



Silenced Women in Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997): A Marxist Feminist Study

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the silencing of women in the patriarchal society of Japan and explores the reasons that contribute towards female subjugation with specific focus on the primary character Sayuri in the light of Marxist Feminism. The paper illustrates the factors responsible for silencing of women, which goes on to violence, oppression, and economic dependence, which ultimately leads to treating them as subaltern. Moreover, this paper avers the issues concerning taboos of sexualization and commodification of women leading to alienation, which is imposed, on women who seem to be self-reliant and deeply access their full potentials.

KEYWORDS: Silencing, Sexualization, Objectification, Marxist-Feminism, Subaltern

INTRODUCTION

There is a very profound and everlasting relationship between literature and the society in other words it can also be considered that literature reflects the true image of the society. It aims to explore the real nature of mankind and serves as a means of communication aiming to explore the society (Rees 9). The real task of literature is to depict the true image of the society by presenting its cultures and ideologies prevalent in it. One such ideology that has strongly rooted in the human society is patriarchy which often does not get enough attention and gives rise to a distorted belief system in the society which puts men on the pedestal and gives them undue privileges in the society which in turn results in the degradation of women and their treatment as an inferior gender. "Generally, gender inequality or discrimination word used for "women", because they considered being most inferior and weaker section of our society." (Shastri 27). This distorted ideology in the society not just only degrades women but also puts them in a susceptible position where women can be silenced and ripped off their basic human rights due the patriarchal nature of the society. In the modern-day world of now it can still be seen that women that women are economically and financially dependent on men and face challenges of survival in the form of financial disparities in the male-controlled society. This unfair system of society and gender roles gives rise to a new tenet of feminism: Marxist Feminism according to which the novel *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997) by Arthur Golden has been analyzed. In order to achieve this the paper explores the relationship among silencing, subjugation, monetary

reliance and opinions of subaltern women. It is pertinent to highlight the bars of sexualization and commodification of women leading to violence and subjugation and ultimately silencing in a patriarchal narrative.

As regards to theoretical framework, theory of Marxist Feminism has been used which aims of liberate women from subjugation and oppression. It is a strong framework which emphasizes and elucidates subjugation on the basis of gender role (Holmstrom 371). The paper is comprised of three-sub theories, Firstly, the theory of Modern Day Slavery by Munck (2002). Secondly, the theory of Objectification by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) and lastly, the Subaltern theory by Spivak (1988).

In terms of analyzing the Japanese culture a very important image of a beautiful woman wearing a kimono appears in the mind. The cultural name given to this woman is *Geisha* which accurately means an artist. However, the figure of geisha often leads to complications as it is regarded as a representative of Asian femininity (Stanley 539). This idea often misleads the westerners to associate geishas as sex-workers and this misinterpretation is due to the depiction of Japanese women in the books and media. Therefore Geishas have been figures of mystery and beauty who have enthused the imagination of the people in the west.

Tracing back to the 16th century female performers Geishas have gone through many transitions. Earlier, men used to cross-dress as women and perform but later on by the 18th century this role came to be only for women. Geishas gained immense popularity in the Meiji Period in Japan during



which Geishas were not just well-trained in mannerisms but were also low-priced and easily available. Meiji era is also called the Golden age of Geisha (Dalby 62). Geishas gained a lot of demand and popularity due to which they became the heart of many social gatherings in the tea houses which were the prime locations of such congregations. This ultimately attracted men towards geishas and they became symbols of attraction and mannerisms. During the 19th century men preferred geishas for entertainment determinations and this blurred the boundary-line between the geishas and prostitutes (Stanley 540). The prime difference between the two was that prostitutes used their bodies to attract men and did sexual labor on the other hand geishas used the power of their beauty and mannerisms to entertain men. Due to this link, geishas were often mistaken as sex-workers and since prostitution is considered as a taboo in Japanese culture, therefore geishas are considered as inferior beings (Stanley 540). Geishas still struggle to whitewash their image and the westerners still considers geishas to be sex-workers rather than artists. Masuda Sayo states that geishas are just sex-workers (7). This misrepresentation of geishas in the literary domain can be observed in the novel *Memoirs of a Geisha*.

Slavery can be defined as the status at which the enslaved person has no rights or powers on his own self but rather these rights are connected with the possession (Argibay 375). The issue of slavery is not limited to any one nation but rather the whole world and forces its preys into sexual labor and in the end limiting their freedom of movement (Argibay 375). Scheme of sexual slavery was proposed by the government of Japan known as comfort women during from 1932 to 1945 (Kim et al. 58). In the modern history it is regarded as the chief case of sexual labor and slavery (Kim et al. 58). With the passage of time when the demand of these comfort women began to surge private brokers with the involvement of the authorities began to deceive women by fake promises of better work and wage and ultimately pushing them into enslavement of sexual and menial nature and recruiting them into comfort houses (Kuki 246). Many scholars opine that a humungous amount of girls were victimized and forced into sexual labor (Kim et al. 58). A very strong example of slavery in these comfort houses was the payment of sexual labor that went into the hands of the men who ran the comfort houses but not into the hands of the women doing sexual labor (Kim et al. 60). Another clear instance of slavery is the fact that these women were forced to do sexual labor and had no right to deny and even if they try to oppose they would face physical torture (Kim et al. 60). Since these women were enslaved and were alienated from the society so they were not allowed to leave and interact with the outer world. These are the instances which exemplify the fact that women were sexual slaves in Japan. Forced labor, undue sexual favors, forced and underage marriages all come in the category of modern-day slavery. Trafficking of women for sex often takes place amongst poor countries as they are surviving under extreme penury they aim to have a better life in the hope of which they get deceived and forced

into slavery and prostitution. Slavery is a global crime and the forcing of children into sexual labor must be eradicated (Tiefenbrun 330).

This sexual slavery ultimately leads to objectification of women as they are just sold as commodities and forced into sexual labor and since women have no consent in this they are just sex objects and have no right to deny. These kinds of issues are predominant among women and they have no way to escape. Women are dual in nature as at one point they are considered beautiful and attract men but at the same time they are enslaved and weakened due to their physical charm and considered as just objects of attraction. Even being physically attractive they are still considered inferior to men due to the absence of some qualities and are labelled as defective version of men. It is pertinent to note that women being considered as beautiful are often objectified by men and it gives rise of the disbelief that this is the major quality they possess this leads to objectification and ultimately degrades the status of women as an object. It can be rightly said that the condescending attitude towards women is the main reason for their objectification. Since women are taken as objects and their sole aim is to serve men as sex-machines which aims to provide sexual satisfaction to men without having no rights or consent of their own which put stops them from appreciating their humanity to the fullest (Slagter 155).

The concept of women and their rights came in the 1960s through feminist literary criticism it is the outcome of feminist movement in the world of literature that argued on the representation of women in the books by means of which men were able to portray their patriarchal power in the male-dominated society. The mentality due to culture and labelling of women is the masculine tool that results in inequality between the genders (Barry 107). Since commodification of women leads to degradation of women and ripping of their basic human rights and ignoring their self-respect and identity. Commodification leads to the idea that women view themselves as others view them (Fredrickson and Roberts 174). Women also face discomfort and humiliation due to the lack of self-confidence due to which they scrutinize their bodies leading to demotivation. Media and literary depiction is accountable of the objectification of women as the physical beauty of these women is used a tool to attract the audiences and gain readership. Commodification of women is also due to their ethnic backgrounds, their age group and their physical appearances (Fredrickson and Robertson 174). This leads to the idea that women observing themselves as others view them which is self-commodification. Another objectification is of sexual nature where the female organs are considered as just objects of satiating sexual desires of men separating women as being humans too. Apart from bodies, the mannerisms and the submissive attitude of women is also considered to be attractive towards men which is why women are forced to be obedient in the male-controlled society (Mackinnon 140). All this commodification ultimately

alienates women from the society and their own self which results in a distorted view-point of themselves and traumatic conditions of depression (Fredrickson and Robertson 180).

Another very important and noteworthy form of subjugation in a patriarchal society is silencing of women where women are silenced by the use of violence and are not just treated as commodities but are also ripped off their rights to speak up for themselves which contributes towards violence of physical and mental nature. The quest for power is the key factor for this silent attitude of women as they are taught to be submissive and their submissiveness is considered to be consent which paves way towards violence. This idea of silencing can be understood by Gayatri Spivak who opines the fact that women are subaltern and inferior to men in our male-oriented society and which is why they are treated as inferior to men. This inferiority not just objectifies women but also allows men to exert their undue power over them by the use of violence.

The redefinition of sane at the end of the eighteenth century is where Foucault locates epistemic violence, a full makeover of the episteme. However, Spivak (Spivak 35) states that this is not the full account of history. To her opinion, imperialism might be defined as 'subjugated knowledge'. In addition, the discursive construction of gender perpetuates the male as the dominant gender, both as the focus of imperialist literature and as the target of insurgency (Spivak 41). When these two theoretical conceptions are combined one can reach the conclusion that the women who are perceived as inferior or subaltern are even more profoundly shrouded in darkness if the subaltern lack a history and are mute. This may be considered as both the cause and effect of that women themselves may define the relationship between silence and woman, which encompasses issues of race and class (Spivak 257).

METHODOLOGY

The method adopted for this study is non-empirical research to comprehend the nature of the literary work, personal observation through critical discourse analysis. The text of the novel *Memoirs of a Geisha* has been the major source of data collection. The secondary data source is the materials written by various scholars in the basis of which it was written and the theory of Marxist Feminism, its traces has been explored and analyzed throughout the novel. Marxist Feminism aims to liberate women by enhancing their status in a patriarchal narrative by improving their economic and social conditions, which in turn will eradicate instances of subjugation and oppression.

SILENCED WOMEN IN ARTHUR GOLDEN'S MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA (1997): A MARXIST FEMINIST STUDY

Golden presents the story of the novel in the form of a memoir through the perspective of the protagonist Sayuri who as a child was sold by her family to the Okiya (a geisha house). Instances of female exploitation are not just limited to sexual

labor but also subordination and violence (Ratnasari 41). Likewise, the protagonist was forced to do menial labor as a child, and was not allowed to interact with the outer world. All these practices contribute to the idea that she is forced by the owners of the geisha to be a slave menially and sexually. There have been instances in the novel where she is deliberately told by Mameha to make a cut at her leg in order to seduce Dr. Nobu who aspires to purchase her virginity. Apparently, the novel has been structured in the form of a memoir depicting the fictional life of the geisha as an artist. However, there are clear examples of slavery, sex-trafficking and sexual labor. While working at the geisha house she has no right to claim her own earnings. She repeatedly thought of her earnings and was not even aware of the exact amount she earned out of all the efforts (Golden 246). This shows that she is indebted and a slave to the geisha house. Later on in the narrative, she is supposed to be have a *mizuage* during which she will have to sell her virginity to the man who will pay the highest amount, this shows that she is forcibly enslaved.

Another very important aspect of Marxist Feminism is the alienation and commodification of women in the novel. The narrative shows power struggle in the geisha house by the ranking of the geishas based on their market price and physical beauty. In the story, women have been depicted as objects of sexual desire, which commodifies them and degrades them to the status of an object (Bartky 26). Since geishas serve as objects of beauty and attraction therefore, they are supposed to be presentable. They masquerade themselves behind cosmetic products which not only hides their face but also emotions and feelings For instance, Sayuri states "I long ago developed a much practiced smile, which I call my "Noh smile" because it resembles a Noh mask whose features are frozen (Golden 1). This ultimately alienates them from the society and their own self.

It is important to mention that in a patriarchal society women are inferior to men and have no voice of their own. Since literature represents the society therefore, it is visible in the narrative of the novel that women being financially dependent are not just treated as slaves and sellable objects by others but also are silenced which contributes to violence. The protagonist after being sold by her own family at the geisha house had to endure violence of physical and sexual nature, which weekend her status in the society and degraded her. It is significant to mention that financial constraints silenced these women and they ultimately allowed other people (mostly men) to exploit them in various ways. Gender inequality takes place in the form of negatively categorizing women and having conventional views against them (Lamphere 11). Silencing is the tool that mutes women and allows men to curb the rights of women (D'Almeida 1).The silent and submissive attitude of the protagonist *Sayuri* is the main reason, which paved way for violence towards her and ripped her off her own rights. The economic deprivation of these women makes them dependent on men, which allows

men to exercise their power and at the same time misuse these women by the use of force to satiate their sexual needs which is evident in the narrative of the novel *Memoirs of a Geisha*.

CONCLUSION

To sum it up it can be rightly stated, that *Memoirs of a Geisha* truly depicts subjugation of women and illustrates alienation of women by commodifying their bodies and their silence is the tool, which is used by men who degrade them by the use of violence in a variety of ways. The era depicted in the novel is the time of the WWII when Japan was providing comfort women and geishas being artists were ultimately forced to sexual slavery due to extreme financial crisis. The novel aptly shows signs of female suppression in Japanese society, which is patriarchal in nature.

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