



## Postcolonialism, Gayatri Spivak and the Subaltern: Struggle and Voices of the Disenfranchised

Praveen Vijaykumar Ambesange

Assistant Professor of English,

Maharashtra Udayagiri Mahavidyalaya, Udgir

[praveenambesange1@gmail.com](mailto:praveenambesange1@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Postcolonialism is a term largely used to refer to the ongoing issues between the once colonized countries and the colonizer or the West, since long back when the colonial process started. It includes literature of the nations such as Nigeria, Kenya, India, Pakistan, Jamaica and other third world countries. The leading critics in this area are Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha. Postcolonialism encompasses the issues such as, subaltern, racism, orientalism and diaspora. The focus of this paper will be on Gayatri Spivak and 'subaltern'. For Spivak subaltern refers to third world women and men, working class people or those disenfranchised and marginalized by the western culture. Marxism and poststructuralism have been a major influence on Gayatri Spivak. In her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' she examines the voice of the subaltern groups (women, tribal, orient). Drawing on Foucault's notion of 'discourse', on Gramsci's 'hegemony' and Derrida's 'deconstruction' this paper focuses on the role of texts, literary and otherwise in the colonial enterprise. This paper attempts to illustrate the representation of the subaltern characters in the texts written by the western writers.

*Key words: subaltern, orientalism, hegemony, power, discourse, identity*

The critical intervention in this paper encompass Gayatri Spivak and her concern for "subaltern" people who were and are often marginalized by the by dominant western culture. The 'Subaltern' is a military term which means 'of lower rank'. She borrowed this term from Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. The subaltern has become the major issue of discussion in postcolonial studies. It tries to explore the unjust representation of the third world women and men, working class or black people in literature. Postcolonialism is the recent development in the field of contemporary critical theories. It examines the impact of colonialism, imperialism and other such postcolonial issues on Third World countries such as India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Kenya and other once colonized countries.

Primary to Spivak's theory is the concept of 'subaltern'. She is one of the influential critics who is often connected to Postcolonialism, Feminism, Deconstruction and Marxism. Spivak in her works explore the representation of the third world women, tribal people and orient. Spivak attempts to focus on the struggle of the silenced subalterns and gives them a voice. By championing the voices she challenges some dominant idea that the western world is more civilized and developed than the non western world. She criticizes western critics such as Karl Marx, Derrida, Foucault and British or French feminists. It can be noticed how the subalterns have been represented by British writers since long back. The examples and illustrations in this paper are taken from my own interest.

In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" questions the voice of the subaltern groups (women, tribal people, Third world, orient). She realizes herself sometimes as Third-world woman, as a marginal awkward special guest, a American Professor, a Bengali middle-class exile and sometimes as a successful American academician. She has been taken for granted in the positioning of the subject as a Third World subject. In this essay she exposes the irony that the subalterns have awakened to a consciousness of their own rights by making practical utterances against unjust domination and inequality. She denounces the harm done to Women/Third World women and non-Europeans. She wants to give voice to the subalterns who cannot speak or who are silent. She focuses on speculations made on widow sacrifice. She attempts to restore the presence of the women writers who have been submerged by their male peers. She investigates of Women's Double-Colonization (Dalit/Black women). She attacks the Eurocentric attitudes of the West. She holds that knowledge is never innocent; it is always operated by western economical interest and power. For Spivak knowledge is like any other commodity or product that is exported from the west to the Third world. The western scholars have always presented themselves and their knowledge about the Eastern cultures as objective. The knowledge about the third world is always constructed with the political and economical interest of the west. Spivak criticizes Foucault other critics accusing them in cooperating with capitalism and imperialism.

She considers deconstruction as a political tool to stabilize the notional of reality and truth. She is a follower of Derrida and his translator. She is the author of translator's preface of Derrida's "Of Grammatology". Along with Derrida Spivak was influenced by Professor Paul De Man. Spivak worries about and challenges the first world for ignoring the vast majority of the world's population who are very poor and oppressed. She criticizes for how the world is represented from the dominant perspective of the first world and how it excludes the other or the subaltern and disenfranchised groups. Spivak says that a clear and transparent language is needed to represent the subaltern or the oppressed people.

Systems of representation are controlled, linguistic and philosophical representation masks the real social and political inequalities. The everyday life of many subalterns especially third world women are complex. They cannot speak, privileged intellectuals speak on behalf of them. Spivak finds risk for such speaking on behalf of subalterns as they will be silenced within the vocabulary of the western critical theory.

In her essay 'A Literary Representation of the Subaltern' Spivak speaks of the Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi's short story 'Breast Giver' ('Stanadayini'). It is the story of the subaltern woman called Jashoda, a poor third world woman who is hired by a rich Brahmin family as a professional mother. She articulates the plight of the subaltern woman. Subaltern women may have to suffer from gender discrimination, caste discrimination and economic discrimination. After breast-feeding several high-caste, Brahmin children, Jashoda's body starts decaying. She suffers from breast cancer. Kangalicharan, her husband has lost his leg in an accident. Jashoda is both economically poor as well as gender marginalized. She is the only source of livelihood for her family. Economy plays an important role in the lives of subaltern women. Her body highlights the failure of Indian nationalism to consider lower-class third world women. Spivak analyzes this story from Marxist point of view. She criticizes Karl Marx's labour theory of value because it ignores the unwaged labour of women in the third world. Jashoda's breast which is her natural gift and her body becomes a commodity. Jashoda after having breast-fed over fifty children develops a lump on her breast diagnosed as breast-cancer. She dies a painful death.

Spivak joins Edward Said in order to criticize the way in which western writers have represented the third world (subaltern) or 'the orient' in their academic discourse. Orientalism is a term pertaining to 'the orient' as discovered, observed and described, in a sense, 'invented' by Europe and the West. As far as, literature is concerned it refers to the discourse by the West about the East, in all fields, such as, literary, sociological, and so on, which have no counter point in the east.

'Caliban' in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is depicted as subaltern/orient and secondary on the contrary Prospero represents the west or the colonizer who is a learned person appears to be controller of natural and unnatural forces of the Island. Prospero can be identified as figure of colonial authority and domination. Caliban accepts Prospero's supremacy. This is how in literature written by the west about the east represents non-white/third world people as subversive and voiceless. Prospero exploits the natives of the New World. Caliban is represented as primitive while Prospero seeks to be civilized. Prospero (England) imposes civilization on the natives as a part of his reformist venture. There is a false myth about 'Cannibals' of Caribbean in *The Tempest*. Caliban's name is like "Cannibal" also similar to Cariban- name used for the natives of the West Indies.

Similarly, in Daniel Defoe's 'Robinson Crusoe', Friday is a subaltern character who becomes slave and Robinson becomes a master. The hero Robinson becomes a prototype of British colonialist and Friday the symbol of subject races. Robinson is represented as Hercules with a muscular body while Friday a Negro and a cannibal as physically less strong than Crusoe. The oriental Third world women encountered by Crusoe are also shown as starkly nude. Robinson imposes upon Friday his language, religion and God. He teaches Friday to call him Master. In this text Friday is submissive, uncivilized and uncouth. It's important to read Robinson Crusoe in light of Spivak's theory of subaltern or from postcolonial point of view to expose the ideological representation of the subaltern or black races like Friday. It's easy to criticize Crusoe for his occasional brutality, like when he kills a sleeping lion on the beach for no reason. The cannibals from the place of Friday's island are shown when they are feasting on other cannibals by killing them. Actually cannibals eat their own kind, but only after the death, they do not kill and eat. From his tattered copy of the Bible, Crusoe begins to teach Christianity to Friday, who at first does not understand and asks many questions. After referring to Friday's people as 'blinded, ignorant pagans', Robinson remarks that by teaching his slave the gospel, he (Crusoe) has become a 'much better

scholar in the scripture knowledge. The important idea here is not just that he is teaching the native Christianity, but rather that he (Crusoe) is becoming a better Christian while enslaving another man.

In E.M.Foster's *A Passage to India* there are such stereotypes which are often applied to the oriental or Third World subaltern character. Adela Quested had prior knowledge about India and its strangeness. Dr. Aziz is a subaltern who has been silenced and is charged for rape even if he had done nothing like that. Mrs. Moore after coming to India speaks that Indians need civilization which the west can give them and is considered as superior than the east.

Spivak is often criticized for employing difficult theoretical language and methodologies for achieving her goal. Spivak still is of the view that European colonialism still continues to affect the cultural and political or economic life of the postcolonial nation states such as Algeria, Nigeria, Jamaica, India, and Mexico. She feels that America as a global economic super power holds the multinational corporate finance on the backs of the Third World women and men. She challenged some of the ideas about contemporary globalization. The dominant idea ignores the fact that economy is regulated by the rich industrial 'first world'. They leave aside the fact that majority of the world's population are poor and oppressed. Spivak highlights the political and economic interest of the west. She exposes how world is represented from the dominant and limited perspective of the 'first world', excluding the subalterns or the disenfranchised group. Literature too reflects the same socio-economic and political impact. Literature by the west is never innocent; it is always operated by the dominant ideas and power of the west. It tries to maintain the values of the European superiority and the inferior Third World (East) or subaltern. Transparent systems of representations such as literature are systems which control and dominate people even in the case of linguistic and philosophical representations.

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