

**“I WANT YOU TO LISTEN TO ME”:
OVERCOMING THE SUBALTERN’S UNSPEAKABILITY
IN NADEEM ASLAN’S *MAPS FOR LOST LOVERS***

Miquel Pomar Amer
University of Manchester
miquel.pomar-amer@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

Maps for Lost Lovers (2004) presents Kaukab, a Pakistani woman living in the close-knit community in an English town. Although she feels isolated in the British society due to her poor knowledge of English, she is presented as a dominant woman in her household. Nadeem Aslam introduces an ambivalent character that must confront opposite discourses in the aftermath of the murder of her in-law and his lover. The aim of this paper is to show not only how Kaukab fulfils the category of the subaltern proposed by Spivak but also how she subverts it. For such purpose, the context will be a key aspect to define in which way the unspeakability of the subaltern can be challenged and still remain a subaltern.

Keywords: Discourse, religion, Subaltern Studies, Nadeem Aslam, *Maps for Lost Lovers*

Probably, Spivak’s best-known contribution to the Subaltern Studies is her assertive conclusion that the subaltern is unable to speak (1999: 308). The aim of this paper is to see how the two different interpretations of this alleged unspeakability are represented by Kaukab, the mother in *Maps for Lost Lovers*. However, she does not only represent the literal and the metaphorical realisations of the subaltern because, eventually, she breaks with her unspeakability and creates a space of her own.

Although the subalternity concept is usually understood as a Platonic idea so that their unspeakability remains intact, it loses its pragmatic and productive strength when it is defined merely by its unspeakability. As Spivak acknowledges, “[w]e are never looking at the *pure subaltern*. There is, then, something of a non-speakingness in the very notion of subalternity” (in Landry and MacLean 1996: 289; my emphasis). Therefore, I understand the subaltern label as a gradable category. *Maps for Lost Lovers* is set in the year following Jugnu and Chanda’s death by honour reasons and it portrays the triggering effect the double murder has for the revelation of family secrets. Thus, the distinction between public and private spaces is crucial to understand how Kaukab is characterised in such a way that she fits the two interpretations of the subaltern’s unspeakability.

1. Little English in Little Pakistan

The first of them is the literal one. How is it possible that one character cannot speak? This interpretation is applicable to *Maps for Lost Lovers* because it focuses on the diasporic condition of the Pakistani community in Britain, whose successful integration in the public sphere depends to a great extent on *speaking* English. Bisin et al. observe that Muslim migrants are more strongly attached to their culture of origin, so that their educational levels (including English skills) are low and, consequently, the

unemployment levels are higher, placing them in a precarious situation within British society (2008: 447).

Indeed, Kaukab highlights the alienation in which they are submerged by pointing out the arbitrariness of language, namely onomatopoeic words, “what was a person to do when even *things* in England spoke a different language than the one they did back in Pakistan?” (Aslan 2004: 35). Therefore, Kaukab suggests that her aversion towards English is not merely superficial because she is defamiliarised even from those things that are apparently the same in Pakistan and England.

True feelings, then, cannot be expressed through an alienating language, as another female character in the novel declares “I wanted to ask my sons so many things today but my English isn’t very good. That prison guard kept telling me not to talk to them in ‘Paki language’ each time I felt like saying what I truly feel. ‘Speak English or shut up’, he said” (174). The prison guard’s statement reveals that the only way to gain certain relevance is by speaking English. According to him, it is preferable to keep quiet over speaking languages from the Subcontinent.

However, English is not the only language that is given a privileged position. Within the Pakistani community Arabic is valued as the language of Muhammad. Towards the end of the novel, Kaukab is criticised by one of her sons because of her ambivalence since she feels alienated by English but not by Arabic: “I’ve read the Koran, in English, unlike you who chant it in Arabic without knowing what the words mean, hour after hour, day in day out, like chewing gum for the brain” (322). However, Kaukab values English and Arabic differently because the latter is a sacred language while the former is the language of the hostile society she is living in, defined as a “nest of devilry from where God has been exiled” (30). Therefore, it is not simply a question of linguistic strangeness.

In addition, Kaukab’s social position keeps her away from contacting the ‘white’ world. In this sense, her neighbourhood is *the* space where she feels safe, “I don’t go there often –white people’s houses start soon after that street, and even the Pakistanis there are not from our part of Pakistan” (42). For this reason, her chances to meet English people are actually very low as she acknowledges when Jugnu brings his white girlfriend for dinner, “[s]he had never met a white person at such an intimate level as she would tonight” (35). In fact, Kaukab’s scarce number of exchanges with whites is made explicit by the fact that she counts them (69).

Needless to say, language is a distinctive feature of the first-generation migrants because their offspring, already born in England, do not experience any linguistic limitation in this sense. This generational difference is clearly stated when Kaukab’s abilities in English are mentioned, in a somewhat humoristic but also degrading tone as when her grandson compares Tarzan and her grandmother’s way of speaking (310). Although uttered by a little child, this remark is not entirely innocent and conceals the association of Kaukab to savagery. Her daughter Mah-Jabin also remembers when his brother Ujala was drunk and his “placement of words in each sentence in slight disarray –the way the drunks talk, the way their mother speaks English (once, when she had a headache, she had told the children, ‘Make noise silently!’)” (300). Indeed, this is the function that Kaukab fulfils: she makes noise silently. Her claims are only noise in the English-speaking society, meaningless noise that reduces her to silence.

This final remark echoes the notion of subalternity: claims can be done but only silently. This attitude is a consequence of Kaukab’s self-realisation of her subaltern condition, as Moore states “due to her downwardly-scaled class position, unemployed status, limited English skills and visible religious identity, society was closed to her” (2009: 10). Kaukab’s optimism in gaining a voice of her own decays even though she

“planned to enrol in an English-learning course as soon as their material circumstances improved” (32). She feels isolated and alone when her children move out. Her daughter justifies such claustrophobia, both in the physical and the intellectual sense, since “[s]he has little English and she feel nervous stepping out of the house because she is not sure whether she can count on a friendly response –” (323). Her son Ujala, though, intends to demystify such victimisation of the diasporic subject: “She would have been exactly like this if she weren’t here in England. What were her achievements back in Pakistan, a country where she *can* speak the language and count on a friendly response ...” (323).

2. Home-made clash of discourses

Needless to say, a friendly response cannot be guaranteed without speaking the core language of the society one is living in. However, as Spivak acknowledges, by ‘speaking’ she referred to “a transaction between the speaker and the listener” (in Landry and MacLean 1996: 289). So, even when the language is spoken, the subaltern is still unable to ‘speak’ because the message is misunderstood. The communicative act fails and the subaltern’s voice is not decoded as it was intended to be. This is the metaphorical interpretation of the subaltern’s unspeakability. As we will see, Kaukab’s subalternity is twofold: she does not ‘speak’ the language of power nor she can make herself understood within her household.

In the private sphere, Kaukab does manage the language and she is characterised as a strong, authoritative and dominant woman. Such characterisation seems to oppose the usual idea we have of the subaltern. Yet, her subalternity is not defined for being literally unable to speak but for being misunderstood. Indeed, Kaukab’s construction as a character fulfils the psychobiography Spivak was interested in: “What I was concerned about was that even when one uttered, one was constructed by a certain kind of psychobiography” (in Landry and MacLean 1996: 291). Certainly, Kaukab’s self-perception and the way the others see her do not coincide and both views are provided to the reader, who will ultimately judge her behaviour with a more contrasted perception.

Although Mah-Jabin describes her mother as “the most dangerous animal she’ll ever have to confront” (111), a close reading of the character shows that her power is only apparent. Firstly, she has a very limited agency and her behaviour is subjected either to the religious discourse or to the discourse of love towards her family. Therefore, the space she is left for producing her own voice is diminished to a great extent. Young’s comment on Spivak’s piece concerning the sati may work for Kaukab as well: “she is a signifier, whose distinction is that she is shifted from one position to another without being allowed any content” (1990: 164). Secondly, she does not succeed in imposing her orthodox faith on any of the members of her family: her husband prevents himself from offending Kaukab but he still thinks very differently, “[s]he is the reason why father won’t openly condemn the idiocies of Islam” (302), while her children follow the western lifestyle and reject the codes their mother is subjected to.

Indeed, it is the affiliation to different codes what opposes Kaukab to the rest of her family. In an illustrative remark, she exposes her ambivalence and shows how she is trapped between two sets of signifiers: “I won’t move to Pakistan. What would my life be then? My children in England, me in Pakistan, my soul in Arabia, and my heart—’ She pauses and then says: ‘And my heart wherever Jugnu and Chanda are’” (146). The first dichotomy (England/Pakistan) is actually referring to the opposition modernity/tradition. She misses Pakistan and she lives according to its principles but she also is bound to England because it is where her children live. The second dichotomy shows her worries for the destiny of the two lovers but it also echoes the

traditional outlook that privileges the soul over the body. Implicitly, these two pairings are interrelated and the spiritual side is linked to Pakistan while the body and its decadence are tied to England.

It is precisely this binary system that privileges one of the sides that will leave Kaukab misinterpreted. Kaukab is conscious of the growing distance that separates her from her children, “[e]ach time they went out they returned with a new layer of stranger-ness on them until finally I didn’t recognize them any more” (146), but it is towards the end of the novel, when the family is reunited, that such distance is enlarged by the revelation of many family secrets. Ujala, the youngest son, accuses Kaukab of poisoning him with a bromide and Kaukab discovers through a letter that Mah-Jabin’s husband abused her. Thus, Kaukab is seen as the perpetrator of violent acts on behalf of the religious discourse even though she claims her innocence. Actually, she does not know what a bromide is as she thought of it as a “sacred salt” she was adding to Ujala’s food to make him more obedient, following a cleric’s advice. As for her insistence on Mah-Jabin to go back with her husband, Kaukab claims that she did not know that her daughter was beaten by her husband.

Therefore, her family is unable to understand why she prioritises religious discourse over her family duties. Yet, from Kaukab’s perspective, there is no space for doubts as these two discourses stand for the earthly versus the divine. For this reason, she places religious discourse as the justification of her behaviours when she is accused of acting against her own family. For instance, Kaukab tells Mah-Jabin she could not prevent her marrying and moving to Pakistan, “I did not have the freedom to give you that freedom, don’t you see?” (115). Spivak warns of this discourse when she says that the diasporic woman “may also be the victim of an exacerbated and violent patriarchy which operates in the name of the old nation as well –a sorry simulacrum of women in nationalism” (1996: 251). However, Kaukab is still seen as an agent rather than as a victim of oppression. Her family thinks that she is subjected to certain discourses because she has yielded her will to them.

Nevertheless, as a pious Muslim woman, she cannot avoid considering Jugnu and Chanda sinners. Thus, when the couple is murdered and Ujala forces her to say what she thinks about it, she clearly states “[i]f you think I condone the murder, you are wrong” (323). Yet, it does not mean she does not feel sorry for them. Indeed, she puts all her efforts in trying to prevent their relationship from being blasphemous because she knows they love each other. She contacts Chanda’s husband and asks him to divorce her in order that Chanda could marry Jugnu and live together without offending anyone. As Kaukab says, “I care about what it is, yes, but also about what it looks like” (62).

Therefore, Kaukab is also a subaltern in her household because even though she can speak, nobody understands her. Even those who are also subjected to the religious discourse do not understand her behaviour: “And how did you, Kaukab, manage to tolerate it [Jugnu and Chanda living together], you who are a cleric’s daughter –born and brought up in a mosque all your life?” (42). Therefore, her position is conditioned by two colliding discourses that cause such desperation that she even tries to commit suicide. Paradoxically, had her husband not prevented it, her constant efforts to access heaven would have been worthless.

3. The speaking subaltern

Contrarily to what it may seem, Kaukab does not only represent the two versions of the subaltern’s unspeakability but she subverts this condition without escaping the dominant discourses. Instead, although she might blindly obey these discourses, she also contrasts them so she gets the most out of them. Kaukab has experienced the

Islamization that took place in Pakistan cultural life in the 70s and early 80s, “the alliance with the Saudis brought a vast increase in the number of Wahhabi mosques and madrasas: these preached a puritanical version of religion at odds with the Sufism that had traditionally been the dominant expression of Islam in much of the subcontinent” (Shamsie 2010: 201).

Her tendencies seem to be very orthodox as a way to keep her faith and her tradition in a hostile environment as England is to her but what the sacred texts say is above the teachings of the ulama. As Ramadan states, in Sufism “the Text is the ultimate point of reference, because ... it is the only path to the experience of closeness to God” (2004: 28). Therefore, she uses her knowledge of the sacred text to establish a dialogic relation with it. For instance, she rejects the idea that Islam forbids music by remembering that when Muhammad migrated to Medina, “the girls there had welcomed him by playing the *duff* drums and singing” (290). Another clear example is when she tastes her husband’s food during Ramadan and justifies it by Allah’s words: a wife can taste her husband’s food if he is a strict man in order to prevent a beating or unpleasantness in case the spices are not according to his preference. However, she knows that her husband does not mind but “since he is not well –perhaps her violating the fast would fall into the category of wifely devotion and love, and be excused” (261). These examples show that Kaukab uses empowering techniques to her own profit even while she is subjected to these major discourses.

In conclusion, it has been shown that Kaukab is constructed as a subaltern whose speakability depends on the context. Contrarily to historiographical accounts, literary works let the author deepen the psychobiography of the characters so that the reader can access the most intimate thoughts of a character as Kaukab. As Spivak states, “[w]hatever the political necessity for holding the position, and whatever the advisability of attempting to ‘identify’ (with) the other as subject in order to know her, knowledge is made possible and is sustained by irreducible difference, not identity. What is known is always in excess of knowledge” (1987: 254). Such an intimate approach allows a closer understanding. Thus, it is precisely in the conscience that the actual subaltern voice is heard, without any mediator involved in the process of decoding. The reader, with such an intimate knowledge about Kaukab’s context and thoughts, can judge her behaviour in a more far-reaching and comprehensive way.

Works Cited

- Aslam, Nadeem 2004: *Maps for Lost Lovers*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Bisin, Alberto, Eleonora Patacchini, Thierry Verdier and Yves Zenou (2008): “Are Muslim Immigrants Different in Terms of Cultural Integration?”. *Journal of the European Economic Association* 6.2-3: 445-56.
- Landry, Donna and Gerald MacLean 1996: “Subaltern talk. Interview with the Editors”. Landry, Donna and Gerald MacLean, eds. *The Spivak Reader. Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. New York: Routledge, 287-308.
- Moore, Lindsay 2009: “British Muslim Identities and Spectres of Terror in Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers*”. *Postcolonial Text* 2: 1-19.
- Ramadan, Tariq 2004: *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shamsie, Kamila 2010: “Pop Idols”. *Granta* 112: 197-214.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty 1987: *In Other Worlds. Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Methuen.

- _____ 1996: “Diasporas Old and New: Women in the Transnational World”. *Textual Practice* 10.2: 245-69.
- _____ 1999: *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason. Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Young, Robert 1990: *White Mythologies. Writing History and the West*. London: Routledge.



THIS TEXT IS PART OF THE VOLUME:

Martín Alegre, Sara (coord. and ed.), Melissa Moyer (ed.), Elisabet Pladevall (ed.) & Susagna Tubau (ed.). *At a Time of Crisis: English and American Studies in Spain*. Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona/AEDEAN, 2012. ISBN-10: 84-695-4273-7, ISBN-13: 978-84-695-4273-6. Available from www.aedean.org