

Representation of subaltern women in *Pad Man*: Against the silencing of women's rights and voices

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ABSTRACT

In patriarchal silence, "Pad Man" defends oppressed voices. The film reveals inequalities and promotes societal change. This study uses Gayatri Spivak's postcolonial review to examine subaltern women's portrayal. This qualitative study analyzes the story and visuals of "Pad Man," which represents subaltern Indian people and their struggles. We selected movie sequences and examined their characters, narratives, and messages for research. This study discovered various evidence of patriarchal culture's oppression of women in India and limited access to women. "Pad Man" portrays women within patriarchal culture, highlights societal stigma, and advocates for women's liberation. This film also addresses India's reproductive health information gap. This film empowers subalterns, especially in India, by telling their experience. This examination also scrutinizes the film's impact on societal awareness, transformation, and gender equality.



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I. INTRODUCTION

Amidst advances in globalization and technology, India today is still not free from subaltern practices that shackle women. There are still millions of women who experience discrimination, violence, and injustice that bind them in the shadow of patriarchy. Women, more than biological entities who play a role in reproduction, have a much deeper meaning in social and cultural contexts. They are often relegated to

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traditional roles of nurturing and domesticity despite their potential and abilities. These practices reinforce women's position as a marginalized subaltern group. In an effort to fight this oppression, media, especially film, has the power to raise social awareness and encourage change towards gender equality. Films are often adapted from actual events and contain implicit messages to the audience about polemics that occur in society.

As explained by McQuail in Weisarkurnai (2017), mass media can reach the masses widely and serve as a source of control that can be controlled as a source of power. The movie "Pad Man" is one example of how the media can raise issues faced by women related to reproductive health. The presence of the movie Pad Man is expected to spread messages about efforts to free women from the confines of patriarchal culture to the eyes of the world. The movie "Pad Man" raises women's voices through the main character, Lakshmi, played by Akshay Kumar. Lakshmi is an activist on a mission to raise awareness about women's reproductive hygiene and health. The movie is based on the story of Lakshmi, who finds his wife always sleeping on the terrace when she has her period. Sadly, all the women in the village have been doing that for a long time. More surprisingly, due to economic factors and lack of knowledge, women do not use sanitary napkins but dirty clothes instead. Lakshmi became restless, especially when she discovered that many women in the village had contracted venereal diseases because of this, leading to death. Lakshmi became increasingly worried about his wife's safety. Lakshmi was determined to help the women in her village get clean, sanitary napkins at a low price. This heroic act shows the taboos and poverty experienced by the villagers. In the movie, Lakshmi defies traditional values of restraining women and demonstrates his skill and ability to develop an innovative, affordable sanitary napkin machine. Through his struggle, the movie reveals how women's rights and voices are often limited by patriarchal customs and culture that bind women to submit to dominant rules. Spivak's postcolonial perspective also emphasizes the subaltern position of oppressed "women" without access to power. Many studies have discussed subalterns. For example, Andriyanto, O. D. et al. (2021) discussed "Representasi Subaltern dalam Novel Jemini Karya Suparto Brata." The focus of this research looks at how the role of women as the main characters in the novel is related to unfreedom, slavery, and forms of torture. The study found that the character is depicted as a subject oppressed by patriarchal domination and social class despite having the strength to keep secrets and resist domination through non-verbal language. Furthermore, by Putri, (2021) on the "Representasi eksploitasi terhadap subaltern dalam novel Perempuan Kembang Jepun oleh Lan Fang". It was found that the female servant character was described as suffering from oppression and economic and sexual exploitation from her employer. This study also found facts in the form of forms of exploitation of subalterns during the colonial period, namely sexual and economic exploitation. In addition, the forms of

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violence experienced by subaltern characters in the novel are physical and psychological.

This research is sought to be useful for consideration and a form of support for the voices of subaltern women. Research on subaltern representation in the movie *Pad Man* has never been done, so this research has the potential to lead to discoveries. Based on this, women in this film represent a hidden reality that is not given the right and voice to be heard. Therefore, there must be an effort to fight for the rights and voices of women in society fairly. So that all forms of discrimination can be overcome, especially for the subaltern. The study of the subaltern, initially pioneered by Antonio Gramsci, is defined as a view of a condition where there are oppressed people. People who experience this oppression are called subalterns. Those in the subaltern include women from the lower class, laborers, farmers, and other oppressed groups. Khair (2020) added that the term subaltern itself was originally introduced by Antonio Gramsci, which refers to groups that are excluded, eliminated, and ostracized in the social environment. Gayatri Spivak described the subaltern as everything related to limited access that creates a differentiating space. Subalterns are categorized as groups that do not have direct access to a voice and often experience oppression and marginalization. According to Saputra (2011), many incidents place women as second-class so that women never intervene or are never involved in problems in the public sphere, even though it concerns women's issues themselves. So, subaltern groups ultimately continue to be oppressed and marginalized in the social order. According to Gandi in Khairunisa (2019), women, as a subaltern group in various colonial contexts, did not have a conceptual language to speak because there were no ears from colonial and native men who wanted to listen to them.

Through her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Kumbara (2023), Spivak points out the importance of women in modern self-expression as subjects of primitive Eastern civilization. This is because, in reality, when women resist without adequate infrastructure, they will find that their resistance is futile. The issues in *Pad Man* align with Spivak's thoughts on women, who are only considered appendages and tools for maintaining more dominant societal power. Women have been silenced for too long by the patriarchal culture that often tortures them continuously. In this case, Gayatri Spivak also criticizes the blindness of race and class. Subalterns are people who are constantly under pressure. Gayatri Spivak emphasizes that subalterns live in a state of powerlessness and alienation. Overcoming discrimination against subalterns requires attention from many people. Although women's issues are gaining attention, the representation of subaltern women is still under-examined, for example, in the context of Indian cinema. This research bridges the issue of subaltern women by providing an in-

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depth analysis of *Pad Man*. It also offers insights into film's potential as a mobilizer for social change regarding women's rights and health issues in India and worldwide.

II. METHOD

This research on subaltern representation is qualitative research with a literature study method. The theory used is Gayatri Spivak's Subaltern, which is about the postcolonial approach. According to Sugiyono in Febriyani (2023), in qualitative research, the position of a researcher is as a critical instrument, and data collection techniques are carried out through triangulation. This research uses the film *Pad Man*, directed by R. Balki and released on April 13, 2018, in India. This approach is in accordance with the purpose of the research, which is to see and reveal the form of subaltern representation displayed in the *Pad Man* movie. The analysis begins with watching the movie repeatedly to understand what subaltern women are shown and represented fully. While watching the movie, researchers also looked closely and slowly at the film's background, which is set in India.

The researcher then began to collect supporting data by recording every dialog, screenshotting images, and recording important information related to the representation of subaltern groups in the *Pad Man* film. Furthermore, the data that has been collected will be selected to find evidence of data that will support the research objectively. After that, the process of analyzing the film begins. In analyzing the data, researchers also use other sources as supporting data, such as journals, books, e-books, written opinions, and the internet. In analyzing the data, the author uses a qualitative descriptive method, which means the author explains and analyzes the data without using numerical data. The data obtained is then identified by focusing this research on the actions, dialogues, and comments made by the characters in the *Pad Man* film. Where the data obtained has also been adjusted to the relevant theoretical approach. So that the results of the study can accurately show what kind of subaltern representation exists in the *Pad Man* film that represents women's voices and rights.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The problems of oppression experienced by subaltern groups, especially women, are reflected in the movie *Pad Man* as follows:

Silencing Women's Voices

The act of silencing women's voices in *Pad Man* shows how women are affected not only by local patriarchy but also by the remnants of colonial structures that still exist today. It shows the silencing of women against the customs and traditions that exist in India. They are required to follow the prevailing customs and traditions and override the interests of the women themselves. This is what gives rise to discriminatory behavior

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towards women. Reporting from Marwiyah (2023) about supporting discrimination also lies in the caste system. Where the system has rules that demean and harass women, this is reinforced by how women, in this case, do not have absolute rights and freedom of opinion to reject the tradition because it has been carried out for years. In this case, the women even tolerate what they know is wrong. However, they put that aside and choose to abide by the rules. Like the character Gayatri in the movie Pad Man, she has to follow the village customs when she is menstruating. More details can be seen from the following description:



Picture 1. Women are forced into seclusion during their menstrual period
(Scene I: 08:17-08:35)

Lakshmi: "Will the "women's problems" go away by sitting outside?"

Gayatri: "All the women in our family sit outside..."

Lakshmi: "I tried to convince them, but they don't understand!"

Gayatri: "As per tradition, it's considered impure. Go inside!"

From the excerpt of the scene (1), it can be seen that Gayatri is having her period, so she secludes herself and stays on the house's terrace. This is conveyed by the character Gayatri in the dialog between her husband and her husband. Gayatri says, " All the women in our family sit outside." This tradition further strengthens the impression of submission to the rules. The women in the village have understood that they must seclude themselves from everyone, especially inside the house when they are menstruating. They do this to follow the village tradition, where menstruating women are considered dirty and must stay away from others. Her husband opposed this phenomenon, but Gayatri refused because she followed the demands of customs and traditions and the elders in her village. It can be seen that Gayatri is very obedient and submissive to the prevailing rules. This also illustrates that the incident was also experienced by all the women who lived there. This incident is also reinforced by the news conducted by BBC (2020) that women who are menstruating are often excluded from various social, religious, and household affairs such as kitchen affairs. This exclusion

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shows the existence of a social stigma in India that considers women unholy to participate in various activities during menstruation because they are considered dirty.



Picture 2. Women use dirty cloth instead of sanitary pads (Scene II: 09:43-09:58)

Lakshmi: "Gayatri. You use..this? You use such a dirty cloth?"

Lakshmi: "I won't even use it to clean my bicycle! What's wrong with you?"

Gayatri: "Please go inside!"

The excerpt from scene (II) shows the character Lakshmi, who found out that his wife Gayatri used a dirty cloth as a sanitary napkin. Astonishingly, Gayatri has been doing this for a long time, and many women do the same thing in the village. Lakshmi even said, "...I won't even use it to clean my bicycle!" hinting at how dirty the cloth his wife was using was. Even though in the condition of having menstruation, cleanliness is the main thing that must be maintained. One of them is using sanitary napkins or sanitary tools properly and guaranteeing cleanliness. The suppression of women's voices in Pad Man can be seen from the social, cultural, and taboo barriers that prevent women from freely expressing and taking action for their health. These shackles create a vicious cycle where women continue to be marginalized in terms of meeting their basic needs. Pad Man's film presents several real examples of how patriarchal norms and social taboos prevent women from expressing their needs and rights. For example, women in the village are severely restricted by customs and traditions. The most astonishing thing is when women have to be ostracized when they are menstruating.

As a subaltern group, women should be given the opportunity and right to speak out. Looking at the existing cases, women are hegemonic and fall into the practice of exploitation. Women's existence is increasingly depressed due to patriarchal practices. Rokhmansyah (2016) explains that patriarchal culture itself illustrates that men always dominate power and privilege compared to women. This means that women are only used as objects to meet material needs and fulfill desires. This subjugation is experienced by many women who fall into difficulty getting help because the stigma that is finally attached is always negative without seeing the facts. Stigma and bad labels will permanently be attached so that these women will be considered very despicable, dirty,

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and have no self-respect. Spivak sees that subaltern groups, especially women, become objects of colonization, which results in oppression not only physically but psychologically and intellectually.

The suppression of women's voices in Spivak's perspective shows that women are most marginalized and do not have access to express their voices. Women are an example of a subaltern group whose voices are silenced by social structures. Subaltern refers to groups outside of hegemony with no voice in power structures and are often not fairly represented. Looking at Spivak's theory, which includes the discourse of women as subalterns, women are again victimized. In India, social structures such as the caste system and patriarchy reinforced by British colonialism continued into the postcolonial era. This led to subaltern women not only struggling against local patriarchy but also having to continue fighting against the colonial legacy that maintained their subordinate status. Not only are subaltern women unable to speak literally, but they also have no space to express themselves or be recognized within existing social structures.

Patriarchy and Social Stigma

This film shows how women in rural India are humiliated and ostracized when they menstruate. The patriarchal hegemony dominates society, thus viewing menstruation as something dirty and despicable and ostracizing women who are menstruating. Mutianingtyas (2020) added that women who belong to subaltern groups are indirectly oppressed and cannot enjoy the freedom to determine their destiny. There is no difference between the colonized and the uncolonized in this condition. It is also explained by Sakina (2017) that patriarchal culture creates men to dominate and act as the center that controls women. As shown in the scene (III), Menstruation is considered taboo.



Picture 3. Menstruation is considered taboo (Scene III: 42:17–44:26)

Woman 1: "He has gone totally crazy! Everyone, look what he is up to! You are so disgusting!

Lakshmi: "I wasn't doing anything wrong."

Woman 1: "Such a sicko!"

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Part scene (III) shows Lakshmi going against tradition by meeting a girl who is menstruating for the first time to educate her on the use of sanitary pads. The villagers who saw this immediately chased Lakshmi away. They even said, " He has gone totally crazy!! so disgusting!". What Lakshmi was doing was forbidden in the village. Meeting and visiting menstruating women is not allowed, as the village has a strong taboo against it. Even talking about menstruation is very taboo in the community. They consider it very dirty and not worth meeting with anyone, especially men. Traditionally, menstruating women were ostracized from society during their menstrual period. Because of this incident, Lakshmi was put on trial by the entire village, and she was forcibly evicted from the village. Quoted from Sahay (2020) "A culture of shame exists around the menstrual cycle, which needs to be addressed. There is a need to talk openly about the menstrual cycle with women, so that future generations are better informed and prepared". From this statement, it is clear that the taboo on menstrual issues still exists today. The taboo to talk about and learn about it causes misconceptions that harm many women.

In Spivak's context, women in this film can be seen as subalterns who have no voice in the patriarchal power structure. They are marginalized in a male-dominated society and cannot express their needs and rights effectively. Not only that but the rules and traditions that have lasted until today still bind women to move like humans. Women have no space to move freely, even to defend themselves. In this system, women are seen as less important than men and placed in subordinate positions, even when they face significant challenges such as health issues and gender-based violence. The implementation of patriarchal culture is part of the silencing when subaltern women lack the means and power to speak out on issues that directly affect them. Women will continue to be trapped in this cycle if they are not given justice for their rights and freedoms. The freedom in question is not only in public but starts from how women can defend themselves and how they are treated in their family environment. This is undoubtedly an important note, not only for us but for the next generation who will continue the ideals and struggles of a nation.

Limited access to women

Women in rural areas lack access to health and education. This reflects how the patriarchal system ignores women's health needs and reinforces gender inequality. The appearance of Lakshmi's character is also presented as an essential role holder in fighting the stigma against menstruation and providing solutions related to health issues. In this case, behind the problems that are trying to be raised in the movie, it still shows that there are male characters who are more reliable. According to Damayanti (2023) there are differences where women are portrayed as meek, motherly, and angry.

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Meanwhile, men are labeled as strong and more rational in various matters. This is very contradictory, where there is still a form of patriarchal power.



Picture 4. Patriarchal system (Scene IV: 1.55.40)

The movie "*Pad Man*" uses Actor Akhsay Kumar as the main character who plays the role of Lakshmikant Chauhan. The true story of Arunachalam Muruganantham, an Indian innovator, inspires the main character in the movie. He is credited as the Indian who invented the machine that makes cheap sanitary pads that women, especially in rural India, can use. Scene (IV) shows Lakshmi conducting a seminar on his invention and the women's reproductive health problems in his village. Lakshmi stands as a representative of women's concerns and provides help for the problem. What he did was change the condition of women, who are more considered and have become part of public discourse, especially subaltern women. However, returning to the use of male protagonists to represent women's voices often indirectly shows the idealized power of men in public. The use of Lakshmi's representation to voice women's reproductive hygiene and menstruation shows how women, in this case, are not given access to voice the opinions they feel as a woman. It is obvious that women will understand feminine issues better than men, who tend to stand at the forefront of voicing women's voices. The existence of the character Lakshmi, who in this case is told to create a sanitary napkin-making machine, also satirizes the case of costly sanitary napkin sales and the taboo issue of women's reproductive health. Reported on Kompasiana in Tanjung's blog (2020) there is a percentage of 355 million Indian women, only 36% of whom use sanitary napkins. Most of them choose to use cloth, leather, ash, leaves, and soil. This is highlighted because poverty is an issue experienced by most people in India.

Reflecting on the postcolonial perspective, limited access to reproductive health products, as depicted in the movie *Pad Man*, is part of the oppression experienced by subaltern women. Women who do not get access show how weak women's voices are in defending themselves. The role of men is still seen to dominate compared to women, who are still unable to voice themselves freely. Limited access to reproductive health products in this film can be seen as the impact of colonial legacies that strengthen the caste system and patriarchy in India. This problem is reinforced by Garg's (2015)

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explanation, "In India, even the mere mention of this topic was taboo in the past and even today cultural and social influences seem to be an obstacle to the advancement of knowledge on this subject." This is based on the influence of patriarchal culture and the caste system that puts restrictions on women's space, resulting in knowledge about women's reproductive health being neglected for centuries in Indian society. As depicted in the movie, women will be immediately exiled because they are considered dirty and not filtered in the environment where their family lives. At the same time, menstruation or period is a normal thing experienced by all women. In fact, a lack of understanding regarding this matter can be fatal to death. Anandita, (2021) added that the lack of knowledge about reproductive health maintenance is even caused by not prioritizing it. In the film *Pad Man*, women prioritize carrying out hereditary traditions and put aside health and hygiene when experiencing menstruation. Not only that, but the men and the people in the village mostly believe in and carry out traditions that have been running since time immemorial. Explained by Susanto (2008) The perspective of the influence of colonialism puts women in a difficult position where women experience colonialization as the dominated party and discrimination against the influence of patriarchal culture. So that women's freedom, in this case, cannot be felt freely. The dual role always imposed on women becomes a chain that continues to bind tightly.

Emancipation, which continues to be echoed today, will be in vain if women's knowledge and representation to represent themselves are not given. This needs to be realized by many parties, including women themselves. During the colonial period, the colonial administration reinforced hierarchical social structures, including the caste system, to maintain control over Indian society. Low-caste women, who were already marginalized before the colonial period, became further marginalized in society. Subaltern women faced not only sex discrimination but also caste discrimination. They do not have equal access to health products, education, and public services because of the entrenched social system based on colonial values that favor men and the upper class. When subaltern women do not have access to appropriate reproductive health products, they lose control over their bodies and health. This is one of the most prominent forms of oppression in postcolonial societies, where the more dominant group controls access to resources in terms of both class and gender.

IV. CONCLUSION

Pad Man successfully reveals the harsh reality of rural Indian women caught between patriarchal control and colonial legacy. Subalternized women are forced to follow traditions that dehumanize them. During menstruation, women are labeled "dirty" and are ostracized from their families, even forced to use used clothes as pads. The rigid caste system further silenced women's voices and prevented access to health and education. In Gayatri Spivak's view, Indian women are subaltern women who are not only

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oppressed but also prohibited from having a voice and determining their destiny. The tight grip of Patriaki makes them passive objects that are entirely controlled by male domination. Future research is expected to explore further how colonial and patriarchal legacies influence access to women's rights and freedoms not only in India but across countries. It will also look further into the role of educational institutions and community organizations in changing the social stigma against subaltern groups of women.

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Author contribution: The author is fully responsible for the research process from data collection, analysis, data presentation, and script writing to completion. In compiling the research, researchers have also searched and collected research data sources in journals, books, and, of course, watching the movie Pad Man repeatedly. In the process, the author conducted research optimally with the help of several references and suggestions. The author is fully responsible for the content of this paper. If there are claims related to the author's analysis in the future, the author is fully accountable for clarifying them.

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