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“Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Indian Cinema: Decoding the tribal women in Kamla (1984) s

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Abstract

Under the theoretical Framework of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" it critically analyzed Jagmohan Mundhra's film Kamla (1984) and its portrayal of tribal subalternity. The film, based on a true story concerning indigenous women trafficking, tackles complicated issues regarding voice, agency, and representation. The research employs a qualitative textual analysis technique, drawing on postcolonial and subaltern theory to explain how the film portrays the tribal lady Kamla as a mute object within a media-driven metropolitan narrative. Though the film seeks to show societal injustice, it paradoxically silences the subaltern, treating her as a mute rather than allowing her to speak. This study contends that, while Kamla has socially aware intentions, its narrative and character dynamics promote tribal women's structural silence. The research adds to wider concerns about the constraints of cinematic representation in depicting underrepresented voices in Indian film.

Keywords: Tribal women, Subaltern voice, Indian Cinema, Representation.

Introduction

Cinema, being a major cultural production medium, influences society attitudes and public conversation, particularly among marginalized populations. Indian mainstream film has repeatedly been chastised for its stereotyped and reductive depictions of tribal tribes and women, who face severe socioeconomic disadvantages (Dwyer, 2006; Ghosh, 2017). As Gokulsing and Dissanayake (1998) suggest, popular Indian film frequently simplifies complicated identities, reducing marginal figures to tropes rather than nuanced persons. Tribal women, in particular, are frequently represented as strange, silent, or victims, reflecting greater societal systems that marginalize them both within society and in the film frame.

Jagmohan Mundhra's *Kamla* (1984) is a socially aware film inspired by a true story in which a journalist bought a tribal lady from a market in order to highlight illicit trafficking and exploitation of tribal communities (Mishra, 2010). The film's title is the same as the name of its main heroine, Kamla. In this paper, *Kamla* (italicized) refers to the film, whereas Kamla (non- italicized) refers to the main character. While the video aims to emphasize the inhumanity of such acts, it also addresses important issues of representation and agency. Kamla, the indigenous lady at the heart of the story, is viewed less as a speaking subject and more as a spectacle in the discourse of the urban elite, casting doubt on her ability to speak with authenticity. This spectacle is consistent with Laura Mulvey's (1975) concept of the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of women in film, particularly marginalized ones, whose visual presence frequently substitutes narrative voice.

To critically investigate this dynamic, this research makes use of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's renowned postcolonial feminist paradigm established in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). Spivak contends that subaltern subjects—those disenfranchised by colonialism, sexism, and class—are frequently silenced or spoken for, rather than speaking for themselves, within dominant discourse. This theoretical perspective is especially relevant for examining *Kamla*, which, despite its progressive goals, may reinscribe the exact power systems it aims to criticize by narrating Kamla's tale through elite characters (Spivak, 1988; Shohat & Stam, 2014). Furthermore, Chandra Talpade (Eschle, 2004) criticizes how Third World women are typically depicted in homogeneous, silent terms in liberal and feminist discourses, which is mirrored in *Kamla*'s depiction.

This article will investigate how *Kamla* (1984) develops the character of the tribal woman in Indian cinema, questioning if the film permits her to overcome subaltern silence or maintains her voicelessness. The study contributes to continuing

conversations about marginalized women's portrayal, voice, and agency in Indian cinematic narratives by using a focused qualitative textual analysis and Spivak's theory. This coincides with larger feminist cinema critique, which advocates for storylines that empower rather than usurp subaltern voices (Kaplan, 2012).

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative textual analysis of the film *Kamla* (1984) to critically explore the portrayal of tribal women, with an emphasis on the subject of subalternity. In film studies, qualitative textual analysis is a well-established approach that entails careful interpretation of cinematic aspects such as narrative structure, character representation, dialogues, and visual framing in order to find underlying social and ideological implications (Lune & Berg, 2017). This method provides for a more in-depth study of how *Kamla* creates the identity and voice of its key tribal character within the sociopolitical setting of 1980s India.

The film was chosen for its direct involvement with the topic of tribal exploitation and trafficking, as well as its position as a socially conscious tale that emphasizes a tribal woman's perspective. By concentrating on *Kamla*, the research investigates the contradictions between the film's activist aims and its representational constraints.

The theoretical basis for the research is based mostly on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous article, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). Spivak's postcolonial feminist criticism emphasizes how disadvantaged people, particularly subaltern women, are frequently denied agency and spoken for within dominant discourses. Using this lens, the study questions if the film enables *Kamla* to speak for herself or if she is a quiet object created by the opinions of other characters.

The study includes critical readings of important scenes and exchanges, with an emphasis on cinematic elements such as framing, camera angles, and narrative voice that shape the audience's perspective of *Kamla*. This technique illustrates how the film translates the indigenous woman's voice and agency into the story's urban, media-driven environment.

This research intends to provide nuanced insights into the complications of depicting tribal subaltern women in Indian film using textual analysis and postcolonial theory.

Analysis and Discussion

Kamla (1984) is about a tribal lady whose life is turned upside down when a journalist buys her from a market in order to expose the unlawful trafficking of indigenous people. This narrative decision instantly casts *Kamla* as an object under inspection rather than a person with agency, highlighting the contradictory

visibility and silencing of subaltern women in dominant discourse. This analysis, using Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" as a lens, investigates how Kamla mediates the voice and representation of its eponymous character, questioning the film's simultaneous critique and culpability in subaltern silence.

Kamla as Spectacle: Objectification and Commodification.

Kamla's objectification is not confined to narrative decisions; it is also symbolically reinforced by a variety of cinematic components. Most obviously, the act of "purchasing" Kamla from a tribal market serves as a primary metaphor for her commercialization, reducing her to evidence rather than recognizing her personality. This is highlighted even further in the press conference scene, in which Kamla is physically exhibited in front of a multitude of journalists, unable to completely grasp or communicate her existence, reducing her into a spectacle. The journalist's argument that he is "giving her a voice" is ironically similar to Spivak's critique of subalternity, in which the subaltern is spoken for rather than being permitted to speak. This dynamic mirrors Spivak's claim that subaltern women are silenced because their tales are recounted by those in authority, preventing them from expressing themselves directly (Spivak 1988). This act, while framed as an investigative move, serves to turn Kamla into an object of display.

Kamla's visual framing, which typically depicts her as mute, overwhelmed, and clad in traditional tribal costume amidst metropolitan modernity, adds to her exoticism and isolates her identity from mainstream culture. Her indigenous dress becomes a symbol of distinction, a costume for displaying marginalization. The household scenes, in which she is questioned and observed by the urban wife and maid, reinforce this superior gaze, establishing Kamla as a "other" within the frame. These repeated visual and narrative motifs serve as emblems of objectification, since Kamla is not treated as a human subject but rather as a case study, evidence, or moral lesson. Her silence, visual framing, and passive stance function as cinematic markers of her reduced to an object, supporting the very hierarchies the film aims to attack.

Kamla's Silence: Lack of Agency and Voice.

Despite Kamla's important role, her own voice is somewhat restrained. Her limited discussions consist primarily of replies to the metropolitan characters' queries or instructions, with little chance for her to express her thoughts or wants. For example, critical moments in which Kamla tries to express her background or sentiments are overwhelmed by the journalist's narration or his family's reactions. Tight close-ups of Kamla's quiet emotions, as well as framing her behind bars, figuratively underscore her confinement—not only physically but narratively.

This visual suppression supports Spivak's claim that the subaltern's voice is frequently unheard inside dominant discourse, even when apparently expressed.

A particularly distressing moment happens during the press conference scenario, when Kamla is introduced to a group of metropolitan journalists. She is bombarded with intrusive, rapid-fire, and frequently rude inquiries that reduce her to an object of spectacle rather than a subject with agency. The tone and form of these queries are degrading, making the moment uncomfortable while emphasizing Kamla's objectification and silence. Despite her physical presence, Kamla remains silenced, her tale mediated via dominant urban discourses that diminish her identity.

The Role of the Journalist: Voice and Mediation

The journalist, who serves as the film's moral core, has a double-edged position. While his objective is to illustrate the injustices that indigenous tribes endure, he also controls Kamla's narrative by determining when and how her tale is told. His role as a mediator in Kamla's experience shows the conflict between advocacy and appropriation. This is made clear when he excuses his act of purchasing Kamla by saying, "*Main uski awaaz banne ki koshish kar raha hoon, jo khud bol nahi sakti*" ("I am trying to be her voice, since she cannot speak for herself"). His claim to mediate Kamla's speech illustrates the complexity and paradoxes that come with speaking for the subaltern.

While the journalist strives to highlight Kamla's situation, his involvement also demonstrates how dominant power structures appropriate, regulate, and moderate the subaltern's voice. This dynamic vividly demonstrates Spivak's claim that the subaltern cannot properly speak because their voice is filtered or twisted by hegemonic discourse.

Visual Framing and Cinematography: The Spectacle of Kamla

Beyond the story, Kamla's visual language shapes the audience's sense of subalternity. The film regularly uses framing tactics to underline Kamla's role as an object rather than an agent. Kamla is framed in limited locations throughout the film, including her basic hut, the cramped confines of the metropolitan home she is transferred to, and the austere, clinical setting of the press conference. These geographical limits vividly represent her physical and social captivity.

Furthermore, the camera frequently looks at Kamla with lingering intensity, underlining her fragility and otherness. Shots that showcase her traditional tribal dress, accompanied by close-ups of her innocent and confused face, help to exoticize her. The contrast with metropolitan figures, which are frequently depicted in larger, more open locations with better lighting, exacerbates the difference between "modern" and "primitive," a distinction frequently used in

postcolonial discourse to denigrate tribal identities (Niranjana, 1992).

This visual spectacle is consistent with Spivak's critique of the subaltern woman as a figure of spectacle that draws attention but lacking subjectivity. The journalist and his colleagues' cosmopolitan gaze alternate between pity and intrigue, indicating ambivalence about Kamla's humanity. This contradiction reflects a broader social unease with facing the facts of tribal exploitation but not fully acknowledging tribal women as speaking subjects.

Scene Analysis: Partial Speech and Mediated Voice

While Kamla's speech is mostly filtered, several instances show that she expresses her opinion, albeit restricted. For example, when Kamla naively replies to the home maid's query about why she was purchased, there is a brief glimpse of her agency and interest about her new surroundings. The maid inquires, "*Tumhe kyun kharida gaya?*" (Why were you bought?) Kamla responds with a mix of bewilderment and candor. This discussion, albeit basic, temporarily breaks the otherwise dominating narrative, which portrays Kamla purely as an object.

Similarly, a brief scene depicts Kamla questioning the metropolitan lifestyle, thereby criticizing the assumed superiority of city inhabitants. These times of incomplete speech are critical because they expose flaws in the dominant narrative. However, these incidents are isolated and rapidly eclipsed by the journalist's framing, which continually directs the narrative flow.

This becomes most stark in one of the final scene, where the journalist (Jaisingh Jadav), after using Kamla for a media exposé, asserts:

"Woh meri marzi se aayi hai to meri marzi se jaayegi."

(—She came because of my will, and she will leave because of my will.)

This sentence dispels any illusions of empowerment or liberty. It highlights how, even after being "rescued," Kamla is still regarded as property, exploited to forward the journalist's goal rather than to combat institutional injustice. Kamla is turned to a symbol of advocacy rather than a topic of justice.

The incident supports Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's claim that the subaltern cannot properly speak—not because she lacks a voice, but because power institutions refuse to hear her unless mediated by dominant characters. The video, while looking progressive, eventually reproduces the silence it criticizes, demonstrating how even well-meaning depiction may support the erasure of indigenous women's subjectivity.

Implications — *Does the Subaltern Speak?*

Ultimately, Kamla complicates rather than answers the issue of subaltern speech. The film highlights the systemic abuse of indigenous women, but it fails to give Kamla narrative authority or a permanent voice. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) argues, the subaltern cannot fully "speak" since their voice is always filtered by dominant structures — a contradiction that the film enacts by silencing Kamla even in its last moments.

The last moments provide a powerful example of this. After becoming the subject of national media attention and ethical discussion, Kamla is secretly removed from the journalist's house. There is no resolution, no justice, and no opportunity for her to speak for herself. Her departure is handled with emotional nuance, but the silence is telling: it demonstrates how quickly the subaltern may be removed from the frame after her job as a "subject of exposure" is accomplished. This underscores Spivak's central claim that, even in well-meaning tales, the subaltern woman is throwaway — heard only via others and forgotten once the spectacle is over.

This narrative arc demonstrates how Kamla's tribal protagonist is positioned as a transitory instrument for urban critique rather than a subject of agency. Once the exposé is over and the media excitement has subsided, Kamla's presence will be redundant. There is no indication of her future, no empowerment, and no change in her status. This ambiguous ending speaks volumes, demonstrating how representation may evoke concern without fundamentally changing the constraints of voicelessness.

As a result, Kamla eventually becomes a work that critiques while also reinforcing subaltern silencing mechanisms. Even though it raises important problems about trafficking, caste, and media ethics, it does not envision a place where subaltern women may speak for themselves, free of the interpretative control of elite institutions and male protagonists.

This research underlines the ongoing need for film that goes beyond depicting victimhood, allowing underprivileged women to narrate, define, and establish their own realities.

Conclusion

The film Kamla (1984), positioned as a progressive reflection on tribal women's exploitation, unwittingly supports the silencing mechanisms identified by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her key essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Kamla, an indigenous woman, is metaphorically "bought" into prominence, only to be discussed rather than heard. Her subjectivity is constantly defined and eclipsed by elite voices, notably those of journalists, who promise to provide a forum but really silence her via representation.

Rather than serving as a change agent, the film portrays Kamla as an object of urban spectacle, promoting a voyeuristic and savior-centric

perspective. Even her few moments of speech are interrupted, interpreted, or contextualized by others, preventing her from articulating autonomously. This underscores the contradiction that Spivak describes: even well-intentioned efforts to "speak for" the subaltern can re-inscribe hegemonic power systems.

Thus, the film does not help Kamla to rise beyond her subaltern status; rather, it promotes epistemic violence by denying her voice inside a system that claims to represent her. The story concludes with her still tied in metropolitan power systems, employed for public spectacle rather than emancipation.

This article consequently finds that Kamla eventually repeats the exact structural silence that it professes to criticize. It emphasizes the critical necessity for cinematic discourses that allow subaltern women to speak for themselves, not via filtered mediations, but through true, unmediated voices that challenge dominant systems of knowledge and representation.

Recommendations include encouraging filmmakers to highlight indigenous women's agency, including their actual experiences into the creative process, and rejecting representations that reduce them to simply victim symbols. Media education and critical research could also challenge mainstream film stereotypes that perpetuate subaltern silence.

Future study should focus on evaluating modern films to see if there has been improvement in expressing subaltern agency, particularly in works by tribal or regional filmmakers. Comparative studies of national and regional cinemas may shed light on alternative storytelling frameworks that challenge dominant narratives.

In essence, Kamla initiates an important discourse about voice, agency, and representation—but it also cautions us that good intentions alone will not destroy power systems. True subaltern speech can only develop when dominant discourse steps aside, allowing the silenced to tell their own stories.

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