



Subaltern Portraits in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Sea of Poppies* and *The Afghan Girl*

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Abstract: Oppression against the subaltern women has always been a significant issue. They have not only struggled through many challenges caused by imperial powers but also suffered from the traditional, religious and social norms imposed by their own patriarchy. Although it is considered that the West is the only saviour for the East, it has never become true as it has been nothing but devastation, poverty, identity struggle and a challenging life in refugee camps. In order to avoid misinterpretation of the subaltern women, it is now up to intellectuals, writers and journalists to make their voices heard and reveal all the facts about them. In this sense, Coetzee and Ghosh draw a perfect picture and become the voice of the subaltern women under the domination of their own patriarchy and imperial powers all around the world. They, in a way, tell the story of millions of subaltern women like Sharbat Gula, who was objectified both by her patriarchal society and by the West to justify its violent acts upon the East. Intertwined between colonists and patriarchy the subaltern is always subaltern and it is almost impossible for them to express themselves as they do not have autonomy and are not independent from dominant foreign groups. Thus, the aim of this study is to discuss how the subalternity is pictured through the female portraits in the novel *Waiting For The Barbarians* by John Maxwell Coetzee and *Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh along with the real life story of the Afghan Girl, Sharbat Gula, who was photographed by Steve McCurry.

Key words: Postcolonialism, Subaltern, Spivak, *Waiting For the Barbarians*, *Sea of Poppies*, *The Afghan Girl*, Orientalism, Guha

Since America was discovered, it has become a land of hope, dreams, new lives, endless opportunities and wealth for European countries, primarily for Spain followed by England and France. As the rumours claimed the New Continent to be rich in gold and other sources, the desire of moving to the newly-discovered continent was elevated among Europeans and huge waves of migrants were taking dangerous journeys across the ocean. However, the existence of the real owners, the natives living in tribes with their own traditions and values, slowed down and even altered their plans of settling down in peace because their priority changed into wiping out those natives with removal acts and violence if they were not persuaded to “live in peace” with them. Those who were “persuaded”, again with violence and acts of assimilations, became the others who were forced to disown their lands and to turn into colonized while the settlers became the colonizer by subjugating the lands as well as destroying the values, languages and religions that the natives had. This kind of colonization, however, is not specific to America. Since it became one of the strongest countries in the world, it was time to exploit other parts of the world, mainly (middle) Eastern countries and, especially Africa, India and Afghanistan, which was thought to be the source of human labour as well as valuable resources. Since the colonizers in America needed slaves to be worked in the field, and people in Africa were means of free labour, it was inevitable for black people to be encouraged or persuaded to move to America in the hope of a better life, but eventually, they encountered violence, dehumanizing and repressive acts of the colonizers. As America was becoming a “great” country, it somehow claimed to have the right to bring “happiness” and “freedom” to the countries where there is oil. Britain, on the other hand, was looking for new routes and sources for trade which also caused many catastrophic wars such as Opium Wars that caused many lives of Indian people to be destroyed. Although there

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have been millions of people who have suffered from colonisation, women have always been the main part of the sufferers of it because they not only struggle against the colonists but also try to survive within their own patriarchal societies. As well as being a controversy among many significant intellectuals, namely Spivak, Said, Fanon and Bhabha, the colonization and its dramatic impact on the colonized have been an inspiration for writers such as Achebe, Conrad and Coetzee. Moreover, worldwide known photographers have issued significant female portraits from “Third World Countries”. These figures have been playing an important role in discussing and demonstrating the sufferings of the colonised and identifying the notion of *the other* and *the subaltern* by gendering them within the context of postcolonialism. Thus, the aim of this study is to discuss the subalternity through the female subaltern portraits in the novel *Waiting For the Barbarians* by John Maxwell Coetzee and *Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh along with the real life story of the *Afghan Girl*, Sharbat Gula, who was photographed by Steve McCurry. The paper will start with the introduction of the postcolonial theories followed by the notion of subaltern defined by Gramsci, Gula and Spivak. After this introduction, the female characters in *Waiting for The Barbarians*, *Sea of Poppies* and the portrait called *The Afghan Girl* will be examined within the context of subalternity.

Within postcolonial discourse, various notions such as othering, subjugation, hybridity and subaltern have been proposed by prominent theorists and intellectuals, all referring to the different aspects of colonisation. Edward Said, for instance, suggested the idea of Orientalism, which can be considered as the basis of *othering*. First of all, the idea of Orientalism proposed by Edward Said can be considered as one of the basics of othering. In his most famous work *Orientalism*, he differentiates “us”, the familiar West, from “them”, the strange East, and creates a binary opposition between the East and the West (44). In this sense of binary opposition, he also refers to the duality between colonizer (us) and the colonized (them/the other). Moreover, he emphasizes the cruelty and its justification by the colonizers who “claim that they brought civilization to the primitive people, but when they misbehave or become rebellious, imperialist powers think that barbaric people deserve to be ruled” (Said xi). Frantz Fanon, on the other hand, deals with negative effects of colonisation and how colonizers create *the other* with their own violent acts not only with physical violence but also with language and discourse. In his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, he evaluates decolonisation as a violent phenomena which aims not only to keep the enslaved men at arm’s length but also to dehumanize them. Postcolonial discourse does not stand alone as it includes a variety of theories such as Marxism and Feminism, thanks to Antonio Gramsci and Spivak who brought another perspective of *the other* within postcolonial context. As a Marxist theorist, Gramsci introduces the term subaltern to refer to Southern Italian workers, *the other*, marginalised by the hegemonic politics of the Fascist party (11). Later in his studies, he uses this term to identify the relationship between the Italian intellectuals and the lowest strata, namely the subaltern groups and classes who are subject to the initiatives of the dominant class as they lack relative political power. Similarly, Ranajit Guha, who is the pioneer of particularly Indian Subalternity, defines the subaltern groups as inferiors who are objectified and suppressed because of their class, religion and culture (144). The main goal of Guha is to raise awareness of the subaltern groups in India with various studies and academic work without ignoring the dominant groups as they always objectify the subaltern. However, he claims that the historiography of Indian nationalism has been dominated by colonialist elitism and bourgeois nationalist elitism which rejects the autonomy and autonomous consciousness of the subaltern groups, so the subalterns are unable to create their own politics and nationalism independent from the British rule and patriarchy (Guha 144). Taking it to a next level, Spivak defines subaltern from a different perspective focusing on the female subjugation, basically in India (300). Discrimination against women has been an inevitable fact for centuries, but Spivak takes advantage of the doctrines of Feminism combining it with the subaltern theory to be voice of subaltern women who are colonised both by the colonisers and by their own extraction. Referring to the patriarchy and imperialism, she suggests that women are subalterns who cannot speak because, as well as being a subject of the ideological construction of the gender that prioritises the male dominance, they are also “doubly effaced” and left more deeply in the shadow (Spivak 287). Similar to Guha, Spivak mentions groups which dominate and objectify women: Dominant foreign groups, dominant indigenous

groups on the all-India level and dominant indigenous groups at the regional and local levels emphasizing that subaltern women are condemned to disappear by being entwined between the patriarchy and imperialism (Spivak 284).

Guha and Spivak have inspired many other intellectuals around the world who are studying subalternity within postcolonial context in order to give voice to the subalterns living in their countries particularly in the East. Thus, considering the definitions above, the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* by J. M. Coetzee can be analysed through the lens of subaltern theory. In the novel, othering and its consequences are very well-pictured with the barbaric acts upon the other by Colonel Joll who is appointed to The Empire by the Third Bureau so that he can start interrogating the barbarians, torturing them to find out when and how the barbarians will attack them, which never happens. He even justifies his violent act after a deathly interrogation stating that the contradictions confronted by the investigating officer who was attacked by the prisoner and in return “a scuffle ensued during which the prisoner fell heavily against the wall. Efforts to revive him were unsuccessful” (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 10). However, the most important part in the novel is how the female character, The Girl, is subalterned through violent acts, as well as through the affection of a white man. The Girl represents an actual subaltern living on the streets alone, directly affected by the colonial forces and not understood by the outsiders as she is not yet capable of the language of the colonisers. In the book, The Girl is subalterned through dehumanization and objectification. Presented as *the other* who has been tortured and left on the street crippled and blind by the dominant foreign group, The Empire, The Girl is also dehumanized by The Magistrate although it may seem that he is always there to help The Girl. Although he acts like a father to her and takes care of her wounds after the tortures of the Empire, there is always a distance between them because The Girl, as a subaltern, barely speaks the dominant language and the existence of her always reminds him that he is the dominant. According to Bhaba, who relates the Lacanian mirror stage to othering in colonial context in his *The Location of Culture*, the ambivalence which focuses on the cultural differences between the colonizer and the colonized and the differentiation it creates when the first part attempts to dominate its supremacy ends in the objectification of *the other* (81). Within this objectification, there is always the threat of the look; in the identification of the Imaginary relation there is always the alienation of *the other* which crucially returns its image to the subject. This objectification which ends with the subalternity of The Girl starts when The Magistrate cannot get rid of his male gaze upon the girl. He sees the wounds and the torture marks on her body, he realizes that he never wished to drawn into such violence acts that later he will be exposed to, but he also thinks that he acts like his lover, he undresses her, bathes her, strokes her and even sleeps beside her, but he “might equally well tie her to a chair and beat her” (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 58-9). This is also a proof of how the subaltern is dehumanized in the gaze of a dominant foreign man. The objectification of the subaltern also appears when The Girl never speaks and always lets the magistrate take actions on her behalf. He becomes the one who decides to take her back to her family, he does not ask if she wants or needs help from him and, interestingly enough, although she has been tortured by the men of The Empire, she never gives up trusting the magistrate. In this sense, the girl is the subaltern that Spivak suggested by stating that within the hegemonic societies, the inferior cannot represent themselves; they must be represented and their representative must appear as their master or as an unrestricted governmental power that protects them from the other classes. The girl in the novel is the damsel in distress, a black woman to be saved by a white man, the magistrate, but who is she saved from or is she really saved? The magistrate, as a white man, attempts to save the girl from the white men, who are the real barbarians, by taking her back to her family, but Mai, the woman who he sleeps with, explains that he actually made the girl unhappy. The magistrate himself is also aware that “[h]owever kindly she may be treated by her own people, she will never be courted and married in the normal way: she is marked for life as the property of a stranger” (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 179). This quotation implies not only the subaltern female who is suppressed by the hegemonic superior within the familiar culture but also the colonised whose life was influenced and modified fundamentally.

Another prominent postcolonial text is *Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh who is Indian-born writer and is famous for its postcolonial texts in which he covers personal and national identity of the characters he creates. The characters in his books are generally travellers and they migrate to other lands in order to escape oppressions and discriminations that they face and they try to find out a way to be free and to survive with their own identity. Among his works, the first book of Ibis Trilogy, *Sea of Poppies*, tells the story of a group of people, representing the Indian people and their sufferings through Opium War and diaspora, travelling to freedom on a ship called Ibis. This ship is like an exit ticket for the people who have been suffering through the war, oppression and discrimination and it resembles the sea voyages, the superficial methods, for determining “slavery” and “freedom” and the struggle for human rights for African American during the nineteenth century. Among different subplots, the story of Deeti is the most remarkable one in terms of representing the subaltern. Coming from a relatively poor background, she has to deal with the prejudices against herself because of her dark skin tone with light grey eyes, a feature that was unusual in that part of the country where these features evoke “superstitions to the point where they would sometimes shout taunts at her – chudaliya, dainiya – as if she were a witch: but Deeti had only to turn her eyes on them to make them scatter and run off” (*Sea of Poppies* 5). Assuming she would be forced to get married to an old widower, she gets married to Hukam Singh who is from the upper class and rich, but that is the time her unbearable sufferings and oppressions that she cannot resist start. Deeti represents the subaltern that is under the oppression of the Dominant indigenous groups on the all-India level. Raped by her brother-in-law when she is unconscious because of the opium that her mother-in-law gives to her, she gets pregnant so that the infertility of her husband would remain as a secret. Living in a male dominant society, she has to give birth to that child remaining silent against all the tortures and mockeries she faces. When her husband dies, her brother-in-law proposes to her offering “the best hope for the future” but she rejects saying “I will burn on my husband’s pyre rather than give myself to you” (*Sea of Poppies* 158). This part of the novel can be considered as the most critical one as Amitav intends to take the readers’ attention to *sati* ceremony, a Hindu ritual in which the widow sacrifices herself after the death of her husband. This ceremony has created a conflict because it is considered to be sacred for the Indians while colonials believe it to be dehumanisation of the women by their own culture. Taking advantage of it in order to justify their colonial acts, the British abolished this exercise in India and declared themselves as “white men saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak 93). However, in opposition to the belief that the British freed the subaltern women in India and in order to emphasize that the British only veiled their colonial acts, Amitav introduces a subaltern male, the untouchable Kaula who keeps his silence in the face of the inhuman treatments of the upper class Indians. Kaula saves Deeti from *sati* and they elope together and get on the ship for a destination of freedom. In this sense, it can be proposed that Amitav tries to demonstrate subaltern autonomy that is independent from colonial oppression is possible only if the subaltern breaks free from their passiveness within the dominant Indian groups as well as the foreign dominant groups in order to be heard. Otherwise, they remain as the insurgent whose history is represented through three stages called primary, the immediate account by the officials, secondary, reports and memoirs narrated by officials later in time which cannot be reliable. Moreover, in the third stage called tertiary, the discourse of the historians fails to represent the subaltern groups and totally excludes them as those historians have no official and direct contact with the events and the subaltern groups of that time, so their narratives become unreliable. Thus, Deeti is an important female character representing the subaltern because of her acts and discourse against the dominant patriarchy. She demonstrates her gendered subaltern identity as a woman who feels free enough to reject marrying her brother-in-law and brave enough to elope with another man refusing the dominant indigenous practice, *sati*. Deeti not only tries to find a way out of her miseries by the male gaze of her dominant patriarchy but also goes through ambivalence because of the foreign dominant groups, particularly after getting on the ship, Ibis. The book is set in India at the beginning of the nineteenth century, right before the Opium War between Britain and China whose aim is to capture the fertile lands near Gange and manage the opium trade. Although China banned the opium trade, it was still shipped outside India and caused a war between two nations, bringing about poverty, starvation and mass migration and diaspora of Indian people.

In this sense, Deeti represents one of those people who has gone through a change of identity and ambivalence. Bhabha introduces ambivalence as liminal space, in-between designation of identity, which becomes the process of symbolic interaction that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white and this borderline, in-betweenness, of culture demands an encounter with “newness” that is not part of the continuum of past and present (4). In the book, Deeti, as well as other characters, wish to forget about their memories and identities that they already have in order to shape new ones for themselves so that they can easily adapt themselves to the current situation. In order to achieve it, Deeti changes her name to Adii in the expectation of leaving everything behind, but as Bhabha emphasizes, particularly after diasporas, colonisation and mass migration, the fixed identity disappears (163). This point of view is very-well pictured when Deeti defines the ship Ibis as a womb but questions if it really “had made [the ones on the ship] into a single family” (*Sea of Poppies* 432). Within the context of subalternity and othering, Deeti’s point of view of the poppy seeds, when she sees one, also evokes the devastating effects of the colonisation and the imperial power on the subaltern. With the name Sea of Poppies, the writer aims to refer to the agricultural fertility of Indian lands as well as the valuable sources that would be a source of wealth for many Indian families. However, for that one single poppy seed, countries fought devastating many lives. Deeti as a subaltern becomes the voice of many Indians regardless of their gender as: “She looked at the seed as if she had never seen one before, and suddenly she knew that it was not the planet above that governed her life: it was this minuscule orb – at once bountiful and all-devouring, merciful and destructive, sustaining and vengeful” (*Sea of Poppies* 451). All in all, the subaltern, no matter what they do, remains as the spices that are condemned to be removed or replaced when they encounter a colonial power, whether it is indigenous or imperial.

Colonisation and its effects on the subaltern is not limited to the characters in books or a group of women in a specific region with its own patriarchal or foreign domination. All around the world, women are going through a different variety of oppression by the colonisers and writing fiction based on real stories is not the only means to reflect the sufferings of these women. Especially in Middle Eastern countries such as Afghanistan and Palestine, imperial powers are performing violent acts upon innocent civilians and everyday little children, men and women who do not have anything to do with the war or politics are dying or wounded. Moreover, the wars or the occupations of the countries and regions in the east cause millions of subalterns to leave their homes and flee to other countries, ironically to the west, or the refugee camps which are close to their homelands. Although the west is watching the occurrences or informed about the violence in the east, the best way to lay the truths, well-known photographers take thousands of photos of the real miseries and struggles of the real refugees, in other words, subalterns. One of these photos named *Afghan Girl* was taken by Steve McCurry, who is one of the most famous journalists in the world. Taken in the 1980s during the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan and published on the cover of *National Geographic* in 1985, the photo shows a girl with a fierce, fearful and bewildered look. Since then, this girl has become a figure and the voice of the subalterns who have been struggling through the same oppressions and imperialist powers. It was in 1979 that the tragedy of the Afghan people began when the Soviet Union sent coups to occupy there with an imperial logic that has been encountered throughout history which is to exercise dominance over the ones who are open to exploitation in terms of valuable sources, commercials, trade and so-called security. Nonetheless, this war brought nothing but devastation to the people who lost their agricultural lands and suffered from poverty; crimes such as plunder, sexual abuse, kidnapping and suicides increased. Moreover, children could not have proper education since they had to leave their homes with their families in order to escape the violence by imperial power. During this occupation, although there were lots of Afghan rebellions against the Soviet army, the innocent adults, children and women, particularly mothers with children, were forced to resist the invasion or they were simply forced to migrate and take refuge in nearby countries like Pakistan. These refugees, almost four hundred thousand in numbers, looked for a shelter in Pakistan, as well as the ones who decided to stay in their homelands, were abused by both Soviet army and Pakistani patriarchy: massacres, individual and collective rapes, arbitrary arrests, detention without trial, torture and executions took place both in Afghanistan and in refugee camps. The

Afghan Girl whose real name is Sharbat Gula was one of these refugees. During the Soviet invasion, she and her family were forced to walk miles over the snowy mountains, hiding in the caves in case the Soviet planes would see and attack them, in order to reach the Pakistani refugee camp called Nasir Bagh. Married at the age of what is estimated to be between thirteen and sixteen, she is a single mother of three daughters whom she wishes to get proper education under good conditions. The importance of her portrait by McCurry lies beneath subalternity which has resulted from the Orientalist look of the west upon the east. Although Orientalism is considered to be the school of interpretation whose subject is the orient with its civilizations, localities and peoples, it is believed that it must be the main job of scholars, historians, and linguists to reflect the truths about the Orient. Nevertheless, similar to the sati ceremony mentioned in Indian subalternity, the photo of the Afghan girl has been misinterpreted, particularly by the U.S, claiming that Afghan women needed help from the west in order to be free of both foreign and domestic oppressions. Since it was first published in *National Geographic*, the photo of the Afghan Girl has been considered as a tool for imperial causes because mass media has repeatedly emphasized how innocent women and children have become victims of war, insurgency and domestic violence in the east and used their portraits on media to show their so-called pity and remorse for them. Notwithstanding, their main aim has always been justifying their act of colonisation through politicians and charities claiming that they occupy the country to bring freedom, happiness and prosperity especially for women and children who are claimed to be under the oppression of their own domestic dominant groups. Sharbat Gula is one of these victims who was located in some distant refugee camp and who has been widely screened in documentaries, indirectly reviving orientalist and subaltern discourses in which the protection of women serves as an opening door to the expansion of the colonial state. While she became the worldwide sensation, she was suffering through hardships in the refugee camps where there is no privacy and she had to get married at the age of thirteen or sixteen -as her husband stated, she did not have proper education -she could only write her name but could not write, she was arrested in Pakistan because of forged identity and was betrayed every time by the Afghan leaders as an Afghan citizen. Sharbat is not only a colonised but also a subaltern; as a woman, she has undergone oppression within her own patriarchy. Within the years that McCurry was looking for her, she had an arranged marriage so she did not have right to make her own decision for the man she wants to be with; she was vanished from the society by going into purdah, the secluded existence followed by many Islamic women once they reach puberty; she could not even smile or look at the journalists who were taking her photo with her husband and daughter while smiling like the gleam of a lantern at dusk. Interestingly enough, when she was asked, she said that it was not a curse for a woman to wear purdah which, according to Fran Hosken, is nothing but a domestic violence and violation of human rights because purdah is something that is equated with rape, prostitution and pornography and women must neither reveal their desires of how and what they wear nor have a right to say a word against what they are forced to do (28), just like the Indian women who were "assumed" to be content with *Sati* tradition without even asking them. In this sense, when you look at the latest photos of Sharbat Gula, the only thing you can see is the weariness, the despair and the fear that the years of oppression and the struggle have brought in her bright green eyes. She is the real subaltern, the real representative of what has been presented in fictions.

It is an inevitable fact that millions of women have been exposed to various cruelties and dehumanizing acts of oppressors and patriarchy and they still are. They are daughters who are forced to be a wife at a very early age with an arranged marriage; they are wives who serve their husbands like a slave; they are mothers who have to protect their children during wars and give them a better future. Although they are also the subjects of colonization and politics, subaltern women have always been an inspiration for writers and photographers because their voice needs to be heard. In this sense, Coetzee presents the reader *The Girl* who is entwined between colonists and patriarchy and her life after being taken to her family is unknown similarly to the subalterns in today's world. Thousands of subaltern women, together with their little children, are obliged to leave their homelands and immigrate to the West where they encounter cruelties. They lose their future travelling to the unknown ahead and that is what Coetzee wants to demonstrate through his character *The Girl*. Gosh, in contrast to Coetzee, pictures Deeti as a woman who is strong and independent enough to revolt against the

patriarchal society and its customs, unlike the subaltern in real life. She represents the subaltern that Spivak and many other intellectuals would like to see around the world. Sharbat Gula, on the other hand, is a real subaltern who has been suffering from wars, terror and customs imposed by her patriarchal society. What makes the photo of Gula significant is that it is the work of colonial gaze. Taken by the American photographer, Steve McCurry, her portrait has been misinterpreted by the West who claims the subaltern women in the Middle East are living under bad conditions because of harsh and cruel customs imposed on them. However, they only justify their barbaric acts on the subaltern. All in all, subaltern means differently in the gaze of the West and the East. This difference results from the interests that both parties have which means while the West is interested in the resources of the areas they occupy, the East aims to be the voice of the subalterns by picturing them in their works.

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