



## Juliet and Julie as Subalterns in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Aparna Sen's *Arshinagar*

Mst. Dil Rifat Sayed

English Discipline, Khulna University, Bangladesh

\*Corresponding Author Mst. Dil Rifat Sayed, English Discipline, Khulna University, Bangladesh

**Abstract:** *Juliet* in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and in its 2015 film adaptation *Arshinagar* by Aparna Sen is marginalized like a subaltern, though the ways of her marginalization are different. She is never allowed to raise her voice in the patriarchal society. Subalternity in Shakespeare's *Juliet* appears intense but Aparna Sen's *Julie* (counterpart of *Juliet*) becomes doubly subaltern because of her gender as well as her religion. Patriarchal hegemony surrounds both Shakespeare's *Juliet* and Aparna Sen's *Julie*, but religious orthodoxy and patriarchal hegemony work together to make Sen's *Julie* subaltern. This paper traces the ways in which *Juliet* or *Julie* is made subaltern. It also shows how *Juliet* and *Julie* are denied freedom of speech in the original text and in its adaptation.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Religion, Silent, Subaltern, Subordinate

### 1. INTRODUCTION

*Arshinagar* is a 2015 Bengali musical romance drama, a modernized version of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. *Juliet* in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is marginalized like a subaltern where Julekha Khan or *Julie* (counterpart of *Juliet*) in Aparna Sen's *Arshinagar* is doubly marginalized. Critics have examined William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Aparna Sen's *Arshinagar* from multiple perspectives but most of them overlook the role of *Juliet* / *Julie* and none of them has explored her position as a subaltern. Applying Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's idea of subaltern, this paper focuses on how *Juliet* is portrayed as a subaltern in the original text as well as in its film adaptation. This paper also shows how *Juliet* is made silent systematically in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as well as in Aparna Sen's *Arshinagar*. I hope this paper will contribute to the existing body of research work.

### 2. DISCUSSION

Subaltern is a person or group of people whose position is below others for their rank, race, gender, caste or religion. The hegemonic society, whose supremacy is confirmed by the submission of the subaltern, maintains its power through domination. The term 'subaltern' has been derived from the Latin roots 'sub' and 'alternus.' 'Sub' means "below" and 'alternus' means "all others." So, subaltern means someone who is below all others. It was originally used by Antonio Gramsci for the proletariat or subordinated social groups whose voice was not heard [1]. In her 1988 essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak examines the situation of subaltern people. Subaltern voices are systematically silenced within the platforms from which one's views and demands are taken seriously. They cannot speak or act more than they are allowed to. Their ability to make their own decisions is suppressed by the powerful in the society. The subaltern belongs to a position where his or her voice is left unheard. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak states, "The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read". She also states, "The subaltern cannot speak" [3]. The word 'speak' here means not only to say something physically, but also to have one's message recognized by others. A subaltern woman has to go by the rules imposed by patriarchy. She has to shape herself according to the patriarchal values of the society. Women's voices are absent, leaving them doubly excluded as both subalterns and women [2]. It is easy to make a woman subaltern because her body is biologically reproductive. In "The New Subaltern: A Silent Preview", Spivak states, "The genetically reproductive body as the site of production questions feminist theories based only on the ownership of the phenomenal body as

means of reproduction, and feminist psychological theories reactive to reproductive genital penetration as normality" [4]. A subaltern woman is used as bait, though she is not directly involved in the process. Spivak states, "If the dominant is represented by the centre less centre of the electronic finance capital, the subaltern woman is the target of credit-baiting without the infrastructural involvement, thus opening a huge untapped market to the international commercial sector" [4]. Both William Shakespeare's Juliet and Aparna Sen's Julie are surrounded by patriarchal hegemony which always exerts its tentacles over women. But in case of Sen's Julie, both patriarchy and religion contribute to make her a subaltern.

### **2.1. Juliet in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet***

William Shakespeare's Juliet lives in a society where women are considered as weaker sex and they are supposed to be obedient, silent, and tolerant. Here Juliet has neither the scope of expressing her choice, nor the power to fulfill her desires. She suffers misery at the hands of the people whose attitudes are guided by the age-old patriarchal values. Even her mother and nurse also succumb to patriarchal ideology. They try to manipulate Juliet. Nurse affectionately addresses Juliet as "lamb", and "lady-bird" [5]. It seems that from her childhood Juliet is encouraged to be a meek, humble, and obedient girl. She is allowed to say only the things she is taught, nothing more than that. Earlier in India a Hindu widow was encouraged to be *Sati* because she was made to believe that her self-sacrifice would bring a happier birth in her next incarnation [6]. Similarly Juliet is also made to believe that in order to be a good girl, she should be meek and humble like a lamb and harmless like a lady-bird. When the names of the *Satis* dead on the pyres were reported by the British officials, they were translated in English. They turned into names like Ray Queen, Love's Delight, Virtue Found, Soft Eye, Moon-beam, Comfort, Love-bud, Dear Heart, etc [7]. These names highlight the sweet and soft nature of women. It seems that women are manipulated to be subdued, humble and submissive. Likewise, Nurse's words have been manipulating Juliet since her childhood. Juliet is brought up in such a family where she is accustomed to see her mother to obey her father. The feeling of powerlessness is injected in her in such a way that she is ready to be ruled by Romeo, who is also a part of patriarchy. She is not only made a subordinate by her family but also wants to be subordinate to Romeo by herself. She promises to be an obedient wife and to do as Romeo wills. She says, "And all my fortunes at thy foot I'll lay, / And follow thee my Lord throughout the world" [5]. According to Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony', the supremacy of a social group is achieved not only by physical force but also through consensual submission of the very people who are dominated [8]. Juliet is manipulated in such a way that her consensual submission gives power to the patriarchal society to dominate her. Juliet humiliates herself by comparing herself with an object. She says to herself, "though I am sold, / Not yet enjoy'd" [5]. She considers marriage as a process of a woman being sold to her husband. It seems that a husband is a master and the wife is his slave. Though Juliet's marriage to Romeo is a protest against her parents' decision, she is not free of the ideology imposed upon her by her mother and her nurse that marriage completes a woman. Juliet respects her husband Romeo, but her respect reaches to such level that she loses her sense of judgment. It seems like she worships Romeo. Though Romeo kills her cousin, she considers any bad thought about Romeo as a sin. Juliet says to her nurse, "Shall I speak ill of him that is my husband?" [5]. Here Juliet herself is giving Romeo a higher position.

In patriarchal power structure Juliet's father has the power and authority to control his family members. At first he agrees to value Juliet's choice, but he feels that it will lead to a distortion of his position and power as a patriarch. So he denies Juliet any opportunity to speak and rejects her freedom. He imposes his rule over Juliet. He says to Lady Capulet, "How now wife, / Have you deliver'd to her our decree?" [5]. Here the word 'decree' means order or command. Lord Capulet simply makes an order to Juliet. He is not ready to accept any objection against his order. When Juliet refuses to marry Paris, her father becomes furious. Though earlier he claimed that Juliet needed to like Paris, when she refuses to marry him, she goes from "hopeful Lady" to "baggage" and "tallow-face" in her father's eyes [5]. He considers her as "unworthy" and Paris as "Worthy" [5]. When a girl is considered as a 'lamb', a 'lady-bird' and 'unworthy', her identity is humiliated. Juliet observes that she has no scope to speak in this society, nobody is representing her, and she is being considered as a

secondary being. Her father rebukes her so extremely that she does not find any scope to confess her love for Romeo. He threatens to kick her out of the house. Even he threatens to drag her on a hurdle. He regards her as traitor for disobeying him. Even he regards her as a curse: "And that we have a curse in having her" [5]. He says to Juliet, "And you be mine, I'll give you to my friend, / And you be not, hang, beg, starve, die in the streets, / For by my soul I'll ne'er acknowledge thee" [5]. This statement suggests that Juliet is a property which her father wishes to hand over to Paris. He does not care about his daughter anymore; he only cares about his power as a patriarch. Though Juliet attempts to convince her father, he does not let her say anything. She even kneels down to show respect to his authority, but he denies her freedom of speech. As a female, Juliet does not have the power to violate the law of patriarchal authority. Having no other options, she urges to her mother to "Delay this marriage for a month, a week" [5]. But her mother also does not want to hear anything further from her. Instead of caring about her daughter Lady Capulet seems to care more about her own safety in Capulet house and her relationship with her husband. Nurse also suggests Juliet to marry Paris. Juliet realizes that she has nothing to do with the patriarchal society. Everybody is going against her. To survive in this society she must be silent. So, hiding her intention she starts to act as if she agreed to marry Paris and wanted to make confession in the church. This seems to be a kind of submission, as her parents want her to act in this way. This shows that she is unable to express her decision boldly.

Juliet's ultimate ending is like Velutha's in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Velutha faces death as a result of cast prejudice, and here Juliet faces death as a result of restrictive patriarchal values. Romeo also faces death, but he had not the societal obligations like Juliet had. Like Velutha and Ammu, Juliet and Romeo knew it was a foredoomed love, but they were determined to make the best of it. Like Romeo, Juliet committed suicide at last: "O happy dagger. / This is thy sheath, there rust and let me die." [5]. Juliet was never allowed to raise her voice. She realizes that she has no power to control anything except her own body. So, she takes her own life. This is a reaction against patriarchal society. Spivak considers the experience of Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri, a female member of the Indian independence movement, who committed suicide. As Bhuvaneswari was unable to speak through official channels, she resorted to trying to communicate with the only thing she had: her body, by taking her own life [2]. By committing suicide like Bhaduri, Juliet also tried to speak through her body. Her suicide gives a message which she wanted to express through her voice but could not. It suggests that she tried extremely hard to speak but could not do so.

## **2.2. Julie in Aparna Sen's *Arshinagar***

Aparna Sen's Julie is doubly oppressed for her gender as well as her religion. In spite of being a girl from a Muslim conservative family, she loves a Hindu boy, Rawnjoy Mitra or Rawna (counterpart of Romeo), who is an enemy of her family. Her family considers her love for Rawna as a sin. They try to shackle her with both patriarchal ideology and religious orthodoxy. Julie is made completely voiceless; she is not given any chance to speak her words. Both Rawna's father Bishwanath Mitra and Julie's father Sabir Khan want to tear down the Arshinagar slum and build high rise buildings. For their own advantages, they provoke Hindu-Muslim riots in which Rawna and Julie are killed. Julie has involvement neither in the feud between families nor in the communal riot, but she is the person who suffers most from this violence.

The film starts with a puppet show. The puppets are like the subalterns and those controlling the strings are the powerful in the social structure. Julie is first introduced in the film when a tattoo of a bird is being drawn on her back. Having a tattoo drawn on the body is not something that Islam approves of. The puppeteer says, "How can she do this in spite of being a daughter of a conservative Muslim Family?" [9]. But the tattoo suggests Julie's desire for freedom and her nature to go against religious orthodoxy. Julie asks her aunt, "Christians and Hindu can marry; Hindu and Sikh can also marry; but why can't a Hindu and a Muslim marry?" [9]. Julie's question suggests her desire to break away from religious orthodoxy, but her aunt denies her words and says, "Get such ideas removed from your brain. In our faith it's forbidden" [9]. Her aunt again tries to shackle her with the religious conservativeness. If she marries Rawna, and gives birth to his child, the child would carry the blood of both Hindu and Muslim which would not be allowed by her orthodox family. It suggests that subalternity is thrust upon female body. The way Tayeb treats Julie suggests that he loves her. He also tries to have power over Julie. When he comes to know about Julie and Rawna's romantic

involvement, he warns her and says, "Keep the thing in mind that Rawna is Hindu, infidel. The more important thing is that he is a Mitra" [9].

Julie's father tells his wife about his dream of marrying Julie to Parvez. But Julie's mother says, "Would your daughter agree? You must consider that too" [9]. It seems that Julie's mother believes in individual freedom. She thinks Julie has the right to take decision about her marriage. But the camera's focus is then shifted towards Fatima and Julie. Julie's father's reaction to his wife's words is not revealed here. Julie tells Fatima that she does not like Parvez and she would not marry him. She satirically says, "My father is an old fashioned person, and his idea is also old fashioned. That's why he thinks of marrying off his daughter and going to Hajj" [9]. Julie then sings, "But his daughter's dreams are ready to fly. She'll fly away one day and stop at nothing. She'll fly where she's unshackled" [9]. It suggests her desire to break the patriarchal shackles. Julie's father wants her to meet Parvez after the play, so he asks his wife to forbid Julie to play any male role and wear moustache. But Julie takes the costume of a boy and wears moustache. It suggests that Julie is not so obedient to her father. When Tayeb informs her that her father is calling her, she agrees to go there soon but then tries to hide herself. It indicates that she does not take her father's word seriously, rather negates his authority. She does not protest directly, but her denial of her father's words suggests her silent protest. When her mother wants to give her medicine, Julie replies, "I have got my medicine, mother" [9]. She regards Rawna as her medicine that she needs. This is the first time she claims what she desires. It is Rawna's love which she desires. When she goes to sleep, the tattoo on her back is again focused. It suggests that she finds freedom in Rawna's love. Rawna always addresses Julie as 'Khan' which reminds the audience of the religious difference between them. It is related with Julie's paternal identity and Rawna does not want her to change her identity for him. While singing the qawwali song, Julie sings, "Appear as my love, o my Lord" [9]. She looks into Rawna's eyes when she sings this line. It is as if she finds her Lord in Rawna. But she never subjugates herself to Rawna. Parvez seems to value Julie's opinion regarding their marriage, but he thinks that the right to take the final decision belongs to him. He says, "If Julekha is willing to marry me, I'll finalize the marriage before I go" [9]. Julie's father is confident about his daughter's choice. This confidence breeds from the notion that his daughter will never go against him. Julie's father is so sure about his authority and Julie's subaltern status. Though Julie does not like Parvez, Julie's father confirms him about her choice. He says "I know she likes you" [9]. It suggests the mental distance prevailed in father-daughter relationship. The father does not know what his daughter likes, but he expects that his daughter's choice would be formed according to his wish.

The history of love between Rawna's mother and Julie's father repeats itself in the new generation. Like Rawna and Julie, there was relationship between Sabir and Madhu. When Sabir is a lover, he wants to marry a Hindu girl, but when he is a father, his ideology changes and he acts like a patriarch. This is the hypocrisy of patriarchy. The patriarchal society believes that their decisions are inevitable and a woman must follow the rules imposed by the patriarchy. She can no way raise her voice and must shape herself according to the patriarchal values. Julie's father declares, "I'll marry Julie to Parvez. He'll take her back with him as his wife" [9]. Julie cries and embraces her father saying, "Please, father, no" [9]. It suggests Julie's inability to protest strongly. Her father not only denies her request, but also denies her scope to speak and represent her desires. He spurts her hand from his hand and strictly says, "Julie, no arguments anymore" [9]. He does not let Juliet speak a word. Julie's mother, who at first values Julie's opinion regarding her marriage, also turns her face from Julie. Julie's father says, "How dare you raise the question of marrying a Hindu boy? Even if he changes his religion, it's impossible. Don't forget that he is the killer of your cousin" [9]. Julie is suppressed by both her father's religious orthodoxy and patriarchal ideology. Julie falls at the feet of her father to go to singing class so that she can meet Rawna, but her father strictly says, "Don't even try to step out of this house. You'll marry in ten days and go straight to Dubai" [9]. He wants to bind her within the confines of the house walls with an invisible shackle. The singer in this film wears something like fetter. This becomes a symbol of imprisonment. Julie is imprisoned in her own house. She becomes voiceless, because she realizes that even if she raises voice, her voice would not be recognized by her family. So, she decides to leave her family. Her decision to elope with Rawna is kind of a rebellion against the patriarchal society. She wants to escape the society where patriarchal values and religious



sentiments are more important than a woman's life. At last she is killed in the communal violence and becomes victim of the religious conflict.

### **2.3. A Comparative Study on the Subalternity of Juliet and Julie**

In William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Aparna Sen's *Arshinagar*, Juliet or Julie is treated like a subaltern, but the ways in which society makes her subaltern are different. *Arshinagar* is a modern day version of *Romeo and Juliet*. Human behavior changes with time and settings. So, it is quite natural that Juliet's portrayal as a subaltern is different in the movie from the original text because of different contexts. The subalternity of Shakespeare's Juliet is intense because she is marginalized by patriarchy, but Aparna Sen's Julie is doubly marginalized. Shakespeare's Juliet lives in a society where a woman is considered as weaker sex. She is nothing but a doll in the hands of patriarchal society. Even her identity is also dependent on her husband. Juliet's mother is introduced as Lady Capulet and Romeo's mother is introduced as Lady Montague. But in Aparna Sen's adaptation, they are given names at least. The 21st century Indian women start questioning the rules laid down for them by the society. They want to break the barriers. Sen's Julie also questions about the rule of religious orthodoxy and wants to break the rule. She asks her aunt why the marriage between a Hindu and a Muslim is considered as sin, but her aunt denies her opinion. Her father does not allow her to speak when he comes to know about Julie's love for Rawna. So, Juliet's opinion or choice is denied everywhere in the text as well as in the film. Her ability to take her own decision is always suppressed. Shakespeare's Juliet makes herself subordinate to Romeo by promising to be an obedient wife, but Sen's Julie does not seem to make any commitment to be subordinate to Rawna. She seems to find freedom in Rawna's love. Shakespeare's Juliet is manipulated by her mother and Nurse who are the flag-bearers patriarchal ideology. They act as the agents to make Juliet subaltern. In Aparna Sen's adaptation, Julie's mother and nurse do not seem to influence her; rather her nurse is quite supportive to her. Both Juliet's father and Julie's father want to preserve their authority and try to dominate Juliet and Julie respectively, but Julie's father tries to suppress Julie with both of his patriarchal ideology and religious orthodoxy. Both Shakespeare's Juliet and Aparna Sen's Julie are never allowed to raise their voice and ultimately they are silenced everywhere. Shakespeare's Juliet commits suicide as a reaction against patriarchal society. She protests against patriarchy by taking control of her own body and taking her own life. She tries to give the message that a subaltern is never allowed to speak. On the other hand, Aparna Sen's Juliet is killed in the communal violence. She does not protest by committing suicide like Shakespeare's Juliet, but she also makes a silent protest. She decides to leave her family and lead a life according to her choice.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

A closer inspection brings us face to face with the fact that Juliet / Julie is marginalized everywhere, though the ways of marginalization are different. This paper describes how patriarchal hegemony surrounds Juliet / Julie to make her subordinate. This paper also focuses how her voice is systematically silenced in the original text as well as in its film adaptation. This paper can raise many possibilities for the readers to look into other literary works from new perspective. Since the introduction of film as a medium of representation, many great classics have been recreated and given cinematic makeover by the directors. This paper can be an encouragement for the researchers who want to explore any particular aspect of a literary creation in relation to its film adaptation.

### **REFERENCES**

- [1] Mulajkar, Ajit Murlidharrao. "Subaltern Voices in the Novels of R. K. Narayan." Dissertation of Swami Ramanand Teerth Marathwada U, 2016.
- [2] Riach, Graham K. *An Analysis of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Can the Subaltern Speak?* Routledge, 2017.
- [3] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Columbia University Press, 1994, pp 66-111.
- [4] Spivak, Gayatri. "The New Subaltern: A Silent Interview." *The Cultural Studies Reader*. edited by Simon During, Rotledge, 2013, pp. 229-240.
- [5] Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet*. Peacock Books, 2003.
- [6] Mayo, Katherine. *Mother India*. edited by Mrinalini Sinha, The University of Michigan Press, 2000.

- [7] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives." *History and Theory*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1985, pp. 247-272. [www.jstor.org/stable/2505169](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2505169). Accessed 22 Nov. 2018.
- [8] Mandal, Tribeni. "Subaltern Voice in Shakespeare: A Study in *The Tempest*." *International Journal of Computational Engineering Research*, vol. 04, no.5, 2014, pp. 63-67. [www.ijceronline.com/papers/Vol4\\_issue05/version3/G04503063067](http://www.ijceronline.com/papers/Vol4_issue05/version3/G04503063067). Accessed 09 Oct. 2018.
- [9] *Arshinagar*. Directed by Aparna Sen. performance by Dev, Rittika Sen, Shree Venkatesh Films, 2015.

#### **AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHY**



**Mst. Dil Rifat Sayed** has done her B.A (Hons) in English from Khulna University, Bangladesh. She has recently completed her M.A in English from the same university.

**Citation:** Mst. Dil Rifat Sayed, *Juliet and Julie as Subalterns in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and Aparna Sen's Arshinagar*. *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*, vol 7, no. 3, 2019, pp. 41-46 doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.0703001>.

**Copyright:** © 2019 Authors. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.