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The Politics of Representation: Painting the (female) Subaltern

Kanika Gandhi

The term representation embodies a range of meanings and interpretations. Any exploration of the field of representation needs to take cognizance of the impossibility of a neutral representation and the irreducible gap between intention and realization. Representations are always tainted by the culture and society that produces them. Representation is a process through which meaning, associations and values are socially constructed by people in a shared culture. It involves an understanding of how language and systems of knowledge production work together to produce and circulate meaning. The politics of representation revolves around issues of power and control over one's own self and its representation and reproduction by others. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak has made an important contribution to theories of representation by insisting that the concept, in a literary sense, must be reconsidered in connection with representation in politics. Spivak underlines how representations, especially of marginalized groups from developing countries, are intimately linked to positioning: gendered, cultural, geographic, socioeconomic, historical and institutional.

The term subaltern dates back to its use by Antonio Gramsci, who used it in his "Prison Notebooks" interchangeably with "subordinate". Extending the terms of Gramsci's original definition, the Subaltern Studies Collective historians define subaltern as "the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society, whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way." (Guha 1988: 35)¹

Gramsci's description of the subaltern as lacking a coherent political identity² is crucial to Spivak's discussion of the subaltern. Though Spivak agrees with the historical arguments of Subaltern Studies collective³, their approach to historical and social change privileges the male subaltern subject as the primary agent of change and ignores the life and struggles of women before and during India's independence. In its attempt to take the lives and histories of women into account, Spivak poses a post-Marxist definition of the subaltern.⁴ The category of the subaltern was intended to bring in focus the practices of dominance and resistance outside the framework of class struggle, but at the same time without ignoring the category of class.

¹ These historians attempt to recover the history of subaltern resistance from the perspective of the people, rather than affirming to the perspectives or narratives supported by the state, or the nationalist and colonialist histories, which are written by elite social groups

² It is this lack of coherence that distinguishes Gramsci's notion of the subaltern from the traditional perception of the industrial working class as unified and coherent. Gramsci used "subaltern" to question the received Marxist emphasis on the urban proletariat and the economy, arguing that questions of culture and consciousness and need to be taken seriously.

³ When they contend that India while achieved political independence, lacked social revolution in the class system

⁴ Spivak expands the original category of the subaltern to include the struggles and the experiences of women, but this expansion complicates the lower class connotations of the word, as it includes even upper class women. . the expansion of the category of subaltern to include women emphasize how the subaltern is not only subject to the rigid class system but also to the patriarchal discourses of religion , family and colonial state.

Ranajit Guha in his essay, “Chandra’s Death”, (1987) poses a question which is integral to subaltern studies. In his analysis, he calls into question the possibility of writing Indian history outside the historically dominant frameworks of colonialism and elite nationalism. Guha claims how a coherent narrative is consciously constructed violating the actual sequence of events in order to conform and serve to the logic of larger narratives. For Guha, this “un-historical historiography” ignores the politics of people who fall out of the purview of those in power. Guha seeks to ask - who interprets historical events, and how this, mediating consciousness, influences the writing of history,⁵ who accounts for the validity of the documents and archives and how can they be read. Thus, he questions the category of history itself and the ends for which it is written. In the light of the above arguments, the paper will attempt to analyze the possibilities of recovering the voice of the (female) subaltern subject. What stands here to be explored is how certain facts are appropriated and re-appropriated by the colonial and national discourses which lead to the silencing of the voice of the female subaltern, who is a site of double victimization and marginalization.⁶ Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak” (1988) brings to the fore the possibility/impossibility of hearing the voice of the (female) subaltern.

Before beginning to look at the aforementioned issues, it is important to analyze the arguments presented in Spivak’s essay. One of the critical aspects of Spivak’s thoughts is her ongoing attempt to describe and reexamine the histories and experiences of groups which bore the brunt of marginalization not only at the hands of European colonialism, but also the anti-colonial national independence movements. Spivak calls for the use of the word “subaltern” to account for a range of subject positions which remain undefined by dominant political discourses. Spivak highlights the flexibility of the term in encompassing social identities and struggles which do not fall under the reductive terms of strict class analysis.⁷ Spivak warns us of the risks that general claims or statements made on the behalf of the disempowered subaltern populations are formulated by educated intellectuals who overlook the crucial differences between these subaltern groups. Spivak is critical of any attempt, including her very own, to fully explain or know the experiences of the disempowered. The very singularity of the disempowered people, for Spivak, tests the limits of the dominant narratives of political representation.

Spivak on one hand highlights the achievements of the Subaltern Studies Collective in their attempts at recovering the histories of the peasant insurgencies, but at the same time brings to critical scrutiny their classic Marxist methodology which prevents them from reading the histories of women’s resistance in India.

Ranajit Guha’s in his “Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency,” (1983) attempts to recover a pure subaltern consciousness.⁸ To Spivak, such an approach brings a false coherence

⁵ In reference to “Chandra’s Death, Guha shows how the actual series of events were distorted and forced into a coherent whole “to conform to the logic of legal intervention which made death into a murder, and a caring sister into a murderess...”(Guha, 140-141)

⁶ “Double” in so far as the female by virtue of gender becomes the subaltern even within the subalterns: twice removed from the claims for equality.

⁷ Through her writing, Spivak demonstrates that the experiences of oppression in postcolonial societies like India cuts across differences in caste, class, language, gender, etc.

⁸ Guha in his essay “The Prose of counter-insurgency” argues that all the major historiographic schools tend to disengage peasant action from peasant consciousness. Guha reads the peasants rebellion as “motivated and conscious”. Guha argues that even the left wing historiography, though while adopting the insurgents point of view, is guilty of “an act of appropriation which excludes the rebel as a conscious subject of his own history.” To him, the

to the differentiated struggles of particular subaltern groups, and thereby objectifies them. Spivak's point of departure from Subaltern Studies Collective lies in her opposition to the idea that the subaltern is a sovereign political subject who is in control of her own destiny. Spivak claims that the sovereign subaltern is an effect of the dominant discourses of the elite. Spivak's essay "Can the subaltern speak", also takes issue with those strands of post-structuralist thought which undo the idea of the subject and in turn argue that "there is no more representation, there is nothing but action" (Spivak, 275)

The practices of representation, one can see then, are directly tied to knowledge and power and are thus political in nature. The feminist project of transforming power relations and improving the material conditions of life is complicated by the difficulties and contradictions of representing subjectivities and identities. Within this context, the possibilities of representation stress the impossibility of ever fully knowing others. Feminist discussions of representation must thus be continuously self-critical, but at the same time, should not abandon the task of working towards an ethical involvement with Others. She criticizes the "self-abnegating intellectual" pose that Foucault and Deleuze adopt when they reject speaking for others on the grounds that their position assumes that the oppressed can transparently represent their own true interests. Spivak contradicts the Foucault-Deleuze claim that the oppressed subjects can "speak, act and know for themselves". For Spivak, such a claim presumes an unchanging homogenous subject and is based on the presupposition that the world can be changed through the action of this subject without intervention from elsewhere. For Spivak, the problem with Foucault and Deleuze is that they efface their role as intellectuals in representing the disempowered groups they describe.⁹ She emphasizes how the Western intellectual paradoxically silences the subaltern by claiming to represent and speak for their experience; in a similar manner the discourses of colonialism silenced the voice of the widow. Spivak shows how the benevolent impulse to represent the subaltern groups, in turn silences them.

Spivak emphasizes that the practice of widow self-immolation is not prescribed or enforced by Hindu religious codes, but rather is an exceptional signifier of a woman's conduct as a good wife. She foregrounds that this sense of widow sacrifice rooted in the ideal of the "good wife" is lost in the British colonial accounts who see the practice of self-immolation as epitomizing the inhuman characteristics of Hindu society, thus representing sati as a barbaric practice in order to justify imperialism as a civilizing mission. Spivak, thus, argues that both the Hindu and the British colonial representation of widow self-immolation turns a blind eye to the voice and agency of Hindu women.

project of Subaltern Historiography is to avoid assimilative thinking "by attempting to make the subaltern the subject of his own history. At the same time, Guha is careful to acknowledge the inevitability of appropriation by the historian; historiography can do nothing to eliminate such distortion. Guha stresses for a "specific" or particular consciousness rather than a "transcendental" or general consciousness. But if the problem is that Marxist historians has simplified a complex historical subject by imposing a desirable "secular consciousness on it", then it merely seems a reverse reductionism to argue, as Guha does, that "religiosity" constitutes "the central modality of peasant consciousness in colonial India."

⁹Despite all the intellectual energy Foucault and Deleuze invest in showing how subjects are constructed through discourse and representation (see Chapter 3), Spivak argues that when it comes to discussing real, historical examples of social and political struggle, Foucault and Deleuze fall back on a transparent model of representation, in which 'oppressed subjects speak, act and know' their own conditions (Spivak, 276).

Spivak's discussion on Sati acts as an important counterpoint to western theories of political representation. She suggests that the construction of the legally displaced female subject within Hindu religious codes and the British constitution of the widow as a passive victim of patriarchal violence both ignore the political and social agency of the subaltern woman. It is in this context that Spivak argues that "there is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak." (Spivak, 307)

One must be cognizant of the fact that certain problems with speaking for, or representing others, stems from two connected points. Spivak's argument is that the representations of the developing world conflate two unrelated but discontinuous meanings of representation. One meaning is speaking for, in the sense of political representation, and the other is speaking about or re-presenting.¹⁰ In the Foucault–Deleuze conversation, Spivak argues that these two meanings of representation are conflated; for in the constitution of disempowered groups as coherent political subjects, the process of (aesthetic) representation is subordinated to the voice of the political proxy who speaks. As a consequence of this conflation, the aesthetic portrait – symbolically representing disempowered people as coherent political subjects – is often taken as a transparent expression of their political desire and interests. Spivak accuses Deleuze and Foucault of the fault of making gross generalizations when speaking of/for the third world subaltern assuming cultural solidarity among a heterogeneous people. She suggests that the progressive intellectuals representing themselves as saviours of marginality further the struggle of the subaltern for greater recognition and rights end up reproducing the same power relations they seek to put an end to.

What needs to be underlined, then, is how the need for representation is an urgent one and not to be sidelined or ignored. However, it is a need one has to pursue cautiously and one which is both - aesthetic as well as political. The example Spivak cites of the political suicide of Bhuvneshari Bahaduri¹¹ sheds significant light on the issue of representation. This serves to highlight that even when the subaltern tries to say something, she is re-interpreted from an ideological-political standpoint. Spivak's point is that conflating speaking for and speaking about the subaltern ends up silencing the widows and erasing the role and the complicity of those involved in the representational process. However, one must be wary of the fact that, Spivak reads Bhuvneshwari's suicide only through the lens of sexuality, reducing her to a gendered subject. Spivak herself can be questioned on the same grounds with which she scrutinizes and critiques the very elitist and reductionist readings of the dominant nationalist or colonial discourse. In Spivak's reading, the young woman's consciousness and interests are reduced to a gesture within a singular discourse of female sexuality.

¹⁰ A way to bypass the dilemma of representation of and for others is to acknowledge and articulate how power enters into the process of cultural translation.

¹¹ Bhuvneshwari Bhaduri was a young woman who hanged herself in 1926. . As Bhuvneshwari was menstruating at that time, it was clearly not a case of illicit pregnancy. Bhuvneshwaris suicide remained a puzzle until it was revealed that she had been an armed independence fighter with a political assassination she felt unable to carry through. Spivak argues that the young woman had deliberately waited to menstruate so that her death would not be read as "the outcome of illegitimate passion" in doing so, she has displaced the "sanctioned motive for female suicide" What is remarkable about this reading is the complete elision of Bhuvneshwari's life and agency as a nationalist revolutionary with an anguished relationship to the assassination mission she was asked to carry out.

The crucial point, however, to be taken in consideration is that such examples of subaltern resistance are always already filtered through dominant systems of political representations. Spivak states that her statement that the subaltern cannot speak means that “even when the subaltern makes an effort to speak, she is not able to be heard.” (Spivak, 1996, 292)¹² The claim that the subaltern cannot speak means that she cannot speak in a way that would carry authority or meaning in the dominant discourses, without altering the relations of power and knowledge which constitute the subaltern.

The focal point here is that these disempowered women receive their political and discursive identities within historically determinate systems of political and economic representation. The question which lies at the heart, then, of the politics of representing the subaltern subject requires us to take on board, dissect, question and problematize the logic governing the claims - “ethical” and “political” - made by those “benevolent” academicians and “saviours” of marginality seeking to paint the Other. The problem with speaking for others exists in the very structure of discursive practice, irrespective of its content, and subverting the hierarchical rituals of speaking will always have some liberatory effects. I agree, then, that we should strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to merely than speaking for others.

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¹² This is not to suggest that the particularly disempowered groups cannot speak, but that their speech acts are not heard or recognized within dominant political systems of representation.