



## Sociological Perspective on Women in “The Lives of Others”

Vida Rahiminezhad \*

<sup>a</sup> Assistant Professor of Research Institute for Education, Iran

### Keywords:

women

Self

Other

gendered subaltern

marginalization

### Abstract

**Introduction:** The Lives of Others won 2006 Academy Award for best foreign language film. This movie exposes the unlimited potential of human beings; it is a multidimensional movie, which concludes tragedy, political oppression, intrigue, and betrayal. This paper aims to examine lives of women in the light of sociological outlook of gendered subaltern and also the concept of Self and Other in “The Lives of Others”.

**Materials and Method:** The methodology of this study is qualitative library-based. It portrays the life of people in East Berlin in 1984, five years before the fall of Berlin Wall.

**Results:** It is found that this movie is successful in portraying the male citizens' exploitation, and hardship of their activist's task, but it marginalizes women and portrays them as those of ignorant gendered subalterns who do not have any voice of themselves and do not know how to use the language which is the tool for maintaining Otherness and protecting the Self.

**Conclusion:** Women are portrayed as others since they are capable of betrayal under pressure and they are deviant as the result of being the only person in the movie to be addicted to drag. On the whole they are those who are not capable of being among decision makers even those men decision makers who are considered as others before Stasi.

## 1. Introduction

*The Lives of Others* starts in East Berlin in 1984, five years before the fall of Berlin Wall and Takes us to 1991, in what is now the reunited Germany. The Lives of Others traces the gradual disillusionment of Captain Gerd Wiesler, a highly skilled officer works for the Stasi. It tries to show the life of those who are considered as *Self* and those of *Others* and those who are considered as *gendered subaltern* in East Germany. In this movie activists are shown their Self through forcing women to be others.

This article aims at analyzing women's condition with two perspectives of "Otherness" and "gendered subaltern". To do so, there is a need to study Simone De Beauvoir's thought regarding the concept of "Otherness" and Spivak's with regard to the concept "Gendered subaltern".

## 2. Method

This is a qualitative library-based study. This article has tried to analyze "The Lives of Others" with the outlook of feminism. In order to find the concepts of Self, Other, marginalization, and gendered subaltern all parts of the movie has examined and relevant scenes have taken under consideration in order to apply selected feminist concepts on them.

### *What is Stasi?*

What is this Stasi? About forty years the Ministry for State Security (MfS--Ministerium für Staatssicherheit,), under orders from the SED—the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED - Sozialistische (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands), collected information about millions of persons. Most of them were citizens of the GDR (German Democratic Republic), but there were information about West Germans or foreigners, too. Millions of persons were registered in the MfS files; Kilometers of file material form the Stasi bequest. At the end of the SED regime, the MfS payroll listed about 97000 full-time employees (Kritz & Mandela, 1995).

The Stasi's aim was to monitor "politically incorrect behavior among all citizens of East Germany. At its peak the Stasi monitored roughly one third of the East German population, employing

over 90,000 officers and hundreds of thousands of informants.

The rule of MfS was based on Marxist-Leninism and molded by class warfare. The Socialist Unity Party had expectations from "its people," which it laid down in the form of programs, plans, directives and clear restrictions, which resulted, for example, in political criminal law. "The conceptual eradication of human individuality allowed the Ministry for State Security (Ministerium für Staatssicherheit, MfS) to categorize the "others," whom it interrogated and spied on, in order to transform them into objects of its hatred. The abbreviation of "Stasi" was the SED "dictatorship's secret method of repression".

Since 1950, the Stasi aim was to serve as a "loyal and effective partner" of the government, and was extremely efficient in penetrating the lives of citizens not only in East Germany, but also in West Germany and abroad. About one in fifty citizens served the Stasi in some capacity, one of the highest penetrations of a society by any intelligence gathering organization.

If someone arrested it was seen as proof that one was an enemy or part of a hostile, negative "element." The Stasi found out its party program as an active and threatening involvement in the "lives of others," in order to change them radically when they did not follow the party's expectations any more.

One typical "offense against the system," which was punishable by two years of imprisonment, was "illegal border crossing". Just planning and trying to "flee the republic" was punishable. The fortification of the inner-German borders and the Berlin Wall gave rise to escape agents from the West and whoever involved in taking someone "abroad" was threatened with a sentence of up to eight years.

After the dissolution of the Stasi it was exposed that often times friends, colleagues, husbands, wives and other family members were routinely filing reports on one another, showing the Stasi's grip over the populace (Press booklet, 2009).

The MfS was not simply and "ordinary" secret service: it stepped in the lives of countless numbers of persons. The MfS influenced professional success or failure, systematically exploited human weaknesses, and stopped at nothing, not even at the

use of the most intimate information. Medical confidentiality was not considered sacred to the Stasi. It had its own departments of investigations and its special prisons.

The peaceful revolution in the autumn of 1989 brought an end to the activities of SED surveillance. Citizen's committees occupied the local and regional MfS offices. Under bizarre conditions, sometimes involving "cloak and dagger" operations, the destruction of files and further destruction of card files could be hindered.

The unsorted written material from the numerous MfS departments was provisionally secured in bags and bundles in the different district administrative offices, which by now were under the control of the citizen's committee.

Under continually increasing pressure from citizens, GDR minister president Modrow appeared before the Volkskammer (GDR Parliament) on 12 January 1990 announced the decision to dissolve without replacement the State Security Service of GDR. "In the period of time that followed East German Citizens—rights activities and member of the GDR Volkskammer especial treatment for the Stasi records: affected individuals would have the possibility of finding out what information the MfS had collected about them." After German Unification, the Federal Government appointed Pastor Joachim Gauck, who had already been appointed by the democratically—elected Volkshammre, to the position of Special Commissioner for the Stasi records. The then—existing legal status, however, allowed only a very limited use of files (Kritz & Mandela, 1995). To date, approximately 1.5 million individuals had done so (Press booklet, 2009).

#### *Men's Condition in the Lives of Others*

The movie shows how artists oppose the regime by any means—writing articles, drama, and also through actors' play in theater hall. Georg Dreyman is a famous playwright, who tries to shed light on the way government oppresses people in the East Germany. The whole movie was at the service of men like Dreyman and his colleagues to show how men object the government and make people aware

of what it does. Men are mostly activist writer and director, officers, or those of belong to high position like cultural minister. Those whose actions are effective in some way—putting under pressure the government or the activist's lives. The director shows men as those who could be a part of decision makers regardless of their positions—against government or with it.

#### *Women's condition in the Lives of Others*

Taking into consideration all parts of the movie and examining women's status, it was understood that women in this movie are:

- 1- Silent students
- 2- Silent wife
- 3- Actresses as workers in the play "The Lives of Others" in the movie
- 4- Silent neighbor who did not inform Dreyman the intrusion of Sati government in his home
- 5- Guests
- 6- Prostitute

The above women are either listening to their lecturer silently in their spy training class, peeping Stasi officers who intrude Dreyman's home through the door sight silently, obeying Stasi's order without any objections, those of being at the party drinking, smoking, making sex.

No one of these women has any role among those of decision makers. They are there to play roles at the cost of being considered as *Others* to strengthen the position of men in a men-dominated society.

#### *Otherness*

The move portrays the concept of *Self* and *Others* conspicuously. The concept of Otherness is rooted in the philosophies of Hegel's description of the psyche as a "self alienated sprit". Hegel talks about consciousness in a divided arena—the observing ego and the observed ego. Sartre's aspiration to Hegel divides Being into two parts: Being-in-itself and Being-for-itself (Tong, 1989 p. 196). *Being-in-Itself* is related to material existence shared with animals, vegetables, and minerals. In contrast *Being-for-Itself* relates to conscious existence and refers to all capacities that one human being shares with other human beings, the common things among all human

beings. Sartre adds one more form of *Being* to those: *Being-for-others*. Sartre often describes *Being-for-others* negatively as it is “a perpetual conflict as each for-itself seeks to recover its own *being* by directly or indirectly making an object out of the *other*” (Tong, 1989 p.197).

As in *The Lives of Others* shows it is for the case of the *Being-for-others* that DDR put people under pressure. This pressure was such that many commit suicide. In his article, Dreyman, the protagonist, clearly describes the horrible situation of life under such a government. He writes in his article:

"Ever was a regime similar to socialism in the history. Agents watch everything on the street, just like mad dogs. On average, a man buys 2.3 pairs of shoes each year, reads 3.2 books and there are 6743 students graduating with straight as. But there is one static that goes unpublished, which might have been calculated into the natural deaths. I you call the National Security Agency and ask them, "How many people kill themselves for being suspected as related to the Western Germany, they won't tell you a word, and they'll write down you name carefully. That is all for the country's safety and well being. German Democratic Republic has stopped counting the number of suicides since 1977. They were those who lived for the best. Because they could not stand their lives like that, without bleeding, without passion, death was all they choose. Death was their only hope. Since 9 years ago when we stopped to count suicides, only one country in Europe has more suicide rate than ours and that is Hungry."

Each *Being-for-Itself* defines itself as a subject by considering other being as object, as other. The process of self-definition is the process of getting power over other beings. Sartre says:

While I attempt to free myself from the hold of the other, the other is trying to free himself from mine, while I seek to enslave the other; the other seeks to enslave me... Descriptions of concrete behaviour must be seen within the perspective of conflict (Sartre, 1956).

### *Otherness of Women*

At the time of portraying women's status in German Democratic Republic (GDR) Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, the director, could darken the face of powerful politicians in GDR. Having considered as others in their own special community and at the same time not considering as self among her own community, women double-oppressed. Christa Maria, the main actress, not even molested and raped by Cultural Minister of GDR, but also she was not considered as self at the time Dreyden and his friends hesitated to trust her in order to let her know their secret. She was portrayed as a weak individual that with the excuse of her safety, better not to let her know anything about male opposition activities; the director at the same time portrays Christa Maria as a politically ignorant one who was treated as an object and *Other* from both points of view—those officials of GDR and activists as well.

It is necessary to consider a model of the cultural situation of women from both sides—"How they are perceived by the dominant group and how they perceive themselves and others" (Showalter, 1986 p. 259). Taking into consideration Showalter's point of view, one reach to the point that Christ Maria is perceived as an object at the time of taking sexual advantage from her and as an distrustful person at the time Dreyden and his friends prefer not to let her anything about their activities and at the time she declared that she does not want to know anything about their oppositions, since Dreyden's friend do not like her to know, she portrays how she perceive herself; she looked at herself as being "Other" before them.

Having taken into consideration the status of women in *The Lives of Others*, one can make three categories of women—an actress who betrays her activist boyfriend, a housewife who never spoke up, an officer, and a prostitute; and men are categorized in to politicians, secret agents, and activists. Comparing these categories, one can judge that men were prorated as those of decision makers and those who stand against decision makers, in other words the presence of men were considered as effective individuals, or it might be said that the strength of

men are proved at the cost of the weakening women by the director.

With regard to the concept "betray", women's otherness is intensified more. The movie starts with the scene that a man is interrogated and after hours of investigation, he opened up and told the Stasi officer whatever they want to know, in comparison Christa Maria easily betrays her husband without going under any pressure.

Christa Maria is portrayed as a deviant woman. Norm in the movie is to act as Stasi officers or male activists; and those who do not follow either this or that are considered as deviants. Through the whole movie, the only one who is addicted and uses drag is just a woman, called Christa Maria.

### *Gendered subaltern*

The term "Subaltern" is taken from Anotnio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (1971), where "subaltern" stands for the proletariat. The Subaltern Studies Collective, a group of revisionary historians in South Asian studies, has expanded it to include all oppressed groups such as the peasantry, millworkers, women, and tribal people. Subaltern history is thus "history from below," giving voice to those who have been written out of history. It begins as a challenge to the established historiography of Indian nationalism wherein official and elitist accounts have no place for the struggles of the poor and the outcast (Hawley, 2001). Noting this point gives us the opportunity to consider Christa Maria as subaltern, though she is not an Asian, the term subalternity is capable of extending to oppressed group such as women.

Subaltern Studies considers the bottom layer of society, not necessarily put together by capital logic alone. This is its theoretical difference from Marxism. The theoretical relationship of Marxism to feminism is that the subaltern is gendered, and therefore, needs to be studied with the help of feminist theory (Spivak, 2000).

Partha Chatterjee says that Gramsci understood his own project as flexible when it came to Indian colonial context. For the historians of South Asia who took the word from Gramsci, 'subaltern' came to mean persons and groups cut off from upward—

and, in a sense, 'outward'-social mobility (Spivak-2000). Though the concept of subalternity is supposed to use in South Asian context, but some of its characteristics can explain women's condition in GDR, since she was cut off from upward and expendable to Western countries such as GDR. Christa Maria the actress cut off from upward and outward social mobility as well. As Spivak says "Subalternity" is a position without identity, Christa Maria has no identity, nor *Self*, nor even *Other*. And that is why social lines of mobility do not permit the formation of a recognizable basis of action (Spivak, 2005).

At the time Spivak asks whether the subaltern can speak. "Could it have its insurgency recognized by the official historians? Even when, strictly speaking, they had burst the outlines of subalternity. This last is important" (Spivak, 2005). Gayatri Spivak in her essay (1985) interrogates the academic effort to give a voice to the gendered subaltern, by drawing attention to how elites reproduce the construction of the subaltern. Spivak asks, when we insist that the subaltern speak? What is at risk? If the subaltern cannot speak, Butler comments (2000), it is not because she would not "express her desires, form political alliances or make culturally and politically significant effects", but because her agency remains illegible in the context of European epistemic regimes, the deep-rooted exclusions they are based upon, and how they conceptualize agency (cited in Buikema & Tuin, 2009).

Gayatri Spivak is enough brave to be called a feminist. In her first critical engagements with the historical writing of the subaltern studies group, she persisted that the inclusion of the gendered subaltern in the work of the project would not simply be a neat politically correct addition, but was itself important to the stated ethical purpose of the project. Dipesh Chakrabarty summarizes that ethical ambition as an aim "to be possessed of openness so radical that I can only express it in Heideggerian terms: the capacity to hear radical that which one does not already understand (Cornell, 2010).

There is the need of unlimited receptivity to account for gender-so as to understand the fact that there is not a single subject whose as yet illegible speech can be listened to. In her early interventions

into the subaltern studies project, Spivak strongly argues that involvement with the gendered subaltern will necessarily do for the category of the subaltern what ‘woman’ does to humanity, that is, mark the asymmetries attendant upon any representation of it as a concept. In her essay on human rights the subaltern, even when it is represented as a ceaselessly shifting collectivity, still is insufficient before the asymmetries that Spivak shows us “to be attendant even upon representations that seek fidelity to this subaltern’s ungraspability within radical theories attempting to bring it into history”. Spivak’s point is that any representation of the subaltern, even one that attempts to rewrite history from the perspective of subaltern as the subject of her own history, will make us to think about the philosophical questions of cognition and representation. The seemingly pessimistic conclusion of her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” that the subaltern cannot speak, can also be read through Spivak’s radical antipositivism, which persists that there is no existing representational space in which the gendered subaltern can make itself heard; therefore, the noting of the failure of representation itself becomes a form of listening (Cornell, 2010).

The subaltern is always “to come,” as we struggle to achieve fidelity to the radical openness to which Heidegger calls us. Eventually, for Heidegger, this openness involves us in patience, for we can only wait and be open to what might be the advent of a new start. This advent cannot be predicated or calculated. It will arise beyond what Heidegger has called the mathematical, the scientization of all knowledge—including, we might add, the knowledge of Marxist reformists. But for Spivak our responsibility needs to go beyond patience. For, positioned as we are in a thoroughly unjust world, we are necessarily called by the other to act; we cannot escape the fact that we are always already involved in representational systems that place us in both an asymmetrical and a hierarchical relationship to the poorest women in the South (Cornell, 2010).

If subalternity is taken in the general sense, its lack of access to mobility perhaps is a version of singularity. Generalization cannot be considered for subalternity according to hegemonic logic. That is

why it is called subaltern. But, it is a category and therefore repeatable. Since the general sense is always involved in difficulties, any differentiations between subalternity and the popular must thus concern itself with singular cases (Hartman & Bunick, 1986).

*The muted*

Edwin Ardener’s model (as it is shown below) has several connections to the issues of current feminist literary theory, such as perception, silence, and silencing (Showalter, 1986 p.263). These issues are the base for discussions of women’s participation in literary culture. In Ardener’s view the term *muted* links to both language and power. *Muted* and dominant groups support the beliefs of social reality unconsciously, but the ones who take control of the structures in which consciousness can be understood are the dominant groups. Hence, the muted groups have to mediate their beliefs through the allowable forms of dominant structures. In other words if women speak, they have to speak through the language of the dominant order.

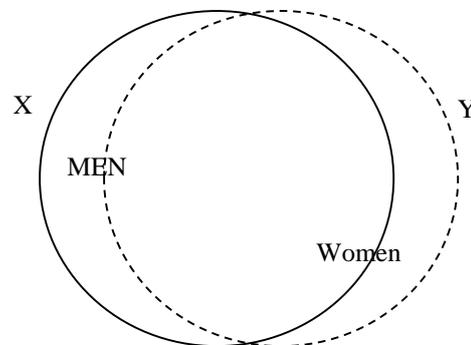


Figure1. Edwin Ardener’s Model

**3. Results**

Women in this movie are shown as silent students, silent wife, workers, actresses, silent neighbor, guests, and prostitute. It is shown that there was no space for Christa Maria, the actress, to represent herself in order to become heard. It is as if since she did not found any space. She had kept herself apart from any effort to make herself to be heard. Christa Maria was suppressed and humiliated through:

Molestation, at the time cultural minister molests

secretly her while he is at the presence of Dreyman and other guys talking about politics,

Rape, at the time Christa Maria is on her way back home; cultural minister follows her and continuously orders her to get in the car, and rapes her in the car at the presence of his driver

Christa Maria faces all these, does not opened up. Edwin Ardener using the concept of Muted and dominant groups explains the reason of why Christa Maria has kept silence.

Christa Maria a subaltern which could not mobilize as the result of singularity; a case that is repeatable not as an example of the universal but as an instance of a collection of repetitions as Deleuze (1990) says.

Christa Maria is a gendered subaltern, a singular woman, who attempts to send a message through her body as the result of not speaking up or even if spoke up, she is not being heard. Her suicide was unrecognizable resistance or unrecognizable refusal of victimize by reproductive hetreonomality.

#### 4. Discussion

Though the director of *The Lives of Others* is successful to portray the hardship life of citizens in German Democratic Republic in 80s before the fall of Berlin Wall but he represents women as those of gendered subaltern who are ignorant, cannot speak out and if she dared to speak out she could not be heard and that is why she sent her message of refusal of victimization through her silent suicide. It is shown that women are others since they are capable of betrayal under pressure and they are deviant as the result of being the only person in the movie to be addicted to drag. On the whole they are those who are not capable of being among decision makers even those men decision makers who are considered as others before Stasi.

#### References

- Buikema, R., & Tuin, I. A. (2009). *Doing Gender in Media, Art and Culture*. UK: Taylor and Francis.
- Cornell, D. (2010). *The Ethical Affirmation of Human Rights: Gayatri Spivak Intervention. Reflections on the History of An Idea: Can the Subaltern Speak*. Edited by Rosalind C. Morris. USA: Colombia University Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1990). *The Logic of Sense, Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (trans), Constantin V. Boundas, ed.* New York: Columbia University Press.

- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. New York, International Publishers.
- Hartman, G. H., & Bunick, S. (1986). *Shibboleth: For Paul Celan', Midrash and Literature*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Hawley, J. Ch. (2001). *Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Studies*. Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Kritz, N. J., Mandela, N. (1995). *Traditional Justice*. Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press.
- Press booklet (2009). "*THE LIVES OF THE OTHERS*," Retrieved from <http://www.sonyclassics.com/thelivesofothers/externalLoads/TheLivesofOthers.pdf>.
- Sartre, J. P. (1956). *Being and Nothingness*. New York: Hazel E. Barnes.
- Showalter, E. (1986). *Feminist Criticism in wilderness. The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*. United States and Canada: VIRAGO PRESS.
- Spivak, G. Ch. (2000). *The New Subaltern: A Silent Interview. Mapping Subaltern: Studies and the Postcolonial*. London and New York: Verso.
- Spivak, G. Ch. (2005). Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular. *Postcolonial studies*, 8(4), 475-486.
- Tong, R. (1989). *Feminist Thought*. United States of America: West view Press.