

Postcolonial Literature
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Lecture No. #17

Gayatri Spivak : Answering the question “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

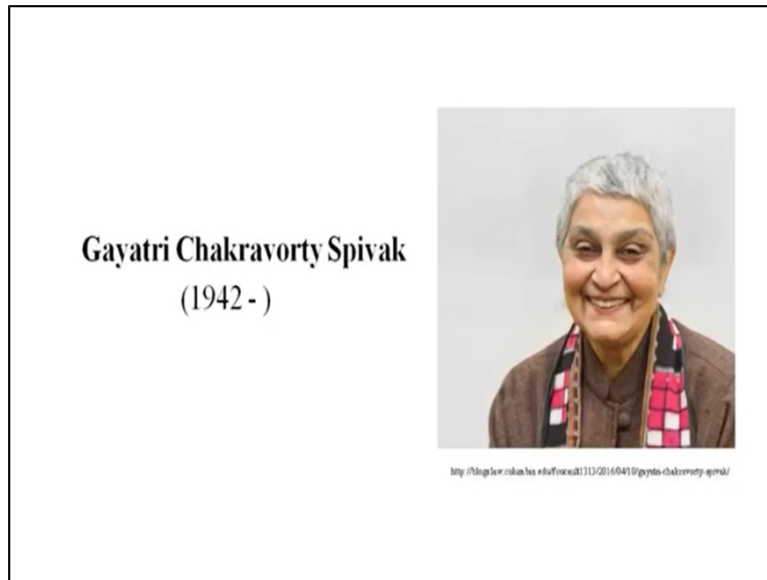
Hello and welcome back, to this course on Postcolonial literature. Today, we are going to take up the writings of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who is one of the most influential, Critical Voices, Theorist, in the field of Postcolonial studies. Now, I am sure, that by now, after going through the previous lectures, in this series, in this course, you have realised, that at the most fundamental level, Postcolonial studies, is an exercise in Ethics.

One of the main agenda of Postcolonial criticism has been, the dismantling of the Eurocentric worldview, which Colonialism had naturalised. And, which had in turn marginalised, numerous indigenous cultural and epistemic traditions, across the Colonised parts of the world. The other agenda of Postcolonial studies has been, to foreground the voice of the oppressed, and to create conditions, at least within the academic institutions, so that the people subjugated by Colonialism, can be heard.

Both of these efforts, these ethical interventions, I would call them, are already prominently displayed, in the works of Edward Said, the founding figure in the field of Postcolonial studies. And, in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak too, we find a continuation of this ethical imperative, that underlines Postcolonialism. Now, Spivak’s ethical intervention, is most associated with her work, with the Subaltern.

And, here I am talking about, work. When, I am talking about work, I am not only thinking about her academic writings, they are important. Yes, we are going to discuss them. But, I am also thinking about her work, as a Teacher and Activist, among the landless illiterate population, in the villages of West Bengal. So, Spivak's ethical intervention, is characterised by her work, with the Subaltern, for the Subaltern, both as an Academic Writer, Theoretician, and as an Activist.

And indeed, at least within the academic circles, Spivak's name is today most widely associated, with the highly influential essay titled, Can the Subaltern Speak. So, in this lecture, we will try and understand, the contribution of Spivak in the fore field of Postcolonial studies, by focusing on her elaboration of the term, Subaltern. But, before we do that, let me introduce, Spivak to you. (Refer Slide Time: 03:31)



Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, was born in Calcutta, in 1942. And, it was a time, when the British Raj, was fast losing its Political grip, over the Indian subcontinent. And, these last years of the Colonial rule, was marked by calamitous in a violence. The Bengal Famine, of the early 1940's, which was triggered by the opening up of the Pacific Theatre, during the Second World War, left literally thousands of skeletal human bodies, dying in the streets of Calcutta.

And, if you remember, I had mentioned in one of my earlier lectures, that although we are primarily going to talk about Colonialism, and Postcolonial legacies, resistance to Colonialism, etcetera, in terms of Cultural Colonisation and Cultural resistance, nevertheless, we should never lose sight of the physical violence, that characterised Colonial rule and Colonial subjugation.

And so, as we see here, Spivak, who was to emerge as, one of the foremost Postcolonial Theorist, grew up, witnessing some of the most gruesome incidents of violence, that were brought about by the Colonial rule, and also ironically, by the middleclass class Nationalists, who in a place like India, doubted the promise of ending British rule and its evil.

So, if we read Spivak's writing, we will see that, when she is talking about this brute physical violence, to which she was exposed as a child, she is talking about a strange nexus, between the British Colonialist and the Middle Class Nationalists. Indeed, for someone living in Calcutta, during the 1940's, the violence of the artificially created Bengal Famine, was only surpassed by the violence, that marked the birth of India and Pakistan, as two distinct Nation States, in 1947.

And, this birth of India and Pakistan, was made possible by a Pact, that the Middle Class Nationalists, and the British Colonialists, had made together. And, it was basically a Pact. What was the Pact, actually meant was, a carving up of the communities, living together in the subcontinent for ages, carving them up into citizens of two distinct Nation States. And, for young Spivak, growing up in Calcutta, this Pact did not translate, so much into the abstract idea of freedom, as to the more real spectacle of blood on the streets.

Now, just like Punjab, Bengal was also the site of partition and of gruesome violence. And, Calcutta was one of the cities, which witnessed the most horrible scenes of crime and violence, during the partition period. Thus, in her essay, Nationalism and Imagination, Spivak writes, that her earliest memories as a child, are those of seeing blood on the streets. And, she emphasises on the statement. She says, that were not metaphorical blood, they were real blood, coming out of killed Colonised subjects.

And therefore, we need to remember, that the blood, in this picture of Colonialism and Postcolonialism, is not metaphorical, is not cultural, but real physical violence, was a real fact, that informed Colonialism. And, the very fact, that Spivak recalls these memories later on, as a Postcolonial intellectual, to think through the idea of Nationalism, and the role of aesthetic imagination, in conceiving Nationalism.

This shows, how Postcolonial high theory, can grow out of ones engagement, with the physical violence, that has always underlined, Colonialism and its legacies. But, this raw physical violence apart, which Colonialism and Nationalism, exposed to Spivak. Spivak as a child, was also exposed, to some of the forces, resisting this carnage, this violence.

And, this force for Spivak, was primarily, the force of the Indian People Theatres Association for instance, which was an association of leftist artists, who were trying to raise social awareness, during this period of time, through organising street theatres, and through very popular songs, that were introduced during these theatres. So, Spivak also remembers, these theatres, and these songs, produced by leftist artists.

And indeed, Political leftism, and engagement with the writings of intellectuals like Marx and Lenin, have remained prominent characteristics of Spivak's work. Apart from this leftist current, Spivak's intellectual horizon, was also shaped by a thorough exposure to British literature, which she received, as a student of the university of Calcutta. After graduating in 1959, Spivak moved to the West, where she completed her Master's degree, at Cornell university, in the United States of America.

And, this was followed by a year of fellowship, at the university of Cambridge. For her PhD, she again returned to Cornell university, to work on the poetry of W B Yeats. And, she worked under the supervision of, Paul De Man. And, the demand is noted for among other things, his efforts to import the insights of Jacques Derrida's Philosophy of Deconstruction, in to the field of literary studies. And, Spivak too, following the lead of demand, has remained strongly enthusiastic, about Deconstruction, throughout her career, as an Academician.

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Notable works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

- *Of Grammatology* (translation, with a critical introduction, of Jacques Derrida's text-1976)
- *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (1987)
- *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1993)
- *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999)
- *Death of A Discipline* (2003)
- *Other Asias* (2008)
- *Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012)

Indeed, Spivak, first came to international limelight, as a critic. When, in 1976, she published an English translation of Jacques Derrida's *Grammatology*, under the title, *Of Grammatology*. And, she published this translation, along with an extensive commentary on the text, which found the translator's preface.

Since then, Spivak has gone on to publish, a number of books including, *In Other Worlds*, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, *Death of A Discipline*, *Other Asias*, and more recently, *Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. However, as I told you, near the beginning of this lecture, Spivak's most influential and recognisable work has remained, *Can the Subaltern Speak*. And, the first version of this essay, indeed this essay has a number of versions now, but the first version, was published in 1985, in a journal called, *Wedge*.

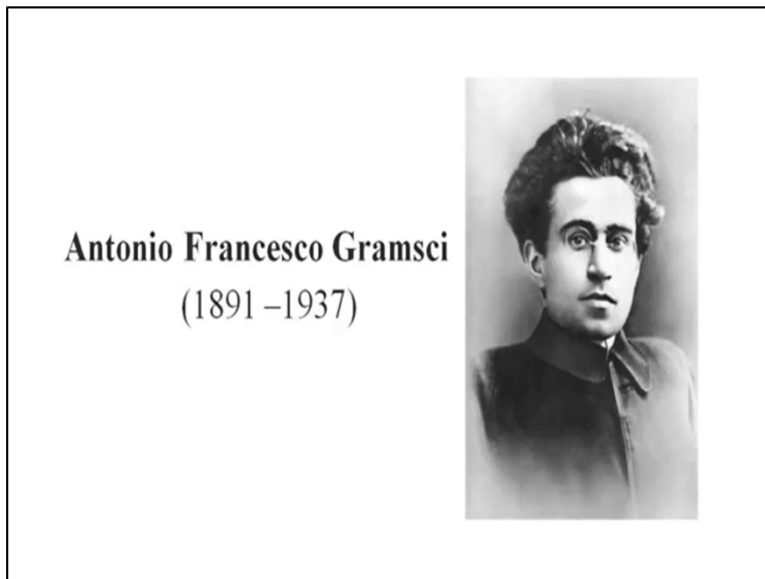
So, let us now turn to the notion of the Subaltern, and to the question, that Spivak so famously asks, in the title of her essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak*. Now, before we start exploring, who, or what is a Subaltern, and before we start answering, *Can the Subaltern Speak* or not, it is essential to clarify the very onset, that though Spivak has occasionally been mistaken, as the founder of the concept of the Subaltern. This concept, does not originate, in her writings.

In fact in, *Can the Subaltern Speak*, we see Spivak, engaging with versions of the concept of the Subaltern, which is already strongly established, before she came out with her essay. But, the

very fact, that today, the word Subaltern, immediately conjures up the name of Spivak, tells us something about the impact, that Spivak had on elaborating the notion of the Subaltern. Now, let us again, return to the word, Subaltern. And, as by now, I am sure, you will know my favourite habit, is to first to go to a dictionary, and see what the dictionary tells us.

And, in this case, if you go to a dictionary, you will find that, the original meaning of the term Subaltern, was a Junior ranking Military Officer. And, this particular use of the word Subaltern, in fact is still very much prevalent, within the military, even today. But, in the field of critical theory, because we are concerned with critical theory here, the term can be traced back, to the writings of the early 20th century Italian intellectual, Antonio Gramsci.

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Gramsci, who was a very prominent Marxist Intellectual, Marxist Theoretician, use the word Subaltern, to signify a section of people, who were subordinate to the Hegemonic groups or classes. Now, to understand this definition, we need to first comprehend the notion of Hegemony, as it operates in the writings of Gramsci.

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Hegemony

- Hegemony is a mode of exercising non-coercive authority
- According to Gramsci, within a society the ruling class mostly asserts its authority by this non-coercive method – that is by convincing the entire population that the interest of the ruling class is the interest of the entire population
- This non-coercive assertion of political authority by a particular class over other groups of people is referred to by Gramsci as hegemony

Now, in its simplest form, Hegemony can be understood, as a mode of exercising authority. Now, if you think about the concept of authority, you will notice, that one of the most obvious ways, in which authority can be asserted, and is asserted, is through the exercise of brute physical force. Now, for instance, if I have a gun, and I can terrorise you, into submission, I can terrorise you, into obeying my instructions, and fulfilling my self-interest. Then, that will be, one way of asserting, my authority over you. Right, that is very simply understood.

And, we can see, how this form of asserting and exerting authority, operates within a society, if we think of the role, that the police force for instance, place. However, Antonio Gramsci argues, that there is also another way, in which one can exert one's authority, over another. Thus, for instance, if I can somehow convince you, that whatever I do in my sort of to fulfil my self-interest, whatever I do in my good, also serves your good, it is also in your self-interest.

If, I can convince you of that, then that is a more effective way, of asserting my authority, over you, than using physical force. Because, if I can convince you, that my self-interest is your self-interest, then you will do, whatever is required to be done for my self-interest, I mean, without any sense of external force, you will do it willingly. Because, you have become convinced, that whatever serves me, is also good for you.

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So, according to Gramsci, within a society, the ruling class, mostly asserts itself, mostly asserts its authority, by this non-coercive method. That is, by convincing the entire population, that the interest of the ruling class, is the interest of the entire population. Now, this non-coercive assertion of Political authority, by a particular class, over other groups of people, is referred to by Gramsci as, Hegemony. So, as I said earlier, Hegemony in its simplest form, is actually a mode of asserting authority.

Now, to understand, how Hegemony works, let us go back to the discussion about Indian Nationalism, that we have had in our previous lectures. If you remember, we had noted in those lectures, that most of the figures, who lead the charge against the British, belonged to a particular social class. And, I have referred to that social class, following Sumit Sarkar, as the middle-class. And, be it, C R Das for instance, or M K Gandhi, or Jawaharlal Nehru, or Subhash Chandra Bose, we have seen, how all of these people, they share similar career trajectories.

But, when we think about them, we do not conceive them as Middle Class Heroes, but as National Heroes. Heroes, who spoke, not on the behalf of a particular class, the middle-class, but on the behalf of the entire nation, right. And, Gramsci would argue, that such ready acknowledgement of Middle Class Heroes, as national Heroes, is an example of the Hegemony, that the Middle Class has exercised in Postcolonial India, over all other groups of people.

And, how the middle-class, has managed to convince, all the other groups of people living within the subcontinent, that what is in the interest of the Middle Class, is also the national interest. So, according to Gramsci, if Gramsci were to read the situation, it would be something like this, that Postcolonial India has been characterised by the Hegemony of the middle-class, where the middle-class has been able to convince the entire national population, that whatever serves their interest, is also in the interest of the nation.

Which is why, for instance, we do not regard people like M K Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, C R Das, Subhash Chandra Bose, as Heroes, or representatives, of a particular class, but rather, as National representatives.

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Subaltern Studies Collective

- Is a group of influential South Asian historians who formed the collective in the 1980s
- Historian Ranajit Guha was one of the leading figures of this group
- His essay “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India” gives us an account of how the group was using the word subaltern
- In his essay Guha presents the term “subaltern” in oppositional relation to the term “elite”.

Now, this Gramscian understanding of the term Subaltern, was taken up, by the influential group of South Asian Historians, who formed the Subaltern Studies Collective, in the 1980's. And, this group of Historians, whom we refer to as the Subaltern Studies Group, or Subaltern Studies Collective, they are primarily studying, Postcolonial Societies, Postcolonial India, Postcolonial South Asia.

And, one of the most significant figures, within this group, was the Historian, Ranajit Guha. And, Ranajit Guha, in his essay titled, On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India, gives us an account of, how the group, Subaltern Studies Collective, was using the word, Subaltern. In his essay, Guha writes, that the term Subaltern, is oppositionally related to the term, Elite.

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- For Guha, the elite was constituted not only of the European colonisers but also of the dominant indigenous groups who had access to hegemony either through their association with the colonial government or through their western style education or, in case of big landowners or industrial and mercantile bourgeoisie, through their wealth.
- Thus, in a more general context, the term elite represents all the sections of a society which have political and economic agency
- In other words, the elites are the people who can intervene and articulate their self-interests within the field of politics and economics

And, for Guha, who in his essay, in this particular essay, that I have just mentioned, was working for within the context of Colonial India, the term Elite, was constituted not only of the European Colonisers, but it also included dominant indigenous groups, who had access to Hegemony, either through their association with the Colonial government, or through their Western-style education, or in case of Big Landowners, for instance, or Industrial and Mercantile Bourgeoisie, through their Wealth.

Thus, in a more general context, the term Elite, represents all the sections of a society, which have Political and Economic agency, right. Power to act out their self-interests and desires, within the Political and Economic arenas. That is what, an Elite is. So, in other words, the Elites are the people, who can intervene and articulate their self-interests, within the field of Politics and Economics.

And, Guha defines the Subaltern, because he said that, Subaltern is oppositionally related to the Elite. Subaltern, is the opposite of the Elite. So, Guha defines Subaltern, as all those people within a society, who do not fall under the category of Elite. So here, Subaltern is not really defined, as a special class, or caste, or race, but rather, Subaltern represents a negative space, or a negative position.

It is the position of disempowerment, opposition without social or Political agency, opposition without identity. Now, Spivak, and Can the Subaltern Speak, that essay, as I said, engages with these existing definitions of the Subaltern. She engages both, with Antonio Gramsci, as well as with the essay of Ranajit Guha, that I have just mentioned.

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“Can the Subaltern Speak?”

- The essay was published in 1985 in a journal called *Wedge*
- For Spivak, the characterising feature of this subaltern position is that no speech is possible from here
- This is however not to say that the physical act of speaking is impossible from within the subaltern position, but it is to say that this speech never gets accepted as meaningful utterances which carries the weight of socio-political agency and which can articulate self-interest and self-identity
- It has been argued by some scholars that rather than saying the subaltern cannot speak, it is more apt to say that the subaltern cannot be heard by the society

But, for Spivak, and this is Spivak's intervention. She characterises Subaltern, or she identifies the characterising feature of this Subaltern position, as that of being unable to speak. Again to repeat, for Spivak, the characterising feature of this Subaltern position is that, no speech is possible, from here. So, in other words, the answer to the question, Can the Subaltern Speak, according to Spivak, is an unequivocal no, the Subaltern cannot speak.

Now, the testiness of this assertion, has often led to confusion, about Spivak's intent. And, she has also been criticised for an attempt, to silence the Subaltern. But, Spivak's argument, is really simple to grasp, if we understand speaking, as generating Discourse. Now, if you recall our discussion of Michel Foucault and Discourse, in one of our early lectures, you will know, that we had defined Discourse, as meaningful utterances.

And, we had also discussed, how within each society, there are checks and filters, which allow certain utterances, to be accepted as Discourse, and certain others, to be rejected. So, theoretically, though anyone can speak or write infinitely, on any given topic, under the sun, what

will be accepted as Discourse, and what will not, is ultimately determined, by the power equations, that underline the society. And, this is a known fact. So, I am not going into further details, about this.

But, let me give you an example. For instance, in a society, where the dominant power structure, equates Reproductive Heterosexuality, with normalcy, it is very difficult, if not all together impossible, to generate Discourse, regarding the Rights of Homosexuals. So, the position of the Homosexual, in a society underlined by Reproductive Heteronormativity, and Reproductive Heteronormativity is a term, that Spivak uses.

It basically means, regarding Reproductive Heterosexuality, as the only normal mode of sexuality. In such a society, Homosexuals, take up the position of the Subaltern, because Discourse generation about Homosexuality, by the Homosexuals, become impossible, in that society, which regards Heterosexuality as the norm. And, it is a position of disempowerment, opposition without any access to agency, that will enable one to define one's own identity, and it becomes impossible to generate Discourse, from within this Subaltern position.

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Now, this is however not to say, that the physical act of speaking is impossible, from within the Subaltern position. But, it is to say that, this speech, never gets accepted, as meaningful utterances, which carries the weight of Socio Political agency, and which can articulate self-interest and self-identity. So, it has been argued by some scholars, that rather than saying, that the Subaltern cannot speak, it is more apt to say, that the Subaltern cannot be heard by the society, just like the mad person, cannot be heard by the society, because her speech is considered as vacuous.

Now, such rephrasing of Spivak's insight, is perfectly alright, provided, we understand, that both the statements, Subaltern cannot speak, and Subaltern cannot be heard, refers to the same inability, to generate Discourse, from within the Subaltern position. This is a complex issue. And, it will become more clear, in the next couple of lectures, where we will again take up, this concept of Subaltern, and we will take up the writings of Spivak.

But, we will apply them, to a short story by Mahasweta Devi. And, if you read the notion of Subaltern, with the help of this story by Mahasweta Devi, which Gayatri Spivak herself has translated, I think this complex issue about the Subaltern position, as well as the possibility/impossibility of Subaltern speech, will become clearer. We will continue this discussion, in our next lecture. Thank you.