



Reasons Spivak Cites When She says that Subaltern cannot Speak

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Abstract

The objective of the paper is to acquaint with the ideas of the critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak about Subaltern Studies and her critical interventions. For this purpose Spivak's of Grammatology and her "controversial" essay can the Subaltern Speak? Have been taken into consideration. Her critique of western models of class-consciousness and subjectivity is developed in the essay. She questions of the notion of the colonial (and western) 'Subject'.

"You don't give the subaltern voice, you work for the bloody subaltern. You work against subalternity". (Spivak 1992: 46)

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak Indian literary theorist, feminist critic, postcolonial theorist, and Professor of comparative literature noted for her personal brand of deconstructive criticism, which she called "interventionist." Her critical interventions cover a range of theoretical heads, including Marxism, feminism, deconstruction and post-colonialism. Spivak confronts the disciplinary conventions of literary criticism and academic philosophy by focusing on the cultural texts of those people who are often marginalized by the dominant culture.

Educated in Calcutta and at the University of Cambridge and Cornell University, she taught English and comparative literature at the Universities of Iowa, Texas, Pittsburgh, and Pennsylvania and at Columbia University. She was appointed University Professor at Columbia in 2007.

Spivak is also the founding member of the school's Institute for Comparative Literature and Society. In 2012, she was awarded the Kyoto Prize in the Arts and Philosophy for being "a critical theorist and educator speaking for the humanities against intellectual colonialism in relation to the

globalized world". She received the Padma Bhushan, the third highest civilian award given by the Republic of India in 2013.

In 1976 Spivak published of Grammatology, an English translation of French deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida's *De la grammatologie* (1967). In a series of later essays Spivak urged women to become involved in, and to intervene in, the evolution of deconstructive theory. She also urged her colleagues to focus on women's historicity. Critical of "phallogocentric" (imperialist as well as Marxist) historical interpretation, Spivak accused "bourgeois" Western feminists of complicity with international capitalism in oppressing and exploiting women of the developing world. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) by Gayatri Spivak relates to the manner in which western cultures investigate other cultures. Spivak uses the example of the Indian Sati practice of widow suicide, however the main significance of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is in its first part, which presents the ethical problems of investigating a different culture base on "universal" concepts and frameworks.

"Can the Subaltern Speak?" critically deals with an array of western writers starting from Marx to Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida. The basic claim and opening statement of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is that western academic thinking is produced in order to support western economical interests. Spivak holds that knowledge is never innocent and that it expresses the interests of its producers. For Spivak knowledge is like any other commodity that is exported from the west to the third world for financial and other types of gain. "Subalternity is the name I borrow for the space out of any serious touch with the logic of capitalism or socialism. Please do not confuse it with unorganized labor, women as such, the proletariat, the colonized, [...] migrant labor, political refugees etc. nothing useful comes out of this confusion." (Spivak 1995: 115)

Spivak is wondering how the third world subject can be studied without cooperation with the colonial project. She points to the fact that research is in a way always colonial, in defining the "other", the "over there" subject as the object of study and as something that knowledge should be extracted from and brought back "here". Basically we are talking about white men speaking to white men about colored men/women. When Spivak examines the validity of the western representation of the other, she proposes that the discursive institutions, which regulate writing about the other, are shut off to postcolonial or feminist scrutiny.

This limitation, Spivak holds, is tied to the fact that critical thinking about the "other" tends to articulate its relation to the other with the hegemonic vocabulary. This is similar to feminist writers, which abide by the patriarchal rules for academic writing.

In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak is criticizing the intellectual west's "desire for subjectivity". Spivak claims that "research" or "knowledge" have served as a prime justification for the conquest of other cultures and their enslavement, as part of the European colonial project. The western scholar authoritatively presented himself and his produced knowledge about the other culture as objective. He presented himself is without interests, and scientific, ethical and accurate. This is, for Spivak, very much not the real case for the opening statement of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is that knowledge about the third world was always tainted with the political and economical interests of the west. Spivak and Bell Hooks (Gloria Jean Watkins) questions the academics' engagement with the other and argue that, to truly engage with the subaltern, would have

to remove him or herself as "the expert" at the center of the Us-and-Them binary social relation. [There is] no need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story[...] I am still author, authority. I am still [the] colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now you are at the centre of my talk. ("Marginality as a site of resistance" 1990:14).

She again points to the fact that the west is talking to itself, and in its own language, about the other. Like other commodities, data or raw material (ethnographical, for example) is harvested in the third world country and taken back to the west, to be produced and sold for the benefit of the western readers and especially the western writer. She wonders if under these conditions it can be possible for the west to speak about the non-west without sustaining the colonial discourse.

She is hardly impressed with western efforts to speak for the other or try to "present his own voice". She believes that the west is obsessed with preserving itself as subject, and that any discourse is eventually about the discoursing agents themselves. Spivak is opposed to the western attempt to situate itself as investigating subject that is opposed to the investigated non-western object.

Spivak's answer to "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is no, they cannot, not when the western academic field is unable to relate to the other with anything other than its own paradigm. Her description of the third world becoming a "signifier that allows us to forget that 'worlding' resembles in many ways Marx's notion of the commodity fetish that he describes in volume one of *Kapital*. In "The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret," Marx suggests that commodity products become part of an obfuscating network of signs that obscure the history of labor that went into their production. She suggests that the Third World, like the commodity fetish, becomes a sign that obscures its mode of production, thus making Western dominance appear somehow given or natural.

Spivak encourages but also criticizes the efforts of the subaltern studies group, a project led by Ranajit Guha that has reappropriated Gramsci's term "subaltern" (the economically dispossessed) in order to locate and re-establish a "voice" or collective locus of agency in postcolonial India. Although Spivak acknowledges the "epistemic violence" done upon Indian subalterns, she suggests that any attempt from the outside to ameliorate their condition by granting them collective speech invariably will encounter the following problems: 1) a logocentric assumption of cultural solidarity among a heterogeneous people, and 2) a dependence upon western intellectuals to "speak for" the subaltern condition rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. As Spivak argues, by speaking out and reclaiming a collective cultural identity, subalterns will in fact re-inscribe their subordinate position in society. The academic assumption of a subaltern collectivity becomes akin to an ethnocentric extension of Western logos--a totalizing, essentialist "mythology" as Derrida might describe it--that does not account for the heterogeneity of the colonized body politic.

However, the vital point that Spivak is trying to make here is that the active involvement of women in the history of anti-British-colonial struggle in India has been excluded from the official history of India's Independence. As Spivak writes: "Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is 'evidence'. It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of

colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow”.

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