

**THE SUBALTERN 'SPEAKS': AGENCY IN NESHANI ANDREAS'  
*THE PURPLE VIOLET OF OSHAANTU***

**by**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 1 ‘CAN THE SUBALTERN SPEAK?’ BY GAYATRI SPIVAK (1988)</u></a> .....	12
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 2 SILENCING, VOICE AND AGENCY IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT</u></a> .....	29
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 3 THE PURPLE VIOLET OF OSHAANTU BY NESHANI ANDREAS</u></a> .....	42
<a href="#"><u>CONCLUSION</u></a> .....	58
<a href="#"><u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u></a> .....	60

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## **INTRODUCTION**

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In this dissertation I will take a critical look at certain sections of the essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ by the post-colonial critic Gayatri Spivak, which deal specifically with the silencing of the subaltern subject. I will examine some of the criticism leveled against the article from different post-colonial theorists, and add my own critique to the above. I will then apply these conclusions to the novel *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* by the Namibian woman writer Neshani Andreas and will discuss how agency is engendered by both the writer and the female characters in the novel. Agency can be described as the capacity to make choices on a personal or collective level and to act upon these choices, while accepting responsibility for the actions and their consequences. The action taken is mostly against oppressive circumstances and should ideally bring about change on a personal or social level. In the process of critically discussing the novel, I will problematize (examine it as a problem to be solved) the notion of the ‘silencing’ of the female subaltern subjects in Andreas’s novel by the dominant ideologies (institutionalized systems of beliefs which dominate society at any given time) of colonialism and patriarchy. I will further examine the extent to which the women act against these ideologies - how they can be heard to be ‘speaking’ or ‘not speaking’ in the novel. Throughout the discussion the issue of self-representation of the sexed subaltern subject will be considered - can the voice of the subaltern be represented by the post-colonial woman intellectual or does she understand her situation sufficiently in order to represent herself? The term ‘subaltern’ is drawn here from Antonio Gramsci’s writings and refers to a subordinate position in terms of class, gender, race and culture. In its original

usage by Gramsci the term signified the proletariat whose voice could not be heard, being effectively written out of the capitalist bourgeois narrative. It has since come to stand in for all subordinate subjects in society and has been revived in history to draw distinctions between the elite and the non-elite within colonized societies.

Spivak's essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' exists in several forms and was first published in 1985, with updated versions published in 1988 and in 1999. I will examine the 1988 version which appears in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* edited by Nelson and Grossberg. As a well-known post-colonial critic who applies contemporary Western 'high' theory to post-colonial issues, Spivak draws on discourses as diverse as feminism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction and Marxism as a basis for her many and varied publications. These include translations, the first and most famous being the translation of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* in 1976; four books - *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, a collection of essays on various topics published in 1987, *The Post-colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies and Dialogues*, published in 1990, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* published in 1993, in which Spivak offers strategies for improving higher education on a global scale, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, published in 1999; and numerous interviews and theoretical and critical articles of which 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in its different versions, is one. In these varied works Spivak brings a feminist perspective to bear on both deconstruction and post-colonial theory, critically examines imperialism and colonial discourse, and uses Marxism to analyze capitalism and the international division of labour. She has contributed vastly to different disciplines in the academic world, not the least of which are history and literary criticism. Post- colonial criticism, international feminism,

higher education on a global scale, and the economic super-exploitation of Third World female labour have been treated with special passion throughout Spivak's career. Internationally the intellectual and political world is indebted to Spivak's insight into global capitalism and would have been much the poorer without her writing, her theories and her political stance.

One of Spivak's main concerns throughout her career seems to be the sexed subaltern subject in both the colonial and neo-colonial or Third World. One of the major questions she addresses in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' is whether the subaltern can speak for herself in her own voice, or whether she is doomed only to be represented and spoken for by the intellectual, in this case the Third World female intellectual, regarded by Spivak as the only one capable of representing the sexed subaltern subject. In this essay she comes to the categorical conclusion that 'the subaltern cannot speak...there is no space from which the subaltern can speak' (1988: 271- 313). I take issue with Spivak on this particular point in her essay. In my opinion she over-emphasizes the destructive power of a combined, all-powerful colonial-patriarchal force and its silencing effect on the subaltern subject. The latter is then portrayed as the helpless, 'voiceless' victim of this 'epistemic violence', with no recourse to any form of agency, her voice only to be mediated by the intellectual. Spivak, as well as other critics, advances several explanations for her controversial conclusions concerning the silenced subaltern in her essay. In an interview in 1993 with the editors of *The Spivak Reader*, Landry and Maclean, Spivak offers an explanation for this deduction:

By ‘speaking’ I was obviously talking about a transaction between the listener and the speaker. That is what did not happen in the case of a woman who took her own body at the moment of death to inscribe a certain kind of undermining... a certain kind of annulment of all the presuppositions that underlie the regulative psychobiography that writes *sati*.... And even that incredible effort to speak did not fulfill itself in a speech act. And therefore, in a certain kind of rhetorical anguish after the accounting of this, I said, ‘the subaltern cannot speak! (1994: 289).

In the same interview, referring to two hundred years of subaltern resistance against British rule in India, which, according to her, always failed, she claims the following: “Now what we have here is the story of continuous subaltern insurgency, always failing, but continuous to this day. This is a spectacular example of the subaltern not being able to ‘speak’” (1994: 291). Her conclusions remain largely unchanged in the revised version of ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ published in her book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* published in 1999. Recalling the casual dismissal of her enquiries about the suicide of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, which she uses, together with the discussions and debates on the issue of *sati* (widow-immolation) in Indian historiography, as her major example of subaltern ‘silence’ in the essay, she explains: ‘I was so unnerved by this failure of communication that, in the first version of this text, I wrote, in the accents of passionate lament: the subaltern cannot speak! It was an inadvisable remark’ (1994: 308). In spite of these explanations proffered by Spivak and many other critics sympathetic to her views on the issue, confusion as to what she actually meant by these dismissive statements concerning agency on the part of the sexed subaltern subject, abound up to this day, sparking many debates and opposing stances to Spivak’s perceived theoretical stance in this instance.

Post-colonial theory has been accused by some critics of only inadequately addressing the agency and resistance of the colonized subject and of evading the

specificities of identity. Its ‘pessimism’ is ascribed to the fact that it is greatly influenced by post-structuralism and postmodernism. For post-structuralist and postmodernist thinkers, human subjects are not fixed essences, but are socially constructed - they are products of cultural and social conditioning, while human identities are shifting and fragmentary. Some post-colonial critics feel that such accounts of fragmented, unstable identities do not allow us to conceptualize agency, or to define subjects who are the makers of their own history. This is one of the criticisms leveled against Spivak’s line of reasoning in the essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ Critics believe that her investment in Western discourse analysis deconstruction and Marxism in particular, prevents her in this instance from accepting that the sexed subaltern subject can know, understand and act against her oppression. The two subjects highlighted in this dissertation - agency and the ‘silencing’ of the subaltern subject - have become rather contentious issues in recent theoretical debates in the fields of post-colonialism and feminism. The most heated discussions in contemporary post-colonial theory are centred on the issue of the ‘native’ as silent object or speaking subject, while agency has become a central problem in both feminist and post-colonial theory in the past few years. The Subaltern Studies Collective, under the leadership of Ranajit Guha and his colleagues, consciously intervened in the production of Western academic history by attempting a historiography of colonial South Asia that restores agency to the subaltern classes in the region. Their project directly challenges the authority of the received historical record from Western sources as well as from elite nationalist sources in India, and was responsible for sparking the fierce debate on subaltern agency in theoretical circles.

The novel *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* by Neshani Andreas is set in post-independence Namibia in a small village named Oshaantu in the Northern part of

the country. This part of the country is inhabited by the majority of Namibia's population, mainly the Oshiwambo-speaking cultural group - one of eleven different ethnic groups in Namibia. German colonial rule over Namibia was formally consolidated in 1907 after a protracted war which started in 1884 and saw thousands of men, women and children die or exiled to neighbouring Botswana. During World War 1, South African troops occupied the country and Namibia was subsequently handed over to South Africa as a protectorate by the League of Nations - the forerunner of the present-day United Nations Organization - after the war ended in Germany's defeat in 1918. It remained under South African rule and was governed as a fifth province of the Apartheid regime until Independence in 1990. The central and southern areas of Namibia where the greatest penetration of colonial forces and settlers took place, was demarcated in 1906 as the 'Police Zone', mainly regarded as 'white man's country', and was separated from the northern territories of Owambo, Kavango, Caprivi and Kaokoveld by an artificial border, the 'red line'. This artificial division determined colonial rule over Namibia. Northern Namibia - north of the 'red line' - was administered by indirect rule, like the homelands in South Africa. This form of administration had as its basis the continued application of 'native law and custom' and the official recognition of indigenous rulers. The former greatly affected gender relations in northern Namibia. Between the South African administrators and the traditional tribal rulers, traditional laws were imposed to prevent the migration of women out of Ovamboland, as the area was officially called during the colonial era. Women's mobility was seen as a threat to both indigenous patriarchal rule in the rural areas as well as to colonial rule. As is suggested by the Namibian anthropologist Heike Becker in a report prepared for the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), 'Gender, Power and Traditional Authority: Four Namibian Case Studies' in 1998, the colonial



construction of gender - the norms, values, attitudes, beliefs, roles and responsibilities attributed to colonized women and men by colonial discourse - was based on a modified version of pre-colonial gender practices, representations and conflicts (1998: 18). This colonial construction and representation of gender led to essentialist gender images with women seen as a social category firmly entrenched in the tribal areas. Working as agricultural subsistence workers under the control of male traditional leaders while their men were away on contract labour, the women subsidized the system of cheap male migrant labour. In line with this construction of gender, women's place was to be in the domestic and traditional spheres of society, whereas men were to enter the public sphere of paid labour. As in the rest of colonized Africa, migrant labour was used by the colonizing powers in Namibia to extract cheap labour from the African men in the rural areas. While only the men were allowed to move out to work in the towns, on the mines and on the white-owned farms for next to nothing, it was in the economic interest of the colonizers to keep women - and thus African family life - situated firmly in the rural areas and villages. This form of economic exploitation of their men contributed to the process of women's economic marginalization by relegating them to the rural economy, which, as was stated earlier, often meant subsistence farming. Apart from this, the increased pressure placed on women as custodians of the family and the children by rapidly changing gender relations induced by migrant labour, amongst others, led to rural women having to face a heavier burden than the one they already had to face under indigenous patriarchal rule. They now also became the victims of the capitalist sexual division of labour in which men's work is remunerated and valued, as opposed to women's daily experiences and work in the home and in the fields that are neither remunerated nor valued.

The Christian missions in Africa in general and in Namibia in particular, also played an important role in the field of colonial sexual politics by redefining gender in the intersection of traditional gender practices and Christianity. The latter's gender representations were based, as one could expect, on that of patriarchal European societies of the time. Christianity became a useful tool in the labour discriminative laws in force in the country at the time. According to Betty Hango-Rummukainen 'Christianity taught by the missionaries reinforced the subordination of women under their husbands ... by teaching them Christian values which have to do with patience and obedience for the sake of diverting their awareness away from issues concerning their lives' (1998: 80). Similarly, Margie Orford states that in both the colonial and mission-colonial (Christian) constructions of gender 'Ovambo women were silenced and rendered invisible' (1999: 4). In her essay, 'Women's Voices: Weaving a New Body Through Language', in which she looks primarily at written records by Namibian women in an historical literary research attempting 'to trace, to reconstruct and re-present women's experiences [in Namibia]', Orford states that she has always been told by officials in the field of historiography that there are no written records of Namibian women's writing. However, on closer research she found quite a number of written records in spite of the fact that these have been persistently 'silenced' in official historical records and published works. These records, formerly totally ignored by the official historiography in Namibia, are of enormous historical interest - mapping 'the points where women's expression ruptured the silencing of traditional and colonial patriarchal structures (in Namibia) which constantly attempt to exclude women from its discourse' (1998: 39).

The liberation struggle and life in exile have been major themes in the writing of

Namibian male writers who published their works after Independence, but unlike that of the women writers, these did not give a speaking part to the women. As Orford observes, however, post-independence writing by women in Namibia 'places women at the centre as speaking subjects and as self-healers/self-weavers through language' (1998: 47). Literature written by Namibian women after independence, therefore, deals primarily with their experiences as women during the liberation struggle and in exile, as well as with the social conditions in the country after independence. Thus the writing of Ellen Namhila: *The Price of Freedom* (1998), Kaleni Hiyalwa: *Meekulu's Children* (2000) and Neshani Andreas: *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* (2001), is 'a repossession of women's history which occurs in the act of writing' (Orford 1998: 40). Post-colonial women's writing in Namibia therefore testifies to the emergence of political agency.

Neshani Andreas was born in Walvisbay, Namibia, in 1964. She is a member of the Oshivambo cultural group and as such speaks from the 'inside' when speaking about the experiences of the women in the rural village of Oshaantu. We find in her novel an intimacy with the conditions and the characters in her novel, a perspective deriving from what Linda Alcoff (1988) would refer to as her 'positionality' as part of the community she writes about. Positionality, according to Alcoff, is a position or point of perspective relative to their socio-historical location, taken up by women, from which they interpret or (re)construct values and meanings. Andreas' narrator and characters are from 'within' this position - the traditions and the way of life of a community - and these are introduced to us by a narrative voice that belongs to this community. Andreas' novel is different from previously written prose in Namibia, since the liberation struggle is given only peripheral treatment in the novel and merely serves as a backdrop for the

main narrative based on social and economic issues which are of great concern to women in Namibia - violence against women, the suppression of women's rights by indigenous patriarchy, and the influence of colonial Christianity and the church in rural Namibia. The discourse of patriarchy is central to the themes of the novel and women occupy the central position of speaking subjects in the novel. Thus Andreas renegotiates the positioning of Namibian women as 'makers of their own stories and consequently of their own selves' as Orford puts it so aptly, rather than as mere peripheral Others. Although the women are realistically portrayed as experiencing oppression in multiple ways, they are also shown to develop and to hand down strategies and subject positions that further political and personal agency. Kauna, the main character in the novel, finds herself entrapped in a loveless marriage and has to endure regularly her husband's violent physical and emotional abuse. He openly humiliates her by having affairs with other women and expecting her to be the obedient and subservient wife who performs without question all the duties that traditional custom has assigned to her as woman and wife. When he dies unexpectedly in their house shortly after his return from an overnight visit to his mistress, Kauna is blamed by the villagers for her husband's inexplicable death. They accuse her of poisoning or bewitching him out of jealousy. Kauna and her children are eventually driven out of the homestead by her in-laws and the story ends where she is leaving, not knowing what the future holds, but willing to embrace her new life.

The dissertation will be presented in three chapters. Chapter 1 deals with the essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' by Gayatri Spivak and several critical evaluations thereof, including my own. Chapter 2, which serves as a general, contextual background to the more specific discussion of the novel *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* in chapter 3, highlights certain aspects of both the creative and

political practice of women, and specifically the woman writer, in certain countries in Africa. Chapter 3 deals with the novel *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* by Neshani Andreas, the concepts of ‘silencing’, coming-to-voice and agency on the part of both the writer and the female characters in the story. In this chapter I will discuss the manner in which Andreas recasts the victim status that many feminists regard as fundamental to feminist scholarship, and which is, in my opinion, over-emphasized in Spivak’s essay, by foregrounding agents of subversion and change operating within an oppressive system. I will examine the above from both a feminist (in the African literary context) and a post-colonial perspective. This dual analytical perspective will afford me the opportunity to analyze the complexity of gender relations in a post-colonial society, while at the same time considering the effects of (neo)-colonialism on the subjects in the text I am dealing with.

## **CHAPTER 1: 'CAN THE SUBALTERN SPEAK?' BY GAYATRI SPIVAK (1988)**

*The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish.*

(Spivak, 1988: 308).

*In the South African context, Spivak's approach could provide a useful antidote to the tendency of social historians to posit an unproblematized indigenous agency which could be fully retrieved, if only the right archival material and oral testimonies are tapped. Ultimately, however, its usefulness is limited as it tends to block any moves beyond the obsession with colonial discourse.*

(Greenstein, 1995: 231)

*The current post-structuralist/postmodern challenges to the coherent, autonomous subject have to be put on hold in feminist and postcolonial discourses, for both must first work to assert and affirm a denied or alienated subjectivity: those radical postmodern challenges are in many ways the luxury of the dominant order which can afford to challenge that which it securely possesses.*

(Hutcheon, 1989 in Williams and Chrisman, 1993: 281)

The controversial article 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' by Gayatri Spivak was written as a contribution to the wide-ranging critical debate raging around the process of recovering subaltern agency and 'voice' in history. Its aim was to clearly state Spivak's criticism of the notion that subaltern voices can be heard from within Western discourse, including Marxism and post-structuralism. Spivak's 'alternative narrative of colonialism', like the Subaltern Studies Project of Ranajit Guha, exposes the exclusions and the gaps in the representation of the subaltern subject in colonial historical records. Here she directly challenges and subverts the production of colonial history in the West and its skewed representation of the colonized. She has also been credited with problematizing our ability to reclaim subaltern voices from their origins. Her analysis compels theorists, whatever their origin or location, to constantly examine their political position - the concerns of which are entirely differently constructed from that of the subaltern - as well as the 'interests' of their critical approaches.

Some historians and writers claim that they are interested in recovering subaltern voices because they are dedicated to changing contemporary power relations. Others feel that by critically attacking historiography's dominant discourses and searching for a resistant presence which has not been totally destroyed by the hegemonic, critics are merely trying to find a platform granting them the freedom in which they themselves might speak, while pretending to 'give' subaltern subjects a voice or allow them to speak for themselves. Jean Baudrillard, believing that projects attempting to recover a voice and agency for the subaltern are doomed to failure because the subaltern cannot be represented, highlights the 'obsessive demand' of our present political culture which compels critics to make the subaltern voice heard, but to construe it in the image of their own (1983: 48-49). This seems to be Spivak's main concern when criticizing the 'benevolent'

gesture of 'giving a voice' to the subaltern on the part of post-structuralist critics Foucault and Deleuze. Unfortunately she seems to be guilty of more or less the same 'benevolence' herself - not by allowing the subaltern to speak for herself, but by claiming the right to represent her, thus constructing a 'text' whose political interest may not be the same as that of the sexed subaltern subject. In the introduction to *Postcolonial Criticism*, Moore-Gilbert states that Spivak, by asserting that the subaltern cannot speak and by claiming the responsibility of representing the latter, repeats the very same 'colonial epistemology' for which she criticizes Foucault and Deleuze - the gesture of constructing and speaking for, or in place, of the subaltern (1997: 32).

Most historians involved in the above debate are agreed that some form of agency should be realized for the subaltern subject in the process of recuperating the latter in history, but the contentious issue of how this is to be attained remains unresolved. There are those who align themselves with the subaltern and attempt to bring him/her 'to voice', on the one hand. On the other we have those who insist that, at the very moment of deconstruction's fiercest attack upon enlightenment's rational human subject and an effective human agency, this very figure of humanism - the self-determining subject-agent in possession of a sovereign consciousness - is restored to history in the figure of the subaltern subject. The critical debate was chiefly inspired by The Subaltern Studies Project headed by the historian Ranajit Guha. This project attempted to write a history of colonial South Asia which not only rejects the totalizing forms of colonialist, nationalist and Marxist modes of historiography dominating the contemporary field, but also essentially operates from the point of view of the subaltern subject. The main objective of those involved was to attempt to restore the subaltern's own particular forms of subjectivity, experience and agency to history. Colonial,



nationalist and Marxist forms of elite historiography are accused by members of the project and sympathetic historians of treating the subordinate peoples of South Asian society as if they had no consciousness of their own, and hence no ability to make their own history - that means that they have no agency. Although incorporating many of the themes of post-structuralism and post-modernism, this project raises the vital question of what form the presence of the subaltern may take in history, if not that of a resistant presence, which ironically means that of an autonomous subject-agent.

The manner in which different perspectives enable marginalized voices to be heard is a hotly contested issue in this debate. Those most prominently involved in this include theorists like Gyan Prakash (1990; 1992; 1994) who supports Guha and recommends that a post-structuralist/post-modernist perspective be followed in writing the history of the subaltern subject. He, however, like Guha, still wishes to maintain some form of counter-hegemonic action for the subaltern subject, as against the extreme Foucauldian view of the inescapability of relations of power and domination. Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Washbrook (1992), in criticizing the project's stance, question the difficulties involved in recovering the subjectivity, history and agency of the subaltern subject by using post-structuralist and post-modernist approaches. While many critics believe that post-structuralist and post-modernist ideas of pluralism and fragmentation, used as a means of recovering suppressed histories, make the standpoint of marginalized historical subjects visible, these two critics feel that Derridean and post-modern/post-structuralist perspectives display a certain 'depthlessness' and therefore lack a strong sense of history - 'a capacity for that labour of remembrance and understanding through which agents become able to experience history in an active way, to orient themselves individually and collectively in the present and

so to act' (1992: 153). As an example of the confusion caused by the use of post-modernist/post-structuralist approaches in a project like Guha's, O'Hanlon and Washbrook argue that the approach of the Subaltern Studies Group implies that the resistance against colonial rule on the part of the subaltern results in 'forms of knowledge which are emancipatory'. Based on the experience gained thus, subaltern subjects therefore can and do represent themselves. The irony is that this principle of self-representation, although positively recommended in post-modernist theory, is at the same time precisely what the latter most vehemently attacks in the Western humanist tradition. These two critics further criticize Prakash's view, based on Foucault, that subalternity in Indian society is to be regarded as 'effects of power relations', while, at the same time, they endorse Guha's theory based on experience as the medium through which resistance emerges and is effected. Subjectivity as 'dispersed effects of power relations' and 'experience', according to them, are two opposing concepts. They firmly believe that some form of experience on the part of the subaltern subject is necessary if agency is to be realized.

Gayatri Spivak's subaltern subjects are the subordinates at the margins of society: 'One can just as well say the silent, silenced center of the circuit marked out by this epistemic violence, men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat' (1988: 283). Her analytic concern seems to be mainly with the doubly marginalized female subaltern subject, regardless of her location. In 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Spivak, as a 'Marxist deconstructionist', cannot fully accept the autonomy and consciousness of the subaltern subject and therefore opposes the latter's self-representation. According to Marxist ideology, subaltern subjects are unable to know their own conditions of oppression, do not have the proper understanding to distinguish

between their desires and interests, and therefore are unable to present their experiences in their own authentic voices. She is concerned to articulate what she sees as the difficulties and contradictions involved in constructing a 'speaking voice' for the subaltern subject or in recovering subaltern agency, and asserts that the problem of who can or should speak for the subaltern or 'give the latter a voice of their own' should be approached from a theoretical perspective like deconstruction, since it is absolutely essential to deconstruct the concept of a fully self-knowing subject. Spivak is careful, however, not to advocate a deconstructive analysis that is not underpinned by the material and historical specificity of subject construction. She therefore examines in detail the historical, material and economic conditions determining the construction of the Indian woman as subaltern subject in colonial India.

Spivak chastises post-structuralist theorists Foucault and Deleuze for claiming that the subaltern subject can know their condition of oppression and speak for themselves. While on the one hand they vehemently attack the Western sovereign, male subject and declare it dead and buried, on the other, they seem to retain the concept of the self-knowing unified subject in respect of the subaltern. She feels that, by ascribing a subject position to the latter from which they can 'speak', the Western intellectuals themselves come to represent - speak for or stand in for - the subaltern subject. She regards this as a continuation of the colonial process of constructing a subject position for the subaltern subject and of articulating their 'voice' for them. In spite of her collaboration with the Indian Subaltern Studies Project, Spivak believes that the project is flawed by its attempt to restore the historical subaltern to voice and insists that the post-structuralist mode of the project only disguises an underlying essentialism. She argues that, like Foucault and Deleuze, Guha and his partners seem to assume a 'pure' and

‘essential’ form of subaltern consciousness which knows its own conditions of oppression and act as historical agents on these conditions. For Spivak, this leads to a reintroduction of humanist models of both identity and agency.

Colonial debates on widow immolation in early nineteenth-century India have recently come to occupy a prominent place within the debates on the agency of the colonized. These debates on the abolition of *sati* form an important part of Spivak’s analysis. She uses them extensively to illustrate her point that the complete absence of women’s voices from the debates is a particularly apt emblem of the silencing of the subaltern woman by the combined violence of colonialism and patriarchy in Hindu society. The British colonialists, in prohibiting the indigenous practice of *sati*, assumed the prerogative of speaking for the subaltern woman, and presented themselves as their saviors, as Spivak so aptly observes: ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ (1988: 297). The women are constructed as consenting objects, spoken for by the colonialists. According to her argument, the main objective here was to find justification for the imposition of Western imperialism and its ‘civilizing’ mission. The Hindu nationalists, on the other hand, claimed that ‘the women wanted to die’ as fully supporting subjects of the traditional practice of *sati*. The widows are thus represented as fully self-knowing subjects who exercise their own agency. This conceals the fact that this interpretation works in the interest of the Hindu patriarchal system. In both cases women are spoken for and their own voices are conspicuously absent. Spivak also draws extensively on the work of Lata Mani (1989; 1992) who has done a great deal of research on the colonial debates on the Hindu rite of *sati* and highlights the absence of the widows as subjects in these debates.

By 'speaking' Spivak refers to a transaction between the speaker and the listener: the subaltern woman 'speaks', and those in power are supposed to 'listen' and should ideally act positively upon this 'speaking'. However, in the examples she uses - the abolition of the Hindu practice of *sati* in India and the death of a young Indian girl, Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri, who committed suicide while an active cadre in the Indian nationalist struggle, and whose death was completely misunderstood and misconstrued by the women closest to her - this did not happen. In the first example, the women as subjects were completely absent from the debates on widow immolation, and were therefore denied a platform from which to communicate their ideas about the issue, which prompted Spivak to declare: 'there is no space from which the subaltern woman as subject can speak' (1988: 307). In the case of the young suicide victim, the attempt at 'communicating' her message - she waited for the onset of menstruation before she committed suicide in order to stress the fact that she did not commit suicide because of an illicit love affair - failed miserably and could not be understood correctly by the 'listeners'. Her effort to 'speak' did not fulfill itself in a speech act. The women within her social circle, according to Spivak's argument, could not interpret her message correctly, because they merely acted within the same ideological boundaries that forced her to 'speak' as she did. Spivak therefore very pessimistically concludes that the subaltern woman, being denied a platform from which to 'speak' and her 'speech' being completely misinterpreted, cannot 'speak'.

Spivak regards it as the historical and political task of the post-colonial (female) intellectual to make the subaltern woman's voice-consciousness heard and to render visible the position of the multiple oppressions the latter has to endure. This she should achieve by speaking to, not listening to or speaking for the 'historically muted subject' - the subaltern woman. As Jill Arnott points out in her

essay 'French Feminism in a South African Frame?' 'listening to' implies the speaking voice of a completely self-knowing subject, while 'speaking for' implies the denial of the subject status of the subaltern woman altogether (1996: 85). In a further explanation of this issue in her PhD thesis on the work of Spivak, Arnott states the following:

But what exactly is implied by the phrase 'speaking to'? I would suggest that Spivak is not here simply making the obvious point that the feminist intellectual should, wherever possible, consult the women she is researching and invite their participation; rather, she is pointing to the need to occupy the dialectical space between two subject positions, without ever allowing either to become transparent... If this is possible... then some form of dialogue can take place *even if the subject position of one of the 'participants' is only discernable as the 'shape' of the silence, the gap in the text of resistance, the fossil-space where the voice of the subaltern would have been*. Out of such a dialogue would have emerged not the ideology-free voice-consciousness of the subaltern but at least the text of her silencing' (my emphasis) (1998: 127).

I do not find it surprising that Arnott is such an ardent advocate of Spivak's theory on the representation of the subaltern subject by the intellectual and can only see merit in the implementation of such a theory in the South African women's movement, even in the face of strong opposition. In this extract the subject position of the subaltern woman is reduced to the "'shape' of a silence... the gap in the text of resistance... the fossil-space where the voice of the subaltern would have been"(1998: 127). One can hardly imagine a more dismissive statement on the subject position of the subaltern woman. No wonder then that, even though 'spoken to', the subaltern subject still shows no consciousness, but merely relates the politically pessimistic story of her silencing, without being able to oppose it. It is then the political task of the intellectual to step in, 'appropriate' the experience of the subaltern woman in order to prevent the risky 'unmediated self-expression of the oppressed' (232) and to 'voice', on behalf of this luckless woman, the 'truth' about her experience and intentions. As a post-colonial female intellectual, Spivak therefore takes it upon herself to theorize the suicide

of Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri, constructing a rather pessimistic 'text' of silenced opposition from her suicide and representing this 'text' as an example of the combined violence of colonialism and patriarchy which has destroyed all possibility of protest and agency on the part of the sexed subaltern subject. According to her analysis this is a very clear example of the fact that the subaltern woman cannot represent herself or be represented by the women sharing her experience of oppression. She has been effectively silenced and therefore needs to be represented by the post-colonial female intellectual. Arnott argues, in support of Spivak's representation of Bhuvaneshwari's story, that it is exactly because of Spivak's difference that she could successfully interpret and make known the former's intentions. This would, of course, in the South African context, create a situation where the privileged intellectual, whose situation and interest are very different from that of the subaltern woman, would be compelled to represent the latter. The subject position of the subaltern woman has thus been theorized out of existence in order to make it possible for the intellectual to represent her.

Unfortunately for Spivak her analysis of subaltern silence in this essay has been vigorously criticized by many theorists, and ironically, as she stated herself, misunderstood. Critics regard her approach - assigning an absolute power to the hegemonic colonial discourse in constructing and disarticulating the subaltern subject - as too deeply entrenched in European intellectual traditions and their positioning of colonial peoples. Her insistence that contemporary Western elite theory, in this case deconstruction, is necessary to post-colonial theory, while, at the same time, her advocacy of the representation of the sexed subaltern subject by the female post-colonial intellectual, provoked accusations from various critical circles of denying subaltern agency and self-representation. She stands

accused of neglecting the way in which subaltern peoples received, contributed to, modified or challenged dominant Western discourses. Ania Loomba (1998) points out that in recent post-colonial criticism and theory the analysis of colonial discourse often blurs the relationship between the material and the ideological and that analysis of representation replaces all discussion of actual events and material reality. Post-colonial critics like Abdul JanMohamed (1985), Elleke Boehmer (1995) and Benita Parry (1987) have likewise accused Spivak of an 'exhorbitation' of discourse - of neglecting material conditions of colonial rule by concentrating on colonial representations. As Elleke Boehmer states: 'Discussions of text and image mask this reality of empire: the numbers who died in colonial wars and in labour gangs, or as a result of disease, starvation and transportation' (1995: 20). Other critics suggest that it is the post-structuralist and deconstructive perspectives within Spivak's work which makes it impossible to account for oppositional voices. Benita Parry argues that Spivak's analysis, based on Derridean deconstruction, and her insistence on the 'necessary' silencing implicit in colonial discourse analysis, denies the subaltern a speaking part and a platform from which to voice her opposition to colonial hegemony. She strongly supports the earlier intervention in colonial discourse of post-colonial critics like Frantz Fanon and, like him, regards anti-colonial nationalisms and de-colonisation in various former colonies as a process of opposition to dominance and of the ability on the part of the subaltern to question and counter colonial discourses, an indication, in other words, of their agency. O'Hanlon & Washbrook (1992) assert that, since the subaltern woman is constructed within multiple social relationships, it should be possible to locate women's voices in women's specific locations, hence to modify Spivak's model of the silenced sexed subaltern subject. Opposing Spivak's colonial discourse theory and analysis, Megan Vaughan points out how scholars of colonial Africa have



highlighted and emphasized the various ways in which Africans in colonial Africa 'have always been active in making their histories (not waiting for them to be conjured up by white men)' (1994: 1). Preferring oral histories of Africa to colonial discourse theory's claim to absolute power and hegemony, she states that the former has documented a more interactive version of colonialism, that colonial discourses and practices 'were created out of the face-to-face encounters of colonizer and colonized' (1994:13). Africans were thus successful in intersecting and contributing to the hegemonic discourse, actively participating in the creation of their traditions, hence in the creation of history in colonial Africa. I find the observation by Ran Greenstein about the history of Shaka and his contribution to the making of South African history a very apt example of Vaughan's argument and therefore wish to use it here to underline my own stance on this issue: 'History is seen as a process that allows alliances across a colonial divide, not a dichotomy between the powerful and the powerless.' (1995: 225).

My own further contribution to this debate would be to criticize Spivak's dismissal of subaltern voices as an effect of colonial/patriarchal silencing on the one hand, while attempting to speak on behalf of the subaltern subject, on the other. In her essay, Spivak constantly highlights the silencing of the subaltern subject by hegemonic discourses, but pays very little attention to the process by which the subaltern's coming to voice could be achieved. Her conclusion that there is no 'true' subaltern subject who has the consciousness of fully knowing her conditions of oppression and opposing these, might be considered politically pessimistic, since it forecloses political agency on the part of the subaltern subject. Spivak makes broad universal conclusions based on her theory of subaltern silence and of the 'epistemic violence' of colonialism compounded by patriarchy which destroyed all possibility of protest and agency on the part of a

universally silenced subaltern woman. As Ran Greenstein observes, Spivak's choice of the *sati*-widow to represent the silenced subaltern woman is significant, since she is in fact the most perfect example of subaltern silence - coming into being only when the subject dies. The to-be-*sati* is merely a widow. The *sati* is by definition a silenced subject. The *sati*-widow's silencing, according to Spivak's reasoning in this essay, represents the oppression of all subaltern women. She therefore disregards the positional and lived experience of the individual subaltern woman.

Theorists often end up constructing monolithic images of the suffering and the silencing of subaltern women by ignoring specific oppressions under specific conditions in specific localities. Chandra Mohanty asserts in another context that it is characteristic of this particular mode of analysis - using women as a category of analysis - to define women primarily in terms of their object status - the way in which they are affected or not affected by certain institutions and systems. In her article 'Under Western Eyes' (1984), Mohanty addresses the problem of the relationship between specific women and their lived experience, and woman as 'signifier' - representing the 'discursively consensual homogeneity' of women as a group. This problem, one of the most contested in recent feminist scholarship, has a definite parallel in the discursive construction and representation of the post-colonial (subaltern) subject by colonial discourse theory and especially the universalizing treatment of the Indian *sati*-widow by Spivak. It highlights the disproportionate importance attached to the hegemonic power of discourse analysis and the discursive construction of the subject by Western discourses, in this case the construction of a universally oppressed, passive 'Third World woman' - one which has been labeled 'powerless, exploited, sexually harassed' by mainstream Western feminism. Mohanty argues (like Ania Loomba and

Elleke Boehmer in a post-colonial context) that the difference between women as material subjects of their histories and the representation of woman produced by hegemonic discourses becomes blurred in an analysis of gender relations in the Third World. This analysis takes the form of a 'cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy' which permanently oppresses a similarly constructed passive, ahistorical (not contributing to history at all, merely being acted upon by external forces), homogeneous Third World woman. Thus, the historically specific material reality of groups of women all over the Third World is collapsed into the figure of the silenced, silent figure of the ever-suffering Third World woman, the eternal victim of an equally homogeneous Third World patriarchy.

In my opinion, Spivak's arguments in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' produce, in a similar fashion, a universal image of the silenced and voiceless subaltern woman, who never manages to rise above the disabling generality of her object status. By thus homogenizing and systematizing the experiences of the subaltern woman regardless of her location, she erases all individual experiences and the subsequent resistance against colonial and patriarchal oppression and exploitation on her part, thus ultimately depriving subaltern women of their historical and political agency. I tend to agree with Mohanty when she claims that it is by using this form of analysis - generalizing the oppression of women as a group - that power (of the hegemonic) is exercised in discourse. Spivak's assumption that the silencing of the *sati*-widows in some parts of India indicates the universal oppression and voicelessness of all subaltern women, rendered thus through the combined violence of colonialism and patriarchy, in my view is analytically reductive. Furthermore, this type of analysis does not make provision for the formation of an oppositional political consciousness and action on the part of the

subaltern subject at all. In fact, the extremely negative political implications of a theory which denies the subaltern a platform from which to offer any meaningful opposition to the 'epistemic violence' of Western discourse needs to be carefully examined. I firmly believe that a politics of opposition - agency - must be forged in concrete historical and political practice and analysis. I therefore argue that, by using the 'silencing' and disempowerment of the *sati*-widows and the suicide of Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri to represent a universal silencing of the sexed subaltern subject, Spivak over-emphasizes the victim status of the subaltern woman and her powerlessness to oppose the destructive power of patriarchy and colonialism.

Warren Montag argues in his article 'Can the Subaltern Speak and Other Transcendental Questions' that Spivak manages to declare what exists in reality - 'the voices and actions of the masses as they wage their struggles for self-emancipation with or without intellectuals of the Third and First World at their side' - impossible, so as to declare necessary and inevitable the representation of the masses by the intellectual (1998: 4). On a material level, subaltern subjects do 'speak', especially where there is resistance to exploitation and oppression. Moreover, they do achieve positive results as the resistance and subsequent change in government in our own countries, South Africa and Namibia so clearly show. Montag further states the following: Spivak does not ask whether the subaltern *does* speak but whether it is possible for them to speak.... That is, what we take to be the subaltern speaking may in fact be determined to be only the appearance of their speaking, if *our theory deems it impossible for them to speak*' (my emphasis) (1998: 3). Spivak persistently refers to material instances of resistance taking place without any positive results - the suicide of Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri which did not get her message across; two hundred years of subaltern insurgence in India, always failing, the *sati*-widows who never spoke - but fails to

mention the successes that must have been there as well. I therefore contend that the silenced, 'voiceless' subaltern subject is a discursive creation of Spivak's to preserve her own subjectivity and agency as representative of this silenced subject, since it has been proven that the former, in fact, *do* 'speak' and *can* be heard, but Spivak's theory '*deems it impossible for them to speak*'.

In support of my views in favour of subaltern consciousness and agency, I would like to point to the theories of Frantz Fanon (1963, 1967), widely regarded as one of the foremost post-colonial critics, as well as that of Homi Bhabha (1983; 1985; 1990; 1994), named in some circles as one of the 'Holy Trinity' of post-colonial literature - the other two being Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak. Fanon's analysis of the colonialist 'text' reconstructs a process of political and cultural resistance and disruption, where the colonized is actively involved in the process of 'writing a text' that can answer back to colonialism, meaning that they are actively participating in a political struggle to overthrow colonialism. As has been proven throughout the second half of the last century with the former colonies gaining their political independence from colonialism one after the other, no hegemonic system can pervade and exhaust all social experience so completely, so as to eliminate all ground for contestation or resistance. I therefore firmly believe that every act of oppression or aggression perpetrated against the subaltern subject, contains the seed of opposition in itself. The enabling conditions for Fanon's analysis are that he, unlike Spivak, does not reject nationalism, but regards it as an oppositional discourse born in political struggle which both replaces a 'harking back' to archaic nativist traditions at the same time as it rejects colonialism's system of knowledge. His theory, like that of Vaughan, projects a native community's involvement in militant and opposing social and political action, culminating in the rejection of colonialism's

denigrating 'text' and power. A conception of the subaltern as historical subject and agent of an oppositional discourse is absolutely necessary in order to make such a projection. Homi Bhabha's theory of the formation of colonial subjectivities as a process that is never fully or perfectly completed, likewise assists in correcting Spivak's emphasis on the destructive power of the dominant discourse, and in focusing on the agency of the colonized. Opposing the image of the colonial subject in a 'fixed' position as the passive object of discursive domination, he presents a discursive situation repeatedly transgressed by the subaltern from within and against colonial discourse. Bhabha's subaltern has contributed greatly to the shaping of its own history by resisting the dominant discourse, and his readings of colonialist history recover a clear subaltern voice. For Bhabha, the subaltern has spoken through her/his contributions in shaping and modifying the colonialist text.

I would finally like to argue that discourse analysis should ideally involve examining the social and historical conditions within which specific representations are generated. It should, rather than attempting to make the subaltern subject an accomplice in her own silencing, make colonial relations and its effects on both the colonizer and the colonized better understood. Therefore we have to find alternative ways of producing history, an analytical framework which enables us to incorporate subaltern voices together with elite and colonial voices in the production of history. In this vein, Greenstein reasons that these various voices then 'interact, constrain and modify' each other in the 'multivocal process' of producing history (1993: 227). This alternative way of producing history should then serve to modify the image of colonial discourse as successfully silencing or incorporating indigenous discourses, but rather as itself inspired and influenced by subaltern voices.

## CHAPTER 2: SILENCING, VOICE AND AGENCY IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT

*and there are black women  
considered so dangerous  
in South Africa  
they prison them away*

*maybe this poem is to say*

*that I like to see  
we black women  
full-of-we-selves walking*

*crushing out  
with each dancing step*

*the twisted self-negating  
history  
we've inherited*

*crushing out  
with each dancing step'*

(Nichols, 1990: 286)

*The well-known image of the oppressed  
speaking out of silence has meant a willed  
intervention by colonised people in the  
fictions which presumed to describe them.*

( Boehmer, 1995: 6)

In this chapter I will take a brief look at the concepts of the ‘silencing’ of the subaltern woman, as well as the process of recovering her voice and agency in the political and creative practices of the post-colonial women’s movements and the woman writer in selected countries in Africa. This chapter serves as a general, contextual background to the specific discussion of the novel *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* in chapter 3. It has not been easy for critics and historians to achieve a balance between positioning the subject and amplifying her/his voice in history. Writing histories from below is not a new practice that has been introduced by post-colonial literature to highlight the plight of the marginalized, but has in fact been attempted by various groups like Marxists and feminists. However, these attempts have often been in danger of essentializing the subaltern subject, that is, representing the latter as possessing an innate and true essence which is irreducible and unchanging.

Referring to Ranajit Guha’s Subaltern Studies Project which attempts to recover a subaltern consciousness and agency in the history of South Asia, Gayatri Spivak argues in what has been described by critics as her ‘strategic essentialist’ stance, that the programme must be understood in its ‘radical context’, because it has a ‘counterhegemonic’ agenda, which means that it opposes received accounts of subaltern insurgency and agency in colonialist and nationalist historical reports of South India. Diana Fuss likewise states the following in an analysis of the use of essentialism and its possible effects, including its political and textual effects in *Essentially Speaking*: ‘My own view is that essentialism can be deployed effectively in the service of both idealist and materialist, progressive and reactionary, mythologizing and resistive discourses’ (1989: xii). Citing Spivak’s simultaneous critique and endorsement of the use of essentialism in the Subaltern Studies Project, she further argues in the same volume that ‘humanism can be



activated in the service of the subaltern; in other words, when put into practice by the dispossessed themselves, essentialism can be powerfully displacing and disruptive.’ (1989: 31-32). In this chapter I will ‘risk essence’ as Stephen Heath has suggested in his article “Difference” published in *Screen* 19:3, ‘the risk of essence may have to be taken’ (1978: 99), a call taken up by post-structuralist feminists like Alice Jardine who proclaims it ‘one of the most thought-provoking statements of recent date’ (1987: 58). By ‘risking essence’ I mean that I will attempt an undertaking, using Spivak’s ‘strategic essentialist’ stance, to show how the sexed subaltern subjects in the novel *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* claim agency for themselves. I believe, like Spivak and Fuss, that a problematized version of essentialism can be effectively deployed as an interventionary tactic, especially in our political and social battles to change society. In order to support my arguments in this chapter, I wish to use the following quote by Rosalind O’Hanlon and David Washbrook about the conditions under which subaltern subjects can become active agents of their emancipation on the basis of their own experience.

Some conception of experience and agency are [sic] absolutely required by the dispossessed’s call for a politics of contest, for it is not clear how a dispersed effect of power relations can at the same time be an agent whose experience and reflection form the basis of a striving for change. To argue that we need these categories in some form does not at all imply a return to the undifferentiated and static conceptions of nineteenth-century liberal humanism. Our present challenge lies precisely in understanding how the underclasses we wish to study are at once constructed in conflictual ways as subjects yet also find the means through struggle to realize themselves in coherent and subjectively centred ways as agents (1992: 153).

Post-colonial and feminist historians and critics have the distinct task of looking for women’s agency, especially within discourses which seek to erase their self-representation. The sexed subaltern subject is to be restored as a subject in her own right, by reclaiming for her a history, a mode of consciousness and practice which are her own and not bestowed upon her by any hegemonic discourse or

representative. She has to be recuperated as an agent, rather than as the helpless victim of impersonal external forces, through the recognition of her capacity for purposeful action. This means the recovery of her experience, tradition, identity and active historical practice which have been lost or hidden by elite historiography. This could be regarded as an essentialist recuperation, but, as Spivak points out in the case of the Subaltern Studies Project, it should be seen as 'a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest' (1988: 205). Teresa de Lauretis argues in a similar vein that women's identity is multiple and changing within a socio-political context and therefore has agency because of its reflective, self-analyzing power. According to her reasoning an understanding of (female) subjectivity lies 'not in femininity as a privileged nearness to nature, the body, or the unconscious... but rather in that political, theoretical, self-analyzing practice by which the relations of the subject in social reality can be re-articulated from the historical experience of women' (1984: 186). Thus, in order to avoid a 'purely' essentialist recuperation of women's agency and experience, there should be a constant examining of this experience, the historical conditions surrounding their lives, and the contradictions inherent in them.

Historically, there have been systematic attempts in dominant discourses to discredit subaltern women as agents and as credible representatives of their own experience. Susan Hekman states the following in her article 'Subjects and Agents: the Question for Feminism' in the text *Provoking Agents*:

The dichotomy between the constituted and constituting subject dictates that agency is the sole province of the constituting, transcendental subject ... The constituting subject is the subject of free will, the subject that determines his place in life, that forges his destiny, that decides to be free. The constituted subject, on the other hand, is determined, a product of social forces rather than their creator, a social dupe (1995: 202).

We can, to a certain extent therefore, accept Spivak's assumption that the subaltern woman is already silenced in many power contexts in society. The subaltern woman, being the 'constituted' in the dominant discourse, is silenced by male dominance, traditional values of the community, religious authority and the acceptance of the social value of women's place and position in society, but that does not mean she has to accept silencing. Subaltern women should demand the right to speak as well as to be heard. Feminist and post-colonial critics should more deliberately shift some of the terms of current discourse away from silencing and voicelessness into more positive fields such as 'coming to voice' and agency which should lead to social and political change in society. At the same time they should also be careful of 'speaking for' women who prefer to remain silent, for as Huma Ibrahim points out in her article 'Ontological Victimhood' published in the collection of essays *The Politics of (M)Othering*: "The victim's silence is also a 'voice', and a 'mode of uttering' to which we as Third World feminist scholars must add our silence rather than be compelled very quickly to take up the empty spaces we imagine are left by it" (1997: 151). On the same issue Obioma Nnaemeka states in her article 'Urban Spaces, Women's Places' in the same text, that 'we can *lend our voices to or speak up against* problems facing others without necessarily *speaking for* them. We should aim at *speaking up* with them *against* the problems and *speaking up with* them *for* solutions without *speaking for/against* them' (original emphasis) (1997: 163). She further declares in the same article on the issue of the construction of African women as passive and silenced:

This casting of African women is not surprising in view of the fact that imperialist discourses invent targets and causes without which their *raison d'être* will be in jeopardy. If it is recognised and accepted that African women can choose and speak for themselves, the intervention of those who have arrogated to themselves the right to speak and choose for African women will be unnecessary. The construction of the voiceless African woman, is, therefore, a necessity (1997: 167).

Feminist scholars should therefore be constantly on their guard against usurping the voice and story of the subaltern subject in their effort to speak for or on her behalf, in this way excluding her from her own story and ultimately silencing her. In her introduction to the text *South African Feminisms: Writing, Theory and Criticism*, 1990 - 1994, Margaret Daymond, in commenting on the highly contested issue of representation and authority in the South African women's movement states the following:

An understandable reaction to the silencing of black women has been to insist that they, and only they, can now speak for black women. But, as Hassim and Walker have argued in a sociological context, no one, white or black, can afford to teach, criticize or theorize social practice (or fictional writing) as though the authority to give utterance comes only from direct experience. This is a difficult point, however, in that Miriam Tlali's recording (1978) and her fictionalizing (1989) of, for example, the distinctive ways in which ordinary township women respond to racial/gender oppression is something that no one else has done from the inside. For the moment, hers is the only voice that can claim this aspect of 'authenticity', although in time her voice will be heard as being as different as any other woman's (1996: xxiii).

Since women demand and take the right to speak and have historically spoken, they 'come to voice' in writing or speaking, and breaking through the debilitating silencing by dominant discourses. Recognizing the power of social structures to position them as females in society and learning to understand the contradictions inherent in their location within the various structures of this society, women can start to 'speak' from this particular position, thus engendering political action. They can interrupt and subvert, where necessary, hegemonic discourses that are designed to make them complicit in their own silencing. While acknowledging the multiple ways in which patriarchal institutions do oppress women, African feminists such as Christine Obbo, Molaria Ogundipe Leslie and Filomena Steady often reject allegations of absolute male power and control. This discomfort with victimhood is demonstrated in their portrayal of women's identities and subjectivities as not only shaped by male control and oppression, but by women's activities in society as well. In the more organized political and social field this

can be seen in women's networking through women's movements and solidarity groups, working towards equality in civil society. In the literary field this belief is expressed by foregrounding women's lives and experiences by women writers who in certain cases, as is shown through the life and writing of Ellen Kuzwayo, are also political activists working in their communities. She describes her autobiography, *Call Me Woman*, in an interview with Adeola Jones in 1985, as a work written about the history and sufferings of the people, and especially the women, in South Africa. 'I was challenged by the lives of so many, many women, who have made such tremendous contributions to the development and growth of our country, in particular, to the development of the black woman' (1985: 53).

In contemporary South Africa and Namibia, women's voices and grassroots activism could be seen to increasingly alter the shape and ideology of nationalism itself. Cheryl Hendricks, in her article 'Gender Politics in a Post-Apartheid South Africa' published in *Southern African Feminist Review*, Vol.2 No.1 of 1996, describes how the pressure from a highly organized Women's Movement, firmly grounded in the community, forced the ANC leadership before the general elections in 1994 to make certain policy and strategy concessions to accommodate women's issues. However, she bemoans the fact that the gains made by the women after the Government of National Unity was in place were not far reaching enough. Hence her urgent plea that the Woman's Movement must remain organized and mobilized in order to sustain effective pressure on the government of South Africa for more restructuring of government policies in favour of women. In Namibia, which attained its independence from South African rule in 1990, massive gains have been made for women's issues during the nationalist struggle for independence and afterwards. The authorization of

affirmative action for women and the prohibition of sex discrimination in the constitution contributed enormously to women's equality both in the private and the public spheres. Post-colonial women's movements, in spite of the fact that many of them emerged as a result of nationalist struggles against racial and colonial oppression, have thus increasingly begun to articulate both the specificity of women's issues and their profound inter-linkage with the community at large in an entirely different kind of 'African feminism'. This has in most cases, in spite of opposition in their respective societies, led to socio-political reform. Many women in formerly colonized countries fought side-by-side with their male counterparts against colonialism, while those forming part of the working class have to fight their economic exploitation together with the men. The colonial situation often caused many forms of struggle as well as many forms of consciousness to operate simultaneously. The nature of the oppression, however, determines the urgency of the particular struggle to be waged at a specific time. Therefore, women's movements during colonialism focused on nationalist issues and fought for women's issues within the parameters of the nationalist struggle for political independence.

Writing by African women account for a sizeable share of African literary works, yet the male-dominated literary scene is in most cases neither woman-friendly nor gender-sensitive. This writing, therefore, has received little coverage in the dominant, male-produced critical works on African literature. In spite of the fact that African women's writing has been published since the 1960s with Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* being published in 1965 followed shortly by Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* which was published in 1966, their works have been left out of general critical works as well as more theoretical works on African literature such as Eustace Palmer's *An Introduction to the African Novel* (1972) and Abdul

JanMohamed's *Manichean Aesthetics* (1983), to mention only two examples. In the former only Flora Nwapa as woman writer is mentioned, and merely to label her 'an inferior novelist'. However, as Tuzyline Allan states in the introduction to the *Women's Studies Quarterly* 1997, 3 & 4: 'The evolving definition of womanhood and the passage of the African woman writer herself - from canonic exclusion through mannered silence to tempered resistance - no doubt constitute defining moments in the African literary tradition' (p. 5). Although still left in the shadow of their male counterparts, the contribution made to the African literary scene by the women writers has been grudgingly acknowledged for at least the last two decades. This came about largely as a result of the resistance of the women to their exclusion from the canon as meaningful contributors to literature in Africa, and their insistence on its reconstruction to counter the neglect of gender as a social and analytical category in African literature.

Most male writers, including anti-colonial or post-colonial writers, have often been criticized by their female counterparts for under - or misrepresenting women's experiences. They seem to consider women as peripheral to the larger exploration of man's experience in their writing. The African woman especially provided the mute backdrop to the major narrative of the male protagonist's exploits and was silent and voiceless when depicted in print. Even a great African writer like Chinua Achebe does not escape this criticism from African women writers and feminists. Florence Stratton (1994) accuses him of severely marginalizing women in his groundbreaking novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Since women are effectively excluded from the male domain of community power in the novel which was published shortly before Nigerian independence in 1960, Stratton charges that it contributed significantly to women's exclusion from post-colonial politics and public affairs in Nigeria through its representation of pre-

colonial Igbo society as governed entirely by men (1994: 27). She furthermore points out that, while wife battering was an accepted fact of life in this community, the women in Achebe's novel did nothing concrete to rebel against this form of physical violence, but rather submitted to the patriarchal definition of their gender.

The women of Umuofia, then, are contented with their lot. In their silence they assent to their status as the property of a man and to their reduction to a level lower than a barn full of yams in their role as signifiers of their husbands' wealth... Alienated from history, women are relegated to 'tradition', their inferiority naturalized by the ahistorical identity Achebe has constructed for their gender: woman as a passive object, acted upon, never acting in her own right (p. 35 and 36).

Thus, Ekwefi, one of Okwonko's wives passively accepts the beatings she receives from him, seemingly contented with her condition as a battered wife. This representation of women as passive and voiceless victims of abuse is in direct contrast with the characterization of women in much African women's writing which attempts to assert women's right to speak and to be heard. Self-conscious writing by women writers, by depicting women and women's experiences, women's ways of knowing in women's spaces and locations in their writing, has successfully undermined this dominant male practice. Through their creative writing African women writers like Mariama Ba, Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head, Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Tsitsi Dangarembga and South Africa's Ellen Kuzwayo and Miriam Tlali, as well as many others not mentioned here, count among the best known writers in Africa and have helped to redress the one-sided, stereotypical picture of African women that has been depicted by both Western and African male writers. With their less well-known sisters, they have filled a gap in the African literary scene by somehow satisfying a longing by African women to be heard speaking in their own voices.

For women who have no other avenue of making their voices heard, fiction



becomes what Mariama Ba has called a ‘weapon’ and a ‘revolutionary device’ that women writers can use to subvert hegemonic (male) representations of women in dominant discourses. As an African woman writing within and against established patriarchal traditions, Ba wrote in 1981: ‘The woman writer in Africa has a special task. She has to present the position of women in all its aspects. As women we must work for our own future. We must overthrow the status quo which harms us and we must no longer submit to it’ (Quoted in Stratton, 1994: 54 - 55). This statement was seen as calling for a different direction in African literature. Ba urged women writers to take charge of their own destiny by telling their own story as well as that of many other women in African society. They should redefine the marginal position of African women in a realistic way as one characterized by double or multiple oppression, but at the same time as one also characterized by multiple consciousness. As Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi states in *Gender In African Women’s Writing*:

Ba insisted on women taking charge of their destiny in order to disrupt the patriarchal establishment’s predetermined hierarchies.... little did she know that many women, whether they had heard her cry or not, would take up the challenge and delve into the African woman question, broadly, vigorously, and on their own terms (1997: 148).

Ba’s epistolary novel, *So Long a Letter*, her first and best-known, is set in Dakar, Senegal, about twenty years after its independence from France. This novel, according to Omofolabo Ajayi in ‘Negritude, Feminism, and the Quest for Identity; Re-reading Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter*’, earned Ba a reputation as ‘a writer who adds a strong, unique, and culturally relevant feminist voice to modern African literature’ (1997: 35). It deals with the lives of two women in post-colonial Senegal and their struggle in married life. Ramatoulaye, the protagonist, and her best friend, Aissatou, to whom the former writes the letter which never gets posted, both belong to Dakar’s professional middle class and were both in the forefront of the nationalist and feminist struggles during their

student days in the 1950s. They now find themselves in a situation where their husbands, who were also part of the militant national movement in the 1950s, take second wives, according to the custom of Islam which is practiced in Senegal. However, faced with the same predicament, they choose different solutions. Aissatou resists the imposition of patriarchal standards and divorces her husband, moves to a new house, takes up studying again in order to secure her financial independence and raises her two sons, against all predictions, on her own. Ramatoulaye, on the other hand, conforms to patriarchy and religious demands and remains in the polygamous marriage with her husband even when he leaves her and sets up house with his much younger new wife. She writes the letter to Aissatou after her husband's death, during the four months and ten days of secluded mourning prescribed for widows by Islam. I certainly agree with Ajayi when she claims in her essay that Ramatoulaye is 'a critical construct whose function not only exposes the inherent shortcomings of Negritude but actually subverts the Mother Africa image she replicates' (1997: 36). At the same time Ba also brings into sharp focus patriarchal religious practices, in this case, the religion of Islam, and the limitations placed on women in her own as well as in many other African societies. Ba's treatment of her conservative protagonist is one of irony, since, as a devout Muslim, Ramatoulaye considers her reaction to her husband's polygamy and the prescribed period of mourning after his death a religious duty, one which, sadly, confines her in a debilitating stereotypical definition of womanhood. She has internalized her dependence on her husband and cannot face the loss of marital security by divorcing him. In spite of the fact that she is a professional woman, a teacher, she neglects to mention this part of her life in her letter and instead concentrates on her status as wife and mother. Ba underscores the fact that she has specifically constructed her women characters in this novel in order to highlight the plight of women in Senegal and

also in the rest of African society in an interview in 1980: 'It is first a cry from the heart of Senegalese women, because it talks about the problems of Senegalese women, of Muslim women, of the woman with the constraints of religion which weigh on her as well as other social constraints. But it is also a cry which can symbolize the cry of the woman everywhere.... There is everywhere a cry, everywhere in the world, a cry is being uttered' (Quoted in Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 8).

Regarding themselves as agents providing a platform from where the voice of the oppressed African woman can be heard, African woman writers generally give a more realistic picture of the African woman's condition and predicament within their different cultures, since, in most cases and in spite of class differences, they experience these difficulties themselves. Like Mariama Ba in a specific Senegalese and an African context in general, Miriam Tlali addresses in her writing the multifaceted nature of the black South African woman's struggle against the political and social oppression that has historically erased her voice in society. In an interview in 1990 she states the following:

I identify myself as a black woman writer. In South Africa we live under a pyramid of power, so I regard myself as the voice of the African woman who is oppressed politically, socially and culturally. There is not enough emphasis given to the plight of the South African woman. I insist on this in my collection of short stories called *Soweto Stories*.... In that book, I show the terrible predicament of the South African woman. (Quoted in Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 8).

Thus women's writing in Africa has become an agent for change since women are now writing about women and bringing not only their points of view but also their lived experience as women to their writing. By using their specific histories and locations to (re)define their selfhood and identity, African women writers bring their own experiences as women to life in the form of active female characters who confront not only a racist world but also a sexist one. Women and the many contradictions inherent in their lives are at the centre of their stories and

their female characters now claim the right to depict themselves from the point of view of what they do with their lives, rather than from the point of view of what they must not or cannot do.

### ***CHAPTER 3: THE PURPLE VIOLET OF OSHAANTU BY NESHANI***

## ANDREAS

*There are no voices, no records or writing, I have been told insistently since I started searching for traces of history through women's writing in Namibia. This is, however, not the case. The voices and experiences of African women in Namibia have been consistently and intentionally marginalised and silenced in the records of history and from published work.*

(Orford, 1998: 1)

*While in exile I remembered home through things I had known. Now that I am in Namibia all that I knew of Namibia, of home, has changed. I am finding myself lost in my own country... If I am lost, if my past is lost amongst historical events over which I have no control, who then shall make or remake my history?*

(Namhila, 1997: 198-9)

*You who understand the humiliation of forced removals-relocation-reeducation-redefinition, the humiliation of having to falsify your own reality, your voice - you know. And often cannot say it. You try and keep on trying to unsay it, for if you don't, they will not fail to fill in the blanks on your behalf, and you will be said.*

(Minh-ha, 1989: 80)

In this chapter I will look at the extent to which the dominant ideologies of patriarchy and colonialism succeeded in silencing the subaltern woman as subject in the above novel. I will furthermore examine the degree of agency in the text - to what extent the women as subaltern subjects act against these dominant ideologies. When attempting to position the sexed subaltern subject in the novel I will keep the following questions in mind - when we emphasize the destructive power of patriarchy, compounded by colonialism, do we position subaltern women as helpless victims, incapable of opposing their domination, as Spivak does in her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' On the other hand, if we suggest that the subaltern subject can 'speak' and question patriarchal authority, are we glamorizing such resistant subjects and underplaying the pervasiveness of patriarchal/colonial violence as Spivak accuses the French as well as post-colonial intellectuals of doing?

The novel *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* deals mainly with the discourse of patriarchy, while colonialism provides the historical context for the events of the main narrative, thus placing this novel squarely within the framework of post-colonial feminist literature. The main ideological function of the novel is to offer a critique of and to undermine indigenous patriarchy which uses traditional practices and colonial Christianity to oppress and to silence women. The themes of the novel reflect issues that are of crucial importance to debates on the status and role of women in traditional Namibian society. Andreas deals with issues like the place and position of women in Namibian patriarchal society, especially in the rural areas, domestic violence, the role of the church in suppressing women, migrant labour and its effects on family life, and the inheritance rights of women in traditional Namibian society. By questioning the existing unequal basis of male-female power relations in Namibia and specifically in this

traditional community, Andreas treats a subject that has been suppressed in the dominant male tradition of writing in Namibia. Although she privileges female experience and voice in her novel, she also demonstrates at the same time how this voice has been suppressed by the patriarchal conventions governing relations between men and women in this specific community. She thereby emphasizes the subordinate role of women and the hypocrisy of the traditional gender ideology in Namibia. The narrator in the novel, Mee Ali, who is Kauna's best friend and confidante, relates the story from 'within'. She conveys Kauna's story from the perspective of a close friend and neighbour, while at the same time, through numerous flashbacks, she tells her own story and that of the other women in the novel: Mee Fennie, Kauna's aunt, a divorced woman, successful businesswoman - a vendor on the open market - and single mother, who acts as an advisor and positive role model for Kauna; Mukwankala, an elderly woman in the community, well known for speaking her mind, a self-assertive, self-authenticating woman on whom the younger women in the community often depend to speak on their behalf; Mee Namutenya, a responsible and outstanding member of the village community who went insane after her husband, Tate Oivo, took a much younger second wife; Mee Sarah, who, like Kauna, was accused of having caused her husband's death by using witchcraft, while in reality he died of AIDS, and who, after the latter's death, was stripped of all her earthly belongings, according to the rules of customary law in force in this community, and Mee Nangula, prosperous business woman and owner of several supermarkets, who nearly lost everything when her husband and his jealous relatives could not cope with her success and accused her of witchcraft. By thus providing a platform for women to communicate their experiences, Andreas uses a representational strategy that counters the portrayal of African women as 'voiceless' in both colonial and African male literature. As has been pointed out in the previous

chapter, the latter has often been criticized for under- or mis-representing women's experiences. If women feature in their fictional representations at all, they are usually relegated to the periphery where they have to form the silent backdrop to the main narrative of male subjectivity. Even though Andreas constructs the women in the Oshiwambo rural community in Namibia as 'speaking' subjects, she nevertheless does not convey an unselfconscious appropriation of their experiences. She rather speaks with and for the others, from, what Donna Haraway refers to as a 'situated knowledge' gleaned from her and other Oshiwambo-speaking Namibian women's lives.

Kauna, the main character in the novel, lives in a society characterized by male dominance which dates back to Africa's pre-colonial past when gender hierarchy was taken for granted. During the colonial process, these traditional ideologies of patriarchy were themselves negatively encouraged as European ideas of patriarchy were imposed on African societies. The notion that men are superior to women in essence still affects the modern day organization of societal structure in Namibia as in most of Africa and the world. Kauna, her life being thus circumscribed by the prescriptions and taboos of traditional patriarchy, is taken to live with her in-laws in a different village after her marriage, where she must learn to live as a wife, a possession, within male-defined parameters. She soon finds that marriage has deprived her of agency. As a single woman she possessed a measure of freedom in making certain choices in life. As a married woman she is a mere instrument of her husband's will. She is subjected to his violent temper and regular physical abuse, while she has to obey him and serve him loyally according to the rules laid down for her by the patriarchal tradition in force in her society. Shange, Kauna's husband, works on the mines in a distant town and visits his village and family only occasionally. Andreas portrays Shange's



character as a classic example of male psychology in a patriarchal society, from the perspective of which women are inferior because of their 'otherness'. His manhood is the basis of his identity, and as a result of racial discrimination and economic exploitation under the Apartheid regime in Namibia, he is both racially and sexually insecure. He therefore has to assert his manhood in his exploitative and violent relationship with Kauna. Andreas, however, in relating the brutality of masculinity to the excess of power a patriarchal society makes available to men, shows Shange as simply conforming to a cultural norm which regards women as the mere property of a man - first of their fathers and then of their husbands.

When women writers as 'knowers' speak from the position of women's lives like Andreas does, their characters are constructed from many different positional perspectives. These characters may be endowed with consciousness and agency, but, rather than presenting an essential, fixed identity, they present multiple and contradictory subject positions that are constantly changing within their specific locations and in response to specific situations. Andreas's female characters therefore adhere to the patriarchal norms of their society in certain respects, but in others they oppose these very same norms and customs. Kauna in many respects still conforms to the model of the traditional wife and, with the other women in the novel, still subscribes to most of the patriarchal norms of their traditional society. She endures her violent marriage to Shange in spite of concerted efforts by both her aunt, Mee Fennie, and her best friend, Mee Ali, to persuade her to divorce him. Her own religious convictions, the fact that her father was a minister in the Christian church, and her mother's frequent admonishing whenever she attempts to leave Shange in resistance to his physical and mental abuse, keep her imprisoned in this loveless union. Kauna's mother often cites the

good Christian norms of love and subservience to one's husband, wifely duty and selflessness in order to quell Kauna's rebellion against her husband. These Christian norms enjoin wives to sacrifice their personal and material interests to male requirements in marriage, where good wifhood and motherhood remain the primary source of women's identification. Schooled in these Christian dictums and their oppressive teachings, especially in respect to women, Kauna's mother becomes an aggressive, assertive agent on their behalf when she tries to convince Kauna of her obligations towards her husband: 'Besides, you forget a very important thing. Shange is the man that God has given you and you must accept him as he is. You have made a promise before Him and the whole congregation to love and cherish your husband till death do you part. You cannot break your word now' (p. 67). Kauna's compliance in this case can be regarded as one of several instances of passive obedience on the part of the female characters in the novel and can therefore be construed as subaltern 'voicelessness'. On the one hand it may indicate a strategy for survival since she has nowhere else to go, while, on the other, it may indicate an internalization of the 'epistemic violence' of colonialism/patriarchy. 'So I just gave up. I'm tired. Now, when he beats me, I simply nurse my wounds. Maybe my mother was right, this is the man God has given me and I must accept him, bad as he is' (p 67). Like Ramatoulaye, Mariama Ba's protagonist in her novel *So Long A Letter*, Kauna seems to have been 'silenced' by her cultural and religious beliefs, allowing them to dictate her actions in deciding to remain married to Shange. She cannot claim full autonomy for herself as yet, because she has not reached the stage where she can imagine herself except in relation to a man. Falling into the trap of objectification as so many women do, she imagines that it is only by being a wife and mother that she can confirm her identity as a woman.

Andreas does not portray her female characters as victims only, however. Since their challenge lies in transcending the patriarchal values of their society, she builds their lives and resistance around the potential sites for protest in their daily lives, however humble. The women in this novel exercise a resistance of a different kind, a resistance dispersed in fields that are not conventionally associated with the political. This form of resistance could include extremely modest forms of counteraction inscribed in small everyday acts of defiance and a refusal of approved forms of behaviour, even if these are made within a coercive framework like patriarchy which is itself not directly challenged, but definitely subverted. The opposition which is played out on a more humble scale by Kauna and the other female characters in Andreas' novel undoubtedly undermines the hegemonic discourse even while the latter exerts its conforming power over them. While Shange lives and assaults her, Kauna has to play the part of the subservient and obedient wife in his presence, otherwise she may pay with her life. However, she refuses to hide the fact that he abuses her and keeps a mistress, something she is expected by the community to quietly resign herself to. In this traditional community, as long as a husband provides for his family financially as Shange does, he is allowed to 'abuse his wife and children (and) should go after other women, otherwise *'okwa tulwa mo'* (he is under his wife's thumb) (p. 4). This tradition is underscored here by the beliefs of Mee Maita, a church elder and, ironically, as a woman in the church hierarchy, the one responsible for dealing with the problems of women and widows in the community who are mistreated by their husbands or in-laws.

Obioma Nnaemeka points out how the title of a seminal work in the study of women in African literature - *Ngambika* (a Tshiluba phrase that means 'help me balance this load') - separates victimhood and powerlessness. This she sees as a

forceful articulation of 'agency in victimhood', revealing only the 'limitation of agency', not its complete absence (1997: 3). Kauna's situation shows that agency and victimhood are not mutually exclusive. She is a victim of her husband's abuse and the norms of her patriarchal traditional society, but at the same time she is also an agent who challenges these very norms, thereby changing her own life and affecting other women's lives by showing that oppressive traditional practices need not be accepted in silence and voiceless submission. Her major act of defiance which provides the climax of the narrative takes place after Shange's sudden death one morning after his return from his mistress. She breaks her silence and 'speaks' her anger, thus rupturing the stranglehold of patriarchal tradition over her life. Instead of shedding tears for her dead husband as tradition dictates, she tells everybody what had happened: 'She was not behaving like a widow. She walked straight up to the villagers and told them that her husband had not slept at home last night and had not eaten her food this morning' (p. 12). Village gossip has it that Kauna has gone mad since she does not mourn her husband's death. Such an act of open defiance can only be ascribed to insanity. Mee Ali, who was responsible for assisting Kauna during her time of bereavement, tries to persuade her to conform and show some emotion other than bitterness which will merely give the villagers reason to accuse her of poisoning her husband or using witchcraft to cause his death. Her plea falls on deaf ears, however, since Kauna's bitterness gives her the strength to shun the traditional practice of mourning. Unlike Ba's Ramatoulaye, who opts to mourn her dead husband for a period of forty days, Kauna refuses to be a hypocrite by mourning her husband in the traditional way:

Well, I'm sorry you all feel uncomfortable about my behaviour, but I cannot pretend.... I cannot lie to myself and to everybody else in this village. They all know how I was treated in my marriage. Why should I cry? For what? For my broken ribs? For my baby, the one he killed inside me while beating me? For cheating on me so publicly? For what? For what, Ali? (p. 4).

Her attempt to ‘speak’ her resistance, to oppose patriarchal traditional practices, becomes the subversive moment of redefining her marginal position as woman in this society.

Another act of open rebellion on Kauna’s part occurs when she is approached to appoint somebody from her family to deliver the ‘widow’s speech’ at her husband’s funeral service . A speech in praise of the dead husband at the funeral is an important part of the Oshiwambo culture. Regardless of the consequences, however, Kauna refuses to appoint a representative to deliver the speech on her behalf. “‘No, I am not going to tell the lies that widows tell at their husband’s funerals. I am not going to say what an honourable, loving and faithful man he was, while everybody in the village knows what type of a man he was... No, not because of Shange or anyone else,’ she said with finality” (p.139). By operating here from a silence which ‘speaks’ eloquently, Kauna risks the extreme anger of her husband’s family and the scorn of the entire village, as one of Shange’s cousins remarks after Kauna’s refusal:

You are doing this on purpose, aren’t you? You want to disgrace our clan. You want to demonstrate to the whole world what a horrible man my cousin was... Haven’t you done enough damage to his name already by running around like a crazy freak broadcasting, for everybody to hear, that Shange had not slept at home the night before he died? (p.138).

This condition of silence, especially when it is a voluntary act, in certain instances can be more powerful than speech. As Trinh T. Minh-ha states in relation to silence and speaking: ‘Silence as a refusal to partake in the story does sometimes provide us with a means to gain a hearing. It is a voice, a mode of uttering, and a response in its own right’ (1989: 83). Kauna’s refusal to mourn her abusive husband after his death and her conscious decision to remain silent at his funeral, break the code of conduct which governs her behaviour as a wife in traditional Oshiwambo society. By thus silencing and un-silencing herself by choice, she

asserts her status as subject, exercising her authority over her own actions and her lived experience. She subverts the dominant ideology by speaking out when expected to remain silent and remaining silent when societal convention demands that she speak.

The struggle for control over women's reproductive and childbearing capacities is one of the problems facing women in Africa and is a strongly contested site of struggle for Namibian women. A draft bill on abortion has been shelved several times over the last couple of years because the predominantly male parliamentarians refuse to pass a bill which would grant women the right to decide over their own bodies, their sexual rights and their reproductive health. Because of the opposition to the use of contraceptives by men in many African societies, women are often burdened with multiple pregnancies in quick succession during their childbearing years. Besides the health risks involved, this also serves to keep women firmly based in the home and the reproductive sphere, curtailing their mobility and experience in the productive sphere. Many women in these societies, however, choose to use contraceptives secretly, in such a way exercising their reproductive rights. Kauna consciously takes the step of controlling her procreative capabilities by using oral contraceptives provided by Sustera, the local nurse, without Shange's knowledge. This is a dangerous choice for her, as she confesses to her aunt, Mee Fennie when she enquires about her last-born: 'He is the last one. Sustera gave me something. Shange doesn't know. He would kill us both....' (p. 78). In spite of the danger involved, however, she makes the choice and in this way exercises her sexual rights over her own body, thus learning to affirm agency in her life even before Shange's death and in the face of severe punishment should he find out about it.

Andreas' novel is in many respects a celebration of female solidarity and support. She uses this solidarity amongst her female characters to counter the oppressive gender ideologies and hierarchies in their society. Mee Ali, apart from approaching Mee Maita as a church elder to intervene in Kauna's marriage in order to alleviate her suffering, also supports her throughout her stormy relationship with Shange as well as after his death. In contrast to Kauna, Mee Ali has a good husband who neither abuses her and her children, nor chases after other women, and for these reasons is seen by the community as being controlled by his wife. Because of her more positive circumstances, she could easily have left Kauna to fend for herself, but, instead, she provides loving care as well as practical assistance whenever Kauna may need it, as is the case with Kauna's *okakungungu* (a joint ploughing session of all the women in the village in order to help the one who is behind with her ploughing). In traditional Namibian society as in most African societies, women, together with their children, have to do most of the backbreaking work of subsistence farming in the rural areas while the husband is away in the urban areas, the mines or on white-owned farms earning a wage as a migrant labourer. When Kauna and her children fail to plough Shange's field in time for the rain, Mee Ali organizes an *okakungungu*. Knowing Shange's brutality and the punishment he would mete out to Kauna and her children should he get to know about this, she approaches the other women in the village to ask for their assistance in ploughing Shange's field. All of them managed to come, even some who were not invited and the field was ploughed in one day amidst joking and laughter. Mee Ali, the narrator of the story recounts her feelings of triumph and sisterly love after the event:

I wanted to run to all these women and hug and kiss them all. I wish the spirit would last forever among us. Although this *okakungungu* lasted just one day, a feeling of sisterhood and communal responsibility enveloped us in a strange and cheerful sense of oneness. I felt connected to these women, these sisters, these mothers, these aunts, and grandmothers (p.119).

Out of a sense of ‘communal responsibility’, the women had spared Kauna the humiliation of punishment from her husband and the gossip of the villagers who would have accused her of being a ‘useless wife’ and of making her husband poor. The celebration that followed with cooked goat’s meat and home brewed beer strengthened the feeling of solidarity, of having subverted once again the pervasive patriarchal discourse through united action amongst women. The invaluable friendship amongst the women is an important step, not only to consciousness, but also to the construction of agency. Mukwankala, like Mee Fennie and Mee Ali, encourages Kauna to be strong even under her adverse circumstances. ‘Don’t always walk with your head hanging down. It is a pity your husband doesn’t treat you well, but that should not allow you to feel sorry for yourself. Be strong and take care of yourself’ (p. 111-112). This courageous woman does not allow Kauna to assume a victim status. She has to fight back and come into her own even in her position as battered wife. However, Mukwankala also tackles Kauna’s problem from a completely different angle, with positive results. She confronts Shange in public after he nearly killed Kauna during one of his violent physical assaults on her:

I heard you beat her again and this time I heard you almost killed her’ she said coldly and with contempt. It was clear to everyone that Mukwankala was on the warpath... Why did you beat the child like that?... Have you ever looked at yourself, your body, your weight, your height?’ How do you feel when you beat a person who cannot beat you back?... Now, if you are such a fighter, tell me how many men you have beaten in this village the way you beat your wife? No, not one. Yes, it is only that poor child you beat like that... (p. 62).

In this society such an act of public confrontation of a man by a woman is almost unheard of and everybody fears that Shange would humiliate Mukwankala in front of those present. However, the old woman, defiantly rejecting the accepted definition of subservience and silence of her gender in this community, demands the right to speak as well as to be heard. She exercises a strong act of agency



which was followed by positive action, since Shange, stunned by her defiance and the humiliation of having his manhood questioned, not only remains quiet throughout the confrontation, but actually stops his cruel assaults on his wife altogether. The women in the community thus provide a supportive network for Kauna, helping her to endure her hardships and to overcome them. eventually.

According to Teresa de Lauretis, subjectivity is an ongoing process, a constant renewal based on interaction between different subject positions, and determined by experience. Subjectivity, in Kauna's case, becomes engendered through personal experiences and positive interactions with other women in her community. Her experience is progressive, for in the end she has grown from dependence for her identity on the conventional roles of wife and mother into a self-authenticating woman. Traditional custom in the Oshiwambo community dictates that when a husband dies, his relatives inherit all his wealth and belongings, often stripping the wife and children bare and leaving them with no means of survival. Andreas uses Kauna's story to offer a critique of this social wrong. A month after Shange's death his relatives fraudulently obtain the ownership of his homestead and chase Kauna and her children off his land. Kauna decides not to fight for the land and the homestead, since she realizes that she would have to continue living a life subjected to indigenous patriarchal custom and control under the watchful eyes of her in-laws. They had won Shange's land, but they had lost the moral battle against Kauna. They have managed to drive her off the land that she has lived and worked on for so long, but they could not undo the fact that she has opposed the traditions that held her captive for so long and gave voice to her anger and bitterness at the suffering she had to endure at the hands of their late relative. They had not destroyed Kauna's spirit for 'having bewitched and killed' Shange, as they wanted to believe. On

the contrary, her subjugation and humiliation as a married woman serve to alter her self-perception after her husband's death, making her aware of her capacity for self-reliance. She makes a deliberate choice for independence and freedom. She will leave and set up house somewhere else with her children. Referring to the latter and the responsibility of taking care of them alone, she remarks to Mee Ali shortly before she leaves: 'This is my baggage and your own baggage is never too heavy to carry' (p. 167). She gets rid of what was left of her belongings after her in-laws took whatever they regarded as rightfully theirs. This signifies a clear break with her past and the old way of life - her suffering and humiliation under the suffocating rules and regulations of this community. The new Kauna would continue her opposition to patriarchal oppression of women as can be gleaned from her remarks to Mee Ali before she leaves her village for good:

You have not seen anything yet. You know what happens to the *mahangu* millet? After it has been knocked down, stepped on and mercilessly destroyed by cattle, it finds the strength to repair itself and grow better. It is often bigger and more vibrant than the millet that has not been threatened by any danger and cut to the ground... No, I am not finished with them, I am only just starting (p. 174).

By comparing herself to the *mahangu* millet, a staple food in Northern Namibia, Kauna makes a powerful statement for women's agency. Like the *mahangu* millet which grows stronger and more vibrant after it has been 'knocked down, stepped on and mercilessly destroyed by cattle', she will find the strength, after the abuse she had to endure in her marriage and the cruelty of her in-laws, to build a new life for herself. She is determined to make this a better life than the one she had had as Shange's wife, affirming her ability to live without a husband and raise her children on her own as Mee Fennie has done. This decision ushers in new dimensions to Kauna's subjectivity and agency at the end of the story. Using the tools that are available to her, she strives to carve a place for herself in a male-dominated society, by refusing to submit to prescribed categories of female behaviour or definitions of womanhood. By so doing, she redefines what

is seen, especially through male eyes in her society, as a woman's natural place. Andreas ends her story with the confirmation of Kauna's willingness to begin the journey into her new life, even in the face of uncertainty: "Kauna looked at the dusty gravel road ahead of us and said 'I don't know what is out there for me and my children, but I will go, I am willing'" (p.174). Released from the shackles of her violent marriage and freed from the stifling norms of this community, a determined Kauna, chastened by her ordeals, seems well poised to continue her struggle successfully. She has demanded the right to act as subject rather than as object of history, and, more importantly, of her own story, thus becoming alive as speaking subject and agent for change.

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## CONCLUSION

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In this dissertation I attempted to prove that, contrary to Spivak's conclusions in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' - the subaltern cannot speak and cannot be heard, and her pessimistic picture of a historically mute subaltern woman, rendered thus through the combined epistemic violence of colonialism and patriarchy, the subaltern woman in Andreas's novel does 'speak'. She opposes her oppression with the scant weapons at her disposal and within the boundaries and restrictions of her patriarchal community, and although this may not seem very significant, it has an indisputable impact on the slow wheels of change in gender relations in Namibian society. Here I wish to echo Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi's sentiments when she states the following:

African and 'Third World' women seem to find themselves in an indescribable position within this metonymic chain of otherness, one that I will describe, to borrow Spivak's words, as that of the 'historically muted subject of the subaltern woman,' with a difference. If Spivak's subaltern woman is historically muted, I contend the reverse, which is that she has always spoken, she has spoken in alternative ways that have challenged and continue to challenge not only imperialism and colonial discourse but us, the critics as well, who have been slow to or have refused to hear and acknowledge when and how these voices have spoken (1997: 30).

As writer Andreas provides a platform for the sexed subaltern subject from which to 'speak' her suffering as well as her opposition to her subjugation, thus engendering individual and political agency. Adeola James points out in her introduction to *In Their Own Voices: African Women Writers Talk*, that women's situation is the key to a critique of society and as such, what women writers have to say about women's lives should receive serious attention, instead of being merely tolerated or disregarded completely (1990: 2). Andreas' novel has seized the attention of Namibian society because of its emphasis on women's issues,

highlighting and criticizing women's oppression under patriarchy in traditional Namibian society while at the same time promoting a positive image of female power and subjectivity. She states the following in an interview in October 2003: 'I am merely holding up a mirror to Namibian society, reflecting the violence in our country. Surely, if you see your face reflected in this mirror, you would want to change'. Her writing is a contribution to, as Carole Boyce Davies puts it in her introduction to *International Dimensions to Black Women's Writing*, 'challenging conceptually the various invisibilities, erasures, marginalizations, silencings' of women and the many faces of their reality. (1995: xviii). This novel, therefore, forms part of a powerful political and creative tradition of opposition to oppression against women, both in Namibia and on the African continent. A first of its kind - a feminist text creating knowledge about the condition of women in Namibia and their opposition to it - it creates a different space for women's writing or for women speaking outside the given boundaries in the Namibian literary tradition. Contributing actively to the subversion of patriarchy as well as to the effort to effect agency for the subaltern woman in Namibia, Andreas articulates an assertive presence, as Davies would call it, 'voicing a creative uprising'. Imperfect though this 'creative uprising' may appear, we ought to honour it.

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