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Writing and The Voice of Difference: Despondent and Repressed Archetypes in Commonwealth Literature

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Women are essentially the origin of life. No one can cast a doubt on the substantiality of women that they are the ultimate creators of this very existence. The woman strengthens the foundation of family as a mother, daughter, sister, and wife embracing everyone with the unconditional love. If allowed to grow their potential they not only enhance a woman's world as writers, entrepreneurs, mystics, painters, counsellors, scientists but can also provide a better vision to the men's world.

—Caroline Satur and Sunil Gouraha, "An Exclusive Portrait of Women in the Works of Indian Writers in English Literature"

Abstract

This research examines the representation of despondent and repressed archetypes in Commonwealth literature. Gayatri Spivak's concept of the "subaltern", in which she advocates for social justice and equality for the marginalised groups, has been used as the conceptual framework for the research. It provides the research paper with a lens for understanding how power operates and helps in challenging dominant narratives and exposes their biases. Thus, the research finally submits that Spivak's concept of intersectionality can be used (especially in literary domain) to analyse how various forms of social inequality intersect and create unique experiences of marginalisation, as sampled by this research paper.

Key words: Representation, archetypes, commonwealth, subaltern, narratives

Introduction

It is important to stress that the issue of despondent and repressed archetypes in literary writings is not Commonwealth inventions, for critics state that Commonwealth writers inherited this method from the colonial discourse. For example, works such as William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611), and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) represent female character in an inferior position, as she is left, mostly, 'inaudible'. The African male, on the other hand, is given a voice to deliver his ideas, even if it is in a 'broken' pidgin (qtd. in Mehellou 3). Not surprisingly, in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* "Okonkwo's mother hardly exists while his father, Unoka, an efulefu or worthless man who has never cleared even a footpath of his own, receives a mention even if it was a juxtaposition to his son." (Muhammed). On this same issue, even during the Victorian era, there was an unending debate over the roles of women. While the era was dominated by writers who treated women as, in Satur and Gouraha's words, "angelic figures-innocent, physically weaker and nothing less than household commodities" (107). This trend does not only stop at the creative power cycle, it is equally embedded in the domain of critical efforts. For example, despite their vast and elegant analyses of colonialism and post-colonialism, Edward Said and Homi Bhabha's works have been charged with gender-blindness for virtually ignoring the question of difference. Bhabha, for example, makes no difference between men and women in his theorizing of the interaction between coloniser and colonised. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose views of "subaltern" forms the conceptual framework for this study, can be said to be the first post-colonial theorist with a fully feminist agender. She has drawn attention to the large majority of colonised women that went unheard within their own patriarchal culture. (qtd. in Bertain 211). These women, for her, "were doubly unheard under a colonial regime." (Spivak). Thus, Spivak represents the voice of difference among the major post-colonial theorists.

Commonwealth literature, while initially intended to highlight diverse Anglophone writing, has been criticised for perpetuating the marginalisation of women by sometimes reinforcing patriarchal narratives and limiting the representation of women's experiences. This is achieved through various means such as dominance of male voices and perspectives: much of the canonical commonwealth literature has focused on male characters often leading to the portrayal of women in subordinate or stereotypical roles; ignoring women's narratives: the voices and experiences of women, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, have been underrepresented, making their stories less visible within the canon; reinforcing canonical and patriarchal structures: inheriting colonial discourse. Some argue that commonwealth literature,

particularly in its earlier stages, inherited problematic representations of women from colonial discourse, portraying them as passive or subservient, as seen above. Others are internalising gender stereotypes, and limited agency and representation: focus on the challenges women face without fully celebrating their agency and achievements. Lack of diverse representations: the portrayal of women in commonwealth literature is often limited to certain types of female characters, overlooking the diverse experiences of women across different social classes and communities; critical reception and interpretation: the way commonwealth literature is read and interpreted can also contribute to the marginalisation of women, as critics may focus on certain aspects of the text while overlooking the nuances of women's experiences. And "such female stereotypes are found not only in African [or Commonwealth] literatures but in literatures all over the world" (Alkali 13). These issues, and many more, will be discussed in this research paper through the lens of Spivak's concept of the subaltern in which she calls for fairness and equality for the marginalised groups.

Theoretical Framework

In discussing a radical theory like Spivak's, the life and times of the creator is imperative. This is because, as Bertens points out, Spivak's thought cannot be understood apart from her life. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was born in 1942. She is one of the foremost feminist critics on the Anglo-American academic scene. She is a professor in the Humanities at Columbia University. Born and educated in India, she is often used as the representative voice of "Third World" feminism, though she is cited just as frequently in psychoanalytic and deconstructionist criticism, and this is symptomatic of the dual intellectual formation of many non-Western critics based in the Western academy. Her work ranges across languages and disciplines and has a provisional, intellectually relentless quality to it. She is also involved with the Subaltern Studies history group in India and maintains ties with the Indian feminist movement and various "Third World" movements. While her prose style is tortuous, her interventions in areas like postcolonial studies, psychoanalytic theory, poststructuralist writing and cultural studies are invaluable. (Sage 594).

Spivak's views, particularly her concept of the "subaltern" and her work on postcolonial theory, form the basis for the theoretical framework of this research. The research paper employs it while analysing power dynamics, marginalisation, and the representation of marginalised groups. This is because her concept of the subaltern refers to those who are marginalised, excluded from dominant narratives, and lack a voice in the established power structures. Thus, her work questions whether the subaltern can truly speak or be represented, and highlights the difficulties and dangers of attempting to do so.

It is important to highlight that, of all the postcolonial theorists, Spivak has most consistently focused on what in postcolonial studies has come to be called the *subaltern:* the category of those who are lower in position or who, in the military terms that are always appropriate to the colonial situation, are lower in rank. Spivak employs the term (which originates from Antonio Gramsci's idea of subordinate groups lacking a voice within dominant power structures) to describe the lower layers of colonial and postcolonial societies: the homeless, the unemployed, the subsistence farmers, the day labourers, and so on. She is aware, as Bertens points out, that categorisations by way of class, tend to make difference invisible: "one must nevertheless insist that the colonised subaltern *subject* is irretrievably heterogeneous" (Spivak 26). One result of this attentiveness to difference is Spivak's focus on the female subaltern, a very large_ and of course differentiated _ category among the colonised (and neo-colonised) that she argues, has traditionally been doubly marginalised: "if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shallow" (Spivak 28).

Like any other literary theory, Spivak's concept of the subaltern has been widely debated and critiqued, with some scholars arguing that it is too pessimistic about the subaltern's ability to speak and act, and others suggesting it is overly focused on the silencing of marginalised voices without adequately addressing the complexities of power and agency. The key figures in critiquing Spivak's concept of the subaltern include Benita Parry, Homi Bhabha, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos. These scholars have all raised questions about the practicality of Spivak's idea of the subaltern and its ability to be heard and represented. However, despite these attacks, Spivak's concept of the subaltern continues to inform critical discussions about how literature can be used to challenge oppressive structures and promote social justice. It has also had a lasting impact on literary criticism, prompting scholars to reconsider the role of power, representation, and subjectivity in literary texts, as deployed in this research.

Female Archetypes in Colonial and Postcolonial Contexts: A Review

The exploration of gendered archetypes, particularly the repression of women, has been a significant theme within Commonwealth literature. In colonial narratives, women are often depicted as embodiment of purity, virtue, and cultural stability. Frantz Fanon (1963) and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1986) critique this idealisation, arguing that such archetypes serve imperial narratives that repress female agency. For example, in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (1985), the protagonist's mother embodies the archetype of the repressed colonial woman _ possessing authority but constrained by societal expectations. Postcolonial literature frequently depicts women as dangerous or hyper-sexualized

figures-archetypes that threaten colonial authority. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart,* while primarily male centric, alludes to female figures as sources of social disorder, aligning with the archetype of the femme fatale. Similarly, Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* (1979) explores the repression of women involved in political activism, depicting female archetypes as both victims and agents of change. The archetype of mother often symbolises cultural continuity but can also embody repression when her agency is suppressed. V.S Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961) subtly explores the maternal archetype within Caribbean society, illustrating the tension between cultural expectations and personal identity.

Literature from the Commonwealth has increasingly challenged traditional female archetypes, emphasizing women's agency and resilience. Authors such as Zadie Smith has depicted women breaking free from archetypal roles. For example, in her book, *White Teeth* (2000), female characters navigate and subvert traditional archetypes, asserting their independence. In works like Achebe's *Girls at War* (1972) and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), female characters are portrayed as complex beings whose repression is challenged through storytelling, symbolizing a reclamation of voice.

Postcolonial feminist scholars, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Bell Hooks, critique the way colonial and patriarchal systems conflate to repress women's identities. Their analyses emphasize the importance of decolonising gender narratives. Spivak's concept of *subaltern* highlights how women's voices are silenced within dominant narratives, a theme recurrent in Commonwealth literature which equally serves as a methodological tool for this present research.

Despondent and Repressed Archetypes in Commonwealth Literature

It is not out of line to begin this segment by stressing that the depiction of characters, women characters in particular, differs from country to country. However, portrayal of male dominance over women is a common feature in all the Commonwealth literature. In Africa, for example, "Modern African writing may be said to begin with Achebe, Ngugi, Soyinka" (Innes and Rooney 194). They are considered as foundational figures that established a distinct voice and style in the field, exploring themes of colonialism, identity, and post-colonial realities. But all these did not settle well with postcolonial feminist critics like Spivak, for she questioned the possibility of truly representing the subaltern without their own voices. It is, perhaps, against this critiquing of Spivak that Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Buchi Emecheta, just like Achebe, Soyinka and Ngugi, explored the lives of women in Africa, but they also critically examined the patriarchal structures and colonial influences that marginalised women. While Achebe depicted women as mostly submissive and

inconsequential in his early works, these three authors offered nuanced portrayals, highlighting female agency, resilience, and the complexities of female identity within both traditional and modern contexts (Msiska and Hyland 195). They challenged Achebe's portrayal by emphasizing the significant roles women played in their societies, including their agency in trade, education, and challenging societal norms. This is in line with Spivak's emphasis on the importance of accurate representation in order to avoid what she calls "epistemic violence", which refers to the violence inflicted upon the subaltern when their knowledge and experiences are denied or erased from dominant systems of knowledge.

Similarly, Canadian literature too, has historically marginalised women by depicting them as secondary characters who are both, to use Spivak's words, "silenced and objectified within dominant discourses" by limiting their agency, and perpetuating patriarchal norms. Works such as *Surfacing* by Margaret Artwood and *The Diviners* by Margaret Laurence, have challenged these limitations. For example, Artwood's portrayal of women and the natural world reflects themes of eco-feminism, highlighting the interconnectedness of female oppression and environmental degradation. The unnamed protagonist's journey towards self-realisation is also seen as a rejection of patriarchal control and an embrace of female power. While Laurence in *The Diviners* depicts women like Moran Gunn as fiercely independent, seeking self-definition and often facing societal restrictions. Morag's journey is a feminist exploration, showcasing the challenges women in her time faced while also highlighting her yearning for a fulfilling life, both personally and emotionally. (Bodal 221).

From their own corner, Indian women writers depict the injustices, the anguish and the despair they received in a male dominated society. Many of the writings can be considered as a mutiny against the restraints which the society thrust upon women. Most prominent women writers who have given voice to the unheard women of the society in India are Pandita Ramabai, Ismat Chughtai, Kamala Das and Shashi Despande. The four writers span over various phases of Indian feminism. Their works have left an indelible mark in the history of Indian literature and also played an important role in presenting the gender issues prevailing in the society. (Goyal 5). For example, Deshpande's work portrays women's journey of struggle and survival in India. Her literature highlights the sufferings of women, their everyday reality. The novels showcase women characters' quest for self, an insight into the female psychology and an awareness of the predicaments of life in which these women are situated. In 1978 her first collection of short stories was published titled *The Legacy and Other Stories.* It delves into the lives of women in India, exploring themes of societal

constraints, relationships, and the search for individual identity. The stories often focus on women's internal struggles and their attempts to break free from traditional roles towards what Spivak calls "a space for marginalised voices to be heard and recognized" _ reflecting a feminist perspective on the Indian female experience.

Portrayal of women in Australian literature is in diverse ways, reflecting historical shifts and societal changes. For instance, early Australian women writers often faced erasure and suppression, navigating tensions between feminism and bush nationalism. Later, themes of female empowerment, resistance to oppression, and the quest for autonomy became prevalent. Australian literary depiction of women have evolved to include questioning gender norms, addressing feminine issues in various contexts, and challenging existing literary conventions. In the first period of Australian writing, male writers at least, were largely content to depict women in subsidiary relationships to men, for a very long time nineteen century Australian literature was represented by just three works: *The Recollection of Geoffffry Hamlyn* (1959) by British writer Henry Kingsley; *For the Term of his Natural Life* by Mercus Clarke (1874), and R*obbery Under Arms* written by Rolf Boldrewood (which was the pen name of Thomas Alexander Browne); while the great many, more popular women writers of that period remained out of print and largely forgotten until the 1980s. (Ward 1). This could be linked to how dominant narratives perpetuate power imbalances, as Spivak would argue. The first Australian novel, Henry Savery's *Quintus Servinton*, was published in 1831. It is strongly autobiographical, and its convict theme amounts to special pleading. (Mitchell 36). However, contemporary Australian literature features a wide range of female voices and perspectives. Themes such as feminism, gender equality, and the experiences of women in diverse communities are explored. For example, Eleanor Dark's *The Timeless Land,* explores Australian identity and the female experience in a colonial context. Thus, the Australian literature landscape is becoming increasingly inclusive and diverse, with ongoing efforts to promote representation of women and other marginalised groups. (Salter 36).

The development of African women's writing has also resulted in a shift in criticism not unlike that in European and American feminist criticism indicated by Elaine Showalter. In "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", Showalter charts the move in feminist criticism from a concern with representation _ the problem of the way men portray women; women as objects, in a sense _ to a focus on women as writers _ women as subjects, rather than objects. These two moments are labelled, respectively, feminist critique, and gynocritics. Additionally, she envisages that we need to

approach women's writing from a cultural perspective. Women's writing, for her, is a "double-voiced discourse" that embodies the social, literary, and cultural conditions of both women and men. (qtd. in Prabhakar 19). Although African criticism by or about women is not necessarily feminist, the centre of interest around women has nevertheless moved in a manner similar to that outlined by Showalter. That such a shift should not be marked in an overtly feminist way is indicative of difficult relation of African women to Western feminism. Nwapa is typical of many writers when she borrows Alice walker's term and declares herself to be a womanist rather than a feminist. Womanism is more openly accomodationist than feminism is perceived to be, and Nwapa's Novels such as *Idu* (1970) and *Efuru* concentrate on central female characters who are simultaneously out-of-the-ordinary and part of their communities; striving for self-determination in (relatively) non-confrontational ways, yet doing so_ spectacularly in the case of Idu_ in relation to, or in partnership with men. Clearly, the idea of womanism as a black feminism is appealing, but the debate has undoubtedly suffered from a rather impoverished image of Western feminism as inherently radical, man-hating, separatist and individualistic. The latter is not just an African perception encouraged by the increasingly individualistic nature of Western society in general, it is also unhelpfully fostered by Western critics. In "Feminist Criticism and the African Novel" for example, Katherine Frank argues: "Feminism, by definition, is a profoundly individualistic philosophy: it values personal growth and individual fulfillment over any larger communal needs or good." (19). By implication, Frank posits that this focus on personal development and self-discovery is a core component of feminist ideology and activism, highlighting the importance of autonomy and agency for women in the pursuit of equality and liberation.

It is equally important, at this juncture, to observe the relevance of Showalter's position in the above paragraph, especially in the area of convergence between her theory and Spivak's concept of the subaltern. The main convergence lies in their shared focus on challenging dominant narratives and exposing marginalised voices. They both examine how power structures, particularly those based on colonialism and patriarchy, silence and subordinate certain groups, and equally strive to give voice to those who have been historically excluded.

If an important dimension of the emergence of modern African literature as a whole has been the problem of representation _the dissatisfaction, as exemplified in Achebe, with white-authored versions of African culture and people _ then an analogous movement may be seen in the emergence of African women's writing. While acknowledging the achievements of their male colleagues, many African women

writers have complained that men's texts marginalise women, and portray them in negative, stereotypical and ideologically unacceptable ways: an exact counterpart to the accusation levelled against European writers. This does not indicate a desire for artificially created, improved positive images to enable women to feel better about themselves, but rather asks for women to be portrayed as they really are, without refracting such an image through the distorting lens of patriarchal ideology. As the novelist, poet and playwright, Aidoo says in an interview with Adeola James.

If I write about strong women, it means that I see them to be around. People have always assumed that to be feminine is to be silly and to be sweet. But I disagree. I hope that in being a woman writer, I have been faithful to the image of women as I see them around, strong women, women who are viable in their own right. (12).

For some, the negative representation of women is just one of the many unpleasant effects of Western influence. The dramatist Zulu Sofola has argued, for example, that Soyinka in *Death and the King's Horseman* allows Elesin Oba a dominance over Iyaloja which in reality he would not have possessed, and that this is the result of a Europeanised perception of male and female roles and characters. This will no doubt seem an idiosyncratic reading to many, given the fact that *Death and the King's Horseman* is usually seen as conveying a deeply traditional message, not to mention the fact that Iyaloja is generally regarded as Soyinka's strongest female character. Representation, as Said pointed out in Orientalism (1978), and many have subsequently reiterated, carries the additional meaning of standing-in for, or speaking on behalf of, as in parliamentary representation, and just as African writers objected to being spoken for by Europeans, so many women are not happy about having their role as speaking subject usurped by men. Certainly, such unlocked-for ventriloquising is only one of the problems African women writers have to face, and many of them point to the range of material and ideological constraints as the principal reason for the fact that women's writing in Africa was late in appearing and relatively slow in developing. For example, the first work by West African women were published in the mid-1960s_the Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo's play *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965) and the Nigerian Flora Nwapa's novel *Efuru* (1966) _ and progress since then, even among the pioneers, has generally been steady rather than starting.

Consequently, one of the writers who has most openly tried to reach an accommodation with Western feminism is the Nigerian novelist Buchi Emecheta. (Ogunyemi 68). Among the most prolific of West African authors, and one of the best known world-wide, Emecheta has lived in Britain since the 1960s. Although her earliest and most

recent works, *In the Ditch* (1972), *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), and G*wendolyn* (1991), are set in Britain, the eighth written between 1976 and 1986 all have African settings, and, as titles such as *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave Girl* (1977), and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) suggest, are very much female-centred. In *The Joys of Motherhood,* Emecheta works on two levels to get her feminist message across. The central character, Nnu Ego, is considered to be the reincarnation of a sacrificed slave girl, and this obviously establishes the possibility of reading her life story as one of slavery, ending with a death which, while it is much less violent than the slave girl's, may be no less unsatisfactory. An interpretation which simply followed the mythical/spiritual lead offered would perhaps suggest that events of this nature, while not ideal, are nevertheless acceptable, or must be endured, because they are part of a pattern much larger than the human. (Ohaeto 357). At the same time, the novel shows in great detail of how Nnu Ego's enslavement is the result of social restrictions, patriarchal norms _ and women's collusion with the system that oppresses them. The fact that slavery is not an inevitable state is determined by Nnu's younger co-wife, Adaku, who achieves a considerable amount of personal and economic freedom for herself and her children.

On contemporary writers, novelists like Zaynab Alkali are often as wary of feminism as many of their predecessors (cited above), though often for different reasons. Alkali, for example, has denied that the women's movement has brought anything of substance to Africa, and regards it rather as a hindrance for women who are trying to write. Her interesting first novel, *The Stillborn* (1984), charts the long and difficult passage of the heroine Li to a kind of independence from the pressures of social stigma, from control by family or men, and towards becoming a person in her own right. Having achieved this, however, she then, in the space of a few lines at the end of the novel, unaccountably decides to return both to the city against which she has so strongly warned her sister, and to the husband who made life so difficult for her.

It was a notable paradox of the post-independence period that forms of exclusion based on gender, as well as on class, caste, race and ethnic identity, established during the colonial period, were in many cases reinforced by the demands of national liberation. Stereotyping of the native male as passive and effeminate produced, as a direct reaction, movement of aggressive self-assertion led and dominated by men. (Msiska and Hyland 42). Literature always a crucial vehicle of nationalist self-imagining, reflected this predominance, both in the subjectivities projected in texts, in who was writing, and in plots and symbolism _ for example, quest motifs featuring a male hero and in the familiar iconography of women as custodians and nurturers, if not embodiments, of national integrity and purity.

Conclusion

Having deployed Spivak's concept of the subaltern to analyse representation of women in commonwealth literature from Canada, India, Australia and Africa, it has become evident that women are often misrepresented and silenced within these narratives. Their perspectives, voices, and experiences are equally overlooked and misrepresented, their stories are shared through a lens that is shaped by either patriarchal or colonial structures, as exemplified from the selected works above.

On the final note, Spivak's concept of the subaltern has proved to be a valuable tool for understanding the representation of marginalised women in commonwealth literature as sampled above. Similarly, by highlighting the voices and experiences of these women who have been historically silenced and overlooked, writers can challenge dominant narratives and elevate the perspectives of those on the margins of society. Consequently, through continued exploration and analysis of subaltern voices, both writers and critics can work towards a more inclusive and diverse representation of women, not only in commonwealth literature, but also (by extension) literatures around the world.

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