

Speaking with the Subaltern:

An Exploration of the Voices of South Asian Women in Literature and Film

Laura Young

Submitted to the Department of English, Vanderbilt University,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the Major,

April 17th, 2012

Chapter 1: Speaking with the Subaltern

If the subaltern could speak, what would she say? Would the women of India and South Asia talk about arranged marriages, sati (the sacrificial burning of widows), bride burnings, clitoridectomy, purdah, pativrata dharma (husband worship), or female infanticide? Would they talk about the expectation of a woman's community or the roles ascribed to them as mothers, caretakers, and the bearers of tradition? Would they talk about the denial of education, property rights, domestic violence, or denial of female sexuality? Or are these the topics on which a white Western feminist would have them speak and, if unsatisfied with what they have to say, speak for them?

Gayatri Spivak's seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" describes the ethical and political problems inherent in post-colonial studies. According to Spivak, Western academic thinking is produced in order to support Western economic interests. Knowledge is a commodity that the West exports to the third world for financial and other gain. When it comes to colonial studies, the West constitutes the colonial subject as an "other," and the knowledge the West develops continues to confirm the Other in the "Self's shadow" (24). In so doing, the post-colonial critic is unknowingly complicit in the task of imperialism. The knowledge produced unfailingly situates the Other as a dependent and mute subject with far lesser value than the Western subject. Spivak's claim is that for intellectuals, "their privilege is their loss" (28).

The key to my inquiry here is the fundamental problematic: can the subaltern represent herself and be heard in Western discourse? The subaltern is best characterized by the economically dispossessed individual whose identity is his/her difference from the elite group. Spivak gives the example of illiterate peasantry, tribal members, and generally "the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat" (25).

Spivak's answer to her own question (Can the subaltern speak?) seems to be that there is no case for the subaltern's voice to be heard. She asserts that any attempt from the outside to ameliorate the subaltern's condition by granting them collective speech would encounter a fundamental problem: the intellectual cannot assume cultural solidarity among a heterogeneous people. Consequentially, the representation of a collective identity would once again place power in the hands of the Western academic who can then "speak for" the subaltern condition, thus reinscribing their subordinate and voiceless/muted position.

What chance is there of the subaltern speaking for herself? Spivak's notion is that "there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself" (27). Spivak does entertain the notion of finding a representation for the subaltern, but the problem she finds is that no intellectual field recognizes subaltern knowledge, logic, or modes of thought. The question becomes, "How can we touch the consciousness of the people, even as we investigate their politics? With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?" (27). Spivak claims one must recognize and render visible the material which, hitherto, intellectuals did not recognize as having a moral, aesthetic, or historical value. This means making a place for texts that before now had no pertinence in history. In reviewing this work, Spivak insists that literary theorists must listen to what is not being said: "When we come to the concomitant question of the consciousness of the subaltern, the notion of what work cannot say becomes important" (28). In this mechanism of rendering visible the unseen (or rendering audible the muted), Spivak cites Foucault and claims that the intellectual must avoid any analysis of the subject, whether psychological, psychoanalytical, or linguistic. Any critical analysis of the text would articulate its relation to the "Other" through the use of hegemonic vocabulary and institutionalized Western thinking. She writes,

With no possibility of nostalgia for that lost origin, the historian must suspend (as far as possible) the clamor of his or her own consciousness (or consciousness-effect, as operated by disciplinary training), so that the elaboration of the insurgency, packaged with an insurgent-consciousness, does not freeze into an ‘object of investigation,’ or, worse yet, a model for imitation. (28)

Based on this assumption, intellectuals learn that “their privilege is their loss” (Spivak 28). By virtue of their own consciousness, the Western academic may treat the subaltern as an object for them to investigate, study, analyze, or imitate.

Feminist Standpoint theory, however, offers a unique lens through which the Western academic could potentially speak with subaltern voices and texts. Though used predominantly by sociologists, it has also been successfully applied in literary analysis.¹ This theory asserts that marginalized groups of people possess less interest in maintaining the status quo so they are more likely to occupy a unique position from which to view the society in which they are relegated. Within this model, a standpoint does not mean a single perspective or experience but “an understanding of perspective and experience as part of a larger social setting” (Lenz 98). By no means rigid, the concept allows for a fluid understanding of experience that can be temporarily stabilized in order to investigate dominant ideologies pervasive within them. These positions are inhabited by groups of marginalized people often described as “outsiders within.” These groups partake in dominant cultural practices but are never fully capable of participating in them, much like Spivak’s definition of the subaltern. The premise behind this idea is that the “outsider within” possesses a more objective and less false standpoint and is therefore a privileged source from which to understand the social processes at work. Although it uses

¹ See, for example, Brooke Lenz’ article “Postcolonial Fiction and the Outsider Within: Toward a Literary Practice of Feminist Standpoint Theory.”

vocabulary from Western criticism, the framework succeeds in challenging patriarchal structures by purposefully rendering the “other” as the subject with a voice.

For my thesis, I explore the works of three artists (literary and visual): Kamala Das, Meena Alexander, and Deepa Mehta. The women of my thesis, though born in India, hardly constitute what Spivak defines as the “true subaltern” (27). All of the women I study were born into privileged or middle-class families and all but one obtained higher levels of education. They most likely fall into the category that Jacques Derrida described as the *antre*, which are the “dominant indigenous groups at the regional and local levels” (qtd. in Spivak 26). Spivak asserts that individuals in this category act “in interests of [the dominant all-Indian group] and not in conformity to interests corresponding truly to their own social being” (27).

By systematic oppression of their gender, however, I would argue that the authors of my texts are socially and economically dispossessed, suggesting that the term ‘subaltern’ carries too narrow a definition. The authors are marginalized by the hegemonic hierarchy that constitutes the male gender as the elite gender and the female gender as the subaltern gender. Spivak herself recognizes that the ideological concept of ‘female’ is fraught with epistemic violence by claiming that “the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant” (28). For this reason, although they were raised in educated and wealthy families, the authors of my texts inhabit a subaltern position.

All the texts I explore in my thesis were written or filmed in English. Some critics might claim that the authors’ choices to produce English texts reinforce the idea that a patriarchal language and Western modes of thinking are necessary to ‘save’ these women. It is my hope that the arguments I raise in the following chapters suggest alternative reasons for why the women chose English as their language of production.

So what is my own position in this discourse? Am I part of the problem or the solution? Spivak accused Foucault of believing that he was able to stand outside of the system of exploitation. By participating in Western modes and institutions, she claimed, treating the subaltern subjectively was unavoidable. Spivak even attacks Western feminism for failing to “dehegemonize its own guiding presuppositions” (Moore-Gilbert). By this she means that Western academics treat the idea of “woman” as implicitly white, heterosexual, and middle class. If we cannot gain access to any subaltern consciousness, does that mean we should not even try? Is there any way that a Western thinker such as myself—a white, middle class, and female student—can unlearn some of her “privileges” in order to engage in a discourse with subaltern authors?

Spivak comments in “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” that “the academic [Western] feminist must learn from [Third World women], to speak to them, to suspect that their access to the political and sexual scene is not merely to be corrected by our superior theory and enlightened compassion” (135). While I cannot claim that I will succeed in avoiding all the pitfalls of which Spivak warns the Western academic, it is my hope that I will avoid many of the assumptions that Spivak accuses Western academics of making. The purpose of my thesis is to demonstrate that South Asian women are indeed speaking through their texts and films, and therefore I am not trying to speak for them but to illuminate what they are saying through the application of Feminist Standpoint theory. In heeding Spivak’s warnings, I also avoid assuming a homogenized collective consciousness among the authors of my texts. Each woman has a distinct voice that transpires from her text and issues that inspire her discourse, both of which I will

demonstrate through an introduction to the context and background from which the women are speaking.

Kamala Das

Kamala Das (1934–2009), born and raised in Malabar, Kerala, was surrounded by talented family members who wrote poetry, including her mother and her great uncle. Das learned early on that sex was not something women discussed, and yet its forbidden nature made it that much more alluring to her. She fantasized early on about becoming the mistress of a notorious man and at the age of thirteen fell in love with a student leader who had been imprisoned for revolutionary activities. During her adolescence a young married woman would visit Das and her parents and answer Das' forbidden questions about sex that no one else would discuss. From her, Das learned about the "sexual acrobatics" that would lead to something called "the great orgasm" (*My Story* 70). Das' second crush was on an art tutor who was twice her age (she was fourteen and he was twenty-nine). Das later developed sexual feelings for a female teacher whose unusual voice aroused her. The first person who reciprocated her emotions was an eighteen-year-old college girl whom her mother's friends had warned her about because she differed from other girls. Das felt an immediate attraction to the girl partly because of the warnings against her favor, but also in response to their first private moments together on a train, where they kissed at length in a private room.

At the age of fifteen her family arranged her marriage to her cousin K. Madhavas Das, a man twice her age. Before their marriage, he made brutal, crude, and painful advances that humiliated her. He would crush her breasts, leaving black and blue marks, and demand to know why she didn't care for his touch, calling her "cold and frigid" (*My Story* 82). Das realized her

romantic, idealized, image of love was nothing more than a dream. She and her female relatives “were all married off when scarcely more than children to older men who brutalized them on their wedding night” (Kafka 140).

Surprisingly, Das believes she fell in love with her husband a few months after their marriage and, seeking tenderness or a sign of the romantic love she once envisioned, would do anything to please him. Her first child was born when she was sixteen, but she said that she “was mature enough to be a mother only when my third child was born” (Warrior Interview). Still, her husband failed to show any interest or tenderness towards her, which left Das feeling neglected and unloved. Das realized that her husband had married her for status and money, and that what she sought in marriage she had no choice but to find outside of marriage. She also realized that her husband had a close friend and, when the two were together, they would act “like lovers” and lock her out of the bedroom. When Das began taking lovers to her bed, initially trying to aggravate her husband, her husband would give them privacy or even encourage her to go out when she was in a poor mood. This began their well-known free-love marriage.

Although Das had begun writing at a young age, she pursued the interest with more passion after she was married, and she began sending her works out for publication. Her husband was very supportive, even when her writing explored womanhood and sexuality. Das expressed that her husband brought her great joy and comfort and stated that “there shall not be another person so proud of me and my achievements” (Warrior Interview). However, she was not allowed to treat her writing like a career and work on it during the day. Instead, she had to write at night. After the children had gone to sleep and the kitchen was cleaned, she would sit at the kitchen table where she cut vegetables and type until morning.

Das' writing gained much notoriety in India and abroad. She used much of her life experiences as inspiration for her poems and short stories, including her growth into womanhood and her quest for love in and outside of marriage. Her writing received much criticism and hostility. Her family rejected her literary pursuits and shunned her because she brought them shame (also for her liberal affairs). However, years later, after her work became well known by critics seeking a woman with independent thoughts, she received much praise and admiration from fans. Many feminist critics lauded her work by saying, "What Das has done is dare to express in her own life, as well as make the claim in writing, that not only do women have sexuality, but that we deserve the right to proactively, freely, express that sexuality" (Kafka, 138). For these reasons, Kamala Das' work provides a crucial link to understanding how subaltern voices speak and about what they speak

Meena Alexander

Meena Alexander, a well-known author and literary scholar, was born Mary Elizabeth Alexander on February 17th, 1951 in Allahabad, India. Her parents named her after her paternal grandmother, but she later changed her name to Meena because she felt the name (with its flexible meaning depending on the language) better suited her. Her father was a government employee who was deputed by the Indian government to Sudan, where the family moved in 1956. Her family often returned to India for months at a time to visit her maternal and paternal grandparents. Alexander recalls much of her life being spent on the boat that transported them across the Indian Ocean, taking her from one home to the other. She attended Unity High School in Khartoum, where some of her first poems were published in the local newspaper in Arabic.

Much of Alexander's life was spent in scholarly pursuits. She obtained her B.A. in English and French literature from the University of Khartoum in 1969. Receiving high

accolades and with encouragement from university faculty, she enrolled at the University of Nottingham in England to work on her doctorate in English. She earned her degree in 1973 with a dissertation that was later abridged and published under the title, *The Poetic Self: Towards a Phenomenology of Romanticism* (1979). Alexander returned to India and worked as a lecturer at a women's college. During this time Alexander forged friendships with other writers, social activists, academics, and feminists and produced three volumes of poetry as well as *The Poetic Self*. Much of her poetic work explores themes of maternal bonds, language, and displacement. In 1979 Alexander married an American, David Lelyveld, and then immigrated to the United States with her husband. There she taught in several New York educational institutions, including Fordham University, Hunter College, and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

Like other authors, Alexander's own life experiences greatly influenced her work. Her poetry deals with displacement, violence, and the ritualized order that infiltrate a woman's world. In *The Storm*, she writes:

Let me sing my song

Even the crude parts of it

The decrepit seethe of war

Cruelty inflicted in clear thought. (Alexander, 167-170)

Much of her memoir, *Fault Lines*, explores the violence and punishments that women inflict on themselves. This causes Meena (the narrator) to realize the limitations she has inflicted on her own self because of her gender. Alexander has published over fifteen books that include two memoirs, a novel, and several collections of poetry. She has also edited and contributed introductions to anthologies of poetry. She has received numerous accolades and honors

throughout her career including the Altrusa International Award (1973), MacDowell Colony Fellowships (1993, 1998), a PEN Open Book Award (2002) and a residency at the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Study and Conference Center (2005). Although Alexander clearly speaks through her memoir, it is important to note the other forms in which she has used her voice to speak and the course and larger direction her life has taken. All of which suggest a desire to speak and a recognition of the limitations of speaking.

Deepa Mehta

Deepa Mehta was born in Amritsar, India in 1949. Her father was a film distributor, so she grew up with an early introduction to the inner workings of the film industry. Her family's fortunes depended on the success or failure of each new release. A perk of the career, however, was that she got to spend many afternoons watching new releases with her friends free of charge. Her interest in film did not arise, however, until after she graduated from University. As she tells the story:

By the time I was in university I knew I wanted to have nothing to do with film! I had been saturated with it...I was going to do my dissertation for my PhD, and I met a friend who said they needed someone to work part time in a place called Cinematic Workshop, a small place that made documentary film in Delhi. I learned how to do sound first, and then I learned camera work; I learned to edit and then finally I made my own documentary and discovered how much I loved it. (Craughwell F10)

She later met and married a Canadian documentarian, Paul Saltzman. The marriage was short-lived, and in 1983 Paul and Mehta divorced, forcing their only child to choose between them. The daughter's choice of the father estranged Mehta and her daughter for years. Mehta took a more serious interest in filmmaking after the divorce. She directed a number of documentaries,

including one about her brother, a photojournalist, and she directed episodes of the Canadian television series *The Twin* and *Danger Bay*. In 1991, Mehta produced and directed her first feature film *Sam & Me*, a story about an unlikely friendship between two outcasts (a Jewish man living in Toronto and a young Indian Muslim immigrant who works as his caretaker) who form a deep bond despite the fact that neither is welcome in the other's world.

One of Mehta's most influential works was the movie *Fire*, set in modern India, which explores the patriarchal, post-colonial society that oppresses women. Mehta wrote, produced, and directed the film herself. Her own life and experiences influenced the film. She said, "I made [*Fire*] because I want to understand myself" (Taylor 6). The inspiration for the film came to her as she was reflecting on the difficulties experienced by many of her female relatives in arranged marriages, including her own mother. Mehta wrote, "We women, especially Indian women, constantly have to go through a metaphorical test of purity in order to be validated as human beings, not unlike Sita's trial by fire. I've seen most of the women in my family go through this, in one form or another. Do we, as women, have choices? And if we make choices, what is the price we pay for them?" (*Fire*).

The film was only one in a trilogy that explored the social forces shaping India. Her second film *Earth*, explored the partition between India and Pakistan and the religious divisions that split the country, causing violence and bloodshed among loved ones. Her third film *Water*, was actually the most contested film as it explored widow houses in the 1930s. Labeled as worthless, the women often turned to prostitution in order to survive. Controversy erupted over this film before filmmaking even began. Two thousand protestors stormed the ghats (wide stairs leading down to a body of water), destroying the main film set. Protestors burnt effigies of Mehta, and she received threats to her life. Three main political/religious parties led the angry

mob. Some asserted that widows constituted a sacred state and others claimed that Mehta's work intentionally covered sensational topics in order to create a stir in Western theaters. The filming was put on hold for several years while tension died down. Eventually the filming was moved to West Bengal and completed in 2004. In reaction to the attacks on her film, Mehta said, "What is so scary is that people are reinterpreting what the rules are regarding culture. If I could just say one thing to those who oppose my work, it would be: 'Lighten up guys'" (Harding Interview).

Although the authors have different backgrounds, they each express how experiences in their lives produced an interest in some issue of femininity. For Das the issues are female sexuality and womanhood, for Alexander they are gender and violence, and for Mehta they are female roles in society. This answers part of the very first question of my thesis since the issues that affect the authors' lives serve as inspiration for their texts. The following chapters will demonstrate how each woman speaks through the different texts and what she has to say about the issues just introduced.

Chapter 2: Language, Identity, and Love in Kamala Das' Poem "An Introduction"

According to Trinh T. Minh-Ha, "In writing themselves, women have attempted to render noisy and audible all that had been silenced in phallogocentric discourse" (60). Kamala Das' writing is well known to address issues of female sexuality and gender in India. In Das' poem, "An Introduction," the socio-political context marginalizes the speaker because of her gender as a woman, her Indian ethnicity, her dark skin, and her sexual desire. Through feminist standpoint theory, however, socially situated knowledge allows marginalized characters, such as the speaker, to become "outsiders within." It is her position as an "outsider within" that allows the speaker of Kamala Das' poem to reveal the oppressive nature of Indian society through language, identity, and love.

The speaker is located both outside and within the socio-political context. In the poem, the speaker claims: "I don't know politics but I know the names / Of those in power, and can repeat them, like / Days of week, or names of months" (1-3). The speaker recognizes her ignorance, or a lack of knowledge that separates her from those who have the knowledge. She does not know politics, but she is connected to politics through the knowledge of names. These names, however, have the same significance as names of days or months, suggesting that this knowledge is not special or unique. This immediate confession classifies her as an outsider, but her connection to politics by knowing the names still places her as an insider. Other aspects of the poem situate her in the position of an outsider. Characters tell the speaker, "Don't sit / On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows" (36-37). Walls and windows are physical barriers that act as dividers. In the poem, they represent the figurative distance and separation the speaker feels between herself and the social agents in the poem.

It is her position both inside and outside of society that gives the speaker the ability to observe the social powers that pervade her culture. These social forces manifest themselves in various forms. Some languages, the speaker notes, oppress and constrain. She calls one such language the “deaf, blind speech / of trees in storm or of monsoon clouds or of rain or the / Incoherent mutterings of the blazing / Funeral pyre” (20-23). This language limits and traps her. She cannot use the blind and deaf speech to express herself. It is also violent through images of storms, clouds of rain, and a burning funeral pyre—potentially the pyres of their dead husbands onto which widows would throw themselves in the Indian tradition of sati. This language aspires to deafness and blindness while the language the speaker creates is “human speech, the speech of the mind that is / Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and / Is aware” (18-20). The speaker must create a language that grants her awareness and the ability to speak on the subjects that the other language could not discuss.

The speaker’s “human” language allows her to expose the social contradictions and oppressive social contexts in which Indian women live. She writes,

...The language I speak
 Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
 All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
 Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
 It is human as I am human. (10-15)

Her language expresses her identity as an individual and a human being with quirks and distortions. It is half English and half Indian presumably because they are two of the three languages she speaks. It could also allude to an identity that is half English and half Indian. Though the language is not perfect, it transmits the challenges that are human. Most importantly,

by using an imperfect language, the speaker demonstrates the poem's honesty. What the poem says may not sound pretty or follow all the rules, but it possesses a human truth. Juxtaposed next to the phrase on storms and funeral pyres, the speaker implies that her language is aware of the social traditions which oppress women. Its awareness and honesty give her the freedom and authority to reveal oppressive forces.

The speaker first uses her standpoint and language to explicate the hegemonic ideas shaping love and sex. The poem situates love and sex in the context of youth and development. The speaker comments on a memory as a child and the development of her body. She writes, "I was child, and later they / Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs swelled and one or two places sprouted hair" (23-25). Her body develops physical features of a woman but the speaker does not recognize the relationship between these features and the concept of sexuality (neither her own nor her development as a sexual object). In the next lines the speaker learns that love and sex have two different meanings:

When I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
 For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
 Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me
 But my sad woman-body felt so beaten. (26-29)

The speaker exposes the discrepancy between love and sex. She asks for love, "not knowing what else to ask" (26). Her ignorance places her once more on the margins and also as a victim. Her desire for love draws her into the bedroom of a man and the event exposes the discrepancy between the "love" she desires and the reality of the event called love. By using third person when referring to herself as the "youth," the speaker effectively closes the door on the reader (27). We cannot know precisely what happens in the bedroom between the man and the youth,

but we can surmise that the event that takes place is of a sexual nature. The implication is that the speaker has no knowledge of sex prior to the event and only afterwards understands the event as violent and demeaning. The speaker draws attention to her “sad woman-body” as the object that feels beaten because it must be a woman’s body and a woman that suffers the abuse. Through these lines the speaker illustrates that part of growing up as a woman is learning the difference between sex and love.

The speaker also demonstrates that love and sex share a significant relationship with gender and power. On the one hand, love, as characterized by the speaker, represents the emotive connection that women seek in a relationship, but never find. Sexual need and gratification, on the other hand, characterize the desires of men. For example, the speaker says, “I met a man, loved him. Call / Him not by any name, he is every man / Who wants a woman, just as I am every / Woman who seeks love” (43-46). A man desires a woman as characterized by her body—the body as it represents an object they can possess. Women, in contrast, seek love, but less often find this love reciprocated. The speaker continues this binary by saying, “In him . . . the hungry haste of rivers, in me . . . the oceans’ tireless / Waiting” (46-47). Sex, in the guise of love, further oppresses this woman. The man will more likely succeed in possessing the object of the female, but the woman will rarely find her love reciprocated in the man’s desire. More than likely they will feel like the ocean the speaker describes, tirelessly waiting for someone to love them.

The passive identity of the speaker further reveals the oppressive experience of this Indian woman. The speaker first begins to form an identity by saying “I am Indian, very brown, born in / Malabar, I speak three languages, write in / Two, dream in one” (4-6). These statements reveal physical and factual pieces of information that, when combined, form the oppressed

identity of the speaker. This identity lacks desires, emotions, and suffers under the authority of others. Characters in the poem constantly tell the speaker what to do and what not to do: “Don’t write in English, they said, / English is not your mother-tongue” (6-7). Besides issuing a command, the phrase also reveals that others expect the speaker to feel a strong connection to a mother-tongue, and thus, also, to tradition. Challenging tradition, as the speaker does later, warrants more commands. The sentences are short and demanding and filled with imperative verbs like “Dress in saris”(33), “be girl”(33), “Fit in”(35), “Belong”(36), “Don’t Sit”(36), “Don’t play”(41), and “Don’t cry”(42). Her passivity appears also in a recollection in which she writes “I was a child, and later they / Told me I grew, for I became tall” (24-25). Her writing reveals that she cannot control or even recognize her own physical growth. The speaker’s alienation from her own body appears also in the previously mentioned scene in which a man draws her into a bedroom and causes her body to feel “beaten” (29), and yet she cannot recognize the sexual event that made her feel that way. Her identity lacks any power or control over her own desires, actions, or bodies.

The speaker in Kamala Das’ poem links the oppressed identity to her gender. She writes, “The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank / Pitifully” (30-31). Her breasts and her womb are obvious representations of her sex as a woman. Her sex is a burden to her because it links her to a gender that is marginalized from sources of power. Her gender also limits her by constraining her to the socio-political context of India in which a woman possesses many roles. Other characters remind her of this by telling her, “Dress in saris, be girl, / Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook, / Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in Oh, / Belong, cried the categorizers” (33-36). The social forces of the socio-political context expect women to cook, marry, manage the household, and conform to other gender norms. The categorizers tell her “It is time to /

Choose a name, a role. Don't play pretending games. / Don't play at schizophrenia or be a Nympho" (39-42). Their criticisms reveal that the speaker cannot have more than one identity. She must choose one. More importantly that identity cannot include nymphomania, the passion for sex, because this identity, one assumes, only belongs to men. Her identity must conform to the expected identity and roles of Indian women.

This oppressive social context prompts the speaker's desire to possess and control a language and an active identity. In describing her language the speaker writes, "The language I speak / Becomes mine" (11) and describes it as "All mine, mine alone" (12). The repetition signifies the speaker's ardent desire that this language belong only to her and implies that rarely do women in this poem have access to something that they can claim to control or possess alone. She uses the language to express "my joys" (15), "my longings" (15), and "my / Hopes" (15-16). The emphasis on possessives once again reflects the importance of expressing and possessing emotions and desires. Possession implies ownership and authority, two statuses that women rarely have. It also implies that women rarely have access to joy, desire, and hope, or if they do then they rarely have the opportunity to express them. The speaker's language, however, because it is outside of the natural/patriarchal structure, succeeds in granting her ownership and the authority to express these emotions.

In another effort to seize her own identity, the speaker abandons the passive and gendered identity that others have thrust onto her. She writes, "I wore a shirt and my / Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored / My womanliness" (31-33). She actively restructures her identity by challenging the prevalent gender roles and norms. According to Howell, "Self-definition in terms of a standpoint provides a starting point for the self-assertion of one's own identity, challenging those identities imposed by conventional stereotypes that form part of hegemonic

ways of thinking from the point of view of the socially and politically dominant” (Feminist Standpoint Theory). By refusing to assume the identity others have tried to foist onto her, she challenges the hegemonic ideologies of what it means to be a woman. Instead, the identity she creates is a collective identity in which the speaker abandons gender, class, or age and expands her standpoint to include all those that live and exist: She writes:

It is I who drink lonely
 Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns,
 It is I who laugh, it is I who make love
 And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying
 With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner,
 I am saint. I am the beloved and the
 Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no
 Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I. (52-59)

The speaker refuses to acquire a single role or a gender. Instead, she lists the various identities she finds in others and in herself including the dying, the drunk, the sinners, the saints, the beloveds, and the betrayed. The speaker addresses others both inside and outside the margins of society and also herself. In doing so she creates a collectivity of others who can claim an identity and feel joys or sorrows. She declares her own existence in the last line by asserting that, “I too call myself I” (59). Instead of allowing others to name and label her, the speaker proves that she possesses the power to name her own feelings and experiences.

Marginalized individuals, such as the speaker in Kamala Das’ poem, are socially situated in a way that allows them to observe and illuminate the hegemonic ideologies and dominating social forces that pervade their culture. Conscious of her social situation, the speaker uses her

position as an “outsider within” to reveal the oppressive forces that constrain her language, identity, and ability to love. By creating her own language and identity she challenges the hegemonic ideologies and adopts an identity that situates itself in the context of all other marginalized voices: the lonely, the brash, the shameful, the dying, the sinners, the saints, the beloveds, and the betrayed. This subaltern, Kamala Das, can speak and what she has to say reveals inequalities and discrepancies that women face. The next author has a different story to tell, but she also shares Das’ discontent with status quo.

Chapter 3: The Voice of the Stone-Eating Girl: Language and Gender in Meena

Alexander's *Fault Lines*

In her memoir, *Fault Lines*, Meena Alexander shares her life experiences and philosophies on identity from her own perspective as a South Asian woman. Similar to the speaker in Kamala Das' poem, Alexander uses her position as both an insider and an outsider to explore the cultural norms and social standards that constitute the identity of a South Asian woman. Language and gender comprise two venues through which she understands her identity and reveals the hegemonic values of her native homeland.

Like many diasporic writers, Meena Alexander is both an insider and an outsider in a physical and figurative sense. Although she was born in Allahbad, India, Meena's memories navigate multiple cities, villages, and towns spanning different countries and continents. Her childhood consists of repeatedly crossing the Indian Ocean from India to Sudan. Twice a year she, her mother, and her sisters return to India to visit relatives, usually for an extended period of time. The constant state of travel has a clear effect on Meena: she can no longer claim a true connection to one country over another. She states, "I am a woman cracked by multiple migrations. Uprooted so many times she can connect nothing with nothing" (Alexander 2). Although she eventually moves to England and then the United States, she still feels bound to India. She writes, "always the longing to return to India haunted me" (Alexander 134). As someone who is born in India, she will always be South Asian. Though physically dislocated, she still feels a connection to her homeland, her mother country. Her physical removal and return to India makes her both an insider and outsider. Her position as an outsider and insider physically and figuratively allows her to analyze and expose the social forces that shape her identity as a South Asian woman.

One of these social forces is language. Language has a clear link to identity in many academic fields. Anthropologists, sociologists, and English literary scholars have all contemplated the influence of language on identity construction and identity comprehension. Many agree with Spolsky's description of their relationship:

Language is a central feature of human identity. When we hear someone speak, we immediately make guesses about gender, education level, age, profession, and place of origin. Beyond this individual matter, a language is a powerful symbol of national and ethnic identity. (Spolsky, 181)

Language carries information about a person's identity and from it people learn about aspects of an individual's life that they have not revealed. Kari Gibson explains that "Language—both code and content—is a complicated dance between internal and external interpretations of our identity" (1). For diasporic writers, the role of language carries important meaning in their writing. What language they use conveys information about their identity and the importance of the language they choose. It also means that the author has reasons for not choosing another language. Perhaps one language does a better job of conveying an identity, or the chosen language can reach a larger audience than any of the others. If that is the case, then a story in this language has a better chance of being heard.

In her memoir, Meena explores the challenges of language in expressing her identity as a South Asian woman. The language with which she chooses to write has powerful implications for the ethnicity she chooses to represent. These questions have clear challenges for someone such as Meena Alexander who cannot call just one place her home. She has learned many languages from her travels and each language comprises a piece of her identity. She illustrates the tangled web of languages inside of her by asking, "And what of all the language compacted

in my brain: Malayalam, my mother tongue, the language of first speech; Hindi, which I learnt as a child; Arabic from my years in the Sudan—odd shards survive; French; English? How would I map all this in a book of days?” (Alexander 1). Malayalam represents the language of her home and family, the people who raised her. Hindi gives her an ethnic identity as Hindustani, and Arabic, French, and English would tell others that she is educated, well-traveled, and a woman with experience. Meena must choose between them when telling her story, yet they each claim a piece of herself, a piece of her identity. By choosing to write in one language, she might mistreat or reject the other aspects of her identity. She avoids doing this, however, by slipping in words from the different languages and by addressing the very problem of having so many different languages from which to choose.

Meena chooses to write her memoir in English, but many facets of the language prove challenging. For Meena, English possesses a clear link to the colonialism of India. This very relationship causes her grief. She writes, “Colonialism seemed intrinsic to the burden of English in India and I felt robbed of literacy in my own mother tongue” (Alexander 128). Meena’s lamentation suggests a parallel to Spivak’s argument about writing in Western discourse. By doing so, authors are implicit in their own colonization. Participating in the discourse would inevitably require them to treat the subaltern subject, even at their own expense, as the subordinate “other” (Spivak 24). Therefore, by writing in English, Meena feels controlled and manipulated by the forces that once dominated India.

Translation remains another problem. Diasporic writers must transform the thoughts in their mind into a literary form. The act itself is unlike the normal translation we think of as conveying meaning from one language into another and many authors lament its inadequacy. The narrator of Salman Rushdie’s *Shame* expresses this sentiment when he writes, “Sharam.

That's the word. For which this paltry "shame" is a wholly inadequate translation" (Rushdie, 74). Some thoughts or ideas simply do not have the same connotation in one language as they do in the original. For example, Meena expresses the limitations of translation in the following quote:

Something tore inside of me. No, I wouldn't. I couldn't do it. I could not turn Malayalam utterances into English. Why would I even want to do it—turn those words of the language where I lived and moved in my inmost being into an English that could never carry that emotion, that would only distort it? (Alexander 121)

Meena realizes that by writing in English her words will not carry the same emotion or meaning that they do in Malayalam, a language with which she shares an intimate connection. Writing thoughts and memories that occurred in one language, but are now being written in a foreign tongue, borders on betrayal. One identity must be sacrificed in order for another identity to speak. Translation, it seems, will always be a barrier with which authors must contend. However, if the author has so many languages and thoughts inside of her, as Meena Alexander does, it seems she must accept that parts of her meaning the reader may never grasp. Meaning becomes lost without a language that can contain it.

However, there is malleability to the English language that challenges its colonial associations and gives Meena the freedom to tell her story. Meena explains, "Later, as I became a teenager, I realized the forked power in the tongue I had acquired: English alienated me from what I was born to; it was also the language of intimacy and bore the charged power of writing. Through it, I dared to hope, I might some day unlock the feelings that welled up within me" (116). English allows Meena to speak through her writing, something that the other languages she knows do not seem to allow her to do. But why English? Of all the other languages she chooses, English shares a similar nature with Meena in that it too is comprised of multiple

languages and identities. English, with both Germanic and Latin roots, is a hybrid language which allows it to adjust and absorb new words quickly. Though diverse, it still possesses a set of grammatical rules and an accepted structure. In order to reclaim her autonomy as an individual, Meena must twist and rearrange the language for it to properly represent her identity. She writes, “I was well aware that the language itself had to be pierced and punctured lest the thickness of the white skin cover over my atmosphere, my very self” (Alexander 118). Meena succeeds in making English her own language by inserting Malayalam, Arabic, or Hindi words into her memoir, such as *perachathe* (80), *qalam* (236), and *mangalsutra* (221). Her writing challenges formal English structure and, instead, takes on the feeling of a free-form poem. Meena realizes “Bit by bit I realized that the form of the poem offered something I needed, a translation out of the boundaries of the actual, a dance of words that might free me from my own body” (121). As a poet Meena frees the words from the steadfast rules of English grammar and meaning. By inserting words from her Malayalam, Arabic, or Hindi tongue, Meena makes sure English reflects the same hybridity that Meena feels describes her. Meena, therefore, appropriates the English language to reflect her fractured identity.

Besides language, another important aspect of Meena Alexander’s identity is her gender. For Meena Alexander, gender carries with it a number of burdens and expectations as well as the ever-present threat of shame. These expectations include marriage, sexual intimacy, child-rearing, pain, and silence. Meena wrestles with these ideas throughout the course of her memoir and often reflects on the implications of being born a woman. Her thoughts, freed from the prison of a native tongue, raise awareness of the social construction of gender in India.

In their article “Doing Gender”, Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman differentiate sex and gender. Sex is often ascribed to the biological state in which a person is born. Gender,

however, is achieved through social interactions and learned behavior of cultural norms. Men and women, therefore, shape their behavior, actions, dress, and personality to produce the socially accepted norms of what it means to be a man or woman. Meena's position as an outsider within allows her to reveal how men and women "do gender" and how their actions align with the patriarchal hierarchy of Indian culture.

Meena acknowledges the social construction of gender in her actions. As a woman, she must act passively in order to conform to the societal expectations. She learns this lesson from her mother, a woman whom she calls "amma." Meena writes, "Bit by bit I learnt from amma a shyness in the face of the world, a fear of looking straight at the lives of others. I did not want to be seen. I did not want to intrude. What would they make of me?" (Alexander 67). When Meena expresses her fear of speaking at a conference, or even writing about her life, she remembers these lessons from her mother and how her conception of gender holds her back from speaking.

Meena continues to explore the construction of gender through her account of the social institution of marriage. Meena describes arranged marriages as "the narrow gate through which all women had to enter, and entering it, or so I understood, they had to let fall all their accomplishments, other than those that suited a life of gentility: some cooking, a little musical training, a little embroidery, enough skills of computation to run a household" (Alexander 102). An arranged marriage is the standard way of fulfilling the gender norms of being a woman in Indian culture. Implicit in this quote are the gender norms of domesticity. A woman must cook, clean, and entertain in order to be considered a suitable wife. Meena even argues that women cannot exist without marriage. Meena explains this idea to her mother when she says, "Really amma, admit it now, if you're a woman, in order to exist, you have to marry" (Alexander 207). A woman must marry because without a husband she has no purpose. Her purpose in life is

wrapped around the well-being of her family, a family that cannot exist without a husband's seed. Meena observes how her mother disregards her own needs and wants to serve her family—it is all she ever does. Meena notes, “she had learnt so well the constant necessity of turning away from oneself towards others” (207). Her mother lives not for her own needs but to satisfy the needs of her family. Yet Meena also recognizes that her mother's life is empty. Without her marriage and her family, her mother would have nothing. The only things she holds close to her are her two symbols of marriage: a wedding ring she refused to remove even when her fingers grew swollen from pregnancy, and a chiseled wedding necklace called a *mangalsutra*, an icon of marriage, that Amma's fingers touch and twist when she is tense. By studying her mother's marriage Meena learns a woman's purpose in life is marriage. Without their marriage, they do not exist.

If women must marry to exist, women who chose to live independently, without a husband, are the scorn of their society. Meena reflects on her sister who still unmarried, feels like “an aberration” (223). Meena says, “It was a feeling I was familiar with, having felt that hot pang when, still unmarried, I had returned home many years ago to suffer under the gaze of gathered relatives” (223). The gaze of her relatives acts much like Foucault's panopticon. Under their gaze Meena feels abnormal and dangerous because she chooses to exist without marriage. Her independence disconnects her from her family and her culture, so much so that when she marries her husband, David, she realizes it is the only way she can allow herself to return home. She thinks, “Now you can go home, now you can face your parents” (208). The thoughts reveal how she has monitored and punished herself for her own independence, and it demonstrates the effectiveness of the socialization by her family. Unmarried, Meena feels like an outcast, but once married she feels reconnected to her homeland.

For Meena, an important part of being a woman involves compromising the sexuality of the female body. She writes, “I recall my childhood fears about what it might mean to be born into a female body. Quite early I was taught how the sexual body enticed men and then was crossed out in the interests of a higher truth. Women had to bear the burden of all the sin, all that forgetfulness” (Alexander 42). While men and women both engage in sex, only women feel shame for their actions. Meena learns early in life that society shames women and their bodies and that an inherent sin comes with being born a woman. This shame is inextricably linked to their gender. Another passage exemplifies this idea. Meena writes,

Sex and death were spliced and fitted into each other, quite precisely: like the milk-white flesh curved into the shell of the tender coconut as it hung on the tree; like the juicy flesh of the love apple rippling inside the purple husk that shone if you rubbed it against skirt or thigh. And shame lit the image. It was what women had to feel. Part of being, not doing. Part of one’s very flesh. (Alexander 110)

She displays in this passage how something natural has an inherently sexual connotation, such as the milk-white flesh of a coconut that alludes to the naked skin and tender flesh of a woman. The apple inside a purple husk bears an intrinsic tie to the penis, swollen with color. According to Meena, by exploring their sexuality women naturally bring shame and death upon themselves. Meena hears stories about unmarried women who jump into wells or commit suicide if they become pregnant out of wedlock. These women live with Meena in her thoughts:

And in the courtyard of a Kerala house I see worlds filled with women, women riding elephants, women like Princess Chitrangada with swords at their hips, bodies covered in rough jute—and who can see the softness of cotton underneath stained with menstrual blood? I see women in white starched saris, tucked in at the waist, hands sore with

cooking rice and dal and fried fish, cleaning out the cooking pots [...] I see women, saris swept up shamelessly, high above the ankles, high above the knees, women well-jumping: jumping over wells. (107)

Every act or trait that Indian society considers shameful, Meena sees in the women who jump into wells. She sees women who, like men, fight with swords at their hips. She sees their bodies that bring shame upon them simply by menstruating, a sign of their reproductive power but also a link to their sexuality. She also sees how their shame traps them in the confines of domesticity and marriage, with nothing to do but cook and clean. All these women who, burdened by shame, can do nothing but jump into wells and end their lives. Meena's observations reveal how Indian society represses women through the social conception of their bodies as shameful objects.

Meena resists, however, the social powers that pervade her culture by shamelessly revealing the stories of her female body. In freeing her thoughts, Meena uses the word *perachathe* (80), a slang Malayalam word that means "shameless-mad, as in mad dog, rabid, bitch, bitches being rabid, rabid dogs being known as bitches" (80). Meena realizes that while others may shame her, to be 'shameless' resists the very societal barriers and restrictions that would have held her back from speaking. She writes, "I would become a perachathe. . .at times it has seemed to me that the price for being perachathe—shameless—was to have one's mouth filled with stones and perhaps the reparation was to perform, in the theater of cruelty that is our lives together, choosing stones, filling one's mouth with them, ejecting them through the miraculous gut we call the imagination" (80). Meena embraces the term *perachathe* to represent herself as she discloses the actions and needs of the female body that would shame other women to silence. These include her curiosities concerning sex at a young age, description of menstruation, sexual passion, pregnancy, birth, and the eventual revelation that she was sexually

abused by her grandfather. These memories are the stones she spits out one by one on the pages of her book. If women never speak because they feel too ashamed by what they have to say, Meena realizes she must become the most shameful being, a perachathe, in order to speak.

Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines* demonstrates that the South Asian woman has a voice and that she can speak for herself, however the act of speaking and the identity linked to speaking create challenges that subaltern authors must navigate. Because of the many places she has lived and the multitude of languages she knows, Meena Alexander struggles with the ability of language to represent her identity in her memoir. The English language poses the challenge of colonial forces still at work but her unique and creative use of the language allows her to create her own English form. Using her hybrid English, Meena reveals the social processes underlying the conceptions of gender and how society uses women's bodies to repress and shame them. By publishing her memoirs and breaking customs of silence in South Asian women, Alexander also challenges Spivak's notion of the subaltern. Though marginalized, she still manages to speak words that the Western world hears.

Chapter 4: Desire as a Liberating Force in *Fire*

While shame and gender repressed the women in Meena Alexander's memoirs, other social forces influenced women in Deepa Mehta's controversial film, *Fire*. The movie, *Fire*, explores the lives of two sisters-in-laws trapped in loveless marriages. The film uncovers how traditional and religious rituals and marriage norms have preserved the system of male supremacy; a system that causes women, like the female protagonist Radha, to suffer by "living without desire." In the movie, the second female protagonist, Sita, says, "Isn't it amazing? We're so bound by customs and rituals. Somebody just has to press my button. This button marked tradition. And I start responding like a trained monkey." Radha and Sita, however, use their sexual desire for one another to liberate themselves from the control of the patriarchal system.

Fire takes place in contemporary New Delhi and explores the lives of members in a middle class family. The members of the family include Ashok and Jatin, adult brothers, Bhiji, the elderly mother who cannot speak from a severe stroke, Ashok's devoted wife Radha, and Sita, Jatin's newlywed bride. Another character, Mundu, is the male servant who works for the family. Issues surrounding desire arise early in the film for each character. Jatin loves a Chinese woman who refuses to marry him, so he is forced to marry Sita. Ashok, under the guidance of a spiritual leader, tries to rid himself of any attachment to desire. Mundu uses his spare time to masturbate to movies that Jatin rents to special customers in his video shop. Radha, unable to bear children, spends her time cooking for the family's food business and caring for the infirm Bhiji. She devoutly serves her husband and family until, that is, Sita arrives.

From the outset, it appears as though the women in the family, bound by tradition and marriage, do not experience any sort of pleasure in their lives. When Ashok learns that Radha cannot have children, he becomes a disciple of a local spiritual leader from whom he learns that

“Desire is the root of all evil.” From then on he does not sleep with Radha and instead uses her to test his ability to resist temptation by making her lie next to him without engaging in any sexual activities. Radha confesses to Sita one night that they have lived “like a brother and sister” for thirteen years. Her grave voice and steady eyes convey that this is not her wish. However, she feels she is bound by “duty” as Ashok’s wife to do what he asks. One night when she asks how their arrangement benefits her, Ashok replies, “By helping me you are doing your duty as my wife.” By practicing celibacy she serves her husband and ignores her own needs and desires. Self-sacrifice, Radha understands, is the duty of a wife.

Sita, Jatin’s new wife, arrives and must also suppress her own desires in order to serve her husband’s. For a different reason than Ashok’s, Jatin also does not sleep with his wife unless it is emotionless and driven by duty instead of love. Jatin marries Sita after his Chinese girlfriend refuses his proposal, and his brother and mother cajole him into an arranged marriage. Jatin frequently ignores Sita and continues to see his Chinese girlfriend after they are married. Jatin and Sita’s coitus lacks any passion or love as evident through the vacant and emotionless expressions on both Sita’s and Jatin’s faces during the scene. Sita, still fully clothed, has her skirt hitched up around her thighs. When he finishes Jatin rolls over to his side of the bed and absently tells her “not to worry” if she bleeds since it commonly happens the first time. His concern, however, seems not to be for Sita as a person but for the purity of his bride, an important quality that reappears throughout the film.

As Meena Alexander expresses in her memoirs, although they suffer in these marriages, women feel they must marry in order to survive. While walking in the market Sita comments to Radha, “My mother says that a woman without a husband is like boiled rice: bland, unappetizing, useless.” Although she says it lightheartedly, Sita’s comment reveals the hegemonic power

structures in which she finds herself living. In this structure, a husband carries the valued social capital through his gender, by being a man. A woman carries no social capital by being a woman and can only obtain some of that capital by marrying a man. Her value and worth are characterized by her association with a man, whether as a good daughter to a father or a good wife to a husband. Without that association, Sita knows her society would consider her “useless.”

The hegemonic norms that support this patriarchal supremacy are rooted in the traditional holidays that the characters of the movie celebrate. One such tradition is the holiday Karva Chauth. During Karva Chauth, wives fast for an entire day in order to prove their devotion and ensure their husband’s longevity. In one scene, Radha narrates the legend behind the holiday. This legend tells of a king who is so beautiful and so wealthy that even the gods grow jealous. One night the gods punish him by covering his body with a thousand needles, casting him into a deep sleep. The devoted queen spends a year carefully taking out the pins. All had been taken out except for two in the king’s eyes. At that moment the maidservant tells the queen that a holy man demands to see her. While she is gone the maidservant plucks out the last two needles. The king marries the maidservant thinking she is the one who had devotedly removed the needles. The holy man tells the queen that if she fasts without food or water for one whole day, from dawn until moon rise, the spell will be broken. The queen does so and upon completion the king, recognizing his true wife, banishes the maidservant and lives happily ever after with his true wife.

This tale establishes the norms and values that wives must follow. The queen, instead of living without her husband, suffers on her husband’s behalf for a year to remove his curse. This expresses again the notion that women cannot live without a husband. At the same time it also implies that men cannot live without their wives; after all, the king is helpless without his

devoted wife who removes the needles. The tale's most important lesson is that women must show devotion and loyalty to their husbands at all times, even when the husband practices adultery or refuses to even acknowledge her—as the king does to his wife. The practice of Karva Chauth binds patriarchal norms in tradition by making self-sacrifice and devotion a yearly practice among women. The fast means that women do not eat or drink for one day, not to save their husband from a curse, but to show their loyalty and devotion. Through the legend and practice of fasting, Karva Chauth keeps the women in the film in passive positions that preserve the status quo of male supremacy.

Bound by tradition, the women in Mehta's film have no choice but to live and follow the rules of the patriarchal family structure. When Jatin tells Sita she does not have to fast on his behalf because he does not believe in the “mumbo-jumbo” behind the holiday, Sita reminds him, “I don't have a choice.” Even later Radha gives her the option of not fasting and Sita replies, “You've got to be joking. My mother would kill me. And Bhiji would never stop ringing the bell. Isn't it amazing? We're so bound by customs and rituals. Somebody just has to press my button. This button marked tradition. And I start responding like a trained monkey. Do I shock you?” Her outburst reveals that the protectors and preservers of tradition are not only men but women too. Women such as Bhiji are so ensconced in the patriarchal structure that they live and define themselves by it. Bhiji, the elderly matriarch of the family, represents the idealized feminine form of the traditional South Asian woman. She has already given birth to two sons, Ashok and Jatin, and now resides in the house with them under the care of Radha. Bhiji cannot speak so she rings a bell in order to communicate. Her muteness could also represent the patriarchal ideal since a silent woman is one who is not challenging or questioning the hegemonic system. Instead, Bhiji uses her bell to signal her disapproval of various actions. One day Sita tries on

some of Jatin's clothing. The camera shot shows her looking at herself in the mirror wearing Jatin's pants, pretending to smoke a cigarette, and dancing to modern popular music. Suddenly Radha enters the room and asks Sita to help Bhiji. Once Bhiji sees Sita she begins ringing her bell, distressed by her appearance. Sita, wearing the clothing of a man, deviates from social norms appointed to women and therefore defies the patriarchal/hegemonic structure. Sita references Bhiji's power to preserve the structure when she explains to Radha why she must hold the fast. Bhiji, she knows, "would never stop ringing the bell"—signaling to Sita that not fasting differs from the prescribed social institution of marriage and gender. Bhiji continues to monitor the actions of women in the household, and one scene shows her watching Sita sneak out of a bedroom after Sita and Radha have enjoyed sexual intimacy. In a later scene, after the family learns of Radha and Sita's secret, Bhiji rings her bell so that Radha will come to her. She then leans forward and spits in Radha's face. Bhiji's action shows that she condemns Radha and Sita for seeking a relationship that is outside of the heterosexual arrangements prescribed by the patriarchal system. Awake and watchful, Bhiji serves as the guardian of the patriarchal system and her bell warns the women when their actions challenge the social norms.

Unlike Bhiji or Sita, Radha cannot have children. Giving birth to children is another obligation of married wives. Unable to fulfill this duty, Radha feels guilty and useless. She explains to Sita by quoting the doctors she and Ashok visited, "Sorry, madam. No eggs in ovaries." Due to her guilt and need for self-worth, Radha helps Ashok in his spiritual quest to eradicate desire from their marriage. A quest that, if Radha could bear children, he would not have taken. He confirms this to Radha when she asks, "Ashok, if I could have children, would you need me the way you need me?" And he answers, "No, probably not, perhaps it was my destiny..." His destiny, to remain childless, constitutes Radha's duty to serve him in the manner

she does. Ironically, although his destiny might rest in some unknown source, Radha's destiny lies in her husband's hands. Society deems her inability to produce children as her failure, and for it she suffers.

As outsiders within, Sita and Radha confront the social prescriptions of married women and reveal the limitations imposed on them through tradition. Both women entered the family through marriage. Ashok married Radha fourteen years before Jatin married Sita. During that time Radha became an insider in the family since she assumed the duties of caring for the family without complaint. When Sita enters the family she becomes the most recent outsider to have an insider's perspective in the family. Her perceptions as an outsider allow her to say things that would shock those insiders who inhabit the status quo. For instance, when Radha tells her the legend behind Karva Chauth, Sita asks, "I guess the queen just couldn't leave her husband, could she?" Mundu, the servant, replies, "Don't you see, madam. How could she leave? Once you're married you're stuck to each other like glue. Sad, but true." Although Mundu is also not biologically related to the family he, like Radha, has lived in the family for so long that he has adopted the perspectives of this very traditional household. This allows him to reveal how marriage can take the form of a prison since even if the wife desired it, she could not leave because the two are "stuck to each other like glue" in marriage. When Radha finishes her story, Sita realizes that the queen stayed with the king because she was bound to him as part of her duty as his wife. She proclaims, "What a wimp. I mean the queen. As for the king, I think he's a real jerk." Her position as an outsider within allows her to voice the perspective that the queen should not have stayed with the king and that the king's inability to recognize his real wife qualifies him as a "jerk". In a previous quote, while speaking of her reaction to tradition, Sita asks Radha, "Do I shock you?" Radha's answer is "Yes." Sita's questions and observations shock her because no

woman would speak about the system that controls her. Doing so challenges the very nature of a system that allows men the privilege to speak but denies women the same ability. Women, as Bhiji and Radha demonstrate, must conform to the expectations and traditions without complaint or comment because it is their duty to be self-sacrificing. By commenting on these inequalities, Sita begins to challenge the patriarchal structure in place.

Influenced by Sita, Radha also starts protesting the status quo by exploring her own needs and desires with Sita. Radha and Sita recognize that women, as self-sacrificial beings in the Indian household, cannot express needs or desires. Sita tells Radha one day, “I’m sick of all this devotion. We can find choices.” Choices and the ability to make decisions in their own lives defy the standard set by a male-controlled system. Radha confesses to Sita, “This isn’t familiar for me. This awareness [pause] of needs...of desires...” Their awareness of sexual desires and emotional attraction to one another leads them to begin having a sexual relationship in secret. Although two women having a sexual affair challenges religious norms in Indian culture, the acknowledgement and exploration of female physical needs and desires constitutes the real threat to patriarchal power. By recognizing and acting on these needs, the women challenge the notion that wives should at all times put their husbands’ needs before their own. Finding satisfaction in another woman also defies the heteronormative expectation that women should only need men to fulfill desires, expectations that once again assign greater power to male capital than female capital.

The women further supplant patriarchal power by transforming feminine spaces bound by patriarchal norms into sexual and liberating spaces. For example, Sita and Radha cook for the family restaurant, thus fulfilling their wifely duties to serve the family. While cooking they use the kitchen as a space to explore their relationship. One day Radha explains to Sita the uses

behind the different spices. Cardamum, she explains, sweetens a woman's breath. She places a seed in Sita's mouth. Sita closes her eyes, chews slowly, then leans forward and breathes lightly near Radha's mouth. The scene draws the two women into an intimate moment with their bodies and mouths close to each other. Thus the women transform the kitchen, a space that in its heteronormative use confirms a patriarchal system, into a liberating space for homoerotic desires.

Another clear example is the bedroom. The bedroom establishes the patriarchal dominion by joining a man and women in marriage through consummation. In this union the husband's sexual needs take precedence over his wife's—as repeatedly demonstrated in the movie *Fire*. Both Ashok and Jatin ignore the sexual needs of their wives, dismissing the idea of female sexuality altogether. Ashok does this by practicing abstinence and Jatin by either raping Sita or ignoring her in bed. When Sita and Radha begin fulfilling one another's physical and emotional needs in the bedroom, the act transforms this male-sanctioned place into a liberating and homoerotic one. Two scenes bring the audience into the bedroom where Sita and Radha encounter one another's bodies. These scenes, through their illustration of Radha and Sita's passion and love for each other, provide stark contrasts to the other scenes where the wives lay in the same beds with their husbands. Radha and Sita's desire once again transforms a heteronormative space into a sexually liberating one.

The women also subvert the patriarchal system by taking the same traditions that suppress them and using them to develop their homosexual relationship. For instance, at the end of Karva Chauth the husband blesses his wife and gives her the first morsel of food and drink of water after her fast. Although the fast still symbolizes the wife's devotion to her husband, in its ending the tradition demonstrates that a husband possesses the ability to end his wife's suffering by giving her food and water. Jatin does not return home to perform these actions for Sita so

Radha gives Sita her first drink and piece of food. By doing so, she takes Jatin's place as husband and undermines the power of the tradition to suppress women. A woman can now alleviate another woman's suffering or fill her needs.

The women also take homosocial behaviors outside of the control of a patriarchal system and transform them into homoerotic actions that strengthen their resistance to tradition. Homosocial behavior remains outside of the patriarchal structure because it is only composed of behavior between women. These behaviors could involve talking with other women, oiling a daughter or sister's hair, or showing affection for another woman that is not erotic. Such behaviors do not challenge the social order of male supremacy so men do not care if women do them. Radha and Sita take socially approved behaviors such as foot rubbing and hair oiling and turn them into sexually-charged behavior. During a family picnic Sita offers to massage Radha's feet since she has been cooking all day and must be tired. Ashok sits proudly on the blanket and even tells Radha, "Let her do it," because he interprets their behavior as affection between two sisters-in-law. As Sita rubs Radha's feet, however, their glances and Sita's slow and affectionate touches confirm that the behavior steps outside of homosociality in homoeroticism. In a different scene Sita asks Radha to help her oil her hair. The camera shot shows the two women looking at one another in the mirror as Radha (standing) massages oil into (sitting) Sita's hair. Sita closes her eyes and Radha smiles, showing that the affection between the two is growing. Since slippage between the socially approved behavior and dangerous homoerotic behavior is so easy, Radha and Sita use these opportunities to express their sexual desires for one another.

Throughout the movie, husbands use various means to test their wives' devotion and purity. As previously mentioned, Jatin asks Sita if she bled after they first have intercourse. By bleeding she proves that she is a virgin and untouched by any other man, thus affirming her

sexual purity. By taking away their wives' virginity, the men maintain hegemonic dominance. Though tested with a simple question, Sita proves to Jatin that she is a virgin and that he has successfully taken away her sexual innocence. Thus, any power or value she may have possessed as a virgin she no longer has. The test (blood after their first coitus) confirms Jatin's power to not only test a woman's purity but also to take it away from her.

A story about testing a woman's purity called *Ramayana* appears several times in the movie. First it appears in the background of a scene as a film that the religious Bhiji enjoys watching, and then later as a play that Ashok watches with his spiritual leader, Swamiji. The story of *Ramayana* follows Sita, a woman who must prove her purity and devotion to her husband, Ram, by going through a trial by fire. In Swamiji's play, the Sita character willingly dances into the cardboard flames and sings about how the fire will prove her purity. She finishes her dance and the flames are removed from the stage. The character Ram sings, "Sita even the moon has flaws but you are flawless. And today, by being unscathed, you have triumphed in the trial by Fire. But sadly, I still have to send you into exile. So take away Sita, and leave her in the forest." The scene ends, but the film never explains why Ram was not satisfied by the fire's verdict. This suggests that men have the ultimate authoritative power to accept or reject a woman's demonstration of devotion and purity. More importantly, the story establishes a man's power to test a woman's purity, not only her sexual purity but also her obedience to the hegemonic ruler in marriage.

In the climactic scene of the movie, Radha endures her own trial by fire, and in so doing frees herself from the patriarchal institutions of marriage and tradition. The scene begins with Radha boiling some water in a pot. Outside a storm is brewing. Both elements foreshadow a violent event. Ashok enters and tells Radha he needs her in their bedroom so he can test himself.

When Radha refuses, Ashok says, “Desire brings ruin. I know that now.” Radha counters by saying, “Living without desires I was dead. Without desire there’s no point in living. What else? I desire to live. I desire Sita. I desire her warmth. Her compassion. Her body. I desire to live again. If you want to control desire ask for Swamiji’s help, not mine.” Her outburst affirms a female desire that challenges the non-feeling and self-sacrificial position of a wife. By desiring another woman she destroys the social expectation of a heterosexual relationship that favors the man. A struggle ensues during which Radha’s sari catches fire from the stove burner. Ashok backs away as the flames grow brighter. He picks up Bhiji and leaves Radha and the room in flames. His exit with Bhiji demonstrates the patriarchal disapproval and ultimate rejection of women who deviate from the social structure. However, the final scene shows Sita waiting for Radha outside a hotel in the rain. A singed but alive Radha stumbles towards Sita, and Sita runs over to help her. Radha’s pain tests her purity and devotion not to her husband, but to Sita, for which she succeeds. The movie ends with the two women holding one another in the soft rain. The dichotomy of fire and water illustrates the association between a harsh and deadly male-dominated structure and safe and liberated feminine world. By refusing to conform to the social role of a wife in a heterosexual marriage, Radha breaks free from her marriage and manages to find comfort and freedom with Sita.

In the movie *Fire*, Radha and Sita challenge the patriarchal institutions of marriage and tradition by transforming heteronormative spaces into ones where they explore homosexual desires and by using homosocial behaviors for homoerotic purposes. They ultimately break free from the system by using their desire for one another as a liberating force. By the end of the movie, the women have articulated their needs and wants, speaking through both language and

action. The film mirrors the vocalization of the women by representing a text through which Mehta's own voice is heard.

As Spivak notes in her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," navigating the hegemonic vocabulary of colonialism is a difficult challenge. Supposedly the subaltern can never speak in a discourse that has been created only by Western academics and historical intellectuals. Many of the authors struggle with this very issue and determine that somehow they must create a language that not only can be heard by the Western world, but that also reflects their own cultural milieu. Das generates her unique "human" language with "distortions" and "queerness" that reflect her own state of imperfection and honest reflection (14, 11, 11). Alexander addresses the same issue in her memoirs and determines that she can bend and twist the English language to suit her own purposes as well.

Deepa Mehta faces a slightly different challenge. By engaging in the film industry, she risks further ensconcing the subaltern image in the shadow of the Western "Self." Films often exploit the image of the native informant/subaltern and re-appropriate it to generate capital that "the object of the representation will never acquire" (Gairola 314). On the one hand, films are so capital intensive that they risk reproducing dominant relations of power. On the other hand, it is possible that film in this new millennium, where access to media is becoming much more prolific, offers women "the possibility of creating visual narratives that use and counter the vehicles of patriarchy" (Gairola 315). Certain mediascapes provide large and complex ranges of images and narratives to viewers throughout the world, in which "the world of commodities and the world of news and politics are profoundly mixed" (Appadurai 35). The film industry's inception profited Western capitalists and promoted Western ideas. Female directors (such as Deepa Mehta, Mira Nair, and Aparna Sen), however, have appropriated and restructured the

industry in a way that challenges the patriarchal implications (just like the other authors did to the English language). Deepa Mehta and Mira Nair both use film to expose the female body, filming erotic scenes with naked bodies that are extremely taboo in India. In doing so they free the female body from the patriarchal vision of it confined in layers of saris and celebrate its beauty and fertility (filming scenes of breastfeeding and pregnant mothers as well). Thus, the film industry provides another outlet for women's to speak, and Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* represents a text we can read to hear their voices.

Conclusion

The authors/artists in my thesis come from different backgrounds with different histories and reasons for speaking, but each one uses her talents and skills to create a text that expresses something from a personal subaltern consciousness. Although the women may not represent an insurgency through collectivity, they all explore topics that suggest dissatisfaction with the status quo. Kamala Das' poetry explores the politics of female knowledge and identity, and Meena Alexander's memoirs expose the social shaming of female bodies. Deepa Mehta's film illustrates how marriages can oppress wives more than they can husbands. At the same time, female characters in these texts use language, shamefulness, and desire to demonstrate agency and resistance to patriarchal structures and institutions.

The authors demonstrate that subalterns can partake in hegemonic discourse through the publication of poetry, autobiography, and film. They do so without losing their position as subalterns by destabilizing the hegemonic norms of production and discourse associated with Western and patriarchal modes of thinking. Their success suggests that future subalterns could also use modes that remain outside normal methods of production, such as folklore, traditional dance, or painting. Spivak only considers the discourses taking place in the Western world because that is where she thinks it is impossible for the subaltern speak. Perhaps future post-colonial critics and academics interested in subaltern studies should look for places where the subaltern is already speaking, but no one is listening.

Works Cited

- Alexander, Meena. *The Storm: A Poem in Five Parts*. New York: Red Dust, 1989.
- _____. *Fault Lines: A Memoir ; with a New Preface*. New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2003.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Bowell, T. "Feminist Standpoint Theory." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 2011.
- Craughwell, Kathleen. "Movies Grounded to 'Earth' Political Upheaval in 1947 India is the subject of the second film in director Deepa Mehta's trilogy." Los Angeles Times 9 Sept. 1999: F10.
- Das, Kamala. *My Story: The Compelling Autobiography of the Most Controversial Indian Writer*. 2nd ed. Kerala State, India: D C, 1996.
- _____. "An Introduction." *Summer in Calcutta: Fifty Poems*. Delhi: Rajinder Paul, 1965.
- Gairola, Rahul. "Burning with Shame: Desire and South Asian Patriarchy, from Gayatri Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak' to Deepa Mehta's Fire." *Comparative Literature* Autumn 54.4 (2002): 307-24
- Gibson, K. "English Only Court Cases Involving the U.S. workplace: The myths of Language Use and the Homogenization of Bilingual Workers' Identities." *Second Language Studies* 15.2 (2004): 1-60.
- Harding, Luke. "Screen: No bridge over troubled Water." The Guardian [India] 21 April 2000.
- Kafka, Phillipa. "Outsiders Silenced: On Domestic Violence and Suppression and Denial of Female Sexuality." *On the Outside Looking In(dian): Indian Women Writers at Home and Abroad*. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2003. 118-70.

Lenz, Brooke. "Postcolonial Fiction and the Outsider Within: Toward a Literary Practice of Feminist Standpoint Theory." *Feminist Formations* 16.2 (2004): 98-120.

Mehta, Deepa, dir. *Fire*. Zeitgeist, 1996.

Minh-Ha, Trinh T. *Women, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989.

Moore-Gilbert, Bart. "Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty." 2nd ed. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism*. Web. 4 Apr. 2012.

Rushdie, Salman. *Shame*. New York: Vintage International, 1983.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988.

_____. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985): 243-61.

Spolsky, B. (1999). Second-language learning. In J. Fishman (Ed.), *Handbook of language and ethnic identity* (pp. 181-192). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Taylor, Diane. "An Interview with Deepa Mehta." Guardian [London, England] 13 Nov. 1998.

Warrior, Shobha. "The Rediff Interview/Kamala Das." *Rediff On the Net*. Web. 23 Mar. 2012.

<<http://www.rediff.com/news/1996/3107adas.htm>>.

West, Candace and Don H. Zimmerman. "Doing Gender." *Gender and Society*. 1.2 (1987): 125-151.