

THE DEAF AND MUTE AS SUBALTERNS IN KOREAN CONTEXTS: ANALYSIS OF KOREAN FILM OF *SILENCED (DO-GA-NI)*

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ABSTRACT: *This research is an investigation of a Korean film (Do-Ga-Ni or Silenced in 2011), which reflects the contemporary situation in South Korea where the sexual crimes against disabled children in educational institutions have occurred. In this research, the deaf students are positioned as subalterns who are recognized as the underrepresented that do not have the ability to speak for themselves. Through the methodology of illuminating individual cases of deaf students featured in this movie, this investigation approaches this interpretation: the testimony of the deaf children through their sign language in the courtroom, although this act of speaking for themselves suggests a possibility to change their identity from subalterns to non-subalterns, turns out to be ineffective due to the social elites' rejection to admit their statement. This does result in a death of a subaltern, which makes the consciousness of the dead student disappear permanently from the understandings of the Korean public.*

KEYWORDS: Silenced (Do-Ga-Ni), Subaltern, Sign Language, Deaf, Representation, Death

INTRODUCTION

The previous research on the theoretical explication of subaltern studies, which have been activated mostly in the social and historical contexts of South Asia for illuminating the condition of the unaddressed in the society, suggests its applicability to a broader context beyond its previous realm. To demonstrate this, this research to interpret a Korean film based on a real-life event through illuminating the characters as subalterns, is an attempt to augment the applications of subaltern theory to the situations of the contemporary South Korea. At the same time, contrary to the previous study's less attention to the subalterns' social mobility within their hierarchy, the temporary movement of the position of individual subalterns within a social stratification is explored in this research.

In 2011, a Korean film of *Do-ga-ni (The Crucible)*, which is also featured in 15 theatres in the United States under the title of *Silenced*, graphically depicts a case of sexual assaults against children suffering from hearing impairments by their teachers in its screen. This movie is an adaptation of a contemporary Korean novel written by Ji-young Gong, who is motivated by an actual event in which the disabled students have been raped for several years by the faculty in Gwang-ju Inwha School in Korea. After the release of the film, the requests to reform the legislative measure that has allowed the criminals to receive lenient punishment reach the Korean government, but the plot of the film also suggests that the case of the victimized children would not have emerged into the concern of the Korean public if the movie had not reopened the event. This film thus shows the reality of the contemporary society in which the deaf students who cannot speak or use spoken language still remain as the underrepresented, and their consciousness disappears without reaching the attention of Korean public regardless of their struggling to talk to them.

Theoretical Underpinning: Applying Subaltern Concepts to Korean Contexts

Studies of the trajectory of the development of the notion of this term, ‘subaltern,’ make it clear that the term itself is not geographically or temporally qualified concept. Even though the previous studies especially by the members of the Subaltern Studies Group such as Ranajit Guha or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have narrowed down the focus of their research into the situations in the nineteenth-century South Asian countries, this does not mean that the subaltern concept should be explained within the relevant social contexts in the regions. As many scholars have pointed out, the origin of the idea of ‘subaltern’ – which implies its usefulness in wide locations of the world – is generated from Antonio Gramsci, who indicates that a ‘subaltern’ is fundamentally “any ‘low rank’ person or group of people in a particular society suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as active individuals of the same nation” (Louai, 5). Later, this concept of subalternity is more detailed and modulated by Guha who tries to newly illuminate the situations of the oppressed in South Asian society with the idea of subalternity, as he designs a four-level of social strata in order to elicit the definition of ‘subalterns.’ To be specific, Guha’s methodology of eliciting the concept of subalterns is based on the system of “identity-in-difference,” as subalterns are those who “represent the demographic difference between the total population and all those whom we have described as the ‘elite [those in the upper two levels]’” (Spivak, 79). Thus, it is the relation among the four levels of social classes that contributes to forming the conceptual difference in their class identity. To this pre-existing system of difference, Spivak does further add a strong emphasis on the impossibility of articulation of the oppressed in the lowest level of the stratification, which is named as ‘subalterns.’

As Guha’s social stratification is widely accepted by the scholars of subaltern studies as a methodology to elicit the definition of subalterns, and as this is because of the easiness to see the social position of subalterns in their relationships with other classes within the stratification, it is essential to transcribe Guha’s arrangement of social hierarchy into a new version suitable for the situation in the contemporary Korea. In this sense, for the purpose of understanding the deaf children as subalterns in the contexts of the Korean film of *Silenced*, the social stratification that has been used in the location of South Asia is to be transformed into a new one adapted for the use in situations of Korea in East Asia:

1. Dominant indigenous groups on the all-Korea level, such as those who are working in the central government or related institutions: in *Silenced*, the judge, prosecutor, and the attorney for the defendants of the rapists belong to this category – as ‘elites’ in the society.
2. Dominant indigenous groups at the regional and local levels in *Mujin*, Gwang-ju: Gang-suk Lee as the principal of Ja-ae academy, Gang-bok Lee as the chief of administration, the teacher Bo-hyun Park – as ‘elites’ in the society, in addition to those in the level 1.
3. Buffer Groups: In-ho Gang (the art teacher in Ja-ae academy), Yu-jin Seo (the employee working in *Mujin* Human Rights Center).
4. Subaltern Classes: The deaf students such as Yu-ri Jin, Yeon-du Kim, Yeong-su Jang and Min-su Jang in Ja-ae academy.

This transcription follows Guha’s (and Spivak’s) basic idea of the locations of social elites, buffer groups, and subalterns in the social hierarchy. In this transformed structure, the subaltern

classes of the deaf children as well as those in the buffer zone are in double subordinations to the dominant groups of 'elites' in the upper two levels. Especially, it is significant to position the teacher In-ho Gang as one of the members of the buffer group, since to locate the buffer group makes the exact place of subaltern groups possible, as the latter is put under the level of buffer zone according to the previous subaltern theory. In this movie, the character of In-ho Gang is an art teacher who tries to divulge the criminal acts of sexual assaults that have been committed more than several years by the teachers in Ja-ae academy, and he cooperates with Yu-jin Seo working in Mujin Human Rights Center in order to open the case to the Korean public. According to the plot, In-ho Gang can be placed in the buffer zone of an intermediate level between elites and subalterns, from the aspect that he could be either one of the dominant or the dominated in the same area. In other words, his situation is ambiguous because he could have resided with the dominant in Mujin society if he had overlooked the sexual crimes committed by the teachers, but he decides not to as he indicts the sexual offenders to rescue the hearing impaired children, which makes him relegated into the condition of the dominated as the result of his insubordination. Once the location of the buffer zone is set, the subaltern groups can be positioned under them. In this stratification, the characters of the deaf students as subalterns are those who represent the difference between the whole characters in the film and all those whom indicated as the 'elites' in the hierarchy. The method of "identity-in-difference" is still working in this new stratification to illuminate the hierarchy in the micro-world of the film, which functions as a mirror to reflect the reality in Korea.

METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

As seen above, the basic methodology to proceed with this academic research on the cultural as well as social understanding of the film, which regards the disabled students sexually victimized in their living environment as subalterns in the contemporary Korea, is indebted to the previous theoretical grounds of the concept of subalterns elicited from the discontinuous system of social stratification. The trajectory of the development of the idea of 'subalternity' by scholars in this field – such as Antonio Gramsci, Ranajit Guha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak – shows that all of these scholars' ideas give profound impacts on the current concept of 'subalterns.' However, for this research which puts its focus on the situation of the deaf who can neither physically speak nor talk with other people who are unable to understand their sign language, it is the perspective of Spivak that would be further considered for its application. This is mainly because of Spivak's specific emphasis on the impossibility of measuring consciousness of subalterns out of their silent condition. For this goal, this research is thematically directed to the feasibility (or infeasibility) of the act of articulations by the deaf students, especially in the public place of courtroom. At the same time, the way for this thematic development is similar to the methodology of a case study explaining the heterogeneous situations of each individual: the discussion section in this research is thus about a close scrutiny of the two main characters – Yu-ri Jin who is provided an opportunity to do testimony and Min-su Jang who is deprived of the chance of speaking for himself. The examinations of the different case of the two characters would show that the subaltern children's consciousness is still rejected to be understood by the intellectuals as well as the Korean public, in the following discussions.

First Discussion: Testimony of the Oppressed in the Courtroom

The situation projected in the transcribed stratification, which clarifies the social hierarchical positions of the characters in this film, also entails a possibility to be additionally modified when the characters in the movie go through a phase of transition of identity. However, this transition is possible only for a few deaf students who are allowed to do a legal testimony through their sign language, so their identity-transition is exceptional as well as unusual. The courtroom scene in this film, which captures a deaf student (Yu-ri Jin) to provide circumstantial evidence to prove her teachers' sexual harassment on her bodies, exemplifies these moments when the deaf child – who has been a subaltern that cannot speak for herself – escape from the former condition of subalternity. At the same time, she is experiencing a liminal phase, a very complex status: in the transitional process where the deaf student struggles to initiate the representation for herself, she is still positioned on the boundary between the two different conditions (subalterns and non-subalterns, or the oppressed and individuals asserting their subjectivity) as the pre-existing relationships of social hierarchy prevent the deaf student from going beyond the threshold into the other side.

As mentioned above, the focus of the camera of *Silenced* on the case of Yu-ri Jin – who suffers from mental disability as well as physical deafness – is to illustrate this complex situation, when it is questioned whether her testimony through sign language can be understood as reliable evidence to punish the criminals. The assumption of judge's decision to give an opportunity to Yu-ri Jin, despite her mental disability which makes her have 5-year-old child's intellectual level, is that Yu-ri Jin clearly knows and understands at least the factual events that have happened to her body. Without this assumption, the judge cannot allow her to have the chance to speak for herself in front of the audience. However, Yu-ri Jin's testimony through her sign language, "He [the chief of administration] pulled off my pants. I said no because it hurts too much. I ran away because I was scared. He grabbed me hard and forced me on a table. He tied my hands and feet to the table..." is countered with "That's all lie! Stop Lying!" (*Silenced*) by the teacher who indicates an error in accepting the testimony from a mentally disabled child. The articulations in the deaf student's self-representation are thus rebutted and rejected, with a doubt continuously emerging, to question whether the deaf student really knows and how far she understands. If she does not know, then the place which she is standing at in the courtroom needs to be substituted by the one who can 'speak for' the deaf student, or who can understand her situation through the "concrete experience" which has enabled intellectuals to grasp "what actually happens [to subalterns]" through their knowledge and experience (Spivak, 69).

However, a problem occurs if an intellectual (or a proxy at the legal court) stands there to represent the deaf student through wielding his or her transparency as well as the "concrete experience." This is also what Spivak questions, to ask whether the subalterns really know clearly and perfectly (Spivak, 69) about their situation, as Spivak suggests that the negative answer to this question would also rule out the possibility of the work of "concrete experience." Spivak's contention is to indicate, what is not included in subaltern consciousness cannot be delivered into the range of understanding by the intellectuals either, and this ultimately makes their "concrete experience" unable to reach the vacant parts within the consciousness of the subalterns. The representation by a proxy could have been inevitable if the credibility of Yu-ri Jin's testimony has been rejected, but paradoxically the proxy in this situation cannot fully understand her consciousness even at the time when he or she stands there to represent her. This leads to an impasse that cannot advance, and a step further from this suggests a possibility of a distortion in interpreting the case.

Despite the danger of distortion in grasping the situation, the intellectuals (or ‘elites’) in this film exploit the circumstantial evidences provided by other witnesses for their advantage. As seen above, the act of indicating Yu-ri Jin’s mental disability as a factor that hinders her testimony from being fully accepted also implies the intellectuals’ incompetence in their ‘concrete experience’ to reach her consciousness, which is not easy to be read due to the student’s abnormal mental condition. Nevertheless, the intellectuals are still asserting that they can reach the consciousness of Yu-ri Jin (through the working of their concrete experience), as they appropriate the circumstantial evidences adduced by other witnesses during the process. The film illustrates this situation as follows:

Doctor: Her vulva was inflamed and her hymen was damaged.

Defendant Attorney: Can a girl’s hymen only be damaged by sexual relations?

Doctor: No, it can be damaged when a girl rides a bike or does severe masturbation. But most of the children who suffered from sexual assaults often lose their minds due to sense of humiliation, but Yu-ri Jin was too calm to be a girl who supposedly got sexually molested. She was calmly eating cookies.

(...) Her wound was not from recent sexual relationship...her hymen was not damaged recently, it seemed to be about five years ago when it started, but at that time she was nine years old and too young for sex.

Defendant Attorney: Is it possible for such a girl and a man to have sexual relations? Even if it was, without the girl’s voluntary consent, it’s impossible! (*Silenced*)

Nine-year-old girl’s “voluntary consent” to sexual abuse by the teacher is how the attorney interprets the case to defend the criminals. The medical opinion by the doctor who suggests the possibility that Yu-ri Jin is sexually molested at least for five years is ignored, as the defendant attorney pretends to see the consciousness of the deaf student who is believed to have done the “voluntarily consent” to the sexual relationships with the teacher. In other words, the defendant attorney reintroduces his ‘concrete experience’ in the foreground when the effect of positivist empiricism is already ruled out: his assumption that the deaf child has done “voluntary consent” makes it necessary to be followed by the conjecture that she ‘knows clearly’ about her situation, and this leads to a discrepancy with the previous argument that her testimony cannot be verified due to her mental disability (which indicates her inability to understand her situation). As a result, the deaf student’s transition from a subaltern to non-subaltern as she is allowed the chance to speak for, or represent herself at the courtroom, is temporary and transient. She goes back to her original state as her legal case is turned out to be rejected due to the settlement between her parents and the defendants, as the contemporary Korean law states that “sex crimes generally can be prosecuted only if the victim presses charges, and charges are often dropped if a financial settlement is reached between the defendant and plaintiff” (Choe, “Film Underscores Koreans’ Growing Anger Over Sex Crimes”).

Second Discussion: Subaltern Deaths in *Silenced*

Scenes in the legal court have demonstrated that even after the deaf student makes her ‘voice’ heard by the intellectuals through her sign language, she is still placed as one of the marginalized who are deprived of the right to participate in the legal case to rectify the crime of the authorities. Another case that continues to be featured in this film is the death of a deaf student, which questions the possibility of reading the intended messages from his dead body.

Specifically, *Silenced* deals with the death of a deaf student – Min-su Jang who has been sexually molested by a male teacher Bo-hyun Park, and who could not reach the witness box to speak for himself due to the settlement between his parents and defendants. In fact, the examinations of Min-su Jang's death in *Silenced* reflect the previous explanations by Spivak: subalterns' struggles for communicating with others are not recognized by those to whom the subalterns are struggling to speak until the emergence of their deaths, which are remarkable enough to be paid attention to due to the unusual way of suicide. At the same time, this film goes further than this, illustrating that the factual event of the death and its postmortem message are also easy to be ignored by the indifference of people living within the community.

In fact, this focus on the deaths of the deaf children in this film shows that the plot of *Silenced* achieves a symmetrical structure, as it begins with the death of Young-su Jang – who is a younger brother of Min-su Jang – on a railroad, and it ends with Min-su Jang's suicide at the same place as he runs over the train with Bo-hyun Park to do his revenge. The deaths of these two brothers can be compared and contrasted with each other, and the scrutiny of the associations of the two brothers' deaths shows that the structure of this movie is well developed as it contains the continuity from the beginning to the denouement of Min-su Jang's death. This is how this film begins: Young-su Jang walks on a railroad without listening to the sound of horn of the locomotive crashing into him due to his hearing impairment. Momentarily does his body disappear from the view, but the angle of the camera captures the scenery where his blood mingles with the rainwater flowing on the earth. Later, the focus goes back to the scene that has presumably happened before his death on a railroad, in which Young-su Jang is sexually abused by the teacher Bo-hyun Park. After this scene, Young-su Jang escapes from his house and meanders outside, perhaps towards his school, and on the way back to school he gets into the accident.

The physically disabled student's train accident, which is later turned out as one of the repetitive cases occurring to the deaf students in Ja-ae academy, allows the trope that the deaf students are in need of the protections and instructions of the teachers. According to this trope, this accident is depicted as an event that occurs as the result of Young-su Jang's violation of the school instructions. To the police inspector who comes to investigate the death of the student, the principal thus says, "I always told the students, "do not go out at night." But the kids never listen. I told them over and over not to go out at nights...What's use telling them, since they can't hear" (*Silenced*). Interestingly, this phrase of the 'need for protection' in this context, espoused by the criminals who hide their perverse sexual desire under the mask that allows the teachers to pretend to play a parental role for the disabled students, recalls Spivak's criticism on the case of *sati* (*suttee*), who is depicted as an "*object* of protection [from the tradition of self-immolation when her husband is dead]" by British army which practices the "dissimulation of patriarchal strategy" (Spivak, 94). Young-su Jang's death, which is seen by the local policeman as one of the usual accidents to the deaf children who cannot hear the locomotive sounds, therefore fails to attract more attention from the police who regards that reconstructing the circumstance of the "typical" incident is unnecessary. The consciousness of Young-su Jang falls into disappearance as the trope of 'need for protection' covers all that can be questioned from the incident.

In contrast to the younger brother's death, which is considered as an unremarkable mode of death to the deaf students who contravene the school rules that do not allow them to go outside at night, Min-su Jang's suicide at the same place poses a question about the death, as it cannot be ignored as a typical accident. Min-su Jang's unusual mode of death – to suicide himself on

a railroad to run into the train with the teacher Bo-hyun Park – suggests that only after his suicide can his sufferings emerge up to the consciousness of the contemporary Korean public. In other words, Min-su's dead body with the teacher's, which is stabbed with a knife that might preserve the fingerprint of Min-su, can stimulate the Korean public's attention to look beyond the previous trope that has previously covered the causality of his brother's death. As Rajeswari Sunder Rajan indicates that the suicide of subalterns is the result of their struggle to "convey a coded message via her [or his] body solely in order to remove any misunderstanding [about the death]" (Rajan, 125), the postmortem condition of Min-su Jang's body with its circumstantial details does struggle to reject and resist any "misunderstandings" in the attempts to reconstruct the dead student's motivation to die. However, despite Min-su's death which left a 'not-to-be-misunderstood' message on the site of the suicide, the camera of this film still puts its focus on the difficulty in revealing the case to Korean society, which is partly because of the indifference of the Korean public and their reluctance in facing the uncomfortable reality. At the end of the film in which the deaf people are demonstrating against Korean government in front of the Supreme Court as they cannot accept the judgment of the lenient punishment to the criminals, In-ho Gang is holding a portrait of Min-su Jang and repetitively cries out, "This boy cannot hear or speak. This child's name is Min-su" (*Silenced*). A Korean newspaper, The Hankyoreh, captures this scene from the film:

Gang In-ho "is seen crying out to the people as he is knocked by a police water cannon. "These are children who can't hear or speak," he yells.

These words come across as an indictment of popular indifference: our unwillingness to hear the things the children wished to communicate through sign language, or to join them in their expression of anger. (Song, "Real life case of child abuse explored in 'The Crucible'")

This ending shows the failure of the Korean public in paying attention to a disabled child whose case could not reach the courtroom. To the end of this film, Min-su Jang remains as a true subaltern: he is deprived of the chance to do a testimony for achieving self-representation in the official place, and his anger from the court's decision did not gain the Korean public's attention.

Implications to Future Research and Practice: Against Audism

This research to interpret a Korean movie of *Silenced* is conducted with a focus on the topics of the possibility (or impossibility) of representations of the deaf as subalterns in a courtroom. However, despite the fact that in the courtroom do the victims try to speak to and communicate with others about their long-lasting pain, this film further describes the reality of the contemporary Korean society, which acts the practice of audism in official places. According to Bauman, this term of "audism" can be defined as:

1. The notion that one is superior based on one's ability to hear or behave in the manner of who hears.
2. A system of advantage based on hearing ability. (Bauman, 245)

Bauman's explanation of "audism" shows that the term itself can include any system that works based on the discrimination against those who have hearing impairment. He continues to mention that "audism" occurs when institutions "have assumed authority over Deaf persons, claiming to act in their best interests while not allowing them to have a say in the matters that

concern them the most” (Bauman, 241). The first trial scene illustrated in *Silenced*, in which the necessity of providing translation from phonetic language used during the legal process to sign language for the deaf audiences is ignored, is a good example for this addressed by Bauman. In this film, after the deaf audience’s request with their sign language, “interpretation, please,” is rejected by the judge, Yu-jin Seo is ordered to get out of the courtroom when she advocates the deaf, saying “Deaf people here cannot hear you. This trial has to do with deaf people. Please bring in a sign language interpreter for them” (*Silenced*). This fictional situation in the movie is in fact based on the real event in Gwang-ju trial, as recorded in The New York Times on the date of October 17, 2011:

In a movie scene that highlights the disconnect between the authorities and the disabled, a judge slams his gavel and shouts “Silence!” to deaf viewers in the gallery using sign language. In the early days of the Gwang-ju trial, no sign-language translation was provided in the courtroom, Mr. Park said.

Im Eun-jeong, a prosecutor in the case, wrote in her diary at the time of a courtroom filled with “deaf children crying out silently to society with their sign language.” (Choe, NY Times)

This description reveals the reality in which the system of communication based on phonetic language consists of most of the legal or political procedures in contemporary Korea, which are still based on hearing-oriented system that has excluded the deaf. At the same time, the judge’s rejection to Yu-jin Seo’s appeal to provide an interpreter for the deaf audiences reflects the lack of precedents using sign language as official language that has the same status with phonetic language in the courtroom. In this sense, to enhance the conceptual understanding of sign language as official language equal to the position of spoken language is essential to approach this problematic issue. In other words, more ways to practice against ‘audism’ that discriminates those using sign language need to be further considered, and one way for beginning this approach is to explore the implications in the philosophy of language by Jacques Derrida as many scholars in the field of deaf studies have indicated. According to Derrida who rejects the phonocentrism, the previous idea – “the phonetic substance” is superior to pictorial language as it “presents itself as the non-exterior” to human beings (Derrida, 7) – is erroneous, because speech also belongs to the category of the signifier (as the exterior from the signified). As a part of the ‘exterior’ of the signified, “manual signs [i.e. sign language] and spoken words occupy equal footing as writings as signifiers” (Nelson, 120). Consideration of this basic idea in the philosophy of language, therefore, does not allow the exclusion of sign language in official places for the expediency of procedures. The idea that verbal language is superior to sign language is, at the same time, rebutted in this philosophy. Studies to narrow down the gap between the theoretical understanding of the position of sign language and the practice of audism in reality is, in this sense, need to be further pursued in the future.

CONCLUSION

Within the range of the cases of each individual – from the ineffective self-representation of the deaf student who is unable to use spoken language in the courtroom to the death of the underrepresented student who has nevertheless wished to talk to the indifference to the public, the topic in discussion shows that the basic idea of ‘subalternity’ can work within a domestic realm of contemporary Korea. This understanding of the disabled characters within the

category of subalterns implies that the pre-existing problems in intellectuals' abuse of their superiority and power to represent subalterns can still be repeated in Korea. Even though the deaf student's act for speaking for herself at the courtroom suggests the tenuous possibility of her mobility to leave her previous social position as a subaltern, this film makes the audiences disillusioned when they see the intellectuals' acts of bending the legal measures for their own advantage. At the same time, the death of subaltern children as a result of the judgment of the legal court depicts that it is impossible for the intellectuals in Korean society to reach the consciousness of the deaf as subalterns, but the elites continue to pretend to grasp the consciousness through their ability of concrete experience.

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