Ars Artium: **An International Peer Reviewed-cum-Refereed Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences**
ISSN (Online) : 2395-2423 • ISSN (Print) : 2319-7889
Vol. 6, January 2018
Pp. 38-44
http://www.arsartium.org

On the Margins: Theorising Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

*–Hemangi Bhagwat**
*Madhavi Arekar***

Abstract

Postcolonialism is the study of theory and literature which analyses the after effects of the colonial era, that is, the effects of the coloniser on the colonised. One of the essential threads in the realm of Postcolonialism is the Subaltern, a term coined and adopted by the Marxist philosopher and theorist, Antonio Gramsci. The term is used as a reference to the colonised South Asian sub-continent and encompasses an area in the study of culture, history, human geography, sociology, anthropology and literature.

This paper traces the history of Subaltern Studies in India pioneered by Ranajit Guha and focuses on the work of Gayatri Spivak who had developed this idea a step further and asks the question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", and throws light on the comprehension of historical narratives of women's resistance in India.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Subaltern Studies, Historical Narratives, Women's Resistance, Othering.

Postcolonialism is the study of theory and literature as it speaks about the colonizer and the colonized experience. It studies the after-effects of the colonial era, that is, the effects the colonizer had on the colonized people. Postcolonial studies is defined as the "critical analysis of the history, culture, literature and modes of discourse that are specific to the former colonies of England, Spain, France and other European imperial powers" (Abrams 306).

Postcolonialism rejects the European narratives of the western imperialism and strikes back on the face of world history. They replaced the European narratives with

* *Associate Professor of English, K. J. Somaiya College of Science & Commerce Vidyavihar, Mumbai, Maharashtra - 400077, INDIA.*
Email: bhagwat_hemangi@yahoo.com

** *Assistant Professor in English, VPM's Joshi Bedekar College, Thane, Maharashtra - 400601, INDIA. Email: madhavi.arekar2708@gmail.com*

narratives written in their own voices and through their own cultural ethnic perspective. "Post-colonial theory considers vexed cultural political questions of national and ethnic identity, otherness, race, imperialism and language during and after the colonial periods. It draws upon post-structuralist theories such as those of deconstruction in order to unravel the complex relations between imperial centre and colonial periphery" (Baldick 265). 'Subaltern and Subaltern Studies', as a discipline, was brought in by the Subaltern Studies Group in the realm of post-colonial studies.

In general terms, Subaltern refers to the group that is excluded from society's established structures for political representation and therefore denied the means by which people have a voice in their society. It literally refers to any person or group of inferior rank and station, whether because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion. Some thinkers used it in general sense to refer to marginalized groups and the lower classes – "a person rendered without agency by his or her social status" (Young 2003).

It was the Marxist philosopher and theorist, Antonio Gramsci, who adopted the term 'subaltern' to refer to the working class people that is, proletariat class, who are subject to the hegemony power of the dominant ruling classes. Gramsci used the term Subaltern to underline an inferior or subordinate place in terms of class, caste, gender and culture. Some scholars are of the opinion that Gramsci, "used the term as a synonym for proletariat, possibly as a code word in order to get his writings post prison censors" while others believe "his usage to be more nuanced and less clear cut" (Morton, "The Subaltern: Genealogy of a Concept" 96). Gramsci opined that though the history of the dominant class, that is, the bourgeoisie class, is considered as 'official' history, the history of subaltern classes was just as complex as the history of the dominant groups. According to Gramsci, the history of the subaltern groups is sporadic, periodic and disintegrated as they are subject to histories of the dominant classes.

Since 1970s, the term 'Subaltern' is being used as a reference to colonized people in the South Asian subcontinent, and it now encompasses an area in the study of culture, history, human geography, sociology, anthropology and literature. All those who were denied access to hegemonic power such as peasants, labourers, workers and such other groups were considered as subaltern classes. (Ashcroft 25)

In India, in the 1980s, the enterprising historians started subaltern studies as a project to reclaim and rewrite Indian historiography from the subaltern perspective. Ranajit Guha took up the task to probe into the peasant movements of the past which according to him, were showcased as something monumental and outstanding by historians. The crucial motive behind this project was to collect genuine, reliable and strong historical evidences of Indian history. This group of historians formed by Ranajit Guha included Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gyanendra Pandey, Shahid Amin, David Arnold, David Hardiman and they as a team aimed to promote organized study and discussion of subaltern themes in South Asian Studies.

A theme that emerges across the early work undertaken by Subaltern Studies Group is the relationship between the marginalized classes and the anti–colonial

movement of the twentieth century. A marked feature of the nationalist movement in that century was how it resonated with either the educated elites or their political interests or, with the capable and skillful leadership of Gandhi and Nehru. It is the keen interest and inquiry of these Subaltern scholars that transformed the face of the nationalist movement. It pushed the nationalist movement from the reserve of its elites and leaders, and made it wider by making it the middle class affair. This paved a way to reclaim and reconstruct the histories and experiences of the poor, neglected and oppressed.

> Guha believed that the politics of the subaltern did not constitute an autonomous domain, for it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter. Subordination in its various forms has always been the central focus of the subaltern studies (Biswas 202).

When one takes to reading history, whose history is to be read? The history of the superiors which is regarded as 'official' or the history of the oppressed? Subaltern Studies took to re-writing history. It is a history that agrees to the inclusion of the common man; all those who were overlooked, neglected and treated with indifference.

> History from Below being by concentrating on local and regional developments, encompassing various groups in the world popular—tribal, peasant, artisan, labour protests and in the middle class, a class which started asserting some kind of regional on national leadership and which had a totally different composition from Princes and Zamindars. (Sarkar n.p.)

When British workers left India they gave their voices and versions to British historians in form of their diaries, Indian workers, labourers, and peasants however, had left behind nothing to be called original or authentic and hence Subaltern Studies had to use Census Reports, Government documents, Folk narratives, documents from Judiciary and Police Department to write Subaltern Studies.

> To the subaltern studies project, colonialist and bourgeois – nationalist histories were problematic because they failed to recognize the agency and actions of subaltern people. Instead, the credit for India's independence and the nationalist movement that preceded it was given to either colonial policies or the altruism of the Indian elite. The failure of contemporary historiography to acknowledge the agency of the socially and economically marginalized – or subaltern – was highlighted throughout the 1970s and early 1980s by periods of peasant action and demonstration, sparking a broader interest in peasant agency throughout Indian academia. As a Maoist activist Guha had directly engaged in peasant insurgency, and had, perhaps during this period, been witness to 'the contribution made by people on their own.' During Guha's role as editor of *Subaltern Studies*, he continued to emphasize the need to 'negate' this historiography, before a new one could be created. (Altern 60)

Therefore, to find and recuperate these Indian Subaltern voices, Subaltern Studies used diverse techniques of reading documents that were available. However, in the pursuit of finding these lost and marginalized voices, they focused more on how subalternity was organized and developed.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak developed the idea of Subaltern Studies a step further "emphasizing that the western Marxist model of social change that these historians employ does not do justice to the complex histories of subaltern insurgency and resistance which they seek to recover" (Morton 7).

Spivak's works reflect her assertive voice as she speaks about the issues of representation, self-representation, political strategies and so forth. "I am not erudite enough to be interdisciplinary but I can break rules" (Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* Exp. 1 L 9). Spivak has always questioned the conventions and margins of literary criticism by shifting the attention towards the cultural texts of those who were pushed away towards the periphery and treated with indifference by the dominant western culture. She focused on the working class, women and the postcolonial subjects. In doing so Spivak challenges the mainstream prominent ideas of the contemporary society and culture. As an influential postcolonial critic, Robert Young asserts,

> Spivak's thought is best understood if it is situated in terms of ongoing political debates within India about the employment of classic European Marxism in the context of anti-colonial struggles, and the failure of Indian socialism to recognize the histories and struggles of women, the underclass, the tribal communities and the rural peasantry in Indian society. (350-352)

Spivak also counters the ideology and methodology of the Subaltern Studies Group by pointing out the western Marxist model of social change that Subaltern historians apply, does not give its due importance to the subaltern histories of resistance which are multifaceted, complex and scattered. And this creates a barrier especially in the comprehension of historical narratives of women's resistance in India. Thus, she has specifically furthered the historical research of Subaltern Studies Group by drawing attention to the life and experience of subaltern, marginalized women which the official Indian history has completely ignored and failed to acknowledge.

Spivak profoundly recognizes that the dominant political, economic, cultural and educational strategies have blighted the lives of many marginalized and disempowered communities. She employs deconstruction as a tool to critically voice this recognition. According to her, the deconstruction perspective empowers the reader to raise a query on the investigating subject, keeping the expert's insight intact and transforming circumstances and conditions which are not possible into ones which are. She writes,

> To investigate, discover and establish a subaltern or peasant consciousness seems at first to be a positivistic project- a project which assumes that if properly prosecuted, it will lead to firm ground, to something that can be disclosed. This is all the more significant in the case of recovering a consciousness. (Spivak 278)

She also anchors on the theme of 'Otherness', a prominent concern in post- colonial studies. Sartre used the term, 'Other' in 'Being and Nothingness' to define the relations between self and others. One finds that it is extensively used in existential philosophy. In the postcolonial studies, the theme of Otherness has always been of prime

importance. Edward Said's 'Orientalism' discusses the theory of the Other- the treatment given by the so called privileged west to the east. Said argues that the Orient is one of Europe's 'deepest and most recurring images of the Other' (1).

The western thought and culture has defined certain people and concepts as 'other' throughout their historical narratives. The poor and powerless were considered as the other that threatens the values of the so called civilized society. According to Stephen Morton, "In the structure of western thought, the 'Other' is relegated to a place outside of or exterior to the normal, civilized values of western culture; yet it is in this founding moment of relegation that the sovereignty of the Self or the same is constituted" (*Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak Routledge Critical Thinkers - Essential Guides for Literary Studies* 37). This led to the act of 'Othering', a term coined by Gayatri Spivak to speak about the process by which the western dominant narratives create their 'others'.

Spivak tries to shake the foundations of the rigid Self - other dichotomy while describing the lives and struggles of the Third World marginalized subaltern women. According to Stephen Morton, Spivak in her essay 'Imperialism and Sexual Difference' (1986) "criticizes some feminists for ignoring the specific experiences of 'Third World' women when they construct a universal feminist subject" (40). Thus, she brings to light the errors of the practical truth- system and knowledge which claim that all women of the world suffer the same set of problems, oppression and resistance transcending geographical, social, cultural and linguistic boundaries simply because they are women. She strongly opposes the myth of 'global sisterhood' (Spivak 226) as it expels the lives and sufferings of Third World women. 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 labour, 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. (Spivak 287)

However, Neil Lazarus emphasizes, "Spivak's injunction to investigate the histories of subaltern women's insurgency is rarely accompanied by any substantial historical research" (Lazarus 113). To which Spivak replies that this is the consequence of the 'ideological construct of gender' which underlines the patriarchal dominance in historical records and archives during Indian colonization. (Spivak 281)

In her essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak? (1985), Spivak popularized the term, 'Subaltern' where she says, "The Subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish" (Nelson and Grossberg 308). Spivak not only breaks the dichotomy of Self and Other but also uses the term 'Subaltern' flexibly, accommodating

"social identities and struggles… that do not fall under the reductive terms of 'strict class analysis'" (Morton 45).

Spivak rightfully opines in an interview with the journal, Polygraph-"I like the word 'subaltern' for one reason. It is truly situational. 'Subaltern' began as a description of a certain rank in the military. The word was used under censorship by Gramsci: he called Marxism 'monism,' and was obliged to call the proletarian 'subaltern.' That word, used under duress, has been transformed into the description of everything that doesn't fall under strict class analysis. I like that, because it has no theoretical rigor." (Spivak 141)

Spivak argues that there is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak. She emphasizes that the subaltern women cannot speak as their voices and agencies were completely silenced under the political, social and cultural hegemony of Hindu patriarchal codes of moral conduct and their representation as victims of a barbaric culture in British colonial narratives. In the male dominated culture, though these subaltern women attempted to voice their narratives, their voices were not recognized that led their silence in the dominant political systems of representation.

In conclusion, her essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' criticizes much of the work done mostly by the western male academicians. She opines that it is difficult for anyone looking in from outside of the colonized group to grant speech to the subalterns from outside. This is because the evidences collected by them are through bare words and not real actual experiences. This, Spivak says, produces logo-centric assumptions inherently restricted or misleading writing built on the study of only one part of the total experience. Spivak was also wary of the intellectuals who attempted to speak on the behalf of the subalterns rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. She thought that this led them being positioned relative to their colonial rulers rather than allowed them cultural identity of their own.

She believed that the western intellectuals intended their response as positive affirming act but actually they contrasted the group they were writing about by looking entirely at their response to one thing – Colonial Rule. Spivak also repeatedly restated that it is extremely important to challenge the universal assumption rooted in some western feminist thought. Histories and narratives of women across the globe are the same. Also, it is crucial to have the global political awareness of the local economic, political, social and cultural conditions that shaped women's oppression in the world. She concluded that, while it is possible to recover the voices of the oppressed, it is almost impossible for the academics from other countries to recover them wholly or without significant distortion.

Works Cited

- Abrams, M. H. and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms.* 10th ed. Delhi: Cengage Learning, 2012. Print.

- Altern, Hannah. "Subaltern Studies: From Writing with (Socialist) Passion to Following the (Postmodern) Fashion". *History in the Making*. Web. 23 May 2017. <https://historyitm.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/altern.pdf>.
- Ashcroft, Bill., Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *Key Concepts in Post- Colonial Studies*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995. Print.
- Baldick, Chris. *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms.* 3rd ed. New York: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.
- Biswas, Amrita. "Research Note on Subaltern Studies". *Journal of Literature, Culture and Media Studies* 1.2 (Winter 2009): 200-05. Web. 22 May 2017. <http://www.inflibnet.ac.in/ojs/index.php/JLCMS/article/viewfile/44/42>.
- James, Dais. "A Subaltern Reading of Asura Tale of the Vanquished." *Academia.edu*. Web. 25 May 2017. <www.academia.edu/13257214/A_Subaltern_reading_of_Asura_Tale_of_the_vanquished.>.
- Lazarus, N. *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. Print.
- Morton, Stephen. *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak Routledge Critical Thinkers – Essential Guides for Literary Studies*. (1st Indian Print). London & New York: Routledge, 2015. Print.
- —. "The Subaltern: Genealogy of a Concept" in Gayatri Spivak: *Ethics, Subalternity and the Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. Rpt. Cambridge: Polity, 2007. Print.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978. Print.
- Sarkar, Sumit. '*Popular' Movements and 'Middle Class' Leadership in late Colonial India: Perspective and Problems of a "History from Below"*. New Delhi: Aakar Books, 2015. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" M*arxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. London: Macmillan, 1988. Print.
- —. *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. Web. 25 May 2017. https://prelectur.stanford.edu.
- —. "Imperialism and Sexual Difference." *Oxford Literary Review* 7.1-2 (1986): 225-240. Print.
- Young, Robert. *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001. Print.

❑❑❑