



Mahasweta Devi : An Icon of Subaltern Literature

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The subaltern in Mahasweta Devi's fiction on tribal life speaks in many voices, neither in unison nor in any unified forms. The tone and tenor of voices in the altogether sixteen fictions I have chosen for my study here are different in many respects. In *The Right of the forest*, *BashaiTudu*, *Hulmaha*, *To the call of Shalgira* and in 'Draupadi', for example, the voice is one of the aggression and revolt, whereas it is one of despairing withdrawal in 'Pterodactyl, PuranSahay and Pirtha'. In *ChottiMunda and His Arrow*, the eponymous hero ChottiMunda speaks of and practices resistance of restricted action. In 'Douloti the Bountiful', the subaltern voice is one of silent and passive suffering, while in 'Dhouli' and 'Shanichari' they are voices of resolution for resistance based on awareness gained through suffering. The subaltern is also spoken of sympathetically by 'organic intellectuals' from the mainstream, like Puran in 'Pterodactyl', Mathur in 'Witch' and the relief officer in 'Little ones'. The incommensurability of such voices with any one particular critical though supports my adoption of the current adventure in thought.

With the euphoria around Subaltern Studies already on the wane, partly due to the lack of a firm theoretical ground and partly owing to the conflict of opinions among the researchers themselves, the venture has nevertheless provided us a site wherein we can rethink things relating to the subalterns. It is within this site that I situate this book as the starting point of my adventure in thought with Mahasweta Devi's fiction on tribal life. An adventure is always certain only of its uncertain destination, and this one is no exception.

This volume is thus set against the backdrop of the project taken up by the Subaltern Studies Collective of Indian scholars headed by RanajitGuha in the early 1980s. Through their writings, the group sought to assemble a counter history of popular forms of action and culture to contest both colonial and nationalist accounts. GayatriChakravortySpivak has written supportively but with reservations on the work of this group. This book focuses mainly on, and is a response to, the question 'Can the Subaltern Speaks?' which was the title of Spivak's 1988 article. In so far as Subaltern Studies invokes a unified voice, her answer is 'No'. The colonized subaltern, she says, is 'irretrievably heterogeneous' and in a world of Western, Indian and other textual representations, can neither 'know or speak for itself' (Spivak 1988:284-285). This book seeks to explore the aesthetics of Mahasweta Devi's representations of the subaltern in her tribal fiction which, despite her initial reservations, Spivak approves of.

Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci has spoken of 'subaltern classes' to designate the politically 'uncoordinated popular MASS' (Brooker 2003:239). For Guha, the word 'subaltern' means 'of inferior rank', as given in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Guha 1982:1). This word is used in studies of the adivasis-India's tribal population who comprise 'about one-sixth of the total population of the country' (Devi 1995/2001:i) who find literary representation in Devi's fiction.

A review of literature takes a look at the major issues involved in representing the subaltern, the various challenges that historians of the Subaltern Studies Collective faced in locating a sound theoretical basis in general and the failures of representation of the subaltern. It will then proceed to look into literary representation in light of Spivak's critique and pick up key concepts so as to trace their resonance with those implied in Devi's fictions under critical scrutiny here. These include critical concepts like- subject, agency, other, consciousness, resistance, alienation, identity, difference, continuity, violence, insurgency, domination, ethics-each of which is loaded with implications of a wide range of contemporary critical theories. These are, we will argue, deeply linked to the literary representation of the subaltern and that as such, the appreciative and explanatory defense of such representation by Spivak, strange in isolation, and creates a gap which this seeks to fill. For spivak ,it is not the author's theoretically sound subject positions that give authenticity to the representation. It is fascinating to observe that despite all her arguments based on western thought, spivak goes beyond theory to reach out to the subalterns as an activist , involving herself in teaching training programmes for rural schools in India and Bangladesh (Morton 2003: 43). We withhold our arguments here against or for such an approach that presupposes the ethical as well as political concerns of one who knows how to unlearn the privileged systems of western knowledge and who represents '---a strategic use of positivist essentialism in scrupulously visible political interest'(guha1985:342). We will further argue that this periodic process of unlearning is contained within the privileged systems of western thought.

The question of European representation of the subaltern 'others' is viewed by postcolonialists as the product of professional canon for representing the truth about 'others'. The purpose of such representation is the production of knowledge about colonial societies within the disciplines of western social science. Central to network of knowledge production is the '---self-originating, self-determining individual, who is at once a subject in his possession of a sovereign consciousness whose defining quality is reason, and an agent in his power of freedom' (O' Hanlon 2002: 137).

Post structuralism in the late twentieth century has launched an attack on this 'presumed sovereignty and universality of the Western intellectual tradition' (O' Hanlon 2002: 136) and on the faith imposed by the Enlightenment in a rational human subject and effective human agency. Michel Foucault has declared that Man, in the sense of constituent subject, was a mere construct and not a timelessly self-evident principle capable of founding a universal ethics. Louis Althusser has said that history is not, as Hegel thought, the absolute development of Spirit, nor the advent of a subject-substance but a rational, regular process which he called a 'process without subject'. Likewise, Lacan has showed that the subject has not substance and no 'nature', being a function both of the contingent laws of language and of the always singular history of objects of nature. This subject, it is alleged by the critics of Subaltern Studies, is readmitted through the back door in the figure of the subaltern himself. Spivak and O'Hanlon, among others, are of the opinion that this adoption of the tool of Western humanism in order to recuperate subject hood for the subaltern is a subversive, self-defeating project. The alternative project of this group of historians- to 'help rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much research and academic work in this particular area' (Guha 1982:vii) - faces a similar crisis. Rosalind O'Halon points out the inherent contradiction: "Is this,

then, another irony of history, doubly confirming the appropriative powers of the dominant discourse: that like the subaltern himself, those who set out to restore his presence end only borrowing the tools of that discourse, tools that serve only to reduplicate the first subjection which they effect, in the realms of critical theory?" (O'Hanlon 2002:174)

The 'dominant discourse' here is what Guha has called the 'elitist bias' of research and academic work, and therefore the act of confirming the 'appropriative powers of dominant discourse' by these historians is directly contrary to the objective of the project. The project is thus put to crisis.

Spivak, likewise, strongly opposes the subjecthood of the subaltern because it is 'an effect of the dominant discourse of the elite' (Morton 2003:53). She, however, defends the group of subaltern historians, arguing that the subaltern subject in Subaltern Studies is not subject at all, but subject-effect: "... That which seems to operate as a subject may be part of an immense discontinuous network ("text" in the general sense) of strands that may be termed politics, ideology, economics, history, sexuality, language and so on.... This latter (the posited sovereign subject) is, then, the effect of an effect, and its positing a metalepsis or the substitution of an effect for a cause". (Guha 1985:341)

In support of her view, Spivak argues that the 'self is itself always production rather than the ground' (Guha 1985:352). This discourse of the Subaltern Studies contains, in her view, the subalterns within the grand narrative of bourgeois national liberalism and as such, totally ignores the different local struggles of particular subaltern groups. The project of the Subaltern Studies historians slips into essentialist humanism also by the fact that they sometimes trace the source of insurgency in 'the articulation of a moral justification, in terms of their consciousness' (O'Hanlon 2002:154). This 'unity' among the subalterns approximates humanism's subject-agent: both the attainment of such 'unity' and the formation of a humanist subject-agent in the work of the historians subvert the intention of the historians, suggest O'Hanlon. A further paradox lies in the process in which the insurgent actually arrives at a sense of himself through negation, as Guha says: 'not by properties of his own social being, but by a diminution, if not negation, of those of his superiors' (O'Hanlon 2002:155). The figure of 'inversion' is used by many contributors to describe 'negativity in action', the process by which the insurgent arrives at a sense of himself by a negation of his superiors, often by appropriating for himself the signs of authority/power of those who dominate him. Inversion here consists of not only resistance but also the limits of its own particular form, that is, the subaltern's incapacity for real action. For according to Spivak, if the insurgent subalterns are shown to be capable of expressing their resistance only through 'negation' and 'inversion', their action will not bring in any genuine structural change. It is the focus on experience in all its authenticity which can be said to resolve the problem of how subalterns are to be represented, in the political as well as the descriptive sense. But this project has also come in for criticism. O'Hanlon raises a pertinent question: "Through the restoration of subjectivity and the focus on experience, the conceit is that a textual space has been opened up in which subaltern groups may speak for themselves and present their hidden past in their own distinctive voices, when authenticity in turn acts as a guarantee of the texts themselves." (O'Hanlon 2002:164-164)

She expresses her concern over the danger in using it to turn the silence of the subaltern into speech, in making their words address our concerns and their figures in our own image. The representation of the collective tradition and cultures of subordinate groups by historians- such as Dipesh Chakrabarty's notion of the 'primordial loyalties' (Guha 1983). The important and deleterious consequence of this portrayal is that it seems to restore the very notion of unity and consensus and the relationships of power which these historians set out to attack. This tendency of

positing a static idea of the subaltern collectivity that does away with the fluctuations of human existence makes their task conceptually less integrated.

The contributors are criticized for dwelling largely on moments of overt resistance and revolt. This tendency is the product of their insistence on 'agency' itself- the demand for a spectacular demonstration of the subaltern's independent will and self-determining power. In doing so, they have paid little attention to the required sustained focus upon the continuities the need to take the subalterns 'acceptance' of and 'submission' to the hegemonic structure into consideration along with their resistance to it (Guha 1985: 153).

Spivak in her 'Subaltern Studies:

Deconstructing Historiography' (1985a) argues that the contributors perceive their task as making a theory of consciousness or culture rather than a theory of change. As such they do not sympathetically emphasize 'the force of crisis' (Spivak 1985a: 331) and their sober tone does not allow them to bring the hegemonic historiography to a crisis. She further argues that their work presupposes that the entire socius is a continuous sign- chain where the possibility of action lies in the dynamics of the disruption of this object, the breaking and relinking of the chain. As the consciousness is not over against the socius but on a semiotic chain, how can it, argues Spivak, play the role of an agent of disruption? Here she draws on Nietzsche for whom 'All concepts in which an entire process is comprehended withdraws itself from definition; only that which has no history is definable' (Spivak 1985a:333)

Individual failures or successes, which the contributors mainly focus on, do not relate to the consciousness of a class. Spivak charges the contributors with a static idea of consciousness: 'They fall back upon notions of consciousness- as- agent, totality, and upon a culturalism, that are discontinuous with the critique of humanism' (1985a:337). The concept of consciousness that Spivak seems to break which brings about reorganization of existing knowledge through the action of the subject of truth. It is a point to which I will return later in this opening section of the book.

Back to our context: if postcolonialism draws its support from poststructuralism, the Subaltern Studies historians find themselves, Spivak suggests, in a horizonless critical domain. Spivak also points out their characteristic expression of the insurgent subaltern's 'negative consciousness' by which he gains a sense of himself by a negation of his superiors. The insurgent envisages his project as that of will independent of himself and his own role in it as no more than instrumental. Spivak views this as half-alienation. Although this alienation can be defended using Hegel's concept of consciousness, as per which: 'alienation is irreducible in any act of consciousness. Unless the subject separates from itself to grasp the object there is no cognition, indeed no thinking, no judgement' (Spivak 1985a:335), Spivak argues this alienation is symptomatic of elite historiography, the bourgeois nationalist account as well as the account of the Subaltern Studies Group. She, however, prefers Gramsci who says that the lower classes must 'achieve self-awareness via a series of negations' (Spivak 1985:336).

To avoid such conceptual difficulties, Spivak suggests a deconstructive approach for the contributors, for such an approach would bring into focus the fact that they are themselves engaged in an attempt at displacing discursive fields, that they themselves fail. Their practice should take this into account, 'Otherwise, refusing to acknowledge the implications of their own line of work because that would be politically incorrect, they would, willy-nilly, insidiously objectify the subaltern, control him through knowledge even as they restore versions of causality and self-determination to him (Spivak 1985a: 336-337).

This suggestion resonates with that of Foucault for whom every 'certitude' needs an unexplored supporting ground for its security (Foucault 1984:69). Spivak's overtly political

commitment to champion the cause of minority groups clashes with her allegiance to deconstruction. Her deconstructive assertion that the meaning of text is radically unstable would surely weaken the effectiveness of any political intervention. I will look into this apparent contradiction in the next part focuses on the literary representation of the subaltern. Spivak's calling into question the subject position of the contributors is echoed in O'Hanlon's attempt at finding a separate political concern for the thinkers.'..... why we seek to find a resistant presence which has not been completely emptied or extinguished by the hegemonic, our answer must surely be that it is in order to envisage a realm of freedom in which we ourselves might speak' (O'Hanlon 2002:175). Thinkers like Spivak speak of the fears and pitfalls of 'continuing subalternization.' "If the woman /black/subaltern, possessed through struggle of some of the structures previously metonymic as man/white/elite, continues to exercise a self-marginalized purism, and if the benevolent members of the man/white/elite participate in the marginalization and thus legitimate the bad old days, we have a caricature of correct politics that leaves alone the field of continuing subalternisation." (Spivak 1987:111)

This gives us yet another form of sustained resistance- the way the contributors help subalterns speak through their small voice of history. This would have been looked upon by Baudrillard as almost an encroachment upon the private world of the subalterns: 'Everywhere the masses are encouraged to speak, they are urged to live socially, electorally, organizationally sexually, in participation, if free speech, etc. The spectre must be exorcised; it must pronounce its name' (O' Hanlon 2002:164).

Literary Representation of The Subaltern

The heading is part of the title of an essay by Spivak, published in *Subaltern Studies V* (1987). The points I propose to look into in this part are mostly derived from this essay along with her two other works, "Can the subaltern speak?" *Imaginary maps* and her interviews with Mahasweta Devi. My main objective here is to parade the main ideas of literary representation of the subaltern against those of the preceding part and to prepare them for application to the fictions of Mahasweta Devi later. Some ideas, despite their inclusion in the study, may not fit the texts and may spill; there is also the possibility of the emergence of new ideas from such a study.

Spivak views literary representation as a more effective mode than non-literary representation as a more effective mode than non-literary representation. This non-literary representation is sometimes called symbolic and sometimes referred to as political representation. Her prioritization of literary representation is categorical: 'Spivak suggests that literary texts can provide an alternative rhetorical site for articulating the histories of subaltern women' (Morton 2003:55)

For Spivak, aesthetic representation tends to foreground its status as a re-presentation of the real, whereas political representation denies the structure of representation. If the aesthetic dimension of political representation is not taken into account, Spivak argues, Western intellectuals will continue to silence the voice of the subaltern. In 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' she argues that despite all the critical energy Foucault and Deleuze invest in showing how subjects are constructed through discourse and representation in which 'oppressed subjects speak, act and know their own conditions' (Morton 2003:57).

Spivak borrows from Marx the idea of two types of representation. For Marx, representation of the peasant proprietors has a double meaning, which is distinguished in the German by the terms *darstellen* (representation as aesthetic portrait) and *Vertretlen* (representation by political proxy). In the Foucault-Deleuze conversation, Spivak argues, these two meanings of representation are

conflated; for in the constitution of disempowered groups as coherent political projects, the process of aesthetic representation is subordinated to the voice of the political proxy who speaks on their behalf. As a consequence of this conflation, the aesthetic portrait- symbolically representing disempowered groups as coherent political subjects- is taken as a transparent expression of their political desire and interests.

Spivak's negative answer to the question 'can the subaltern speak?' is given in the context of political representation alone and that too in a specifically political on text. Otherwise, her own formulations of the same would have been impossible. Her refusals to simply represent non-western subjects come from a profound recognition of how the lives of many disempowered groups have already been damaged by dominate systems of western knowledge and representation. Spivak says, 'Incidentally, derisive comments made by upper middle class Indian-Americans of the public version of Chuni's suicide put me in mind about the dismissal of BhubandeswariBhaduri's suicide by women of the next generation, anger against which produced my remark that the subaltern could not speak' (Spivak 1995/2001:xxii). Despite the context to which the remark is limited, Spivak's decontextualised 'no' here has been the object of much critical debate ever since its publication. She has not suggested that particular disempowered groups cannot speak, but that their speech acts are not heard or recognized within the dominant systems of representation.

A literary text, Spivak suggests, is not stable or transparent but is radically indeterminate and therefore always open to further questioning. This suggestion is in accordance with her contention in 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography' about the subject position of the contributors: 'Their actual practice, which I shall argue, is closer to deconstruction' (Spivak1985a : 332). Derrida, the father of deconstruction, posits that meaning is always perpetually deferred across a spatial and temporal axis so that the finale point of stable meaning and knowledge is never reached in any signifying system. For Spivak, deconstruction's affirmation of the complicity of theory with the object of its critique is the greatest gift of deconstruction, for it questions the investigation subjects' authority without paralyzing him. The absence of stable meaning and the radical indeterminacy of the literary text can impart greater authenticity to representations of the subaltern. In the light of such propositions together with those of Alain Badiou, I will read selected fictions of Mahasweta Devi.

The Dimension of Ethics and Politic in Literary Representation

Spivak traces a gradual move in Derrida's work from the conceptual limits of western philosophical discourse to a greater emphasis on ethics and its relationship with the political. This ethics is not the traditional ethics which belongs to the realm of moral philosophy and is concerned with the calculation of justice. In this tradition ethics is bound to the transcendental, universal principles of western metaphysics. Spivak describes the painstaking labour required for subaltern representation, especially literary representation, for she has not said this in context of the subaltern studies historians. Spivak is herself involved in long-term teacher training programmes to encourage literacy among poor, underprivileged children in rural schools in India and Bangladesh. She emphasizes such real mind changing formations of collectively that she hopes will withstand and survive the victory of the hegemonic structures that suppress them, but this is incredibly slow and penetrating movement from ethics to politics in the everyday struggles of subaltern communities to become literate, political citizens on their own terms. She makes an ethical plea for the patient work of learning to learn from the oppressed rather than just speaking for them. "... we must learn to learn from the original practical ecological philosophers of the world, through the

slow, attentive, mind-changing (on both sides), ethical singularity that deserves the names of “love” – to supplement necessary collective efforts to change laws modes of production, systems of education and health care. This for me is the lesson of Mahasweta, activist/ journalist and writer. This relationship, a witnessing love and a supplementing collective struggle, is the relationship between her “literary” writing and her activism... such a supplementation must become the relationship between the silent gift of the subaltern and the thunderous imperative of the Enlightenment to “the public use of Reason,” however hopeless that undertaking might seem. One filling the others’s gap.” (Spivak 1995/2001: 204-205)

Literary representation alone is not enough, she says, as it has a gap which needs to be filled in by supplementary activism: ‘... as I have argued above, the literary text cannot successfully represent a supplementation without standing in the way of such practical effort. That text (text-ile as the weave of work) is in the field of activism, e-labourated in labour’ (Spivak 1995/2001:205)

Spivak speaks of ‘learning from below’ which can only be earned by ‘the slow effort at ethical responding – a two-way road-with the compromised other as teacher’ (1995/2001 :206). This ethical responding echoes Levinas. For Levinas, ethics begins with the face of the other that emphasizes responsibility for the other. For him, ethics is the calling into question the ‘spontaneity’ by the ‘presence’ of the (Levinas 1969:43). Levinas posits that this calling into question of the knowing ego occurs in the face-to-face encounter with the other. This encounter is totally devoid of any intention of reducing the other to the order of the same. Levinas is other than simple and pure perception. In such encounters the ‘ego’ or ‘self’ feels a responsibility for the other who looks at him. Such responsibility for the other is ‘incumbent’ on the ‘elf’ (Levinas 1985:96).

Moreover, Levinas’ exaltation of the ‘Saying’ over the ‘Said’ resonated with Spivak’s emphasis on the day-to-day experience of the subaltern rather than any fixed subject position of the subaltern who represents them both politically and aesthetically. In Simon Critchley’s words, the ‘Saying’ is ‘Performative doing that cannot be reduced to constative description’; by contrast, the ‘Said’ is ‘a statement, assertion, or proposition..... concerning which the truth of falsity can be ascertained’ (Critchley 1992:7). Mahasweta Devi’s own subject position as writer, always supported and supplemented by her activism and which draws much on her living experience with the subaltern, is illustrative of ‘performative doing’: ‘My house is full of them, they write to me, they come and stay with me, I go and stay with them’ (Spivak 1995/2001:ix)

References

All the plays written and translated by Mahasweta Devi
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