Can the Subaltern Really Speak?: Analyzing the Precarity of the Subaltern in Betty Shamieh's *The Machine* (2007)

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Abstract

The paper examines Betty Shamieh's one-act play *The Machine* (2007) in the light of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal work "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1994). The play presents five hybrid poets who are narrating their histories, but face being silenced by the shredding machine. The machine threatens their existence and censors them. The paper analyzes the hybrid identities in the play as precarious lives, as well as their subaltern status in the power structure. Themes like racism, hybridity, precarity, voice, and power are also traced and analyzed. Moreover, the paper highlights the importance of storytelling to narrate the counter-history and to cause change. Hence, the paper, through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's article on the subaltern, Judith Butler's work on precarity, Homi K. Bhabha's hybridity trace the journey of the hyphenated poets in the play. The paper also highlights the importance of storytelling as a technique used in the play. Finally, the paper traces the attempts of the subaltern's resistance, and it also questions if the subaltern can find a way to be recognizable and heard, and if the subaltern's endeavors for voicing themselves can ever be achievable.

Keywords: race, precarity, subaltern, voice, hybridity, Arab-American

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What is the Other? Who gets to subordinate the Other in the power dichotomy? If it is the white wild card of privilege, what makes a minority subjugate another minority? Who gets to distinguish between and also rank the different minorities based on their ethnicities? Which one gets to be on top of the chain of being and who gets to be the last one to be devoured and rather silenced? Ania Loomba, in her book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, once asked:

> To what extent did colonial power succeed in silencing the colonised? When we emphasise the destructive power of colonialism, do we necessarily position colonised people as victims, incapable of answering back? . . . To what extent are we products of dominant ideologies, and to what extent can we act against them? From where does rebellion arise? (231)

In this context, the colonized has lost agency. The man of color has been labeled as a subaltern, who can easily be lost and unrecognized. But, can a subaltern speak? Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942-) has long concluded that a subaltern cannot speak. Yet again, "From where does rebellion arise?" (231)

In Betty Shamieh's *The Machine* (2007), hyphenated identities narrate their subaltern lives, but they too silence a fellow subaltern, the Arab-American. They all have been silenced before, but now it is the Arab-American who gets unvoiced and censored. *The Machine* is a play about a minority-within-a minority, who finds itself at the end of the chain of being. It is a play about a poet who cannot narrate her story, because of her ethnicity and is thus faced by the dreadful shredding machine that censors her story and robs her of her voice. Will the subalterns speak this time, or will the shredding machine silence them forever? The paper aims to analyze the precarity of the subaltern in Betty Shamieh's *The Machine* (2007), using Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1994) to highlight themes of racism and power, hybridity, voice, and precarity. The paper endeavors to answer the following questions: 1) To what extent Spivak's work applies to Shamieh's *The Machine*, 2) how the precarity of the subaltern in the play takes place in the power dichotomy, 3) to what extent how hybrid subjects can be both precarious and rebellious using Homi K. Bhabha's work on hybridity, 4) and to what extent storytelling as a tool used in the play is crucial for resisting silencing.

1. Who is the Subaltern?

The term "subaltern" is deeply connected to postcolonial studies. It was first coined by the Italian Marxist political activist and thinker, Antonio Gramsci who "used [the word subaltern] as a codeword for any class of people (but especially peasants and workers) subject to the hegemony of another more powerful class" ("Subaltern"). The term then was used by postcolonial critics and emerged as a discipline of its own with the publishing of Ranajit Guha's book *Subaltern Studies* (1982). In his preface to the book, Guha defines subaltern as "a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office, or in any other way" (vii). Subordination, according to Guha, "cannot be understood except as one of the constitutive terms in a binary relationship of which the other is dominance, 'for subaltern groups are always subject to the

activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up'" (viii).

The seminal work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1994) expanded the term subaltern to talk about the subaltern as female and women in the shadow. For Spivak, the term subaltern is proposed "to encompass a range of different subject positions which are not predefined by dominant political discourses" (Morton 45). In her article, Spivak sees that the female subaltern is seen "both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant" ("Can the Subaltern" 82). Similarly, it works the same for any subaltern who in this case the ideological construction of hyphenated/colonized identity which keeps the White American dominant. Spivak's article focused on Third World women who are robbed of their identity and voice with the example of the Hindu widow who "ascends the pyre of the dead husband and immolates herself upon it," and this ritual is called the "widow sacrifice" (93); thus the existence of the Indian woman is linked to her man, and thus her existence is diminished in this gender dichotomy; yet this ritual was prohibited by the *enlightened* British man that appeared as the savior in opposition to the barbaric Indian known as the case of "White men saving brown women from brown men" (93). Amidst all of this, the voice of the Indian woman was not taken into consideration and thus diminished again and kept in silence in the power dichotomy of colonizer vs. colonized. Hence the conclusion, women as subaltern are "more deeply in the shadow" (82).

The theoretical framework of this paper will use three interconnected term in postcolonial discourse: subaltern, precarity, and hybridity. Firstly, the paper shall examine Spivak's notion in accordance with race, specifically the hybrid or hyphenated identities. In other words, the paper traces how the hyphenated character is a voiceless subaltern. Spivak's essay can be equally applicable to female as well as hybrid identities as subaltern entities doubly in the shadow. Indian women, in Spivak's example, are a minority-within-a minority; they came last in the chain of being (a White man on top of the pyramid of power, followed by the Indian male figure, then Indian women) and cannot speak. Hence, just as Spivak saw that "the subaltern has no history and cannot speak," the hybrid subaltern (just like Spivak's female subaltern) "is even more deeply in the shadow" ("Can the Subaltern" 82). Those who are more deeply in the shadow are the hyphenated identities who fall with no place in the power dichotomy; they are neither white nor colored; they are both; they are of mixed race and are unrecognizable, and thus unheard of.

Secondly, the subaltern in the already set power dichotomies faces precarity. Judith Butler, the American philosopher (1956-), is preoccupied with who is "eligible for recognition" (iv). A hybrid falls out of the binary system, hence becomes precarious. The precarious life "characterizes such lives who do not qualify as recognizable, readable, or grievable," as Judith Butler describes them (xii-xiii); moreover, they "are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection" (ii). Consequently, the precarious subaltern is invisible and destined to be unvoiced and unspoken of.

Thirdly, hybridity is crucial to trace the journey of the hyphenated characters of the play. The hybrid identities fall last in power structure and are also liminal, since a hybrid identity is formed "in between spaces" (Bhabha, *Location* 2); the hybrid identity is lost in ambivalence because he/she breaks away from fixed racial polarity. It is "neither the one nor the other" (25), and thus arises an issue of

belonging and being accepted. Homi K. Bhabha (1949-) commented on hybridity: "The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable" ("Third Space" 211). He believes that "the colonizer's cultural meanings are open to transformation by the colonized people. He states that there is an element of negotiation of cultural meaning when colonizer and colonized come together" (Tibile 73). Once these binaries are destabilized, "cultures can be understood to interact, transgress, and transform each other in a much more complex manner" (77). The theoretical framework used in this paper explains how the hybrid identity is a subaltern. The paper, therefore, intends to explain how hybrid subjects are precarious, no longer recognizable, and voiceless. Moreover, the paper investigates how the subaltern can resist and find his/her voice.

2. Betty Shamieh

Born in 1971, Betty Shamieh is a Palestinian-American playwright, actress, screenwriter and author. She has written over 15 plays, like her famous off-Broadway plays: *Roar* (2005), and *The Black Eyed* (2009), in addition to other plays like *Chocolate in Heat* (2001), *Again and Against* (2006), *The Alter-Ego* (2014), *Fit for a Queen* (2018), and *As Soon as Impossible* (2021), among many others. The play examined in this paper, *The Machine*, was directed by Marisa Tomei and presented at Duke Theater in 2007. Shamieh received numerous awards including Clifton Visiting Artist in Harvard (2004) and the NEA/TCG grant (2008); she was also awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship for Drama and Performance Art in 2016, as well as being a two-time recipient of the New York Foundation for the Arts Playwriting Fellowship ("Shamieh").

Shamieh in her plays is often preoccupied with showing the Arab identity and showcasing the trouble that comes with it in terms of power in the Western world. Shamieh explains: "I realised I could not write only despite my fear of being pigeonholed, but also about my fear of being pigeonholed and having my opportunities limited because of who I was" ("Introduction" 9). In her work, she "strives to emphasize Arab-American women's ability to articulate their opinions and to elucidate Arab and American social issues" (Borgan 2). After 9/11 in particular, there was the need to write about Arabs and their culture; Shamieh, thus, "felt even more compelled to write upon Palestinian gender and social issues. She questioned her identity as a Palestinian-American woman living in New York as well as the reactions she may receive from non-Arabs" (20). This can be seen in her different plays; however, in her one-act play, *The Machine* (2007), the message was conveyed concisely, especially with the direct message of the shredder vs. freedom of speech; in a few pages, Betty Shamieh in *The Machine* manages to address hybridity, Otherness, minority-within-a minority, and unvoicing the subaltern through censorship.

3. *The Machine*: The Precarious Subaltern

The Machine (2007) is a one-act play about several hybrid poets: Native-American, African-American, Japanese-American, Jewish-American and Arab-American. They all get the chance to narrate their subaltern, precarious lives as hybrid identities in a White-American context, except for the Arab-American poet who is silenced for most of the play. The play takes place in a library with the Narrator who reads excerpts from a book, and each poet comes to life on stage to narrate their part; each poet has a trauma that has happened in their lives due to their hybridity, and how they feel left out, despite their American side. They are all at a loss and feel confused. Yet, the Arab-American poet hardly speaks. Whenever it is her turn, the Narrator finds her part in the book torn, and the other poets look

down upon her. Eventually, the Narrator finds shredded pieces of the book and they are no other but those of the Arab-American poet; he gathers the torn pieces, and at last, she is assimilated and comes to life to speak as well of her calamity. Her trauma of course is not a personal incident but rather a universal issue that recurs till today. With the progress of the play, one finds out that the Narrator is no other but the author himself of this poetry anthology about hyphenated poets. This is the only copy of this book, only left in one library, so its existence is crucial for the existence of the histories of those poets/ethnic cultures/subalterns.

The anthology is described as "a touchy-feely kind of book, the kind that often gets on your nerves. The poets are grouped by race. It's clear someone spent a lot of time making sure minority voices, token voices, are included" (*Machine* 1); but when it comes to the Arab-American poet, her parts are shredded to pieces or torn. She is silenced by force every time she tries to speak:

> ARAB-AMERICAN POET. I am an Arab-American poet
>
> *Pause. All actors turn and look at the Arab-American poet, who lowers his or her head.*
>
> NARRATOR. For some reason. The rest of that page and that poem are ripped out. You turn to another pages. (2)

The reaction she[1] receives from non-Arabs is that of shaming. This highlights the fact that the Arab-American is a minority-within-a minority. She is not equal to the other hyphenated identities, though they all share a traumatic history with the tyrant white man. However, when it comes to the Arab-American poet, she faces further silencing and erasing from the cannon of literature:

> NARRATOR. You flip to the next page. You can barely make out the words.
>
> ARAB-AMERICAN POET. I am an Arab-American poet.
>
> *Pause. All actors turn and look at the Arab-American poet, who lowers his or her head.*
>
> NARRATOR. See, what's left of the page is smeared with a foul smelling substance. And most of the page is ripped out. You slam the book shut and you head for the door. You notice a pile of papers next to an appliance. It's a shredding machine and you realize that the hum you almost always hear while you're in the library must come from that. You wonder why you never noticed the machine before. (4)

The shredding machine is the true threat of being silenced forever. It is the destiny that the Arab-American side of the story has received. It is the ultimate punishment for being an Arab, a subaltern.

The situation of the Arab-American poet who is doubly in the shadow (because of being a hybrid and an Arab) suits the term "expressionless" that Shoshana Felman introduced; the expressionless

> are those whom violence has deprived of expression; those who, on the one hand, have been historically reduced to silence, and who, on the other hand, have been historically made faceless deprived of their human face . . . Those whom violence has paralyzed, effaced, or deadened, those whom violence has treated in their lives as though they were already dead, those who have been made (in life) without expression, without a voice

> and without a face have become - much like the dead- historically (and philosophically) expressionless. (13-14)

This obligatory silence of the Arab-American poet is due to being a hybrid, a minority-within-a minority, with the Arab label. She is being silenced twice: by her peers with a cold stare and by censorship through the shredder. According to Judith Butler, those of precarious lives are at high risk of violence, harassment, and aggression (iii). Nonetheless, this silence is telling. The audience can decipher this silence to what kind of double oppression the Arab-American poet faces. This intentional muteness speaks of the violence practiced against her, resulting in her precarity: the shredding. As much as it is traumatizing, her silence is threatening as well.

3.1.The Trauma of Being a Hybrid

Betty Shamieh once said: "My goal as an artist is to talk about humanity, and I think having the vantage point of being a first-generation American gives me the ability to see very clearly what is universal about all human beings" ("Writing a Script to Connect"). That is why she gives the stage in *The Machine* for all different hyphenated poets to come to live on stage. On one hand, it serves her purpose to show the racism that any hyphenated identity faces; and on the other hand, to show the discrimination the Arab-American poet struggles with; she is silenced, whereas others are not. The Native-American poet, for instance, narrates the ugly story of how Americans sent blankets infested with smallpox: "That would wipe out those Indians, we'd get their land,/and we wouldn't have to pull a trigger./And, if they ever figured it out, all we'd have to say is 'Oops!' " (*Machine* 1) Similarly, the African-American poet narrates how her father was lynched: "He was a black man./He knew that was a risk he faced./ So did I" (2) and how White women took pieces of his clothes as souvenirs after his death. Then, the Japanese-American poet describes how she faced clear racism during the Second World War; she recounts that her German roommate, who was born in Germany and spent his first 16 years of life there before moving to America, was allowed to stay and study and become an American; in contrast, the Japanese-American who was born and raised in California was sent to "an internment camp" when the war started (3). The Japanese-American poet is confused: "America was at war with both our countries./They could have rounded up the German-Americans if they wanted to./ But, for some reason, they didn't want to./ Does that make any sense to you?" (3) Finally, the Jewish-American poet speaks of her previous tragedy and how she came on a boat to America: "It was snuck out, full of people fleeing the Nazis" (3). But, the boat that carried her brother was sent back to where it came from, "knowing full well that the boat was full of my people who were likely to be killed in the places they were coming from,/ knowing full well my brother was on it because I wrote a letter to them" (3). Eventually, her brother died: "He jumped into the ocean. /They called it a suicide./But I don't think so./My brother was trying to swim back to me" (3).

These four hybrid identities know they are minorities, but among themselves, they share the same trauma; "psychic trauma results when the colonised subject realises that he can never attain the whiteness he has been taught to desire, or shed the blackness he has learnt to devalue," explains Ania Loomba (176). In this case, the hyphenated poets realize that their skin color has always made them a target; they are precarious lives because of their color and are thus exposed to injury, violence and death as Judith Butler has explained. The crimes of the white American mentioned in their side of the stories are traumatic: First, the history of eradication of the Native Americans is exemplified in the joke of sending infested

blankets with smallpox. Second, the normalizing of targeting Black people just because of their skin color, equating lynching to dying because of cancer, or getting hit by a bus (*Machine* 2); all are very expected risks to the African-American. Third, the German man was chosen to live in contrast to the Japanese, due to their obvious skin color as Caucasian features gain privilege here. Sophie's choice recurs with the fourth story of the Jewish-American, who gets to be saved and who does not? and on what basis? No answer. It is just that the more immigrants, the more infested the country will be. All four hybrid poets see themselves at the bottom of the chain of being in the power/race pyramid. They are indeed doubly marginalized because, in the Western power dichotomy, they do not fully pass as Americans, as if their ethnicity which constitutes an integral part of their identity and story/history will haunt them forever. Their obvious ethnic features and skin color dub them as precarious and subaltern. They are just numbers in a death toll, with no names. They do not deserve the propaganda in the media to speak of their calamity and the injustice they faced. The racism they encountered in their lives is not seen or described as racism; but rather labeled as "a sense of humor" (1), "a joke" (1), and tokens from the dead subaltern are mere "souvenirs" (3). The only reaction to these intentional massacres is "all [they'd] have to say is 'Oops!'" (1), a word (and a reaction) repeated twice in the play. Indeed, just like the Native-American poet said: "be careful what you laugh at./Not everything is funny" (1-2). Butler in an interview with Vikki Bell once noted, "I think that there is a culturally instituted melancholia because what that would mean is that there is a class of persons whom I could never love or for whom it would be unthinkable for me to love" (170). The hyphenated poets fall in this category, they are in Butler's words "the unthinkable, the unlovable, the ungrievable" (170). The precarious subaltern is powerless and undeserving mourning. Hence, being ridiculed by the dominant White man is normalized and expected. Butler has stated that in such power dichotomies, it is distinguished "who will be criminalized on the basis of public appearance; who will fail to be protected by the law, or, more specifically, the police, on the street, or in the job, or in the home. Who will be stigmatized . . .?" (ii) Of course, the answer is clear: the subaltern.

3.2. Unvoicing the Subaltern

As for the Arab-American poet, she is silenced throughout the play, till near the end. The Narrator reminds the audience that this part of the book is torn in pieces. He says: "So you walk over, compelled to see what is being shredded./You dig into the industrial sized garbage bag under the machine./And pull out paper and recognize the font./It is the Arab-American poet's torn pages, already in shreds" (*Machine* 4). This matches what Spivak has labeled as epistemic violence: "a good example of epistemic violence is when accounts of history leave out subalterns. When oppressed peoples are not allowed to speak for themselves, or to have their contributions recognized, they are in effect erased from their place in the world" (Riach 11). The Arab-American poet, unlike the other four hybrid poets, is literally censored, and thus erased. Being censored is equated to being unrecognized and thus killed. In fact, the Arab-American poet is not recognized by her fellow hybrid minorities. Every time she tries to speak, they give her a cold stare, and she ends up lowering her head (*Machine* 4). Again, she is a good example of the expressionless that Felman has spoken of.

Moreover, the Arab-American poet faces the ultimate oppression. She is not equal to her hyphenated peers; she is still deeply in the shadow, in Spivak's words. Hence, in the play, the Arab-American poet is eventually interrupted by the

entrance of the librarian. Consequently, the Narrator has to stop reading and stop the process of storytelling. The Narrator describes that sudden interruption: "You feel a tap on your shoulder. It's the librarian. Her lips are smiling, but her eyes are telling you something else" (*Machine* 6). The entrance of the librarian casts fear in the Narrator himself. He is the medium of those stories (and hyphenated poets) to come to life. If he is caught, it is the end of their existence. But from the perspective of the dominant White, the telling of these stories has to stop. "This is a restricted area," says the librarian (6), alluding to the gates of hell that are going to be wide open if the Arab-American poet continues speaking, and if the Narrator continues reading out loud to his audience. It is a restricted area that has no room for discussing why wars till today take place and what is happening in Gaza: "War is about pumping the water out of Gaza and selling it back to the people of Gaza at higher prices than it costs the settlers-" that is where the Arab-American poet was silenced for good by being interrupted by the librarian for one last time (6). Talking about Palestine and Gaza is prohibited; the Palestinian subaltern should again remain in the shadow.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has once argued: "When you cannot speak, it means that if speaking involves speaking and listening, this possibility of response, responsibility, does not exist in the subaltern's sphere" ("Interview with Gayatri" 46). This is now the question: is there a possibility of a response? Not all of these elements exist in the subaltern's sphere in *The Machine*; those hybrid poets may have had the chance to speak and be heard, but the possibility of a response from the listeners is questionable. Therefore, Betty Shamieh has started the play by giving a bit of hope with the first four hybrid poets (the Native-American, the African-American the Japanese-American, and the Jewish-American), that they are standing up for their culture, race and, history; they are speaking and narrating their stories, and the audience gets familiar with their history and starts to grieve their losses and mourn along with them. Nonetheless, Shamieh soon with the character of the Arab-American poet takes away that hope of being heard and finding a similar response. The Arab-American poet is being "shredded" and thus censored. She says:

> That would be one poet's
> experience of the world that
> she had no right to write
> about.
>
> Well, actually, she has the right to
> write about it all she wants.
>
> But what are the chances of it
> getting heard? (*Machine* 6)

Indeed, what are the chances of a subaltern altogether getting heard? Spivak has already concluded: "The subaltern cannot speak" ("Can the Subaltern" 104). For speaking should not be in the void but again has a response in return. An action of hearing along with changing unjust situations should ensue.

Every subaltern in the play knows that they are being ignored and silenced. That is why in *The Machine*, all five hybrid poets, including the Arab-American, finally share a verse to expose their suppression and oppression as subalterns. The Arab-American poet beautifully puts it -and finally, the other hyphenated poets share with her:

> As if
>
> ALL ACTORS. dismissing,
>
> discounting
>
> ignoring
>
> suppressing
>
> ARAB AMERICAN POET.
> silencing the other side's
> stories ever led to
> understanding. (*Machine* 6)

The action of dismissing and silencing those hybrid subalterns makes their lives not worth living. A very ironic comment to an actual dilemma. She makes sure to highlight that all those of ethnic backgrounds are being silenced, but that will never lead to a better future in this world.

The silencing process does not end here; the librarian who interrupts the play is the symbol of the imperialist who wants to subjugate the subaltern and silence them once and for all. This is the only copy of the book, in this one library; if that book is lost, the history of those subaltern lives will be lost too. The Narrator explains how this is the last copy ever to exist: "Because the only library that carries a copy of your book of poetry is this one. You're too discouraged to write another. The book didn't sell well, the stores won't stock it" (*Machine* 7). These lines show the racist reality of America where freedom of speech is just a not-so-much working slogan. The Narrator is afraid the librarian will know his name/his true identity: "If she knows who you are, she might shred the only copy of your book of poems in the one public place where people might have a chance to see it" (7). He too knows that his existence is linked to the existence of that book. If it is shredded, not only the hybrid poets but the author (the Narrator here) will be censored from existence too. The precarity of the colored subaltern is at its maximum in this scene. The absence of recognition and intelligibility is threatening and traumatizing. Failing to fit in the social norms of race and power makes the Narrator himself subject to be violence too. Moreover, the description of how the book did not sell well and was not well received shows how no one wants to hear these stories altogether, and no one wants to take action against those who committed crimes; again, the lack of responsibility that will not take place in the subaltern's sphere.

The intimidating librarian casts fear and dominance, symbolizing the colonizer in the power dichotomy. Therefore, the librarian exercises her power too: "She thinks that patrons believe everything they read, so she takes it upon herself to stop us from reading everything we can and making up our own minds" (*Machine* 7). The Narrator is scared to tell the librarian his name, and he thinks if he apologizes, his book -and thus his and the poets' existence - will continue to be, and thus be read and heard. It is the hope of being heard and voiced that lingers in the soul of the Narrator -or rather the author of this anthology of subaltern, hybrid poets: "You're hoping that one day, maybe long after you’re dead, that someone somewhere will find your book and say. /That poet had heart. That was a person whose voice should be heard" (7).

Since the librarian in this context is the symbol of the imperialist, the dominant one, or even the colonizer, the Narrator wishes to meet her outside of the library. Taking the librarian out of her original context, away from the place where "she decides the rules and enforces them" (*Machine* 7), opens a slight possibility for her to listen and thus understand. He sees her as intimidating since she is the one who censors and erases words using her ultimate weapon, the shredding machine. He wishes to see her "outside of her environment of that library . . . Perhaps she will be like a regular person. Perhaps she will listen" (7). But, of course, "she never leaves" (7). This symbolizes the dichotomy of East and West, of Subject and Other, of no meeting in a "middle" space and seeing each other as peers and tête-à-tête. This will never happen in the Narrator's world. Disrupting and subverting the colonial discourse is not that easy.

Betty Shamieh continues to rob us of the final hope of finding common ground and mutual understanding and ends the play with: "you wait all night, listening

to the sound of the machine,/Killing poets./ I mean, shredding paper all night long" (*Machine* 7). A very ironic -yet realistic- ending that the subaltern is the one who listens. S/He listens to the shredding of books, to the sound of guns killing Palestinians in Gaza, to bombastic statements on Western T.V. about peace; the subaltern listens to the void that never recalls the lives that matter, those whose lives got lost. Hence, the white man is far more superior, speaking on behalf of the subaltern. The sound of the shredding machine, the voice of the librarian, the dominant White is the one who speaks on behalf of the subaltern poets. It is the only voice that rules.

As Spivak has said, the subaltern cannot speak, for the Narrator in the play cannot be heard, but was rather forced to listen to the continuous shredding of the last copy of his book that did not sell well. The Narrator listens to the crushing of his hopes to be heard by someone, anyone, at any given day; the Narrator listens to the sound of shredding his own words and his history as a hyphenated identity himself as well as his poets whom he recounted in his anthology. This anthology of hybrid poets was his only chance to tell counter-history and stop history from repeating itself till today. But this, again, is a restricted area.

3.3. Breaking the Silence

Nevertheless, throughout the plays glimpses of breaking the silence were seen. Firstly, when the Narrator eventually gathers the shredded pieces, the Arab-American poet finally gets a chance to speak; she is finally upstaged and speaks like her peers. But when she speaks, she is apologetic, then she attacks and exposes crimes/traumas too. For instance, the Arab-American poet in *The Machine* attacks her Narrator for including her altogether in his book. She says:

> It's your fault for including me in this anthology.
>
> You should be more careful next time.
>
> You see, if you give an Arab-American the chance to say something,
>
> they might actually go ahead and try to say something,
>
> which is a risk most people aren't willing to take. (*Machine* 5)

She knows she cannot remain silent and will recount all crimes done against her and her race. She also attacks the other hybrid poets who were earlier shaming her with their cold stares: "Don't you realize when one minority is allowed to be targeted/that no minorities are safe?!" (4) Indeed, being left out at the bottom of the chain of being of the minorities does not mean that those above gain better privileges, are saved, or even recognized. In fact, they all still share the precarity of their lives and the fear of being unvoiced and unrecognized forever.

Secondly, the Arab-American poet exposes further calamities by being apologetic for crimes she has never committed. She feels sorry that one side of her caused 9/11, and the other side took revenge by invading Iraq. In both cases, her people (White and Arab) are killed. She laments:

> I'm sorry that thousands of
> innocent people died of
> September 11.
>
> I'm sorry that hundreds of
> thousands, let me repeat,
> hundreds of thousands of
> just as innocent Iraqis were
> killed by Americans for oil.
>
> And I'm sorry that I can't help but
> see a connection between
> those events. (*Machine* 5)

No one sees that her loss is doubled in this case due to her hybridity; nonetheless, since she is neither here nor there, she is unrecognizable by both sides. She then

continues to highlight the precarity of the Arabs by stating the crimes committed against Palestinian children dying of malnutrition and lack of medicine, "[b]ut it obviously doesn't [matter], since you rarely hear about it" (5). Western media is being ridiculed because they dismiss the subaltern, in this case, the Palestinian who is deeply in the shadow.

Thirdly, the Arab-American poet gets aggressive and attacks the political system: the colonizer. She, for instance, speaks of her frustration as an American citizen who unintentionally takes part in the crimes committed against the Third World/her Other side of identity. She exposes where the American tax money goes, actually the money of every other American (hyphenated or not), including herself and the other poets who just distanced themselves from her. She exclaims:

> And if I told you that I, as an Arab-American, pay tax money which doesn't go to health care or education or the homeless in this country
>
> but goes to a foreign government
>
> that drops 1 ton bombs into apartment complexes
>
> into the most crowded corner of our world,
>
> And all that foreign government has to say is (pause) oops!
>
> We don't really mean to kill Palestinian civilians,
>
> it's unfortunate about those little Arab children,
>
> but they just keep getting in the way.
>
> . . .
>
> My tax money at work. And yours. (*Machine* 5-6)

The pronoun "yours" is targeted at the audience who should become aware that they too have blood on their hands and take part in such crimes. The Arab-American poet warns everyone: "Don't be fooled into thinking war is about religion./War is always about economics" (6). They are being colonizers by their ignorance of the issue, silence, passivity, and by their lack of response.

Nonetheless, the Arab-American poet knows she is a precarious life; she knows that "Arab blood is cheap" (*Machine* 5), and she even screams: "You wish me dead/Or rather censored, which for a poet is almost the same" (5). She knows that her life, along with Palestinians, and other minorities, does not matter, as they are unheard of. She knows that Arab lives are not grievable as it is always their fault, as "they just keep getting in the way" (5). Therefore, whenever she tries to continue recounting her story, she has to be silenced again by the shredding machine.

3.4. Resistance through Ambivalence

Yet again, the recurring question, yes the Arab-American poet too is just another subaltern, but can the subaltern really speak? In this case, yes, the subaltern can. Though it has been established that a hybrid is a subaltern, their hybridity is their voice as well. Seeing the hyphenated poets in Homi Bhaba's terms, they are an example of disruption and resistance; their hybridity is all about ambivalence. Loomba explains, "an ambivalence that can be read not just as marking the trauma of the colonial subject but also characterising the workings of colonial authority as well as the dynamics of resistance" (177). Since the hybrid identities cannot replicate the "perfect" self, the difference creates a space for resistance. This ambivalence, through their hybridity, creates a space for agency and thus speaking, of finding a different voice, truly their own. These hybrid identities are formed "in between spaces" (Bhabha, *Location* 5). According to Homi Bhabha, "the colonial presence is

always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference" (Tibile 81). For example, when the Arab-American poet is being apologetic for both 9/11 and Iraq, she cannot assimilate to this or that. She is both; her difference makes rise for her new voice. In addition, with the hybrid poets criticism to the double-standards of the White-world, they are being disruptive of the power binary. Bhabha explains:

> The language of critique is effective not because it keeps forever separate the terms of the master and the slave . . ., but to the extent to which it overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of translation: a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, neither the one nor the other, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics. (*Location* 25)

In this respect, hybridity, which has dubbed the hyphenated poets as subaltern, is their means of finding new territories of recognition, of a voice, and of resistance. Facing hardships in solely assimilating with their white side, given the traumas that have been inflicted on them, gives rise to their uniqueness and ambivalence. Hence, subverting the subaltern status will ensue.

3.5. Storytelling to Defy Silencing

Another way of resisting silencing is through storytelling. Seeing the play in a different, wider context these hyphenated poets still get the chance to speak in the play; and when they speak, they expose several issues. They expose the double standards they have faced because of their ethnicity; they expose the brutality of the white man; they expose racism against those of color, those who are different, and those who will always be labeled as the Other; and all of that is done through storytelling. The existence of a narrator, a book, and characters testifying to real historic incidents are all Betty Shamieh's means to give voice to the subaltern. Coming to life, on stage, getting a chance to speak, is a power not only given to them by the Narrator/the author of the book himself, but also by Shamieh, the playwright of *The Machine.* The four hybrid poets have the chance to stand, face the powerful White-written history, to narrate their side of their story. They, in fact, re-write history by highlighting their precarity. Their testimonies are crucial to reconstruct their existence and to resist colonial discourse. They force the audience to grieve for them, to mourn their losses, and thus recognize their existence. The power of the oral storytelling here -in the form of free verse the play is written with- lies in the shape of oral documentation of counter-history. It is said that "[t]he main aim of oral form of communication was to pass on the facts or knowledge as soon as possible before it is forgotten" (Sharma 271). Therefore, the poets eradicate the lies in the form of upstaging the Other's side of the story. They counter the silence of the white media, by speaking out loud on stage. In these terms, the five hyphenated poets defy precarity by asserting their right as Americans, with all the power and privileges that should come with that side of their identities, as well as their right to speak of their Other ethnic side and have a chance to voice themselves. By narrating their stories they become recognizable (with being actually staged), readable (even literally speaking with the notion of being written in a book by the Narrator and a play by Betty Shamieh herself), and thus the audience gets the chance to recognize and hear them. History has just been rewritten at different levels.

It is noted that "[t]he connections between us and the 'subalterns' we seek to

recover exist also in the fact that past histories continue to inform the world we live in" (Loomba 244). The hyphenated poets in *The Machine* have educated the audience about their histories, their precarity, their trauma, and even of being intentionally silenced. By testifying to the oppression they have faced, they are resisting in their own way and breaking the subaltern silence. They refuse to continue being expressionless. Julia V. Emberley in her work on Indigenous storytelling writes:

> Today Indigenous writers and artists are using Indigenous storytelling practices to transform what was once "expressionless" into a language of experience that resists the reality of violence as an inevitable or essential determination in Indigenous life . . . Indigenous storytelling practices contribute to making a new form, perhaps a new genre, through which to gain knowledge about the specificity of violence that occurred in this context, knowledge that is reparative for writers, listeners, readers, and viewers. (40)

Here, one should expand this to all types of storytelling, especially of those of color. Since every subject of color is a subaltern, the storytelling by a subaltern will be his/her way to testify, share the trauma, and find agency.

Storytelling is thus a powerful tool employed by Shamieh in her play, *The Machine.* Giving the stage to the Narrator and his characters to recount important -yet traumatic- incidents in their lives is a forever-changing tool. The action of storytelling is crucial to the subaltern for resisting censorship:

> The very act of telling bonds our hearts together. Story shared from the heart is always understood to be a gift. As the one who offers this gift, you may never know whether or not it was accepted. But rest assured that the story will have made its way into many hearts and that the act of giving will have been appreciated. And one more enormous value of storytelling: the story event bonds the listening group. . . . And when we return from this moment of shared experience, the individuals and the group are changed just a little. (MacDonald xiii)

The existence of the Narrator in the play emphasizes the fact that there is a story that must be told. Reading these stories out loud to the audience changes the white-inscribed history that has for so long brainwashed the Western world. These stories cannot be unheard of now. Once the story is spoken, it cannot be erased. That is why the pages of the book with the four stories of these poets are not shredded, in opposition to that of the Arab-American poet. Hence, the Narrator's insistence to gather back the shredded pages, to keep the story alive.

In storytelling and in their testimonials of what they had to endure, the five hyphenated poets have found their voice, and thus start to speak up. They shift their precarity to one of readability. Thus, the world is now ready to sympathize a bit more with those ethnicities. Only recently, the white world started to acknowledge and recognize some of the crimes committed against some of those of color; hence, they get mourned and recognized. But that same white world is not yet ready to embrace the existence of the Arabs, and own their responsibility towards the ongoing crimes happening in the Arab world. This is exemplified in the intentional censorship of the Arab-American poet, and the ending of the play with the hum of the shredding machine to symbolize the continuity of that censorship. But again, Shamieh gives much space to the Arab-American poet to speak in every subject matter that hurts her when she got the chance; she has to be

heard despite all. Even with the moments when the Arab-American poet was intentionally silenced, her silence speaks louder than words. The silencing of the poet and the Narrator is so loud to the extent that it is telling. This silence carries meaning for the listener, in this case, the audience; they just have to work it out themselves.

However, when one looks at the whole picture, one cannot help but notice the trials of speaking and being heard do not end here with the fall of the curtains of this play. Despite the shredding of the book that is heard off-stage, the duality lies in the fact that it is Betty Shamieh's play, *The Machine*, that lives and gets heard. It outlives the librarian and the shredding machine. It also outlives the bookstores that did not re-stock the book. It surpasses the Narrator himself; the play lives and is not shredded, not even a single part of it. The play is staged and gets received by the audience; it is out there in the world, in a moment that cannot be unwound. Once a story is told, it cannot be untold. There might be no other copy of the anthology, but having the stories being told has forever changed history: "The story can cease to exist if it is forgotten; because there were no backup copies, the people's memories were the keepers of the scripts" (Sharma 279). Now the audience are held as the "keepers of the scripts;" not everyone can easily erase or forget what they have heard.

3.6. The Keepers of the Scripts

Shamieh once said, "I do believe racism exists, but I also believe one can choose to see it as a challenge that can be overcome" ("Betty Shamieh"). She, as an Arab-American, a hybrid identity herself, makes sure that she speaks through her play, she - as usual- speaks of the Palestinian case as well as the crimes committed against others (consequently the presence of other minorities and ethnicities). She exposes Western media crimes as well as those of Arab and American leaders. Does this mean she cannot speak? If conversing should be about speaking and listening, and thus a verbal transaction between two different sides takes place, is not writing her play and staging it a chance for being heard? It is a continuous effort to change the strict dichotomy of power and design new spaces for other minorities to rise and break that dichotomy. Ania Loomba once commented: "We are interested in recovering subaltern voices because we are invested in changing contemporary power relations" (243). Writing the play, performing it, and staging the Narrator vs. the shredding machine, is an act of insurgence and resistance. Giving a voice to a minority means there is a possibility of taking action to cause change, the very essence of storytelling:

> The inclusion of the physical co-presence of an audience clearly distinguishes the work of a storyteller from that of a writer. It is a communal, rather than solitary art. The act of storytelling can only occur when a story, storyteller and audience come together. The relationship between the storyteller and the audience is certainly reaffirmed and renewed as call and response. (Sharma 274)

Moreover, the dark end of the play, that depressing hum of the shredding machine will trigger the audience/reader of the play to get out of the colonialist discourse and act differently, for now their knowledge is surely different, even if it was just a little bit.

In addition, this action of storytelling is therapeutic. Storytelling can heal both the storyteller him/herself and the audience too. A listener has to be part of that transaction: "Because in a process of healing, the first and most important step is disclosure" (Emberley 42). Sharing personal experiences can be relatable to the listener and thus a bond is forever created. Thus arises the hope of change:

> One of the most effective uses of storytelling is that of healing. A healing story is one that addresses a particular emotional or spiritual need of the audience. People suffering psychological scars from deep personal loss or trauma can sometimes be reached through stories . . . This very democratic art form has helped societies strengthen and form cultural bonds and has helped people feel closer and more connected to each other for generations. (Sharma 278)

At one level, this healing process happens when all hybrid poets speak out and find that they all share the same ordeals and the same status as subaltern. Hence, for example, they manage to bond at the end and talk together in verse to highlight their trauma/oppression. At another level, the healing process happens among the listeners (the audience in this case) who can either relate, connect, and/or understand what they have just heard. They witnessed trauma being exposed, and by listening and understanding they help in the healing process of the speakers/storytellers in the play. They might as well get healed if they have shared the same history of oppression. Someone in the audience might feel being heard and voiced through the upstaged stories. A member of the audience might finally get out of the shadow if that is his/her story too. Moreover, by understanding and recognizing, a stronger bond will be created, with the hope of strengthening the community itself.

The Narrator's anthology might end up being shredded, but the audience cannot easily erase the memory. It is the role of "the participatory listener who must enter into the process of meaning making" (Emberley 53). The audience are a witness to what they have heard throughout the play. Shamieh utilizes this through the use of direct pronouns as well as the direct address to the audience; in addition, she uses the testimonies told to the audience, all of these make the audience a participatory listener. It steers their emotions, creating empathy; they are now accountable too. Hopefully, the audience goes out of the theater forever changed.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, the paper has examined Betty Shamieh's *The Machine* (2007) in the light of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal work, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1994). The study has analyzed the subaltern status in the play, showcasing them as precarious lives. Through storytelling, the characters of the play have highlighted their precarity, the racism they face, and how they are they are Othered due to their ethnic backgrounds as well as their hybridity. Though, just like Spivak, it is concluded that the subaltern cannot speak in the play, the paper has proved that through storytelling and art (playwriting and theatre specifically in this case) a subaltern can eventually speak, find a medium to voice themselves and force being heard. The shredding machine can devour paper, but it cannot erase the oral tradition of storytelling nor the traumatic testimonies being told. It can censor words, but cannot erase memories. Storytelling has proved to be therapeutic for the characters in the play, but also for the listeners. But most importantly, storytelling did give a voice and thus agency to the subaltern. Hence, the poetic language that Shamieh uses in *The Machine* to overcome the dangerous buzz of the shredding, and to be forever carved into the memories of the audience. Shamieh uses her language to the maximum in the shape of testimonies, storytelling, a poetic language, and a telling silence, all to be her weapons to find a voice for every subaltern upstaged.

Moreover, the paper has highlighted that hybridity can cause the subject to be a subaltern, and have a precarious life, but also it can be a medium of creating ambivalence and finding a new

space of agency. Hence a voice can be found, but it is a long journey of recognition. The precarity of the subaltern hyphenated poets has been traced in this paper, but the hope in a different voice to be found arises. Therefore, one may conclude that the subaltern might speak, and the audience are now the keepers of memory and have a participatory role. They have a responsibility, and thus a response is being awaited for.

Lastly, one cannot but help find similarities between Betty Shamieh's journey as a playwright and her play *The Machine.* With both hyphenated identities, Shamieh resembles her protagonist, the Narrator, since both write about hyphenated characters. Shamieh in most of her plays is often consumed with the topics of otherness because of race, color, and hybridity in particular. This is similar to the anthology of hyphenated poets written by the Narrator. In addition, Shamieh often presents herself as a world citizen who is not only concerned with her Arab origin and Palestinian roots, and this is showcased in presenting other hybrid characters as in the Asian, Black, Jewish, and Native American poets (all those of color face the same trauma and discrimination). Being Arab-American herself, racism against Arabs is a common topic in most of Shamieh's plays (as in *Roar*, *Black Eyed*, *Chocolate in Heat*, among many others); similarly, *The Machine* presents that side of Arab history and how it is perceived and received in the American world, but most importantly, how it is often censored and silenced. Showing how she cannot escape talking about racism against Arabs in particular for nothing has changed in the world, Shamieh explores the journey of the Arab-American poet as a minority-within-a minority; the only one who gets her story shredded.

In this respect, does *The Machine* represent Betty Shamieh's way of defying being unvoiced and censored as an Arab-American writer? The paper has argued that the subaltern can actually speak and be heard, thus remembered. The subaltern in the play has spoken of the political crimes committed against them; Shamieh herself as a subaltern (being hybrid and of Arab origins; i.e. deeply in the shadow too) has seized the chance by using her talent to speak out loud on behalf of all precarious lives because of their color and hybridity; but whether the subaltern can speak or not is not the real question that should be posed here; the real question is: will speaking matter? Will there be a response, hence a responsibility towards what has been spoken of? The remaining ordeal is that if any change will ensue: a change in social norms and power structure. A call for change in the world towards acceptance, inclusion, and ending discrimination. A call for ending precarity on the basis of equality and thus recognition, all alike. It is thus a call from Betty Shamieh of no massive response *yet*. It awaits the memory keepers and the participatory listener: the audience.

However, the rebellion has already started; a first step towards change is already there; presenting art in itself is an act of responsibility and insurgence. Writing, performing and even attending the play is the first act of response and adopting a different position in life. Change will ensue, even if it takes a bit of time. Betty Shamieh is thus applauded for her courage in still talking/writing about these subject matters, of finding her own voice within the colonial discourse and literary canon; and by being disruptive using the stage, Betty Shamieh, through *The Machine*, lets the subaltern speak.

Notes

[1] Though Shamieh's play left the gender of all characters open for change, the researcher refers to the Arab-American poet with female pronouns in reference to the female performer who enacted this role, to avoid confusion and ambiguity in the paper. However, gender does not matter in the issue, for the universality of the topic is the one that matters.

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