Voice, Silence, and Agency: Reimagining the Gendered Subaltern in Thrity Umrigar's the Space Between Us and Jahnavi Barua's Rebirth

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***Abstract*—This paper examines the dynamics of voice, silence, and agency in the representation of gendered subalternity in Thrity Umrigar's The Space Between Us (2006) and Jahnavi Barua's Rebirth (2010). Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?", and Kate Millett's Sexual Politics, the study positions these novels within broader feminist and postcolonial frameworks. Through her narrative, Umrigar highlights how class and gender intersect, keeping women within long-standing silences. In contrast, Barua presents the gradual transformation of her protagonist from silence to articulation, underscoring motherhood and female friendship as sources of empowerment. This study also draws on the ideas of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Judith Butler, Ranajit Guha, and Bell Hooks to show how Indian women's writing unsettles the rigid divide between voice and silence by emphasising the shifting nature of agency within patriarchal systems. The comparison demonstrates that silence can operate both as a sign of subjugation and as a deliberate stance that opens the possibility of resistance. The findings suggest that Indian English women's fiction reconfigures subaltern subjectivity by charting a movement from marginality to empowerment, contributing to feminist literary discourse while reimagining the gendered subaltern as a figure capable of negotiating power and selfhood within and against structures of dominance.**

***Index Terms*—Gendered Subaltern, Voice and Silence, Thrity Umrigar, Jahnavi Barua, Postcolonial Feminism.**

I. INTRODUCTION

In Indian literature, portrayals of women have consistently mirrored the shifting dynamics of gender, caste, class, and cultural identity. Over time, South Asian fiction has documented women's subordination and operated as a space for resistance and self-expression. Within postcolonial and feminist scholarship, the category of the subaltern first articulated by Antonio Gramsci and reanimated in the South Asian context by the Subaltern Studies collective has become central to understanding the layered marginalisation of women, especially those positioned at the intersections of class, caste, region, and coloniality (Guha). By posing the question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak examined how structures of power and representation silence women who are caught under several forms of domination, beginning from patriarchy and colonialism to nationalist agendas. Her provocation continues to animate debates on who can speak, who can listen, and which voices are audibly legible in literary and cultural archives.

Contemporary Indian English women novelists have increasingly challenged this silencing by creating narrative spaces in which marginalised women narrate their lives, assert subjectivity, and negotiate agency. Thrity Umrigar and Jahnavi Barua represent two compelling voices who grapple with the complex intersections of gender, class, silence, and resistance in urban and regional settings. Umrigar's *The Space Between Us* (2006) explores Bombay's rigid class stratification through the relationship between Serabai, a privileged employer, and Bhima, her domestic worker; the novel dramatises how gendered subalternity persists even in female solidarity. By contrast, Barua's *Rebirth* (2010) charts the journey of Kaberi, a soft-spoken woman from Assam now living in Bangalore, whose impending motherhood and female friendships catalyse a movement from silence to speech. Taken together, these texts invite a comparative inquiry into how silence operates: as

subjugation, as endurance, and occasionally as strategic withholding that precedes assertion.

This paper argues that both novels complicate the presumed binary of voice and silence by showing that silence is not always synonymous with passivity. While silence can reveal pain and restriction, it can become a means of survival, self-reflection, and renewed strength. By engaging with the theoretical frameworks of Spivak, Millet, Mohanty, Beauvoir, Butler, and hooks, analysis suggests that Indian English women writers portray the subaltern not as a fixed or silent figure but as someone whose identity shifts and adapts in response to different structures of power. Rather than asking only whether the subaltern can speak, these novels prompt a different question: how, when, and under what conditions do subaltern women choose to speak, to whom, and with what effects?

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci describes "subaltern" groups as those kept outside the structures of power and unable to shape historical discourse through official institutions. Although his reflections were tied to Europe, South Asian historians later reworked the concept to read the colonial record against its silences around class and caste (Guha). Subaltern Studies highlighted how nationalist histories written by elites frequently established the marginalisation of peasants, labourers, and women, despite claiming to recover their voices. Within this context, Spivak's contribution is crucial. In *"Can the Subaltern Speak?"*, she argues that subaltern women are muted not only by colonial power and patriarchy but also by scholarly frameworks that presume to represent them. Subaltern Studies insisted that elite nationalist narratives often reproduced the marginalisation of peasants, workers, and women, even when purporting to recover their histories. When Spivak writes that "the subaltern cannot speak," she is less making a total claim than cautioning us to consider the conditions in which speech is heard and the dangers of scholars claiming to represent the marginalised voices.

Feminist theory provides complementary lenses for reading gendered subalternity. Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex theorises women as "Other," constructed through a relational logic that defines them against a masculine norm (Beauvoir). Kate Millett's Sexual Politics rearticulates patriarchy as a diffuse political system, structuring intimate life and public institutions (Millett). Together, these insights clarify how women's subordination is reproduced through cultural narratives, legal frameworks, and domestic arrangements that appear "natural." Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity further denaturalises gender by showing how it is constituted through repetitive acts; performativity also stabilises openings for resignification, acts that can subtly or dramatically rework the scripts available to women (Butler). Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques Western feminist generalisations about "Third World women," arguing for attention to context, materiality, and coalition-building across difference (Mohanty). Bell hooks strengthen this argument by emphasising how gender is inseparably linked with race and class, warning that feminist analyses which overlook these dimensions risk misrepresenting the realities of the most marginalised women.

Bringing these strands together, this paper approaches Umrigar and Barua as storytellers and cultural theorists staging the conditions of possibility for speech. Spivak helps us explain why certain women remain unheard even when they speak. Mohanty and hooks argue that class, caste, region, and global capitalism complicate what we recognise as agency. Beauvoir and Millett draw attention to the institutional forces that make women's silencing persist. Butler emphasises the potential for rewriting gendered scripts in everyday acts. These critical approaches frame the following discussion, shedding light on how silence, voice, and agency are socially produced and how literature brings these processes into view.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical discussions of Thrity Umrigar's The Space Between Us frequently foreground its elegant delineation of class and gender hierarchies in contemporary Mumbai. Early reviews emphasised the novel's subtlety and ethical attentiveness to domestic labour, affective ties, and social distance, noting how the friendship between Serabai and Bhima is intimate and constrained by the "space" of class. Scholars have linked the novel to a broader corpus of Indian English fiction that interrogates the home as a site where structural inequalities are reproduced, even as intimate

bonds generate forms of care that do not neatly map onto class antagonism. However, relatively fewer studies explicitly read Umrigar through subaltern theory. This approach can illuminate why Bhima's experiences often fail to register as political speech even when they erupt into narrative focus.

Jahnavi Barua's Rebirth has attracted attention for its lyrical form, a mother's sustained monologue to an unborn child, and its sensitive portrayal of a woman's internal journey from despondency to resolution. Critics have traced how impending motherhood reframes Kaberi's sense of self and how female friendships provide scaffolding for new forms of agency. Some readings emphasise the novel's regional texture, its evocation of Assam's landscapes and political histories as they shadow Kaberi's life in Bangalore, while others highlight the ethics of care that permeate the narrative. Few studies, however, place Rebirth in sustained conversation with subaltern theory, and fewer still juxtapose it with Umrigar's urban class narrative to theorise silence and voice comparatively.

Beyond author-specific scholarship, work in South Asian feminist criticism and Subaltern Studies offers a robust scaffold for this article's argument. Gyanendra Pandey's reflections on the "subaltern citizen" examine how democratic polities negotiate marginality, suggesting that formal inclusion often coexists with substantive exclusion. Studies of gender in South Asia have repeatedly warned against collapsing women's experiences into a single narrative, urging attention to caste, class, and regional difference. Read alongside Beauvoir, Millett, Butler, Mohanty, hooks, and Spivak, this body of work supports a methodological orientation attuned to how literature stages both the brutalities and the resourcefulness of women's lives. The scholarship indicates a gap this paper addresses: a comparative, theoretically grounded reading of Umrigar and Barua that treats silence not as a simple absence but as a complex social and narrative practice.

Analysis and Discussion

Thrity Umrigar's *the Space Between Us* centres on two women whose lives are entangled across the fault lines of class. Although Serabai, living in modest comfort as a widow, and Bhima, her long-term domestic help, share moments of companionship, sorrow, and secrets, the story underscores that this intimacy cannot dissolve the rigid hierarchy separating them. The "space between" them is not only architectural, Bhima sits on the floor, not the sofa, but also juridical and affective: the structures that separate them are sedimented in habit, custom, and law. Bhima's labour sustains Serabai's household, but Bhima's voice rarely registers beyond the household's confines. Her injuries, economic precarity, sexual coercion visited upon the women in her family, truncated access to education and healthcare are narrated with lucidity. However, the novel refuses the fantasy of a clean exit. Even acts of resistance are circumscribed by the need to survive. Through Spivak, Bhima's predicament exemplifies how the subaltern woman is positioned in a field of force where speech is frequently misrecognised, contained, or punished (Spivak). Umrigar thus shows how silence is not an empty category but a social product sustained by classed arrangements of space and attention.

The novel's treatment of female solidarity is equally nuanced. Serabai's affection for Bhima is genuine, and her memories of domestic violence complicate any easy reading of her as a mere benefactor. At the same time, Serabai's gestures of care are framed by paternalistic assumptions: she "knows better," she decides, she dispenses. Moments that appear liberatory: a shared meal, a confidante's embrace, are undercut by the endurance of etiquette and taboo. Bhima's exclusion from the table symbolises more than a household rule; it points to the larger social codes that tie eating, touch, and closeness to class and caste. In Millett's terms, this clarifies how private life is never separate from politics. Following Beauvoir, we can read Serabai's complicity as one more iteration of women's "Othering," this time leveraged against another woman to stabilise a fragile sense of self (Beauvoir). The result is a portrait of solidarity constrained by hierarchy: human, moving, and ethically fraught.

Jahnavi Barua's Rebirth, by contrast, turns inward to track Kaberi's voice as it gathers force. The monologic address to her unborn child is not merely a stylistic device but an ethical and political practice of self-making. Addressing the future allows Kaberi to narrate her past without becoming trapped by it. Her husband's emotional neglect and infidelity, the demands of corporate sociality in Bangalore, and the residual grief of her childhood in Assam merge into an early posture of resignation. However, the narrative slowly records a pivot: impending motherhood

becomes a site of reclamation rather than mere domestication. Here, Butler's account of performativity is instructive: Kaberi resignifies "mother" from a role associated with self-effacing compliance into a practice of care that includes herself (Butler). She draws boundaries, refuses toxic reconciliation, and reimagines home as a space that she authors. Her friendships with Joya, whose memory continue to animate her decisions; with Preetha, whose tough-minded generosity models an alternative to submissive femininity; and with Soniya, whose initially instrumental relationship becomes unexpectedly mutual function as counterpublics in which Kaberi can speak and be heard.

In both novels, silence is textured rather than flat. For Bhima, silence is tied to hard work and constant fear; speaking out could cost her the little stability she has. Kaberi's quiet, especially at the beginning, reflects her withdrawal from a world that does not welcome her hopes. With time, though, her silence becomes purposeful, and she learns to control what she shares and with whom. Where Umrigar captures the persistence of constraint with documentary precision, Barua turns to the small but steady possibilities of agency that appear as Kaberi learns to voice herself. Each work circles Spivak's challenge: does women's speech reach institutions as meaningful subjectivity, or is it reduced to noise? Barua suggests a tempered optimism that speech may not instantly change structures, yet it carries restorative power when heard by companions, communities, or even an unborn listener.

A comparative lens clarifies how class mediates the forms available to agency. Bhima's material constraints are stark; the risk calculus of her life narrows her choices. Hooks reminds us that feminisms that ignore class reproduce elite interests. Thus, Barua's narrative is not a universal recipe for emancipation but a document adapted to the privileges and possibilities that follow unevenly.

Finally, both novels reimagine the relationship between narration and ethics. Umrigar refuses the consolations of victorious endings, insisting that readers sit with the discomfort of persisting silences.

IV. CONCLUSION

Indian English literature has become a crucial realm for reimagining the voices and silences of marginalised women. Thrity Umrigar's *The Space Between Us* and Jahnavi Barua's *Rebirth*, though distinct in setting, style, and outcome, both illustrate Serabai's privileged class position that allows her to extend occasional acts of kindness, yet it also blinds her to the subtle violence embedded in social etiquette. Kaberi, though economically more stable than Bhima, is still subject to patriarchal control within her marriage and professional life. Her advantage lies in access to education, work, and supportive networks, providing her greater scope for resistance. Reflecting how gendered subalternity is produced in everyday life and sometimes reworked from within. Umrigar's work highlights the persistence of structural barriers that show how the domestic sphere reinforces class divisions in ways that personal affection cannot erase.

In contrast, Barua presents a different trajectory where speech becomes possible and sustainable through the support of friendship, the experience of motherhood, and the act of self-definition. Read together through Spivak, Beauvoir, Millett, Butler, Mohanty, hooks, and Guha, these texts teach us to approach silence not as a monolithic absence but as a layered practice that is sometimes imposed, sometimes chosen, often both at once. The contribution of this paper is to demonstrate that voice and silence are not antithetical poles but interdependent dynamics through which women navigate injurious worlds. Future research might extend this comparative frame to look at the aspects, including writings of Dalit women, Northeast insurgency narratives, or diasporic texts, and attend more explicitly to caste and migration as they intersect with gender and class. Such work would deepen our understanding of how the subaltern speaks, strategises, withdraws, and rebuilds in the face of persistent inequities.

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