



Open Access

QLANTIC
 JOURNAL OF
 SOCIAL SCIENCES

A Comparative Feminist Study of Subalterns in Adichie's *Americanah* and Darzink's *Song of a Captive Bird*

Alia Kashif¹ Hafsah Zafar² Qasim Shafiq³

Abstract: *The present study explores the issues of oppression and gender identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah and Jasmin Darznik's Song of a Captive Bird. This study examines Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subaltern theory that views how women suffer from oppression and gender identity in a patriarchal society. The postcolonial feminist research method is employed in the study to analyze how the two female authors present the struggle of women living in patriarchal cultures. From different views, this study uses close textual analysis to examine the narratives of Ifemelu and Farrokhzad and their respective struggle with societal expectations about gender roles. The findings of the study indicate that both authors address the issue of oppression and gender identity through their respective narratives. The authors' works show how gender norms and expectations limit women's opportunities and agency in Nigerian and Iranian societies. This study also highlights how patriarchal culture contributes to the anguish of Nigerian and Iranian women, creating additional barriers to their empowerment and fulfilment. This study concludes that the works of both female writers provide valuable insights into the struggle of women living in patriarchal societies and call for a re-examination of gender roles and societal expectations to promote gender equality and empowerment.*

Key Words: Adichie, Darzink, Feminism, Oppression, Patriarchy, Subaltern

Introduction

Postcolonial literature explores topics like reconstruction, subversion, and resistance, which shed insight into the tensions that arise when indigenous communities and imperial powers collide (Sawant, 2015). It examines historical, political, cultural, and linguistic contexts in an effort to educate people about the terrible views of the strong ones in bygone ages. Both *Americanah* and *Song of a Captive Bird* deal with gender identity and the way in which one's gender is shaped by cultural norms and assumptions. Both *Americanah* and *Song of the Captive Bird* examine the repercussions of a patriarchal society, though *Song of the Captive Bird* focuses more on racial injustice. Both books depict the marginalization and abuse of women at the hands of upper society. This study examines the depiction of oppression and gender identity concerns in Adichie's *Americanah* and Darznik's *Song of a Captive Bird*. The study looks at how Nigerian Black women in Africa and Iranian women in West Asia are treated alike in male-dominated societies.

The present work shows how two different societies, Nigerian and Iranian, are made up of similar hegemonic socioeconomic, cultural, and political structures of oppression that define and limit the identities of subalterns in each country. Subaltern women examine Adichie's *Americanah* and Darznik's *Song of a Captive Bird*. This study reveals how women living in two different regions are given mistreatment in the same way. It also demonstrates that women suffer from issues like oppression and gender identity owing to the reason they are considered inferior members of society. Though the social-cultural patterns of Nigeria and Iran differ, the females of both regions receive the same treatment, i.e., oppressive and discriminative. The reason for such oppressive treatment in Nigeria is race, while in Iran, it is the patriarchal culture that prevails in the respective society. National elitists conduct a form of home

¹ M.Phil. in English, Department of English and Literature, The University of Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

² Lecture in English, Department of English and Literature, The University of Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

³ Associate Professor/Chairperson, Department of English and Literature, The University of Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

▪ **Corresponding Author:** Qasim Shafiq (qasimmirzaa@gmail.com)

▪ **To Cite:** Kashif, A., Zafar, H., & Shafiq, Q. (2024). A Comparative Feminist Study of Subalterns in Adichie's *Americanah* and Darzink's *Song of a Captive Bird*. *Qlantic Journal of Social Sciences*, 5(1), 210-216.

<https://doi.org/10.55737/qjss.650779312>

colonialism that silences and exploits subaltern women. So, this study aims to highlight the issues females have to face in two different societies where men are considered to be superior members. For this purpose, the present study opts to do a comparative analysis of Adichie's *Americanah* and Darznik's *Song of a Captive Bird* by applying Spivak's theory of subalternity. In Nigeria, race is a superstructure, and in Iran, a patriarchal culture is a superstructure. Both of these affect the identities of the marginalized along gender, class, and family structure lines. In fact, it was a form of colonialism within the country.

Literature Review

Recent studies have shown that literature is an effective tool for depicting gender roles and cultural mores. It can reflect societal norms and values by embodying those that are important to them. In addition, literature acts as a corrective for flawed thought processes by reflecting societal norms and values back to the reader. In this context, the ambiguities of gender identification are examined in the works of Adichie's *Americanah* and Jasmin Darznik's *Song of a Captive Bird*. These works of literature examine the effects of social norms and prejudice on individuals, highlighting the difficult and never-ending task of coming into one's own. These novels, via their narratives, illuminate the complex relationship between individual experiences and societal expectations around gender expression.

To empower subaltern women, the literature emphasizes the importance of addressing structural barriers and fostering social justice. The narratives of *Americanah* (2013) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and *Song of a Captive Bird* (2018) by Jasmin Darznik explore issues of gender identity. These novels depict societies in which women are expected to be submissive. When attempting to express themselves creatively and pursue their passions, the protagonists confront disapproval and ostracism. Budi & Widyastuti (2017) discuss that women are treated unfairly and subjected to oppression in many parts of the world. They typically receive preferential treatment compared to their male counterparts. They are always treated unfairly since they are deemed inferior to men. This is the result of a cultural phenomenon called "male dominance", in which males are looked at as superior to women. In a patriarchal society, only men can hold positions of power at home. The prevalent unjust treatment and oppression women have to face throughout the globe are routinely subjected to discriminatory practices. In patriarchal societies, positions of power are reserved exclusively for men, reinforcing the systemic discrimination women face in both the public and private spheres (Budi & Widyastuti, 2017). This study sheds light on the broader societal context of gender oppression and the hierarchical power dynamics within patriarchal systems, whereas previous research has focused on specific literary works and the commodification of women.

Gayatri Spivak (1988) uses the term 'subaltern' to refer to marginalized and oppressed vis-a-vis their social, economic, or political status. Postcolonial studies have been shaped by Gayatri Spivak's 1988 essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* which argues that dominant discourses prevent subalterns from speaking for themselves. *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* (1984) by Chandra Talpade Mohanty shows how Western feminist research reproduces colonial power dynamics and silences subaltern women. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* (1984) by Bell Hooks emphasizes the importance of centering marginalized women's experiences in feminist theory, while Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) critiques everyday power and privilege.

Research Methodology

Postcolonial feminism examines many levels of oppression that can co-exist and is closely related to post-colonialism. Postcolonial feminism emerged as a response to criticisms levelled at both postcolonial theory and classic feminism for failing to sufficiently address gender-related issues and failing to take into account the viewpoints of people living under patriarchal structures in the Global South. In order to confront and end all types of marginalization and injustice, postcolonial feminism seeks to bring them to light. The theory of postcolonial feminism highlighted the need to include and represent the experiences of those women and other marginalized groups from the Global South who were instead represented through stereotyping or, in some cases, completely erased from the narrative.

In *Can the Subaltern Speak*, Gayatri Spivak makes the case that most liberal feminism and Western academic theories are written with the assumption that the reader is either white or from the Global North. This adds to minority women's oppression and marginalization. She also takes aim at liberal feminists for



selectively highlighting some aspects of minority women's hardships in order to support their cause rather than making a sincere attempt to incorporate their stories into feminist philosophy. This strategy reveals subaltern women's depictions of oppression and gender identity in Nigeria and Iran. This study adopts the subaltern theory of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who is best known as a postcolonial theorist and describes herself as a "para-disciplinary, ethical philosopher. According to Spivak, the subaltern cannot speak. She opines that the subaltern does not have a voice. Spivak, in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Writes: "*The Subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with women as pious. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual has a circumscribe task that she must not disown with a flourish*" (p. 308, emphasis added). She criticizes the harm done to women/third-world women and non-Europeans. She wants to give voice to the subalterns who cannot speak or are silent. She focuses on speculations made on widow sacrifice. She attempts to restore the presence of the women writers whom their male peers have submerged.

Analysis of Texts

Women are subjected to physical, social, and psychological forms of oppression in patriarchal postcolonial nations. Oftentimes, authors of African and Iranian descent use their literature to explore issues of gender identity and oppression. Although many works by women seem to be critically important. The treatment of subaltern women in Africa and Iran could be due to racial discrimination or a feudal socioeconomic system. These oppressive systems have perpetuated gender hierarchies and contributed to women's identity loss and marginalization. In response to these complex social and structural inequalities, postcolonial female authors have emerged as potent voices, using fiction to address and challenge gender disparities and other women-centred issues. Given the imperative need for justice and equality, it is the responsibility of society as a whole to correct the existing imbalance and dismantle the prevalent utopias that perpetuate gender discrimination. This research acknowledges this necessity and intends to contribute to the ongoing dialogue by concentrating on subaltern women as a central theme in the selected novels: Adichie's *Americanah* and Darznik's *Song of the Captive Bird*. By analyzing and interpreting these literary works, this research hopes to cast more light on the experiences of subaltern women and draw more attention to this vital subject.

This study acknowledges the significance of engaging with postcolonial feminist theories and literature in order to obtain a deeper understanding of subaltern women's experiences. By critically analyzing *Americanah* by Adichie and *Song of a Captive Bird* by Darznik within the work of Spivak's theory, the researcher hopes to contribute to the discourse surrounding gender disparities and advocate for social change. *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and *Song of a Captive Bird* by Jasmin Darznik offer powerful insights into the ways in which patriarchal culture adds to the anguishes of Nigerian and Iranian women, respectively. In *Americanah*, Adichie demonstrates how the Nigerian government's corrupt bureaucracy exacerbates the oppression experienced by women. For instance, strikes are commonplace, and university lecturers list their complaints in newspapers about agreements being trampled on by government men whose own children are schooling abroad. This lack of concern for the needs of Nigerian citizens is felt even more acutely by women, who are already constrained by gender roles and stereotypes (Adichie, 2013). Ifemelu wished the dogs were kept outside, which was where dogs belonged. When Elena asked why Ifemelu had not petted her dog or scratched his head in the week since she moved in, she said, I don't like dogs. Is that like a cultural thing? What do you mean? I mean, like, I know, in China, they eat cat meat and dog meat. My boyfriend back home loves dogs. I just don't (Adichie, 2013, p.125).

Adichie also portrays how gender norms and expectations limit women's opportunities and agency in Nigerian society, as is evident from the above excerpt. Ifemelu, the protagonist, encounters a dog in her shared apartment and expresses her discomfort. When her white roommate asks her why she hasn't petted the dog, she says that she does not like dogs. Her roommate then asks if this is a cultural thing, referencing China and perpetuating the stereotype that cultures outside the Western world are backward and barbaric (Adichie, 2013). This moment illustrates how Western culture is often portrayed as superior to non-Western cultures and how non-Western people are often seen as lesser, perpetuating oppressive attitudes towards cultures and their people. In *Song of a Captive Bird* (2018), Darznik depicts the restrictive and patriarchal culture that Iranian women experience. Farrokhzad, the protagonist, is expected to be the

perfect wife and to subjugate her opinions and desires to her husband's will. Her husband's expectations stifle her creativity and prevent her from realizing her full potential as a writer. In addition, the society she lives in reinforces gender roles and stereotypes that limit women's opportunities and potential.

Americanah (2013) highlights a form of oppression related to intra-racial discrimination or internalized racism. "She is one of those black people who want to be the only black person in the room, so any other black person is an immediate threat to her" (p. 241). The protagonist is describing a black person who feels threatened by the presence of other black people, which suggests a deeply ingrained belief that only one black person can be successful or accepted at a time. This type of oppression can be subtle and insidious, perpetuating feelings of isolation and self-doubt among members of the same community. At the same time, Jasmine Darznik, in *Song of a Captive Bird* (2018), highlights a form of oppression related to intra-racial discrimination or internalized racism. It is evident from the following lines: "You're powerless to alter God's inscription, she told me. Powerless, Forugh, and also foolish to try" (Darznik, 2018, p. 18).

Both novels illustrate how gender norms and expectations limit women's opportunities and agency. Adichie (2013) portrays this through Ifemelu, who encounters a dog in her shared apartment and expresses her discomfort. Her white roommate asks her why she hasn't petted the dog, assuming that Ifemelu's aversion to dogs is due to her cultural background. This moment illustrates how Western culture is often portrayed as superior to non-Western cultures and how non-Western people are often seen as lesser, perpetuating oppressive attitudes towards cultures and their people. In comparison, Darznik (2018), in the following excerpt from the novel, portrays how Farrokhzad's husband expects her to be the perfect wife, always ready to serve him, and subordinating her opinions and desires to his will: "You are a woman who's been disowned by her father and cast out by her husband, a woman whose son knows her less each day and very soon won't know her at all" (p. 167).

Moreover, both novels demonstrate how oppression and gender inequality are perpetuated by the broader society. Adichie (2013) depicts the discrimination that black immigrants face when trying to immigrate to Western countries. For instance, Ranyinudo, a Nigerian woman, is rejected by a black American embassy worker who is more interested in blowing his nose than looking at her documents. This example shows that even within oppressed communities, discrimination and prejudice still exist. Similarly, Darznik (2018) illustrates how gender stereotypes limit women's opportunities and potential. When Farrokhzad meets with a publisher, she is told that her writing is too feminist and that she should write about more traditional topics (Darznik, 2018). The publisher argues that women's voices have the power to drive men to lust and distract them from matters of both heaven and earth, reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes that limit women's opportunities and potential.

Both *Americanah* (2013) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and *Song of a Captive Bird* (2018) by Jasmin Darznik address issues of gender identity through their respective narratives. These novels explore how societal expectations and stereotypes can shape and restrict individual lives and how asserting one's own identity can be an ongoing and complex process. While *Americanah* focuses on cultural and racial stereotypes as following excerpt highlights it: They roared with laughter, at that word *Americanah*, wretched in glee, the fourth syllable extended, and at the thought of Bisi, a girl in the form below them, who had come back from a short trip to America with odd affectations, pretending she no longer understood Yoruba, adding a slurred r to every English word she spoke" (Adichie, 2013, p. 62). *Song of a Captive Bird* (2018) centres on gender inequality in Iran as it is illustrated through the following excerpt: "From behind the door, I heard my mother say, if she comes out, she'll be good as dead with all this shame and dishonour she's brought on us all" (p. 27). The protagonist struggles to find her voice and assert herself in a society that expects women to be subservient and obedient. Her desire to express herself creatively and pursue her passions is met with disapproval and ostracism from her family and society. This can be seen as a reflection of the ways in which gender norms and expectations can be used to control and suppress individuals who do not conform to traditional gender roles.

Through dialogues, both authors illustrate how gender identity can be shaped and influenced by the perceptions of others, as well as by internal struggles for self-discovery and self-determination. In *Americanah* (2013), the character Obinze mocks the idea of adopting a fabricated exotic persona to appeal to Westerners, highlighting the way in which cultural and racial stereotypes can shape identity. The



following dialogue suggests that such stereotypes can be harmful and limiting, as they can create narrow and inaccurate perceptions of entire cultures and communities. "You could have just said Ngozi is your tribal name and Ifemelu is your jungle name and throw in one more as your spiritual Name. They'll believe all kinds of shit about Africa" (p. 249). In *Song of a Captive Bird*, the character Tahereh reflects on the limitations placed on women's lives in Iran when he utters the following dialogue: "A woman could see herself better when she wasn't known, I decided to Remember the flight, for the bird is mortal. My conclusion was that "a woman could see herself better where she wasn't known.

Nigerian and Iranian women's experiences in Adichie's *Americanah* and Darznik's *Song of a Captive Bird* are affected by the patriarchal culture of their respective countries. A patriarchal culture, which may be defined as a system in which men hold primary power and authority, is a key issue in both of these works and is shown to contribute to the challenges that women confront in these civilizations. Patriarchal cultures are defined as systems in which men hold primary power and authority, specifically by emphasizing the importance of removing the constraints and definitions placed on women by society in order to gain an accurate self-perception. This conversation highlights the pervasiveness of gender inequality in Iran, where women face obstacles to education and careers and must negotiate rigid societal standards and expectations. Especially for women, who are frequently marginalized and oppressed, this remark implies that self-discovery and self-determination are crucial components of claiming one's own identity.

Both novels illustrate how cultural and societal norms can impact individuals' perceptions of themselves and their place in the world. In *Americanah* (2013), Adichie shows how the Western concept of race can shape identity and social status, while in *Song of a Captive Bird* (2018), Darznik explores the ways in which gender roles and restrictions are deeply ingrained in Iranian society. Both authors, Adichie (2013) and Darznik (2013) use the characters in their books to shed light on the ways in which patriarchal society contributes to the establishment of a system in which women's voices and wants are stifled and in which they are required to conform to conventional gender roles. The authors emphasize the widespread nature of these cultural expectations and the impact they have on the lives of women by using conversation and developing the characters in the story. For instance, Adichie asks the question in her novel *Americanah*: what was the point of female empowerment when she could not even choose what to do with her own hair? This phrase draws attention to the ways in which traditional gender roles and expectations restrict the agency of women and the power they have over their own bodies. Darznik (2018) says: "I am a lady who writes. It just so happens that I'm a woman, but I'm a writer. I am both things, and the fact that I am one does not invalidate the fact that I am the other" (p. 104). This quote highlights the struggle that Farrokhzad faces as she strives to assert herself and her identity as a writer in a society that does not appreciate women's voices. Specifically, the quote highlights the difficulty that Farrokhzad faces when attempting to write.

In *Americanah* (2013), the main character, Ifemelu, is a Nigerian woman who moves to the United States and struggles with questions of identity, including her racial and cultural identity, as well as her gender identity. Throughout the novel, Ifemelu grapples with societal expectations of what it means to be a woman, both in Nigeria and in the US, and the pressure to conform to these expectations. For example, Ifemelu's aunt in Nigeria encourages her to pursue a relationship with a wealthy man, seeing marriage as the ultimate goal for a woman. In contrast, Ifemelu's American boyfriend, Blaine, challenges her to think critically about issues of gender and race and encourages her to pursue her own career goals. In *Song of a Captive Bird* (2018), the main character, Forugh Farrokhzad, is a poet and filmmaker in Iran during a time when women were expected to conform to traditional gender roles. Forugh struggles against societal expectations and the restrictions placed on her as a woman, including being forced to marry at a young age and having her artistic pursuits dismissed as frivolous. Throughout the novel, Forugh defies gender norms by pursuing her passion for poetry and film, even in the face of societal backlash and personal hardship.

Both Ifemelu and Forugh challenge societal expectations of what it means to be a woman and seek to define themselves on their own terms. However, their experiences are shaped by the specific cultural and societal contexts in which they live. Ifemelu's experience as a Nigerian woman in the US is informed by her race and culture, while Forugh's experience as an Iranian woman is shaped by the political and social

climate of her time. In terms of dialogue, both characters engage in conversations with others that highlight their struggles with gender identity. For example, Forugh has discussions with her husband and other male colleagues about the role of women in society and the challenges they face. Ifemelu has similar discussions with her American boyfriend, Blaine, as well as with other Nigerian immigrants in the US who have different views on gender roles. Through these dialogues, the authors are able to explore the complexities of gender identity and the ways in which societal expectations can impact individual experiences. Through their respective narratives, the authors demonstrate how gender norms and expectations limit women's opportunities and agency in their societies. Adichie depicts this through Ifemelu's experiences as a Nigerian immigrant in the US, where she grapples with questions of identity and societal expectations of what it means to be a woman. Similarly, Darzink portrays Farrokhzad's struggles against societal expectations and the restrictions placed on her as a woman in Iran, where her artistic pursuits are dismissed as frivolous, and she is forced to marry at a young age.

The novels also highlight the ways in which oppression and gender inequality are perpetuated by the broader society. Adichie (2018) depicts the discrimination that black immigrants face when trying to immigrate to Western countries, while Darzink illustrates how gender stereotypes limit women's opportunities and potential in Iran. Through dialogue and character interactions, both authors explore the complexities of gender identity and the ways in which societal expectations can impact individual experiences. The authors of *Americanah* (2013) and *Song of a Captive Bird* (2018) bring to light the issues that women experience in civilizations that are dominated by men in both of these works.

The societal expectations of what it means to be a woman, overt discrimination, and violence against women are all examples of the kinds of obstacles that women face today. Ifemelu's interactions with a guy called The General are used by Adichie in her novel *Americanah* to illustrate the pervasive sexual harassment and assault that women face in Nigeria. The events described in this novel take place in Nigeria. The unwelcome overtures made by the General towards Ifemelu are an example of the peril that women confront in a society dominated by men. In such environments, men may feel as though they have a right to women's bodies and activities. Similar to what happens in *Song of a Captive Bird*, when Farrokhzad wants to assert herself and follows her creative pursuits, her family and society turn their backs on her and shun her. Her husband's expectations hinder her creativity and prevent her from reaching her full potential as a writer. Her creativity is stifled by her husband's expectations. These instances illustrate the variety of obstacles that women experience in communities dominated by men, such as limited agency, constraints on self-expression, as well as overt assault and harassment.

Conclusion

This research intends to examine the portrayal and representation of women in societies where males hold power, highlighting the similarities in the struggles women face across diverse cultural contexts and, hence, finding out how the truth is being constructed. This study is based on Spivak's *Subaltern* theory, which had a significant impact on postcolonial feminism, to undermine the ways in which women's voices have been muted. For Spivak, knowledge is like any other commodity that is exported from the West to the third world for financial or another type of gain. The findings of the study highlight the plight of oppressed women and the challenges of navigating a culture where men have power and authority. The present study also provides a new dimension to other research work as the subaltern theory, which is a tool of this study's investigation, may also be applied to the comparison of the literary works of other authors. Moreover, the researchers may argue how women, with their conviction and female agency, find a way to be heard and assert themselves in a conservative society by demonstrating worries about gender identity, oppression, and male supremacy. In terms of comparative analysis, the novels share similarities in such ways in which cultural and societal norms can impact individual perceptions of themselves and their place in the world. However, their experiences are shaped by the specific cultural and societal contexts in which they live. The Nigerian and Iranian cultures depicted in the novels are both patriarchal but with distinct nuances and expectations of patriarchy.



References

- Adichie, C. N. (2013). *Americanah*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- AHMED, S. (2017). *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11g9836>
- Budi, L. S., & Widyastuti, D. (2017). Self-determination to fight oppressions as seen in the main character of the color purple by Alice Walker. *Journal of Language and Literature*, 17(2), 116–124. <https://doi.org/10.24071/joll.2017.170202>
- Darznik, J. (2018). *Song of a Captive Bird*. Random House.
- Isoke, Z. (2019). bell hooks: 35 Years from Margin to Center – Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center. By bell hooks. New York: Routledge, [1984] 2015. 180 pp. \$136.00 (hardcover), \$23.96 (paperback). *Politics & Gender*, 15(4). <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1743923x19000643>
- Mohanty, C. T. (1984). Under Western Eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Boundary 2*, 12(3), 333. <https://doi.org/10.2307/302821>
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). *Can the subaltern speak?* In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and The Interpretation of Culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
- Spivak, G. C. (2012). In other worlds. In *Routledge eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203441114>
- Sawant, R. P. (2015). A study on awareness and demand pattern amongst consumers W.R.T green products. *International Journal of Marketing and Technology*, 5(1), 136–148. <http://www.indianjournals.com/ijor.aspx?target=ijor:ijmt&volume=5&issue=1&article=011&type=pdf>