

“Can the Subalterns Speak?”: A Post Feminist Study of *The River And the Source*



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Abstract: *This study explores post-feminism in the context of Margaret A. Ogola's novel *The River and the Source* through the lens of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" By focusing on the experiences and narratives of female characters in the novel, this analysis seeks to examine how Ogola's work articulates the voices of women within a postfeminist framework and the extent to which these voices challenge or reinforce existing power structures. *The River and the Source* chronicles the lives of several generations of women in a fictional African society, highlighting their struggles, resilience, and agency. This study employs a post-feminist perspective to assess how these women navigate and resist patriarchal and colonialist constraints. Through a close reading of the novel, it evaluates how the characters' experiences reflect broader themes of identity, autonomy, and resistance. The study critically engages Patricia Hill Collins as its primary theorist with Spivak's concept of the subaltern and examines how Ogola's narrative either provides a platform for these subaltern voices or inadvertently silences them. By exploring the complex interplay between gender, colonialism, and post-colonialism in Ogola's portrayal of female characters, this study sheds light on the challenges and possibilities of feminist and post-feminist discourses in postcolonial literature.*

Keywords: Subalterns, Post Feminism, Feminism, Resistance, Women Empowerment, Marginalization

Introduction

This research highlights the status of African women from resistance to independence in society of today with an eye of post feminism. The change in women status is presented through the analysis of the novel *The River And the Source* (1994). Four generations of African women have been shown going through this process of change in social status in *The River And the Source* by Margret Atieno Ogola published in 1994. This article answers the question raised by Spivak by asserting that Yes! subalterns can speak in an era of post feminism where feminism is not needed as it has achieved its goals and women of today are no more weak creatures. An African American theorist,

Patricia Hill Collins is the key theorist for this article and Angela McRobbie also supports the arguments conferred here with a deep insight into post feminism. The female characters of the novel show the power of women and their struggle of the past to come forward equal to the level of men. The article is only concerned with the female characters presented in the novel as they show the independent status in the age of post feminism.

The current research focuses on the female characters presented in African literature not as weaker ones but courageous and independent. It shows how women have influenced the denial of subalternization and highlights the self-actualization and freedom of African women to

assert that they have voice and they can speak. A close textual analysis of the novel *The River And the Source*, develops and justifies the arguments presented here. African politicians, social activists, scholars such as Joyce Banda and Simphiwe Dana are actively participating as leaders to change the negative circumstances affecting women by using their power, activism, knowledge and creative skills. This article focuses African literature referring also to Black Feminism to highlight the empowerment of women in African writings as well as in society. The background history of Africa regarding colonialism and imperialism and involvement of African women in social movements and national struggles mark the place of feminism leading to post feminism in Africa. African women have faced the hard circumstances and their experience have made them strong and fearless and powerful as Crenshaw while talking about the hard work done by women, says in Sojourner Truth:

Look at me! Look at my arm! I could have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man-when I could get it-and bear the lash as well (Crenshaw, 1851, p. 56)

The above quoted lines are clear example of the power and independence of African women. African women are considering themselves equal to men and are not dependent upon them. They are no more Subalterns of the society. The victims of injustice and male insensitivity are not only victimized because of their external circumstances, but they also suffer a lot because they lack strength, resourcefulness, and being a woman a vital sense of their own integrity. Wesley Brown in *Women writers in Black African* (1981) says "their inner weakness often stems from the degree to which they have internalized male modes of perception until they accept male notions about female inadequacy and about masculine privilege" (Brown, 1981, p. 37). She further postulates that all the major female writers are "preoccupied with the woman's personal strength-or lack of it when they analyze sexual roles and sexual inequality" (p.189). This research admires Brown's

contribution to the criticism of female literary works and provides justification for the focus on the female characters of an African novel. Pamela Oloo makes a feminist stylistic analysis of Ogola's novel *The River And the Source*. She says that "the male characters of the novel live very short life spans" (Oloo, 2005, p. 42). She says that "Ogola discredits or devalues the male subject and honors or credits the female subject" (Oloo, 2005, p. 23). It is very true that the female characters of the novel are in a strong position and they have dominating roles in the novel while male characters are likely to play supporting roles only. Tom Odhiambo in *Writing Alternative Womanhood in Kenya in Margaret Ogola's The River And the Source* writes "The several female protagonists in the text representing different historical periods in Kenya's history symbolically articulate a kind of womanhood in contemporary Kenya" (Odhiambo, 2006, p. 44). Unlike previous works on women , Womanhood along with the current liberal and powerful social status of women in an age of post feminism, is the major concern of this research article.

Literature Review:

In the past, women were not at liberty and they were portrayed as suppressed and subaltern in writings. On the contrary this article presents the independent, powerful and strong side of women. During the past years of feminism in English fiction women were presented powerless and miserable. Simon de Beauvoir writes in his famous book *The Second Sex*, one of the famous books in feminism especially with reference to second wave, "Man is defined as a human being and a woman as a female- whenever she behaves as a human as a human being, she is said to imitate male" (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 49). This was the plight of women in the past era when feminism was striving for their rights. English literature is abundant with this type of representation of women, however, in the later years changes started to occur and feminism gained a strong position and started to achieve its goals. Women started to resist as Nora in *Doll's House* (1879). Ibsen was a feminist and he took a bold step while showing a woman leaving her children and husband in

order to maintain herself and dignity. However, on the whole Nora is also the same house wife who takes care of her family and always makes sacrifices for her family but at the end Ibsen makes a bold decision when he makes Nora leave her family. This was indeed a milestone and a step towards achievements of feminism.

Feminism further expands to related approaches in different contexts as Black feminism specifically advocates for rights of black women. Alice Walker and Toni Morrison are the notable names in Black feminism. Alice Walker highlighted the issues of black women in her works as one of them is her famous novel *The Color Purple* published in 1982 in which two sisters face the hard circumstances. African women experienced a world full of hardships and occupied by men. Many African writers worked on feminism and its related issues. Some major names among African feminists are Theo Sowa, Abena Busia, Nana Sekyiamah, Amina Mama, Ama Ata Aidoo and some contemporaries are Chinua Achebe, Aminatta Forna and Mariamaba. So far most of the African writers paid attention towards the miseries of women and feminists presented them as weak and powerless but this article presents the arguments on empowerment and freedom of women through the analysis of *The River and the Source* rather they have reached the position where they can act freely or at least resist openly against undesired circumstance. The novel is best example of depiction of traditions and culture of the society and age. Novel is divided into four parts presenting four different generations and a process of evolution and continuous change among these generations. Some traditions go on to next generation and other get vanished with a passage of time. Colonial and post colonial aspects are also present here along with elements of Christianity. In spite of these various aspects of the novel, this article concentrates on female characters from post feminist angle where women are not weak but equivalent to men. This Article analyzes the novel to assert that in today's society if subalterns are women, they can speak. Akoko, the leading character of the novel is a real example of courageous, confident, bold and

strong women who proves that Subalterns can speak.

An Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci used the term subalterns in order to refer to low rank or powerless people in any society who are suffering because of the people who are in power and dominating in society. They are not voiced and are not allowed to make the history of that particular society by doing any worthwhile task rather they are kept on the margins of the society. Gramsci is interested in making their condition and status better, he writes "The subaltern classes according to definition are not unified and cannot unite until and unless they are able to become state" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 33). Before Spivak, in twentieth century a subaltern studies group appeared under leadership of Ranjit Guha in India who defined it as "a name for the common attribute of subordination in south Asian society whether it is shown in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any kind of different way" (Guha, 1982, p. 33). It was Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, an Indian American postcolonial feminist who made this term more complex and in 1994 wrote an essay *Can The Subalterns Speak?* (1994). She assesses the issues of subalterns while considering Hindu women and examples of Sati. She talks about problems of Indian women as "dispersed not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shutting, which is the displaced figuration of the third world woman caught between tradition and modernization" (Spivak, 1994, p. 44). In short, Spivak considers women as subalterns and challenges their social status by asking the question can subalterns speak. Feminism works for the power of women who are considered subalterns or on the margins of society.

Feminism, a most well discussed issue of the past as well as of present, advocates for the equal rights and just position of women in society and condemns women 's suffrage. In the past it worked in three different waves for the equality of women and to highlight as well as condemn the suppression and sufferings of women in patriarchal society. Different famous personalities and theorists played their roles during these waves of feminism to gain a

privileged place for women as Wollstonecraft (1792) also opens up for women rights and she discusses the issues of education for women in *Vindication of rights of women* that even for women leading a domestic life at homes, education is necessary because social life is interlinked with domestic life and they are not different from each other. In 1980, post feminism appeared on the scene as a reaction to specifically the second wave of feminism and argued that goals of feminism have been accomplished and feminism is no more in fashion as women have gained the rights and positions which give them power, liberty and independence. In context with this backlash to feminism, female radicals argued that "We're interested in people now, not in men and women, that it would be 'pro-woman without being anti-man, and that their stance is called post-feminist" (Cott, 1987, p. 56). Susan Bolotin's 1982 article *Voices of the Postfeminist Generation* published in New York Times Magazine introduced the term with a large number of interviews with women who largely agreed with the achievements of feminism. Susan's book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (2006), quotes that in 1980, feminism has been successfully redefined by a backlash against second wave feminism. Angela McRobbie, a post feminist argues that feminism is decisively aged as she writes:

Post feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality has been gained, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasize that feminism is no longer needed, as it is a spent force. (McRobbie, 2008, p.11)

This elaborates that feminism has become aged because women of modern society are not facing the problems which were the agenda of feminism.

Theoretical Framework:

Discussion of feminism and postfeminism leads us to Black feminism and African women who faced the most hard circumstances still they came forward as strong, bold and independent women. Black feminism grew up in the 1960s.

There were already in process Black liberation movement and Women's movement but still there was dire need of Black feminism. Black women felt that they are sexually repressed in Black liberation movement because it only talks about black men and are racially suppressed in the Women's movement as it only works for white women. So, black women were totally ignored and this fact created Black feminism which claims that class, gender, sex and social roles are inter connected with each other. So, other than gender, some other factors can also be the reason for suppression. Sometimes gender can be the reason and other times race but in case of African women they were doubly marginalized as they were women and black at the same time. Their hard circumstances made them strong and made them able to stand before the world with full strength. As Patricia Hill Collins, an African American feminist, In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990), enhances the arguments and the social contradictions raised by Sojourner Truth, as follows "If women are supposed passive and fragile, then why are Black women used as mules and ascribed heavy cleaning chores?" (Collins, 1990, p. 34). She challenges the notion that women are always weak and perfect for household work only and asserts that they work hard as mules so they cannot be called fragile or weak. This strength of African women and their freedom of choice in their independent life is visible in the selected novel named as *The River And the Source*. African women were tired of being suppressed and silent on the basis of color, race , gender or sex issues but their hardships became their strength and in the era of post feminism they emerged as powerful ones. Collins argues that "By making the community stronger, African-American women become empowered" (Collins, 1990, p. 34). It shows that empowerment of black women is not doubtful in the present era of post feminism.

Discussion and Analysis:

The selected novel is representing the four generations of African women who are evolving from acceptance to resistance and further from resistance to independence. In this novel the

major notable characters are obviously female characters who are powerful, strong, free and are having choices of their own in different issues like religion, marriage or education. African women are empowering as Collins writes about their empowerment "Their roles are a source of empowerment for them" (Collins, 1998, p.54). This power and freedom is the property of the female characters in *The River And the Source* (1994). An analysis of the novel is presented here to describe the different aspects of women's life like education of women, importance of women, strength and independence of women according to post feminist perspective. Women have become an integral part of today's society. They have gained an important place and are playing important roles in almost every department. They are not treated as subalterns rather they are considered an important and core part of the family and the society. The novel also shows the worth and value of African women. In the beginning of the novel Ogola describes the importance of women as a father who is obviously a male accepts the importance of women. She writes "later he would say wisely, with something of turnabout that a home without daughters is like a spring without a source" (Ogola, 1994, p. 9). The value or importance of female figures among family is very much clear here. This is what post feminism says that goals of feminism have been achieved, as it is clear here that women have gained the importance. As the lead character is a female not a male. In this novel male have to pay bride price to get married and in this way they bring wealth to their family and prove that women are important and cannot be taken for granted. For Akoko, the central character, the highest bride price was demanded which shocked everyone "After careful consultation and a lot of discussion we have, therefore, reached the conclusion that thirty heads of cattle should be the proper bride price" (p. 19). This proved the worth of women who cannot be taken for free. As when Akoko was a child and crying, her father, a chief, was worried about her. Ogola writes "the father hung around rather in chiefly manner, perhaps in fear that his spring would dry up before it had really begun" (p. 10). This line depicts that women have value

and an important individual place in post feminist society. In the past daughters were considered a burden and were not given any importance but now it is not the same as it is written in the novel "for a home without daughters can never prosper but is faced with eventual poverty and lack of friendships forged in marriage" (p. 11). For the prosperity of the family, females are crucial figures. These revolutions to end gender discriminations are the key points of post feminism as Angela McRobbie, a post feminist says in her book *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2008) "an overarching framework of capacity, freedom, change and gender equality conceals new modes of gender regulation" (McRobbie, 2008, p. 51). This new modification into gender equality makes the women important for the family as well as for the society. To be get known by a woman is not shameful or disgracing rather they have become so worthy and important that their descendants are feeling pride over it as Aoro to impress Wandia says that "somebody should have told her that he was the great grandson of Akoko" (Ogola, 1994, p. 232). These words vividly picture the significance of women for men. Before marriage she was very much important for her family and father, after getting married she holds a valuable position for her husband and for the next generations, even after death, she remains a worthy place and important figure to get inspiration. All other female characters also portray their worth in this novel as Ogola writes about Nayabera "Nayabera thrived and had such an affective personality to charm the birds off the trees" (p. 29). Women can charm the people as well as nature. After analyzing the depiction of women worth and importance, the next step is to highlight the educational opportunities for women.

Post feminism claims that women have gained the freedom and opportunity to get education and leave their marks in professional life as well. Angela McRobbie, a post feminist writes "The young women are offered a national form of equality or justice, concretized in education and employment" (McRobbie, 2008, p. 3). Feminism worked for the educational rights of women as in the past women were supposed to

remain at homes and were not allowed to get education at all. In some cases they were allowed to get education but that education was again different from the education provided to men. Women were taught household tasks such as stitching, knitting or cooking etc. But as this is the era of post feminism where feminism has achieved its goals so women are now getting education and they are enrolled in the same courses taught to men and are becoming professionals as doctors, teachers, pilots or police officers etc. In this novel women are also getting educational opportunities and joining practical fields. Katwiwa Mule in *Women's Spaces Women's Visions: Politics, poetics and Resistance in African Women's Vision*, pens up that "female authors are reshaping and redefining the images of womanhood, giving new visions, and reshaping and fixing the distorted characterizations of African women in fiction" (Mule, 2007). The same reshaping and redefining of womanhood has been done by Ogola who presents the working women as well. Her female characters are getting education and doing it in an excellent way as about Awiti she writes "She could mesmerize the class with her powers of recall" (Ogola, 1994, p. 107). Girls are intelligent and can excellently compete with men in education as Awiti secures good grades as compared to Owuor . Ogola writes "Awiti excelled in reading and Owuor took to numbers like a duck to water" (Ogola, 1994, p. 108). Further, Awiti shines among good grades as Ogola writes "'Out of the eleven who sat for the examination only five passed and Awiti was the best of them" (p. 121). For this bright educational career she receives awards and certificates and finally she becomes a teacher and starts receiving pay. She becomes an example and an object of curiosity. "She was an object of curiosity; a woman who worked at anything apart from tiling the land and rearing children was a hitherto unknown phenomenon" (p.130). It proved a breakdown from traditional barriers put on women. Education is necessary because educated women prove better mothers and productive members of society as in this novel Awiti being a teacher and Wandia being a doctor contribute in betterment. Awiti at the time of her marriage was introduced as a light

because of education as Ogola writes "She is highly educated and a teacher of children. So while bringing an educated woman, your son will actually be bringing a light to your home. He is indeed a very lucky man" (p. 138). Awiti proves so and she is conscious about the education of her children even before their birth and she decides to send her daughter to university. Next generations further excel more in education as Vera. "Vera got a first division pass with notable distinctions in Mathematics, Biology, Physics, Geography and English and shining credits in Chemistry and Literature" (p. 185). Women were not allowed to get simple education but in the post feminist and modern era they are becoming experts in science subjects as well. Vera decides to become an electrical engineer and Wandia a doctor. She further gets education in the pathology department and after her second degree she scores a university position. She is an example of such women who have to leave their children and family for some time in order to get their degree. And the same process of getting education and becoming professional women goes on generation upon generation. Lisa in next generation is also a very intelligent girl and a brilliant student. Her teachers think that she is extraordinarily intelligent and they are inclined to promote her up hurriedly in next standards. In this novel we find almost all major female characters getting education and becoming professionals as Awiti a teacher, Wandia a doctor, Becky an air hostess so we can argue that in post feminist society women rights for education have been achieved and they are getting education. This thing makes them strong, courageous and independent because they don't have to depend upon others for their needs rather they can support their family and lead an independent life.

African women are portrayed in this novel as independent, free, bold, courageous and strong. They are not weak and are not meant to bend; rather they are strong enough to face the circumstances courageously. In this novel the depicted African women are not facing any kind of fears and limitations to act in their personal lives affairs. They are independent and free to

decide about very sensitive issues like religion, marriage, relationships. Professions etc. Akoko is the woman who is independent enough to lead her life on her own after her husband's death. She does not seek any help from anyone and maintains her wealth. This independent status gives her freedom of choice and courage to face enemies. Atieno tries to overpower her but she is powerful enough to handle the situation. "He summoned Akoko who declined to go" (p. 82). A woman is strong enough to reject the orders of men. Religion is a very sensitive issue but here in this novel women are deciding about their religion which suggests their strong and independent position. Nayabera says "I have made a decision to seek the new religion which you have heard about" (p. 94). She changes her religion and turns to a Christian. Her daughter and mother also follow her. After this shift in religion, she becomes Maria. A new Christian name. It shows that African women can change their religion as well as identity according to their own choices. Feminism was advocating for this freedom of choice for women which they have gained now that is why McRobbie writes "feminism is decisively aged and made to seem redundant" (McRobbie, 2008, p. 11). As Vera decides not to marry "Tommy asked me to marry him and I said no" (Ogola, 1994, p.213). It is the freedom which they have and they can freely deny the proposals of males even. Wandia, another independent and bold character of the novel, herself proposes to Aoro. Becky chooses her profession according to her wish even though it goes against her father and she also decides all by herself about her married life. All these characters and choices made by them prove that African women are independent and strong. They are independent and free in their religious, professional and sexual affairs as Becky is living alone in a flat and is frequently changing her boyfriend "Becky changed men continuously and frequently as she changed dresses" (p. 258). In *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, Angela favors the boldness of women by writing that "Women no more abide by the rules, they can no longer be relied upon to be passive, grateful recipients of male sexual passion" (McRobbie, 2008, p. 31). Black women are

neither silent nor fearful rather they are strong and powerful. Collins (1990) states in her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* that the roles of African women are not causing them to become weak rather they are the reason for their strength and the heavy tasks assigned to them make them strong and powerful. All female characters of this novel are meant to be strong and they don't get afraid by the hardships and trials. Rather these things make them strong as Akoko is the best example among these characters who face difficulties and get strong. Collins writes about this power as "Power from this perspective is a creative power used for the good of the community" (Collins, 1990, p. 34). Akoko has been the strong one since her childhood as she surprised everyone when she began to sit without support after a few months of her birth and also she started walking at a very early age. She does not feel shy while coming in front of her suitor and she never gets afraid of anyone even when she remains alone after her husband. She knows very well how to remain strong and courageous and where to make a perfect use of her witty tongue. When she faces her brother in law there Ogola describes the courage of Akoko in perfect words as "She looked at him angrily straight in the eye and hissed 'just you dare!' He retreated at the pure venom in her eyes" (Ogola, 1994, p. 33). At another point she answers him very boldly in the following words "Your size can be double than I, but my courage is three times greater than yours" (p. 83). Even age does not confine her dare and power. Women are no less than men as the following line shows "Elizabeth had been no exception apart from the fact that her father had been a woman---- her grandmother Akoko" (p. 187). This shows that Akoko played the role of a father too and she did not step back at any moment or at any problem. Wandia's mother is another strong woman of the novel who does not know the meaning of giving up and leads her life without her husband. In short, we can say that African women are independent, strong, fearless, bold, confident and free. Their roles give them power and they always have a choice to make as Collins writes "The presence of Afro-centric feminist thought proposes that there is

always choice to make and power to act" (Collins, 1990, p. 234).

Conclusion:

To cap up our discussion, it is argued that all major female characters of the novel prove that African women have gained the required status and they are no more voiceless subalterns of our society. The analysis of the novel from a post feminist perspective shows that feminism has achieved its goals as women are getting equal opportunities in society and they are independent and powerful. In the novel it is very much clear that the courage and struggle of women from early generations have paved the way for next generations and women of these generations have evolved from resistance to independence. When they become professional they gain independence and this independence makes them strong and gives power to speak. So, women as subaltern can speak in the era of post feminism where they are powerful and independent. In the present era they have a voice to speak and power to raise that voice to make it audible to the rest of the world.

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