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GAYATRI SPIVAK AND THE SUBALTERN: THE IRRETRIEVABLE SILENCED VOICE AND THE FUNCTION OF THE POSTCOLONIAL INTELLECTUAL

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Abstract

Gayatri Spivak remains undoubtedly a prominent postcolonial theorist, who has attained international fame and eminence. In fact, her writings and fields of interest are diverse, starting from her engagement with the Marxist critique of capitalism, through her critique of imperialism and colonial discourse, to her feminist perspective on deconstruction. Since the discussion of the concept of subalternity is overriding and central to Spivak's work, my paper endeavors to offer an insightful analysis of such a controversial concept and to problematize the function of the postcolonial intellectual. To attain the afore-mentioned objectives, I shall draw most of my insights from Spivak's monumental article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In my paper, I shall first trace back the origin of the concept of subalternity in the theoretical formulations of both Gramsci and Guha. Then, I shall study the way in which Spivak draws most of her arguments from the criticism she directs mainly to Guha's essentialist premises. I shall then show how she builds upon her arguments to come to her provocative conclusion that the subaltern cannot speak, which I find very significant in her work. One of the central conclusions that I drew from her article is principally related to the functions she assigns to the postcolonial critic. Put simply, the postcolonial intellectual and historian should touch the consciousness of the people instead of merely theorizing about the nature and construction of

such an irretrievable consciousness. In Pierre Macherey's words, "what is important in a work is what it does, not what it says."

1

There is no doubt that Gayatri Spivak is one of the most remarkable and outstanding theorists in the postcolonial theory. Along with Said and Bhabha, she is a prominent pillar of the so-called 'the postcolonial trilogy.' Additionally, Spivak is one of the foremost feminist critics who have attained an international fame and eminence. Spivak's writing and field of interest are diverse, including her feminist perspective on deconstruction, her critique of imperialism and colonial discourse, her engagement with the Marxist critique of capital and the international division of labor, and her critique of race in relation to nationality, ethnicity, and immigrant groups (Landry et al 1996: 3). The discussion of subalternity is overriding and central to Spivak as a postcolonial critic who harshly critiques the imperial, colonial, and even postcolonial discourse and practices.

In this humble article, I shall study the Spivakian notion of subalternity, endeavoring to offer an insightful analysis of Spivak's conception of the subaltern. To do so, I shall draw most of my conclusions on such seemingly inaccessible conception, in my view at least, from her influential and significant essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" If one is not trained enough in "the tradition of continental philosophy," one might face many difficulties when reading Spivak as she has skillfully challenged the eminent grounds of established philosophical discourse. In fact, she has succeeded in such a challenge with her difficult theoretical language and on grounds exclusively recognizable to philosophers. However, I have set out deliberately to study this theorist so that I might get more insights into the postcolonial theory through one of its pioneers.

2

First of all, I would like to start with a general definition of the concept 'subaltern' and its origin. Subaltern is a concept first used and coined by the Italian Marxist activist Antonio Gramsci to refer to those groups who are subjects to the hegemony of the dominant classes (Ashcroft et al 1998: 215). For Gramsci, the term designates non-elite or subordinated social groups. Gramsci was interested in the subaltern classes' historiography as he claimed that the history of the subaltern is as complex as that of the ruling classes. The realization of such

history results in a fragmented and episodic history since the subaltern don't have the means whereby they might control their own representation and because they have less access to cultural and social institutions (Ibid: 216). The term has been subsequently adapted to postcolonial studies from the work of Guha's group of Subaltern Studies, who aimed at launching a systematic and fruitful discussion of subaltern themes. For Guha and his followers, the term 'subaltern' refers to any sort of subordination whether it is expressed in terms of age, gender, caste, and class. Guha's group's aim was to point to the imbalance between the elites and their culture on one hand and the subaltern in South Asian historiography in academic work on the other hand; the goal of the group germinates from the belief that the historiography of Indian nationalism has been long dominated by eliticism (Ibid: 217).

When Gayatri Spivak first critiques the conclusions of the Subaltern Group in her monumental article "Can the Subaltern speak?" the notion of the subaltern has become a central and overriding issue in postcolonial studies. Her criticism is directed to Guha's fundamentally essentialist assumptions; since for her, no way for determining who or what might constitute the subaltern group can escape such essentialism. I shall return back to this very point later in my article as my main concern now is to trace the way Spivak has built her argument to come to such conclusions.

In her influential article "Can the Subaltern speak?" Spivak problematizes the production and retrieval of subaltern speech in the light of its dependence on controlling and dominant discursive practices, which define the modalities of expression of the subaltern subjects and construct the position from which they speak or are heard (Coronil: 42). In the course of her essay, there is a profoundly genealogical delving into whether the subaltern can speak for him/herself or whether the subaltern is minimized to be represented, known and heard in a very ideologically falsifying fashion. In fact, the main aim of Spivak here is to learn to speak to the historically silenced subjects of the non-elite rather than to listen to or speak for such muted subjects. In other words, Spivak does not endeavor to problematize the authority of colonial discourse; rather she is interested in the ways whereby imperialism has constructed narratives of history, gender, and class of the hegemonized subjects according to a single axis of differentiation (the centrality of Western history and Man). According to her, the subaltern's actions are inscribed and read in terms of dominant codes of colonial imperialism

and the nationalistic eliticism; this leads her to conclude, provocatively, that "the subaltern cannot speak."

Before coming to such provocative conclusion, Spivak starts with a critique of Foucault and Deleuze, through which she warns against the threats of re-inscribing imperial premises of colonial studies. Her purpose is to undo the opposition between these two influential French theorists in order to trace the track of ideology (Spivak 1988a: 68). According to Spivak, both Foucault and Deleuze failed to provide and consider a suitable concept of ideology; she accuses them of aligning "themselves with bourgeois sociologists who fill the place of ideology with a continuistic 'unconscious culture'" (Ibid: 68). Spivak's criticisms of both Deleuze and Foucault are two-fold. First, she stresses that by referring to the 'worker's struggle' as the main principle in his political theory, Deleuze is trapped in his unconscious Euro-centrism since he "ignores the international division of labor, a gesture that often marks post-structuralist political theory" (Ibid: 67). Second, Spivak insists that Foucault and Deleuze favor micrological structures of resistance which are basically determined by local conflicts and functions through local voluntary associations, at the expense and objective determination like class interest, nation state alliances and global capitalism (Moore-Gilbert 1997: 81). It is in this very point that Spivak rejects the post-structuralist micrological determinations and argues that the micrological forms of resistance must not be used to obliterate the larger macrological configurations of power and other modes of resistance (Ibid: 81). If I understand Spivak well, therefore, for both Foucault and Deleuze there is no representation, no signifier, so there is no sign-structure operating experience; one famous example of the aforementioned denial of representation is the post-structuralist claim that language is a non-representational system. Spivak harshly criticizes this claim by arguing that:

> One responsibility of the critic might be to read and write so that the impossibility of such interested individualistic refusals of the institutional privilege of power bestowed on the subject is taken seriously. The refusal of the sign system blocked the way to a developed theory of ideology (Ibid: 75).

Despite the fact that Spivak will rely heavily on Foucault in her latter discussion of epistemic violence and the worlding of the world and notwithstanding the fact that he actually tried to

decentre human subjects, Foucault still believes that the oppressed (the subaltern) can speak for themselves, which Spivak does not approve. Consequently, she accused him in her article "Can the Subaltern speak?" of not having any conception of the repressive power of colonialism (Loomba 1998: 233).

Spivak moves on to the discussion of the epistemic violence of the codification of Hindu law so that she could show how the narrative of history as imperialism is considered as the best and valid version of history. In fact, a narrative or explanation of reality was established as a normative one (Spivak 1988a: 76). Therefore, Spivak wonders whether the subaltern can speak in a world with new realities of division of labor and in a world in which epistemic violence of imperialist law and education exist. To find a way out from this labyrinth, she starts with the critique of both Gramsci's and Guha' treatment of subalternity; in this critique she focuses mainly on Guha's analysis of the social structure of postcolonial societies by means of what he called 'dynamic stratification grid":

Elite { 1- Dominant foreign groups.
2- Indigenous groups on the all-India level.
3- . Dominant indigenous groups at the regional and local levels.
4- The terms 'people' and 'subaltern classes' [are] used as synonymous throughout [Guha's definition]. The social groups and elements included in this category represent *the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the 'elite*' (cited in Spivak 1988a: 79*).*

In the grid given by Guha's group, the subaltern refers to under-represented group of people, their hidden histories, and even to the historiographers who study them, which Spivak critiques harshly.

Spivak leaves Guha's problematic of the 'floating buffer zone' of the regional subaltern-elite and moves on to problematize the ideal itself, 'the people,' 'the subaltern.' The work of Guha's group for Spivak contains an element of essentialism in the attempted recuperation of a subaltern consciousness—something which could only be a 'theoretical fiction' (Williams and Childs 1997: 161). This is simply because she believes that they read and look for the

subaltern voice in the colonial texts which minimize the subaltern activity. The Subaltern Group tried to rewrite the history of colonial India from below, from the view point of peasants. However, this seems to be a paradoxical project as the documentary evidence is so one-sided that no scientific, positivist account of subaltern insurgency is possible. In fact, there are no subaltern memoirs, diaries, or official histories (Laundry and Maclean 1996: 9). According to Spivak, this is an essentializing language; Guha's project actually aimed at re-writing the development of the consciousness of the Indian nation (its history), instead of touching the consciousness of people. She stresses:

> I have argued, in the Foucault-Deleuze conversation, a post-representationalist vocabulary hides an essentialist agenda. In subaltern studies, because of the violence of imperialist, epistemic, social, and disciplinary inscription, a project understood in essentialist terms must traffic in a radical textual practices of difference (Spivak 1988a: 80)

Unlike Guha, therefore, Spivak does not endeavor to write another history of the subaltern, but rather unearths the assumptions and workings of that representation: the way the subaltern is represented in colonial and elitist historiography.

Spivak comes subsequently to her provocative conclusion that the subaltern consciousness/voice could not be retrieved, and hence any postcolonial analysis ought to show this impossibility by locating the positions from which the subaltern speaks, but 'cannot be heard or read.' Robert Young, who is one of Spivak's interpreters, argues:

> Rather than speak for a lost consciousness that cannot be recovered, a paternalistic activity at best, the critic can point to the place of woman's [as an instance of the subaltern] disappearance in an *aporia*, a blind spot where understanding and knowledge are blocked (Young 1990: 64).

This leads me to the issue of representation and representability that Spivak addresses in her article. Therefore, she believes that the subaltern should not be represented (and this is probably a reaction against the vanguardist position of the Leninist ideological intellectual); nor does s/he have the ability to represent themselves. Put simply, they cannot speak; for the subaltern is only produced by subject-effect, the inscription found in colonial historiography: 'the peasant' is marked as irretrievable consciousness. There is no subaltern voice that can be retrieved or made to speak (Williams and Childs 1997: 162).

Another important idea in Spivak's article is the functions she assigns to the postcolonial critic and intellectual. The central role that critics should play is to resist the desire to retrieve the voices silenced by imperialism since they are irretrievable and also because such a move would subscribe once more to the humanist notion of the voice as the free expression of an 'authentic' individuality (Ibid: 162). This very idea leads her to give as an example of the silenced subaltern the rite of widow-sacrifice on a husband funeral pyre (*sati*), and here she again brings the feminist and postcolonial criticism together. For Spivak, the *sati* is silenced by both the British and the nationalistic indigenous colonial elite. For instance, the fact that the British banned this practice leads to the conclusion that 'white men are saving brown woman from brown man,' which is an imperial practice *par excellence* since it inscribes and imposes certain sort of history on the colonized. Likewise, the fact that the nationalistic romanticization of the purity, love, and strength of these self-sacrificing women reveals clearly the patriarchal nationalistic position that 'the women want to die.' Indeed, one should ask: where is the subaltern voice between these two different (but similar in essence) inscriptions of history?

Spivak concludes that there is no possible alternative history to be written from the subaltern position. Therefore, postcolonial critics must learn not to seek the subaltern voice, but to point to the silence (Ibid: 164-5). The figure of *sati* here, for instance, disappears between what is constructed to her by others; we are given two versions of the *sati's* free-will and the act's meaning. Indeed, this gendered subaltern is repeatedly re-written, but absent between the discourse of imperialism and patriarchal nationalism.

It might be argued that the fact that Spivak asserts that the subaltern cannot speak is an expression of terminal epistemological and political pessimism. Saying that she has been misunderstood, however, Spivak argues that the term 'subaltern' is to be used for everything that is different from organized resistance (Coronil 2000: 42); it is a group defined by its difference from the elite. Building on Guha's ideas and findings, she justifies this usage:

> He is making an analysis of how a colonial society is structured, and what space can be spoken of as subaltern space. There is space in post-imperial arenas which displaced from empire-nation exchange. Where one sees 'emancipated bourgeoisie,' 'organized labor,' 'organized left movements,' 'urban radicalism'…, all of this constituted with the empire-nation exchange,

> reversing it in many different kinds of ways. But in post-imperialist societies there is a vast arena which is not necessarily accessible to that kind of exchange. It is that space that one calls subaltern. The romantic notion that the subaltern can speak is totally undermined by the fact that the real effort to pull them into national agency with the sanctions that are already there (Spivak 1990: 90).

It seems from this extended quotation that 'Spivak has homogenized and pushed the subaltern out of the realm of political exchange, beyond national agency (Coronil 2000: 43). In fact, her aim is to resist the impulse to solve the problem of political subjectivity by romanticizing the subaltern (ibid: 42). In my opinion, if I read Spivak well, I take her to mean that there should be a reconstitution of the subaltern not only as a unified subject who cannot speak, but as a silenced object located outside agency. Coronil seems to share the same view when he says that "subalternity defines not the being of a subject, but a subjected state of being (Ibid: 44). Moreover, Spivak's purpose is the concept of an unproblematically constructed subaltern identity, rather than the subaltern ability to give voice to political concerns. That is, there is no act of resistance that occurs on the subaltern subject's behalf entirely separate from the dominant discourse that provides the conceptual categories with which the subaltern's voice speaks; for Spivak the postcolonial discourse is an attitude of such speaking.

3

To sum up, what I do consider very meaningful in Spivak's article and considerably relevant to our post-modern and postcolonial world and condition is her examination of the function of the postcolonial intellectual. Spivak challenges the widespread thesis that the intellectual (or postcolonial historian) can recover the voice and consciousness of the subaltern. In my view, such a postulation might sound as a kind of intellectual pessimism; yet I do understand it as a kind of 'historical' despair which allows us, as subaltern, to express our worries (even in silence) and to re-organize our 'historical' realities since despair can be considered as the first step towards resistance. As for the function of the intellectual, notwithstanding the fact that Spivak's point of view sounds intellectually cogent and theoretically well-grounded, I find myself identified with Edward Said's view as it gives me more insights into the function

and the value of the intellectual. For Said, unlike Spivak, "there has been no major revolution in modern history without intellectuals; conversely there has been no major counterrevolutionary movement without intellectuals. Intellectuals have been the fathers and mothers of movements, and of course sons and daughters, even nephews and nieces" (Said 1996: 11). In fact, Said stresses explicitly the representative function of the intellectuals in the sense that they are 'the voice of the voiceless;' likewise, Spivak herself, in spite of her seemingly justified pessimism, appreciates the desire of the postcolonial intellectuals to uncover the oppression and to provide the standpoint of the oppressed. Loomba summarizes this juxtaposition of pessimism and optimism:

> She [Spivak] therefore suggests that such intellectuals adapt the Gramscian maxim – 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will'—by combining a philosophical skepticism about recovering any subaltern agency with a political commitment to making visible the position of the marginalized (Loomba 1998: 234).

I think that it is very difficult to get out of Spivak's labyrinth once one gets inside. This is simply because this labyrinth is in a sense ours; being lost as postcolonial oppressed subjects in a postcolonial condition.

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