

I. Mishra's *A Widow's Gift* and Subaltern Representation

This research focuses on Shanti Mishra's attempt to speak on behalf of subaltern in her novel *A Widow's Gift*. Shanti Mishra is one of the female writers of Nepal who has represented a fine picture of child marriage and early widowhood in the novel. This research focuses on the subalternity of the widows and women in the elitist, patriarchal society, their silences under the hegemonic domination of the rigid Hindu social codes and struggles to come out of the subalternity. Radha, daughter of Purna Sharma and Shakuntala Sharma, of conservative Hindu family, has been married to Basu, son of another Hindu orthodox Shastri family at the age of nine. Radha wants to get married because she knows nothing about marriage but she is enticed with the clothes and ornaments only the married women have permission to wear. Her ignorance and plight throughout her life is depicted as the consequence of the child-marriage in the novel. The narration of her wedding preparation highlights the ignorance and childish innocence of Radha:

The twelfth day of Falgun was fast approaching. Radha herself was still unaware of its significance, but everyone else in the family became caught up in preparations for the marriage. . . . Radha knew nothing about what was going on in the house. She was more interested in playing with her rag dolls, animals, and playmates from the neighborhood. (14)

Radha is unable to understand what marriage is and to think about its consequences is beyond her cognition. She plays with the rag dolls and boasts with the friends that she is getting beautiful ornaments and costumes to wear in her marriage. The evil practice of child marriage is determined by the orthodox Hindu elitist discourses and women are forced to bear the consequences that are beyond their cognition. Radha, a little

girl, who needs sound sleep and care, is forced to wake up early in the morning to perform the ritual of Kanyadan. Her mother feels sorry to her little girl but she is so oppressed in the tradition that she cannot speak the reality:

Radha's mother ran to her room to shake Radha from her sleep.

Looking at her daughter, she almost burst into tears at having to send her away, and cursed the awful custom of child marriage. She prayed silently, "O God, be always with my daughter; she is still a child." She forced herself to wake her up. (24)

Radha's mother is aware of the oppression but she has no option but to silently curse the evil customs and abide with them. Mishra has highlighted the silence of subalterns throughout her novel and depicts the plights of a child that start as soon as she goes to her husband's house. She is unable to understand what husband is and she bears no love to him. Since her husband is in his teens, he prepares to go to Banares to study Sanskrit and religion leaving his young wife at home. He returns half-dead picking up some illness and dies nearly one year later. Radha is compelled to cry for the husband who has never touched her and has no emotional attachment or love. While her husband's corpse was burning on pashupati Aryaghat, her red bangles had been broken by widow, there no more red tikas, no more bright colors as Hindu tradition demands. Still she questions, why her bangles had had to be shattered. Indeed, for Shanti Mishra from each and every corner Radha is pathetic and marginalized. Her bangles are broken without her awareness of the reason.

The experiences of family life and her ill treatment become the parcel of her life. The pains and sufferings of the accursed life of the innocent girl have been depicted in the novel beautifully. After the death of her husband Basu, She is shunned by her communities, viewed society as an outcast, tagged as witches, banned from

attending happy celebrations and treated as domestic slaves that is what Shanti Mishra projected in the novel *A Widow's Gift*. Being a child widow, Radha had to go through all types of discrimination, we can imagine how it is for widow who have no money, no education, no access to any resources - the lives were really terrible. Especially young widows are assumed to be witches and are blamed for the death of their husband.

The novel becomes an actual representation of the subaltern in our patriarchal as well as rigid Hindu society of Kathmandu during the penultimate decade of Rana oligarchy. In the novel, Mishra highlights the fact that the subaltern people have no space in the society; neither in the past nor in the present. They do not have their own voice which has been made silenced as far as possible. They are identified with the stereotypical way as the interest of patriarchy as Radha is taken as 'bad omen' for the society, 'husband eater', and 'witch'.

Mishra attempts to uplift the voice of the voiceless as she has raised the voice of marginalized Nepalese women through her mouthpiece Radha in the novel *A Widow's Gift*. The purpose of this study is to unearth the effect of excessive exploitation and domination among the sidelined people. The focus of the study is to underscore the fact that how the patriarchy, orthodox Hindu society are responsible for silencing the voice of subaltern women. In the course of the research, it explores the subalternity with the theoretical insights from subaltern critics like Spivak, Guha, David Ludden and the like. The examination of Radha sheds light into the evil and muted history of child marriage as well as early widowhood.

While depicting the problems of the women subalterns, Mishra raises the voice for the oppressed people to resist the dominant power. At the beginning of the novel, Radha does not come in opposition to the proposal of her marriage forwarded

by her family. As patriarchy does not acknowledge the female voice in them, voice of Radha has not been taken into account. She is discounted as the silent object about which the almighty discourses of the customs determine the function. So, she easily accepts the marriage. After her marriage to Basu, her husband leave her at home and goes to Banaras for his further study. In Benares, he suffers from sickness, and then he returns at home where all the family members are curious to know what has happened to Basu. He is unable to regain his health again. At last he takes his last breathe and leave the world forever .Now, Radha is alone. In her early age she becomes widow and from onwards her single life sinks in to the ocean of sorrow.

Rigid orthodox Hindu community never accepts her activities easily. So she is a puppet on the hand of patriarchy. Once, when grandfather-in –law and daughter-in –law were sitting together and one of the neighborhood friend grumbles at seeing the new bride alone with grandfather as “Shame! Shame! How does she dare to be with Pandit-ji without your permission, Bajai?” (30) to Radha’s grand-mother-in-law. In the mean time Radha’s family members’ die due to the destructive earthquake but she and brother Ram are saved luckily. She and her brother had to live with her uncle Govinda and aunt Sharada’s house. Another thunderbolt strikes in Radha’s life there. The moment she enters into the uncle’s house, her aunt behaves her differently getting irritated with Radha for no apparent reason. Being a woman, even Sharada has no sympathy to Radha. Radha is compelled to return to her in-laws without complaint. At the end of the novel, Radha leaves the world forever because of the disease, cancer. Indeed, society is more responsible than cancer for her death .Before her death, she struggles a lot to remain in the society. She bears the shame throughout her life and dies. Regarding to the voice of Radha, patriarchy plays a great role for suppressing her desires and sentiments. Thus, she is a typical subaltern character.

As patriarchy never acknowledges the voices of woman, till her marriage ceremony, she is unknown about the age of groom, even cannot see her would be husband. So, Radha is exemplary figure of marginalized woman in the Nepalese society. Being obliged to the traditional patriarchal Hindu discourses, the Hindu society handovers Radha as a gift. Radha's parents are so conservative that they are in favor of child marriage. Here, Shanti Mishra critiques the early marriage and tagged child marriage as a crime.

Radha, as a woman on the one hand and widow on the other, is doubly subalternized in the patriarchal society. Even when she is provided an opportunity for study, people criticize and mock her attempts. Everyone wonders why a widow was given this opportunity. Beside this, one of the orthodox Brahmin ladies, Ruby came to visit the Shastri family to enquire about their intentions in educating Radha. This lady also warns the Shastri for breaking tradition and not following the religious belief. Here, again Radha is victimized. So, time and again she is made sufferer. Shanti Mishra counters the hypocrisy of such Hindu religious belief which always cripples the woman and inferiorizes their mind. Shanti Mishra has taken the subaltern character Radha to present the condition of widow in the context of Nepal in which the title suggests the incomplete and humiliated life. Through the study of the central character Radha, we can see how the subaltern people of Nepal were living during the time of child marriage.

The present research incorporates the issue of subaltern to analyze the novel *A Widow's Gift* by Shanti Mishra. The novel is taken as one of the role models for depicting the feelings and sentiments of the repressed marginalized people, especially the women like Radha and their pain and sufferings among the rigid orthodox Hindu community and the suppression of patriarchy. Hence, novel has projected the moving

story of Radha and her trials and tribulations as a widow in the rigid Hindu Community of her time and shown how she has been ostracized from the society only because of her widowhood.

The term ‘subaltern’ basically has an adjective meaning “of lower rank” and it is still used in the British military to describe the ranks below captain. In recent political and cultural theory, especially associated with the Subaltern Studies Group and with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the term subaltern is used as a catchall term for members of subordinated people— the colonized, women, blacks, the working class—although it is commonly used to describe the people oppressed by British colonialism and by the political and economic turmoil of the Postcolonial period. As Ranajit Guha, a frontrunner theorist of the Subaltern historiography defines subaltern, “The word ‘subaltern’...stands for the meaning as given in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, that is, ‘of inferior rank’. It will be used... as a name for the general attitude of subordination in South Asian Society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (vii).

The most important advantage of the term subaltern is that it does not privilege any one category over the others. It gives no priority to economic oppression over racial oppression. At the same time, it does imply insurgency: the subaltern is a participant in a movement to overthrow the cultural and political forces that ensure his or her subordinate status. In several essays, Homi Bhabha, a key thinker within postcolonial thought, emphasizes the importance of social power relations and subversion in his working definition of ‘subaltern’ groups as “oppressed, minority groups whose presence was crucial to the self-definition of the majority group: subaltern social groups were also in a position to subvert the authority of those who has hegemonic power.” (191-207) Here, the term subaltern is used to denote

marginalized and oppressed people(s) specifically struggling against hegemonic globalization.

Subaltern Studies is the name of a circle of intellectuals and the journal they publish, based in New Delhi, India. The term is also used more generally and can also refer to the academic study of the lives and writings of Subalterns. Deeply influenced by Marxist, semiotic, feminist, and deconstructionist ideas, the Subaltern Studies group aims at politicization for the colonized, according to Gayatri Spivak. In many ways, this group works for change by striving to seize control of and alter the overriding narratives that determine the subjectivity, identity, and speech of the subaltern. Although deeply political, the members of the *Subaltern Studies* group view political change as happening through alterations in consciousness and culture, changes led by an enlightened, disinterested intellectual class. This view reflects the influence of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who used the term subaltern to refer to Italy's rural peasant classes. The work of the Subaltern Studies group has been instrumental in pushing issues of Postcolonialism to the fore of critical and theoretical endeavors in the West. As Leela Gandhi succinctly puts the goal of Subaltern Studies group, 'subaltern studies' defined itself as an attempt to allow the 'people' finally to speak within the jealous pages of elitist historiography and, in so doing, to speak for, or to sound the muted voices of, the truly oppressed' (2). To bring out the history of the muted oppressed is thus, the foremost goal of Subaltern Studies group and its subaltern historiographers. But for Spivak one needs to be careful to use the term subaltern as there is the danger of the too general use of the term subaltern to every case of oppression making its meaning goalless and ineffectual. Spivak argues that subaltern is not:

Just a classy word for oppressed, for other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie....In postcolonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern – a space of difference. Now who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern....Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus, they don't need the word 'subaltern'....They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They're within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of the pie and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern. (29-47)

The people within the hegemonic discourse but unable to get benefit from the dominant group are not subalterns for Spivak. For her, the voiceless people who have made systematically voiceless and devoid of agency in the domination of imperial and elitist discourse are the subalterns. For her, subalterns are unable to use the hegemonic discourses for the struggle for their voice and agency. For Spivak the ideological sidelining to the hegemonic discourses do not let the subalterns realize that they are made voiceless and they have no way to speak. For her, women are subaltern because the ideological construction of gender has made the women subordinated and their history has been muted. Spivak asserts the subalternity of the women as, “. . . the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the contest of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (32).

A Widow's Gift by Shanti Mishra is the project on subaltern people who are exploited by dominant ideologies of the society and patriarchy. Radha is being marginalized in one way or other in the society. She is sidelined and tortured only because of her widowhood. Subaltern character, Radha does not speak and cannot represent her selves. In Mishra's novel, Hindu custom plays vital role to subalternize the women. The Hindu mythology works as a camouflage that helps the Hindu males to suppress the heinous subordination they impose on their female counterparts as Spivak would argue. Spivak criticizes the males for creating binary oppositions in terms of women/man, upper/ lower, rational/irrational, immanent/transcendent and so on. After examining the case of Bhuvaneshwari's suicide Spivak concludes that "the subaltern cannot speak" (104). It has been mostly interpreted as the lack of means and strategy on the part of the subaltern to speak on their own. Instead, they have got only the dominant language of voice at their disposal. They, therefore, must appropriate this dominant language of voice if they really want to be heard. The Subaltern woman, therefore, emerges as an epitome of "subaltern". Ranjit Guha also contributed in his seminal essay "Chandra's Death", which attempts to demonstrate the nature of women's subordination within patriarchy. In the same vein, Susie Tharu and Kamala Visweswaran have carried on woman issues in their works. Kamala Visweswaran observes the pathetic women condition as "women are not accepted as proper subjects, but it does register and seek to contain their agency" (124). Thus, the women are regarded as subalterns and devoid of agency and variety of subaltern theorists. The main character of the novel *A Widow's Gift*, Radha; the only daughter of Sharma family becomes a widow in her early age. From her very childhood to her widowhood, she is devoid of agency. She is born in an orthodox Hindu family in which boy is regarded as an asset to his parents, who is expect look after them in their

old age and to perform rituals in their death, in order to clear the pathway for them to heaven, whereas a girl is always regarded as burden. Subaltern literature focuses on the voices of the subaltern people. The self identity of the character becomes the central issues of the subaltern literature. In this text, the main character Radha, who is identified as widow in which her activities were overshadowed by rigid orthodox Hindu culture, becomes the pivotal one to highlight the issues of subaltern literature.

The present research work has been divided into three chapters. The first chapter fundamentally deals with introductory outline of the present study. It introduces critical review and the characters in subordinate condition oppressed under the elitist discourses of the rigid Hindu society and their subalternity and voicelessness. Thus it presents the bird's eye view of the entire research. The second chapter aims at providing the theoretical methodological reading of the text briefly with both the textual and theoretical evidences. It attempts to examine the oppression the women used to face in the name of customs in the form of child marriage and widowhood during the latter decades of Rana regime. On the basis of the various theories of subalterns and subalternity including Spivak, Guha, Visweswaran and so on, the characters and their circumstances and struggles are examined. This chapter further sort out some extracts from the text to prove the hypothesis of the research. This part serves as the core of the present research. The third chapter concludes the ideas put forward in the earlier chapter, focusing on the outcome of the entire research. The various logical conclusions have been summarized as the proof that the novel is concerned to encompass the subalternity of women during the Rana rule in Nepalese society grappled with elitist Hindu discourses.

II. Radha's Gendered Subalternity and Quest for Subaltern Consciousness in Shanti Mishra's *A Widow's Gift*

This research focuses on the study of orthodox Hindu elitist discourses and their silencing of the subaltern women and widows during the final decades of Rana oligarchy in Nepali society in Shanti Mishra's novel *A Widow's Gift*. Subaltern historiography came into prominence in post-colonial Indian context as Ranajit Guha clarified the contemporary problems of the historiography of colonial India and the silencing of the minority histories systematically with the dominant elitist discourses. Basically, Mishra's novel draws our attention to the Hindu elitism that has silenced the women and the widows systematically with especial attention to the child-marriage and widowhood of Radha and the silence of the women speak against the evils of the society entangled with the orthodox Hindu elitism and patriarchy. As Guha calls for the recovery of the marginalized, silenced histories and trace the history from below, Mishra has chronicled the plights and the unspeakable desires of victim of child-marriage, minority widow Radha and the silence of Radha's mother and the women of Hindu society.

Radha's silence and unbound troubles and the plights of women are narrated from the very beginning of the novel. Purna and Shakuntala Sharma have given birth to Radha and she grows very quickly. The family members of the conservative Sharma family are dictated by the orthodox Hindu norms and discourses. So, they are worried about Radha's marriage as soon as she turned nine which was considered as the very high age of marriage at that time. This is narrated beautifully by Mishra, "They were somewhat worried, in fact, because she was going to reach ten after some months" (2). The conservative elites of Sharma family, thus, observe the rigid Hindu custom of early marriage. Elitist Hindu discourses have silenced the voice of women and the young girl like Radha. Purna Sharma and his father Ganesh Prasad Sharma,

the male heads of the Sharma family finalize Radha's marriage with Basu, son of other orthodox Hindu elite Harsha Shastri without consulting Radha, her mother and grandmother. The women and the child are made the mute spectators of the decisions the male elites take and they suffer due to them. Radha is told she is going to get married soon but she does not know what marriage actually means to her. She is happy because she was going to get the beautiful ornaments and attires as she had seen the brides decorated in very enticing dresses and ornaments during marriage. She shares her excitement with her friends but his ignorance about the marriage becomes obvious as she cannot answer the name and the age of her future husband. Frustrated, she goes to her grandmother to request that her husband should be equal to her age so that she could play dolls with him. She goes to her grandmother in the night time when her mother goes to there to massage the mother-in-law's legs with oil:

Her grandmother said, "Sit just a second. I love you very much, Radha. When you get married you must have to behave just like your mother – always gentle and quiet, and ever providing all the needs of the family." [. . . .]

Radha's grandmother burst into laughter at her granddaughter's innocence and told her that she should never play at her in-law's place. She should always cover her head with her sari and help her mother-in-law and sister-in-law with their work, inside and out. (16-17)

This instance shows the discourse and codes of the elitist Hindu society designed for women. The elite Hindu discourses tend to discount the women's and children's desires and yoke women to the household labor. They are taught to be gentle and quite, silent and never complaining, self-sacrificing for the members of family rather

than thinking about their happy childhood play from the start of their domestic life at the very childhood.

Radha's grandmother has been molded with the same elitist discourse of the society and expects the silence and self-sacrifice from her daughter-in-law and granddaughter. Radha's grandmother scolds Radha's mother for not caring her properly before she goes to her in-laws' house:

She scolded her daughter-in-law for not looking after Radha well and told her that Radha should have good food and sleep before she went to her in-laws' house. That day was not too far away – she should not look feeble, but strong, healthy and beautiful. The poor mother! She was expected to keep silent in front of her mother-in-law, to be polite and listen to what she said. She just looked at her daughter and gave an encouraging smile so that Radha would ask her grandmother what she wanted. (16)

Radha's mother is charged by her mother-in-law that Radha should be fed well and made healthy before going to her in-laws' house. She should look beautiful enough to please the male elites of the family. Radha's mother is expected to remain silent when her elders are giving directions to her. The Hindu elitist discourse is exercised here in the daughter-in-law and she is silenced to present her opinion. The Hindu elitist discourses, thus, have silenced the voice of the women and they are unable to speak their problems and plights in the family; they have to obey everything they are ordered by the elders without any questions.

As Ranajit Guha and other subaltern historians point out the elitism as the discourse to dominate and silence the minority, subaltern voices Shanti Mishra highlights the elitist discourses and the silences of minority voices time and again.

She depicts the marriage preparation of Radha in which she has no agency to do anything. It goes according to the custom determined by the elitist discourses and idiosyncrasies of the Hindu elite Brahmins while Radha is made the silent onlooker of her own marriage preparation:

Beauty and physical attractions meant next to nothing in the eyes of Brahmins. The only thing of concern to both the families was the purity of caste. Still, like all Brahmins, they loved to quote the Sanskrit verse: “The girl counts good looks; the mother, riches; the father, knowledge; relatives, lineage; other people, sumptuous marriage feasts.” The boy and the girl who were to be married were never consulted in those days, especially not the girl, who was likely to be five, seven or at most nine years old. This was strictly observed by the Sharmas. Radha knew nothing about what was going in the house. She was more interested in playing with her rag dolls, animals and playmates from the neighborhood. Being the first child in the family, she was loved by everyone. (14)

The brahminic elitism has been displayed by Mishra beautifully in the narration. The discourse of the purity of caste is the chief discourse that governs the notion of marriage in the elite Brahmins. The elitist Hindu discourse has pointed to the different focus of all the related parties present in marriage ceremony – physical beauty for girls, riches for mothers, knowledge for fathers, lineage for the relatives and the sumptuous feast. The girls are made the mute spectators of the ritual practices of the marriage at that time. The boys and girls both would not be consulted about their marriage. The brides used to be children who would not understand the proceedings and the consequences of marriage. Radha, a child of nine, loved playing the dolls

instead of taking part in the strange ceremony going on in her house. She is ignorant and lack the agency in the social proceeding; she is expected to cooperate the ceremony by remaining silent.

In several essays, Homi Bhabha, a key thinker within postcolonial thought, emphasizes the importance of social power relations in his working definition of 'subaltern' groups as "oppressed, minority groups whose presence was crucial to the self-definition of the majority group: subaltern social groups were also in a position to subvert the authority of those who has hegemonic power" (191-207). Here, the term subaltern is used to denote marginalized and oppressed peoples specifically struggling against dominant power structure of the society. Children like Radha and the women like Radha's mother are the minority voices who cannot raise the voice against the social injustices born by the women. The silence and psychological turmoil undergone in Radha's mother is beautifully portrayed by the novelist narrating the night before Radha's marriage:

The Sharmas could hardly sleep. They had just closed their eyes for a while and it was time to get up. The auspicious time was quickly approaching. Everyone finished their morning duties before it was two in the morning. They let Radha sleep till shortly before three. Her grandmother voiced complaint that nobody had woken her up. Finally, Radha's mother ran to her room to shake Radha from her sleep. Looking at her daughter, she almost burst into tears at having to send her away, and cursed the awful custom of child marriage. She prayed silently, "O God, be always with my daughter; she is still a child." She forced herself to wake her up. (24)

Radha's mother is aware of the evils of the custom of child marriage but she has to give her daughter away. The little child should be woken up early in the morning and made ready to perform the role of a bride. Radha's mother hardly controls her tears looking at her sleeping baby. She would never get chance to sleep in in-laws' house in so carefree manner after her marriage. Radha's mother realizes that her daughter is still a child but she has no option and way to protest the social practices. She silently curses the evil social practice and prays for God's help. Praying for God's help suggests to her profound helplessness, silence and inability to speak against the evils of the society and the compliance to the elitist discourses of the elitist Hindu society. As Bhabha points, she is in the position to subvert the authority of hegemonic power of patriarchal orthodox Hindu elitism but she fails to do so for her social existence. The elitist discourses of the Hindu society always keep males in the dominant position and the desires of the females are sacrificed so as to maintain the dominant position and elitism of the males intact. After the marriage, Radha has to serve the members of her in-laws' family but Radha's husband is sent away to Benares so as to get education. He does not know what marriage means but the marriage has supplied the labor force for his household duties after the arrival of Radha so as to give him the freedom to go anywhere:

Basu had to leave home for Benares to continue his studies right after the wedding. He did not even have a word with his wife. Marriage for him was nothing more than a ritual. He married because he was asked to do so. At eighteen he might have a desire to play the real husband, but he could not till he was given the role. It would be some years, he knew, so he left home happily. (28)

The patriarchal Hindu elitism has thus, relied on the child labor, sacrifice of the women desires and making women compliant to the social codes and systematically silencing them.

The question of elitism and the silencing of the minority discourses and groups is prominent question from the very beginning of subaltern historiography. This question is addressed by Shanti Mishra in her novel *A Widow's Gift* very well. As Ranajit Guha's first point among his specific and solid sixteen points in "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India" he has focused on the question of elitism: "The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism —colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism" (1). These two elitisms – colonialist and bourgeois-nationalist, continued their ascendancy after surviving the transfer of power and were transformed into what Guha called "neo-colonialist and neo-nationalist forms of discourse" (1). Though we cannot term Hindu elitist discourses that were at work during the latter phase of Rana oligarchy neo-colonialist elitism in literal sense, we obviously see it as neo-nationalist elitism because the Hindu Brahmins considered their identity and practices deeply rooted to the orthodox Hindu elitist discourses. For them, educating women was a shame which was systematically internalized in the mind of the women of the society blinding them from their real social condition full of oppression. "Traditional women were very critical about Radha and Master Shiva's new steps towards promoting co-education" (80), as the writer writes about the social condition of Radha in which the education for the girls and women was unthinkable. The women elites of the Hindu orthodoxy criticize Radha and her tenant, Master Shiva's move to promote co-education sending Master Shiva's daughters Sita and Gita to the boys school:

Ganga was flattered to chair the session. “How nice to arrange a get-together after such a long time! We have so many things to share. Our society has been moving in wrong ways. Who is going to do something if we don’t? Just see how Master Shiva and Radha are breaking tradition by sending Gita and Sita to a boys’ school instead of arranging marriages for them. Shame, shame!” (80-81)

Ganga, the neighborly woman to Radha, is critical of the Radha and Master Shiva’s move to send girls to school. This move, in the eyes of the orthodox Hindu women elites, was deteriorating the order of the society. The order of the society would be considered as right one only when it headed ahead with the conformity to the elitist Hindu discourses. The elitist discourses have made women blind to their own problems and the conditions that leave them in ignorance without giving them chance to be educated. They see their identity and history associated with the history of the Hindu elitism and thus, they are subalterns unable to understand their subalternity and Radha and Master Shiva’s attempt to bring women out of their subalternity.

In his book *Dominance without Hegemony*, Ranajit Guha observes the elite-nationalism “was an unrepresented, unassimilated, subaltern domain where nationalism, like many other phenomena in the social and spiritual life of our people, worked according to a chemistry of power rather different from that which obtained in the elite domain” (135). National or the social identity of the people functions according to the chemistry of power in elite-nationalism according to Guha which is seen exactly matching the condition of the subaltern women of the elite Hindu society of Nepal as portrayed by Mishra in her novel *A Widow’s Gift*. Ganga and other orthodox Hindu elite women are acting accordance with the power-centers of Hindu elitist discourses. Radha, the socially ostracized widow, is not far behind from the

other women of the society as she has to act accordance with the power mechanism of Hindu orthodoxy to exist in the society that has subordinated her. In the quest for the support from some reliable power other than the indifferent social elites, she turns to God and regards God as her only source of everything she gains. She seeks the solace from God when she feels helpless and burns with the socially prohibited desire for company and love. She addresses the God as everything of her life:

You are my mother,

You are my father,

You are my friend,

You are my wisdom,

You are my wealth,

You are everything for me;

Except you, my Lord, no one is mine. (86)

The history of the ostracized and socially subordinated widow, Radha, is thus, not free from elitism and the notion that one needs to accept the fate and turn to God for every solace rather than acting against the social injustice. Elitist discourses of the orthodox Hindu society have repressed her desires and have made her silent. She is expected to remain introvert and conceal her desires forever because widowhood is seen as a contagious disease in the society and the widows are not permitted to blurt their desires and contaminate the society.

For Gramsci, “The subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a "State": their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States” (946). Radha has seen the need of women unification and role of education to change the mind of the elite women of the society. So she encourages Master Shiva to send

his daughters to the school but the society is so much entangled with the Hindu elitist discourses that even the women fail to see the far reaching consequences of woman education. The sidelining of the women without realizing their own subalternity is the major question Mishra seems to raise in her novel *A Widow's Gift*. Even though the liberal elitists permit women education and give them the chance to study, they first tend to teach them the elite values so that women would always remain subordinated to the patriarchal elitist discourses governing the society. Radha's grandfather-in-law, Pandit Shastri, was keen to educate her granddaughter-in-law Radha:

Pandit Shastri wanted Radha to learn to read and write, so that she could recite religious books like the Ramayana and Gita, which depicted the true state of society with all its good and evil. He strongly believed that if anyone wished to reach the highest goal, finding the truth of God, they should digest the essence of Hindu epics written thousands of years ago, yet equally applicable today. (59)

Radha is taught even though she is a widow, the under-privileged woman, a social inferior on the eyes of the Brahmin elites of the society. So, it is no surprise that she is taught the elite doctrines of Hindu religions first. The *Ramayana* and *Gita* are designed so as to promote patriarchy and fatalism. Sita, wife of Lord Rama, is forced to go to jungle and live in seclusion without her fault at all but because of the fault of the society that questioned her fidelity to Lord Rama. Gita on the other hand, teaches that no human wish has any relevance because everything in the world runs according to the God's wish. Further, the elitist teaching divides the world into binary opposition of good and evil in which women have the high chance to get the evil end rather than the good one. The women of the society are thus, taught the elitist discourses and taught to control themselves and bear whatever befalls on them as a

passive and silent onlooker without resistance. Thus, the elitism that is functioning in the form of teaching and education is responsible factor to hegemonize the subaltern systematically silencing them. Shastri family controls Radha's restraint because she has far less privilege in the society than the other women because of her widowhood. Moral and cultural constructions are very important to understand the cultural hegemony and the silence of the subalterns as Himani Bannerji observes:

Cultural and moral constructions and regulations regarding women are as important today for understanding current theories and practices of hegemony as for the past. Partha Chatterjee's writings on social and political thought of the 19th century Hindu Bengali male elite can reveal much about his need for this constellation of topics regarding women to flesh out his theory of hegemony. Topics such as motherhood, sexuality, conjugality or education as treated by him can tell us much about Subaltern Studies' general theoretical politics. This is to say that Chatterjee's interest in women . . . forms a cornerstone for a theory of hegemony and a successful decolonization. (904)

While discussing on the theoretical up thrust of Partha Chatterjee in subaltern historiography, Himani Bannerji points to the need of understanding the cultural and moral construction of women and the regulations regarding the women. The cultural and moral construction of women and the regulations for them have the utmost relevance whenever the question of women subalternity comes into debate. The topics like motherhood, sexuality, conjugality and education are very important to understand the theoretical position of subaltern studies and examine the subaltern silence. The very understanding of the crucial topics forms the basic move towards

the successful decolonization or freedom of the hegemonized woman subject of the society bringing them out of their subalternity.

In the novel *A Widow's Gift*, Radha is given the chance to get education that teaches her the social and cultural regulations in the terms of Bannerji in which there is the binary of good and the evil at play. She always faces the social opposition and the evils of the society throughout her child widowhood but the elitist education has given them the clue how she needs to behave in society despite all the oppositions she faces in the society. She needs to sacrifice all her desires and restrain her romantic desires of the youth. She has become widow without knowing what the marriage is and she never gets the chance to consummate her marriage and quench her sexual desires due to her husband's death. So she wishes for a mate who could quench her sexual desire and erase her loneliness but her wish is futile in the conservative Hindu society that observes rigid codes for the widows:

Radha, ever beset by social opposition, was always looking for soul mates to share her loneliness with - a nearly hopeless task. Her community never conceded her much freedom. Her widowhood was a great curse against which she had been ceaselessly struggling, refusing to take it as such. She knew that without much sacrifice she would not be able to overcome the challenge. (95)

Radha understands the need of the sacrifice of her desires and restraint her desire to have a soul mates. She replaces the soul mates with the God Krishna and cries before the God whenever she feels very lonely in her closet of worshipping. She has the knowledge that the society is devoid of freedom for the widows and women. Her struggle in the world is made difficult due to her widowhood. She embraces the elitist discourses but is unable to use them to counter the elitist discourses themselves. She

is unable to use her own discourses to counter the elitist, hegemonic discourses is also unthinkable because she has to exist in the society grappled with the elitist discourses. So, she is the real subaltern who is silenced by the hegemonic elitist Hindu discourses of the society, in the terms of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak:

In postcolonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern – a space of difference. Now who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern....Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus, they don't need the word 'subaltern'....They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They're within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of the pie and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern. ("Interview" 29-47)

Subaltern is, for Spivak, the person or the group who has no access to the cultural imperialism or those who have no agency to form the cultural discourses and promote them rather they are just the consumers or the bearer of the consequences of the dominant cultural discourses. Even the working class is not a subaltern if they are just denied their rights and they can protest within the hegemonic discourses against the injustice. But those persons and groups that have no agency to use even the hegemonic discourses for the social justice are the real subalterns for Spivak because they have no voice at all. They are silenced. Radha is, in Mishra's novel, is the true subaltern because she has no agency to protest against her subalternity and the hegemonic discourses using the channel of hegemonic discourses themselves. She has

the only way left, to control herself, show the nice behaviors to the people who come into her contact and try to reform their attitude. So, she has been compelled to take the spiritual way so as to change the social attitude towards the widows by her motherly compassion, good advices and social reform. Her attempt to come out of the subalternity is Buddhistic, not using the available elitist discourse for resistance of elitism but advocating the peaceful co-existence in the society. In her attempt to reform the society she requests Master Shiva to send his daughters to school. She refers to the follies of society not being serious for the real social problems but focusing on the petty personal interests and remembers the great social reformer Ram Mohan Roy of India:

She recalled the story of Ram Mohan Roy, the Hindu reformer, who had pressed for the introduction of education for women and for the abolition of suttee. He had had the friendly support of the Christian missionary William Carey, the father of modern missions, who translated the Hindu epics and established the first schools for girls in Calcutta. Had her grandfather- in -law been living, she would not have been so lonely in her own mission. Thus deep in thought, she heard the girls coming back from school. As usual, they looked in on her even before going to their room, to show her their results so that she would know that they were meeting her expectations. (96)

Radha is aware of the social deprivation of women and the evils of the suttee or the sati system but she cannot protest them in the front of other people of the society. She protests the evil practices and hegemony only in front of her educated relatives, her brother and sister-in-laws by relation, Akash and Jyoti because only they can understand her plights and sentiment. She is expressing her motherly love to the

motherless daughters of Master Shiva, her tenant, who has sent the girls to the school following Radha's pious advice to promote the girls education. Spivak is also conscious of the subalternity and silence of the women in the evil practices of sati system in her essay "Can Subaltern Speak?"

In the fourth section of "Can the Subaltern Speak?," through a critical analysis of the representation of women in the British abolition of the Hindu practice "suttee," Spivak investigates the instrumentality of women and their situation as having no agency to speak for themselves. "Suttee," or "sati," was the sacrifice of the Hindu widow who immolated herself on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. This practice, which was considered sacred by the Indian society, was regarded as barbaric and later outlawed by the British in 1829. This action brought about a conflict between the two foreign and indigenous groups—the British took their outlawing of suttee as a case of "[w]hite men saving brown women from brown men" whereas the Indian men claimed that "[t]he women actually wanted to die" (Spivak, "Can" 297). Spivak discovers that, in the two groups' respective self-legitimizations of their views of sati, "[o]ne never encounters the testimony of the women's voice-consciousness" (Spivak, "Can" 297). The Hindu widows, protected without their saying "yes" by the British, become an instrument for the colonial power to justify colonization as a "civilizing mission" (Morton 64).

On the other hand, the Hindu widows' self-immolation, an exception in a religion that prohibits suicide, indicates the oppression of women within a patriarchal domination. Women, who are silenced, serve as the "ideological battleground" of the British colonizer and the Indian male colonized (Spivak, "Can" 302). From this rupture, the "untranslatability" (Spivak, "Can" 300) between the two groups, Spivak detects the limitation and problem of representing women in the two narratives.

Women are represented rather than representing themselves; they do not have their own voice and agency. Spivak concludes: “There is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak” (“Can” 307). Even in the Subaltern Studies project, a project whose concern is particularly the marginalized and exploited people, the male subaltern is privileged. By investigating and opening the discussion of the gendered subaltern, Spivak “expands and complicates the established concept of the subaltern” (Morton 59).

Though, Radha is also the widow and she criticizes the evil practice of sati, self-immolation of widows, she herself has immolated herself in the tortures and the flames of desires. She also cannot question her social condition of silence as such but expects the spirituality and the woman-education would wipe the difficult condition of women and widows from the society. She has been a gendered subaltern in the society. Spivak examines the misrepresentation of widow sacrifice and its silencing of women’s voice and reaches to the conclusion that the subalterns cannot speak as Stephen Morton points:

Spivak’s discussion of *sati* or widow sacrifice operates as an important counterpoint to western theories of political representation. As Spivak suggests, the complex construction of the legally displaced female subject within Hindu religious codes and the British constitution of the widow as a passive victim of patriarchal violence each ignore the social and political agency of the subaltern woman. It is in this context that Spivak argues that ‘there is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak’. (64)

For Spivak, the widow sacrifice is represented by the Hindu elites as the voluntary and willing self-sacrifice and the British representation as a barbaric practice both

undermine the real voice of the women because women lack the agency in the Hindu society. They are the subaltern and the Hindu elite codes have dictated them because they face the legal exclusion in the Hindu society. Radha, the widow protagonist of Mishra's novel, also points to the problems of widows and indifference of the society to understand the gravity of the problem and take an initiative to solve them. She listens to a discussion going on among the elite males in her uncle's house regarding the social problems but they are not serious to solve the social problems at all:

I listened very attentively to the conversation. I expected to hear about the new policies for education, social reform and community care.

Alas, nothing of the sort! Their talk centred on themselves. Seventy percent of the talk was jokes, which hardly appealed to me. The only thing I remember is the story one of them told. (93)

Radha is frustrated with the Hindu elites of the society because they are deaf and blind to the real problems of the society. They mostly spend their time in jokes and irrelevant talks. They talk about themselves rather than the social problems. Radha hates such an indifference of the elites. She remembers one problematic story they share during their gathering:

“It was about a widow who committed suicide being extremely neglected by her family following the death of her husband. Her in-laws blamed her for the death. I was waiting to hear some comments on the torture the widow went through during her life. But there weren't any. Everyone kept quiet. Not a word about doing away with the deplorable tradition or how to help and support widows in society. (93)

The elites tell the story of the torment a widow bears throughout her life after the death of her husband. She is blamed for the death of her husband has to go through the torture everywhere in the society. Her family neglected her. Due to the unbearable torture and indifference of her family to her plights, she committed suicide. The elites of the society don't think any solution for such social problems rather they remain silent to the troubles faced by the widows. The problems of widows have little chance to be addressed. It is the example of subalternity, unheard voices, unnoticed agency and profound silence of the widows in the society, which really lead one to doubt if subaltern can speak. Spivak, full of such pathetic and pessimistic situation of the widows reaches to the conclusion of impossibility of the retrieval of subaltern voice as Morton observes:

Spivak . . . concludes that 'the subaltern cannot speak' because the voice and agency of subaltern women are so embedded in Hindu patriarchal codes of moral conduct and the British colonial representation of subaltern women as victims of a barbaric Hindu culture that they are impossible to recover. (64)

The history of the widows and widow sacrifice are much embedded to the discourses of the misrepresentation of the widows and their voices and histories are erased. In case of Indian widows, patriarchal Hindu elitist discourses and British colonial representation of widow sacrifice both have actually silenced the actual history and the voice of the widows. Those discourses are circulated so much that it is impossible to decipher the voice and the histories of the widows appropriated by those discourses.

The gendered subaltern and the question of the subalternity of the women are the major concerns of Spivak in her subaltern historiography. In the last parts of

“Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography”, Spivak advocates an emphasis on noticing and investigating the “gendered subaltern”— women. Spivak puts forward the problems of the absence of the history of women’s involvement in insurgency in the elite historiography and the neglect of attention to the female subaltern in the Subaltern Studies project. This observation has uncovered the particularly serious marginalization of women, as Spivak writes in her famous essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”: “Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. [. . .] If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (287). Spivak specifies the predicament of women as victimized by the double-oppression of not only the class system but also patriarchy. Spivak states “Male subaltern and historian are here united in the common assumption that the procreative sex is a species apart, scarcely if at all to be considered a part of civil society” (Deconstructing 28). The patriarchy or the man-made codes are very harsh on the women and they are responsible for their voicelessness. A woman and widows are even controlled in their dress up and the activities they perform in the daily life, thus, the agency of the women is deeply shadowed in the patriarchal Hindu society. Radha, the widow protagonist of Mishra’s novel, is restricted by the elitist, patriarchal social codes of the Hindu society even in the manner and choice of her dress. Her desires and voice are repressed but she hopefully expects to change the social behaviors and codes with her sacrifice and patience:

It never took long for her to dress. She always looked graceful in her simple attire; simple was beautiful for her. Whenever she looked into the mirror, she regretted not being able to wear colorful dresses like married women of her age. Thinking again about man-made customs

for widows in society, she prayed to God to give her more strength to slowly overcome them. She has to sacrifice and display great patience, so she looked always calm, smiling and loving, though her mind was much occupied with convincing opponents to change their outlook. That is why she decided to visit Jamuna, knowing well that her visit might not be welcomed. (87)

Radha knows the profound social opposition to the widows and women but instead of protesting them in direct way, she tries to convert the view of the opposition to more liberal and reformed with her activities and her kind behaviors to them. She has no history because women never have the agency to write the history of their own in the patriarchal Hindu society. Her subalternity is gendered one as the males are the makers of the social codes for the women and a widower is not restricted in the same way as a widow in the society.

Spivak's essay "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" is the criticism of the Subaltern Studies Project for the subaltern historian's apathy to raise the question against the gendered subalternity of the women. In the essay Spivak expresses her surprise to find the discussion of "woman" as subject scarcely appears in the Subaltern Studies project; she says: "in a collective where so much attention is rightly paid to the subjectivity or subject-positioning of the subaltern, it should be surprising to encounter such indifference to the subjectivity, not to mention the indispensable presence, of the woman as crucial instrument" (27). Spivak observes that the members of the Subaltern Studies collective "overlook how important the concept-metaphor woman is to the functioning of their discourse" (Deconstructing 26). Spivak explains that women, who signify only "exchange-value" in the men-centered power structures—for example, in the aspects of territoriality or the

communal mode of power—are represented as “instrument.” In these power structures that are based on kinship or clanship, “notions of kinship [or clanship] are anchored and consolidated by the exchange of women” (Deconstructing 28). Women are instrumental in the patriarchal narrative. Spivak hence declares: “the continuity of community or history, for subaltern and historian alike, is produced on [. . .] the dissimulation of her discontinuity, on the repeated emptying of her meaning as instrument” (“Deconstructing” 31). According to Spivak, the history of mankind is generated by the exchange of women. Relations and lineage are formed due to the exchange value and the continuity of men’s history comes into existence but women have to sacrifice her continuity. She needs to control her behaviors and make them favorable to the men of the society. This marks the subalternity of women, their lack of agency and autonomy which is forgotten by even the subaltern historicists of the Subaltern Studies Group led by Ranajit Guha.

Radha’s conduct, her walk on the street in the evening against the social conduct for the widows, has led male like Jagannath to surprise. In the self-belief of male superiority, he offers Radha to escort her to her home. Women’s autonomy and social life is badly curtailed in the patriarchal society is indicated by Mishra in her novel, which highlights the subalternity of women and the widows:

On her way back home, Radha met Jamuna’s husband, Jagannath. Though he was taken aback to see Radha alone in the street in the evening, he admired her spirit and offered to escort her home. Radha politely refused and, giving him a bow, requested him to visit her at his leisure. He told her he would certainly do so. Once his niece had come with her husband on a planned week’s visit, they could all get together. Radha was surprised to hear about their coming, but she did not

complain to him about his wife's secrecy. With heavy heart and a fading smile, she went on. (89)

Jagannath, the male elite of the society, praises Radha's strong attitude and attempt to live in self-dependent way even in the condition of loneliness and helplessness. But Jamuna, Jagannath's wife and the aunt of her sister-in-law Bani, misbehaves her by hiding the information of her brother and sister-in-laws' arrival time. Jamuna does not let her daughter Renu to open up before the widow but Renu expresses pleasure and shares her plight of not getting the chance to go to school:

Renu looked happy to see Radha in the house for the first time. She ran up and took her by her arm, and said in a low voice, "Radha Ama, how nice of you to come to visit us. I often think of you as my favourite storyteller. How are Gita and Sita? I always tell my mother about your love and care for them and your getting them into the school. They are really lucky to have you as their landlady. Look at me. I'm not allowed even to go to the girls' school. Can't you tell my mother to at least engage a private tutor for me?" (88)

Renu, a little girl, praises Radha for her story-telling and thinks Gita and Sita, daughters of Radha's tenant, lucky to get the chance to go to school due to Radha's pious motivation. This highlights the optimism that the coming generation is growing with the open heart and the condition of widows will improve in the next generation. Both Radha and Renu are subalternized in the society in which the elitist, hegemonic male discourses have appropriated the women like Jamuna and set them blind to the problems women and widows facing in the conservative Hindu society. Jamuna sends her innocent daughter away from the widow as soon as she starts to talk to her, that highlights her ignorance and the subalternity of her daughter and the widow:

Jamuna was not happy to see her daughter so convert with Radha. Widowhood was like a contagious disease. She immediately asked her to go to the Kitchen to fetch her some water. Radha understood everything, so she told Renu to do what her mother asked. Renu unwillingly left her. (88)

The central epitome of the novel comes in the narration of Mishra that widowhood is the contagious disease in the elitist, patriarchal Hindu society and the widows have to bear the consequences of the death of their husbands for which they have no responsibility at all. Mishra is able to pinpoint the plights of the widows and their profound subalternity and social exclusion in her novel with the narration of the heartrending plights of a child widow Radha. Radha's relatives focus on her wealth rather than the troubles she is undergoing in the society. She is frustrated with her relatives as soon as she visits her aunt and cousin's home in Kathmandu for their indifference to her problems and curiosity to her wealth:

Radha returned home from Kathmandu with a heavy heart. Except for the little time she could spend with her cousin's son Harsha, now a busy doctor, she had not enjoyed her visit to her aunt and her aunt's family even for those few days. They had more questions about her property than her day- to- day work and problems. There was not one enquiry from her aunt about how she had been getting on and whether she was facing any problems as a widow. Radha thought that she could share her sorrow and happiness with her, but she could not. She sensed that all interest in her was due to that fact that she had no issue. (103)

Radha is frustrated that even her closest relatives are unwilling to share her sorrows and happiness. Besides the cold behavior of her aunt, her sister-in-law, Bani, listens to

her aunt Jamuna and charges her of the love affair with Master Shiva. The patient and cool Radha loses her composure with such blame because she has born enough insults in the society and has cried silently in her room before her God many times. Due to this strong and unbearable blame of her sister-in-law, she falls seriously ill.

The neighborly girl Dhana helps Radha to go to hospital amid the negligence of her brother and sister-in-law. Radha's suffering from the cancer of uterus. There, in the bed of hospital, Radha's aunt wants her signature in a will-paper as a part of conspiracy to capture her property instead of caring her. The conspiracy is spoiled by Dhana, Akash, Jyoti and Doctor Harsha. Finally, in her attempt to come out of the subalternity, Radha gives all her property to be spent for the improvement of the social condition of widows and girl-education. Her final gift, her will-paper, included the following objectives:

1. To help widows overcome traditional man-made taboos.
2. To make them economically capable of leading their own lives, thus bringing change to the society, but without destroying the joint family system.
3. To enlist elderly men and women and Brahmin storytellers to publicly narrate religious stories that portray widows in a favorable light.
4. To present awards to widows who are successful in bringing change to society. (160)

The realization of the widows and women of the society as the minority, non-privileged and subordinated subaltern groups dawns in Radha and she realizes the need of collective effort to bring them out of their subalternity. This realization comes to her through the lifelong indifference, troubles and insults she bears in the society. This is very important realization to form the subaltern consciousness. But Radha fails

to unite the marginalized women and widows and raise the awareness against the subalternity and directly protest her subaltern condition. In her will, she has pointed to the elitism and patriarchy and understood well that the social-taboos regarding women are constructed by the dominant male elites of the society. She has professed for the increase in the widows' power in the society so that they could overcome the traditional codes constructed by the male elites for the widows. But Radha's approach is very moderate, not aggressive enough because she wants the subaltern empowerment keeping the traditional social and family system intact. She is the advocate of co-existence of the males and females, dominants and dominated, by sharing the social rights which has been ineffectual till the modern time. For her, change in social condition is by promoting the moral and considerate behaviors rather than the strong resistance. So, Radha is only in the threshold of subaltern consciousness because she is still in the clutch of the patriarchal, elitist discourses. She is using the same hegemonic discourse and is unable to understand the impossibility of the subaltern consciousness using the same hegemonic discourse. But her attempt to come out of the subalternity is praiseworthy because it was very unlikely for the women of her time to think about their subalternity alone. Mishra has portrayed the desperate attempt of a widow to come out of the subalternity in her novel.

Shanti Mishra, in *A Widow's Gift*, has put her effort to show the struggle and the realization of a widow of the need of subaltern consciousness of the Nepali society. By doing so she has put her own social values and practices into rigorous questioning which itself is the praiseworthy move. The writer's contextual factors-social position of being a woman and her social values are always at the work in the novel. Margery Sabin highlights the importance of the writer's contextual factors in

the writings that search the subaltern consciousness in her essay “In Search of Subaltern Consciousness”:

In searching for subaltern consciousness through writing, projections of the writer’s own social position and values are always discernible. Even interviews and oral histories reach print through the work of composition, not to mention the more substantial mediation that occurs with translation. Not only writers of fiction, but also historians, journalists, and social investigators deploy their evidence in accord with their own values and purposes. (178-79)

By projecting the own social and cultural factors, Mishra is able to deploy her characters and evidences of the sufferings of widows so as to focus on their problems and need for the subaltern consciousness. This novel, thus, has become very important resource for the women and widows who want to understand their subalternity and understand the value of subaltern consciousness to come out of the hegemony and subalternity in the Nepali society.

III. Ambivalent Representation of the Subaltern Voice

This research has focused on Shanti Mishra's novel *A Widow's Gift* for the study of orthodox Hindu elitist discourses and their silencing of the subaltern women and widows during the final decades of Rana oligarchy in Nepali society. Besides the focus on the silences, it has examined the subalternity as the gendered condition in the backdrop of the society that is portrayed in the novel. Mishra's novel is devoted to the unraveling of Hindu elitism that has silenced the women and the widows systematically. Mishra unravels the elitist discourses of the conservative Hindu society with especial attention to the child-marriage and widowhood of Radha and the silence of the women speak against the evils of the society. As Guha calls for the recovery of the marginalized, silenced histories and trace the history from below, Mishra has chronicled the plights and the unspeakable desires of the social minority victims of child-marriage, socially subordinated and tormented widow Radha and the silence of Radha's mother and the women of Hindu society. Subaltern historiography, that lends the eyes to see the social hegemony, came into practice to unearth the muted histories of the margin in post-colonial Indian context as Ranajit Guha clarified the contemporary problems of the historiography of colonial India that stands in the systematic silences of the minority histories, with the focus only on the dominant elitist discourses.

From the very beginning of the novel, Mishra has chronicled Radha's silence and unbound troubles and the plights of women. Radha is born in the orthodox Hindu Brahmin family from the parents Purna and Shakuntala Sharma. The family members of the Sharma family are conservative and are dictated by the orthodox Hindu norms and discourses. So, accordance with the prevalent social customs of the Hindu society, they are worried about Radha's marriage as soon as she turned nine. Radha's

marriage is scheduled as the male heads of the Sharma family finalize her marriage with Basu, son of other orthodox Hindu elite Harsha Shastri without consulting Radha, her mother and grandmother. Radha is told she is going to get married soon but she has no idea what the marriage is. She is happy as she was going to get the beautiful ornaments and attires because she had seen the brides decorated in very beautiful dresses and ornaments during marriage. She does not know the consequences of the marriage but she has to become the mute recipient of the decisions imposed by the elites of the family.

The women of the society like Radha's grandmother are appropriated by the elitist patriarchal discourses of Hindu orthodoxy. Radha is trained with the elitist values by her grandmother. Radha's grandmother dismisses Radha's questions regarding the age of her would be husband and if she could play the dolls with him. Her childhood desires to play the doll with her husband are silenced and she is given a lecture about the duties she needs to perform in her in-laws' house. She needs to be gentle, help her mother and sister-in-laws in the household chores, be polite and considerate to the elders and make everybody of the family happy with the sacrifice of her childhood desires. Social codes are imposed on the women, girls, and the newly wedded children like Radha. The elitist history has been the history of the women and widows of the society and their voice is entangled with the elitist history. Their history is the lost history of subaltern assimilated to the history of orthodox elites, thus, there is profound silence of the subaltern voice.

Radha's mother is aware that her daughter is still a child and is unwilling to wake her up from her sleep on the early morning of her wedding day. But she has no option but to observe the ritual waking up her child disrupting her sleep. She silently curses the evil practice of child-marriage and prays for God's compassion to her

daughter. She cannot protest the evil practices of the society because nobody would be there to listen to her resistant voice. Her voice is suppressed due to the patriarchal, elitist codes and discourses of the Hindu society, robbing her of the agency.

Radha's subalternity is aggravated after her marriage. Her sorrow and self-sacrifice begin as soon as she goes to her in-law's house. She has no idea about the notion of husband and so she gets bored of her daily ritual of washing her husband's feet and bowing to them every morning. Her husband prepares to go to Benares without the knowledge what the marriage and a wife mean to him. Radha becomes happy to get rid of the daily ritual of bowing to her husband as she is child enough to understand the love and life-long intimacy she would get from the man. Her husband Basu is free from his domestic duties and goes to Benares for study because the labor of his wife at home gives him freedom. Unfortunately, he returns home seriously ill from malaria nearly one year later and dies. Radha was still ignorant of the situation and she does not know how to face the situation. She does not cry for her husband because she does not understand what the husband is and how to react to the death of the person she never love. Her ignorance is unwelcome in the society because she has to cry for the lost husband at any cost. Her beautiful clothes she got in the marriage are gone and her tika and bangles are thrown away. The social codes of elitist Hindu society have robbed the desires of a child in the name of a weird ritual and she has no option but to become the mute recipient of the consequences created around her without resistance.

Radha becomes unwelcome and inauspicious sign in the society from the date of the death of her husband and is ostracized in the society. Her parents and grandparents die of the great earthquake and her aunt regards her as burden. So, she has no chance to stay with Sharmas. She has to return to her in-laws and help them to

reconstruct the house ruined in the great earthquake. Shastris, her in-laws are kind-hearted, so, she gets brief chance to learn to read and write from her grandfather-in-law. She learns quickly but she is taught the elitist Hindu texts like *Ramayana* and *Gita*, which train her to remain patient and bear everything that goes around her. Her silence is maintained properly with those elitist doctrines and her subalternity is perpetuated. Soon, her in-laws die of the epidemic of Cholera. Only Radha and her brother-in-law Banu remain alive. After Banu marries with Bani, Radha is behaved in very merciless manner. She has to cook and do everything for her brother and sister-in-law but she has to bear insulting complaints time and again. She has found only solace in the elitist Hindu religious texts in her neglected, maid-like life. She has to bear the insults everywhere in the society and her lonely life becomes more sorrowful as soon as her brother-in-law's job is transferred to Palpa and he leaves her alone. Only her far relatives, educated and government official couple, Akash and Jyoti understand her loneliness and pious desires and bring some solace to her life. They propose her to lend her rooms to a tenant, pious widower with a maid and two daughters, Master Shiva, for her economic support. She suggests Master Shiva to send her daughters to school, and thus, promotes the co-education even though the society is very critical of them. The society also spreads the rumor of her wrong liaison between Radha and Master Shiva. Radha has to bear the unending torment of the society in the attempt to make women aware of their subalternity due to the lack of education.

Radha empties the house as soon as she hears the news of the possible return of Banu from Palpa. Bani openly charges Radha of her illicit relationship to Master Shiva because of the evil counseling of her aunt, Jamuna. Due to the unbearable shock and mental torture, Radha falls seriously ill. She is admitted to the hospital with the

help of pious neighborly girl, Dhana, even though her brother and sister-in-law are careless to her illness. In the hospital, her aunt, Surya Kumari attempts to get the rights of Radha's property making her sign the will-paper made in her direction instead of caring her to fight the disease. Radha is more aware of the subalternity of widows and women with those unwanted developments. She is suffering from the cancer of uterus which is grown beyond the control. Before her death, she wishes to make a will-paper in which she donates all her property to the charity to be spent for the welfare of widows and women. She wants her property to be spent for the betterment of the widows of the society and the education of the girls. It marks her desperate attempt to come out of her subalternity and silence in the society. She uses the traditional, elitist discourse of mutual existence of males and females in the society through power-sharing rather than openly resisting it, so, she is still unable to be heard in the society. Her attempt to come out of the subalternity appears ambivalent. Her death suggests the perpetuation of elitist discourse even though she makes the desperate attempt to come out of her subalternity because she cannot throw the garb of elitist discourse in which she is appropriated throughout her life.

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