Rajan, sati is glorified in religious and pro-sati doctrines by constructing the "ritual of pain as a discipline, a yogic submission, both abject and heroic" (*Real* 19). The sati is transformed into a superhuman entity who is beyond pain, because pain is something that impacts normal people. In Jasodha's case, too, she is transformed into a goddess who does not feel pain and is, therefore, above all human emotions; the exploitation of Jasodha's body can be guilt free. What is intriguing is that Jasodha too believes in this image and ignores her body in order to imitate the other's construction of her subjectivity. However, at the end when Jasodha is diagnosed with cancer, she is no longer respected as the Lion Seated or *Singhabahini* by the people who once worshipped

her. Her productivity ends, and she is alienated from the society. Jasodha is forced to live the life of a loner and survive on handouts from other people.

Ironically, this distressing and painful experience gives birth to the real Jasodha. For the first time, she realizes the truth about her existence; and, as her “aging, milkless, capacious breasts break in pain,” Jasodha speaks about her feelings: “If you suckle you’re a mother, all lies! Nepal and Gopal don’t look at me, and the Master’s boys don’t spare a peek to ask how I am doing. The sores on her breast kept mocking her with her a hundred mouths, a hundred eyes. Jasodha opened her eyes and said, 'Do you hear?'" ("Breast Giver" 319; 324–25). The decaying of her body is symbolic of her fragmented identity, and the utterance of pain can be read as Jasodha’s recognition of her failure as a mother. With rejection from all quarters, the selfless, dedicated, and sacrificing image of Jasodha is replaced with a woman who had expected future benefits in return for her service and expected to be looked after by the children she nursed. There are two fundamental issues that come to the fore when Jasodha speaks out of pain. First, Jasodha did not stay the naïve, selfless person that she was constructed to be. It is clear that she encouraged the comparison of her labor with the sacrificing mother goddess in order to gain respect and appreciation for her service. Albeit through a false consciousness, she enjoyed the momentary celebration and glorifying of her qualities. Unfortunately, she failed to realize that she sacrificed her body in the whole process and misrecognized a part of her body (breasts) for the whole subject. Second, Jasodha endured pain as an investment for future benefits. Jasodha considered pain another asset, like her breasts, whose benefits she would reap in the future.

Hence, before dying she looked around to see if her biological sons or those she “suckled for a living” had come to perform her last rites. The story ends with “Yet someone was supposed to be there at the end. Who was it? It was who? Who was it?” (331). The narrator leaves readers

wondering who or what Jasodha was waiting for. It is possible that Jasodha may have thought of her mothering body in terms of exchange value and invested in pain as a capital for a comfortable life in the future. She nurtured with the expectation that the children would take care of her out of gratitude and respect for "Motherhood." Ironically, it is the pain of the body, or Jasodha the subject in pain, that reveals her misrecognition of her identity through her breasts. The pain that she feels because of cancer is quite different from the pain of bearing children. Besides, the pain during delivery of a child assured something productive (children as well as lactating capability), which earned Jasodha her living. In comparison, cancer tears her body into pieces and makes it unproductive, leaving her bereft of any positive outcome. Ironically, it is this vacuum or the lack of reproductive capability that makes it possible for Jasodha to reflect on her false consciousness about the larger-than-life imagery of "Motherhood."

### ***Making Dopdi***

Mahasweta's portrayal of Dopdi as the female subject in pain is exceptionally powerful and effective. Through Dopdi, Mahasweta rearranges the gendered subaltern's subject position from passive resistance to that of active militancy. "Draupadi" (1981) is the story of a tribal revolutionary Dopdi Mehjen and her encounter with Senanayak, a special task force officer with the Indian army. The story is set against the backdrop of the Naxalite revolt, essentially a peasant rebellion demanding agrarian reform. The peasant rebellion was also a caste resistance against several generations of feudal exploitation of tribal men and women. Dopdi and her husband Dulna are fighting guerrilla warfare against those landlords and exploitative state institutions that oppress the lower-caste people like Dopdi. As chief instigators of the revolt in the Jharkhani forest area, Dopdi and Dulna have become prime targets of the state. Dulna is hunted down and shot to death, and, after a long search, Dopdi is also apprehended.

Once in custody, Dopdi is brought to Senanayak and he orders his subordinates to “Make her do the needful” (“Draupadi” 267). What follows this abstruse command is the brutal rape and torture of Dopdi—“a violence clearly deemed unspeakable even by Senanayak himself, who will not say the words for the act he has sanctioned” (Mishri, “Naked” 606). The story ends with Dopdi countering Senanayak’s violence with a naked protest, leaving Senanayak speechless. He challenges Dopdi’s individuality through sexual violence, and Dopdi retaliates by emasculating Senanayak through her subversive act of naked protest.

Senanayak plays a prominent role in the narrative and represents two things. First, as a specialist in “combat and extreme-left politics,” he represents the Indian state: a state that operates through gendered, caste, and feudal modes of power politics and relies on a system that uses physical violence as its chief modus operandi (606). Therefore, Senanayak’s position in the story is in direct opposition to Dopdi who represents the subaltern class that is fighting against the state’s coercive mechanisms and the alienation of the margin from the center. Second, Senanayak represents the dominant class’s pedantic approach and subsequent failure to understand subaltern people. Professionally, Senanayak adopts ruthless methods to get rid of young rebels by “apprehension and elimination,” but privately he wears the mask of humanity and is sensitive to (or so he thinks) the tribal cause. Unfortunately, however, Senanayak wants to know the tribal people on his own terms and with the power invested in him by the state. Therefore, when the time comes, he fails to “apprehend” Dopdi or understand her actions, pushing subaltern-elite conversation to the domain of the impossible. Mahasweta places Dopdi’s subject position in binary opposition to Senanayak’s. Dopdi’s reaction to Senanayak’s brutal treatment of her body establishes her as an active agent. Hence, to gauge Dopdi’s action as an independent subject, it is necessary to focus on Senanayak’s subject position, as well.

The narrative begins with a group of baffled officers fanatically searching for two tribal rebels, Dopdi and Dulna. The state has issued a mandate to the Indian army for the immediate arrest of these two criminals. Many officers have been employed for this purpose, but so far Dopdi and Dulna have eluded capture. Finally, when all efforts have failed to arrest them, the Indian army brings in Senanayak for his expertise in guerilla warfare and knowledge of tribal mind-set:

[He] knows the activities and capacities of the opposition better than they themselves do...[He] respects them because they could be neither understood nor demolished if they were treated with the attitude. "It's nothing but a bit of impertinent game playing with guns." In order to destroy the enemy become one. Thus [he thought] he understood them by becoming one of them. (258–59)

Senanayak can be categorized as "an eager agent of the state's panoptical desire," whose methods include keeping a close vigilance on his enemy and controlling them both physically as well as psychologically (Mishri 607). He does not believe in the power of the gun alone as the only technique for arresting tribal rebels, rather "he is always engaged in seeing the tribals by learning about them" (607). His strategies, therefore, require extensive research about his enemy (607). He does the same while searching for rebel Dulna and Dopdi, resulting in the successful killing of Dulna and apprehension of Dopdi. Thus, Senanayak achieved his goal:

*Apprehend!...*

The elderly Senanayak was at once triumphant and despondent. *If you want to destroy the enemy, become one.* He had done so. As long as six years ago he could anticipate their every move. He still can. Therefore, he is elated...Draupadi Mehjen is apprehended at

6:35 P.M...Senanayak's dinner hour approached, and saying, "*Make her. Do the needful,*" he disappeared. ("Draupadi" 266–67)

Dopdi's arrest upholds what Deepti Mishri in her article "Naked Protest" calls the "prosthetic masculinity" of Senanayak (606). Mishri applies "prosthetic masculinity" to the excessive power endowed upon the male, upper-caste army officers of the Indian government. Because of such an institutional arrangement, Mahasweta writes, "power explodes from the *male organ* of the gun" ("Draupadi" 258). In Senanayak's case, however, power does not explode from the barrel of the gun alone but also through his knowledge of the other. It is this knowledge that makes him extraordinarily successful in his combative action to "apprehend" Dopdi. Apparently, Dopdi's apprehension is crucial for Senanayak in more than one way. Spivak gives this information in the preface to the translation:

As a tribal, Dopdi is not romanticized by Mahasweta. The decision makers among the revolutionaries are, again, "realistically," bourgeois young men and women who have oriented their book learning to the land and thus begun the long process of undoing the opposition between the book (theory or "outside") and spontaneity (practice or "inside").

Such fighters are hardest to beat, for they are neither tribal nor gentlemen. (253)

As Senanayak's search for Dopdi intensifies, the narrative makes it clear that Dopdi's importance to the state is limited to her "connection with the fugitives," and apprehending her will lead the officers to the main leaders of the movement (262). Therefore, Dopdi is a minor player in the movement itself; she is the conduit between the "young bourgeois men and women" and their initiation into the tribal lifestyle. So her importance lay in her ability to lead Senanayak to the leaders of the Naxalite movement, who have drifted away from the mainstream to fight the war for the marginalized people. At a personal level, however, apart from extracting information,

Dopdi's apprehension bears a decisive victory for Senanayak. She represents the "world" that Senanayak wants to capture and write about in his book (259). Senanayak's interest in Dopdi also alludes to decoding the subaltern mindset and entering the domain of the "other's world" (259). Dopdi and Dulna are tribal people whose rustic ways and unconventional choice of weapons have harassed the police force. Senanayak with the power of his knowledge was able to understand their strategy and was successful in capturing Dopdi and killing Dulna. Therefore, Dopdi's arrest meant more than capturing a Naxalite rebel for Senanayak. And, more than securing information from Dopdi, Senanayak's triumph is an expression of his pride and his ability to enter the mind of the enemy, to "become one of them" and to destroy them forever. Once satisfied with himself, he orders his subordinates to "do the needful" by inflicting pain, alongside terrorizing Dopdi ("Draupadi" 195).

"Making Dopdi," or gathering information from the prisoner through torture, as Mahasweta shows, is necessary for the state to exercise its power, but this act is also contingent upon the docility of the subject (Mishri 606). As a routine practice, Senanayak leaves it to his men to "do the needful," but he does not anticipate Dopdi's reaction to it. And this is where Senanayak's knowledge fails him. His study of the tribal is nothing more than a pseudo-attempt at giving a token recognition to the marginal section of the society. He studied them as generic subjects of his query and not individual agents. What follows Senanayak's order is the brutal and repeated rape of Dopdi by the men in the army camp:

Then a billion moons pass...Slowly the bloodied nailheads shift from her brain. Trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to the four posts. Something sticky under her ass and waist. Her own blood. Only the gag has been removed...In the muddy moonlight

she lowers her lightless eyes, sees her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn. How many? Four-five-six-seven—then Draupadi had passed out. ("Draupadi" 267–68)

Custodial rape and torture are often used as signs to the extended community, but they also function as violent ways of installing shame into the female rebels who flout bourgeois decorum, participate in violent revolutions, and roam alone (Mishri 608). Dopdi, however, is not a bourgeois and, therefore, her actions cannot be understood with chauvinistic bourgeois ideals. But at the same time, Dopdi Mehjen is a Naxalite supporter, and her ideology is constituted in a language of the bourgeois class. She has access to mobility for class struggle and has risen against the atrocities of the landlords. As a politically conscious subject, she can articulate her resistance and is ready to face the consequences. She is not a naïve supporter of the movement, understands the meaning of “encounter,” and is aware of the torture that she will be subjected to if caught. In other words, Dopdi has access to hegemony and can understand or communicate in a language that is comprehensible to the mainstream ("Draupadi" 263). Ironically, when it comes to Dopdi’s reaction to torture and pain inflicted on her body through the medium of rape, Senanayak and his men are unable to decipher her actions. The multiply raped Dopdi refuses to put on her clothes when she is asked to meet Senanayak in his tent; she remains publicly naked to “counter” the violence inflicted on her body: “this is the place where male leadership stops... What’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?... I will not let you put my clothes on me. What more can you do? Come on, *counter* me—come on, *counter* me?” (269). Dopdi, by refusing to put on her clothes, disembodies shame from her body. Senanayak had assumed Dopdi’s body as a vulnerable space to inflict pain and does the “needful.” Dopdi, however, diffuses Senanayak’s power by nullifying the impact of violence on her body. After the rape, she stands naked and represents the icon of victimhood: “Thighs and

pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds” (196). What follows this performance of Dopdi is unprecedented for everyone present: she “looks like a victim but acts like an agent” (Mishri 608). The marks of pain attach itself to Dopdi’s body as a prosthetic agent and transform her into a “terrifying superobject” (“Draupadi” 252). She terrorizes Senanayak instead by transforming her bodily pain to a powerful agent: “Draupadi’s black body comes even closer...wipes the blood with her palm and says in a terrifying, sky splitting voice, as sharp as her ululating, ‘...Are you a man?’ Senanayak is speechless. His knowledge system fails him and he is unable to identify Dopdi, the female subaltern subject of his research. The loss of the power of knowledge leads to the symbolic castration of Senanayak and the destruction of his “prosthetic masculinity.” Dopdi further challenges Senanayak by asking him to “counter” her action. Senanayak cannot act because how can he counter an already violated body? He has used the last resort to “make” Dopdi and discipline her; there is no other word or action left in the vocabulary that can answer Dopdi. By using the word “counter,” Dopdi lexicalizes the original word "encounter." Encounter is a tactic, used by the government, to assassinate or kill the Naxalites. Dopdi challenges Senanayak to either kill her, or “counter” her actions, with another form of violence on her body. Dopdi’s daring approach leaves Senanayak baffled because her actions have demarcated the limitations of his power. Power can only be useful if it manages to impact the subject of violence. Dopdi’s refusal to be docile destroys the power of the rape, leaving it empty and valueless. Alongside, through her utterance of the word “counter,” Dopdi speaks Senanayak’s language and enters the domain of hegemony. However, she does not give the same privilege to Senanayak or allow him access to the domain of the subaltern. She renders her body unreadable and resists being analyzed according to hegemonic logic of Senanayak. In other words, through her performance of naked protest and resistance, Draupadi the female

subaltern puts hegemony to crisis. Senanayak is silent and cannot decipher Dopdi anymore. Dopdi lays her graphematic body for Senanayak to “make” sense of it, but Senanayak fails to decode it. Albeit momentarily, Dopdi’s resistance pushes Senanayak to the position of the subaltern, and he is forced to exchange registers with her.

Dopdi’s use of her brutally raped body is similar to Bhubaneshwari Bhaduri’s use of her menstruating body. Both these women use their bodies as agents to communicate with mainstream institutions. In the case of Bhubaneshwari, she did not want her community to misconstrue her suicide as an act of shame and her body bore evidence of that. Dopdi refused to be the docile subject of shame, and she paraded her bloodied, naked body to defy Senanayak’s oppression. Nevertheless, Dopdi and Bhubaneshwari are separated vis-à-vis their socioeconomic class and differential subaltern status, and, therefore, their naked performances differ in their ideological approaches. Bhubaneshwari’s subalternity is marked by her identity as a woman within a traditional patriarchal setting, whereas, Dopdi’s subalternity is marked by her caste, class, and gender identity. Thus, for Bhubaneshwari, the primary objective of using her menstruating body is to be recognized as an independent political agent, not a hapless female victim. However, Bhubaneshwari, by using her menstruating body to send the message that she was not pregnant at the time of her death, reconstituted herself as a quintessential middle-class Bengali woman or *bhadramahila*.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, she wanted to avoid any misconstruction of her suicide, and on the other, she wanted to assure everyone that she had not jeopardized the family’s honor and the sanctity of the home was intact. Even though her letter states that she killed herself for failing to carry out a revolutionary mission for the country, her suicide is a sign of her allegiance to the nation (the world). By failing to execute the plan, Bhubaneshwari, in her

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<sup>4</sup> Ideal Bengali woman—nineteenth-century bourgeois nationalists’ construction of middle-class woman as the symbol of purity, sacrifice, tradition, etc.

mind, has failed in performing her duty towards the nation and shamed everyone; suicide seemed the only alternative and a justified act under the circumstances. Therefore, Bhubaneshwari's use of her body is more of an effort to convince her own class that even in death she remains true to her image and has maintained the piety of an unmarried woman both at home and outside of it. It is unfortunate that even in death she remains silenced, but Bhubaneshwari through her body demanded recognition of her purity and her sacrifice for the nation. In contrast, Dopdi displays her violated body to resist being constituted according to Senanayak's logic. Unlike Bhubaneshwari, her act of naked protest is a refusal to submit to the violent outcome of rape and be shamed by it. By refusing shame, Dopdi refuses to be constituted as the docile subject and thereby detaches herself from the mainstream. Therefore, her act is more of a symbolic gesture to refuse to be subjected according to hegemonic logic. Unlike Bhubaneshwari, Dopdi through her body refused to be constituted as the subject of the state.

Mahasweta's depiction of Dopdi problematizes the understanding of gendered subaltern Bhubaneshwari Bhaduri's body as an agent of protest. The question of the female subaltern's body as a literary text is essential, but at the same time, it is necessary to differentiate the space from where the female subaltern speaks. Mahasweta's fictions are not an answer to whether or not a subaltern can speak. Her efforts are to both represent (speaking for) and re-present (portraying as is) the female subaltern subjects. She does not write Jasodha, Doulati, or Dopdi to make them accessible to the mainstream but to represent them through an un-coercive rearrangement of their desires.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I borrow the term "coercive rearrangement of desires" from Gayatri Spivak's essay "In Response" (2010). She uses the phrase to caution those in positions of representing subalternity about projecting subjective desires onto subaltern desire.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Living in Subalternity: The Becoming of the Subaltern**

If I had to write one day I would just like to say people is people and not damn white, damn black... Make them real. Make you love them not because of the color of their skin but because they are important as human beings. (Head, *Woman* 4)

Bessie Head's (1937–1986) autobiographical writings gesture towards her relentless efforts to conserve both the subjects of her writing (characters) and her own subject position as a writer. The passage quoted above, thus, while conveying her desire to write about “real” people (that is, the racially and economically marginalized and disenfranchised populations of South Africa and Botswana) seeks to “make” her readers “love them.” Head wants her readers to appreciate the fictional characters of her stories as human beings and not merely objects of oppression. The expressions “make” and “love them” in the quote can be further analyzed to delineate Head's methodology for representing subalternity. The words “love them” demand that the readers acknowledge the desire, will, and speech of her characters; while “make” asserts her authorial position and voice as most authentic when it comes to representing these characters. In other words, Head attempts to convince her readers that she is best situated to represent subalternity. As I show below, given her racial, gendered, and economic or class position, she speaks for and about the subaltern from a marginal space. The above statement thus can be read as a claim to (a) write about the marginalized people silenced by mainstream racial and color politics, (b) represent them in a realistic way without engaging in a coercive rearrangement of their desires, and, (c) establish herself as an authentic representative of the represented subjects.

Head's *desire* in the above passage is interesting for another reason. It directs us to what is now the most debated issue in Subaltern Studies, namely is not representing the subaltern

tantamount to speaking for the subaltern? For whether it is the marginalized Lodha tribe from India, or women and children in the sweatshops in Bangladesh who are not part of the international division of labor, or the Mayan guerillas in Guatemala, anyone claiming to represent them authentically is suspect of speaking over and not on behalf of the subaltern. This is where Spivak's most recent polemic regarding un-coercive rearrangement of subaltern desire comes into play. What it means is representation must refrain from moderating subaltern desires into mainstream desires. As Drucilla Cornell notes, it is imperative that the subaltern in representation does not become merely "an idealized shadow" (Drucilla, "Ethical Affirmation" 103). Therefore, it is essential to critically analyze the position of the speaker and his/her interests in representing the subaltern. For that matter, representations of subalternity must always be questioned about the methods of representation. However, that is easier said than done. John Beverley, in his turn in the debate, has questioned the very possibility of subaltern representation from within the institutional space of the academy. He asks, "How can one claim to represent the subaltern from the standpoint of academic knowledge, then, when that knowledge is itself involved in the 'othering' of the subaltern?" (*Subalternity 2*).

How, then, are we to evaluate Head's *desire*? This chapter will argue that Head's unique position—a prolific writer who also occupies a subaltern position—gives her an advantage that is absent in authors such as Mahasweta and Djébar. Head is not a subaltern in the strictest sense of the term. She was forced to become a subaltern because of her class, race, and gender identity. As a writer forced into the marginal space of subalternity, her works articulate subaltern experiences from the locus of the subaltern. Writing in 1962, Head could not have known the impact of her statements and writings on contemporary academic debates regarding subaltern representations. Letters written to friends at various stages of her life bear evidence to the fact

that her writings about abject things, explaining the banalities of subaltern life, stemmed from her own lived experiences on the margins of society. As this chapter argues, Head's writing in representing the subaltern does not silence the subaltern voice. Yet, since any claim to representing the subaltern cannot be accepted without a deconstructive analysis, this chapter will illustrate this point through an examination of her works from two broad perspectives: her praxis of representing the subaltern through un-coercive rearrangements of subaltern desires, and the subject position from which she speaks for and about the subaltern.

In delineating the second proposition vis-à-vis the first, this chapter will examine Head's literary works alongside her personal history of struggle against poverty, alienation, and state-organized violence so as to situate her as a marginalized entity within a particular sociopolitical context. In what follows, I argue that her background of a first-generation biracial person in South Africa resulting in self-exile to Botswana and her subsequent experience of living in refugee camps for almost ten years have a direct link with her works that best illustrate the subaltern position as a position without identity. My analysis of her novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), her autobiography *A Woman Alone* (1990), and her letters published as *A Gesture of Belonging* (1991) will determine the marginalized position from where she wrote about those she calls the "real people"—the disenfranchised people of South Africa and Botswana.

It should be clarified that Head's claim to subalternity is not only due to her exile from South Africa or her stays in refugee camps in Botswana, but also because of her marginal position as a writer in national and international literary circles. Her letters testify to the struggle she underwent in order to publish her works. Therefore, when she writes, "make you love them," that can also be directed at the publishers along with the readers of her work. In sum, I argue that Head's experience of being treated as a social and literary outcast made it possible for her to

understand the gendered subaltern subject position. In spite of being a class-conscious subject (which disqualifies her as a non-subaltern), she was forced to become a subaltern and move from being a citizen to a refugee.

### **Head's Subalternity**

Subaltern representation has been put to crisis following Gayatri Spivak's argument that "the subaltern can only speak or be represented if she/he carries any sort of authority or meaning for us (western educated intellectuals) and without altering the relations of power/knowledge that constitute it as subaltern in the first place" (Beverley 29). This argument, of course, stems from Spivak's original contention in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that French theorists such as Foucault's and Deleuze's theory of class struggle for empowering the poor workers of the global South reconstitutes these workers as the subject of the West (*Critique* 271). For Spivak, their discussion centers on a presupposition that "theory is a relay of practice," and the oppressed can know and speak for themselves. This conflates the desire of the oppressed with that of the intellectuals (Foucault and Deleuze) to construct a homogenous political subject (279; 285). Thus, when Deleuze states, "Those who act and struggle are no longer represented either by a group or a union...it is always a multiplicity, even within the person who speaks and acts [and] all of us are 'groupuscules,'" representation no longer exists; it assumes that the political desire of the oppressed and the intellectuals are identical (271, 279). Besides, "the erasure of their own enablement to represent the workers through an appeal to the direct experience of that class actually involves [...] the constitution of the other as an idealized self-shadow [by the West]. The shadow is both erased and idealized in that the resisting other becomes what the [western] intellectual desires to become himself but is unable to achieve [because they are] unable to simply 'join the masses'" (Drucilla 103). Therefore, the Foucault-Deleuze conversation ignores

the international division of labor in their account of political action; women and men who do not have access to mobility for class struggle are silenced in this discourse. Spivak's intervention in the Deleuze and Foucault conversation (which in the text of the exchange was merely an aside), then, purports to challenge the ideological politics involved in representing the subaltern subjects in the West.

In the last twenty-five-odd years, Spivak's deconstructive reading of (western) representation has been implemented for examining a wide array of writings about and involving subaltern speech. Among other things, this has opened avenues for a multidirectional critique of subalternity including the subaltern representing itself. A study of the recent arguments and critical analysis of one particular "subaltern," indigenous Guatemalan activist Rigoberta Menchú's testimony transcribed by Elizabeth Burgos Debray, is relevant in this context. *I Rigoberta Menchú* is an "autobiographical text about how one negotiates between subaltern and elite status in the Americas" (Franco, "Moving" 211). However, how Menchú as a subaltern subject "comes to power," so to speak, became a matter of debate after the text's inclusion in an undergraduate course on "Western Culture" at the Stanford University. One of the primary concerns in reading Menchú's *testimonio* as an authentic representation of the subaltern experience has to do, first, with her own subject position while narrating the events and, second, with the fact that the testimonial made the "subaltern" Menchú a public intellectual. In other words, can Menchú, who via (the success of) her testimonial moved from subalternity to citizenship, whereby voting is symbolic of one's transition from subalternity into hegemony, be considered an authentic representative of the people she claims to talk about? This question arises from a concern that a subaltern loses its subalternity when it speaks and is heard in the mainstream because it cannot be heard "without altering the relation of power/knowledge that

constitutes it as subaltern in the first place” (Beverley 29). Therefore, the main argument surrounding Menchú’s change of position centers around the fact that by being inserted into the mainstream, she has become “not subaltern,” jeopardizing the validity of her testimony and putting subalternity into crisis.

Spivak, on her part, recommends reading Menchú “against the grain of her necessary identity-political idiom, borrowing from much older collective tactic (namely secrecy) against colonial conquest” (Franco 216). For Spivak, it is the untold ending of the text which is important:

Of course I’d need a lot of time to tell you about all my people, because it’s not easy to understand just like that. And I think I have given some ideas about that in my account. Nevertheless, I am keeping my Indian identity a secret...what I think no-one should know. Not even anthropologists and intellectuals no matter how many books they have can find out all our secrets. (Menchú 247)

This confirms, she notes, that “[t]he text is not in the books and the secret keeps us not the other way round” (Spivak, *Critique* 245). Jean Franco has argued against this reading, emphasizing instead the conflict between maintaining a secret and Menchú’s impulse to speak (Franco 217). For Franco, the testimony itself is a Christian public declaration of faith, and Menchú’s political consciousness was sparked by “the base communities and the catechistic discussions of liberal theology that transmitted an anti-capitalist ethos dating back to seventeenth and eighteenth century missionaries” (217). The secrecy that Menchú claims, therefore, does not necessarily mean the secret identity of her tribe but a defense to shield themselves from outside scrutiny. Similarly, anthropologist David Stoll has argued that Menchú’s story involves “mythic inflation” and that she speaks from her own political commitments towards mobilizing support for the

guerilla movement in Guatemala (Beverley 66). Beverley, however, disagrees with Stoll, saying, “Stoll’s case against Menchú is precisely a way of, so to speak, re-subalternizing a narrative that aspired to (and achieved) hegemony” (66). With so many points and counterpoints, the question to be asked here is whether “preserving subalternity” is a contradiction in term, and not desired. Should the subaltern not speak in order to get out of it? (Franco 215). My discussion of Head’s subject position, that is, from where she wrote for and about the subaltern, stems squarely from the above discussion. However, it should be mentioned that Menchú’s and Head’s trajectories are very different when it comes to their spatial relocation from the margin to the center. Head was never assimilated at the center: she received her citizenship only five years before her death and although some of her works received minor critical acclaim during her lifetime, that did not improve her financial, political, or social positions significantly. All her life, she moved from one marginalized position (colored in South Africa during the apartheid era) to another (refugee in Botswana). She gained recognition as a writer only after her death in 1985; that too after universities in the United States and Britain started teaching her books with increasing regularity as part of their newly established Anglophone and/or African literature courses.

Bessie Head, as I state above, cannot be designated as a subaltern in the conventional sense of the term. She became one because of her interracial background. Born of an illicit love affair between a rich white woman and a black stableman, she belonged to the first generation of Colored people in the apartheid era of South Africa. And as such, she faced state-sanctioned persecution and oppression. The identity of Colored people at the time was precarious because their identity was constructed by the “European racist ideology which, through its binary logic cast people deemed to be of mixed racial origin as a distinct, stigmatized social stratum between

the dominant white minority and the African majority” (Adhikari, *Not White* xi). Moreover, Head embodied the mark of a different kind of interaction between the colonizer and the colonized that in many cases proved to be embarrassing for both parties. For example, Head’s mother, a white upper-class woman, “[i]n a sudden and quite unpredictable way, decided to seek some love and warmth from a black man” (Head, *Woman* 4). In so doing, Head’s parents not only crossed race and class barriers but also altered the basic fulcrum of the colonized-colonizer relationship of violence with love. This brought the colonizers’ identity to crisis and symbolized a massive defeat of the ideological purpose of colonization per se. The unsophisticated behavior of a white woman (seeking love from a black man) was labeled aberrant: Head’s mother was locked up in an asylum for “having a child by a stable boy who was a native” and her father was never heard of again (4). Head’s physical presence became a reminder of this dangerous liaison as a result of which she too was treated like a criminal all her life. Separated from her mother at birth and shuffled from one place to another, she was always under a “sly and secret supervision of her life” (4). This kind of racial prejudice placed Head and others like her on a blind spot in South African history, a spot from where they could never be seen or heard (Adhikari 1). In fact, there are very few accounts of Colored people’s lives during that time, and it is only recently that historians have started writing about their individual agency and participation in South African history. This experience made a profound impact on Head, and her writings that I discuss in this chapter bear evidence of her relentless struggle to be recognized as a free individual and defy the stigma that made her existence an excess with no place or apparent need in the society (Head 3–5). In fact, her writings about marginalized people, referred to as “under-dogs,” attempt to bring to the fore the brutal treatment meted out towards them by the racist government at various stages of formulating discriminatory legislative policies (49, 87).

During Head's teenage years, the government changed its treatment of Colored people and devised a new way of dealing with the interracial population. At one level, the Colored population was redefined as culturally superior to the native black population because their complexion was lighter, and yet they were segregated from the white population and forcefully displaced to designated areas, like District Six in Cape Town. This strategy by the white supremacists proved successful in separating the Colored population from both the blacks and the whites. The illiterate and impoverished Coloreds failed to intercept the treachery and supported the white government with false hopes of better economic and social benefits. But they sadly failed to realize that this spatial alienation aimed at restraining and keeping Colored people, especially the poor, under constant watch and in fear of both the black natives and the white oppressors (Adhikari, *Race* 22). As a poor disenfranchised Colored woman, Head was an easy target of the systematic oppression and exploitation of Colored people. She experienced every humiliation and brutality meted out to citizens not born white, and these discriminatory practices pushed Head to the margins of the social order, making her a subaltern (Head, *Woman* x). However, it must be clarified that Head's position as a subaltern can be contested on the basis of the fact that she was not unconscious of her class position or the oppression to which she was subjected. In fact, all through her life she wrote against it and criticized racial prejudices. Therefore, in contrast to her neighbors in District Six or in Botswana's Francistown refugee camp, some of whom are mentioned in her stories, Head found it difficult to accept her inferior position without questioning it. For this reason alone, it can be and has been argued that she was not a traditional subaltern. With her high school education and excellent writing skills, she educated herself about the politics of race and racial discriminations. Her association with the political journal *The New African* further influenced her idealization of a decolonized and

antiapartheid "New Africa." Yet even this association was cut short for legal reasons, and the only piece she wrote in that journal was a poem and not a political article. Her friend Randolph Vigne described Head in his book *Gesture of Belonging* as anything but conventional, someone who had such unusual views on life and politics that even her friends found her behavior and opinion weird at times (1–4). She was unlike many people in District Six or the Botswana refugee camp in that she was neither naïve nor unquestioning, but like them, she did not have an avenue to improve her situation and get out of her subalternity. Remaining a subaltern is a contradiction in terms, and it was Head's right to want to get out of it—her letters are proof of her desperate attempts to improve her financial position to escape from the stifling atmosphere of Botswana's refugee camps. As a writer and a mother, she struggled daily to live a normal life, to get rid of hunger, humiliation, and financial problems. She was extremely unhappy in the marginalized space in which she was forced to live and confessed that she could not live with the people there. Therefore, Head can also be called an anti-subaltern, but at the same time, she wrote about the subaltern life with such intensity and realistic understanding that her novel *When the Rain Clouds Gather* has become a powerful book for understanding the Bushmen of Botswana. She was aware of the conditions that made one a subaltern, and her anger was aimed at those conditions that perpetuate poverty and alienation. In one of her letters, she calls the world of the subaltern "a dog eat dog" place (*Gesture* 9). Although she initially resisted this marginal space and its people, the experience of living on the edge as a nonentity installed in her a streak of subaltern consciousness, which in turn helped her understand the actions and reactions of the poor, the disenfranchised, and those silenced in mainstream discourses.

## Subaltern Space

Head's initial representation of subalternity was focused on the subalterns' attachment to his/her occupied space. In fact, her own search for citizenship and desire to belong someplace had a profound impact on her appreciation of the impact of space, especially on someone who has been forcefully displaced. In her earlier works, *District Six*, the ghetto specified in 1960–1980 for Colored people in Cape Town, becomes an important site where the tension and drama of her stories unfold. One story is about a man who cannot leave District Six. It is a sad but real projection of a group of people whose fixation with a temporal space leads to total alienation from the real world. The main protagonist in the story plans for a holiday with his wife to visit Durban for a couple of days. A packing hand at the railways, he could only afford this trip because it was free. But he changes his mind at the last minute and just when the train is about to leave, he gets off, saying that his leaving District Six was nothing short of an act “of most virile treachery” (Head, *Woman* 7). Wanting to leave, even temporarily, the place that gave him shelter when everything else was denied to him, the place that defined his being as a Colored person, was unacceptable to his conscience. If there was anyplace that the colored people regarded as “our territory,” it was District Six. As Beyers explains, due to their forced marginalization, District Six had become their place of origin and an essential element of self-definition (“Identity” 79). Leaving District Six was treachery.

The story brings out a unique aspect of subaltern consciousness in relation to space. There are two things that can be derived from the actions of the man-who-would-not-leave. First, he cannot leave District Six out of a fear of losing this space that, even if temporary, is the only place allocated to him. Second, his prolonged alienation in District Six has also left him anxious about the outside world. Ironically, then, the place that had been designed to contain and restrict

him had become his haven. Leaving this space even for a day would mean dissociating from a culture that could not be found anywhere else. To be fair to the man-who-would-not-leave, it must be added that as much as knowing another's culture is strange, he is doubly handicapped because he does not possess the necessary acumen to appreciate something foreign. In his anxiety about losing the space, he holds on to it even if that means letting go of the most exciting opportunity of his life. District Six, though a part of South Africa, in the man's consciousness, it is the whole itself. He is not only spatially alienated from the center but psychologically segregated as well. A prolonged detachment from the center leads to misrecognition of District Six as symbolic of a new country and a false consciousness about his identity vis-à-vis the nation. It is his systematic alienation from the mainstream that led to the understanding of Durban as a different country and a complete negation or ignorance of South Africa as a nation. He failed to realize that his ideal space (District Six) is a catalyst that helps in marking him as a subaltern and puts him in a position of no identity. Consequently, the man's inability to leave District Six has nothing to do with nationalism or patriotic fervor; it is born purely out of insecurity and fear of being spatially displaced once again. However, the attachment to space in the story is not just singular. It is in fact collective. The fact that the man-who-would-not-leave did not have to explain his sudden change of plans to those who had come to see him off at the railway station shows that the rest understood him well. Everyone understood his reluctance because for all of them leaving District Six meant "destruction of all that [they are] as [men]" (Head 79).

Head complicates the situation further and brings out another existential crisis that impacts the man's decision with her ending to the story: he did not have the "kind of pretentiousness that makes an American tourist gape at Zulu dances" (79). This statement brings

to the fore yet another aspect of subalternity that the poor Coloreds were faced with, which was the fear of losing their subalternity. The observing of Zulu dance was not exotic for the man, but it symbolized his difference from the native black heritage. And as a Colored person, already burdened with the stigma of interracial origin, it was essential to maintain that distance even if that meant retaining his marginal position and holding on to the subaltern space. Head attributes this fear of the oppressor that forced Coloreds to comply with the hegemonic racial ideology and distance themselves from their black counterparts to the Coloreds' lack of consciousness about their own oppression at the hands of the government. Zulu dance and Durban, therefore, signify the hub of native black culture in this particular context, and going there could mean losing the only position he had (which he mistook for a real identity), that is, subalternity. For the protagonist, there is no understanding of the fact that being at the margin of the society has led to a position without any rights. Head's story highlights this misrecognition and the lack of consciousness in the subaltern. It appears, for Head, that living on the edge with the fear of losing space and identity was directly related to the construction of a group of people who could never rebel against their oppressor or have access to resources to do so. The man in the story and others like him, thus, hold on to their positions of no identity under the misconception that it is the only way of getting closer to the (white) ruling class and maintaining distance from the black natives. Head's representation of the Colored people's dissolution with their sociopolitical status under the apartheid government gives a vivid idea of a history that is otherwise missing from mainstream discourses. She brings to the surface the silence of the subalterns and also offers a way to understand their actions; actions that otherwise remain inscrutable to those at the center.

It is interesting to note that Head subtly inserts herself in her own narrative about the man-who-would-not-leave. When she writes that everyone around the man understood his

reasons for not leaving District Six, she includes herself in the group. To the readers, the author's insertion into the narrative and the group functions to unpack the desire of the man-who-would-not-leave. This unpacking of subaltern desire is, however, achieved by Head an un-coercive rearrangement of desire of the main protagonist's action and not by imposing her speech or consciousness onto that action. Her silent insertion of herself into the group illustrates the desire of the subaltern. There is no excess dialogue or any melodrama in the story that can possibly take away the agency from the man-who-would-not-leave. Rather it is direct, precise, and only half a page long. However, in another story where she engages in a critical analysis of the Colored people's position and blames their desire to become white as the key to their subalternity, she puts subalternity to crisis (11). These two sides of the author make a dent in Head's ideological program and her ability to represent subaltern consciousness. In fact, even with the first story, it can be argued that unlike the other witnesses of the man's action, she is conscious of the reasons that guide his judgment of which he and the others are ignorant. This particular ability shifts Head's position from a subaltern to being closer to the mainstream. She was an educated woman and had the opportunity (for a brief moment) to interact with a group of intellectuals who installed a feeling of revolution in her. Therefore, unlike her poor, uneducated neighbors in District Six, she knew about mass mobilization and ways of criticizing oppressive state apparatus. But again it should be mentioned that Bessie Head was unconventional in her approach towards life (McKenzie, "Introduction" xii). Her experience of living as a subaltern had installed a consciousness that was perhaps unreasonable to others but important to her. She may have criticized Colored people's inability to leave a certain space, but towards the end of her life, she did the same and rejected the one (and ultimately only) opportunity of leaving Botswana's refugee camps. Her decision was influenced by subaltern sensibility, and this aspect can be best

understood from the letters that she wrote during this time explaining her transformation from extreme hatred of Botswana and the Bushmen to adopting their lifestyle as her own.

During her initial years in Botswana, Head refused to identify with the other marginalized populations in the refugee camps and was averse to associating with them in any capacity. If anything, she criticized the refugees and their living conditions. She left South Africa in 1964 to settle in Botswana because she thought she would get the much-needed freedom to pursue her career as a writer and take care of her son. However, things did not turn out her way. She lost her job as a schoolteacher and was forced to live as a refugee for almost ten years in different camps in Botswana. Strangely enough, when most of her friends, including her ex-husband, left Africa, she stayed behind. She left South Africa to teach in a school in Botswana and naively believed that she would be accepted and welcome in that country in spite of her Colored identity. She faced different kinds of discrimination and was marginalized within the already marginalized space of the refugee camp. After her dismissal from the school—something that led to a physical scuffle with the principal—she was blacklisted for her rebellion against the authorities. This was unthinkable for both the natives and the government representatives because no one rebelled in the refugee camps; refugees were always complacent about whatever was offered to them, and they even accepted the oppression with an odd sense of dignity (Head, *Woman* 37). In a letter to Randolph Vigne, she wrote, “the police sort of told me that for biting the fellow I couldn’t expect them to approve of my residence here” (37). Therefore, she became alienated from all quarters, and was under suspicion by both the natives and the authorities for her erratic behavior and eccentric character.

Thereafter, the letters written to Vigne bear witness to the extreme hardships that she faced and her desperate attempts to get out of Botswana in the hope of a better life. The first

letter written in October 1965 gives a vivid description of her mental state during the first few months of her stay in Serowe:

I am writing to you because there's a dim chance that I'll be alive or see this year to an end here...such tremendous pressure has built up against me in this little village and I shall get no help from the police if my life is in danger...little by little I became aware of the most terrible brutality in this quiet-seeming village...There are only people and animals here and starvation, fear, frustration, and dog-eat-dog. Nobody values anybody except for what he/she can give so everything's rather that crazy thing—survival of the fittest. (*Gesture* 9)

This was the beginning of Head's harrowing experience of living in Botswana, and she continued to live with a shattering sense of anxiety all her life (Head, *Woman* 27). Out of the hundred letters written to Vigne, almost ninety speak of her dreadful situation and constant search for avenues to get out of Botswana. Her hatred for the place mounted to a point where she writes, "I was a damn fool to get stuck up in a village and not make enough efforts to get out when things were going haywire" (*Gesture* 14). It should be noted that while all her friends, including her ex-husband, took political asylum in Europe and North America, she stayed in Africa because of her loyalty to the African soil. But after the being continuously harassed by the authorities in Botswana, she decided to seek refuge elsewhere. From 1965 to 1972, she sought help from every corner of the world in order to be rescued from Botswana. She wrote to Amnesty International, UNO, UNESCO, and every government of a democratic country (including India) to give her citizenship. She applied to different foreign universities for fellowships, but those too were turned down because her qualifications did not match the university criteria for admission (35). Her financial situation was as unstable as her identity in

both South Africa and Botswana. She survived from hand to mouth and barely had enough to feed herself and her son. She took any job that came her way and tried to make the best out of it. She worked as a typist for a construction company and lived in a desolate village for two months. She even worked as a farm laborer, washed dishes, and dug weeds for scanty amounts of money (21). Shortage of money often forced Head to seek financial help from her friends. In a letter she writes, “There is nothing more humiliating in the world especially if one is fit and in order and capable of doing hard job but finds oneself a beggar” (37). In Serowe, she lived in a twelve-by-twelve-foot makeshift hut and wrote her stories with a candle in between her knees. And even this was temporary as no one would rent her a hut; the woman who did had to run away because she was threatened by the authorities (38). Head’s living conditions were so abject that she went for days without food. In a letter written in April 1968, she wrote that she could not write for a while because “[t] here is nothing like outright hunger over a prolonged period to make you lie down and stare deeply at life” (60). But Head was an optimistic person with a great sense of humor and she considered this situation as a positive experience of disciplining oneself.

Food, shelter, and clothing were not the only challenges that she faced, for she endured extreme difficulty to establish herself as a writer as well. Sometimes it was hard to find a publisher, while at other times the publishers had a hard time accepting her views and style of writing. But the most challenging part of sustaining herself as a writer was the lack of resources to write. More often than not, she did not have paper, and even when she did manage to borrow some, there was no way of editing her stories because of the lack of more paper. She borrowed a broken typewriter for a short while, but that did not last long either. Under such dire circumstances, wanting to leave Botswana was the only solution for her, and, after a harrowing struggle, her friends were finally able to find a way to get her and her son out of Botswana.

Ironically, when everything was settled, Head refused to leave. In her defense, she writes, “it would be a bit of a wrench to leave because I have such a grasp of our way of life here and it could be never as perfect anywhere else” (177). This decision not to leave resonates with the man in her story who never left District Six out of an insecurity of losing the place and his subaltern identity. Head’s fascination with Botswana carried the same sentiment as the man’s. She even justified her choice by saying that she loved that she was a nonentity in Botswana, and it was the silence that helped her rejuvenate her mind and gave her the subject of her writing. Gradually, she got used to the hard ways of life, the walking for miles to get water and carry it back home, the hardship, the hunger and most of all the poor Botswanans who “walked around with no shoes.” Like the Colored man of District Six who derived his identity from his place of oppression, Head too read her rejection by the people as “the most enduring (form of) love.” It is this love that forced her to write and understand the same people who hated her to the core (58). And it is this rejection that produced the most wonderful stories that she wrote. She established herself as a writer by writing about the land and its people and, therefore, derived her identity from it. Bessie Head was full of surprises but most intriguing was her sudden decision to not leave Africa in spite of the hardships. She bore a strange connection to the African soil and since she remained landless for the most part of her life, it was very important for her to give her son roots and a background to hold on to. All her life she craved a sense of history that she felt was absent. In her autobiography, she expressed this deep concern by writing, “we did not know who or what we were, apart from objects of abuse and exploitation” (Head, *Woman* 66). And it seems that she found her place in Botswana among the Bushmen and tribal culture. She was not one of them because there was a huge gap in their consciousness, but she somehow managed to overcome that and chose to live among them as a subaltern for the rest of her life.

## **Subaltern Consciousness**

Head's writings of this period are crude, mostly descriptive of the life of the tribals though completely free from any romanticization. There is nothing to suggest that she was either in possession of a vocabulary that would best represent the life of the tribals or knowledge about the tribals that would allow her to write effectively about their lives. Yet she gradually appears to have embodied a sense of what it means to be a subaltern through her own marginalized position in society. Head, who was once critical about the tribal people and their ways of life, gradually became more complacent and patient with that lifestyle. Her writings show this transformation. How this came to pass is a question open to hypothetical answers, but it can be said that Head, to borrow the words of Spivak, seems to have learned to learn by unlearning (Spivak, "In Response" 318). This journey is, however, best studied in relation to the events in Head's life at this stage.

Head's primary anxiety about living among the disenfranchised people in the refugee camp stemmed from the dreadful idea of losing herself. She feared that staying with a group of illiterate, vicious, and passive people would lead to her becoming one of them. In her early letters written from Serowe in 1966, she wrote specifically about her anxiety over becoming ignorant in the absence of proper modes of communication. She described the other refugees and natives as "small mind revolving in a small circle [between their] bell[ies] and sex organs" (25). She addressed the natives and other blacks as "they" and refrained from establishing any kind of relationship with them. She lived in the same space as they did but avoided all association with native culture. Like the man in District Six, she kept her distance from the other refugees because she suffered from the misconception that she was superior to them. However, her attitude changed after a few years, and a gradual shift in her tone is noticeable. It is not known what

changed her mind-set, but it can be safely assumed that after years of struggle to get out of Botswana, Head finally accepted it as her own country. Alternatively, it can be said that she realized the difficulty of integrating with mainstream South Africa and Botswana from a marginal position. She also understood the systematic oppression and exploitation of the poor that aimed at taking away agency from them. Therefore, she subverted all attempts that restricted her spatial mobility towards the center and focused on aligning with the margin. And the best way to do that was to integrate with the people she lived with. Thereafter, on many occasions Head referred to herself as a Bushman, belonging to one of the most ancient tribes of Africa. To a friend, Pat Van Rensburg, she wrote in 1969, "I can't change myself from being a Bushman, half breed or what have you into anything to please anybody. I look like a Bushman, who is a despised tribe here [...] I am short in height. There is no one who is going to unbushman me" (71).

In a story written a couple of months before, as part of her autobiography and describing her experience in the refugee camp in Francistown, this acceptance of a new subaltern status became prominent. It was later published as "Chibuku Beer and Independence." The story is set in a refugee camp in Francistown. Head lived in this camp for about three years, and this story speaks about one of the many unique experiences she had during that time. The narrative begins with the news that Rhodesia "was sending tankload of free Chibuku beer for the Independence celebrations of Botswana. To taste Chibuku beer again was almost like news from home for six young students and the refugees in Francistown" (Head, *Woman* 36). Interestingly enough, Head titles the story "Chibuku Beer and Independence" and not "Independence and Chibuku Beer." Head was like a social gadfly who was attuned to writing about issues that were uncomfortable to read about but addressed some of the most pertinent issues of the time. She was a lesser-

known writer, writing from the margins about specific moments in the lives of the poor people rather than in any event as a whole. Consequently, in this story she chose to emphasize the drinking of the free beer as *the* most important moment in subaltern life and not celebrating independence. Whether or not this was intended is a matter of debate. But her limited access to the world outside of refugee camps in which she lived, makes it clear that these people and their lives were the only materials she had for writing her stories. This story also gives the readers a glimpse of the gradual shift in Head's own perspective. To explain, her initial reaction to the occasion is nothing different from the Bushmen. She acts in the same way as the people who have no idea about the concept of freedom or the nation. She came to the celebration with a bucket like the others, and fought like the others to drink the free beer and enjoy the moment. Head writes,

I went along too with my water bucket. The whole afternoon it was continuously overflowing with Chibuku beer. We formed a tight circle in a shed and were as nasty as possible to strangers who begged a drink [...] and at the beer tank the law of the jungle prevailed [...] We prided ourselves that we drank in peace. (36–37)

It is only after students express their anger at the sheer ignorance and lack of respect for the nation among the tribal people that a guilt-stricken Head joins the students in singing the anthem and making a few remarks about the lowering of the British flag. But unlike the students, she understood why the Bushmen looked surprised. She observed that when the others raised their hands towards the Botswana flag and “burst out singing the defiant song of South Africa, ‘Africa is Ours’” the Bushmen looked on in awe as if the patriotic students “were zoo animals” (37).

The story ends with an anecdote validating one Bushman's reaction to the whole fiasco on freedom and the display of nationalism by the students. His nation was limited to his refugee

camp because he had been spatially restricted for years. He had come to believe that this was his plight, and because of his peaceful nature, or lack of resources, he had never revolted against the arrangement. In this context, the country that demanded the celebration of its freedom is also the country that oppressed and alienated him from all his rights. Hence, the change in flag had no real significance for him. In fact the nation that the flag symbolized was completely unknown to him. For the Bushmen, then, there was love for a piece of land or attachment to a particular place, the refugee camp in Francistown, for example, but they did not share the students' love for their nation. Displaced from his land and forced to live in a confined space (refugee camp) because of his tribal origin, the Bushman is full of a feeling of helplessness, of loss of orientation, and dependency, but no nationalism.

From an analytical point of view, the people depicted in the story are subalterns who were not part of any resistance groups like the students, but they have accepted their wretchedness as normal. In order for this attachment and love for a particular place to transform into nationalism, the Bushmen needed to be organized and integrated with the center or mainstream. However, this does not mean that there was no struggle among the subalterns in Head's story. They had to fight for everything including the right to live. Head's account of her daily struggle in her autobiography gives evidence of life in Botswana's refugee camps. Mobilization happened in private, for banal things in life, like water, shelter, and food, but not for a larger public event or national cause. It is the small things in life, which can be defined as tertiary moments in the mainstream, that are the events of the subaltern life. Under such circumstances, the Bushman's declaration that, "I like Francistown better" is a confirmation that this feeling for or attachment to the camp cannot be extended to the whole country since there is no full-blown nationalism at work here. At the same time, this announcement can also be read as

establishing his agency and challenging the students' assumption of freedom as liberation in the collective consciousness. His plight would not change with freedom, so he was not worried about the change in administration or government. Therefore, he grabbed the opportunity to enjoy the free beer rather than the freedom of Botswana. The fact that Head expressed solidarity with this sentiment is an example of her understanding of the dire situation from where the Bushman spoke. Faced with extreme hardships and spatial confinement all her life, she understood the pressures responsible for changing the human psyche and altering one's sensibility. The priorities of life were very different for the Bushman and the students because of their individual positions and identities. The students had fled from South Africa but were part of the mainstream. They had an agenda and were part of an ideological movement for freedom against foreign rule in South Africa. For the Bushmen and Head, who had participated in the celebrations only for the free beer, daily struggles of life were an independent movement for human rights. For that matter, beer was a luxury they could not afford. The zeal to fight for the beer was thus bigger than their enthusiasm for freedom. Head understood this but the students did not because she shared the Bushmen's lives for almost fifteen years. As a mark of camaraderie, she ends the story by saying,

It is all right...perhaps (these) are weird kind of people who pull against the current; unprovokable; ever reasonable. Perhaps it is the rags and tatters of poverty that are worn with an upright posture and pathetic dignity. Whatever it is I say it is good because you feel it in your heart as peace. (Head, *Woman* 39)

The story articulates the disconnect between two groups of people whose knowledge and language about the nation and nationalism are so different that there is no possibility of communication between them.

A discussion of Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's lecture on "Nationalism and the Imagination" is relevant in this context because it bears similarity to Head's formulation about the subaltern consciousness of the nation. For an in-depth understanding of the nation in the subaltern community, Spivak participated in an oral tradition of repeating history through songs with a group of Sebar women who belonged to a tiny, unrepresented, aboriginal group from Birbhum, West Bengal. The women were traveling to Calcutta, a teeming metropolis of 15 million people and the capital of the state of West Bengal, to attend a handicraft fair, and sang songs on their way to mark the occasion. Spivak, who was accompanying the women, observed that the lyrics incessantly praised the "king of Calcutta," when in reality Calcutta never had any kings. A city founded by the British in 1690, and the capital of the British Empire until 1911, Calcutta never had a king, unlike Delhi or Mysore, for instance. More interestingly, when Spivak informed the women that the building where the exhibition was being held was called the "Information Center," they reproduced the same lines praising the king of the building. This was all the more confusing for Spivak because although, as she notes, the women knew that in both cases there never was a king, in the minds of these subaltern women, "the concept of sovereignty" functioned to designate "a space in apposition to archaic Manbhum or Barabhum (their native village)" (*Nationalism* 16). She analyzed this phenomenon of addressing a city and its buildings via references to a king, as a way of investing power in the hands of one supreme authority. Similarly, these Sebar women live in remote areas in Birbhum, but in their songs they used the precolonial name Manbhum (a name that is deleted from the Indian map but it is retained in their oral traditions) to accentuate the imaginary presence of a sovereign overlord. They held on to that idea of a king as someone who has power over them. There is "thinking without nation, space-names as shifters, in a mythic geography, because of the power of the

formulaic” (20). Hence, they can only relate to a place through its ruler. These women belong to a group that is so removed from the center that their existence is never mentioned in the discourses of Indian nationalism. They have never been a part of nation formation and irrespective of the rulers (precolonial, British, democratic Indian government), their position has always remained the same: subaltern. Therefore, they cannot have any sense of nation because there is no struggle to obtain it. The Sebar women only learn to accept wretchedness as their plight and continue to sing praises for sovereigns, imaginary and real.

There is a similar instance in Head’s “Chibuku Beer and Independence.” At a crucial point in the story, the Bushman says, “I love Francistown better.” He makes this statement because he was rattled by the idea of insulting the British flag and the white people. Freedom translated as the absence of the ruler becomes a bigger threat for the old man just like the Sebar women in Spivak’s case study. For the subalterns, their relations to the marginalized spaces they occupy become an important factor in constituting their subjectivities as subalterns. For the bushman it is the refugee camp in Francistown, and for the Sebar women it is Manbhum. The difference between Spivak’s and Head’s analogies of the subaltern and the nation is that while Spivak made a conscious effort to understand the tribal Sebar women, Head learned it from her own experiences. Therefore, if Spivak is a traditional intellectual, Head was an organic one. The latter did her research among the people she lived with and gained from her own experience of living on the edge. Her concerns and representation are a display of genuine experience of living like one of them, so much so that she even acquired the language of the subaltern to express her angst and total apathy for the institutions that perpetuated oppression of the poor.

In addition to noting the subaltern’s lack of consciousness of the nation, Head’s writings engage with the question of subaltern language in subaltern-elite communications. The article

“God and the Underdog: Thoughts on the Rise of Africa,” written in 1964, explicitly states her views on the impossibility of any dialogue between the subaltern and the elite (*Woman* 48–49). In this short article, she defines the subaltern as “underdogs” born out of violence. They are the results of a brutal scheme whereby one group enjoys power and privilege by suppressing another, and enable oppression via categories of race, class, caste, and gender. Head used the word underdog to emphasize the spatial configuration of a group of people who were pushed to the margins and shoved to the lowest rank of the sociopolitical and economic spheres. Head wrote this article while she was in a refugee camp in Botswana and described the condition of the poor blacks and colored people in these words: “It is the most peculiar sensation and I can only express it in a personal way, restricted to the feelings of my own life. It was as if up to my generation we were all locked up in together in a dark air-tight room. We even seemed excrete together there and the stench was awful” (48). Head used the crudest of examples to explain the terrible conditions under which the marginalized people of southern Africa were living. In the same article, she defended their violent actions because they can only reply in the language that shaped their identity. Besides, according to Head, it is also the only agency that is available to the subalterns to express themselves. She refuted the notion of nonviolence, saying that it is an elite conspiracy to solve the problem of the “underdogs” and silence subaltern uprisings by quashing their instinct to rebel. Nonviolence for Head was yet another oppressive philosophy to contain and suppress “the damage and havoc [the impoverished] can really create at any given moment” (49). She was adamant in her belief that violence can only be countered with violence and the inability to do so would leave the underdogs silenced forever. Violence was not only a way of expressing oneself, it was also the only language of communication possible within

hegemonic institutions since these institutions invented violence as the only way to treat and speak with the subalterns. She wrote,

I found above all that that type of exploitation and evil is dependent on a lack of communication between the oppressor and the people he oppresses. It would horrify an oppressor to know that his victim has the same longings, feelings, and sensitivities.

Nothing prevented a communication between me and the Botswana people and nothing prevented me from slipping into the skin of a Morsawa person. (69)

Intrigued by this lack of communication, Head believed violence was the only language to break the hierarchy between the oppressed and the oppressor. This ideology landed her in trouble and drove her away from the center. Her feisty nature and tendency to resolve problems through physical scuffle had become a problem with her friends who wanted to help her. There are several instances when she displayed streaks of violent behavior and was dismissed by all for her actions. Her brawl with her landlady in District Six was noted in her autobiography, and her friends have repeated accounts of her public fights with her husband. Moreover, her passion for Africa led to ugly arguments with her colleagues and friends in Cape Town. While in Botswana, she bit the school principal for making lewd comments and asking her for sexual favors. There are several other instances when Head, because of her bizarre and violent behavior, could hardly be considered a sensible person. I think these moments in Head's life exhibit a pathetic and helpless side of a creative mind who had to resort to violence to get heard. She was aware of her limited skills to interact with the outside world as well as her inability to follow the rules of the elite world. Therefore, she chose to stay back in a remote village in Botswana for the rest of her life. After making that decision, she wrote to Randolph Vigne:

I have a long memory of all you said to me: Don't be bigoted. Don't swear at God. Don't swear at that respectable gentleman shuffling down the road. He's the keeper of society's morals. Don't show off. Keep your mouth shut while important people are talking. Have a social conscience [...] and so on. When have your efforts to make me respectable [...] EVER succeeded? (Head, *Gesture* 88)

Because of her attitude, she never received proper validation as a writer. Because of her unconventional background and ways she was also refused by society. As a result, her life was spent trying to negotiate a space for herself both at the margin and the center. But again, she enjoyed living with the Bushmen and, at the end, sought refuge in them. She was not apologetic about this; rather, she felt uncomfortable doing something that was not characteristic of her nature. Then again, the question remains as to how far she was conscious about being shaped into subalternity by her habitation of marginalized spaces. There is an interesting anecdote that illustrates her inability to function normally in the mainstream. There was one time in her entire writing career when she received some money from a publisher. This money helped her build the only concrete thing in her life, a small one-room house. However, soon after she received the money she was nervous and wrote to her friend:

Though I talk like this I am having terrible headache about the one thousand pounds received from Bantam books [...] Then someone said I ought to open a chequing account with the bank. The thing is I have never made out a cheque in my life and the thought of it terrifies me so that every time I think of it, I go cold head to toe. I have been totally unable to pluck up the courage to get a cheque book [...] I don't know what appalls me so much about writing out a cheque. (98–99)

Bessie Head could fight, scream, and kick if she disagreed with anything or anyone, yet she could not muster the courage to write a check. She was as alienated from the mainstream as the man from District Six and the Bushman in the story "Chibuku Beer and Independence." There are many other occasions noted in her autobiography and letters where minute things in life became big events. Ultimately, when she was able to make the house of her dreams, she wrote to her friend, "the house is minute but the pride is overwhelming. It is the only brick thing I shall ever own" (98). Similarly, when she opened a post box in Serowe or bought a new pair of shoes for her son, she was ecstatic and informed her friends immediately to share the joy.

### **Can the Elite Speak?**

Head's representation of and reaction to subalternity can be divided into various stages like criticism, sympathy, anger, and ultimately an acceptance of it as part of her own history. In terms of her work about the subaltern state of being, her initial writings are more direct. She observed the life and mannerisms of the people around her and wrote about them in her testimony. However, in her first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, published in 1969, we see a different approach to the question of subalternity; it is didactic and carries a lesson (65). Head had some experience teaching in a school, and this novel on subaltern life reflects the work of a teacher. What we find in the later Head is a pedagogic approach to understanding the subaltern. She understood that class mobilization alone could not be the source of liberation and, like the modern-day theorists of subalternity, thought of education as a supplement because it "can animate an alternative" (Spivak, "Response" 232).

*When Rain Clouds Gather* is important for many reasons. First, the accuracy with which the novel depicts the people and landscape of the countryside represents the exact condition of Botswana's villages. Hence, this book is used as a guide for foreigners who come to study and

work in the rural areas of Botswana (Head, *Woman* xvii). The second reason is more fitting for the purpose of this chapter. The book not only gives a glimpse of the subaltern way of life, but it also suggests a way to amend the gap between the center and the margin. Head sketched the character of the main protagonist Makhaya Maseko to implement the method of filling the gap between subaltern-elite communication. He can easily speak and listen to the subalterns because, first, he learned to learn by unlearning from the subalterns; second, he listened carefully and patiently to their speech so that he could devise an intuition of the public sphere in the subaltern, and third, he translated subaltern speech through an un-coercive rearrangement of desire, that is, by questioning who he was and reimagining the world in which he lived.

*When Rain Clouds Gather* is the story of Makhaya, who leaves his village and people to join a revolutionary group in South Africa. He educates himself and develops an ideological perspective on nation, freedom, and human choice. However, in a twist of fate he is accused by the South African government of being a terrorist and is sentenced to life in prison. Makhaya, however, manages to escape from prison in Cape Town and finds himself in a small and impoverished tribal village, Golema Mmidi in Botswana. The village people and its corrupt chief remind Makhaya of his past, and there is an initial resentment towards the tribal way of life. Nevertheless, his life changes after meeting an Irish volunteer, Gilbert, who was experimenting with the growing of cash crops in an otherwise barren landscape. He starts working with Gilbert and in due course meets many others who help him reassess his dreams and desires. In the end, Makhaya stays in the village, marries a tribal woman called Paulina, helps the people with agriculture, and embraces tribalism. The novel revolves around Makhaya's journey from the center to the margin, and, in many ways, his character is similar to Head's. She used her own

experience in framing the characters in the novel to give a realistic picture of the marginalized people of Botswana.

The brilliance of this novel lies in the minute details that sketch Makhaya's shift from the center to the margin of the society. In his endeavor to understand the subaltern, he experiments with many things and ultimately develops a relationship of exchange whereby not only does he inspire the tribal people to grow cash crops and to build fences to protect them from animals, but he admires and learns from their organic knowledge of things to gradually become one of them. Therefore, when Paulina challenged him to eat the goat meat and sour milk porridge that was the staple food of the people, Makhaya accepted it as a mandatory step towards starting a subaltern-elite conversation. He was not used to the taste of the food but made an effort to win the women's trust and convince them of his intentions.

[Paulina said] "Perhaps you don't like the goat milk and sour milk porridge?" she queried, in a somewhat penetrating voice [...]." "I like goat meat," Makhaya said quickly and untruthfully. But privately he loathed it. The meat was tough and had a weird taste [...] Paulina instantly sensed the lie and decided to rub it in [...] "We Batswana even sometimes eat rotten meat through which worms crawl. We just wash away the worms." Makhaya turned his head[...] Aloud he said, "Well don't wash off the worms for me. I won't notice them." [It] brought a shriek of laughter from the gallery [...] But it served the purpose of breaking the ice between Makhaya and the women [workers]. (Head, *Rain* 109–10)

Soon after this incident, the women formed a deep bond with Makhaya and shared their concerns and queries with him. He too felt an overwhelming sense of being a part of the village people and their tribal ways. He gets involved in their lives and takes a deep interest in

understanding their views about life. But at the same time, he does not force his own ideas or politics on these people. He listens to them and forms a relationship of trust, care, and friendship. Unfortunately, this relationship of equality is missing between Gilbert, the Irish volunteer, and the villagers. In spite of the fact that he had been with the tribal people longer than Makhaya, he remained the good white man from Ireland who worked for their benefit but could never be one of them. Gilbert thought of Golema Mmidi as one of his projects and the people as hapless victims waiting to be rescued from this life of subalternity. Therefore, Gilbert maintained a hierarchical position of being the savior of the people, and no matter how hard he tried, this was not hidden from Makhaya. He lacked the basic language of communication with the people and remained unsuccessful in convincing the village women to become the main developers of the cash crop. Makhaya, on the other hand, was able to convince them and explain the benefits of growing cash crops from the point of view of an insider. Head gives an explicit description of Gilbert and Makhaya's dealing with subaltern people and the stark difference in their perspectives:

Gilbert was a complete contrast to this wavering, ambiguous world in which Makhaya lived [...] Gilbert prided himself in being an unusually well-informed man. No doubt the sun did too. The sun knew why the clouds formed and why the wind blew [...] But there were shut-away worlds where the sunlight never penetrated, haunted worlds, full of mistrusts and hate, and it was about this side of life that Makhaya was particularly well informed. (*Rain* 81)

Through these lines, Head situates Makhaya in a position from where he can gauge the subaltern way of life. His past experience of living a tribal life gave him that added advantage of understanding a certain sensibility that is unique to culture, tradition, language, and tribal history.

What has to be noted is that there are other characters in the novel who are from the same tribe but take advantage of the poor villagers and help the corrupt chiefs and the government in further exploiting them. Makhaya, however, takes another route and chooses to revert to the margin to work with the people and help them in emerging out of subalternity. He does not impose any hegemonic notion of class revolution on these people but encourages them to educate themselves through their work and organic knowledge of the surrounding region. Therefore, his role as the teacher and educator is limited to a point where the villagers are willing to accept it. There is no imposition of ideology, and he refrains from being judgmental. Gilbert too comes to Botswana and works in a remote village, but he wants to bring about change on his own terms. He is less worried about the people and their sentiments and more concerned about their lack of intelligence and understanding of any lucrative prospect that might improve their conditions. In fact, he even fails to understand his wife Maria and remains suspicious as to whether she agreed to marry him out of love or obligation. He deals with the whole business of growing cash crops from the perspective of financial gain. Makhaya, on the other hand, has a more humane approach to the whole thing. He “understood tribalism, that it was essentially the rule of the illiterate man who, when he was in the majority, feared and despised anything that was not a part of the abysmal darkness in which he lived” (45).

Head further expanded the difference in Makhaya and Gilbert’s social and political stance to give a vivid idea about their individual intentions and goals for being in Golema Mmidi. The difference between the two brings out the real problem inherent in Gilbert’s theorization of what he thought would be the best for the tribals. His views of Africa and world politics were extremely naïve and childlike. Since he had come to Botswana with the idea of being a savior to the poverty-stricken people, he wanted to impart what British socialist and trade union

movements had done to improve the conditions of the poor in Britain. He was uneasy about the new government of Botswana and its debates on democracy and the tax system (83). His only solution was to have a dictator for Botswana:

‘Where is all this talk of democracy going to get us, Mack? [...] Only a reasonably developed country can afford the time to debate these pros and cons. What we need here is a dictatorship that will feed, clothe and educate people. I could work well with a dictator [...]’ Makhaya returned an almost hostile look. Not any politics in the world meant anything to him a stateless person, [...] Makhaya nearly laughed out loud. Gilbert’s statements were an explanation of his own personality. He was a man only impressed by results, and he had been unable to produce these in Botswana the way agriculture exerts had produced them in Russia and China [...]. (82)

Until this point in the novel, Makhaya followed Gilbert, supporting and taking his orders. He had escaped into Botswana from South Africa in search of peace and wanted to maintain a low profile. However, after this discussion on the future of Africa, Makhaya takes a new role. He contradicts Gilbert’s assumption that the Chinese, Russian, and Botswana peasants are similar, and resents Gilbert’s inability to understand that certain types of socialism might not be suitable for Africa. Unlike Gilbert, Makhaya’s solution was to leave Africa on its own because it had already faced enough violence by both local and foreign dictators, and it was time to give democracy a chance even if that meant a painstakingly slow process. Gilbert, however, could never erase the thrill of being called the rescuer of the hapless tribals because his pride, attitude, and confidence originated from this identity. This instance also marks a separation of Makhaya from Gilbert. Makhaya establishes himself as the Bushman and not Kipling’s “Thousandth Man,” as Gilbert would like to believe. He resisted this title of being a brother to Gilbert because

he was aware of the barriers that separated them. Most importantly, Makhaya could not think of the Golemedi people as the burden of history who can only be saved by the white man. Even though there is no direct confrontation noted between the two men, towards the end of the novel, Makhaya emerges as the more popular worker and Gilbert loses out to him. Makhaya succeeds because he does not establish himself as superior to the villagers but learns their language, social behavior, and norms to become one of them.

Head describes Makhaya's trajectory of teaching and learning from the subalterns in vivid detail. The most apparent and important is his finding of a carved wooden spoon in Paulina's dead son's hut. This incident is the most touching of all the events that explain the conditions under which the Bushmen of Botswana were condemned to live. Paulina's eight-year-old son from her first marriage was stationed at the cattle post when he died of tuberculosis. When Makhaya, Paulina, and Gilbert go to inquire, they find that all that remains of him are a few bones and pieces of flesh left behind by the wild animals. Shocked by this outcome, Makhaya decides to spend the day at the hut to guard the remains of Paulina's son while the others return to the village to get the doctor and the police inspector. The time that Makhaya spends in this forest gives him a sense of the lonely and dark life of the Bushmen. This turns out to be the biggest realization of his life. He spent time in the boy's hut to understand a life that was dark and alienated; he wanted to know this little boy with whom he would never have the chance to interact. He went through the boy's things bundled in a heap and found a wooden porridge spoon. He assumed that the boy made it as a gift for his mother. Makhaya read and reread the carvings on the spoon—the twisting pattern of the snake's scaly body, monkey, tortoise, and birds. The minute precision with which these figures were made gave him an impression of the boy's observational power and artistic genius. He was particularly surprised

with a figure of a crocodile that was carved on another piece of wood because the boy did not have enough to eat, let alone buy a book, and there was no way he could have seen a crocodile along the eastern borders where the cattle's grazed. Makhaya was curious to know the little boy's source of information and conjectured that the boy met a hunter or a man from another side of the world and heard stories of the crocodile and drew pictures from his imagination. The importance of this experience takes Makhaya closer to understanding subaltern consciousness as he learns from the boy's experiences. The curved porridge spoon tells the life story of a little boy who had no communication with the outside world and expressed himself through words and iron. One can argue that there is a certain romanticization of subaltern art and speech in this example, but Head, through Makhaya, gives a thorough and reasonable explanation of the boy's life and his desires. Makhaya collects all the things that belonged to the boy and instead of burning them, brings them back with him to the village. He studies them for days to uncover the silent story of the boy (162–65). Gilbert, on the other hand, remains astounded by Makhaya's interest in the dead boy and his belongings. Incidentally, this particular incident brings the subaltern silence to speech and raises some pertinent questions for rescuers of subalternity like Gilbert.

*When Rain Clouds Gather* deals with the question of subaltern speech and silence. But what is equally important is that alongside questioning the elite's inability to understand subaltern speech, it brings out the subaltern's inability to understand the elite. Both the elite and the subaltern in this novel are marked for their inability to understand one another. It is this gap that becomes an important question in the book as well as Head's own experience of trying to communicate with the so-called elite society. In this context, the two suicides in the novel,

Paulina's husband and the chief's brother Matenga, make a fascinating statement about the impossibility of subaltern and elite interaction.

Paulina's husband belonged to a tribal group whose tradition dictated that one was to commit suicide when honor was compromised. He was an account manager of a British company who was accused of embezzlement and charged accordingly. After failing to prove that he was not responsible for the crime, he hung himself following his tribal norms. Even though his suicide note explained his innocence in the matter of fraud, the company concluded that his suicide could only be read as a sign of his guilt (76). Ultimately, the case was dropped, but his property was seized by the government, leaving his family homeless. In the context of the novel, Head mentions this story to foreground the tribal sensibility and loyalty to traditional customs in contrast to the company, which remained focused on its profit and its efforts to recover the money at the cost of the man's life. In order to delineate the different approaches to the whole incident, one has to fully understand the different registers from within which each perceives the situation. For the company, even if there was enough evidence to prove that Paulina's husband was innocent, they had to recover the money that had gone missing from the company's fund. Therefore, they could only be interested in retrieving the money, even if that meant tarnishing the reputation of an honest manager. For Paulina's husband, his reputation was important for his identity as an honest Bushman. Therefore, he committed suicide not to profess his guilt but to abide by the rules of his tribe. The company failed to understand this act and read it as a show of his guilt. His suicide note, written in English, a language that the company understood, did not make a difference. The company understood the letter but failed to *read* his intentions. Therefore, he remained guilty even after his death.

Coincidentally, this textual event bears a stark resemblance to Spivak's example of Bhubaneshwari Bhaduri's death in the essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Bhubaneshwari too wrote a suicide note, but her own family members misunderstood it. Spivak dug up Bhubaneshwari's suicide to analyze the silence over her death as a proof that it was due to the absence of "valid institutional background for resistance, [that] it could not be recognized. Bhubaneshwari's resistance against the axioms that animated sati could not be recognized. She could not speak [...]" (Spivak, "Response" 28). This silencing of Bhubaneshwari's volition is similar to Paulina's husband's. Bhubaneshwari became a subaltern based on her gender and Paulina's husband was muted because of his tribal identity. He could speak and write in the language of the elite (in this case, English), but his actions still had no validation within the elite's culture.

This story, real or imaginary, does a brilliant analysis of subalternity. It makes the intelligent remark that speaking the language of the center is not enough to counter the silence of the subaltern in mainstream discourses; one has also to acquire the consciousness of the elite. Paulina's husband fails to do that, thus he has to die. He remains a subaltern even if he has the power to articulate in the hegemonic language; therefore, speaking is not enough to escape subalternity; speech is not subject constitutive. Action is what marks the subaltern as different and unintelligible to the elite. This particular assertion derived from Head's story has the potential to question all those agencies that question Rigoberta Menchù's credibility. One has to understand that language and speech cannot alter the conditions of subalternity; rather norms and rules that shape subalternity have to be undone for the subaltern to escape its position.

The second instance in the novel that speaks about the impossibility of elite-subaltern dialogue addresses the issue of the subaltern's failure to read the elite speech. Towards the end of

the novel, the corrupt chief Matenga commits suicide out of fear of rebellion by the village people. Matenga was unhappy about Makhaya's presence in the village and tried everything to drive him away. When he heard of Paulina's friendship with Makhaya, he concocted a plan to harass her for not reporting her son's death, with the ulterior motive of getting back at Makhaya. Aware of Matenga's vicious character, the villagers decide to accompany Paulina to the chief's house and ask him about the safety of the animals during the drought season. Since they had not met him in a while, they wanted to ask him in a polite manner why "their cattle were dying, while his cattle were safe" (175). They thought Matenga protected his herd with some magic spell and could help them as well to keep their animals alive. Matenga, however, did not expect to see the whole village and, out of sheer fear of the people rebelling against him, committed suicide. When Makhaya discovers the body, the villagers stand crestfallen and afraid "that they had really killed Matenga in a strange gathering together of all their wills" (175). The whole village shivered in fear at the thought that they had committed the gravest sins by offending their leader. The villagers failed to realize that Matenga was terrified seeing so many people walking towards his house. They failed to realize that Matenga read their gathering as an act of mass rebellion and committed suicide out of the fear of being dishonored by his people. If the villagers failed thus, Matenga too failed to recognize that the villagers wanted a peaceful negotiation with him, that the villagers, as per tribal culture, wanted him to know it was important for them to share a good relationship and live in peace. Ironically, the villagers have no consciousness of their potential as a group and ability to mobilize against the cruel chief. They failed to recognize the power of their solidarity and collective effort with which they could fight back autocratic rulers who exploit them. They were marked as peaceful people and were not supposed to rebel. Therefore, they react to the suicide with total dismay. They are guilt stricken at the demise of

their chief and do everything necessary to help complete his last rites with dignity and honor. They translate Matenga's action into a show of his pain and extreme sadness for being treated as such by his own people. Alarmed, they "decided to suppress" the facts about Matenga's death (182).

What is critical to note here is how the subaltern's conscious decision to suppress a piece of information serves to dismantle the potential of mass mobilization. The villagers maintain the structure of hegemony and fail to realize the power of their mobilization. They analyzed the incident from Matenga's point of view rather than appreciating the sheer power of *their* act. Matenga was an extremely corrupt and unjust leader, and the villagers knew that. Yet they were unable to accept his death. They were more scared of having broken the tribal code of conduct by disobeying their chief, guardian, and "father." Put differently, it is not enough that the elite understands the subaltern; the communication or recognition can only be complete when the subaltern also understands the language and actions of the elite. This is a two-way effort that has to be made for the communication to be complete. Therefore, the effort to educate the subaltern through an un-coercive rearrangement of desire is a misunderstanding of the subaltern's intelligence. One has to ask, why should the subaltern accept the traditional intellectual's imposition of knowledge in their domain? I find Head's analysis of this relationship (thirty years ago) relevant for both answering and problematizing the question, "can the subaltern speak?" Head did not remain content with the elite's inability to understand the subaltern and ventures to explain the subaltern's inability to comprehend the elite as well. She reformulates the question in this way: Can the elite speak (to the subaltern)?

## CHAPTER 3

### **Gendered Spaces as Subaltern Space: The Coming Together of the Popular and the Marginal**

Spaces can be real and imagined. Spaces can tell stories and unfold histories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practice [...]

"The appropriation and use of space are political acts." (hooks, "Choosing" 152)

Algerian novelist Assia Djébar portrays harems and hammams as radical spaces for female resistance in *Ombre Sultane* (Sister to Scheherazade, 1987) and *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (Women of Algiers in Their Apartment, 1980).<sup>6</sup> My aim here is to analyze the modes of reproduction and transformation of these spaces from marginalized, gender-secluded locations to sites for and of resistance. Building on Irvin Cemil Schick's argument, "the word harem denotes both a space and a category of people," I contend that the female dwellers of Djébar's stories, whose identities are integral to the places they inhabit, play vital roles in transforming these places and emerge as new postcolonial female subjects (Schick, "Harem" 69). This twofold process where both the space and the inhabitant undergo transformations is what I call Djébar's *politics of location*. This chapter will analyze it through an examination of the subject-space/subject-object relationship as observed in the above two novels. In order to understand the mapping of spaces in *Ombre* and *Femmes*, it is important to start with a brief background of postcolonial Algerian society and the position of women in it. This delineation of the sociopolitical history of Algeria will help to better contextualize Djébar's politics of location.

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<sup>6</sup> I use Dorothy S. Blair's translation of *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (*A Sister to Scheherazade* [1993]) and Marjoligin de Jager's translation of *Ombre Sultane* (*Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* [2002]). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are from these texts.

## Locating the Politics of Location

As a writer and historiographer, Djébar's preoccupation with human lived spaces chronicles "her native society, producing polyphonic texts that represent a wide range of experiences, perspectives, and dialects" (Best, "Harem" 873). Set in postcolonial Algeria, both *Ombre* and *Femmes* portray a society obsessed with national boundaries, nationalism, and attempts at constructing a social order based on religion, class, and gender. Under such circumstances, the female protagonists of Djébar's narratives live in confinement, "primarily within the house and secondarily within the veil" (873). Alienated thus, these characters constitute the fulcrum of Djébar's politics of location. As signifiers of the *new* independent Algerian society, their reified presences stand out in Djébar's narratives as a critique of Algerian nationalism and the position of women prescribed therein. As Larzeg reminds us, neither veiling nor exclusion from the public sphere was common in Algeria (barring some regional cases) prior to its independence from French colonial rule (*Eloquence* 20). The move towards elimination of women from the public sphere appears more arbitrary and meaningless when considered alongside the history of Algerian women's active participation in the anticolonial struggle. The veil that was then used to hide bombs became, after Independence, a radical symbol of female piety. Similarly, the harem, Best observes, was restructured in post-independence Algeria as an ideologically saturated space aimed at controlling and restricting women within the domestic sphere ("Harem" 874).

Interestingly, the main protagonists of both *Ombre* and *Femme* do not aspire to break away from their domestic confines. Instead, they subvert the gender-sequestered passive space of the harem to a space for radical activism without stepping out of the physical and cultural confines of the site. As I show below, the female occupants, knowingly or unknowingly,

transform the harem from a site of oppression into a site of communication between silenced subjects. Verbal and nonverbal communications such as casual interactions between past and current dwellers, revisiting of memories, identification via scarred bodies, and sharing of traumatic experiences function to suture gaps between women individuals through the reorganization of meanings attached to the space. In Djébar's writings, the harem becomes a creative space for its female inhabitants.

In Djébar's representations of domestic spaces, the subject-object perimeters are often altered and space becomes a condition for subalternity. The normative understanding of subalternity is associated with the alienation, marginalization, and dissociation of the subaltern from the mainstream (Spivak, "Scattered" 476). The harem in Djébar's writing is similar in the sense that it too is alienated, marginal, and dissociated from the outside world. It exists on the margins of society like its female inhabitants. However, in Djébar's novels, the female dwellers rupture this configuration from time to time, though the structural situation of the space qua the center is left untouched. Put differently, the women in Djébar's novels achieve independent voice consciousness from within their subaltern spaces without closing the physical or structural gap between the center and the margin.<sup>7</sup> In Djébar's stories, the women's painful experiences of being pushed to the margins become their ultimate source of strength to rebel against the forces that dominate them. Their marginalization forces them to understand the gendered politics behind spatial divisions. Thus, they do not want to assimilate with the whole or interchange their position with the center. Rather, they seek to destabilize the center by dissociating the margin

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<sup>7</sup> One is reminded here of bell hooks' theory that women who live in marginal spaces "passionately hold on to aspects of that 'downhome' life." While they "do not intend to lose" their only dwelling space, they nonetheless seek "new knowledge and experience" through these spaces and "invent new spaces of radical openness" (hooks 206). Hooks' theorization is based on the African American community whose experience of living on the edge helped them understand the margin and the center as complementary parts of a larger whole, and their own marginal existence as valuable in this context. This in turn "sustained their struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened [their] sense of self and [their] solidarity" (206).

from the whole. Their struggle is an ideological one and against the very notions that constitute the center as *the* center. In fact, Djébar's characters alter the commonplace notion of the center as a positive term and the margin as negative by strategically reversing the value-laden binary system. They deconstruct the center-margin opposition and the ideology of gender constituted around this hierarchical arrangement by placing the negative position in the binary pair in a positive position and the positive in a negative position.

Women in Djébar's novels are radical subjects and not passive victims. In spite of their spatial marginalization in independent Algeria, they articulate new voices of female subjectivity—voices that bridge the past and the present, the heard and the unheard, the narrated and the un-narrated, to reconstitute Algerian women's history free from religious and/or cultural sanctions. The two stories under discussion oscillate between the past and the present to create a space for Algerian women to listen, understand, and speak to each other. What facilitate these communications are those very spaces constructed by patriarchy to discipline and silence them. In *Femmes*, for instance, the domestic space shields the women from the violence of the outside world while enabling them to recreate it as a place that promotes newer methods of perceiving and practicing gender relations. Similarly, in *Ombre*, the domestic space contains fragments of the past that allow its present-day occupant to understand her gender position and move towards the construction of a new gender-neutral world order. It is true that Djébar's gendered subalterns are not marginalized through class and may be construed as not "true subalterns." But as Spivak reminds us, "woman's interception to claim to subalternity can be staked out across strict lines of definition by virtue of their muting by heterogeneous circumstances" (*Critique* 308). Sarah and Leila from *Femmes* and Isma and Hajila from *Ombre* are all forcefully silenced by different circumstances. Yet they alter the subaltern condition of the harem and the hammam to open up

communications between women marginalized by class and gender. In other words, these spaces bring the “true subaltern” and the “not true subaltern” women under the same roof. These women may not speak the same language, but their experiences of being alienated and of bodily suffering are the seeds for their eventual communication.

The hammam, in comparison to the harem, plays a minor yet important role in both *Ombre* and *Femmes*. It is presented as an extension of the harem and is treated by the women as both a public and private place. It serves as the central meeting point for women of different classes, and helps them form collective bonds and develop the necessary strengths to confront as well as understand the culture of domination. The hammam is the public site that allows individual women to share their experiences of alienation and oppression in the harems (and other marginal spaces). In the process, they develop a common ground for secretive communication; stories and information that they hear, learn, and share remain partially inscribed within the four walls of the hammam for future generations to learn. Hence, the hammams in the stories are also referred to as women’s sacred place—a sanctuary that has stored their voices and memories from time immemorial and will continue to do so in the future. This intimation of the hammam as timeless could be problematic because it resonates with Orientalist discourses—the hammam as the Other space cut off from the present and existing only as a fantastic site under the Romantic gaze. However, according to Karina Eileraas, Djébar does not return the gaze but dismembers it: “Djébar regards the body as the primary site for inscription of discourses that seek to establish the truth” and regulate it as such (“Dismembering” 18). Following this line of interpretation, it is possible to read Djébar’s use of space as a vessel that embodies untold stories of marginalized female subjects. She presents the space as a mystic writing pad that holds voices, experiences, and memories of its past as well as present dwellers.

The female dwellers of these spaces engrave their voices on the walls, and in the nooks and corners of the house, in the form of oral narratives, signs, symbols, and songs. They transform these lived spaces to something like the unconscious mind that remembers or preserves everything.

The harem and the hammam in Djébar's texts are thus not only empirically measurable and mappable spaces, but cultural places that are socially produced and change with everyday use. One can read Djébar's conceptualization of space through Edward Soja's theory of the Thirdspace that is, an Other space in which "everything comes together [...] subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history" (*Thirdspace* 57). Spaces for Djébar are indeed both "lived as well as mental spaces" (266).

The representations of the harem and the hammam in Djébar's novels, then, are representations of how women transform marginal spaces into spaces that serve as unconventional archives of *her* stories. In effect, they subvert the very ideological function of these structures (that is, to silence and repress) by recompensing silent voices through returning them back into the mainstream. Djébar uses this trope of the space as a photo montage of the women's lives, to reinstitute them as survivors and not merely victims of particular sociocultural conditions. Women are portrayed as speaking subjects, and their relationship to the space that restricts them is not merely repressive. They fight against the social norms and use the privacy of these spaces to master various methods of resistance to counter oppressive acts of violence. They thus transform the domestic into a political space. Moreover, as Brinda Mehta notes, this style of

writing and “the inscription of memory in texts or the space, corresponds to a particular birthing of voice. This voice locates memory within a primal sensory consciousness, thereby revealing the intimate association between the body and the text [or space]” (*Rituals* 14–15).

It is imperative to keep in mind that Djébar’s female protagonists do not wage physical war against the institutions that conspire to oppress them. Rather, their struggle is geared towards a rewriting of her-story in order to unveil lost voices buried under the hegemony of mainstream narratives. Therefore, even though the endings of both the novels are idealistic, it is useful to concentrate on Djébar’s politics of representation—of the space as sites of resistance and the female dwellers as agents of change. It should be remembered, as well, that Djébar does not in any way claim to rewrite history or expect her stories to be read like the only possible truth. Rather, her narratives and plots design a theoretical approach to understanding, speaking, and representing the gendered subaltern subjects, which is especially productive for current discussions.

Before moving into a close reading of the texts, let me summarize the two novels. Following this, I will look closely at how the harem and the hammam are represented in the narratives, tracing the transformation of these spaces from spaces of excision to spaces that embody subaltern voice.

*Ombre* is a story of two women, Isma and Hajila, and their individual struggles against their spatial confinements in post-independence Algeria. They are the co-wives of the same man, and they become friends under extraordinary circumstances (I will discuss the exact nature of this circumstance later). Incidentally, both Isma and Hajila are gifted with an uncanny ability to know people through their lived spaces. The main narrative focuses on Hajila, a poor tribal girl—her arranged marriage to a wealthy man and her initial fascination with her husband’s

luxurious apartment and the newfound class identity gained by moving into it. Soon, however, she realizes that the traditional laws of the harem, which forbid women from venturing outside of it, bind this modern apartment as well. She understands that her new location is a means to restrict her spatially and control her freedom. Through a series of experiences, she resists her captivity and ultimately breaks free from the shackles that bind her to the man and the domestic space. The two other characters in the story are Isma, the ex-wife of Hajila's husband, and the husband, a narcissistic and violent person, referred to as just the man or "l'homme" in the narrative. Isma is the narrator of the story and a key witness to the torture that Hajila endures at the hands of her husband. Djébar presents Isma as a voice-over and a voyeur who captures and narrates every single moment of Hajila's life to the readers. At times, she tells Hajila's story from her own experience of being confined within the domestic space. Djébar adopts *Ombre's* narrative structure from *A Thousand and One Nights* and uses the frame narrative method "to suggest an on-going discourse—that cannot—must not be broken off." Just like in the narrative of *A Thousand and One Nights*, "where a complete narrative closure" can only be brought about with "Scheherazade's death," in *Ombre* Isma's narration is structured in a way so as to imply that this story is an ongoing practice that cannot stop or else the Algerian women's voice will be silenced (Pizer, "Dialectical Filter" 123).

*Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, on the other hand, is a collage that weaves together events surrounding the lives of women living in post-independence Algeria. It is a novella that voices the stories of women who have been marginalized, as well as silenced by radical Islamic values and patriarchal nationalist ideologies in postcolonial Algeria. The female protagonists in the stories are placed as active agents in the making of Algerian history. Some of them fought the war of national liberation alongside the men, yet independence has proved to be

futile for them as they have been pushed aside to a space where they are neither represented nor recognized.

### **The Harem: *Ombre Sultane***

The harem in *Ombre Sultane* is an alternative space of difference that is reconstructed by its inhabitants, namely Isma and Hajila, as a site for resistance against gendered social laws. This reconfiguration is best explained through Henri Lefebvre's theory on the Thirdspace or the lived space. Lefebvre explains the "Thirdspace as an *other* of the Firstspace [that is, an empirically measurable and mapable phenomenon] and Secondspace [that is, representation of spaces through cognitive and symbolic worlds]" (Soja, *Thirdspace* 266). He theorizes that "the persistent dualism between materialist (Firstspace) and mental (Secondspace)" is a form of reductionism that produced dichotomies in philosophy and social theory such as "subject-object, center-periphery, man-woman." These two terms, he contends, can accordingly "never be enough to describe both real and imagined worlds." By contrast, the Thirdspace as a category can break down the closed logic of the Firstspace and Secondspace in favor of a more flexible and expansive logic of "both-and-also." As Edward Soja puts it, "This *Othering* does not derive from the binary opposition and/or contradiction, but seeks instead to disorder, deconstruct and tentatively reconstitute in a different form the entire dialectical sequence and logic" (269). Soja himself proposes "thirthing-as-Othering" as a useful term for studying Thirdspace as a distinctive way of looking at, interpreting, and acting to change the spatiality of human life. And most importantly, Thirdspace for Soja is "a strategic meeting place for fostering collective political action against all forms of human oppression" (269).

My analysis of the story will employ Soja's theory of "thirthing-as-Othering" to examine Isma's and Hajila's subversion of the harem as a marginalized/subaltern space and the

appropriation of the harem as a site of resistance. Through a discursive manipulation of the gender-sequestered space of the harem, Djébar's central characters transform this space of "temporal otherness" to a dynamic place that archives individual and collective memories of its female dwellers (Lewis, *Rethinking* 254). The harem becomes the secret storehouse of the stories of its female occupants whose spatial alienation otherwise silences them in mainstream history. *Ombre*, then, is as much a story of how its female characters restricted within the harems strive to destabilize the social boundaries that divide the margin from the center as it is about them revisiting the traditional harems to retrieve lost voices through cognitive, conceptual, and symbolic readings of these spaces. Through the latter, terms and images of confinement are reframed [or redeployed or ...] to establish a positive alliance of spaces with their inhabitants. With the marginal situation of these spaces shielding the women within from the unwanted attention of the mainstream, the female residents successfully transform these into common unrestrictive spaces—spaces to share and circulate their stories with the other women, record them as songs, paint, dance, and rephrase parallel her-stories without the threat of any forced exclusion. The domestic space (Hajila's apartment) in the novel serves as a common point of interaction between two women who come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Hajila speaks Arabic and Berber, and Isma speaks French) and different classes. The space of the apartment effectively "re-inscribes the message that women's solidarity can help them escape patriarchal oppression" (Elia, *Trances* 34).

Isma is an educated, wealthy, and class-conscious woman. She marries out of love, but gets a divorce when her husband restricts her freedom. After the divorce, she moves to France for a fresh start. But before leaving, Isma arranges for Hajila to marry her husband because she

wants someone to look after her daughter Mariem, who lives with the father. Isma hopes that Hajila will be her substitute and help her escape from her haunted past relationship to “the man”:

One of these women, Isma, singled out the other to fling her into the marital bed. She had decided to act as the matchmaker to her own husband; thinking naively to free herself by this means from her own past—enslaved to passionate love—and from the stalemate of the present. (*Sister 1*)

Hajila is this other woman. Daughter of a poor tribal woman, she easily falls prey to this proposition, hoping to benefit from this wealthy alliance. Understandably, at first Hajila is charmed by the lavish lifestyle and her newfound class identity:

The first day you came to see it with your mother, both of you were full of respect for these long empty rooms [...] You examined the bathroom, running your finger round the pink marble bathtub. ("I've never seen marble this colour!" you ventured, laughing shyly, like a little girl. (13)

Hajila's mother Touma (who lived in a one-room hut with her other relatives) is equally ecstatic with the thought of Hajila staying in a large apartment all by herself. Hajila is full of respect for this space, having lived like a refugee for ten years prior. For her, this was a welcome relief from her poverty-stricken past and signaled a prosperous future. She initially tries to embody this newfound identity and fit into the role of a sophisticated upper-middle-class woman:

During the first few weeks, when your husband drove you over a couple of times to visit your family, you answered their questions in monosyllables [...] you have changed your style: you drape yourself now in the veil, in two stages, as if you've been a town-dweller all your life [...] It is true you were now wearing high heels—to conceal your unsteadiness you slid your feet along the ground in a graceful manner [...] As you

walked to the car you could feel the admiring eyes of all the women in the street, peering at you from their half-closed doors. (16)

Unfortunately for Hajila, six months into the marriage, she is faced with a cruel reality: this new life has burdens that might be too heavy for her to carry. She is forbidden from venturing outside by herself, and her days are spent doing household chores or roaming around like a ghost from one room to the other (7). Her presence in the family is limited to being a “governess” to the children by day and a sexual object to her husband by night, accompanied by physical and sexual violence (58). Hajila finds herself no different from the expensive furniture or the fancy fixtures in the luxurious apartment; and, like them, she occupies the space with no actual rights to it. Hers is a *position without identity*. The meaning of the domestic space thus starts to change for Hajila. It transforms to a majestic façade that hides the violence carried out in the privacy of the domestic space. Consequently, Hajila’s consciousness about this space undergoes a drastic shift and she develops an entirely new perspective. Her initial excitement with the apartment is replaced by a curiosity about the place and the stories of violence it hides behind its whitewashed walls. Eventually she starts exploring ways to liberate herself from this space. It is while mapping her own escape that she encounters a bizarre experience where she can hear, feel, and read the space as a text that narrates the history of all the women who were confined within it before her:

You are imprisoned by these bare walls. Tears run down your delicate, brown face; a slanting sunbeam dispels the greyness all around. But you are oppressed beneath a drizzle of melancholy [...] you grope as in the dark, you cannot understand what is tormenting you: voices of all those dead female ancestors [...]

(7–8)

Following this experience, Hajila is overcome with melancholy and her apartment is filled with the hubbub of sad female voices. She is mystified by this sudden change as she fails to recognize any of the voices she hears from behind the walls, and she begins to sob out of fear of the unknown. She searches “for the names of friendly saints” who can help her restore her former carefree self: “Oh, to return to the peace of the former times!” (8). This lived experience of the space marks Hajila’s change from a position of innocence to that of knowledge. When she calls for the friendly saints, she wants them to take her back to her former state of naïveté when she had no consciousness of the pain that surrounds the domestic spaces of upper-class women. Not knowing seemed peaceful and uncomplicated, yet she cannot dissociate herself from these unknown women who occupied the same space as her.

Hajila’s curiosity about the space and the voices she hears leads to more questions than answers. And in due time, the fancy apartment of “the man,” the beautiful marble floor that mesmerized her in the beginning, becomes a large tomb filled by the ghosts of its former female inhabitants. All she can hear are sad voices murmuring sad tunes.

Isma enters the narrative in the midst of all these to help Hajila understand these anguished voices—voices that at once echo the violence on and resistance offered by the former female dwellers of the apartment. Isma’s presence in the narrative is, however, a complicated one. In addition to adopting the frame narrative structure of *A Thousand and One Nights*, Djébar also models the character of Isma on Dinarzade. Like Dinarzade, whose vigilance saves Scheherazade from being executed by the sultan, Isma awakens Hajila from her slumber of ignorance and rescues her from her tyrant husband: “Today to come to the rescue of a concubine,

I imagine myself beneath the bed; along with the task of waking her, I revive the image offered long ago” (103).<sup>8</sup>

The introduction of Isma in the narrative introduces the question, does Isma overwrite Hajila’s subjectivity? Or does she speak on behalf of Hajila? Does Hajila have the choice to reject this set up? The question is, does Isma *represent* the subaltern? We ought to keep in mind that, as a feminist historiographer, Djebbar has always maintained that writing about marginal women in her novels, stories, poetry, and films is an ongoing process aimed at recovering the silenced voices of Algerian women that are buried under the hegemony of mainstream narratives. *Ombre* portrays Algerian women as active agents and not mute objects as in Delacroix’s 1837 painting "Femmes d’Algers dans leur apartment."<sup>9</sup> So it is apt to read Isma as serving a dual purpose in the text—first, as the narrator of the story and second, as Hajila’s guide and co-conspirator who follows her on her journey from the domestic to the outside world. It is clear that one of the reasons Isma comes back to Algiers is to witness and narrate the events of Hajila’s transition from a position of silence to that of an active agent. However, what makes *Ombre* fascinating is the interlocking of Isma’s liberation with Hajila’s act of defiance.

Isma, an ambitious and self-centered person, initially relocates to Paris after her divorce. But she gradually realizes that patriarchal oppression functions by proxy through women, and that she had unknowingly participated in the incarceration of Hajila by arranging her marriage to her ex-husband. She returns to Algeria to rectify her mistake and release Hajila from the bond of marriage. Nonetheless, Isma does not meet Hajila in person until the very end of the novel;

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<sup>8</sup> The novel and Djebbar’s narrative style do not allow a clear understanding of Isma’s character and presence by the readers. Her presence within the narrative is kept ambiguous. For one thing, it is unclear how Isma is surveying Hajila’s situation. Both her presence and narrative are voyeuristic and force the readers into the position of a third party. The storytelling is structured in a way that the readers can only read or listen by eavesdropping on a private conversation between Isma and Hajila. And Isma breaks the code of privacy and lets the readers inside the secretive space of the apartment to record and observe Hajila without being seen by her.

<sup>9</sup> Djebbar refers to this painting in almost all of her writings to destabilize the fixed imagery of the Algerian women that was constructed in the nineteenth century but continues to haunt them to this day.

instead she keeps a close watch on Hajila's life and secretly guards her from the wrath of the husband. Djébar adopts a surrealist narrative technique to portray Isma's interactions with Hajila, especially in the first half of the novel where Isma transforms herself into various household objects to observe Hajila. Her presence is kept ambiguous until Isma and Hajila can develop a common language for communicating with each other.

Djébar is extremely cautious about Isma's and Hajila's difference in terms of their respective class consciousness and, accordingly, puts them in two entirely different positions vis-à-vis the social Other. Their expressions, speech, actions, and reactions are addressed to two separate, symbolic O/others. For example, the act of unveiling for Isma is a radical statement that confronts the Other (patriarchy) by disregarding it. It is a parallel reaction to the Other's action, and by shedding the veil, rather than subverting it, she reinstalls the symbolic meaning of the veil for the Other (36). In contrast, Hajila does not unveil to rebel against her confinement or the Other (the husband as Law). She takes on the old woolen veil in order to disguise herself as a woman from shantytown. That is, she changes her class position by veiling in a different fashion so as to avoid scrutiny of her mobility in the public space:

you decided that you were going to cross the threshold soon [...] wrapped in the shabby veil of unbleached wool [...] The neighbors mustn't know! [...] anyone wearing this veil could be taken as an old woman or a peasant [...] That day you took out the veil of unbleached wool, folded in four [...] It was as if this length of cloth helped you concoct your lie. As if the veil held your future days in its folds [...] Your escapes. You are "going out" for the first time, Hajila [...] you are wearing slippers like an old woman, your head muffled in the heavy wool [...] once you are outside, all alone, you will walk. (18–19)

In the beginning, Hajila does not think of confronting the Other by unveiling completely. Coming from a subaltern position, she can change registers and continue to operate within a particular symbolic order. Both Isma and Hajila acknowledge the symbolic meaning of the veil. However, for Isma the veil operates as a metaphor on a horizontal plane, whereas for Hajila the veil is a metonymy—a part of the whole. Hajila does question the symbolic meaning of the veil, but she believes that her use of it can change its meanings. Also, for Hajila, the Other is constant and cannot be questioned. The veil will designate her position vis-à-vis the Other. As a result of their dichotomous symbolic relationship to the veil, communication between Isma and Hajila in the beginning of the story is partially empty. Under such circumstances, Isma must invent newer methods of communication in order to succeed in creating a mutual or collective resistance. Therefore she communicates with Hajila through their mutual experiences of pain. However, understanding of pain is not enough, and according to Isma, Hajila has to know about the stories of the other women with similar experiences if she is to conceive of a collective resistance and replace her naïveté with knowledge (69–75). Therefore, when Isma first enters the narrative, Djébar makes her speak to Hajila from behind the walls in the apartment. She takes the form of an invisible entity whose experience of listening and observing the female inhabitant of the harem makes her a human archive, of sorts, of the domestic space:

Now that I have reached this point in my story, I have no choice but to merge my life with that of another woman [...] I can remember a Moorish house, the oldest and the largest in the area I was born [...] Twenty years later I can still feel the stillness of this tea hour [...] When as a little girl, I used to sit around at the feet of the embroidery woman [...] I half-listened to the conversations: The important thing was to let them re-echo in my mind for years to come, the years when these women would continue to be

cloistered [...] I lived subsequently outside the harem; my widowed father sent me to boarding-school, but I felt myself permanently linked to these prisoners [...] a mother's admission of rebellion, an angry wife's monologue after her master has gone. (76–78)

Isma wants Hajila to examine her modern-day apartment as a continuation of the traditional harem. It is true that Hajila lives in a different setup, and there is a significant difference in Isma's and Hajila's experiences of spatial confinements. Nevertheless, Isma's revival of the memories of the harem is a deliberate attempt by Djébar to criticize the retention of the architectonics of the harem within modernized domestic spaces in postcolonial Algeria. Hajila's confinement in the thirteenth-story nuclear-family has not only alienated her from the outside but from her peers. Therefore, she resorts to silence, which according to Isma is a curse that Algerian women have had to endure for a long time. Isma looks into the past to break this cycle of silence. She does this by reenacting what she learned from her experience of the Moorish harem of her childhood. She recalls how the patios in the Moorish harem set the stage for all kinds of dramas to unfold—it was the “heart of all conspiracies,” a mother's admission of guilt, a daughter's allegation against her father, a wife's admission of marital rape. She also remembers when a male member proposed covering the patio, every woman who lived in that harem protested, saying, “we must keep a patch of sky open,” and collectively fought to save this space from being covered (79). The patio, though situated inside the harem, had become a cause and site for resistance. The patio itself symbolized a free space within the confinement of the harem. This resistance of the “docile” women had a profound impact on Isma, and after so many years, she is still haunted by the voices of resistance that echoed across the patio: “That concert of docile women, so ready to revolt, those dithyrambs of harsh words hurled in the face of fate,

that threnody of woe, all remained relegated to the interior of the house, as veiled bodies of each woman without" (78).

By reverting to the memories of the harem and celebrating the minutest details of the women's lives, Djébar upholds the harem as a viable site for resistance. It represents a common meeting ground for sharing secrets as well as a site transformed by its occupants. The voices of the female dwellers of this Moorish harem travel with Isma into Hajila's apartment to reconstruct the ambience of solidarity in the modern apartment. "The second wife will repeat what the first one only half succeeded in doing; cutting her way through the same undergrowth, starting the same impromptu madness, but in the diamond-sharp light of reason" (159).

Isma's presence behind the walls of the inner chambers of the apartment, and her surveyed narration of Hajila's life story from within, transforms the space of the apartment into a distinct entity within the text. It replaces the concrete walls with voices of the former dwellers; voices that narrate stories about their confinement. In doing this, Djébar once again borrows rhetorical allusions from *A Thousand and One Nights*. Comparing the bond between Isma and Hajila with that of Dinarzade and Scheherazade, she writes, "Every night a woman prepares to keep watch to prevent the executioner's bloody deed. The listener now is the sister. Her vigil ensures that she will render without fail the promised assistance; she brings the hope of salvation before the new day dawns" (98). Isma like Dinarzade keeps a close watch on Hajila to save her from the metaphoric death. She lends parts of herself (eyes and ears) to Hajila so that they can undertake this journey of defiance together. Djébar terms this relationship "*arabesque des noms entrelaces*"—Hajila's and Isma's individual experiences are intertwined into one collective consciousness of violence, pain, and defiance.

Some critics find the intersection of Hajila's and Isma's life as part of the same history problematic, given the distinct class positions of the two women. Anjali Prabhu, for instance, charges Djébar of creating one woman through the discourse of another. She questions the "forces of desire and power in the quest for representation" of Hajila by Isma ("Problematic" 69). Prabhu situates Isma as someone who has the knowledge, speaks from a position of power, and manipulates Hajila's actions by instituting her eyes and voice into Hajila's body. We are back again to the issue of whether Isma *represents* the subaltern. However, unlike Prabhu's appropriation of the Isma-Hajila relationship in *Ombre* as only "consequential in theorizing solidarity between [the] powerful and [the] subaltern," we must consider Hajila's role in the text (71). In other words, we need to analyze how much of Hajila's consciousness and actions are derived from or directly result from Isma's intervention into her mind and life.

It cannot be ignored that Isma impacts Hajila's transition from a position of silence to that of speech:

The sun is watching you, O Hajila, as you stand in for me tonight [...] He began his interrogation [...] "who did you go to meet?, what make-up did you choose?" [...] You snapped back at him "What I liked [...]" you ventured. "Yes?" He caught his breath, "I liked to take off my veil in a narrow alley-way, when no one was passing, and then walk naked!" [...] He struck at the word "naked" [...] He strikes you across the face. You make no move to avoid the blow [...] It is your time to gaze at him wide-eyed [...] you have fallen back on the floor. (86–87)

Yet we must keep in mind that Isma only helps Hajila discover agency to protest against the violence of her husband. Thereafter, it is Hajila who acts. Hajila's actions rather than her voice become an important marker of her subjective entity. As one critic notes, just like in *A Thousand*

*and One Nights* where “characters are subservient to the actions,” in *Ombre* too, it is Hajila who establishes herself through her actions (Chatman, *Writing* 113). Isma only helps Hajila in her struggle against gendered oppression, but she does not and cannot act on behalf of Hajila. In fact, there are instances when even Isma cannot predict Hajila’s actions or reaction to situations. Isma, the educated and enlightened woman, can help Hajila in her struggle to transition from the consciousness of the domestic to that of the public, but Hajila’s actions remain her own. Hajila’s actions remain instantaneous and organic. As Hajila grows in strength, she starts to act on the basis of that. Thus, by the time we come to the end of the novel, Hajila is no longer dependent on Isma’s tutelage. Consequently, we find Isma assuming a secondary position. At the end when Hajila embarks on her own journey, Isma stands apart with these words: “I neither invent you nor pursue you. I can scarcely even testify; I simply stand here in your presence” (157). The novel aptly concludes with the narrator saying, “[t]he second wife stands on the threshold, devouring the space: and now the first wife can put on a veil and go into hiding” (159).

In this context, it is equally important to consider Djébar’s well-documented ideological position on the issue of subaltern representation. In *Femme* she articulates it thus:

Don’t claim to “speak for” or worse, to “speak on,” barely speaking next to, and if possible very close to: these are the first of the solidarities to be taken on by the few Arabic women who obtain or acquire freedom of movement, of body and of mind. Don’t forget that those who are incarcerated, no matter what their age or class, may have imprisoned bodies, but have souls that move more freely than ever before. (2)

I understand Isma’s role in the narrative, at least for the first part, as that of a teacher who does not act on behalf of Hajila, but nurtures in Hajila an intuition of the private space. Put differently,

Isma encourages Hajila to understand her spatial surroundings. She urges Hajila to rethink her cloistered existence: "The darkened room seems inhabited; you imagine you can hear whispers, voices creeping insidiously past you, fragments of tears. What sinister ceremonies haunt these newly whitened walls?" (10) By lending her eyes and ears, Isma makes Hajila aware of her capabilities. Their relationship then, as Anjali Prabhu surmises, is not a simple one governed by positions of power. Instead, it is a testament to the possibility of transcending class divides between complete strangers because of their experience of suffering in a common spatial premise. As Djébar poetically notes in her prelude to *Femmes*, "the bodies of women in the harems may have been confined, but their souls have moved freely" (2).

### **The Harem: *Femmes d'Algers dans leur appartement***

In *Femmes d'Algers dans leur appartement* (1980), by contrast, Djébar maps women's journeys from the outside to the inside, or from the public to the private space. She borrows historical facts to write about women (ex-freedom fighters) who deliberately discard the male-dominated public sphere of post-independence Algeria to revert to the domestic space and reconstruct it as the center where her-story unfolds. Accordingly, through a narrative of the subject's choice of the spaces she inhabits and conscious alienation from mainstream politics, Djébar portrays in *Femmes* another form of resistance by Algerian women against their sociopolitical status within a nation that is "predicted on the practice of female silence" (Zimra, "Writing" 69). As Fayyad puts it, *Femmes* is "concerned with redeeming memory from the lost chronicles of official colonialist history [and] underlin[ing] dependency on the oral voice to provide a means of reading between the lines of the official narrative" ("Re-inscribing" 155). In Djébar's own words, writing is way for her to recover vanquished voices and vanished sisters: "Writing [about resistance] has brought me to the cries of the women silently rebelling in my

youth, to my own true origins. Writing does not silence the voice, but awakens it, above all to resurrect so many vanished sisters" (*Cavalcade* 204). Djébar's stories in *Femmes* excavate female speech, and oral narratives from domestic spaces rather than official historical documents. In so doing, these stories reconstruct a hybrid female consciousness that can provide the basis for both individual and collective identity.<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, silence more than speech plays a powerful role in delineating the female subject's volition in *Femmes*. Silence for Djébar is an amalgamation of a number of things. On the one hand, "it could mean historical asphyxiation of female speech or sound, on the other hand, the extinction of oral tradition of tribal legends; while at another collective solidarity and solitude" (Budig-Markin, "Writing" 893). It is common for Djébar to characterize women's silence as both "submission to masculine norms or defiance and refusal of these norms or other oppressions" (893). Significant for Djébar, the different polarities in the meanings of silence can only be found "in houses or an apartment—always enclosed spaces where silence can be a protective retreat, a place of feminine solidarity, a symbol of submission, or a prison" (893). Consequently, silence alongside speech is a powerful medium for listening to her-story. For instance, Sarah (a former freedom fighter and one of the main protagonists in the story) transliterates oral narratives to unveil lost female speech while wielding silence as an alternative method for resistance against male dominance. Sarah's self-imposed silence, in the story, is a perverse gesture of opposition to a modern state that compels women to revert to the domestic space and withhold their speech. Sarah from the very beginning describes herself as a voiceless prisoner who, "like certain women of Algiers: [go] around outside without ancestral veil, and yet out of fear of unexpected situations, become entangled in other veils, invisible but very

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<sup>10</sup> I borrow this idea of a hybrid female consciousness from Gloria Anzaldúa's work on what she terms the "mestiza consciousness."

noticeable ones” (*Femme* 47–48). The primary focus of this section of the chapter is to analyze female speech and silence within the domestic space as an agency to negotiate and/or reject the patronymic identity imposed on women by the Algerian nation.

Set in the 1980s (almost twenty-five years after Algeria gained independence), *Femmes* depicts the struggle of Algerian women for identity and recognition in the aftermath of the war of liberation. The main characters, Sarah, Leila, and Anne, are bound together in their quest for freedom and experiences of being confined within gender-sequestered spaces. Each one of these characters, for various reasons, is secluded from mainstream politics and pushed to the margins; and they react to this treatment by refuting the public space altogether. To question the meaning of *freedom* for women in independent Algeria, Djébar draws multiple references from the political history and gender politics of modern-day Algeria. Through Sarah and Leila’s conscious decisions to revert to the seclusion of the domestic space, *Femmes* raises significant questions about the women who fought alongside men only to realize “that war changes nothing, or very little, for women” (Tahon, “Women” 45).

In the aftermath of the liberation war, even women who played active roles in the anticolonial struggle against French occupation found themselves excluded from all forms of political participation. Segregated thus, their dreams for emancipation and empowerment were crushed and their voices silenced. Sarah is one such woman. She responds by endorsing silence, and adopting listening, as an alternative method to sustain her freedom of thought and expression: “I see no other way out for us except through an encounter like this [...] She who watches, is it by means of listening, of listening and remembering that she ends up seeing herself, with her own eyes, unveiled at last” (*Women* 47). Sarah’s retreat to the domestic space is her way of redeeming guilt for ignoring the women who remained secluded within the domestic

spaces both before and after independence. She admits to being swayed by the patriarchal ideology of liberation and the false promises made by nationalist leaders. Like the other female fighters, she too had failed to recognize the gender biases ingrained within Algerian social structure and nationalist discourses. Sarah, like the others, fought alongside the men in the liberation war thinking that freedom would eradicate all forms of inequality. However, women bore the trials of the fight without gaining the benefits: first, in the name of decolonization and then, when in the name of building an authentic Islamic nation, they were left out of all forms of political participation. As a result, the daring, fearless, self-confident image of the Algerian woman during the war was replaced by an invisible, voiceless image afterwards.

Unable to adjust to this new role and unable to put up the required gendered performances, Sarah dissociates herself from the public space altogether and turns to the sequestered inner chambers to invent a different identity for herself and those like her. Frustrated with false promises, she looks inside the traditional harems as sites for radical change—sites that embody female speech shielded from the scrutiny of the outside world and sites that allow the circulation of a multiplicity of voices and the formation of collective consciousness. By weaving these individual voices and collective consciousness, Sarah discovers hybrid female subjects in the harems—subjects who exist free from restrictions imposed by center-margin binaries.

Sarah works at the institute of musicology, documenting tribal songs that are no longer part of the Algerian popular culture and transliterating “haoufis of Tlemcen, a form of poetry sung by women about the times gone by” (16). This work leads her to “the lost traces of a culture that is both distant and unfamiliar yet reconnected with her own past” (Harrison, “Writing” 117). The nature of this job allows her to withdraw from the public and reconnect with her country’s vanishing, erased past at the same time. It represents a conscious effort at dissociating from her

immediate surroundings and relocating herself in and through songs sung by women within domestic spaces. She prefers sitting in the dark studio all day long listening to songs sung in the privacy of the harems, songs that are transmitted orally from one generation to the other. For her, this is more than a professional exercise; it allows her to be caught up in a "chain of memory"—a struggle to define the history of her people and through it endeavor to define herself (Fayyad, "Re-inscribing" 149). Sarah interweaves her own fragmented past and that of the *houfis* (with other narratives from colonial history, oral and lyric poetry) using polyphonic discourses to blur the boundaries between them—"she widens the scope of [her memory] to embrace the collective voice, inserting her discourse within the community of Algerian women" (154). The songs and the memories become Sarah's way back to the cherished maternal world of her past, "where she seeks healing and reconciliation for a self fragmented by the colonial and postcolonial experiences" (154). In songs sung by complete strangers, Sarah finds her past. In finding her past, she discovered the meanings of these songs and the lives of the strangers who sung them.

Sarah recognized the melody: in her childhood, aunts, cousins would suddenly start to clap their hands in some courtyards, right in the middle of their household chores [...] Sarah was transcribing the text more slowly than the Arabic verses lines progressed [...] Clumsily Sarah seemed to be following along with some path of sadness. A world of tenderness with which these words are filled, was coming to the surface. (17)

Bell hooks' theory on the revival of the past through one's memory offers a useful lens for understanding Sarah's journey and her desire to reclaim lost voices. It is a journey born out of a desire to retrieve legacies of women's pain, suffering, struggles, and triumph. It is a journey to understand women as individual subjects and not mute objects of history. Sarah's transliteration

of oral narratives, narratives that were recited in the seclusion of the harems, should not be understood as “a flat documentary.” Instead, her work should be read as a “‘new take’ on the old”; an inspiration as well as incentive for the new Algerian woman to decipher her-story through different methods of articulation (205). Indeed, as the passage above illustrates, the *haoufis* are more than a group of faceless women singing or reciting together. Sarah can decipher the sentiments behind their songs and the singers individually because of her own memories. As she listens to these *other* songs, her mind revives similar images of women from her past. Women who broke into similar tunes in the middle of their household chores to express joyous moments, or celebrate something too trivial for the outer world to take notice of, or to share a moment of individual loss, or to mobilize against an event of male oppression. By transliterating, Sarah charts her own life story and recovers via translation her oral tradition—the maternal legacy of songs, legends, and women's stories. She reinterprets the traditional female space of the harem into the locus of female relationships. And, in the process, she uncovers female voices who speak not just as wives, mothers, or sisters but as individual subjects. For Sarah the songs practiced in the seclusion of the harems serve as unconventional archives of “counter narrative for the war against male amnesia, which marginalized [...] the female subjects to symbols of motherhood and domesticated femininity” (Mehta, *Rituals* 10).<sup>11</sup>

Sarah listens to oral narratives as a way of “speaking next to” marginalized Algerian women (*Women* 2). She listens to songs to record the voices of the women who kept their stories alive through other forms, because they did not get a hearing in any mainstream discourse. The

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<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, even though Sarah is a transliterator by profession, she uses her emotions and memories associated with the melody of the songs rather than the original words while translating the songs. She knows Arabic yet hesitates to write down the exact words out of fear that she might misinterpret the sentiments of the songs. Sarah’s hesitation can also be related to her fluency in French, the colonizers' language, rather than her native Arabic. Thus her return to the harems is important not only to reclaim the female space but also the language that has become secondary to her.

lyrics of the songs range from narrating the story of the Berber queen who fought against the French colonizers to the mourning of the death of a lover, but what is more intriguing is the fact that these continue to be transmitted orally to this day. The women of Algeria still sing these songs in their inner chambers while celebrating marriage, or a circumcision ceremony, or mourning the death of a close relative. Sarah listens to these old songs to connect the past with the present and assess the changes that have occurred in the lives of women between then and now. Unfortunately, the Algeria that Sarah lives in is reluctant to admit these independent female voices in the public space. Yet Sarah gains inspiration from women who were/are marginalized from the center but were/are not bereft of independent consciousness. She makes a connection with her mother for the first time through songs that describe the plight of women locked up inside the harems. The voices of the domesticated women in the songs lead her to take a close look at her dead mother's life, and through her, many other women who die without speaking to anyone or being heard. Thus, her documentation of the *houfis* is much more than a professional interest; it inspires her to seek a separate identity outside of the allegorical lines that reduced women to mere signifiers of nationalism. Her gesture of reverting to the domestic space is thus symptomatic of her personal negotiation with the fragmented identity bestowed upon her by the newly independent nation. She voluntarily confines herself in the darkness of her studio or roams around the city aimlessly, and when in the company of others including her husband Ali, she somehow remains insular to these mainstream voices. Ali's voice does not reach her: "Is it only Ali, is it with all of them? When others talk to me, their words aren't connected [...] They float around before they reach me! [...] Is it the same when I talk if I talk? My voice doesn't reach them. It stays inside" (7).

Silence and its association with collective experiences, however, does not ease Sarah's friend Leila's pain and disappointment. Like Sarah, Leila (also a former freedom fighter) listens to old songs to recollect her past. However, she is not interested in collating untold stories, rather in regaining an individual identity. Consequently, for Leila, "to listen is to learn, to trace back identity to contextualize oneself within the present" (Fayyad, "Re-inscribing," 155).

When Leila woke up, she put a record on: an old Jewish songstress who reminded her of her childhood [...] her melancholy voice use to console the women languishing in the patios in earlier days. On the bed, listening to the same record over and over again Leila plunged back into the drifting images of her nightmares: the looks of the women veiled in white or in black but their faces freed, who were weeping silently, as if behind a window pane. And Leila was telling herself, her body in pain, that they, these disappeared aunts and grandmothers, were weeping over her, over her dismantled memory. (*Women* 22)

Djebar presents Leila's sociopolitical and spatial positioning in postcolonial Algeria as far more marginalized than Sarah's. Leila had been incarcerated for a prolonged period of time, first in a French prison and then in an asylum because of her drug addiction and hallucinations (21).

Therefore, Leila's loss of memory is synonymous with her loss of freedom. It is possible that Djebar represents Leila as a confused and delirious woman to portray the impact of forceful alienation on individual female subjects. In that sense, Leila's temporary amnesia and ramblings are a result of her incarceration and seclusion from the immediate realities of the outside world.

Sarah and Leila negotiate their respective seclusions in very different ways. Sarah is alienated from mainstream politics, but unlike Leila she has more options in selecting her spatial locales. Sarah's mobility is also not totally constrained. She enjoys more independence than

Leila and is free to move in and out of the domestic space as long as she does not cross certain boundaries. She is not constrained from traveling in the outside world for her research. She moves freely between the domestic and public space documenting the lives of women on the street and inside the modern-day apartment (22–23). Yet it appears that she prefers the darkness of her studio to the public outside. This choice symbolizes her escape from the gaze of male-dominated public spaces and functions to subvert women’s social and political subalternity. Leila, on the contrary, is forcefully dissociated from the outside world and silenced. Though not a submissive character, the prolonged institutionalization has stifled her voice and agency. Even after being rescued from the asylum and undergoing extensive rehabilitation, she still cannot or does not speak. Sarah is her only confidant. Even to her she can only speak in private. In my opinion, Leila’s silence is not pathological; it is an act of defiance against the repressive practices of society. Just like their distinct seclusions, their acts of resistance are also different. Yet what both share is the need for the seclusion of the domestic space. This space allows them their individuality as well as an opportunity to communicate with each other via shared experiences of pain:

Words, what good are words?

“On the contrary,” Leila attacked in French, “I’ve got to speak, Sarah!”

[...]

They never knew the carefully listed details of your own tortures. Afterwards they took care of you as they now do of me, they thought you were left with just a few scars, they never knew ...

[...] Sarah mused as she undid her blouse, her face still wet with tears. She uncovered her blue scar that started above one of her breasts and stretched down to her abdomen.

She approached the bed, embraced Leila. (45)

Leila's narrative about her ordeal is a vital part of Djébar's politics of location, especially Djébar's representation of the subaltern existence of women in postcolonial Algeria. The narratives of Leila and Sarah are crucial missing pieces of their lives—something that will never be recognized by mainstream historical discourses in the absence of institutional validation and/or axioms for representing women outside of patriarchal nationalist discourses in modern-day Algeria. National identities of the Algerian women, especially freedom fighters like Sarah and Leila, will almost always be imagined within a limited vocabulary that constitutes them as self-sacrificing ideal mothers, sisters, and daughters. Yet Leila refuses to term her participation in the war of liberation as such. Instead she demands to be recognized as a soldier who fought for the nation as well as individual freedom. She is relentless in her quest for being recognized, but her desire to speak is misunderstood and she is diagnosed with insanity. Even her male colleagues from the war fail to understand her agony and support her in this endeavor (45). Unlike Sarah, who dissociates herself from the public domain, Leila continues to struggle for self-representation and resists being an object of allegorical mythification. Through Leila's and Sarah's struggles for self-representation, Djébar depicts one of the most complex tasks for women who wanted to resist and renegotiate Algerian women's roles "within a master national narrative" that "homogenizes the concept of national." There is a struggle to decouple the woman from a nationalist discourse that functions by assigning to women "fixed role[s] as [a] historical metaphor [,] signifier of traditionalism, [and] reservoir of a communal identity"

(Fayad, "Re-inscribing" 147). It is a struggle to deconstruct the sociopolitical and literary discourses of postcolonial Algeria that represent Algerian woman "through the allegory of mother/earth/country, a re-inscription that involves ancient Middle Eastern mythology and an abstract feminization of *al-umm*, the mother whose original name carried no sexual marker. Consequently, the women are written into history as the necessary blood-sacrifice that precedes the birth of the nation" (147).

Leila's and Sarah's conversations about Algerian women's identity constitute a counterdiscourse to such ahistorical and apolitical representations. Leila, for example, is opposed to the celebration of the female martyrs just as she is opposed to the marginalization of those female freedom fighters who are alive. Like Sarah, who is committed to recovering lost voices, Leila wants to locate the female freedom fighters who are mysteriously absent from postcolonial Algerian discourses and read the marks on their minds and bodies as spaces to excavate the her-story of struggle, torture, and mutilation. She challenges the nationalist readings of female freedom fighters as dismembered bodies and their portrayal as objects. Leila's opposition to celebrating female martyrdom is based on the shallow representations of these women as those who sacrificed their lives to enable the Algerian men to free the country. Identified only through the rhetoric of sacrifice, these women cease to be individual agents with independent dreams of freedom. Eileraas reminds us that Leila's resentment of Algerian nationalism is aimed at the "symbolic economy that held sway during the Algerian revolution, when women's bodies became a battleground for French colonial and Algerian nationalist male aggression" (Eileraas, "Dismembering" 19). Leila disapproves of the practice of hanging photographs of women suicide bombers on the living room walls of modern-day Algerian households, and considers the songs and poetry glorifying their sacrifices as limiting their actions to a language that minimizes all

scope for individual agency. Her disenchantment with the nationalist mythography of female martyrs finds its most critical exposition in her opposition to the common practice of referring to the bodies of women suicide bombers as motherly vessels or holders. Her comment, “I am every woman’s sterile belly in one!” (*Women* 44), can be read as a resistance in this context. Sterility is a metaphor of resistance. It seeks to decouple the forced imagification of women freedom fighters with the mythography of the Mother; it attempts to exorcize the discourse of the female suicide bomber as a fertile space. It is an attempt to tear apart the mythologizing of the women as the Woman. She finds these and similar nationalist representations as putting the body under a mark of erasure—female bodies are inscribed with inflexible truths that disrupt the possibility for social and political mobilization (44–45). By contrast, Leila wants to focus on those women who are alive and on reading the stories of rape and suffering in French prisons that the marks on their bodies narrate. She wants to reinscribe these scarred and dishonored bodies in the grand narrative of Algerian nationalism. Retrieval of memory facilitates the reappropriation of the body from its condition as an object of male desire and its transformation into a desiring force that rejects its subjugation in a narrative of erasure. The refusal to ground women’s identity in the passive earth, which is always the focus of national allegories, is a demand to present identity through the corporeal female body—a body that resists being subsumed under allegorical and/or mythical sameness.

Djebar prioritizes these singular and personal events in the lives of the two protagonists to listen to the voice of the common women who are absent from official documents. The stories, songs, dances, proverbs, paintings, laughter, and tears that remain engraved in the dwelling space become a means to keep their stories alive. It is carried from generation to generation and travels a long way from one harem to another through oral transmission. It remains embedded as an

epitaph, a space-specific ritual, within the harem and preserved within the family as “jam would be” (89).

In the context of listening to the past and reclaiming identity, the character of Anne is next only to Sarah and Leila. Daughter of a French colonial officer, Anne is Sarah’s friend who returns to Algiers to commit suicide (the reason remains unknown). When Sarah first meets Anne, she had completely withdrawn from the outside world. Sarah was able to help Anne because she could identify with Anne’s extreme isolation and loneliness. It is possible that like Sarah, Anne too wanted to look back into the past and discover her true identity; hence she travels the thousands of miles from Lyon to Algiers. The turning point in her life in Algeria comes when she visits a neighbor on the eve of their youngest son’s circumcision ceremony. There, like Sarah, she gets caught up in a chain of memory (24). As the daughter of a French colonial officer, she had always observed the native culture from the perspective of an outsider. Nonetheless, when she heard an Andalusian song during the ceremony, she is immediately reminded of her childhood and her Berber nanny. Though she does not understand the language, the guttural sounds and the laughter of the women envelops her with an extraordinary sense of association with the songs and singers. It was as if she had wanted to hear these sounds for a long time. And through these she is able to forge a strange yet stable connection to the native women. This moment is all the more extraordinary because it gives her new hope and rekindles her desire to live.

What is also fascinating about this moment are the associations evoked by these songs in Anne. Unlike Sarah, Anne had no knowledge about living in or any experience visiting a traditional harem in her past. Therefore, Anne cannot attribute the connection she experiences with the singers to her remembering either her own mother or her cousins living and singing in

the harem. At the most, she identifies the tune of the songs sung by the women in the *hazab's* harem with that of her Berber nanny who sang similar songs as lullabies to put her to sleep. Anne's connection to these oral tales, therefore, materializes in and is transmitted to her in her bedroom in the French colony, a space outside of the harem. Yet when she hears the songs after so many years, she easily acclimatizes to that unknown space—she connects not to kin but to her Berber nanny. Djebar's representation of Anne's association with the native women via a collective consciousness resonates with Susan Griffin's *In A Chorus of Stones: The Private Life of War*, where she writes, "perhaps we are like stones; our own history and the history of the world embedded in us, we hold a sorrow deep within and cannot weep until that history is sung" (8).

This development of a filial relationship with the unknown women is interesting because of Anne's social position and class identity as a foreigner and representative of the French colonial powers. Therefore, she is not only socially accepted in relation to the domesticated poor women dancing in the courtyard but a reminder of a vicious colonial past. The story of Anne in *Femmes* is, therefore, yet another story about the possibility of communication between the elite and the subaltern through the exchange of stories and similar experiences.

### **The Hammam**

Hammam, place of respite or amaranthine garden. The sound of water obliterates the walls, bodies are liberated under the wet marble. Every night the Turkish bath serves as a dormitory for country-folk in transit and so becomes a harem in reverse, accessible to all—as if, in the melting-pot of sweat, odours and dead skin, this liquid prison becomes a place of nocturnal rebirth. And of transfusion. Here,

women can communicate by signs; here, a split glance, a barely perceptible touch, will seal their secret collusion. (*Sister* 148)

The hammam in *Femmes* and *Ombre* is represented as a radical space that enables women marginalized by class and/or gender to come together and break their silences. In describing the hammam as an alternative to the harem, Djébar reconstitutes their spatial meanings and boundaries, alongside establishing an idiomatic and symptomatic semblance in them. While one symbolizes the seclusion of the private sphere detached from the outside world, the other represents a gendered private space within the public space. Djébar's narratives establish a commonality between the gendered natures of these spaces—she talks of one as an extension of the other. However, when compared, the cloistered nature of the harems and openness of the hammam appear as distinct yet connected to serve special purposes. The alienated and marginal position of the harem is used as a space for the rejuvenation of individual identity, while the openness of the hammam provides the sequestered women an opportunity to tell and share their stories of the harem with the other women. The latter allows them to form a collective bond. The hammam then becomes an open yet private space that facilitates the narration of personal memoirs; it culls the voices of women from across the different sections of postcolonial Algerian society and embodies it.

Djébar transforms the public bathhouse to an unconventional place to emphasize the volatile nature and fluid boundary of the precinct. Reading Djébar's descriptions of the hammam, it appears as if she is suggesting that the bathing facilities serve only as a pretext. In reality it is a space where women come to read, listen to each other, and leave behind their own stories. The flowing water, steam, marble floor, and humming of sad tunes all gesture towards an “atemporal female space vitalized by the dynamics of solitary fluidity of expression, and the

physical uncensoring of the body” (Mehta, *Rituals* 125). The un-censoring of the body or nakedness is often referred to in the texts as an extraordinary feature of the hammam—naked bodies announce the freedom guaranteed by the space while serving as texts inscribed with individual stories of pain and suffering. The naked body carrying the marks, signs, and signatures of various painful experiences that can be visibly read substitutes spoken language with an alternative mode of communication. For example, in *Ombre* when Isma and Hajila meet in the hammam, Isma states that it is only in nakedness that the truth can be heard or spoken between two women who have shared the same man.

If two women—or three or four—who have shared the same man (for months, or years, or a whole lifetime, for what really hurts in this so-called sharing is the length of time it lasts) are really to come face to face it can only be if they are naked and unadorned. At least, if physically naked, they can hope to hear the voice speak true; and then to hear the heart’s truth. (*Sister* 149)

It is interesting that Djébar describes this form of silent communication as the only possible meeting point for two women who occupy very different sociopolitical positions in the society. The reference to nakedness and shedding of the clothes also implies the discarding of artificial attributes such as clothing and jewelry, all of which symbolize class and constitute false social identities. Accordingly, the spatial meaning of the hammam is transformed from a facilitator of bathing to a communal forum, which makes space for women to claim their voices by baring their bodies and minds. The individual stories and songs of the harems are laid bare in the hammam and made public for others to share. The personal and private in effect becomes public and political in the hammam.

Similarly, in *Femmes*, Anne's experience of the hammam as a foreigner and Sarah's engagement with the space as a native compel the readers to explore this space as something more than a public bath. Djebbar portrays this space as capricious and not class bound, for anyone can use the communal bath: "in the working-class district the public baths were open to [all] women except on Fridays" (*Women* 97:29). In the story, Sarah and Baya, who accompany Anne to the hammam, belong to the upper middle class yet they opt for the public bath located in the working-class district, giving Anne the opportunity to interact with women from all sections of the society. Upon entering the hammam, Anne is overwhelmed by the mysterious façade and the secret murmurs that surround the place. She is tranquilized by the bathing rituals (the heat, the greenish paste smeared on her head) and undergoes a drastic transformation.<sup>12</sup> In the midst of the steam, water, and unknown muffled voices, she walks on a mystic path to look for solace and peace. With a quest in her eyes, she speaks to herself: "who would mix her sobs of silence with the seeping water? The mystery of a universe of subterranean water" (*Women* 29). Anne is surprised that her feelings resonate with the other women for whom the cleansing of the body is an equally necessary step towards the purification of the soul. It is a way of treating their violated bodies that are in constant pain: "Then sitting down, all of them rosy, looking alike, they were getting ready to be more lighthearted: conversations or monologues unrolled in gentle, trifling, worn-out words that slid off with the water, while the women laid down their everyday burdens, their weariness" (*Women* 31).

In the process, Anne develops an intimate relationship with one woman in particular, Fatma, the water carrier and masseuse of the hammam. When Fatma wraps Anne with the towel as the latter steps out of the spa, Anne feels an instinctive connection to her caretaker. Fatma's

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<sup>12</sup> This particular scene is also suggestive of an initiation ritual for the popular entering the domain of the marginal—a necessary first step towards communicating with the other women. Alternately, the bathing ritual marks Anne's transition from an outsider to an insider and *her* journey from the center to the margin.

compassionate touch induces an odd sense of attachment in Anne, and the wrapping of the towel, an otherwise common practice in the hammam, translates into a unique maternal touch, “*enveloppées maternellement*” (*Women* 35). Anne does not understand Fatma’s language, but she observes Fatma minutely. In the contours of her wrinkled skin, long, pendulous breasts, crisscrossed little veins, and in the rhythm of her body working tirelessly to relax the others, Anne deciphers a story of pain and violence: “her villager’s face, aged before its time, was turning into the mask of an oriental sorceress” (30). Anne is driven towards Fatma and cannot resist the temptation of knowing her intimately, so much so that when Fatma slips and breaks her hand, Anne travels with her in the ambulance and stays with her in the hospital. She spends days and night sitting by Fatma’s hospital bed trying to ease her pain. Anne does not know Fatma’s life story or the cause of her loneliness, but when Fatma sobs in the ambulance and calls herself the excluded one, Anne connects with the pain of marginalization and isolation.

Anne and Fatma’s stories are very different—they never exchange a single word in the course of their interaction—yet Anne holds Fatma’s hand and remains with her throughout her stay in the hospital. Fatma’s caring eyes and warm touch reminded Anne of the wet nurse from her childhood and takes her yet again to the past she had come looking for (36). By nursing Fatma, Anne believes she can repay the love and care that she received from her Berber nurse.<sup>13</sup> This interaction with Fatma changes Anne’s life and, instead of going back to Lyon, she decides to stay in Algeria, giving a motive to her own life and marking the end to her loneliness (51).

Sarah, on the other hand, treats the hammam as an extension of her workplace. She continues to document singular tales of difference that unfold in the hammam. She enacts the usual rituals of the hammam—clutches her *pagne* to her armpit, a comb in her hand, and a cup of

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<sup>13</sup> In fact, her efforts are so genuine in her act that the other patients in the hospital believe her to be Fatma’s daughter-in-law.

drinking water—and sits very close to another bather to listen to the mélange of the interwoven voices (32). She uses every opportunity to “record” women humming sad songs and sharing stories about their lives' burdens. Here too she succeeds in understanding their chronicles in spite of her unfamiliarity with the language (32). At the end, she justifies her practice of listening as an active means that will make a way for women to talk about themselves and give identity to their silenced voices (47).

In *Ombre*, this exercise of listening to others is well articulated and relatively straightforward. Written almost seven years after *Femmes*, the hammam in this novel can be read as a continuous space where Sarah, Fatma, and Anne's stories overlap with that of Hajila's and Isma's. Djébar chalks out the hammam as a place where the very meaning of enclosure dissolves and disintegrates to offer a secret consolation for sequestered women. It is also a place where women communicate through different signs: a split-second glance, a perceptible touch, and, as always, through silence (*Sister* 148). The metaphor of touch is used repeatedly to insinuate its importance as a means of communication that takes precedence over spoken language. When Isma and Hajila meet for the first time, they express solidarity via the media of touch and water. Isma fills a copper cup and pours water over Hajila's shoulders. However, there is no homoerotic overtone here, and Isma does not excite a sensual pleasure in Hajila. Instead, Hajila's expression is restricted to that of a calm peacefulness. There are no words exchanged, but the act of pouring water suffices for the act of purification that Hajila had looked forward to since being raped by her husband (64). This gesture also symbolizes the washing of one woman's pain by another—an act of solidarity. Once again, through the act of bathing together, Djébar indicates the coming together of the subaltern and the popular via a common experience that surpasses one's identifiable class position.

It should be noted that Isma and Hajila's social positioning is as different as Anne's and Fatma's, but a particular gesture and the experience of violence suffered at the hands of the same man brings them together. This experience gives Hajila the much-needed confidence to free herself from all kinds of enclosures, be it the modern apartment bound by traditional rules or the man's child inside her body. She liberates herself and ultimately crosses the threshold of all norms that limit her freedom of expression and speech. Djébar describes this scene as a spiritual experience for Hajila where Isma, by giving her the key, gives her the mantra to freedom. Consequently, the hammam transforms into a space of difference, where women meet, share their stories in unconventional language, and inspire one another, to carry on a collective movement in spite of the individual restrictions of their domestic settings. The handing over of the key by Isma to Hajila, then, alludes to the baton that one woman passes to the other in this relay race for gender equality and freedom of space. This is a race that is to be run (and must be run) by women across the globe, both fictional and real subaltern women.

## CONCLUSION

Lecturing at the École Normale Supérieure on the topic of the gaze and the scopic field in 1964, Jacques Lacan tells a “little story” to his students that illustrates poignantly the relation between the Subject and the subject as object in the visual field. In his early twenties, Lacan decided to explore the world. He wanted to “get away, see something different, throw [himself] into something practical [...] in the country say, or at the sea” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental* 95). On one such expedition, he accompanied a fisherman, Petit-Jean, in a frail boat to explore the sea. In the middle of their exploration, Petit-Jean pointed at a sardine can floating in the sea and said to Lacan, “*You see the can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn’t see you!*” (95; emphasis in the original). “The point of this little story, as it has occurred to my partner, the fact that he found it so funny and I less so,” notes Lacan,

[...] derives from the fact that, if I am told a story like that one, it is because I, at that moment—as I appeared to those fellows who were earning their living with great difficulty, in the struggle with what was for them a pitiless nature—looked like nothing on earth. In short, I was rather out of place in the picture. And it was because I felt this that I was not terribly amused at hearing myself addressed in this humourous, ironical way. (95–96)

As most students of Lacan would note, this anecdote explains the Real and the tenuous position of the “subject supposed to know.” But at the same time, it is also a story about subalternity and representation, and Subject-subject relationship. As an intellectual and the narrator of the story, Lacan is the dominant Subject, whose zeal to explore the sea and risk his life is a choice and not a compulsion. In comparison, Petit-Jean’s subject position as a poor fisherman is a marginal one. He has no other option but to risk his life for survival. Therefore,

Petit-Jean can be considered a subaltern subject in relation to Lacan. Petit-Jean's words—"well, it doesn't see you!"—make Lacan's presence irrelevant to the sea, Petit-Jean, as well as the can. What is more, by using the word "doesn't," Petit-Jean attaches an agency via which the can, an object, chooses to ignore Lacan's (dominant Subject) presence.

John Beverley also uses this passage to augment the category of the subaltern as a position outside of and in opposition to the mainstream (*Subalternity* 2). Like Beverley, I do not think that the irony in Petit-Jean's words is lost to Lacan. This is because, in recollecting the moment, Lacan subtly redacts himself from the position of the narrator to give Petit-Jean the last word on the issue: Lacan deliberately italicizes Petit-Jean's words to him to imply that the force of the statement qua its effect on the Subject—"You see *the can*? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!"—is not lost to the audience under the aura of his position as the speaker and author of the anecdote. It is Lacan's emphasis of Petit-Jean's words that opens up the significance of the passage and Petit-Jean's role in the elite-subaltern communication—Petit-Jean acts as a mediator and represents the object's relationship to the Subject in a way that renders the Subject invisible to the *other* (subject), thereby detaching the Subject from a position of dominance to that of a nonentity. Alternately, the subaltern represents the dominant Subject to itself, unsettling the dominant Subject "in the form of a negation or displacement: I was rather out of place in the picture" (26).

The unsettling of the dominant Subject's position is integral to the ideological purpose of this work.<sup>14</sup> "Who Speaks?" is a deconstructive study of subaltern representation in mainstream literature. In this context, questioning of the modes of representation of the subaltern subject has been unavoidable. Representation as a concept is not only a matter of "speaking about"

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<sup>14</sup> By dominant Subject position, this I mean the elite intellectuals, who are in a position to represent or speak about the subaltern subjects.

(representation), but also "speaking for" (re-presentation) someone or something. It is the "speaking for" or re-presentation that has become a problematic area in the study of subalternity. The subaltern subject has been categorized as separate from the mainstream in its speech, action, consciousness, and desire, and as a position or articulation that cannot be understood within hegemonic logic. Anyone claiming to speak for the subaltern should understand subaltern speech, desire, and action, and re-present it accurately without coercing his/her own desire on the subaltern. In other words, the hegemonic relation of the Subject of enunciation and the enunciated subject is to be considered or else the dominant position from where he/she speaks or writes about the subaltern takes precedence over the subaltern, thus silencing the subaltern. Thus, the one who represents the subaltern and the subaltern represented must occupy the same space so as to re-present subalternity in its current form.

The problem here lies in the fact that the process of un-coercive rearrangement of the subaltern's desire is impossible. The representative of subalternity is almost always situated at the center and as the Other of the subaltern. That is, as the Other or symbolic law, the representative (the elite intellectual, speaking for or behalf of the subaltern) governs, directs, and is complicit in situating the subaltern in its marginal otherness. The elite other occupies the position of the Other to the subaltern by virtue of its class position, the lack of which marks a subaltern as a subaltern. This issue has not been lost on me. Therefore, my central point of query has been the representative of the subaltern and the representative's Subject position (that is, the position from where the subaltern is represented), rather than the subaltern itself. It is not the "subalterns" in the writings of Mahasweta Devi, Bessie Head, and Assia Djebar who are the focus of my argument. This dissertation does not just study the speech of the subalterns in the works of these three writers, rather *how* and *why* they "speak" within the textual weaves of these

writers. As mainstream writers writing in the language of the dominant class, Mahasweta, Head, and Djébar quite naturally occupy the dominant Subject position. However, their unique approach to subalternity marks them closer to Petit-Jean, the mediator of subaltern agency, rather than Jacques Lacan, the dominant Subject. Like Lacan, all three writers mediate subaltern agency not to make it accessible to the mainstream but to unsettle the hegemonic positions of dominance and put the elite's Subject position in crisis. Therefore, the stories analyzed here have been selected with the aim to retrieve the ways in which the subaltern subjects represent the dominant Subject back to itself, rather than how the dominant Subject represents the subaltern.

My interest in subaltern studies is premised on the idea that subalternity is imbricated with the idea of nonrecognition of agency (Spivak, "Scattered" 476). Yet my reading of literature forced me to think otherwise. Mahasweta Devi, Bessie Head, and Assia Djébar have recognized the impossibility of representing gendered subalterns as conscious subjects and, therefore, make them speak in a language that complies with mainstream axioms while destabilizing mainstream privileges. In so doing, these writers have invented alternative ways of looking for agency in the female subalterns. Their works retrieve a certain, if volatile, agency of the gendered subaltern by shifting attention to subaltern action and subaltern lived spaces rather than the spoken words through which the subaltern expresses itself. The arguments here are not an answer to Spivak that yes the subaltern can speak, but an attempt to look for an agency through which to understand and speak not *for* but *with* gendered subaltern subjects.

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