

From Orientalism to Subaltern: Re- Reading Said, Bhabha, And Spivak on Postcolonial Identity and Pedagogical Reform in Indian University Syllabi

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Abstract

This paper tries to understand postcolonial theory through the three prominent thinkers Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. While Said's *Orientalism*(1978) shows how Western writing made the East look like an inferior 'other', Bhabha questioned this East-West divide itself. He used concepts like Hybridity, Mimicry, and 'Culture Intermixing' in *The Location of Culture* (1994). Spivak took it even further by asking "can the subaltern speak?", she pointed out epistemic violence and how suppressed groups cannot represent themselves. When we read them together, the three theorists map how postcolonial thought moved from questioning representation, to figuring out identity negotiation, to asking who actually gets to speak. My point here is simple that Said spots the problem, Bhabha maps the middle ground, and Spivak demands we take ethical responsibility for the excluded. In India, I will use these ideas to look at English literature syllabi and classroom teaching. I want to show that how postcolonialism question not only land occupation but also the control over knowledge, language, and imagination.

Keywords: Orientalism, Hybridity, Subaltern, Postcolonialism, Epistemic Violence, Third Space.

Introduction

Postcolonial theory came up as a critical response to what colonialism left behind not just politically, but in culture and thinking. It looks at how power did not only through armies and economic control. Power also work through knowledge, literature, and education. The field really took off after Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978. Said's argued that the west created the East as its inferior 'other' to justify ruling over it. Later, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak expanded this idea. They shifted focus from just representation to the complex processes of identity formation and the politics of voice.

Said showed how Western writings, literature, and art constantly painted the Orient as backward, irrational, and exotic. Bhabha complicated this binary model in *The Location of Culture* (1994). He brought in ideas like Hybridity, Mimicry, and the Third Space' to explain how colonizer and colonized interact in those grey, in between zones. Spivak in her essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*"(1988), pushed the debate further. She asked whether the most marginalized groups can ever really be heard inside the dominant system of knowledge. That's where she introduced the idea of 'epistemic violence'.

When you put them together, these thinkers maps how postcolonial thought evolved from questioning representation, to working through identity, to the ethics of voice. People study them a lot individually, but very few studies use all three together to look at Indian education. That's a problem because English

literature syllabi in Indian universities, which were designed under colonial rule, still shape how students read both Western and Indian texts today.

This paper uses Said, Bhabha, and Spivak to Study these syllabi. The main question I am asking is do they help build critical imagination toward the ‘other’, or do they just repeat the same old colonial hierarchies of knowledge? I want to check if our current teaching actually meets spivak’s call for ‘aesthetic education’ or if we are just continuing intellectual colonization in a new form.

1. Edward Said and the problem of representation

Edward W. Said’s *Orientalism*, published in 1978, is usually seen as the founding text of postcolonial studies. Said, a Palestinian- American professor of comparative literature at Columbia University, was mainly concerned with how the West portrayed Arab and Asian societies. He argued that “*Orientalism*” was not just an academic subject about the East. it was actually powerful system of thought that Europe used to control and even create the Orient politically, sociologically, and in people’s imagination.

Said’s main point is pretty blunt: “The Orient was almost a European invention” (Said 1). This does not mean the region itself was not real. What he meant was that the idea of the Orient, as this timeless, exotic, backward, and dangerous place, was built up in western books, painting, and research. This made up version of the Orient played a huge role. It let the West define itself as rational, modern and superior by comparison. The Orient basically became the west’s ‘other’. For Said, this whole method was tied directly to power.

He borrowed Michel Foucault’s idea of discourse to show that knowledge about the orient was never neutral. European writers, scholars, novelists, and colonial officers produced knowledge that made colonial rule look rational and necessary. Things like doing censuses, surveying land, writing travelogues, and teaching English literature were not unbiased. They were ways of ruling the orient by defining it. So *Orientalism* shifted the study of colonialism. It was not just about wars and economics anymore it was about culture and representation. Said proved that power also works through what we read and learn.

1.2 Three Mechanisms of Orientalism

Edward Said argues that Orientalism works through three connected method. These methods helped the West dominate the East not only with armies, but with ideas. Understanding this is really important if we want to see how colonial power still works in education today.

Academic Orientalism

This is about how European universities produced knowledge about Asia and the Middle East. From the 1700s, colleges in London and Paris started teaching Sanskrit and Arabic. The aim was not cultural exchange. It was to collect data that could describe Eastern societies for Western readers. Said calls this building an archive that spoke about the Orient, but never let it speak for itself (Said 3).

For example, British officials made detailed lists of Indian caste and drew maps of villages. They praised ancient Indian texts but at the same time argued that modern Indian could not match that past. This gave them a kind of ethical excuse to govern. They basically showed themselves as guardians of a declining culture. So here, research and teaching became part of colonial power. The university did not stay neutral. It turned into a place where colonial authority was produced through books and exam.

Imaginative Orientalisms

Imaginative Orientalism works through stories, artworks, and novels. It built the East as a land of dreams, danger, and longing in the Western mind. These images were everywhere in Europe and shaped what people thought, often more than facts did (Said 12). French artists painted harems and wars. British writers described bazaars and temples as odd and timeless.

Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* is a prime case. The hero is a white boy who understand India better than Indians. The story makes India look colorful but helpless. Such books led British people to believe Indians could not govern themselves. Even now, ads showing 'mystical India' draw on the same old notion. Stories framed how the west viewed us.

Institutional Orientalism

Here, book-ideas turn into actual laws. The British used their studies to control India. Macaulay's 1835 policy is the clearest example. He argued English books should replace Indian ones to create clerks who think like the British (Said 36).

The British also created 'Hindu Law' and 'Muslim Law' by picking only old texts. This made religion more rigid than before. Even railways were called a 'gift' to a poor country. Thus Orientalism shifted from the library to the office and school. We still noticed its impact today: English papers are compulsory, but Indian language texts are optional.

1.3 limits of Said and link to India

Said's *Orientalism* transformed how we study colonialism. But it also has some flaws. These flaws matter when we examine Indian college today. Said claims the West always depicted the East as weak and backward. This is termed a 'binary'. He present West vs East as two opposing sides. This is too simple (Clifford 259).

In reality, Indians did not merely accept British ideas. They also opposed, altered, and used those ideas. For example, Raja Rammohan Roy studied English but used it to fight against Sati Practice. Said's theory does not explain this mix well. It suggests the East had no voice. But Indians were speaking and writing back. So, we need ideas that show both power and resistance.

This problem is seen in our B.A syllabus today. Macaulay sought Indians who were "Indians in blood, but English in taste" (Said 36). We still follow that. Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth are compulsory but Kabir, Tagore, or Dalit poems are optional or missing. We read more British books than Indians ones. This suggests English culture is better. This is how colonial ideas persist without British soldiers.

So, Said reveled the problem. But we need a new idea to grasp the mix and resistance. Homi K. Bhabha offers us that idea with 'Third Space' where two cultures meet and form a new one. It is not just West and East. It is a blend.

2. Homi K. Bhabha and the politics of in-between

While Edward Said's *Orientalism* marked colonialism as a discourse of power, Homi Bhabha moves the focus to the space between colonizer and the colonized. In *The Location of the Culture* (1994), Bhabha claims that cultural identity is not fixed or pure (Bhabha 1). When two cultures interact, a liminal zone appears, which he terms the 'Third space' or 'in-between space'. This space is not merely a site of

domination, but one of negotiation, translation, and mutual transformation. It destabilizes binary oppositions of West/East or self/other.

For example, the growth of Indian English literature or the Indian legal system shows this process. Indian English novels are neither fully western in form nor purely indigenous in content. They adopt the colonizer's language to voice postcolonial experience. Likewise, the Indian constitution borrows from British parliamentary models yet includes uniquely Indian principles of social justice. These cultural forms are results of hybridization that question colonial authority from within.

Bhabha thus goes beyond Said's framework of opposition. He studies the processes that happen in the middle ground, where power is challenged rather than simply imposed. The viewpoint is vital for studying the contemporary Indian classroom. It let us to ask whether our curriculum works as a Third space for critical exchange, or merely repeats colonial hierarchies. To address this, Bhabha gives three central concepts Hybridity, mimicry, and the Third space.

2.1 From Binary to Third space

Colonial thinking was first built on a binary model. Edward Said showed this in *Orientalism*. The west framed itself as modern and rational. It labeled the East as backward and traditional (Said 5). This created two fixed categories colonizer and colonized. Power was viewed as one-sided. In *The Location of culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha challenges this binary framework (Bhabha1). He claims that cultures do not stay separate during colonial contact. When the British and Indians interacted, both were changed. Bhabha terms this interaction as a 'Third Space' a zone where new meanings form (Bhabha 37).

Within the Third Space, cultural meaning is not fixed. The colonized do not engage in direct imitation. They translate and alter colonial ideas. This leads to new cultural expressions. Indian English literature and Parsi theatre shows this process. These forms are neither fully British nor fully Indian. They are hybrid.

Thus, the move from binary to Third Space marks a shift from fixed opposition to cultural negotiation. The binary suggests total control. The Third Space reveals that authority is always questioned. This framework helps examine if our curriculum simply repeats colonial models or generates critical dialogue. Hybridity and mimicry are key concepts Bhabha provides to examine this process.

Hybridity is a core idea in Homi K. Bhabha's theory. It means to the blending of cultures that occurs in the Third Space. Under colonial rule, the colonized did not just copy the colonizer. They merged foreign and local elements to form new forms. These new forms are hybrid since they belong to neither culture completely (Bhabha 112). For instance, Indian English novels use the English language but express Indian experiences. Likewise, Girish Karnad's plays like *Hayavadana* adopt western dramatic structures yet are rooted in Indian folks tales and myths. This creates a Culturally Hybrid play. Hybridity proves that colonial authority is never complete. The colonized actively reshaped what they receive. Hence, hybridity is a form of resistance. It questions the binary of pure colonizer and pure colonized by creating something new form the cultural encounter.

Mimicry is another central concept in Homi K. Bhabha's work. It refers to the colonized subject's imitation of the colonizer's language, culture, and habits. However, this imitation is never precise. Bhabha terms it as "almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha 86). This small difference is crucial.

Macaulay's *Minute on Education*, 1835 aimed to create Indian administrators who adopted western culture but stay racially distinct. This gap between the copy and the original produces mockery and challenges colonial authority. The colonizer wants the colonized to imitate but also stay different to keep control. Thus mimicry is not submission. It is an indirect form of resistance because the imperfect copy unsettles colonial power.

The third space is Homi K. Bhabha's main concept for grasping cultural interaction. It is not physical location but a space of negotiation that appears when two cultures meet under colonialism (Bhabha 37). In this space, cultural meanings are not fixed. Both Colonizer and Colonized affect each other. The colonized subject does not passively take colonial culture. Instead, they translate, adapt, and question it. This process creates new, hybrid identities and forms of expressions. For instance, the Indian constitution uses western legal ideas but adds Indian value of diversity and social justice. Hence, the Third Space is productive. It proves that colonial power is not absolute. It is always questioned and altered through cultural exchange in this in-between area.

2.2 Postcolonial Pedagogy

Using Bhabha's concepts in the Indian Classroom examine whether Education forms a Third Space or only Mimicry. Gauri Viswanathan claims that English literature was introduced for colonial control (Viswanathan 3). If students only memorize Shakespeare without connecting him to their own world, the classroom creates mimicry. They can recite "tomorrow and tomorrow" but cannot share their own ideas in English. Bhabha states that such imitation is always incomplete and holds a crucial difference (Bhabha 86).

Rukmini Bhaya Nair argues the classroom should become a Third space. Here, texts are negotiated, not imposed. For instance, teaching *Macbeth* along with Indian politics or folk tales helps students translate Shakespeare into their context. This results in the making of a new mixed cultural expression. Thus, the syllabus alone is not the issue. The teaching method determines the outcome. If the classroom allows students to use English for critical thought, it builds a Third space. If it only teaches repetition, it stays mimicry.

3. Gayatri Spivak and the question of the subaltern

Gayatri Spivak's 1988 essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" marks a shift in postcolonial theory. While Edward Said revealed representation and Homi Bhabha explored hybridity. Spivak raises the question of voice. She asks whether the most oppressed group can truly speak for themselves inside existing power structures. Spivak borrows the terms 'subaltern' from Antonio Gramsci. However, she redefines it. For her, the subaltern is not simply the oppressed. It points to those fully cut off from paths of the social mobility. This group has no access to education, law, or political representation. Their position is formed by caste, class, and gender, which together silence their voice (Spivak 283).

Her main example is the abolition of sati in colonial India. The British outlawed sati to represent themselves as moral reformers. Indian elite men defended it as cultural traditional. In this entire debate, the widow herself was missing. She was spoken for by others but never allowed to speak. Spivak shows that colonialism and patriarchy mute the subaltern women. This leads to Spivak's central claims. She claims that when intellectuals try to 'represent' the subaltern, they often repeat the same violence. The act

of speaking for others turns them into objects of knowledge. Even sympathetic scholars cannot fully recover the subaltern's voice because the language and institutions are run by elite.

Therefore, Spivak answer is that the subaltern cannot speak within current systems. Her essay does not end in despair. It asks scholars to check their own privilege before claiming to give voice. For Indian universities, this is vital. If Dalit or Tribal texts are taught only through English and western theory, epistemic violence continues. The syllabus must ask who speaks, who listens, and who stays silent.

3.1 Epistemic Violence and Representation

a. Epistemic Violence

Spivak brings the concept of 'epistemic violence' to show how knowledge itself can mute people. This violence does not occur through physical force. It happens through education, law, and literature. The colonial system builds categories and definitions that decide who can be heard and who cannot (Spivak 280). In Indian Universities, this violence carries on through the syllabus. English literature is often taught as the standard form of knowledge. Local languages, oral traditions, and Regional histories are pushed to the margins or treated as optional. For instance, a Tribal student may study Shakespeare but never find Gond and Bhil stories in the core curriculum. Their knowledge system is labeled as 'not academic'.

Thus, the student learns to value western texts above their own culture. They are taught to speak in English about Hamlet, but their mother tongue has no place in the classroom. This is epistemic violence. The structure of knowledge itself erases the subaltern's voice before they even join the debate. The problem is not that they are silent. The problem is that the system is built not to hear them.

b. Problem of Speaking for

Spivak cautions against the idea of 'speaking for' the subaltern. Intellectuals and teachers often say they represent oppressed group with good intentions. However, this act repeats colonial power. The subaltern becomes an object to be studied, not a sub who speaks. In the classroom, this occurs when a professor explains Dalit literature without involving Dalit students or scholars. The text is read through Western theory, and the real life experience of the community is ignored. The Teachers speaks about the subaltern, but the subaltern is not given room to speak. Spivak claims that representation is always a form of power. Even when we try to help, we must ask who gains from our speech. If the elite continue to control the language and the platform, the subaltern remains unheard. Therefore, simply adding a few marginal texts to the syllabus is not enough.

c. Aesthetic Education

As a solution, Spivak suggests 'Aesthetic education'. This means training the Imagination to hear to the other. It does not give fixed conclusions or prescriptive solutions. It involves learning to read slowly, to examine our own social position, and to unlearn inherited privilege (Spivak 13). In practice, this changes the classroom. Rather than finding set themes in a Dalit poem, students are asks to consider how their own caste location shapes their reading. Instead of forcing Western theory on a tribal novel, the class explores how the text redefines the theory itself. The goal is to cultivate ethical responsibility in interpretation. Aesthetic education does not claim to 'give voice' to the subaltern. It prepares the reader to notice that voice when it appears. For NEP 2020's call to decolonize the syllabus, this distinction matters. Simply

inserting ‘Indian knowledge system’ into curriculum will have little impact if the pedagogical approach stays western. We must revise our methods of reading, not only the content we read.

3.2 Spivak in Indian universities

When we apply Spivak’s ideas to Indian universities we see clear gap in today’s syllabus reforms. Many colleges have started adding Dalit and Tribal literature now. NEP 2020 also pushes an ‘Indian education system’ to decolonize learning. But Spivak’s theory digs deeper. It is not enough to add new texts. We must check if the structure of the learning still creates epistemic violence.

First, we see the problem of access. Most MA English syllabi include only one or two Dalit poems or a single Tribal novel. These usually placed in optional papers. The core curriculum still focuses on Shakespeare, Milton, and other British writers. As a result, marginal voices remain at the edge. A student from a Tribal community studies English literature for two years but rarely reads stories from their own culture. The knowledge system marks their tradition as less important. This is epistemic violence. The syllabus decides what counts as ‘literature’ and what does not.

Second is the method. Even when Dalit or Tribal texts are taught in the class teacher are explain them through western theory. A professor might use Bhabha’s hybridity or Said’s Orientalism to discuss a Dalit autobiography. The real life experience of caste is reduced to a theoretical model. The author’s voice is filtered through academic jargons. Spivak calls this ‘speaking for’ the subaltern. The teacher talks about the text, but the community it belongs to it is not part of the discussion. So the subaltern remains an object of study. Therefore, NEP 2020’s goal will stay incomplete if we only changes the content. Adding ‘Indian knowledge system’ helps, but the method of teaching must change too. Spivak’s idea of Aesthetic Education is useful here. The classroom should train students to question their own position. Students must ask how their caste, class and language shape their reading of a text. The goal is not to find the ‘correct’ meaning. The goal is build responsibility towards the other.

This connects all three theorists. Said pointed out the problem of representation in colonial knowledge. Bhabha showed how hybridity and negotiation work in culture. Spivak gives us the ethics for reading and teaching. Together, they show that decolonizing the syllabus is not about removing Shakespeare. It is about changing how we read him, who we read with him, and whose voices we bring in to the classroom.

Conclusion

This research paper looked at the issue of postcolonial identity in Indian university syllabi using three main theorists. Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak each give us a different lens to understand how English literature is taught in India Today. Their idea make it clear that real decolonization needs more than just changing the reading list.

Said led the groundwork for the problem through Orientalism. His concept shows how colonial knowledge built a false image of the East. They painted the East as emotional, backward, and silent just to justify colonial rule. He showed that colonial power worked by controlling knowledge itself. In Indian universities, we still see this when British literature remains the core tradition. Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth run the syllabus while Indian writing in English, Dalit literature, and Tribal narratives get pushed to optional papers. Consequently, the curriculum repeats the old pattern where the west defines

literary value. Said's work explain why just adding a few Indian authors does not break the deeper hierarchy. The whole framework of knowledge itself stays intact.

Bhabha gives us tools to think about cultural transformation. His idea of hybridity, mimicry, and the Third space shows that culture is never pure. The colonized did not just copy they adapted and subverted the colonizer's language and texts. The Third space is where new meanings emerge through negotiation. If we apply this to teaching, it means the meaning of Macbeth is not fixed in England. It shifts depending on our own social and political context. An Indian classroom can turn into a Third space where Shakespeare and folk tales are gets read together. This leads to cultural mixing. However, Bhabha mainly focuses on how to create negotiation between cultures.

Spivak gives us the ethics of reading. Her work on the subaltern and epistemic violence makes us asks how we should teach. She argues that just adding Dalit or Tribal texts is not enough if the method of teaching stays western. The point of aesthetic education is to train students to question their own social position before they speak about others. This builds responsibility towards voices that have been ignored for long.

Therefore, the answer to the research question is clear. The current MA English syllabus still repeats colonial hierarchies because it uses western theory as the main lens for reading. Even when Indian content is added, epistemic violence remains if students are not taught to unlearn privilege. The paper suggests two changes. First, at least 50% of core syllabus should include Indian and marginal literatures, not just as optional papers. Second, teachers should use aesthetic education exercises. Students need to reflect on how their caste, language, and class affect the way they read of any text.

Future research can look at how digital classrooms and online archives might create new forms of Orientalism, and how regional universities are actually implement NEP 2020 into practice despite problem like constraints of staff training, library funding, and lack of theory texts in Hindi and other languages. Decolonizing the syllabus remains an ongoing task. It requires constant attention to both what is taught and how it is taught, so that classroom becomes a space for justice instead of just repeating colonial patterns. The internet does give access to more voices, but it will also copy the same old power structures if the method of reading does not change.

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