

Negotiating the Subaltern Self in Leslie Marmon Silko's

Gardens in the Dunes and Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman*

Vitsino Haikam

Research Scholar, Department of English

Assam University Diphu Campus

Karbi Anglong, Assam, India

vitsihaikam@gmail.com

Prof. Sivasish Biswas

Supervisor

Department of English

Assam University Diphu Campus

Karbi Anglong, Assam, India

Abstract

This paper examines the intertwined dynamics of negotiating the subaltern self in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* and Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman*. Both novels foreground the experiences of women who navigate the dual pressures of colonial domination and entrenched patriarchal structures, positioning them as subjects of layered oppression. Drawing on W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, the study adapts this framework to explore the fractured self-perceptions and internalised conflicts faced by women in postcolonial contexts. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of the "most subaltern" provides a critical lens to understand the structural silencing of these women, whose voices are marginalized both within their communities and by colonial power. Furthermore, Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space" is employed to investigate the sites of negotiation, hybridity, and cultural survival that emerge as women assert agency amidst overlapping

oppressions. Through a comparative analysis of Silko's Native American protagonist and Kire's Naga female characters, the paper demonstrates how these women enact strategies of resistance, preservation and identity formation within contexts shaped by historical displacements, war, and gendered hierarchies. The study highlights the global relevance of feminist-postcolonial inquiry, illustrating the commonalities and divergences in women's responses to layered marginalisation across distinct cultural landscapes. By situating these narratives within broader theoretical debates, the paper underscores literature's potential to articulate subaltern perspectives and to theorize the possibilities of self-assertion in spaces where oppression and survival coexist.

Keywords: Double Consciousness, Double Marginalisation, Feminist Postcolonialism, Hybridity and Third Space.

Introduction

The experience of women in colonised societies is often shaped by a layered form of oppression that extends beyond the reach of a single system. This dual oppression, commonly referred to as double marginalisation, arises when women are subjected simultaneously to patriarchal domination within their own cultural settings and to colonial subjugation imposed from outside. Unlike single-axis forms of exclusion, double marginalisation demonstrates how gender and imperial structures converge to restrict women's autonomy, silence their voices, and redefine their roles in ways that serve both patriarchy and colonialism (Loomba 151).

The psychological dimension of this condition can be understood through W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, originally applied to African American identity. Du Bois described the inner conflict of living with two selves—one shaped by one's own culture and the other by the gaze of a dominant society (Du Bois 8). In feminist and postcolonial contexts, this concept is productively reimagined to explore how women

internalise conflicting expectations, struggling to balance their cultural heritage with colonial frameworks while also negotiating patriarchal strictures. The dissonance between these identities produces fractured subjectivities, yet it also creates the possibility of self-awareness and resistance (Nayar 212).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, provides another crucial theoretical entry point. Spivak highlights how the most silenced subject is often the colonised woman, doubly muted by colonial power and by patriarchal traditions. Women's narratives are thus relegated to the margins, treated as either invisible or unintelligible within dominant discourses (Spivak 28). Their subjectivity is denied not only in colonial archives but also within their own communities, rendering them what Spivak terms "the most subaltern."

Homi K. Bhabha expands this debate with his notions of othering, hybridity, and the Third Space. For Bhabha, cultural identities under colonialism are never fixed but constantly negotiated in in-between spaces. The Third Space becomes a site where the marginalised can contest dominant narratives, form hybrid identities, and articulate strategies of survival (Bhabha 54). For women, this space allows negotiation between imposed colonial categories and indigenous traditions, opening a ground for cultural resilience (Niranjana 93).

In this theoretical approach, the paper introduces into discussion two authors of different cultural geographies. Leslie Marmon Silko, a Native American author of Laguna Pueblo descent, places *Gardens in the Dunes* in the post-dispossession stage of Native Indians through which Indigenous women were forcibly removed and displaced (Silko 102). The Naga novelist Easterine Kire depicts in *A Respectable Woman* the lives of Naga women (before and after World War II) in which colonial experiences and patriarchal cultures define their everyday existence (Kire 67).

This study will argue through a comparative analysis of these readings that both Silko and Kire portray women who have fallen into the entrapment of double marginalisation but also demonstrate how these women can bargain through fragmented identities to reclaim their agency within Third Spaces of resistance. In this sense, literature is not just narrative; it is a political space in which voices that have been silenced express resistance, oppose erasure, and maintain cultural memory.

Negotiating the Subaltern Self in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* and Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman*

Colonial encounters have historically disrupted not only political structures and cultural systems but also the intimate fabric of women's lives. Women, already positioned within patriarchal frameworks, were subjected to intensified oppression under colonial regimes. In literary depictions, this dual subjugation manifests as both physical displacement and psychological fragmentation, reflecting what W. E. B. Du Bois terms "double consciousness," now extended to account for gendered and colonial realities (Du Bois 8). Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* and Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman* present two geographically distinct yet thematically parallel narratives in which women confront the erosion of cultural security through colonial intrusions. Both texts underscore how colonisation magnifies double marginalisation and shapes fractured identities that women are compelled to negotiate.

In *Gardens in the Dunes*, Silko foregrounds the story of Indigo, a young girl uprooted from her Indigenous community and placed in alien environments under the guise of assimilation. Indigo's removal is emblematic of a wider colonial practice: Native children were frequently separated from their cultural roots to be disciplined into Western ways of living. The garden, once a sacred and communal space, becomes a metaphor for what is lost when Indigenous cosmologies are displaced by Western domination (Silko 115). Through

Indigo's forced journey, Silko illustrates how the imposition of Euro-American values not only dislocates Native peoples from their land but also fractures their cultural memory. For women like Indigo, the psychological burden is intensified: she embodies a split self, torn between ancestral knowledge and the coloniser's expectations. This mirrors Du Bois's double consciousness but in a distinctly gendered and colonial register, where identity is always measured by the yardstick of an alien authority (Nayar 214).

Silko also demonstrates how colonialism invades women's spiritual and communal roles. In Pueblo traditions, women often held responsibility for cultivating and sustaining community gardens, which were both practical and sacred. The removal of girls like Indigo thus disrupts not just individual lives but also the collective spiritual fabric. The loss of cultural continuity, coupled with the imposition of patriarchal Western norms, produces women who are doubly displaced—geographically removed and symbolically estranged from their heritage (Loomba 153). Indigo's longing for the gardens she once knew highlights the resilience of cultural memory, but her displacement underlines how colonial violence specifically targeted Indigenous women's agency.

Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman* shifts the focus to Naga women during and after World War II, when colonial encounters intensified in Northeast India. The novel situates female characters in a transitional moment marked by war, missionary presence, and the persistence of patriarchal structures. Kire portrays women negotiating survival amid bombing raids, scarcity, and the looming presence of imperial powers (Kire 71). Unlike Indigo's childhood displacement, the Naga women face disruptions in domestic and communal life caused by militarisation and colonial interference. The war unsettles traditional gender roles, forcing women into spaces of responsibility that had previously been denied to them. Yet this temporary expansion of agency is always constrained by colonial hierarchies and patriarchal expectations.

In Kire's narrative, displacement takes multiple forms—physical, cultural, and psychological. The intrusion of foreign soldiers into Naga spaces destabilises women's safety, while the spread of missionary Christianity reconfigures traditional practices. As with Silko's novel, cultural memory is at risk, particularly for women whose roles as custodians of oral history and ritual are undermined by imported values (Devika 119). The women in *A Respectable Woman* embody double consciousness by navigating a fractured sense of self: they must balance loyalty to their communities with the pressures of adapting to colonial structures and the wartime order. Their internal negotiations echo Du Bois's idea of "two-ness," though refracted through the gendered realities of the Naga world.

Both Silko and Kire emphasise how colonial encounters exacerbate women's displacement by turning cultural guardians into marginalised subjects. In both contexts, women's voices are muted by the intersection of two dominant forces: colonial power and patriarchal tradition. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's framework of the subaltern clarifies this condition, for these women are not only stripped of authority by foreign domination but also constrained within their own societies (Spivak 287). Their displacement is not simply spatial but epistemic—they are excluded from the authority to define knowledge and identity.

Yet displacement in both novels is not represented as absolute erasure. Silko's *Indigo* preserves fragments of cultural wisdom through memory and ritual, even when severed from her homeland. Similarly, Kire's women retain resilience through storytelling and communal solidarity. These acts of survival suggest that even within displacement, women inhabit what Homi Bhabha calls the Third Space, negotiating hybrid identities that resist complete assimilation (Bhabha 58). The persistence of memory, ritual, and solidarity indicates that colonial displacement, while deeply damaging, does not extinguish cultural continuity. Instead, it forces women into a complex double consciousness that both fractures and fortifies identity.

Taken together, *Gardens in the Dunes* and *A Respectable Woman* reveal that colonial encounters transform women into subjects of multiple displacements—physically uprooted, culturally undermined, and psychologically divided. By centring women’s experiences, these texts highlight the gendered dimensions of colonialism that mainstream histories often overlook. The novels demonstrate that double marginalisation under colonial conditions intensifies double consciousness, producing fractured selves that nonetheless find strategies of survival and cultural affirmation. In their narratives, Silko and Kire provide literary testimony to the enduring resilience of Indigenous and tribal women, whose displacement, though profound, becomes a catalyst for rearticulating identity within spaces of oppression.

Colonialism did not operate in isolation; it often intersected with local patriarchal structures to deepen the subjugation of women. In many Indigenous and tribal contexts, women historically exercised spiritual, cultural, and communal authority. Yet, both external domination and internal traditions worked simultaneously to curtail their roles. This dual oppression exemplifies what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak identifies as the predicament of the “most subaltern” subject, namely women whose agency is muted by multiple overlapping systems of control (Spivak 288). Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Gardens in the Dunes* and Easterine Kire’s *A Respectable Woman* illuminate how women’s subalternity is not only the product of colonial encroachment but also of patriarchal expectations embedded within their own societies.

In *Gardens in the Dunes*, Silko situates women within a cosmological and cultural framework that grants them significant roles as keepers of ritual, fertility, and ecological knowledge. Indigo and her sister emerge from a matrilineal spiritual tradition that values women’s connection to the land and gardens. However, this authority is systematically undermined when colonial ideologies infiltrate Native communities. Western missionaries and educators often devalued women’s spiritual practices, branding them as “superstitions”

incompatible with Christian or modern ideals (Silko 137). In this process, women were displaced not just physically but symbolically, stripped of cultural authority and confined to passive roles.

Patriarchy within Native communities also contributed to this silencing. While Pueblo traditions historically maintained more balanced gender relations than Euro-American societies, colonial disruption fostered hierarchies that privileged men. Silko portrays how women's voices become marginal in negotiations with colonial powers, with men assuming the role of spokespersons while women's ritual authority is relegated to the private sphere (Loomba 160). Indigo's experiences show how women could be doubly marginalised: the colonial system treats her culture as inferior, while within her community, patriarchal dynamics prevent her from publicly contesting that erasure. This gendered silencing creates a double marginalisation that turns Indigenous women into invisible agents of cultural survival.

Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman* portrays a parallel, though culturally specific, form of gendered subalternity within Naga society. Naga women are depicted as central to family and community life, yet their roles are circumscribed by patriarchal norms. Decisions about land, warfare, and politics are made predominantly by men, while women are expected to maintain domestic respectability and uphold communal honour (Kire 74). During wartime disruptions, women shoulder the burden of sustaining households, yet their sacrifices remain undervalued. Kire highlights how female characters navigate rigid expectations of propriety that restrict their agency even in times of crisis.

Colonialism exacerbates this patriarchal order by reinforcing gender hierarchies. Missionary Christianity, for instance, often codified male authority by aligning spiritual leadership with men while limiting women to the domestic sphere. Women's knowledge systems—whether medicinal, agricultural, or oral—were downgraded as colonial modernity privileged male-dominated institutions (Devika 122). Kire illustrates how these intersecting

forces leave women silenced: they are subordinated within their own communities and simultaneously marginalised by the colonial presence.

The concept of double consciousness thus becomes essential to understanding the subalternity of Silko's and Kire's women. They are silenced on two fronts—denied recognition by colonial authority and muted within patriarchal traditions. This layered silencing echoes Spivak's caution that subaltern women are not merely passive victims but subjects whose speech is structurally excluded from dominant discourse (Spivak 294). The women in both novels embody this paradox: their lived realities contain resistance and resilience, yet their voices are rarely accorded authority in the public sphere.

What distinguishes Silko's and Kire's portrayals is how they render women's agency through subtle, often overlooked practices. In *Gardens in the Dunes*, women's connection to gardens and rituals persists despite patriarchal suppression. Indigo recalls ceremonies and ecological wisdom even when removed from her community, suggesting that cultural survival is preserved through memory and everyday practice (Silko 201). While not openly confrontational, these acts demonstrate resilience in the face of silencing. Similarly, in *A Respectable Woman*, women's storytelling and solidarity function as quiet forms of resistance. Though male authority remains dominant, women create spaces of care and remembrance that preserve communal identity (Kire 89).

Homi K. Bhabha's notion of othering helps to frame these dynamics. Both colonisers and patriarchal authorities define women as "the other," relegated to marginal positions from which they are spoken about rather than allowed to speak. Yet, Bhabha's Third Space also offers a way of reading how women carve out zones of negotiation within these constraints (Bhabha 64). Silko's gardens and Kire's circles of solidarity become liminal spaces where subaltern women reassert presence. Though structurally silenced, they cultivate strategies of survival that complicate the binary of oppression and resistance.

The intersection of patriarchy and colonialism also produces psychological consequences. As Pramod K. Nayar observes, postcolonial women often internalise competing expectations, leading to fractured subjectivities (Nayar 217). Indigo's sense of identity is divided between her spiritual inheritance and the colonial demand for assimilation, while Kire's women juggle respectability with survival in a world disrupted by war. This tension is the gendered manifestation of double consciousness, where women must live with the constant awareness of their community's expectations and the coloniser's gaze.

In both novels, the subalternity of women is emphasized as both the act of silencing and structural displacement that reconstituted identity. The portrayal of women as doubly marginalised helps reveal the intricacies of negotiating agency when operating under two systems of domination: Silko and Kire. Women lack the power of authority over the patriarchal institution and colonisers who oppress and dominate them, but they persevere through memory, ritual and solidarity. Their endurance never removes their subalternity, but it lacks the simplicity of the convention of non-resistance since it anticipates approaches to quiet resistance.

So, gendered subalternity in *Gardens in the Dunes* and *A Respectable Woman* becomes a complex phenomenon: women are both de-voiced by external colonial powers and internal patriarchal frameworks, creating a state of dual marginalisation. Yet, their resilience to keep cultural memory alive, to maintain community and to negotiate disrupted identities, proves that, within silencing as well, women implement agency. In this literary sense, literature can be an important location to speak (what erupts when history is suppressed) of that which women have to bear and struggle against at the periphery of power.

Homi Bhabha's theorization of the "Third Space" offers a valuable lens for analyzing the strategies of survival and resistance articulated by women in Indigenous and tribal contexts. The Third Space is not a fixed location but an in-between zone of hybridity where

the subjugated negotiate new meanings and identities outside the binaries imposed by coloniser/colonised or male/female (Bhabha 55). Within this space, women who are doubly marginalised—by both patriarchal and colonial structures—find the possibility of voice, resistance, and healing. Both Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999) and Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman* (2019) dramatise the creation of such hybrid spaces in which women deploy cultural memory, storytelling, and solidarity as counter-strategies against domination.

In Silko's novel, Indigo's relationship with the natural world—particularly gardens and rituals—becomes emblematic of cultural survival. Even when uprooted from her homeland and displaced into a colonial household, Indigo continues to carry fragments of her cultural practices, embodying what Bhabha terms the “interstitial passage between fixed identifications” (Bhabha 2). The gardens that Indigo cultivates are not mere botanical sites but symbolic Third Spaces where Indigenous traditions coexist with Western forms of knowledge. As scholars note, Silko invests the natural landscape with spiritual meaning, positioning it as a repository of women's knowledge and resilience (Arnold 143). In this way, Indigo resists assimilation by nurturing hybridity—she does not reject the foreign plants introduced by colonial contact but integrates them into a living archive of Indigenous survival.

Similarly, rituals and memory act as Third Spaces through which women in *Gardens in the Dunes* assert agency. Indigo's recollection of her people's ceremonies, even when practiced in secrecy, disrupts the colonial logic that seeks to erase Native culture. Memory becomes a site of resistance, affirming that cultural practices can survive displacement through re-enactment and adaptation. This aligns with Bhabha's notion that hybridity unsettles dominant narratives, as it produces new forms of meaning that cannot be fully controlled by either colonial authority or Indigenous orthodoxy (Bhabha 38). Thus, Silko

presents women's resistance not through overt rebellion but through subtle acts of remembrance and re-creation.

In Kire's *A Respectable Woman*, the idea of the Third Space manifests in community resilience during the turbulence of World War II and its aftermath in Nagaland. Women, though deeply constrained by patriarchal customs, form networks of solidarity that allow them to survive colonial disruptions and internal oppression. Storytelling, in particular, emerges as a cultural Third Space where women articulate collective trauma and preserve oral histories. Scholars argue that Kire foregrounds women's perspectives to contest the male-dominated narratives of war, making their voices central to cultural memory (Visier 67). In this way, storytelling functions not only as a healing practice but also as an intervention into the historical record, destabilising both colonial historiography and patriarchal silencing.

Kire also situates resilience in the everyday practices of women who navigate war, displacement, and patriarchal restrictions. Acts of caregiving, resource-sharing, and informal leadership reflect what Bhabha describes as "minority discourse," where marginalised voices generate alternative visions of community (Bhabha 112). These practices are hybrid because they draw from traditional Naga values of kinship while simultaneously responding to the unprecedented conditions of colonial violence. Women thus carve out a Third Space where survival is linked not only to resistance against colonial power but also to a renegotiation of their roles within patriarchal society.

Placing Silko and Kire side by side highlights the comparative strength of the Third Space as a theoretical framework. Both texts resist reductive binaries of victimhood versus empowerment. Instead, they depict women as situated within complex zones where displacement and oppression coexist with agency and resilience. For Indigo, hybridity materialises in the garden, where cultural traditions and colonial plants intertwine to generate

new forms of meaning. For Kire's women, the Third Space is communal, arising through solidarity, storytelling, and survival during wartime upheaval. In both cases, women refuse erasure by negotiating hybrid identities that are neither wholly traditional nor entirely assimilated.

Moreover, these hybrid practices carry an explicitly feminist resonance. By foregrounding women's cultural knowledge and solidarity, Silko and Kire suggest that women occupy central roles in the survival of their communities. Their resistance is not always dramatic or revolutionary but often embedded in the seemingly mundane acts of remembering, narrating, and sustaining. As Bhabha insists, hybridity destabilises hegemonic authority by producing meaning "in excess of the sum of the parts" (Bhabha 162). Thus, the Third Space is not a compromise but a radical reconstitution of identity, one that allows doubly marginalised women to transform displacement into resilience.

In conclusion, the Third Space in both Silko and Kire offers a framework for understanding how women negotiate identity, agency, and survival under conditions of double marginalisation. Gardens, rituals, and memory in *Gardens in the Dunes* and solidarity, storytelling, and resilience in *A Respectable Woman* show that cultural hybridity is not merely survival but a creative, resistant force. Through these hybrid practices, women reclaim agency, unsettle colonial authority, and challenge patriarchal constraints. The comparative analysis thus affirms the potency of Bhabha's theory for feminist postcolonial readings, revealing the Third Space as a terrain of both resistance and healing.

This study employs a qualitative and interpretive methodology to examine how women in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* and Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman* experience double marginalisation under the dual pressures of colonial domination and patriarchal control. Rather than relying on quantitative measures, the research privileges close reading as the primary tool, allowing textual analysis to uncover subtle negotiations of

identity, silence, and resistance. Literary interpretation, particularly within the framework of feminist postcolonial criticism, makes it possible to engage with the layers of meaning embedded in characterisation, narrative structure, and symbolic spaces.

The framework of feminist postcolonialism is central, as it highlights how women are subjected to intersecting structures of oppression. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* foregrounds the silencing of women within both colonial and indigenous patriarchal systems (Spivak 83). Applying Spivak's argument to *Silko* and *Kire* enables an understanding of women as the "most subaltern," positioned at the margins of dominant narratives yet finding alternative spaces of articulation.

Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the Third Space further inform the analysis. His theorisation of cultural negotiation in in-between zones provides a useful lens for examining how Indigenous and tribal women generate new hybrid forms of resistance that cannot be easily subsumed under colonial or patriarchal authority (Bhabha 55). Through Bhabha, the novels are read as constructing liminal sites—gardens, rituals, storytelling, and solidarity—where women's agency is reimagined in contexts of displacement and oppression.

In addition, W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of double consciousness, originally articulated in the context of African American identity, is adapted here to theorise the fractured subjectivities of women who navigate dual oppressions (Du Bois 3). This framework allows a comparative reading of Indigo in *Silko's* novel and the women in *Kire's* work as figures who must reconcile the conflicting demands of colonial modernity and patriarchal tradition.

Finally, a comparative cross-cultural method underpins the study. By juxtaposing a Native American text with a Naga novel, the analysis highlights convergences and divergences in how Indigenous and tribal women experience and resist marginalisation. This

comparative strategy not only deepens the feminist-postcolonial approach but also situates Silko and Kire within a global discourse of subaltern women's survival.

The comparative analysis of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* and Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman* reveals a clear pattern of double marginalisation. Women in both texts are situated at the intersection of patriarchal oppression and colonial domination, making their lives emblematic of the "subaltern within the subaltern," as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes in her critique of women's historical silencing (Spivak 83). Silko's Indigo is uprooted from her community and subjected to Western assimilation, while the women in Kire's narrative navigate both British colonial intrusions and restrictive local traditions. This duality underscores how colonial encounters exacerbate gendered subordination, leaving women without stable positions within either system of authority.

A second finding is the prevalence of double consciousness in both novels. W. E. B. Du Bois's idea of a divided self, originally applied to African American experience, is equally relevant to Indigenous and tribal women negotiating fractured identities (Du Bois 3). Indigo exemplifies this tension as she struggles to preserve the rituals of her people while being immersed in Western domestic and academic culture. Similarly, Kire's women embody an internal split, torn between their prescribed roles in a patriarchal community and their responses to the disruptions of war. Both groups of women must negotiate competing expectations, forming identities that are fractured but not defeated. This confirms that double consciousness is not only a psychological burden but also a tool for navigating multiple worlds.

The third major finding is that Bhabha's Third Space provides a conceptual terrain where women assert cultural survival and resilience. For Silko, the garden emerges as a living archive where Indigenous women preserve their traditions even as they adapt to colonial impositions. Memory and ritual become hybrid strategies, sustaining culture in new contexts

(Bhabha 55). In Kire's narrative, the Third Space materialises in women's storytelling, caregiving, and solidarity during wartime. These acts transform domestic and communal spaces into zones of resistance, demonstrating that women's agency often resides in the ordinary practices of survival.

Taken together, the findings confirm that women in both texts, while subjected to layered oppressions, refuse complete erasure. Their strategies of negotiation—whether through ritual, memory, or storytelling—demonstrate resilience in the face of double marginalisation. The novels reveal how cultural assertion emerges precisely from fractured subjectivities, with hybridity enabling both survival and transformation. In this sense, Silko and Kire make visible the resilience of subaltern women whose agency is often overlooked in dominant discourses.

Thus, the study aligns closely with key currents in feminist and postcolonial scholarship, which emphasise the intersection of gender and colonial domination as a site of compounded subalternity. Scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty argue that women in colonised or tribal societies are often represented through homogenising discourses that erase their specific histories and struggles (Mohanty 42). The novels of Leslie Marmon Silko and Easterine Kire resist this tendency by foregrounding women's voices and experiences, thereby contesting the double silencing that Spivak critiques in her landmark essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (Spivak 83). The two texts confirm that the subaltern woman is not merely a passive victim but an active participant in cultural survival, even if her forms of agency are subtle, hybrid, and situated in everyday practices.

Silko and Kire's contributions are especially significant for extending the scope of subaltern studies into Indigenous and tribal women's contexts. Much of the earlier scholarship in subaltern studies focused on South Asian peasant insurgencies or class-based struggles (Guha 18). By turning attention to Native American and Naga women, these novels

highlight how Indigenous identities complicate the categories of coloniser and colonised, particularly when overlaid with patriarchy. In Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes*, Indigo's quiet persistence in carrying cultural memory through rituals and gardens challenges colonial erasure while reclaiming a space for Native women's knowledge. In Kire's *A Respectable Woman*, women's solidarity and storytelling ensure that their wartime resilience is inscribed into communal history. Both writers, therefore, expand the canon of feminist postcolonial literature by situating Indigenous women at the heart of cultural continuity.

The discussion also affirms a broader global pattern of gendered subalternity. Across cultures—whether Native American, Naga, African, or Caribbean—women frequently confront dual oppressions, their marginality deepened by the intersection of colonial power with patriarchal traditions (Loomba 152). This resonates with Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, which, when adapted to feminist postcolonial contexts, captures the fractured subjectivities women negotiate daily. Yet the novels also demonstrate that this fractured identity need not only signal oppression; it can serve as a generative site where hybrid forms of resistance emerge. Bhabha's notion of the Third Space thus gains feminist inflections in these works, as women carve out spaces of cultural assertion within displacement, trauma, and silence. Therefore, Silko and Kire demonstrate that Indigenous women's agency, though often overlooked, constitutes a crucial dimension of subaltern studies. Their characters embody resilience that is local in form yet global in implication, revealing transnational patterns of survival and cultural renewal. By situating Native American and Naga women within the frame of feminist postcolonialism, these texts reaffirm the importance of literature as a site where silenced voices can articulate presence against erasure.

Conclusion

The comparative exploration of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* and Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman* underscores how Indigenous and tribal women

inhabit a position of double marginalisation, bearing the burden of colonial subjugation alongside patriarchal restrictions. Both texts reveal how this compounded oppression not only fractures identity but also produces conditions for new forms of agency. Through different historical and cultural contexts—Silko's turn-of-the-century American Southwest and Kire's wartime Nagaland—the novels demonstrate a shared truth: women at the edges of power are among the first to suffer dislocation but also among the most determined to preserve continuity and meaning.

Central to this negotiation is the adaptation of double consciousness. While Du Bois originally theorised it in relation to African American identity, its relevance in these novels lies in its articulation of the fractured awareness women develop when negotiating between worlds. Indigo carries with her both the imposed knowledge of colonial households and the ancestral practices of her people, embodying a consciousness split but also expanded by her dual experiences. Kire's women, shaped by the expectations of patriarchal domesticity and the violent upheavals of war, similarly learn to hold contradictory realities within themselves. This fractured selfhood, far from paralysing them, becomes the foundation upon which resilience is built.

The novels further illustrate that survival depends on inhabiting Third Spaces, where hybridity transforms oppression into creative negotiation. For Silko, gardens and rituals function as hybrid cultural archives, preserving Indigenous identity while adapting to colonial disruption. For Kire, storytelling and solidarity convert trauma into communal resilience, ensuring that women's experiences are neither erased nor silenced. Bhabha's theory of in-betweenness thus gains renewed relevance in feminist postcolonial contexts: the Third Space is not abstract but lived daily through memory, language, and care.

What emerges from both texts is a powerful reminder that subaltern women, while historically marginalised, are also cultural carriers and creators of continuity. Their agency

may not always take the form of overt resistance; often it is found in tending a garden, recalling a ritual, telling a story, or sustaining a household under duress. Yet these gestures embody forms of defiance that resist erasure, demonstrating that women's contributions are central to the endurance of Indigenous and tribal communities. In bringing *Silko* and *Kire* into conversation, the study highlights the global pattern of gendered subalternity, cutting across geographies and histories. Native American and Naga women, though shaped by distinct colonial encounters, both exemplify how survival and cultural assertion emerge from the margins. Their stories challenge dominant historiographies and affirm that literature serves as a crucial site for restoring voices that might otherwise remain unheard.

Ultimately, the novels insist on a vision of resilience grounded in hybridity, memory, and community. By dramatizing women's negotiation of fractured identities, *Silko* and *Kire* not only document historical trauma but also illuminate pathways of cultural survival. Their works remind us that even in the most disempowering circumstances, subaltern women generate spaces of healing, continuity, and resistance—ensuring that silence does not equate to erasure.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Copyright: © 2025 by Vitsino Haikam, Prof. Sivasish Biswas Author(s) retain the copyright of their original work while granting publication rights to the journal.

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, allowing others to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon it, even for commercial purposes, with proper attribution. Author(s) are also permitted to post their work in institutional repositories, social media, or other platforms.

References

- Arnold, Ellen L. *Sacred Landscapes: Indigenous Women and Gardens in Native American Literature*. University of New Mexico Press, 2014.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Devika, J. *Women's Writing and the Cultural Politics of Gender in India*. Zubaan, 2021.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903.
- Guha, Ranajit. *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Oxford University Press, 1982.
- Kire, Easterine. *A Respectable Woman*. Zubaan, 2019.
- Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2005.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Duke University Press, 2003.
- Nayar, Pramod K. *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. Pearson, 2008.
- Niranjana, Tejaswini. *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context*. University of California Press, 1992.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Gardens in the Dunes*. Simon & Schuster, 1999.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.
- Visier, Visier. *Voices from the Periphery: Women, War, and Oral Histories in Nagaland*. Speaking Tiger, 2016.
- Young, Robert J. C. *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*. Blackwell, 2001.