

Can Women Speak? A Spivakian Study of Deborah Ellis's *The Bread Winner*



Shahana Bari	M.Phil, Department of English, Qurtuba University of Science and Technology, Peshawar <a href="mailto:shahanabari.sbbu@gmail.com">shahanabari.sbbu@gmail.com</a>
Dr. Irfan Ali Shah	Assistant Professor, Department of English, Qurtuba University of Science and Technology, Peshawar
Shahtaj Iqbal khan	M.Phil, Department of English, Qurtuba University of Science and Technology, Peshawar
Hafsa Taj	M.Phil, Department of English, Qurtuba University of Science and Technology, Peshawar

**Abstract:** *This study attempts to explore voiceless and voiced struggle of the protagonist, Parvana, in Taliban dominated society depicted in Deborah Ellis, The Bread Winner. The Taliban in the selected novel, have suppressed the women, not allowing them freedom of movement and expression and the right to education. Parvana, the protagonist, remains voiceless against the Taliban's suppression of women, however, later on, challenging their rules, becomes voiced in her struggle. The methodology applied in the work is qualitative, wherein, textual analysis of the novel is made. The theoretical framework in the work is Spivakian feminism, which highlights the suppression and oppression of the protagonist in the selected novel. The findings of the work are that Parvana, living in the repressive society, struggles against the Taliban's suppression. She becomes voiced and like women in other society, she can have the courage to make decisions to run her life. The results show that Afghanistan remained a repressive state under the Taliban regime in terms of suppression of women.*

**Keywords:** Parvana ,Struggle, Spivakian Feminism, Taliban Society

**Introduction**

According to Bergman (2002), Feminism, in general, is a philosophy that is motivated by the idea that all women should be treated equally in society. The worldview ignored the long-held belief that women were less than human beings. In the past, it was mistakenly believed that women are weak and irrational by nature. It was once thought that women were completely dependent on males and unable to live alone.

Several philosophers and thinkers believed that women were less human than men. The relationship between men and women is, according to Aristotle, "by nature, a relationship of superiority to inferiority and of the ruling to

the ruled service" (Jewett, 2021). Thomas Jefferson also supported women's roles in the home rather than in politics and public service. Charles Darwin, another significant scholar of the previous century, believed that men are intellectually superior to women (Whitehead, 2019).

Furthermore, the researcher has applied the Spivakian concept of feminism, with reference to Gyatri Spivak groundbreaking essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak?* Subalterns are suppressed and marginalized entities having different social, cultural, political, economic, and psychological oppression. Minor, subjugated, mediocre and lower-rank people, are some terms associated with Subalterns (McClella, 2020). Thus, they

have no position in society and remain neglected and suppressed with no identity and history in their surroundings.

A subaltern is someone who is unreachable or inaccessible to the hegemonic authority. In addition to being oppressed, they are also powerless (Spivak, 1988). In her philosophical article *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), Spivak first uses the term Epistemic Violence. The dominance or repression of other people's knowledge systems and modes of knowing is referred to as epistemic violence. It entails forcing dominant ideologies, narratives, and beliefs on marginalized people or groups, effectively silencing their opinions and further marginalizing them.

Under the Spivakian concept, the Subalterns are not accepted socially; they are neglected in society. Thus, in the selected novel, the position of women is similar to that of subalterns. The researcher uses this theory to demonstrate how Taliban rules and gender inequality affect women's mindsets, as seen in the novel's female characters who experience oppression and marginalization in Afghan culture. Women are disallowed to go outside without a veil, and male figures and many forms of expression like reading books and listening to music have been banned. Parvana's parents are from old respected Afghan families and have foreign educations, though they have lost most of their wealth and possessions after years of war. Even though the Taliban restricted girls from getting an education, Parvana loves schooling and she loves getting an education. Parvana, the protagonist of the novel, just because of her feminine origin, has to disguise herself as a boy, she is not allowed to go outside without a male figure. Similarly, another girl named Shauzia, Parvana's former classmate also has to disguise herself as a boy. It depicts the subaltern relationship of the Taliban with the women (Marry and Govind,2022). The researcher focuses on the female characters that how women are subaltern, oppressed and marginalized by dominant force, the Taliban in Afghanistan.

### 1.5 Research Questions

1. What suppression and oppression of women are reflected in the selected novel?
2. How does the protagonist of the selected novel transform from voiceless to voiced under the Taliban regime?

### Literature Review

According to data from the Feminist Majority Foundation, coeducation schools have been in place in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, and many other regions of the nation since the 1950s(Maria,2022). According to the same statistic, more than half of Afghanistan's university students were female before the Taliban seized power. Women received education to become nurses, engineers, doctors, lawyers, and teachers before the Taliban era.

Nepokiski (2020) , states that Feminism describes the campaigns to defend the patriarchal order. Men are given a higher status in the system than women. Feminism as the idea that women and men are, in most respects, on an equal footing.

According to Hook (2000), there are three ways to combat gender inequality: through seeking education, joining a sisterhood, and working. These battles are crucial to wage in the patriarchal society that restricts the independence of women. Now is the moment for women to take genuine action and confront the challenging circumstances in order to alter public view of them. So that they might be on an equal footing with men, women's hardships can be seen as sources of empowerment. Feminist literary criticism was employed to examine the concepts of women that were present in literature.

Women are often associated as a weak figure, not included in all matters and can only do housework. On the other hand, men associated with being superior and dominant. which put women into a subordinated position and women felt very disadvantaged. This is often the reason of oppression towards women. Issues related to women not only found in reality, but also in literary works. Literary works offer a variety of human and humanitarian problems in life and represented through many ways (Amber,2022).

Hartley views that when the Taliban seized power of Kabul in 1996, the majority of educational opportunities for women and girls quickly came to a stop. Almost soon after seizing control of Kabul, the Taliban forbade the majority of girls from attending school and shut down most girls' schools. Despite the Taliban's restriction on women going to school, the majority of men are still able to pursue their education. There are a few home based schools in the country's rural parts that provide girls with limited educational chances, but they constantly live in fear of terrible abuse from Taliban side (Blelic, 2021).

According to reports, one teacher who reportedly objected to the Taliban's laws and insisted that she would keep teaching was shot in the head and stomach before being executed. Her husband, daughter, and students all were witnessed (Akbarian, 2021).

Dabhade (2021), in his research paper "*Suffering of the Children During Taliban Regime*" argues that during the Taliban invasion, there are many ways of dominating the people but those children suffered hugely. The so-called Taliban in Afghanistan are not supposed to allow children to have an education, women are brutally tortured, and confined to their homes and they are not allowed to go anywhere without male companions. Heads of the families have been arrested and shattered to death. Children grieved greatly by the death of the family's patriarch. The female sector of society is defenseless; they were evicted from their homes, and in some households, there are only females who can work. It is unclear how these families can support themselves because no one is working or even going outside to get them their daily necessities. Due to the absence of a remaining breadwinner and a lack of money, the family's financial situation deteriorates, they are unable to meet their basic necessities, and the children eventually perish from famine. The fanatical Taliban coerced young girls into marriage, Taliban troops exploited youngsters, many kids were injured in terrorist assaults and developed disabilities, and many kids ended up orphaned as a result.

Subalterns was a word created by Italian Marxist

philosopher Antonio Gramsci in his book *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1971). It depicts societal groups that are underrepresented. They are not being represented. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a writer from South Asia, was influenced by Gramsci's concept of the Subaltern and talks about it in her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). Being of South Asian descent, Spivak uses the perspective of the Subaltern to speak up for the socially inferior, oppressed, and marginalised group of people. People who are obedient and subdued are referred to as subalterns (Dharmaraj, 2014). They are under the control and oppression of a strong authority, both mentally and emotionally. They become mute and voiceless members of society as a result of these restrictions and oppressions (Zaib, 2017). Subalterns are not included in the existing social order. Subalterns don't have a place in society (Spivak, 1985). From a political standpoint, subalterns are weak, ineffective, and helpless on a global scale (Spivak 1998). Spivak is a writer from South Asia who has seen the silent people in society and writes for them in order to defend their standing in society (1998). How well can the subaltern speak? The same strategy has also been used by post-colonialist writers. They both oppose colonial power in the same way. Subaltern critics evaluate the issues that the masses encounter and examine how power affects such issues (Zaib, 2017). Spivak refers to a subaltern as someone who hasn't dared to speak out against a strong authority figure (1988). She believes that the Subaltern has no history and is unable to talk. No one is allowed to know or speak Subaltern. In this paper, which highlights current themes including women's plight, oppression, and subordination in society, especially in Taliban-dominated Afghanistan, the researcher applies this theory while keeping in mind Spivak's notion.

The researcher will use this theory to demonstrate how all women in the novel are viewed as subalterns and are stifled and defeated. Spivak asserts that subalterns are not socially acceptable and hold no official place inside society. The literature also illustrates the

same phenomenon. According to the character Parvana, who believes that being female is a weaker and suppressed gender in society and lacks the freedom to leave the house in her feminine appearance in a Taliban-dominated society, social norms and values imposed by the Taliban in Afghanistan control women's mindsets. Parvana disguised herself as a boy to support her family. Females were confined to their homes and resembled a weaker, smaller gender. The researcher will highlight, through the persona of Parvana, how women are considered as inferiors and are ill-served by moral and righteous forces that deny them any voice. Women are also denied the right to live the lives they choose and wish. The researcher emphasises and demonstrates how male dominance controls women's lives and how it shapes their thinking.

### **Discussion**

In our culture, men are viewed as being powerful and capable of being heroes, whereas, women are consistently portrayed as being weak and in need of a lot of assistance from men. This perception is habituated even from childhood. Most literature put men as a central hero character. In addition, when we see people in our surrounding, it is observed that men are doing activities, that enhance the idea men are heroic. For instance, a father consistently does massive physical jobs, mother only performs mild physical tasks like sewing or cooking. These factors shape the perception that men are stronger and better equipped to handle challenging situations than women.

*The Bread Winner* by Deborah Ellis breaks this perception, the story revolves around on Parvana's struggles in Taliban culture. The Taliban group establishes various laws that severely restrict the movement of women and young girls. Women must remain inside their homes. They are not allowed to leave the building unless it is an emergency. They are permitted to leave the building, but they are not free to do so. There are numerous mechanisms they have to follow. They should first cover their entire body with a burqa. Second, they should be escorted by men who are their relatives. Besides, they are forbidden to go to school and work ( p.

7). These rules reflect the Taliban's lack of confidence in women's abilities. Men are free to engage in all activities outside the home, whereas women are restricted from doing anything. The Taliban does not believe that women are equally capable of performing tasks outside the home as do men. According to Shaista Wahab (2010), the Taliban year unfortunately left a harsh legacy to social life, including increased interethnic distrust, the complete dismantling of the educational system, and a reversal of decades of steady progress on the status of women.

Parvana's struggles to fight against the Taliban's rules are the proof that women and female children are worthy to be equal to men. She does some actions like disguising as a boy to become a breadwinner and fulfill other needs of the family, optimizing her attempts in saving her family, encouraging her family and helping other women to survive. Even though the Taliban restricted girls from getting an education, Parvana loves schooling and she loves getting an education. Parvana, the protagonist of the novel, just because of her feminine origin, has to disguise herself as a boy, she is not allowed to go outside without a male figure. Similarly, another girl named Shauzia, Parvana's former classmate also has to disguise herself as a boy. It depicts the subaltern relationship of the Taliban with the women (Marry and Govind, 2022). In Taliban society, it is uncommon for women or even young girls like Parvana to engage in such behavior, because men are obliged to perform these tasks without any restrictions, they are the ones who can go outdoors freely. yet, Parvana goes ahead and performs all of these things because there isn't any male figure in her house. She steps in to protect her family after her father is abducted by Taliban soldiers. Despite being eleven-year-old, she accomplishes important tasks for the benefit of her family.

Parvana's struggles against the Taliban's rules that extremely restrict women's movement show some qualities that women actually have. These qualities signify that equality can be achieved by women. The first quality is having capability in taking the decision and the real action.

It is evident from Parvana's struggles that she is

capable of making decisions and really acting on them. She has the capacity to choose what she can do. She makes the decision to disguise herself as a boy, she believes that her family depends on her and that the only thing she can do to assist them is to dress like a boy. Even though her family provides her the option to disguise herself, she ultimately chooses to do so because she believes it will be advantageous for their family (p65–66). By working as a letter reader, seller, and bone digger, she is also able to take meaningful action to make money. She goes to the jail in earnest to try to save her father. She brings the other woman home as protection. These deeds provide as evidence that Parvana is able to make decisions and carry them out in reality.

he third quality is becoming brave and confident women. her struggles make her confident and brave. She is brave enough to yell at the Taliban soldiers to help her. She also stayed confidently by herself in Kabul when the rest of her family travelled to Mazar to wait for her father to return to her home. She is not afraid travelling to Mazar to save her family

Parvana's struggles serve as evidence that young girls or women are capable of performing tasks that were once thought to be exclusively the domain of men. Despite having different experiences than grownups, she is nonetheless capable of thinking and think about what would be best for their life and the lives of others. She is also able to maximize her skills in a way that helps lots of people in a very severe, like the Taliban society. These characteristics are undoubtedly present in the women living in Taliban society, as well as in women living in all other types of societies around the world. Therefore, there shouldn't be any more gender inequality between men and women, or even between female and male children.

### **Conclusion**

The focus of this study was to examine the suppression and oppression of women, to explore the transformation of protagonist from voiceless to voiced in Taliban society in the selected novel. The conclusions that can be drawn are explained below.

The regulations of Taliban group which extremely limit women's actions are certainly harmful to women in Taliban society, it causes two types of harm to women. Fear and lack of confidence insecurity cause the most damage. Taliban punishment to women who disobey the roles make them afraid and less confident in their ability to make decisions and do certain acts. The second harm is desperation and unwillingness to struggle. The majority of women in Taliban society are unable to envision a better future for themselves. Female activists have no chance because the Taliban severely limit their travels. Additionally, the constraint makes them unwillingness to struggle.

In conclusion, Parvana's struggles demonstrate that living in the repressive Taliban society does not suppress and oppressed. They cannot weaken and unvoiced women. Just like women in other society, they are capable of making decisions and taking actual acts to run their lives. They are also independent, brave, and confident. They are voiced. They are able to raise their voice against restrictions. These qualities prove that women are equally worthy and capable to men even.

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