



## GENDERED VIOLENCE AND SUBALTERNITY: A POSTCOLONIAL ANALYSIS OF RAO'S *A DISAPPEARANCE IN FIJI*

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### Abstract

Both racism and colonial exploitation have had immense effect on marginalized groups especially in the British colonial policy on indentured laborers. The colonial empire marginalized certain groups of people within the society by institutionalizing prejudice based on race. Indentured laborers were forcefully taken out of India to places like Fiji and they had to endure extreme hardships, exploitation and maltreatment. This work analyses how the British colonial policies had a lasting influence on the Indian indenture system and the manifestations of colonial injustice and epistemic violence in Fiji that could be seen in the novel *A Disappearance in Fiji* (2023) by Nilima Rao. This study employs the postcolonial theoretical framework of subalternity developed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to explore the intersecting forms of oppression based on physical systemic abuse, gendered based oppression and epistemic violence inflicted on the Indentured Indian laborers. Its research methodology is a close textual approach to the novel based on Spivak idea of subalternity. The study aims to contribute in reclaiming of the silenced voices and provides much-needed insight into the long-term colonial legacies in Fiji.

**Keywords:** *Epistemic Violence, Gender-Based Violence, Indentured Labor, Postcolonial Theory, Spivak, Subalternity, Systemic Abuse*

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## 1. Introduction

Throughout the historical accounts, colonial oppression and racism has been a persistent phenomenon that has shaped the history of the world, particularly when it comes to European colonialism and the empire. Racism refers to a fundamental pattern of discrimination, exploitation and marginalization of groups of people or individuals, into racial/ethnic difference (Hall, 1997). Within the colonial setting, racism has been used to justify the European rule of indigenous people and enslavement of non-European colonies. The indigenous populations were removed off their lands and their cultural lifestyles were oppressed; the forms of labor like indenture and slavery were utilized in a bid to exploit maximum non-European labor in order to achieve economic benefits (Rodney, 1973).

*A Disappearance in Fiji* is a historical fictional novel by Nilima Rao which explores the consequences of British colonial policies such as Indian indentured system in Fiji. The novel portrays a vivid picture of colonial injustice to Indentured laborers in Fiji by showing their harsh living conditions, cruelties inflicted upon them by colonizers, racial discrimination and gendered based violence in the form of rape and murder. The novel starts with the disappearance of a female indentured laborer from plantation. The protagonist, Sergeant Akal Singh is entrusted with the case of missing Kunti and during his journey he finds that indentured laborers are extremely marginalized, they live in poor conditions, are treated badly by plantation owners and especially women are living in extremely miserable state. The characters of Indentured women like Kunti, Magamma and Anjali in the novel exposes gendered base colonial violence. They are raped by plantation owners repeatedly and Kunti is even killed. Moreover, the laborers were told lies about their contractual bonding and the access of education to their children was also limited highlighting the phenomenon of epistemic violence as coined by Spivak.

This study takes a postcolonial stance to the novel using the notion of subaltern by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The novel is interpreted as attempt to reclaim the voice of subaltern people which are historically peripheral to the mainstream historical narratives.

### 1.1. Research Objectives

The objectives of the study are:

1. To analyze how the experiences of marginalized indentured Indian labourers, exemplify the subaltern condition in Nilima Rao's novel *A Disappearance in Fiji*.

2. To explore the intersecting forms of oppression faced by indentured Indian labourers, regarding gender, epistemic violence and systemic physical abuse in the novel.

### 1.2. Research Questions

1. How do the experiences of marginalized indentured Indian labourers, exemplify the subaltern condition in *A Disappearance in Fiji*?
2. In what ways does Rao's novel expose the intersecting forms of oppression faced by indentured Indian laborers, particularly regarding gender and epistemic violence often manifested through physical abuse?

## 2.LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter explores the literature and finds that there is no research work done on this novel. Therefore, it explores the research work done related to postcolonial theory specifically subalternity, indentured labor, gender-based violence and racial discrimination.

“Subaltern and Marginalization in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” by J. Anitha is a research paper that aims to explore the novel with respect to themes of subalternity and marginalization of black women in contemporary male dominated society. According to this study (2018), Tony Morrison’s work addresses important modern societal issues such as racism, class, and exploitation that affect subaltern women as well as others who suffer in daily life. Her writings present a novel viewpoint on black people's ancestry and way of life. In her book, Toni Morrison depicts the victim. The monograph focuses on the historical imagination of Black Americans putting an emphasis on racial tensions, American history, and the situations of slavery. It explores issues which women face in the context of racism and gender discrimination and exposes the paradoxes in the reasoning that discriminate them (Anitha, 2018, p. 58).

Chaudhary and Pareek (2022) examine *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) as the account of experiences of the subaltern-categorized women and reflect on their dual marginalization in the socio-cultural contexts and, as colonial subjects, in Jamaica. Such women experienced disadvantage and repression due to their gender among other reasons including race, social status, caste, sexuality as well as regional position. Most of these exclusions existed even after independence. There is also the issue of destruction of identity and culture of local residents.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), Arundhati Roy describes her mission to gather the castaways and the marginalized people under one umbrella. Research has been conducted to bridge the gaps in the subaltern perspective which is based on Spivak’s

gendered based subaltern concerns. This research mainly focuses on exploring the shattered identities of lower-class people, Kashmiris, Maoists and transgenders in the novel and to show the effects of minute social divisions, institutionalized hierarchy, genders and nationalities in crushing the people and holding them down in a grid. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a comprehensive satire that attacks the ways of a patriarchal society. In this hegemonic society, thousands of marginalized individuals, including transgender people, beg for acceptance in public spaces, while women are raped and forced to bite their tongues. (Sadia, Dharmyal & Iqbal, 2021)

Another research has been conducted to examine the portrayal of marginalized individuals within the South Asian environment. Most of the characters in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* fit under the subaltern category in terms of gender, caste, class, etc. Research demonstrates how Anjum, the transgender lead character who experiences social and political marginalization, sets out to construct a paradise of her own, a gathering place for fallen individuals from all walks of life. This study also questions the poor option of caste discrimination and the condition exposed by Roy of the subalterns in the globalized city and the system of capitalism (Jahan, 2021).

“The Exploitation and Oppression of Colonial in Amitav Ghosh’s “Sea of Poppies”- A Colonial Aspect” (2016) is a research article by Dr. Venkateswarlu Yesapogu which explores the colonial oppression and exploitation of Indentured labourers and consequences of illegal opium trade. Dr. Venkateswarlu Yesapogu (2016) studies the colonial oppression exercise over poor and illiterate Indian farmers to work in their fields, produce crops exclusively benefiting British corporations, which also got a shelter of the courts.

“Colonial History of Oppression and Immigration: A study of Amitav Ghosh’s Sea of Poppies” by Dr. Chanchal Kumar is another research paper which focuses on the nineteenth-century Indian colonial history of oppression and immigration as told in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008). According to Dr. Chanchal Kumar (2016), British people moved to agriculture after wrecking the industries. The British completely wrecked the Indian economy at the same time. The hardest affected regions of India were Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, West Bengal, etc. due to the lack of an administrative structure and the resulting political vacuum. Poverty and hunger were perpetuated by fewer job options for qualified laborers across a range of industries. Because of his surroundings, Ghosh is able to portray the colonial dictators' methods and their far-reaching effects.

The article ‘Cheaper Than a Slave: Indentured Labor, Colonialism and Capitalism’ (2013) by Tayyab Mahmud challenges the relationship that exists between colonialism, capitalism and indentured labor. Tayyab Mahmud (2013) highlights the colonial economic exploitation and underlying capitalistic strategies to create free labor force for their plantations in the form of indentured laborers after the abolition of slavery. The British

East India Company started the colonization of India in 1617 when it gained commercial concessions with India and gained political authority over the Bengal Delta in 1757. Indian colonial rule grew throughout the course of the following century, reaching its western limits by 1850, and coming to an end in 1947. In order to further the objectives of the colonists, colonial administration altered India's manufacturing and agricultural sectors during the ensuing 200 years.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study's research methodology is close textual analysis of novel *A Disappearance in Fiji* by employing the theory of postcolonialism, particularly the theory of subalternity presented by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. To have a complete picture of the experiences of the indentured Indian laborers discussed in the text, one has to bring up the concept of the subaltern, introduced by Spivak, which refers to populations in colonial and postcolonial societies who are at the same time marginalized and silenced.

#### 3.1. Post Colonialism

It is clearly imperative to focus on colonialism if postcolonialism is in question. Colonialism is defined by Ania Loomba as the appropriation of someone else's property and mode of living. But colonialism here means more than the several European nations' penetration of Asia, Africa, or the Americas beginning in the sixteenth century; it is a steady and widespread feature of human history (Loomba, 2015).

The aim of colonialism, as undertaken by the imperial powers, was to discover and conquer new lands that were distant from theirs. A colonial order was created by the West, who explored the Eastern block for a plethora of reasons, ranging from conflicts and geographical discoveries. Even though the chief purpose of colonialism was to colonize new territories, it aimed to eliminate social memory, integrate existing cultural heritage, and employ capitalist means to obliterate language, culture, lifestyle, historical, and sociological capital (Kara, 2021).

According to Edward Said (1978), post colonialism is an academic field which is concerned with the impacts of colonialism on the society and cultures of colonized people both during and after colonization. On the one hand, the term postcolonial, in its epithetical usage, refers to the epoch that developed after the process of decolonization, but on the other hand, its analytical potential applies to the continuity of colonial structures beyond the temporal and spatial borders. As a result of this, postcolonialism focuses on the policies with which colonialists established political, cultural and social structures that have remained functional even after independence.

"Post-colonial criticism tends to focus on works produced in those portions of the world that were once part of the large European colonial empires that reached their height

in the nineteenth century," write Kaplan and Anderson (2000) in an introduction to Homi K. Bhabha's essay on postcolonial theory (p. 763). But they went on for Homi K. Bhabha:

[...] the notion of post-coloniality encompasses more than this and has significance even for people who were never colonised in the most traditional sense of the word[...] and touches on race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and even the threat of AIDS, as well as the more central post-colonial concerns of nation and identity. (p. 763)

All in all, a critic using postcolonial theory will analyze any literary work, such as a novel that is set in or originated from a non-colonized, colonized, or decolonized society. The framework deals with the symptoms of colonial or neocolonial oppression, exploitation, victimization and disillusionment and organizes its analysis about the strategies that are used by subaltern groups in challenging this status quo. The theory also looks at how relationships both domestically and globally are impacted by issues of class, racism, gender, exile, location, displacement, dislocation, migration from the homeland, alienation, identity crisis, and homelessness.

### **3.2. Emergence of Subaltern School of Study**

Subaltern is an etymological term that refers to someone who is lower in rank. It is one of the labels used by British military officers to refer to their juniors. The term subaltern is defined as "an officer in the British army below the rank of captain, especially a second Lieutenant"(The Oxford Essential Dictionary of the U.S. Military, 2001). The word was initially used in a non-military sense by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci to refer to peasants, workers, laborers, and other groups that are excluded from positions of authority (El Habib Louai, 2012).

In the context of South Asia, the term is foregrounded to indicate colonized people according to post-colonial discourse. This term has been embraced in non-western, post-colonial scholarship, to interrogate the hierarchical social formations that are typical of the Third World, particularly how they affect historically marginalized groups like women, lower castes and economically deprived populations. According to Peter Childs and Patrick Williams (2016), it is frequently employed as "a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society," frequently stated in terms of caste and gender. These days, it is frequently used to describe individuals who have been forced to maintain little to no access to socioeconomic and political power structures in society.

To bring out the foregrounding of the subaltern experiences in South Asian Studies, Subaltern Studies Group was formed in the 1980s. The SSG was established by a group of Indian historians as they tried to question the history of Indian nationalism and to rethink the character of colonial rule using Gramsci and his definition of the subaltern. Ranjit



Guha, one of the founder members of the group and the founding editor of the Subaltern Studies series, in *Subaltern Studies III*, clarifies the aim of the group is to make 'subaltern groups the subjects of their own history, we are indeed opposed to much of the prevailing academic practice in historiography and the social; sciences for its failure to acknowledge the subaltern as the maker of his own destiny' (Guha, 1994).

### **3.3. Antonio Gramsci's Concept of Subaltern**

The most modern cliché for denoting a condition of helplessness, inferiority, and servitude in terms of caste, religion, class, and so forth is "subaltern." It is a marginalized state brought about by colonization or other types of dominance in the social, cultural, racial, religious, or economic spheres. The definition of this hotly debated phrase can be found in the theories of Italian communist social theorist Antonio Gramsci, who investigated *Risorgimento* and published his findings as *Notes on Italian History*, which was later renamed *Prison Notebooks*. The study of the underprivileged by Gramsci takes center stage in his analyses of Italian politics, history, culture, and the relationship between the state and the civil society.

Gramsci's concept of the subaltern developed gradually rather than being immediately apparent at first. His approach to examining "subaltern" people and looking for signs of particular norms, inclinations, and patterns is similar to Machiavelli's. His question is about how subalterns came into existence; the means they resorted to in order to survive especially in the periphery of power and the means through which they rose to dominant status. In reality, Gramsci chose the word in an attempt to get over Benito Mussolini's fascist regime's censorship. Thus, the term "subaltern" was frequently used in place of 'proletariat'. At first, capital-labor relations were Gramsci's main area of interest. The concept of subalternity developed by Gramsci explains people or groups that do not have political power or independence. (Sadia, Dharmyal & Iqbal, 2021)

### **3.4. Spivak's Concept of Subalternity**

In her well-known article *Can the Subaltern Speak* (1988), Gayatri Spivak defined the "subaltern" as the socially inferior class. She referred to Indian women in particular as third-world women with this word. She discusses this phrase in relation to Indian women's double colonisation, marginalization, suppression, and subjugation. She discusses the idea of Sati as well. In her writings, she discusses how women are oppressed in postcolonial settings. According to Spivak, the voice of subaltern women is marginalized twice. She employs the term of the double oppression and establishes a two-fold process of domination, which was developed by Pandey in *The Subaltern as a Subaltern Citizen* (Pandey 2006). According to him, it alludes to "political" domination on the one hand and "patriarchal" submission on the other (p. 4738).

According to Spivak, (1988), such level of repression is effective enough to leave the subaltern speechless. She goes on to explain why elites are unable to hear the voices of the subaltern. In a society where men predominate, the female protagonists in the book experience dual oppression because of their gender and class. In society, women are not respected or given any space.

Spivak in her masterpiece, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) points out that the subaltern cannot speak simply because they are never given a chance to describe their experiences in their own words. When they do, they are always overruled by an omnipotent body, usually a Western intellectual and the fact that the subaltern are not doing it on their own behalf is highlighted by the inability to speak on behalf of themselves. Subaltern people, therefore, are the ones who cannot do without the others, who should speak on their behalf and make a decision on their behalf.

Spivak also asserts that western intellectuals tend to deceive the lives of the subaltern. These intellectuals do not have the experience of the subaltern, which is why they cannot describe the experience of the subaltern with the necessary sensitivity; rather, they are imposing their own models of interpretation on the world of the subaltern. The outcome is the misrepresentation of the voice of the subaltern in the circuit of global power relation. In this way, the subaltern representation turns out to be a highly questionable enterprise, which is characterized by the complex relations of power and subjectification.

#### **4. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS**

##### **4.1. Indentured laborers as Subaltern in *A Disappearance in Fiji***

*A Disappearance in Fiji* by Nilima Rao explains the dark side of Indian indentured labor under British colonialism by describing complex social relationships that force historically subordinated characters to stay in the roles they are assigned. Colonial exploitation, stratified power structures, and gender violence are the major themes highlighted in the novel, which is why the characters, especially women, can be regarded as the representatives of subaltern condition theorised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and other postcolonial thinkers. The situation of these laborers was always oppressive because women were exploited physically, economically and usually objectified by the colonial regime that viewed women as expendable and inherently inferior. The first scene where Father Hughes and Akal play at the Cathedral is a revelation of the situation of these workers, because Hughes reveals to Akal the miserable conditions in which the indentured laborers live at plantations, the false provisions of the labor contract they sign, the communication gap through which they cannot communicate, and the violence that is systematically practiced against women. He observes,



I'm trying to show how the terrible conditions the Indians are living in are resulting in their moral decline. The Church is deciding on its position on the indentured servitude program, and when the bishops see my report, I think the conclusion will be unavoidable. The situation on the plantations is an indictment of the indenture system, and it is incumbent on all good Christians to. (p. 10)

Using this conversation, Rao displays the argument by Spivak in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) that the subaltern cannot speak since he or she is not granted the legitimate voice of representation; instead, the Church, which is a colonial power in this scenario, creates a discourse of depravity instead of a discourse of injustice.

Other passages that follow also demonstrate how the novel represents the dehumanising experiences of indentured labourers. As an example, the brutality of the colonial order is emphasized with the narration of Zain. He narrates that the sahibs beat his father and mother all the time. They beat everybody. They are bad men (Rao, 2023, p.42). The unemotional description of physical abuse given by Zain exposes the violence that has become normal in the hands of the sahibs, or European overseers and Indian sirdars who impose the colonial rule. This structural violence takes away the dignity of the labourers and makes them the subjects of a regime that exists through fear and physical control.

When talking to Akal, Zain tells him about harsh treatment of his parents by the so-called Sahibs; Akal remembers an indentured worker who, under the influence of alcohol, was telling him of violence, which he had experienced during his forced labor. This is highlighted by the visage of the former coolie as he is described as a map of everything he had gone through (p.43) indicating the psychological and physical aftermath of the effects of such oppression. Their conversation takes place in private when both are drunk and it implies the loneliness that the systems of oppression create and the silencing of the conversations about the suffering of laborers. This condition illustrates the Spivak's argument that subaltern subjects are turned into voiceless individuals as their experiences remained outside the global discourse (Spivak, 1988, p. 294).

The example of Mr. Angtesh provides yet another evidence of colonial violence. His foot produces recurring ulcer which gets infected when he is forced to work in the muddy boots. Dr. Robert also admits the unrealism of following medical advice; "In an ideal world, I would say stay off the foot, but I know that isn't possible." (p. 51). Although the compassion of Robert comes out, his limited authority exposes the institutional limitation which makes it impossible to intervene effectively, reflecting a bigger injustice in the plantation economy. The fact that Robert concludes that Mr. Angtesh, who works in exhaustive conditions, cannot afford to rest, is an indication of a structural injustice: in capitalist production laborers are reduced to a status of a tool, made to persist working in unhealthy environments without much consideration to the physiological consequences.

Therefore, the ability of Robert to perceive as well as empathize with the suffering of Mr. Angtesh is not enough to bring about substantive redress measures. In fact, the institutional set-ups in which Robert lives dissolve the voice and agency of Mr. Angtesh making the lived experience of subaltern workers epistemically unavailable.

*A Disappearance in Fiji* lets the reader know the oppressive conditions of colonial exploitation not just through the experience of indentured women like Kunti and Anjali, but also through the subordination and helplessness of their husbands, Venkat and Shri. The novel describes the experience of the plantations in which Kunti, Magamma, Anjali and other female workers face gendered violence and exploitation by colonial overseers. At the same time, Venkat and Shri are both trapped in the same system, and they have to admit that they cannot protect their wives against its regimes of domination.

Venkat is a character that shows powerlessness in the same system. Even after the baby is born, he does not protest the paternity of his child, although he doubts it and internally hopes that the baby would resemble him (Rao, 2023, p. 12). His passivity and silence support the Spivak's (1988) argument that when the subjects of subaltern speak, their voice is still not heard. The fear of colonial authority is explicitly shown in the incident when Shri stops midway talking to Akal fearing that Parkins may not see him. He nervously sates to Akal that this baby belongs to Brown's Sahib and not to him (p. 120). This revelation to Akal best exemplifies the process of internalization of the colonial discourse and the associated fear of being observed.

The relationship between Venkat and Parkins carries the juxtaposition of the Race and Class in the indenture system. When Parkins is informed about the death of Kunti, he shows no sympathy to Venkat and even tells Venkat rudely that if he will not work full day, the day will not count in his contract (p.121). This insensitivity towards the grief of Venkat shows the racial prejudice of the colonial regime where workers are seen just as a tool of productivity and economic gain. When Akal insists Parkins to inform Venkat about the tragic incident of death of his wife, Parkins coldly replies, "Why do you have to tell him now?" Parkins asked. 'He is supervising ten men. This is going to distract all of them' (p.118). Such reaction reproduces a racial and class-hierarchical colonial attitude, which views workers as disposable instruments of labor. In this way Venkat is denied simple human dignity as his mourning is superseded by the necessity of the plantation to continue to work productively another symptom of the deeply seated racial racism of the colonial government.

*A Disappearance in Fiji* is a stark example of subaltern framework because the novel reveals the logic of violence of the colonial labor regime, the logic that became real through the lives of indentured workers and their wives who had to face constant physical and mental trauma. The text puts into foreground the structural circumstances that silences

and dehumanizes the subaltern such that their voice is deemed inconsequential in colonial order that retains a hierarchical system.

#### 4.2. Epistemic Violence

Epistemic violence is a term first coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in his famous essay ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ which can be defined as silencing and erasure of knowledge and opinions of marginalized groups by the dominant powers, frequently within the framework of imperialism and colonialism. The colonial violence may be described as the enforcement of the worldview, language and system of knowledge of one group by another thereby discounting the ability of the latter to represent itself and act.

This process is depicted by Father Hughes, in his encounter with Parkins in *A Disappearance in Fiji*: Parkins saying that What is the problem? All of them (indentured laborers) signed their contracts (p. 11) points to destiny of the complaints of laborers. Hughes then discloses that the contracts were tools of trickery, they were meant to cheat the illiterate workers who merely put their thumbprints on an agreement that they could not even read and that they were fed with all kinds of stories. One of the most repeated lies, he says, was that “Fiji was just south of Calcutta!” (p. 11). This shows the subaltern state where workers have no language, literacy and consciousness to prevent exploitation. In this regard, these contracts represent the elimination of agency since they command the laborers to a system that they could not comprehend, eventually leading to their consent. These strategies undermine the consent of the laborers and the resulting slavery is what best epitomizes Spivak epistemic violence where awareness of the colonised people about their condition and experience is intentionally limited by colonial authorities.

The novel also explores how limiting education maintains colonialism and suppresses the voice of laborers. Upon being asked by Akal, the protagonist, on how high can she count, the little Divya responds by saying that she can count up to twenty. Her previous nanny, Sujula Aunty taught her but now there is no one to teach her (Rao, 2023, p. 49).

The fact that Divya has very little numeracy, coupled with her problems in attaining it, is an indication of the continuance of the mental enslavement of the colonial system. Rao highlights that education is a privilege for laborers but not a right thus revealing the institutionalized elimination of laborers educational rights.. The fact that Divya relied on Sujula Aunty to teach her in an informal way is a reflection of the colonial policy of denying literacy and formal education which is a calculated measure that does not allow labourers to imagine life beyond servitude.

Akal was shocked when he came to know about the lack of educational facilities for laborer’s children as he was a son of a teacher and could not imagine a childhood without learning. Akal’s own privilege as a teacher son highlights the contrast between a

colonizer and colonized and an institutionalized effort by colonial empire to keep indentured laborers away from education and to proceed in their life. “But Akal was the son of a teacher. Even before starting at the village school, he had started learning his letters on his father’s knee. Akal couldn’t imagine a childhood devoid of learning how to read. He couldn’t imagine a life without being able to write” (Rao, 2023, p. 56).

#### 4.3. Gender Specific Violence

The story that provides the description of Kunti, Magamma, and Anjali in *A Disappearance in Fiji* can be viewed as a best example of how the colonial plantation setting could create both exploitation and violence against indentured women. The text of Rao introduces a complex stratum of mistreatment which went far beyond working, and the women in this case can be seen as victims of a highly gendered and exploitative colonial society. Their powerlessness, lack of autonomy and representation, and safety against systemic abuses have been made explicit through the description of their mistreatment, especially by Brown and Mr. Parkins.

The story of the novel also reveals to us that the violence and injustice was not only restricted to colonizers but it was also became common among the labor community. This interaction of Divia with Akal helps to set this violence in the familial settings; Divya, the daughter of a missing indentured woman, Kunti, says in a casual tone that her father remarried, and his new wife was a victim of domestic violence: Her husband, he is dead now, he used to beat her (p. 46). This cycle of abuse is expected as reported by Divya, which shows how oppression and powerlessness was internalized among the indentured community. The assertion by Spivak that subalterns particularly women are doubly oppressed not only as colonial subjects but also in patriarchal systems is therefore proved right (Spivak, 1999, p. 305).

Rao’s description of how Akal sees the exploitative working conditions of the women is a strong testimony of how little value is placed on the physical well-being of women. Though the contractual regulations on women included tasks of lesser intensity but they had to work in work conditions of utmost intensity. Even they had to manage the household, cooking food to their family members and taking care of their children. When Akal passes open doors of coolies, he sees a woman preparing food for her tired husband: he looks into one of the rooms, and through the hazy air sees a woman cooking a late dinner to her husband, who is seated outside in a position of fatigue. This was the scene repeated in the coolie lines. Akal pondered over where the women got the energy. They had their own full-time experiences in the fields but their contract included that they do lighter work (Rao, 2023, p. 49).

The blurry picture of women and their work, as presented by Rao, is close to that of Spivak, who refers to the figure of the doubly marginalised: the subject, marginalised

by both colonial and patriarchal interests. This is obvious from the phrase ‘Where the women found the energy’ (p. 49) looks at the women as if they have no other option than to do all this. Although employed for what are apparently “less strenuous duties” in their contracts, their roles are inflated way beyond the written document and into the torture chamber of exhausting, unpaid domestic work that remains unenumerated within colonial records, or even within the community itself. This means that their suffering is effaced, in a way, because there is no valid avenue in the social hierarchy for their suffering to be articulated.

During the time when Akal is probing into the case of the disappearance of Kunti, he learns that many other women in the plantation too have met a similar tragic fate. One of them is Magamma. Many of them, especially the female ones, have been sexually abused by the plantation owners, and she also reach Fiji through the system of contracted or ‘ship marriage’. Magamma also presents her traumatic ordeals, sexual violation at the hands of Mr. Parkins and Brown, contracted marriage as pointing to the explicit violence of the plantation system toward women. This act is described by her in detail in the statement, “He made sure I had the duties that kept me closer to the house, away from the other women so Parkins sahib could ... well, you know” (Rao, 2023, p. 142). Magamma’s words provide the reader with an unspoken but highly traumatic event where she was locked in for Parkins’s pleasure while her humanity was erased. It is as if these women had no right to defend themselves against such abuses, or complain, because such action was impossible under the colonial rule, which denied their voices and sufferings.

The story by Magamma is a critical case study of the sexual subordination of the indentured women since it highlights the loss of choice which came with the labour of the indentured under the colonisation process. According to her testimony, she had no options in the beginning, she had no choice in the matter of her husband and what the sahib had done to her when she arrived here. She sits with Akal and tells his past with determination that is filled by survival. “I didn’t have any choices, not at first” (p. 141), she starts, her words exposing the stark example of silence enforced by the colonial system which governs her.

The text also throws light on the experience of Anjali that depicts the way gender-specific oppressions were institutionalized in indenture. Anjali is denied both the rest period and additional food that she needs to recover from the physical pain of her pregnancy, contributing to a cycle of 'greater exhaustion' and 'less food,' with the result that it could risk the life of Anjali herself and that not only of her baby-to-be. At this point, we can use Gayatri Spivak's concept of the subaltern, that colonialism silences and eradicates the voice of women living on the margins of power structures (Spivak, 1988). Anjali's reluctance to seek help from Parkins when she is needed depicts her realization that seeking relief through a colonized system which considers her not as a human being

would be meaningless and dangerous in the process. Spivak affirms, "subaltern women cannot speak" within the colonial system; indeed, whatever way their suffering is expressed it is considered or marginalized by the dominant power (Spivak, 1988).

The labor relations between the Indian workers and the British supervisors are already complicated, but the fact that Anjali is pregnant and the doctor Robert tells Parkins that she should be given some free time, otherwise her poor nutrition can easily lead to a serious health problem making the situation even more complicated. Parkins responds by saying, her pay will be cut down when she is not working a full day and it is written in the contract (Rao, 2023, p. 61).

The reaction of Shiri to the initiative of Robert further explains the tense character of these relations. As soon as Robert informs Shiri that he will be talking to Parkins about the condition of Anjali, Shiri responds by refusing to give Robert direct access to Parkins, which highlights his extreme fear of being punished or even further marginalized. The insistence by Shiri "Please do not bother Mr Parkins" (p. 58) and his leaving Anjali with Parkins, shows a survival instinct that had manifested in his previous experiences with the colonial authority as he is not willing to take the risk of being involved with the man, even remotely. This scene, therefore, shows the long-term psychological impact of the colonial power on its subjects.

## 5. Conclusion

The work aimed at shedding light on the subaltern life that is persistent in the novel, including the intersectional oppression suffered by indentured Indian workers under the colonial regime. By deconstructing the themes of subalternity, gendered violence, and epistemic violence, the study brings to the light the brutalities such people had to endure, especially the double marginalization that women suffered. The circumstances of forced labor in plantations, the systematic violence carried out by the colonial masters, and the periodic rapes of women are interrelated examples of the rampant injustice that was the hallmark of the colonial period. The careful analysis of the textual quotes of *A Disappearance in Fiji* through the lense of postcolonial theory reveals the different modalities, in which the colonial regimes alienated indentured workers.

The main focus of this study is the concept of subalternity developed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as a part of the Subaltern Studies Group. Presenting the analytical framework, the evergreen essay written by Spivak question[s] whether women, who are perhaps the most oppressed and voiceless members of the colonized societies, can describe their experience in the structures which by definition do not allow expression.

In the novel the marginalized life of the indentured Indian workers especially women and the concept of subaltern living highlight the exploitation of the people with intersection of oppression and power of colonial rule. It is the richness of the pain they



undergo that is registered in this story with the help of the experiences and memories of Akal which are filled with lies and beatings and manhandling. Cases like the discriminative language used by IG Thurstrom, imprisonment story by Father Hughes and the story of violence by Zain all reflect the reality of life in the plantation. When Zain says that ‘The Sahibs’ beat his father and mother every day. They beat everybody, they are bad men and he gives a grim account of violence made normal- the violence that common laborers had to undergo under the rule of both European overseers and Indian sirdars who applied the colonial order. This institutionalized violence deprived the laborers of their dignity, thus reducing them to stigmatization in a system that operated using fear and physical subordination of its subjects as mandated by the system.

The study also reveals that Indentured women like Kunti, Magamma, and Anjali, in particular, are subjected to multiple forms of gendered violence at the hands of Parkins and Brown, which when put together create a cycle of violence in which the possibility of liberty is not allowed to exist. These women work full days in so much hardship only to be followed by the never-ending domestic slavery while men like Venkat and Shiri are unable to stand up to protect their family; oppressed, full of fear and helplessness as the majority of indentured population stays.

The removal of education solidifies their control on laborers which Spivak called epistemic violence. When Father Hughes tells Akal, “They were told all sorts of stories. Do you know, one of the common lies was that Fiji was just south of Calcutta! Told that the work was easy when really the daily ‘task’ defined in the contract was only achievable by the strongest.” (Rao, 2023, p.11). Labor contracts are often an institutional process that excludes the subaltern populations; it represents the obliteration of agency because they are bound to the systems that they do not understand, yet they are forced to consent to them. Language skills and literacy skills, which are not present in the laborers themselves, do not only restrict the abilities of the laborers to break the cycle of exploitation, but also guarantee that the exploitation continues to take place without any interruptions. All in all, the oppressed laborers faced multiple forms of oppression, rendering them as helpless characters whose tragic experiences epitomize the notion of subaltern.

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