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Interrogating Subaltern Voice: Representation and Epistemic Violence in Spivak's Postcolonial Theory

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Abstract:
This paper critically examines the concept of subalternity in the writings of Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, with particular emphasis on her seminal essay *"Can the Subaltern Speak?"* and her subsequent theoretical interventions. Situated within postcolonial discourse, the study explores how questions of voice, representation, and epistemic violence shape the conditions under which marginalized subjects are rendered audible or silenced within dominant systems of knowledge. Drawing on Spivak's interdisciplinary engagement with Marxism, feminism, and deconstruction, the paper analyzes subalternity as a positional condition produced through material exploitation, gendered power relations, and discursive mediation rather than as a stable or recoverable identity. Through a close theoretical and textual analysis, the study highlights Spivak's critique of historiographical transparency and intellectual mediation, demonstrating how attempts to recover or represent subaltern voices often risk reproducing structures of domination. Particular attention is given to the gendered dimensions of subalternity, illustrated through Spivak's reading of the sati discourse, which reveals the double marginalization of subaltern women within colonial and patriarchal frameworks. The paper also engages with critical responses to Spivak's work, reassessing the claim that the subaltern cannot speak as a methodological provocation rather than a literal denial of agency. The study concludes by underscoring the continuing relevance of Spivak's intervention for contemporary postcolonial literary criticism, emphasizing the need for ethical reflexivity and critical vigilance in engagements with marginal narratives in an era of globalization and mediated representation.

Keywords: Subalternity; Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak; Representation; Epistemic Violence; Marxism; Feminism; Deconstruction

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of Subaltern Studies is a critical turning point in the development of the postcolonial discourse as it transitions into an extended focus on the less-than-elite lives and experiences (Guha, 1982). Started in the early 1980s by historians including Ranajit Guha, the Subaltern Studies collective aimed to criticise the colonial historiography as well as the nationalist histories which still focused on dominant social groups. By relying on the idea of the subaltern as being part of the group that had been not included in the hegemonic power, as put forward by Antonio Gramsci, the project focused on retrieving the histories of subordinates who had been marginalized historically, including peasants, workers, women, and other

non-dominant communities (Gramsci, 1971; Guha, 1983). Even in the case of Subaltern Studies trying to preempt agency at the base of the oppressed, the challenge of taking up the subaltern experience, however, without reproducing the epistemological frameworks that had already created their marginalization, a greater theoretical issue arose (Prakash, 1994). In this context, voice and representation became the key questions of post colonial inquiry. The marginal narratives do not by any mere absence become part of the historical and literary documents, but are filtered, translated and reframed using dominant discursive systems. Voice cannot therefore be interpreted only as the ability to speak, but it is to be studied in connection to the circumstances that make speech understandable and acceptable in regimes of knowledge. Representation in literature, historiography or even political discourse is a two-sided process: it can be aimed to restore the oppressed perspectives, but it also can be used against the oppressed (distorting it) (Spivak, 1988). The subaltern, therefore, finds himself in a paradoxical status, used as an object of study and yet excluded of the structural aspect to actually have full participation in the discursive that purports to represent them. It is along this troubled ground that Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak appears as one of the most powerful and disturbing names of the postcolonial and feminist theory. The intellectual stance of Spivak is characterized by the fact that she does not consider subalternity as a fixed or recoverable identity. She predicts using Marxism the material circumstances of class relations, labor, and economic exploitation that are the conditions of subaltern existence; she emphasizes the gendered aspects of marginalization using a feminist theory, and the unsteadiness of meaning and limits of representation itself using the Derridean deconstruction (Spivak, 1988; Spivak, 1999). This interdisciplinary participation allows Spivak to criticize not only the colonial discourse, but also those efforts well-intentioned to provide voice to the marginalized postcolonial or feminist. The argument of subaltern speech has been radically critical with Spivak seminally intervening in the debate with her article titled, Can the Subaltern Speak? Spivak does not pose the question of whether marginalized subjects have agency or consciousness, but inquires about the epistemological and discursive circumstances of considering speech to have a meaning. The argument that she puts across is that the subaltern is not merely unheard but is structurally silenced, placed within the systems of power through which power mediates and overwrites their expression (Spivak, 1988). Disclosing the collusion of intellectuals, historians, and theorists to operations of representation, Spivak thus transfigures the question of voice as an ethical and theoretical question as opposed to an entirely empirical one. This framing requires a re-evaluation of the manner in which postcolonial criticism endeavors to practice marginal narratives and the need to maintain a kind of sustained reflexivity in working with the figure of the subaltern.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM, OBJECTIVES, AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

One of the core issues in the postcolonial theory is the issue of subaltern speech paradox. Postcolonial discourse attempts to reinstate lost voices, but it is also faced with such a challenge of being able to represent these voices non-mediated. The subaltern is often referred to as an object of study, but is structurally bounded within systems of knowledge that are dominant. The issue is here, then, not that subaltern speech is empirically inexpressible, but that it is subjected to such circumstances that it becomes inaudible or incomprehensible within the hegemonic discourse. The intervention of Spivak brings about the difference of the empirical expression and structural silencing. Marginalized subjects can talk and even rebel in lived experiences, yet their talk may be filtered, translated, or even stolen through the framework of colonial, nationalist and elite intellectual discourse. Through this mediation process, an epistemic violence is created in which subaltern knowledge is destroyed or misrepresented even in the efforts to

represent it. The theoretical interests of posing the question of whether the subaltern can speak in this way go beyond questions of agency to the question of whether the discourse of intellectual targeting can be interrogated as to the complicity of such discourse in reproducing and maintaining power relations. The current study is guided by this issue and seeks to achieve two things. First, it attempts to critically review the notion of the subaltern in the works of Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, with specific focus being on Can the Subaltern Speak? and her new theoretical interventions. Second, it looks at the manner in which Spivak approaches Marxism, feminism, and deconstruction to influence her perception of the subalternity and voice. The study is theoretical and textual in nature. It concentrates on the chosen major works by Spivak dealing with subalternity, representation and epistemic violence and uses the postcolonial, feminist, Marxist and deconstructive approaches to analysis. The field studies and the comparative field studies cannot be subject of empirical research, and this paper can be well focused and coherent with the conceptual problem of subaltern speech.

3. THE CONCEPT OF THE SUBALTERN: THEORETICAL ORIGINS AND SPIVAK'S INTERVENTION

The term subaltern has a theoretical origin in the political works of Antonio Gramsci, who defined the term as social groups that are not brought directly to the hegemonic power (Gramsci, 1971). In the formulation of Gramsci, the subaltern groups are beyond the framework of political representation and cultural hegemony, and they do not have the institutional resources to voice their interests in the political arena. Subalternity is therefore not only an economic state of deprivation but an output of unequal relations of power where domination is supported by the coercion and consent combination. Gramsci with his focus on hegemony prefigures the activities of a culture and ideology that establishes the normalcy of political exclusion making subalternity not a social identity but a relation instead. Based on this model, the Subaltern Studies Collective attempted to make usable of the concept in the historical analysis of South Asia, especially the reclaiming of the agency of the oppressed peoples (Guha, 1982). Ranajit Guha led the collective which criticized colonial and nationalist historiographies of making the peasants and other subordinated peoples passive receivers of elite action. In foregrounding peasant uprisings, rebellion, and independent political awareness, the Subaltern Studies tried to produce a history of the past that could be written by them that upset the elitist histories and enlarged the history writing field. This intervention was a great methodological change, where the elite view was challenged and the political rationality of the subaltern action was brought forward (Guha, 1983). In spite of such critical promise, the Subaltern Studies project had its own limitations. Its attempts to reclaim subaltern agency tended to be based on the archival sources and narrative production based on the elite discourses, and consequently, led to the representations that were highly mediated and not immediately available. This dependence posed the issue of how clear the historical recovery process was and how far one could get the subaltern consciousness without the historian impersonating his/her epistemological authority (Prakash, 1994). Although the project was able to disrupt traditional historiographical assumptions, it also revealed the existing complexity of the project of depicting subaltern experience without reproducing structures of power. It is under this crucial point that the intervention of Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak comes to play. Spivak does not inter the intentions of Subaltern studies but critiques its methodological propositions with strictness. Using deconstruction, she opposes the fact that historical accounts can offer unmediated experience of the subalterns and contends instead that historiography is discursive in nature, informed by language, power and institutional authority (Spivak, 1985). The fact that she criticizes the transparency of historiography is that, it is within the realms

of representational structures that define the subaltern as a subject of constant construction, and as belonging to dominant systems of knowledge. The main part of the intervention proposed by Spivak is the redefinition of subalternity as a positional and not identitarian category. In her definition, subaltern refers not to a social group which has a fixed voice, a coherent consciousness, but to a status of structural exclusion existing in a system of power and representation (Spivak, 1988). Such a stand can change in terms of historical and cultural backgrounds, but it is still characterized by the impossibility to be discussed by hegemonic discourse. In such a way of reframing subalternity, Spivak frustrates the recovery or representational endeavors of subalternity and demands ongoing responsiveness to the boundaries of representation and moral lack of conscience of intellectual action.

4. "CAN THE SUBALTERN SPEAK?": REPRESENTATION, SILENCE, AND EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE

The essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak. is one of the most powerful and problematic interventions in post colonial theory (Spivak, 1988). Instead of trying to reclaim subaltern voice in a more direct or unmediated way, the essay inquires the epistemological and political circumstances in which speech is generated, mediated and accepted. Spivak puts the analysis on the empirical existence or non-existence of speech to the structural processes that make some forms of articulation inaudible in dominant discourses. Thus, she reveals the shortcomings of the Western intellectual traditions as well as the postcolonial recovery efforts which presuppose the openness of the representation and easy access to the tone of the marginalized voices (Spivak, 1988; Morris, 2010). One of the main conceptual schemes in the analysis by Spivak is the difference between Darstellung and Vertretung, terms introduced by Marx and reformulated in relation to the postcolonial criticism (Marx, 1852; Spivak, 1988). Darstellung means re-presentation, i.e. aesthetic, textual or descriptive representation, whereas Vertretung means political representation or representing others. Spivak shows that the two categories of representation are often merged and so this leads to the scenario to conflate the two categories of representation where intellectuals who argue that they are simply describing the subaltern realities effectively take the place of the subaltern when it comes to politics and epistemology. This confusion clouds the power dynamics incorporated in acts of representation and instigates the illusion of neutral interpretation. Through this predestination of the difference, Spivak indicates how the subaltern is turned into a subject of knowledge as opposed to recognizing the subaltern as a talking subject in discourse (Spivak, 1988). The very process of epistemic violence further extends the criticism of Spivak on representational issues. Epistemic violence is the ordered processes through which the knowledge systems at work negate, distort, or override any kind of subaltern knowledge (Spivak, 1988). Production of knowledge in both the colonial and nationalist discourses functions in terms of classificatory categories and narrative formations that preclude the subaltern views of intelligibility. The colonial rulers, reformists and historians usually insisted that they represented the interests of the marginalized populations but their portrayals were informed by Eurocentric and patriarchal presumptions (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988). Although nationalist discourses rejected the colonial control, they often recreated such silences by giving new precedence to elite voices and cultural homogenizations. The subaltern in both scenarios was still a mediated/inaccessible entity and strengthens structures of domination even in emancipatory-themed projects (Prakash, 1994). An example of concrete exposition of epistemic violence and structural silencing can be illustrated through the analysis of Spivak on the discourse of sati, which is the practice of widow immolation in colonial India. She shows how the colonial discourse constructed sati as a civilizing

problem whereby the role of saving the brown women was played by white men to the brown women as opposed to white intervention in their culture (Spivak, 1988). In both stories the voice of the widow herself was conspicuously missing. In this way, the subaltern woman became the most vocalized thus existing in between the colonial paternalism and native patriarchy. This instance highlights the fact that gender magnifies subalternity, which creates an oppression of agency where women are marginalized twice due to the overlapping force of power (Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 2003). It is in this stratified form of criticism that Can the Subaltern Speak? shows that the issue relating to subaltern speech can not be solved by mere recovery or representation practices. Rather, it requires long-term questioning of the discursive, institutional structures that dictate who is allowed to speak and who should be listened to. Spivak intervention therefore resets subalternity as an ethical and theoretical problem in that it brings scholars to the threshold of their own interpretative power, and makes them see the continuation of silence in the very practices that assert to speak on behalf of the marginalized (Spivak, 1999; Morris, 2010).

5. MARXISM, FEMINISM, AND DECONSTRUCTION IN SPIVAK'S THEORY

Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's theorization of subalternity is marked by an interdisciplinary engagement that brings together Marxism, feminism, and deconstruction, which she mobilizes in a critically interwoven manner rather than as discrete or competing traditions (Spivak, 1988; Spivak, 1999). This intersectional theoretical approach enables her to move beyond purely cultural or textual explanations of marginalization and to foreground the complex interactions between material structures, gendered power relations, and discursive practices. Through this synthesis, Spivak develops a nuanced understanding of subalternity that resists reduction to a single explanatory model and instead emphasizes the layered and contingent nature of exclusion (Morton, 2007). Marxism plays a foundational role in Spivak's analysis by foregrounding the material conditions that shape subaltern existence. Drawing on Marxist concepts of class, labor, and exploitation, Spivak insists that subalternity cannot be understood solely in terms of cultural difference or discursive exclusion (Marx, 1867; Spivak, 1999). Rather, it is rooted in economic structures that systematically marginalize certain groups from access to resources, political representation, and social mobility. Her engagement with Marxism highlights how colonial economies and global capitalism produce and reproduce subaltern positions, often rendering marginalized populations invisible within dominant narratives of progress and development (Spivak, 1999). At the same time, Spivak remains critical of orthodox Marxism, particularly its tendency to privilege class struggle while marginalizing other axes of oppression such as gender, caste, and colonial difference (Spivak, 1988). Feminist theory further complicates Spivak's account of subalternity by foregrounding the gendered dimensions of marginalization. Spivak is particularly critical of Western feminist discourses that universalize women's experiences and, in doing so, marginalize women from the Global South (Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 1988). She argues that such frameworks often reproduce imperialist assumptions by positioning Western women as normative feminist subjects, while representing non-Western women as passive victims in need of rescue. Against this tendency, Spivak foregrounds the figure of the subaltern woman, whose experiences are shaped by the intersecting forces of patriarchy, class exploitation, and colonial domination. Gender, in her analysis, intensifies subalternity, producing forms of silencing that cannot be adequately addressed by feminist models that ignore historical and cultural specificity (Spivak, 1988; Spivak, 1999). Deconstruction, particularly as developed by Jacques Derrida, provides Spivak with a crucial methodological tool to interrogate the limits of voice and representation (Derrida, 1976; Spivak, 1993). Through deconstructive reading, Spivak exposes the instability of meaning within language and the

impossibility of fully transparent communication. This insight is central to her critique of attempts to recover subaltern voice, as it reveals how language itself is implicated in relations of power. Speech, in this framework, is never a neutral medium but is structured by exclusions, hierarchies, and silences that shape what can be said and understood (Spivak, 1988). By applying deconstruction to postcolonial and feminist discourse, Spivak demonstrates that even radical critiques remain vulnerable to reproducing the structures they seek to dismantle. Taken together, Marxism, feminism, and deconstruction enable Spivak to articulate a complex and self-reflexive theory of subalternity. Marxism foregrounds material exploitation, feminism highlights gendered silencing, and deconstruction exposes the instability of representation. This theoretical convergence allows Spivak to challenge simplistic notions of voice and agency and to insist on sustained critical vigilance toward the ethical and epistemological limits of speaking for the marginalized (Spivak, 2012; Morris, 2010).

6. STRATEGIC ESSENTIALISM AND THE QUESTION OF POLITICAL VOICE

The concept of strategic essentialism occupies a significant yet contested place within Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's theoretical framework, particularly in relation to questions of political voice and collective action (Spivak, 1987; Spivak, 1999). Introduced as a pragmatic intervention rather than a fixed theoretical position, strategic essentialism refers to the temporary and tactical adoption of a unified identity by marginalized groups in order to achieve specific political objectives. Spivak proposed this strategy as a means of enabling collective mobilization within political contexts that demand coherent and recognizable subjects, while remaining critically aware of the internal differences and heterogeneity that such unity necessarily obscures (Spivak, 1987). Strategic essentialism is therefore best understood as a provisional political practice rather than an endorsement of essentialist identity. For Spivak, the adoption of a collective identity is always a calculated and context-dependent decision, undertaken with the explicit recognition that identities are socially constructed, contingent, and internally fractured. In the context of subaltern politics, this strategy allows marginalized groups to enter the political arena and articulate demands that might otherwise remain unheard. Political voice, in this sense, does not arise from an unmediated expression of subaltern subjectivity but from a conscious negotiation with the representational demands imposed by power structures (Spivak, 1999). However, Spivak has repeatedly expressed concern over the widespread misinterpretation and misuse of strategic essentialism. Detached from its provisional and self-reflexive intent, the concept has often been deployed to justify rigid or homogenizing identity claims that erase internal differences and reinforce exclusionary politics. Such misreadings transform strategic essentialism into a form of uncritical essentialism, undermining its original ethical and political purpose (Spivak, 1993). In response to these appropriations, Spivak later distanced her work from simplified applications of the concept, emphasizing that it must always be accompanied by critical vigilance and an awareness of its inherent risks. The ethical stakes of strategic essentialism lie in its ambivalent relationship to subaltern voice. While the strategy can facilitate political visibility and collective action, it also carries the risk of reproducing the very silences it seeks to overcome by marginalizing those who do not conform to the dominant version of the collective identity. This tension reflects Spivak's broader insistence on reflexivity in both political and intellectual practice. Strategic essentialism, when employed without caution, can harden into dogma; when used critically and self-consciously, it can function as a limited yet necessary tool for negotiating political voice within structures that otherwise deny recognition to the subaltern (Spivak, 2012).

7. LATER INTERVENTIONS AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's later writings extend and refine her earlier interventions on subalternity, representation, and voice, situating them within broader critiques of knowledge production and globalization. In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak deepens her examination of how Western philosophy, literature, and historiography have systematically excluded colonized and subaltern subjects from the domain of reason and historical agency (Spivak, 1999). By revisiting canonical thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, and Marx, she exposes the epistemological assumptions that render non-European subjects marginal or invisible, reinforcing her argument that subalternity is produced through entrenched structures of knowledge rather than isolated acts of exclusion. This work demonstrates the continuity of her concern with epistemic violence while expanding its scope beyond colonial discourse to encompass modern intellectual traditions more broadly. An important dimension of Spivak's later interventions lies in her reflections on translation as an ethical practice. Through her engagement with the works of Mahasweta Devi, Spivak conceptualizes translation not as a transparent transfer of meaning but as a form of ethical listening that demands humility, patience, and attentiveness to difference (Spivak, 1993; Spivak, 1995). Translation, in this sense, becomes a model for engaging with subaltern voices without appropriating or domesticating them. By emphasizing the limits of linguistic and cultural equivalence, Spivak underscores the responsibility of the translator to preserve the opacity and alterity of the source text, resisting the impulse to render subaltern narratives easily consumable within global circuits of knowledge. Spivak's critique of globalization further underscores the contemporary relevance of her theorization of subaltern voice. She argues that neoliberal globalization frequently commodifies difference, incorporating marginalized identities into dominant frameworks of recognition while stripping them of political and historical specificity (Spivak, 2012). In such contexts, subaltern voices may appear increasingly visible, yet remain mediated through institutional, technological, and market-driven structures that determine the terms of intelligibility. Spivak's insistence on ethical reflexivity thus remains crucial for understanding how subalternity persists in reconfigured forms under globalization, where the promise of inclusion often coexists with subtle and pervasive modes of silencing. Through these later interventions, Spivak reaffirms that the question of subaltern voice is not confined to colonial histories but continues to shape contemporary cultural, political, and intellectual landscapes.

8. CRITICAL RESPONSES AND THEORETICAL DEBATES

Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's theorization of subalternity has generated extensive critical engagement across disciplines, making *"Can the Subaltern Speak?"* one of the most debated texts in postcolonial theory. Supportive interpretations have emphasized the rigor and ethical seriousness of Spivak's intervention, particularly her exposure of the complicity of intellectual discourse in processes of silencing. Scholars sympathetic to her position argue that her work does not deny subaltern agency but rather problematizes the conditions under which agency is recognized and represented. From this perspective, Spivak's insistence on structural silencing is seen as a necessary corrective to overly optimistic narratives of recovery and empowerment that overlook the power relations embedded in knowledge production.At the same time, Spivak's arguments have attracted sustained materialist and feminist critiques. Materialist critics, most notably Benita Parry, contend that Spivak's emphasis on epistemic violence and discursive mediation risks foreclosing the possibility of subaltern resistance and collective action. From this viewpoint, the subaltern is not merely a position of silencing but also a site of struggle, where marginalized groups actively negotiate and contest domination. Such critiques argue that an excessive focus on

discourse can obscure the material and political dimensions of subaltern agency, particularly in contexts of organized resistance and social movements. Feminist critics have similarly questioned whether Spivak's formulation leaves sufficient space for women's voices and lived experiences, expressing concern that the subaltern woman may appear perpetually silenced within her framework. In response to these debates, subsequent readings have sought to re-evaluate the claim that the subaltern cannot speak by situating it within its theoretical and rhetorical context. Spivak herself has clarified that the statement was never intended as a literal or universal denial of subaltern expression, but as a critique of the conditions under which speech is rendered intelligible within hegemonic discourse. Re-read in this light, the thesis functions less as a definitive conclusion and more as a methodological provocation, compelling scholars to reflect on their own practices of representation and interpretation. The continuing debates surrounding Spivak's work thus underscore its enduring significance, not as a closed theoretical system, but as an invitation to ongoing critical interrogation of voice, power, and knowledge in postcolonial studies.

9. CONCLUSION

The research has examined the concept of subalternity through a critical engagement with the writings of Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, with particular emphasis on her interrogation of voice, representation, and epistemic violence. By tracing the theoretical origins of the subaltern, analyzing Spivak's critique of historiographical recovery, and closely reading her seminal essay *"Can the Subaltern Speak?"*, the study has highlighted the structural conditions that govern who is permitted to speak and who is heard within dominant systems of knowledge. Spivak's interdisciplinary engagement with Marxism, feminism, and deconstruction has been shown to provide a complex framework for understanding subalternity as a position of exclusion shaped by material, gendered, and discursive forces. The analysis underscores that the problem of subaltern speech cannot be resolved through simple acts of recovery or representation. While marginalized subjects may articulate resistance and agency in lived contexts, such expression does not automatically translate into intelligible or legitimate speech within hegemonic discourse. Spivak's intervention reveals the limits of representation, particularly the risks of intellectual mediation and the persistence of epistemic violence even within critical or emancipatory projects. At the same time, her work does not foreclose the possibility of political voice altogether; rather, it calls for cautious, provisional strategies, such as strategic essentialism, coupled with sustained ethical reflexivity. The continuing relevance of Spivak's intervention lies in its capacity to illuminate contemporary forms of marginalization in a globalized world. As neoliberal structures and cultural institutions increasingly claim to incorporate difference, her critique reminds us that visibility does not necessarily equate to voice. Subalternity persists in mediated and reconfigured forms, making Spivak's insistence on attentiveness to silence and exclusion as urgent as ever. Her work thus challenges scholars to remain vigilant about the power relations embedded in acts of interpretation and representation. For postcolonial literary criticism, the implications of this study are significant. Spivak's framework compels critics to rethink conventional approaches to marginal narratives, moving beyond recovery models toward a more self-reflexive and ethically informed practice. By foregrounding the limits of voice and the complexities of representation, her work enriches postcolonial criticism with a critical vocabulary capable of addressing the enduring tensions between speech, silence, and power.

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