



Questioning Subalternity: Between Colonizer and Colonized in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

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ABSTRACT

In India the practice of sati was very common and many women who became part of the rituals did it out of their love for their husbands. The society has played a major role in making sati a common phenomenon in the country so as to deny separate existence from men. The essay vindicates the apprehension of women in India who practice the widow sacrifice known as ‘Sati’ The practice of sati in the pre independent India was considered as a part of a barbaric culture by the Western world. Gyatri Chakravorty Spivak has become an authoritative voice of the post-colonial period and through her cultural and critical theories tried to challenge the legacy of colonialism. India is a land of varieties and vitalities that is divided into different states in the name of class, religion, language, authenticity, gender and citizenship. In this scattered outlook the condition of the subaltern is all the most



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pathetic. She came to the forefront of the literary circle with her celebrated essay “*Can the Subaltern Speak*”. Her critical discourse raises the issues of marginal subjects such as the place of the subaltern women in the society and their empowerment.

I. INTRODUCTION

Post-colonialism marks the end of the colonial period and the dawn of the New Era. The post-colonial period is the significant one for subalterns because both the nation and the people have just been relieved from the terrible clutches of colonial rule. This period embarks on a mission to reproduce the colonial experience of the subalterns in literary works. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (born on February 24, 1942) is an eminent scholar concerned with the relationship between Feminism, Post-colonialism, Deconstruction and the discourse of post-colonialist. She presents a feminist perspective on deconstruction, the Marxist critique of capital and the international division of labor, the critique of imperialism and colonial discourse and the critique of race in relation of nationally, ethnicity, the status of the migrant, and what it meant to identify a nation or a cultural form as post-colonial in a neo-classical world.

II. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Spivak emphasizes the intersections between race and gender, and sees a connection between women and colonized races, as both have been given the marginalized position of others and both have experienced oppression and repression. Her controversial statement about the subaltern implies a lot of inner meanings like the



subalterns are not able to have transactions with others because of the disparity that exists in the society.

Spivak writes that in some places where sati was practiced, such as Bangladesh women had the right to inherit which means there may have been some corrupting fiscal influences involved in the performance of sati.

She discusses the lack of an account of the sati practice, leading her to reflect on whether the subaltern can even speak. She recounts how sati appears in colonial archives and demonstrates that the western academy has obscured subaltern experience by assuming the transparency of its scholarship. Her over-riding Ethico-political concern has been for the site occupied by the subaltern especially subaltern women, both in discursive practices and in insinuations as much as western culture. She is hardly impressed with western efforts to speak for the other or try to present her own voice. She believes that the west is obsessed with preserving itself. As Edward Said wrote; *“She pioneered the study in literary theory of non-western women and produced one the earliest and most coherent accounts of the role available to us.”* [The New York Times, 09 February 2002, Section-B, Page-7, *Creating a Stir Wherever She Goes* By Dinitia Smith]

She describes an obscure tradition in parts of India, sati, where when a husband dies, the wife may choose to burn herself on the husband’s funeral pyre; often it was expected of a good wife. Sati as a women’s proper name is in fairly widespread use in India today. Naming a female infant “a good wife” has its own proleptic noun is not the primary operator in the proper name. Durga in her manifestation as a good wife, in the part of the story, Sati. She is already called that arrives at her father’s court uninvited, in the absence, even of an initiation for her divine husband Shiva. Her father starts abusing Shiva and Sati dies in pain. So, in ancient time if Sati, wife of lord Shiva commits suicide, it was not due to ritual but due to love towards her husband Shiva. It is important to note that at this time, widows could inherit the husband's property. So it makes sense from a patriarchal perspective to encourage this behavior so that sons could directly inherit, this is taking place under Britain's-Colonial rule. Eventually



this practice is outlawed while understandably recognizing that this was a good act by the British and not a violent imperial imposition insists that it still reflects the problem of representation and transparency. However, the women who were performing sati were never heard from. In the Indian cultural scenario, the hysteric graph failed to represent the contribution of women towards the materialization of Indian independence. It would be now difficult to retrieve the voice of the subaltern classes. Women had a very limited role to play in society as they were not allowed to think independently. The gendered subalterns are playing the role of mere shadows to please their men. It is clear that voices of the oppressed and marginalized are silenced in the hegemonic discourse. How can the subaltern be empowered to speak? She says in, *Can the Subaltern Speak; "Hindu.....regulative Psychobiography? Can a women Have access to **icchamrity-a Category of suicide** arising out of Knowledge of the 'it'-ness of the Subject? The question of gendering Here is not psychoanalytic or Counter psychoanalytic. It is the question of women's access to that paradox of the knowledge of the limits of knowledge where the strongest assertion of an agency can be an example of itself is suicide".*

Racial discrimination begins with the advent of colonialism and the colonialism had a specific game behind the venture. In the name of civilizing the East and purifying them from barbarity, the European forefathers imprinted their Footmarks on various countries as a source of autonomous power. Spivak explains the notions of violence with the example of reformation of the Hindu legal system reveals that such epistemic violence is kept alive by the establishment of one explanation and narrative of reality as the normative of reality as the normative one. She goes on to indicate that on the margins of the circuit marked out by epistemic violence are men and women among the illiterate peasants and tribal. She shows that it is either the white man explaining why sati is a barbaric custom and must be abolished or the brown insisting that it is a ritual that renders the women sacred. It was the finest example to support the argument that the subaltern women didn't get the opportunity to transact their ideas and convince the society. Spivak is a leading contemporary feminist deconstructionist who pays careful attention to issues of



gender and race. Her use of the term 'subaltern' is influenced by Italian, Antonio Gramsci and consistently referred to a subordinate position in terms of class, gender, race and culture. In '*Death of a Discipline*' Gyatri Chakravorty Spivak remarks;

“Nationalism only ever be a crucial political agenda against operation. all organs to the contrary, provide the absolute guarantee of identity”.

By 'subaltern' Spivak means the oppressed people or more generally the people that has no history and cannot speak. In other words it refers to the subordination of class, caste, gender, race language and culture. The main argument of her essay is between patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object formations, the figure of women disappears not into nothingness, but into a marginal position tradition and modernization.

Spivak's controversial statement “the subaltern cannot speak” implies a lot of inner meanings. The subaltern has the capacity to articulate things well and they can go to any extent so as to make their stand clear before the authorities. The subalterns were made to believe that they belong to an inferior race and so not fit for making any real contribution to society. The white settlers always emerged as champions of the superior race. Such type of comparisons subjugated the will and aspirations of subalterns. The white settlers very often resorted to violence for the implementation of various policies. The Imperialist acted on the principle that offence was the best form of defence. As women were tied down to four walls of their bedrooms, they hardly had an opportunity to speak and even when they spoke something they could not transact the proper message. The peace of the funeral pyre of her dead husband turns out to be the first and the last platform for a woman to speak. The women may try to speak but others won't have patience to listen to her. The communication system fails when the speaker is not able to convince the receiver.

Spivak famously gives the example of English classes in India as India has actually played a subtle but powerful role in perpetuating an imperialist civilizing mission. She adds in *A Critique of Imperialism*; “It should not be possible to read



nineteenth century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as English social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English.”(242)

Another misreading of the concept is that, since not speak, she needs an advocate to speak for her affirmative action or special regulatory protection-Spivak object “*Who the hell wants to protect subalternity?No activist wants to keep the subaltern in the space of different..... You did not give the subaltern voice.....you work against subalternity.” (1992:46)*

Spivak emphasizes the intersections between race and gender, and sees a connection between women and colonized races, as both have been given the marginalized position of others and both have experienced oppression and repression. She believes that the subaltern cannot speak’ is derived from general statements in which the subaltern women is conceived as a single and homogeneous category and that there are ways that these women have articulated their presence.

The subaltern is one who has no position or sovereignty outside the discourse that constructs her as subject. The subaltern cannot speak and is hence spoken for and has no position of enunciation: she remains within the discourse of patriarchy and colonialism as the object of somebody else’ discourse subaltern is used to denote the entire people that is subordinate in term of class, caste, age, and gender, or in any way.

The historical process of colonial India was marked by an admixture of pre-capitalist and capitalist relations. The nature of power, exploitation and popular resistance in such a society was not therefore amenable to adequate understanding in terms of distinct class categories that can be clearly enunciated. Spivak is hardly impressed with western efforts to speak for the other or try to present his own voice. She believes that the west is oppressed with preserving itself as subject and that any discourse is eventually about the discoursing agents themselves.



“Spivak is a unique voice of courage and conceptual ambition that addressed public life from the perspective of psychic reality, encouraging us to acknowledge the solidarity and the suffering through which we emerge as subjects of freedom.”

Spivak is primarily concerned with the issue of whether people who have been historically dispossessed or exploited by European colonialism are able to achieve a voice. Spivak does agree with the introduction of the term subaltern which conventionally refers to a junior ranking officer in the British army.

The subaltern figure could be historically understood as those under the control of colonial powers or a victim of slavery, they can be understood as the completely powerless. Problem of subject formation or representation – for Foucault the subject is knowledge and for Derrida the subject is always a subject of the West. For Spivak, this is a problem of assumed transparency in Western intellectualism, which dismisses the problem of representation without acknowledging that ideologies are often delineated through what remains unsaid.

She began the final part of her essay by asking what the elite must do in order to avoid continuing to construct the subaltern. As mentioned earlier, Spivak broadens the definition of the subaltern to include women and their histories. She uses the example of sati in colonial India and the story of *Bhubaneshwari*, a relative of Spivak who hanged herself 1926. Her suicide exemplifies the ‘interventionist practice’ that resistance entails, the absorption of her story into the broader culture reveals the futility of such gestures in the face of the patriarchal order. *Bhaduri* affirms that the woman is assigned no position of articulation, she did so carefully transmitting certain signals through the details of how she staged the event. She was so careful to hang herself during menstrual cycle, so that it was clear that she was not pregnant at the time of her death. Everyone else speaks of her. Spivak formulates the sentence ‘*White men are saving brown women from brown men*’ and states that the sentence discloses her politics. Applying this sentence to the example of the practice and subsequent abolishment of the practice of sati, Spivak shows us that it is either the white man explaining why Sati is a barbaric custom and must be abolished. At no point



is the voice of the 'brown' heard. It is women who become sati, yet no one comes across the 'testimony of the women's voice consciousness.' She is continuously written as the object of either patriarchy or of imperialism. She addressed the way the Subaltern' women are constructed, as absent or silent or not listened to. The main argument of her essay is that between patriarchy and imperialism.

Spivak asserts that women are restricted to being the subject of men because they are only included in the student and marriage life stages, since this aspect of problem with sati (and the larger problem with the lack of gender) was never articulated by either the British or the Hindu leaders, it becomes apparent that ideology is at play and that the subaltern position effectively silenced.

The subaltern is all too often silenced. It is true; swallowed in ethnocentric representation, or, muted out right by the interests of power we cannot give voice to the subaltern without supplanting it; perhaps much of the problems lies in our ability to listen for the quiet; perhaps we need to listen for what the silence signifies. Spivak is against any attempt to express the voice of subalterns by intellectuals because the intellectual is a transparent medium through which the subaltern emerges. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*; Gyatri Chakravorty Spivak says;

One must ignore the innumerable Subaltern examples of resistance throughout the imperialist and pre-imperialist centuries, often suppressed by those very force of nationalism which would be instrumental in changing the geo-political conjuncture from territorial imperialism to neo-colonialism and which seem particularly useless in current situations of struggle. (2012: 338)

Spivak's theory of subalternity is still relevant as people suffer in the name of gender, class and creed. As change is the only permanent thing in the world, the subaltern should continue to make their position clear before the authorities. It is only when the authorities heed to the pleas of the subaltern that a new dawn of life may be enjoyed by the subalterns in its fullness.

The subaltern was subjected to colonial rule and only the colonizer had the voice. The subaltern women continue to suffer and there is little scope for further improvement. The position of the subaltern can know only the subaltern, only women can know women, and so on, cannot be held as a theoretical presupposition either, for it predicates the possibility of knowledge on identity. In an interview with the editors Gyatri Spivak further explains the controversial statement, *‘the subaltern cannot speak’* as;

“It means that even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard and speaking and hearing complete the speech act. That’s what it had meant, and anguish marks the spot”

She says that subaltern are not allowed to speak because possession of a single ‘voice’ makes one essentialist and reductionist not allowing for a looking at a class and discusses the problem of widow sacrifice in great detail and reiterates her stand point that subaltern can’t speak and the condition of woman is even more complicated. It would be now very difficult to recover the dissenting voice of the subaltern and the case is further complicated as they lost between colonial power structure and the Hindu religious codes.

III. CONCLUSION

From the earliest days of exploration and colonization, Postcolonialism critically examined the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Spivak rejected the idea that there is a pre-colonial past that we can recover. Nostalgia of lost origin, roots and native culture is a flawed project because there is no pure pre-colonial past to recover; it has been changed by colonialism. India's colonial state could never aspire to an absolute and exclusive control over the body of each and every-one of its subject. But there existed a latent claim that became operative in certain administrative, judicial and medical contexts. The early 19th century attempts to abolish sati and female infanticide were preliminary demonstrations of this arrogation of corporal power what we can do is only understand the “worlding” of



the “Third World”. Worlding is a process through which the local population was persuaded to accept the European version of reality for understanding the social world.

The Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci first theoretical apply the term as a part of Marxist Theory during 1920 in order to describe the unorganized masses that must be politicized for the workers Revolution to succeed. Subalterns, according to Spivak are those who belong to the third world countries and it is impossible for them to speak up as they are divided by gender, class, caste, religion and other native which do not allow them to stand up in unity.

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الملخص

لقد أصبحت ممارسة ساتي شائعة جدًا في الهند والكثير من النساء اشتركن فيها بسبب حبهنّ لازواجهنّ. إنّ المجتمع لعب دورا حاسما في انتشار هذه الممارسة في البلاد لانكار وجود منفصل لامرأة بلا رجل. هذا المقال هو تبرئة تخوّف نساء الهند الواتي يمارسن التضحية المعروفة بسم ساتي. اعتقدت ممارسة ساتي في الهند قبل الاستقلال عادة بربريّة من قبل العالم الغربي. أصبحت ج. س. جاكروفورتبي صوتا مؤثرا في مرحلة ما بعد الاستعمار. لقد حاولت التحدي ارث الاستعمار من خلال نظريّات ثقافية ونقدية. تكون الهند منقسمة من موقف الولايات وطبقات وديانات ولغات واصالة وجنس و جنسيّة. وفي مثل هذه الظروف يكون وضع السفلي مثيرا للسففة. اتت هذه الكاتبة الشاحجة الى الدائرة الادبيّة بمقال معروف اسمه "هل من الممكن للسفلي ان يتكلم؟" يرتفع خطابها الانتقادي مواضيع هامشة وفي طريق مثال وضع النساء ذوات المكانة المنخفضة .

پوخته:

له هیندا ئەنجامدانی (ساتی) واتە خۆفیداکاری کرداریکی گشتگیربوو وە بەشیکی زۆر له ئافرهتهکان وەك نهریتیک ئەنجامیان ئەدا بەهۆی خۆشهویستیان بۆ هاوسەرەکانیان. کۆمەلگا رۆلی سەرەکی هەبوو له کردنی (ساتی) بە دیاردەیکی بەرێڵاو له نێو وڵاتدا بۆ رەتکردنەوهی جیا بوون له پیاوان. ئەم نوسراوه بەرگریکردنە له ئافرهته تۆقیوهکان له نێو هیندا ئەوانەى كه کرداری خۆفیداکاری بێوهژنی ئەنجامدەدەن ناسراوه بە (ساتی) جێبەجێکردنی دیاردەى (ساتی) له پێش هیندی سەرەخۆ وەك بەشیکی له کهلتوری باربارک له جیهانی خۆرناو. گایاتری چاکراڤۆرتی سپۆنک بوو بە یەکی له دەنگە رەسمى و باوەرپێکراوهکانی ماوهی دواى داگیرکاری وە ئەو بەهۆی بێردۆزە رۆشنیبیری و رەخنەیهکانیهوه هەولیدا که بەرەنگاری رێچەى داگیرکاریتی بکات. هیند خاکی هەمهجووری و چالاکیه که دابەش کراوه بەسەر چەند بەشی جیاواز له ژێر ناوی چینهیهتی، نایین، زمان، رەسەنایەتی، رەگەز وەهەرۆهەها رەگەزنامە. لەم دیمەنە بۆلەبوووەدا باروودۆخی ئاست نزمەکان زیاتر شایەنی بەزەى پێداهاتنەوهن. نوسەر ئەو هات بە پێشەنگی بۆ بازەى ئەدەبی بە بەرهمە ناودارهکەى " دەتوانی ئاست نزم قسەبکات؟". ووتارە رەخنەگرێهەکەى ئەو جەخت دەکاتە سەر دۆزە پەراویزخراوهکان بابهتی وەك شوینی ئافرهتانی چهوساوهی ئاست نزم له نێو کۆمەلگا وە هەرۆهەها دەسەلاتی رینگەپێدراویان.