



# Unveiling the Power Dynamics: A Reading of Sunjeev Sahota's *China Room*

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## Abstract

*Power dynamics delve deeply into the ways in which power is exercised in certain social contexts, resulting in control and influencing people who are powerless. Hierarchies within the socio-cultural domain of certain cultures determine who holds power, and such hierarchies are sustained through dominance and repression. Under these conditions power functions as a tool to subjugate and exclude people in lower hierarchies from the mainstream. Drawing on Subaltern theory, the study examines how the existence of the power dynamics in the novel China Room employs a range of suppressive actions to silence and marginalise subaltern subjects. By analysing the different forms of the power dynamics, the paper depicts the silent struggles of the oppressed under extreme dominance. The study further unveils how the absolute power shapes the experiences of the subaltern characters in the narrative, ultimately highlighting the subtle resistance they carry out in an effort to challenge the dominant power structures. The implications of the study demonstrate how the narrative acts as a space for representing marginalised voices.*

**Keywords:** matriarchy, patriarchy, subalternity, hegemony, race

Subaltern, the term stands as a synonym for subordination, initially developed by Antonio Gramsci in his most influential work *Prison Notebooks*. According to him “Subaltern classes are subject to the initiatives of the dominant class, even when they rebel; they are in a state of anxious defense” (21). Over the course of time the term becomes an umbrella concept referring to people subjected to various forms of discrimination. Subaltern studies have become one of the mainstream concerns of Postcolonial theory. Subalternity as a condition that involves the discrimination and marginalisation of an individuals based on gender, caste, religion, class, nationality or race. The theoretical framework for

this study is grounded in Gayatri Spivak’s seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Her critical work marked a major breakthrough in Subaltern Studies. She revisited the issues of subalternity and traced out the voiceless positions marginalised groups.

Sunjeev Sahota is a British novelist of Indian descent, known for his powerful works that explore themes of Indian diaspora, culture and belonging, identity crisis, estrangement and the pursuit of freedom. His third novel, *China Room* published in 2021, has been longlisted for 2021 Booker Prize. The novel has been partially inspired by Sahota’s ancestral and his own history. With the backdrop of political turmoil in colonial India, extreme



dominance of the matriarchy, patriarchy and the racial segregation of an Indian descents in England, the novel focusses on the systemic oppressions experienced by the protagonists under the dominance of power dynamics.

The novel has two storylines the past and the present. The past storyline set in rural Punjab in 1929 follows the life of a young Indian woman named Mehar, who is deprived of agency and caught between two antagonistic poles namely matriarchy and patriarchy. The present storyline, set in the 1990s centres on Mehar's descendant, the unnamed narrator who as a victim of racism, recounts his experiences of suppression and alienation. By intertwining these two narratives, the author skilfully delves into the psyche of both protagonists as they strived to find a sense of freedom in a world where their voices have been unheard.

In this context, China Room becomes more than a semi-autobiographical novel, it delineates hierarchies of power within both familial and colonial settings. The conflicting forces of Matriarchy and Patriarchy hold authority in these dynamics. Notoriously, these two systems practiced in rural colonial India in 1929, were slow to grant rights and opportunities to young girls. The suppressions perpetuated by such power structures limit the agency and confine young brides to a marginal role within the family hierarchy.

Matriarchy is a social system in which the eldest woman of the family holds absolute power. In the novel, Matriarch of the family Mai, exercises authority over young brides in the household. She perpetuates her dominance by silencing and influencing both her sons and daughters - in - law. To restrict the agency of the young brides, Mai orders them to Keep their faces veiled in front of their husbands. Because their faces remain covered during and after the marriage, they are not aware of their husband's identity. They are conditioned to accept the ideologies of the matriarchal authority without question.

In the novel, Mehar attempts to voice her thoughts, yet they remain unheard. As Spivak asserts "the Subaltern cannot speak" (28), which means that the subaltern is unable to speak for themselves. Though they try to voice out, their voices are consistently ignored by the power structures operating within

socio-cultural settings. In one instance, Mehar questions about her husband's identity to Mai, the matriarch silences her, the response Mehar receives suppresses her agency and exemplifies how her voice is muted within the family hierarchy.

Be thankful you've no father- in- law to paw and prowl over your body every night. She pats Mehar's head in a leave taking gestures. Ashes. Carry on, and Mehar does, industriously, desperate to finish up and wash herself for an hour or more. If this is how asking the question makes her feel, she'll never ask again. She'll just do the work. (17)

These lines elucidate the voiceless and powerless position of Mehar within the familial power structure. The matriarch's absolute authority denies Mehar the knowledge of who her husband is. She demands Mehar to be silent, obedient and restricts her from looking beyond her veil. The matriarch, sustains her power by enforcing strict rules over the young brides, confining them to the china room, a small room where Mehar and her sisters-in-law are expected to stay. As a fifteen-year-old bride, Mehar is powerless to withstand the verbal abuse and extreme dominance of her Mai. Consequently, in accepting her marginalised position, she becomes a passive victim of oppression.

The hierarchies of the familial structure, deeply rooted in certain traditional cultural practices prioritise male authority thereby reinforce patriarchy. Spivak asserts that "the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant..." (28). This posits of Spivak sheds light on how certain socio-cultural ideologies privilege men, and keeps women in a silenced and oppressed position. As the novel depicts, the husbands in the family occupy powerful position and exert dominance over their wives. The young brides are sequestered from contact with the men in the family and are made to believe that they don't possess the audacity to look upon their husband's faces. Entrapped within the traditional norms of patriarchy, Mehar and her sisters -in- law are reduced to sexual object, their lives defined solely by the expectation to reproduce male heirs and perform domestic chores without question. They endure the struggles of gendered oppressions, their voices systematically suppressed through patriarchal power structures.



Set against the backdrop of colonial India, Mehar's story reflects her loss of political and social autonomy. Her personal struggles parallel the collective struggles of the nation for freedom. As Spivak posits that "the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (28) suggesting that women within subaltern groups experience a double marginalisation. Embedded within this socio-political turmoil, Mehar's life is governed by the rigid rules of colonial and patriarchal dominance, consequently she faces double marginalisation. Navigating through intersecting forms of oppressions Mehar faces estrangement not only from the world outside but also from her own identity. Her individuality gets concealed through this subjugation. She experiences emotional conflicts that deepen her sufferings.

The impact of colonialism exists in numerous ways, one such manifestation of colonial impact is Racial power dynamics. It is a complex issue take its toll when individuals based on the colour of their skin are subjected to coercive control and marginalisation. The parallel narration in the novel, set against the backdrop of racial segregation in Britain towns during 1999, offers profound insight into the struggles and isolation of immigrant under the supremacy of racial power structures. As the son of an immigrant shopkeeper in Derby, the unnamed narrator- the great grandson of Mehar, endures the harsh realities of racial segregation in England. Because of his distinct racial identity, the natives inflict violence upon his family. The narrator and his family are restrained from raising their voice against such brutality and instead endure the pain submissively. Reflecting on his pain, he says "Perhaps that was my first inkling that this place, this town, this estate, would kill us..." (173). The extreme suppression perpetuated by the natives towards his family has affected him psychologically, as a result he becomes a drug addict and loses his control over his life.

Though power dynamics never gives a chance for the subaltern subjects to speak, and their voices remain disregarded, there is limited scope for them to engage in subtle resistance against subversive forces. In the novel, though Mehar is unable to speak for herself, she subtly attempts to subvert the dominance of the conflicting forces in her life. She

employs certain tactics to unravel the anonymity of her husband's identity, as a result she unwittingly caught up in a love triangle with her brother-in-law Suraj. In an effort to break free from the shackles of overarching control, she tries to elope with Suraj, though her attempt ultimately fails. Nevertheless, Mehar's self-determination to reclaim her agency can be read as a form of subtle resistance disrupting and challenging the conventional structures of both patriarchal and matriarchal dominance.

Spiralling around her subtle resistance, the novel also highlights the resilience of the unnamed narrator, who has been traumatised by racism. He regains control over himself by returning his roots for an extended stay. His self-alienated life in his ancestral home in Punjab enables him to recover from past traumas and regain the strength to return back to England. By reconnecting with his ancestral culture and history, he transcends the traumatic experiences that has relegated him to a marginalised position. His act of reclaiming control over his life stands as a powerful resistance against the hegemonic power structures that push him to the margins. Furthermore, he also rediscovers the life history of his great grandmother Mehar, which becomes a powerful means of understanding his lineage.

In *China Room*, the narrative strategy itself works as a form of resistance, because it brings attention to the lived experiences and inner voices of subaltern characters like Mehar. Even though the oppressed cannot fully speak for themselves in a society shaped by strict patriarchal and social hierarchies, the novel allows their struggles and emotions to be heard through storytelling. By doing this, the narrative gives space to the silenced voices of the marginalised and highlights how their lives are shaped and restrained by unequal power dynamics.

Sunjeev Sahota's *China Room* is a profound exploration of subaltern challenges which are rooted in their lived experience. The study foregrounds the authority of power dynamics and their influence in shaping the subjectivity of subaltern subjects. Through the lens of Subaltern theory, it reveals how nuanced portrayal of multifaceted power dynamics function as a tool to efface individual autonomy. The systematic subjugation endured by Mehar and her great-grandson sheds light on the prevailing practices



of colonial, matriarchal and patriarchal norms within specific cultural contexts. Transitioning from passive victims to challenging power structures, the study has disclosed the subtle resistance of the marginalised subjects. By amplifying their voices China Room ultimately challenges the existing hierarchies that reinforce social injustice.

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