

SILENCE AND RESILIENCE IN BINA SHAH'S *SLUM CHILD*

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the factors contributing to the traumatic experiences of subaltern children in Pakistani Christian society. It delves deep into the painful memories and traumatic encounters of subaltern children within the confines of their homes and communities. The analysis centers on Bina Shah's Slum Child, where the narrator, Laila, represents the collective psychological struggles of subaltern children. Drawing on Judith Lewis Herman's concepts, it explores how silence and resilience influence the impact of trauma. Additionally, it employs insights from Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's works to examine the testimonial role in fictional narratives. The study concludes that subaltern children often endure trauma, significantly affecting their psychological well-being. Resolution of these inner conflicts requires confronting entrenched fears. Importantly, testimony not only gives a voice to the voiceless but also provides psychological healing.

Keywords: Postcolonial Psychology, Subaltern Studies, Trauma and Recovery, Testimony, Pakistani Christian, subaltern children.

INTRODUCTION

Subalterns are group of people, who are kept politically, economically and socially outside the hegemonic order. They are deprived of their voice through marginalization and oppression by the dominant class. Gayatri Spivak (1984) in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* states that subaltern must be voiceless. The intellectuals ought to speak for them since they cannot speak for themselves. She draws attention to the representation of subaltern women, who are imposed in this position by both local and global capital. Spivak writes, "The woman is doubly marginalized in shadow" (Spivak, as cited in Nelson & Grossberg, 1988, p. 84). She asserts that women, especially those without a recognized caste or from rural South Asian areas, represent the ideal subaltern figure. This is because they encounter marginalization and oppression both outside of their households and in public settings. These women experience double marginalization as a result of their inferiority due to gender.

In accordance with Spivak's concepts, we argue that the term subaltern can include all oppressed voices that have been disregarded in Pakistani Christian society, even classifying children as members of this group. Despite being exposed to oppression and marginalization by the dominant, some children may be able to transcend the traumatic experiences they have gone through while others end up trapped in silence as a result of the traumas and atrocities they have experienced. Many contemporary writers have recognized the subaltern status of these children and are actively trying to give them a voice.

In the same connection, Judith Lewis Herman in her book *Trauma and Recovery* describes the word 'unspeakable' by relating it to the traumatized people. She writes that, "the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from the consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud; this is the meaning of the word unspeakable" (1992, p. 1). She explains how a person's experiences with trauma and tragedies can have a negative psychological impact. She asserts

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the centermost cause of psychological trauma is “the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud” (1992, p. 1). Herman states that for individual to recover from past traumatic experiences, he/she needs to speak about the atrocities that he has experienced in the past. If she/he remains silent, he/she will struggle psychologically. This inner struggle can find resolution if the person testifies to such incidents. The victim's testimony speaks for the collective group rather than just his own confessional self.

Keeping in line with Herman, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992) discuss the significance of testimony, witnessing, and memory in relation to the Holocaust in their book *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. The ideas of testimony and witnessing have been broadly interpreted by Felman and Laub. Similar to this, testimonial literature is created to tell the history of the oppressed, marginalized, and subaltern groups. The voiceless are given a voice through this genre. In addition to providing psychological comfort for the traumatized person, the testimonial function is important in portraying minorities as a whole.

Statement of the Problem

The research attempts to investigate the complex predicament of the subaltern children in Pakistani Christian community, who experience trauma as a result of numerous forms of oppression and discrimination. The study will focus on a pair of children; one of them survives and comes to terms with her traumatic memories, while the other retreats into silence and meets a tragic end. The study investigates how subaltern children's personal and individual sites; their homes and communities, have affected their traumatic experiences. The narrative's testimony renders the atrocities experienced by Christian subaltern children collectively.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate how community and family contribute to the trauma experienced by children in the Pakistani Christian society with reference to Bina Shah's *Slum Child*.
2. To examine the effects of silence and resilience on subaltern children in the novel *Slum Child*.
3. To analyze the use of testimonial narrative in representing subaltern children as a whole in Bina Shah's *Slum Child*

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the paper *Stories of Resilience and Resolve: An Intersectional Study on the Plight of Non-Muslim Women and Girls in Pakistan* by Mary James Gill, Asif Aqeel and Basil Dogra (2022) the challenges that women of the minority group must deal with in the male-dominated culture is highlighted. They state that women are marginalized not only because of their gender but also because of their religion. “Women and girls belonging to religious minority communities are faced with inter-sectional discrimination on multiple accounts. For example, they were discriminated against for being women in a patriarchal society and coming from a religious minority community” (Gill et al., 2022, p.5).

In the blog *On Christians in Fiction: How well do Pakistani authors write about religious minorities?* Anum Shaharyar (2016) writes about the representation of Pakistani Christian in literature. She takes into account authors like Bina Shah and Muhammad Hanif, whose writings give voice to the voiceless. Both Shah and Hanif tries to highlight the struggles of the Christian subaltern living in Pakistan. Shahryar emphasises how discrimination based on gender makes marginalised women doubly powerless in society. Both authors address this issue in their writings, ““Hanif says, who uses his platform to integrate ideas of religious discrimination with the rampant sexism that runs in Pakistani society. This is something Bina Shah does as well, but her story separates sexism from the religious aspects of it. While she seems to be saying sexism affects all girls everywhere, Hanif is found concentrating on how being a woman is just an added disadvantage over the mistake of being born a Christian in this society” (2016, para. 6).

Freya Dasgupta (2021) in her work *Social Justice Through Fiction: Intersectionality of Religion, Caste, and Gender in Mohammed Hanif's Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* writes, “Literature has the ability to inspire immense empathy for the other by lending voice to the forgotten and marginalized, which is the first step to any dialogue for social justice” (p. [not available]).

Moreover, Marta Caminero-Santangelo (2009) explores the relationship between testimonies and trauma in Edwidge Danticat's "The Farming of Bones." He examines the delicate relationship between these two literary ideas, which are frequently viewed as being inseparable, in his examination. Santangelo looks into the conflicts between historical trauma writing and testimonio literature, both of which seek to chronicle crimes and amplify the voices of underrepresented groups.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The psychological effects of racism and postcolonialism were initially discussed by Frantz Fanon. He asserted that the majority of the colonized country had an impact on the minority of the country, much like how colonists impacted the colonized. People in the lower classes shared similar psychological problems as a result of their marginalization, discrimination, and subjection. Through their writings, postcolonial authors began to draw attention to these psychological problems.

By delving deeper into postcolonial concerns, theorists of subaltern discourse like Gyandera Pandey, Vinayak Chaturvedi, and Gayatri Spivak will assist the current study in assessing how distinct societies are created through marginalization and oppression of the weaker groups. The Subaltern rose to popularity because of theorists like Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak. Their writings aimed to give voice to the South Asian cultures' minorities. Their major goal was to draw attention to the many viewpoints of the subaltern, which the aristocratic class often disregarded.

The essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* by Gayatri Spivak emphasizes how dominant mechanisms silence subaltern voices. She contends that the way the subaltern is portrayed in Western academia frequently supports hegemonic narratives and silences the different experiences and viewpoints of the subaltern. She focuses on the dual marginalization that subaltern women experience as they are repressed by patriarchal standards and outside influences. Spivak also urges intellectuals, particularly women, to portray the realities of subaltern women in scholarly discourse. She draws attention to the subaltern's lack of voice, making representation essential for their participation in the larger narrative.

The current study also examines how subaltern oppression affects children, taking age, gender, class, and religion into account. Children may be exposed to traumatic events and psychological difficulties as a result of the weak family structures that ensue. Postcolonial psychology, which emphasizes the importance of witness in healing and speaking up for the oppressed, helps us understand how subalternity can result in trauma and silence by relying on Judith Lewis Herman's research on post-traumatic stress disorder.

The subaltern uses testimony as a weapon to contest prevailing ideologies and proclaim their identities. The study takes into account the opinions of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, who stress the value of witness in the process of psychological recovery. Testimony expresses collective traumas endured by marginalized communities in addition to narrating events. It serves as a forum for both lone and group voices.

DISCUSSION

Jumana's Silence

Bina Shah's *Slum Child* is a story about two Pakistani Christian subaltern children; Laila and Jumana. Jumana's character shows how trauma can cause children to withdraw into silence and how this silence makes them suffer psychologically. In contrast to children from the dominant group Jumana's childhood is difficult due of her subaltern status, leaving her more vulnerable and traumatized. Jumana suffers more than her sister because she chooses to remain silent rather than speak out against the injustice. According to Laub and Felman (1991), silence can compound a traumatized person's sorrow and suffering. They write that "the speakers about trauma on some level prefer silence so as to protect themselves from the fear of being listened to and of listening to themselves" (p.58).

The silence of Jumana makes her more sensitive than Laila and is prone to making compromises. Since she has no one to confide in, her tendency to remain silent in the face of difficulties adds to her psychological fragility. Jumana's health issues are made worse by the frequent neglect she

experiences at home. Her family leaves her behind with a neighbor and goes to beach which reflects the lack of emotional support from her mother.

Jumana's health problems grow increasingly serious, and Laila advise her to talk to their mother about it, but Jumana refuses. She tells Laila to be silent about it since she did not want to bother her mother, "I'm not telling her, and neither will you," hissed Jumana. She's got enough to worry about. She doesn't need to know about this" (Shah, 2010, p.40). Being ignored within the family and community, she internalizes the idea that she has to endure her pain and sufferings silently. The constant neglect of her family makes her believe that she is not the priority of her parents and rather they have much more serious issues to handle.

Furthermore, because Jumana belongs to the subaltern community, doctors do not treat her properly. She does not receive the appropriate care from a reputable hospital since her family cannot afford it. She describes the hospital as "zoo with people milling around like depressed animals, walking, sitting in the sun, or sleeping on the ground no sense or order of organization anywhere" (Shah, 2010, p.83). Due to her traumatic experience, Jumana prefers to die than receive any medical care as she says: "At least if I were dead, I wouldn't be sick" (Shah, 2010, p.84). It reflects how the subaltern children suffer psychologically due to their economic issues. Herman in her book talks about the traumas that people go through and their wish to die: "The most profoundly afflicted wish that they were dead" (1992, "The Dialectic of Trauma", para. 11). Jumana also have similar wish which shows her psychological conflict.

Additionally, children often endure trauma and atrocities as a result of their own parents. Herman (1992) emphasizes the significance of family in the psychological trauma in this context, "A secure sense of connection with caring people is the foundation of personality development. When this connection is shattered, the traumatized person loses her basic sense of self" (1992, "The Damaged Self", para.1). Jumana experiences trauma not just as a result of her financial situation but also as a result of how her own mother treats her. Her mother consistently ignores her due of which her self-esteem deteriorates. She starts to blame herself for every issue. Zainab frequently expresses her sadness for having two girls:

I was going to get out of this place, work in a beauty salon. I would have made something of myself, my life. But instead I had to give birth to you two terrible girls, and now look where I am.' Jumana began to cry, while I just watched Amma with a sense of bewilderment (Shah, 2010, p.85).

Children who hear such harmful statements may develop emotions of guilt and worthlessness, like Jumana and Laila did. Even when time has passed, they continue to remember painful events from the past. In addition to this, Jumana's declining health also causes psychological strain in addition to depleting her of her physical strength. She watches in silence while her family talks about her health in front of her. Her hope is destroyed by this tragedy, leaving her emotionally numb. Her physical and mental energy are depleted as a result of her incapacity to deal with stress:

Jumana looked unconcerned, bored even, as though the entire living world had lost interest for her, and she for it. She smiled, but the smile never quite reached her eyes. She never laughed anymore. I only knew she cried when I saw the corners of her eyes grow watery and red. Emotion took too much energy out of her these days (Shah, 2010, p.92-93).

Likewise, Herman describes in her book how people with psychological problems show limiting signs, such as a lack of optimism for the future. Jumana's personality exhibits a similar feature as a result of her psychological pain, which causes her to lose interest in life, "Moreover, years after the event, the children retained a foreshortened sense of the future; when asked what they wanted to be when they grew up, many replied that they never fantasized or made plans for the future because they expected to die young" (Herman, 1992, "Constriction", para.14-15).

She loses the battle of life due to her inability to show resilience against her traumatic encounters. Being unable to speak about her pain and sufferings, adds to her psychological struggles. Laub writes about the disadvantage of silence

None find peace in silence, even when it is their choice to remain silent. Moreover, survivors who do not tell their story become victims of a distorted memory, that is, of a forcibly imposed "external evil," which causes an endless struggle with and over a delusion. The "not telling" of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny (1991, p.79).

Jumana's experiences marginalization and oppression, which silent her and exacerbate her psychological struggles. Her internalized pain is a result of several sociological, political, cultural, and economic causes, which cause her terrible death. Her character serves as a metaphor for the larger struggles that subaltern children go through. They are frequently silenced by society and even their own families since they are viewed as immature and foolish. Jumana's terrible fate highlights the vulnerability of such children as they are disregarded and abandoned by both society and their own relatives.

Laila's Resilience and Testimony as Pathways to Psychological Healing

The pain that subaltern children experience causes them to retreat into silence. While some deal with their prior trauma by testifying and talking about it in order to live and survive. Children belonging to subaltern group don't speak out against their traumas are more susceptible to atrocities. Those who testify find psychological comfort by confronting their experiences and raising their voices.

Through the character of Laila, Shah highlights the importance of speaking against the atrocities. Laila being a subaltern child suffers similar to Jumana, but her resilient nature helps her to overcome her psychological sufferings. Laila's voice, which addresses themes like sexual abuse, pain, and gender discrimination, resonates not just for her personally but also for the larger Christian subaltern community. By highlighting how these difficulties add to her trauma and suffering, Shah shines light on this minority group's sufferings in Pakistan. When Laila travels with her mother to the Ansari's house, her bus journey proves to be a traumatic due to the sexual abuse she encounters:

Only a few minutes into the journey I could feel someone's hands rubbing against my backside, and I tugged on Amma's arm to whisper into her ear, 'Someone's touching me.' 'Stay close to me,' said Amma, managing by some feat of contortion to exchange places with me, so that I was squeezed between her and a plastic seat, while she took my place in the aisle.... I shuddered with horror. I don't know how much time passed on that bus, but every second of it was like a special kind of torture devised for the poor (Shah, 2010, p.68).

Being a young girl of eleven, Laila is greatly impacted psychologically by the experience. She understands that women of all ages encounter this kind of harassment in public settings. Laila instantly tells Zainab about the abuse rather than suffering in silent.

Furthermore, Laila has another instance of sexual abuse at the hands of a member of her own community. Salim comes to their house when Laila is home alone. He enters the house by taking advantage of the circumstance. When Laila brings the drink he has requested, Salim clutches her hand. Incapable of responding at the time, Laila became frozen. Her psychological struggle to speak out against the abuse is evident in the way she becomes numb. Laila is voiceless due of her subaltern position. Because of her status in the society, Laila is treated like a toy,

I stood at the window, watching him go, breathing like a railway engine, anger and loathing stirring up a whirlwind inside me. But it had nowhere to go, nothing to wreak havoc on except the ragged insides of my own skin.... even though I felt dirty and sick, and wanted to run to Amma and cry my disgust to her. But I could not (Shah, 2010, p.89-90).

Laila also does not talk about the violence she experienced as a result of her family's problems since her mother already has a lot to handle. She blames herself for allowing Salim inside the house, which makes her silence a contributing factor in her psychological pain, "this was my own fault- I'd let Salim in without even thinking twice about it-" (Shah, 2010, p.90). In the same connection, Herman highlights the psychological consequences of trauma, "In the aftermath of traumatic events, as survivors review and judge their own conduct, feelings of guilt and inferiority are practically universal" (1992, "The Damaged Self", para.5).

After the death of Jumana, Zainab becomes unwell. Laila takes up the home duties. Irfan, who is having trouble paying his bills, is thinking about Salim's idea to trade Laila to a Saudi Sheikh. Laila's

trauma exacerbates by this. She finds it hard to believe her stepfather would act in such a manner. However, Laila, in contrast to Jumana, doesn't remain silent; instead, she takes action by abandoning everything to protect herself. Her strength and resilience come through despite her emotional fragility. She refuses to accept Salim and Irfan's victimization.

When she leaves home, Haroon offers her help, but Laila declines it because she worries about being harassed again. However, despite her trauma, she resists running and faces her fear. Laila demonstrates her resilience by defending herself and speaking up in a vulnerable situation, "I'll go with you. you touch me, I'll scream, and everyone will hear me, and then they'll come here and kill you" (Shah, 2010, p.134).

We argue that Laub and Felman examine testimony from two angles: the pursuit of witnesses by the accident and the pursuit of the accident by witnesses. They assert that trauma deeply and enduringly affects the victim's mental state, with memories of trauma persistently haunting them. Testimony serves as a means to free oneself from these traumatic memories, as the unresolved issues from the past keep victims trapped in their trauma. Testimony's role is to offer psychological relief by resolving these lingering memories. Once Laila begins talking about her past trauma, she gets psychological relief. Laila is able to not only find psychological comfort but also solutions to her problems by acknowledging her past trauma. Testimony becomes a tool for Laila to acquire solace and freedom from her traumatic memories. The first testimony that she makes is when she meets Najeeb at the park. Laila felt the burden of her silence and as soon as she talks about her past with Najeeb she feels relieved:

I told him the story, in fits and starts at first, then more fluently.... After so many weeks of keeping my own counsel, of talking to no one about my fears and worries.... the relief was so intense it was almost painful, the way you feel when you've been holding your breath to see if you suffocate, and then you finally let it go (Shah, 2010, p.199).

After speaking up and facing her previous pain, Laila feels relieved. She finds relief from uncertainty via her testimony, restores trust, and develops relationships with others. While testimonies may not remove trauma, they do enable people to live with unfulfilled desires and the knowledge that they are not alone. Laila acknowledges her incapacity to alter the past and her connection to her friends by finding companionship in Najeeb, Haroon, Maryam, and Jahan.

The story of Laila in the novel acts as the collective voice of Pakistani Christian subaltern children, expressing their pain. We argue that Laila's narrative can be viewed in the context of Herman's idea that testimony serves as a toolbox to articulate atrocities committed across a community. Her stories resonate with the psychological hardships of her community, highlighting their unspoken truths and the challenges. According to Herman testimony is "a language that can withstand the imperatives of doublethink and allows all of us to come a little closer to facing the unspeakable" (1992, "Introduction", para.13).

Felman argues that testimony not only presents the stories of the individual rather it represents the stories of the generation. Through the act of testimony not only silence is unmuted but it also provides voice to the generation:

Although frightening, effects of his own rebirth to speech in the testimonial process, on the value of his own emergence from a life of silence not just for himself, but for his children, for the conscious and unconscious legacy that history and memory—unwittingly or lucidly—leave for the forthcoming generations (Laub & Felman, 1991, p.47).

Likewise, Laila's testimony is not limited to herself, rather it is what Laub quotes, "the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others" (Laub & Felman, 1991, p.75). Herman asserts that it is essential for the individual to speak about their traumatic encounters. To mourn on their loss in order to find psychological solace.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the experiences of Christian subaltern children, who frequently encounter hardship as a result of their economic, political, and social standing, are represented in Bina Shah's *Slum Child*.

Gender prejudice within their families adds to the difficulties, women already endure. Both Laila and Jumana face atrocities at the hands of their own family members. Shah's characters represent the importance of testimony in psychological terms as well as a tool to represent the sufferings of a collective group.

Both Laila and Jumana faces atrocities because of their subaltern status. The difference lies in their response towards their past trauma. Laila is able to overcome her past traumatic memories through testimony. When she speaks about her trauma, it reflects her resilience towards her psychological sufferings. Jumana, on the other hand, suffers within as a result of her silence. She struggles to express her pain and is burdened by severe psychological distress in addition to her physical afflictions. Her lack of resilience not only deteriorates her physical health, but it also affects her mental health. Jumana suffers in silence and meets her tragic end. The journey of both the characters serves as a poignant reminder of the value of talking about painful events and shows how testimony bring solace to the mind.

Lastly, more than merely a fictitious description of tragic circumstances, Bina Shah's *Slum Child* puts awareness on the difficulties experienced by Christian subaltern children in Pakistani culture. Shah creates a realistic portrait of South Asian minority population via the use of testimonies. Testimony gives the voiceless a voice, enabling them to express not just their personal sorrow but also the suffering of their society as a whole.

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