

Introduction to Literary Theory
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Lecture - 34
Postcolonial Theory II: Bhabha and Spivak

Hello and welcome back to another lecture on Literary Theory. Today we are going to carry forward our discussion on Postcolonial Literary Theory. And we are going to do so, by focusing on the works of two major theorists Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In our previous lecture on Edward Said, we have seen how post colonial theory seeks to delegitimize the Eurocentric grand narrative of colonialism especially, through the technique of contrapuntal reading. In today's lecture, we will see how post colonialism addresses the question of alternative discourse formations that challenge the hegemony of the colonial grand narrative.

Now, if you look back at orientalism, which is an example of colonial discourse that we had discussed in our previous lecture, you will see that it is pivoted on a notion of essentialism. What do I mean by this, well the European colonizers who justified their colonial rule through a discourse like orientalism for instance, thought of themselves as inherently or essentially superior. In contrast the subjugated orient was looked upon as inherently or essentially inferior. The grand narrative of European colonialism posits that since, the native cultures of places like India for instance or Africa or Southern America is inferior the imposition of the quote unquote superior European culture through colonialism acts as an ennobling influence. So, colonialism from within this grand narrative is perceived as a kind of civilizing mission.

Now, what is important to note here is that is actually, the way in which the quote unquote superior west and the quote unquote inferior east, they act as 2 sides of a binary; which means that, in spite of the colonial contact and cultural engagement, the grand narrative of colonialism perceives the colonizing west and the colonized east has mutually exclusive opposites. That is how we understand binaries right, binaries are mutually exclusive opposites.

So, in this equation underlying the grand narrative of colonialism, the superior west and the inferior east acts as mutually exclusive sides of the same binary, so, no matter, how


much the colonizers culture comes in contact with other cultures it is assumed that, it will retain its essential superiority. And, on the other hand no matter how much the colonized population tries to quote unquote civilize themselves by adopting the cultural traits of the colonizer they cannot shed their essential inferiority.

Homi Bhabha's intervention in the field of post colonial theory is marked by his conceptualization of a non essentialist theory of culture, which both undermines the colonial grand narrative and provides a lens through which to identify the dynamics of alternative counter narratives. And the 2 major ideas that Bhabha foregrounds in this regard are: Firstly, hybridity and secondly, mimicry.

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Homi K. Bhabha
Born. 1949

- Hybridity
- Mimicry

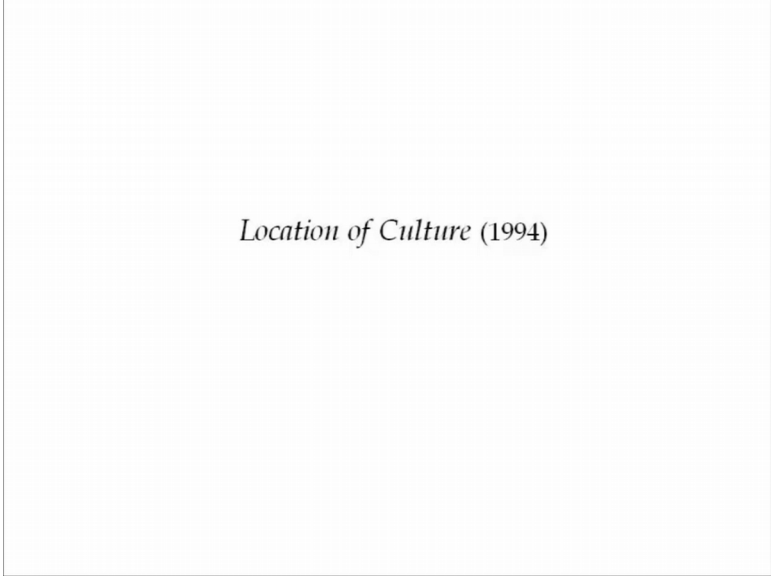


Source: Harvard English - Harvard University

We will come to each of these two ideas one by one, but first let me briefly introduce Bhabha to you. Homi Bhabha was born in the city of Bombay in 1949 and do not confuse this Homi Bhabha with the other famous Indian personality bearing the same name, he was a scientist. He is known for his contribution in the field of literary theory.

So, Homi Bhabha, the literary theorist was born in the city of Bombay in 1949 and he completed his graduation from the Bombay University and then he went on to do his doctoral thesis from the University of Oxford. He started his teaching career in England at the University of Sussex and he is currently, a chair professor at the University of Harvard.

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Location of Culture (1994)

He is most well known within the field of post colonial studies for his book titled the *Location of Culture*, which was first published in 1994. And it is in fact, in this book this seminal publication that Bhabha presents the 2 crucial concepts of hybridity and mimicry. And so, let us now turn our attention to these two concepts and let us start with the notion of hybridity.

As I stated earlier in this lecture that the notion of hybridity is pivoted on a non essentialist understanding of culture; which means, the culture is not looked upon as a static entity that remains unchanged irrespective of the context. Rather culture here is understood through the metaphor of a melting pot, where disparate elements come together to form a whole. But what is important to remember here is that, this whole is not a final form, but subject to change and flux.

So, for instance as new elements get incorporated within the melting pot, they keep on getting integrated within the melting pot, the flavour of the cultural whole also goes on changing. It is this mixedness of culture, it is the sense of culture being in a continuous flux being in a state where, new elements continuously gets added to it and keeps changing the identity of the whole. This is what Bhabh'a signifies through his concept of hybridity or the notion of cultural hybridity to be more specific.

So, to sum it up cultural hybridity is a non essentialist notion; in other words within this framework of understanding culture there is no notion of an eternal or universal

Indianness for instance or Africanness or Britishness. Secondly, cultures are regarded as both spatially and temporally fluid and hybridity understands the cultural landscape as a site of constant intermixing of new and disparate elements.

But how does this alternative vision of culture undermine the grand narrative of European colonialism, that should concern us. Well if we follow Bhabha and regard culture as a dynamic process that is characterized by hybridity by mixedness then, the superior slash inferior and self slash other binary underlying a colonial grand narrative like, orientalism for instance starts to break down. This is because the talk about a superior rest, which represents the colonial self and an inferior orient, which represents the other cannot operate without assuming culture as, static fixed and unchangeable.

So, once the idea of culture as an isolated essence is challenged, the entire edifice of colonialism as a civilizing mission comes crashing down. And colonialism in fact, is revealed for what it actually is, which is an exploitation of other peoples land and resources through brute force. Now, from hybridity, let us move on to the concept of mimicry, which presents an account of how the colonized subject punctures the hegemony of the colonial discourse and asserts his or her identity in a way, that is quote unquote menacing to the edifice of colonialism. To understand this menace of mimicry that Bhabha talks about, let us start with the term mimicry, let us try and understand that first.

Now, the term mimicry has its root in the word mine which is also connected with the Greek concept of mimesis that we have discussed at length in our lectures on Plato and Aristotle. So, from that discussion of mimesis, you will understand that at the most fundamental level mimicry is a form of imitation. But in English language, the term mimicry means not only imitation But, it actually means something more; there is an added nuance that mimicry conveys in English language. And this added nuance is evident for instance in the definition of the term mimicry which we can find in oxford English dictionary.

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Mimicry is explained as the “imitation of the speech or mannerisms of another in order to entertain or ridicule”.

(O.E.D.)

In the dictionary mimicry is explained as and I quote the “imitation of the speech or mannerisms of another in order to entertain or ridicule”. Now, the word ridicule is a crucial to Bhabha concept of mimicry. And we will come to that in a moment, but for now let us focus first on the aspect of imitation, which is conveyed by the word mimicry. Now if a colonial discourse presents the act of colonisation as a civilizing mission, it automatically expects the colonized subject to perform the role of imitators.

Because, it argues that it is only by trying to become like the colonizer, that the colonized subject would emerge from his state of barbarity. This emergence will, however never be sufficient to make the colonized subject exactly like, the colonizer because, as Bhabha points out the colonized would forever remain a quote unquote not quite not white.

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“not quite, not white”

But nevertheless, the emergence would be sufficient enough to make the colonized subject more civilized and more mature than, what he is in the present. Now, if making the colonized subject imitate the colonizer, is part of the latest agenda is part of the colonial agenda, then, how can we understand mimicry as an assertion of agency by the colonized subject because, I introduced the concept of mimicry as something that is associated with the assertion of agency by the colonized right.

So, how do I explain this because, I have just said that, this idea that the colonized subject should imitate the colonizer was already part of the colonial plan, was already something that we can find within the colonial discourse. Well here the notion of mimicry as ridicule comes to the foreground. So, as I told you mimicry is not simply imitation, mimicry is imitation which also conveys the added nuance of ridiculing the person, who is being imitated.

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Bhabha points out that the very act of the inferior colonised imitating the superior coloniser turns the latter into a subject of ridicule.

Bhabha points out that the very act of the quote unquote inferior colonized subject imitating the superior colonizer turns the latter into a subject of ridicule. In other words, the adoption of the colonizers speech, mannerism etcetera by the colonized subject, turns his act into a sort of mockery of the superior colonizers culture. It becomes, if you want to understand this through an example, it becomes something like a clown, picking up the manners of a sway of gentleman and then, repeating it after him in the most exaggerated and comic manner. It is imitation yes, but it is a form of imitation, which also ridicules the subject of imitation.

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The comic undermining of the coloniser's position by the colonized through distorted imitation is what Bhabha refers to as the "menace of mimicry".

And this comic undermining of the colonizer's position by the colonized through distorted imitation which is mimicry is what Bhabha refers to as menacing, he terms this as the menace of mimicry, a menace that undermines the edifice of colonialism. But rather than ridicule through mimicry, can not the colonized subjects simply create an alternate discourse for himself or herself, that is to say can not the colonized subject simply emerge out of the colonial hegemonic discourse by articulating a different discourse of his or her own.

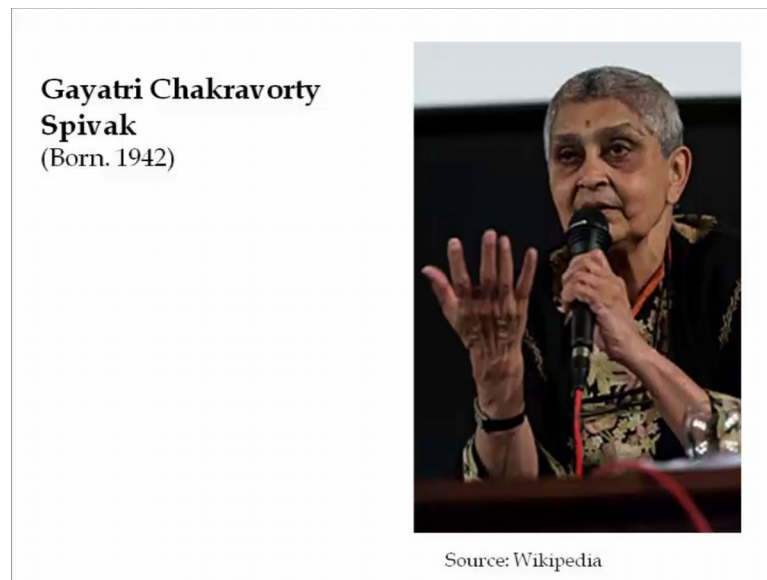
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"Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985)

Well, these questions bring us close to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak seminal essay can the subaltern speak. But before we take up that essay and start exploring the concept of subaltern vis a viz the question of discourse formation let me introduce Spivak to you.

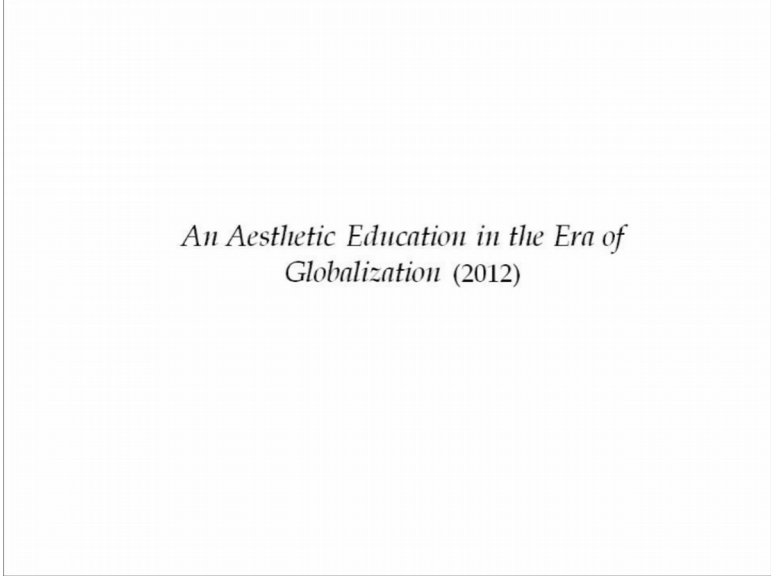
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Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was born in 1942 in Calcutta and she grew up amidst some of the worst years that this earth's while capital of the British raj has ever experienced. The horrific Bengal famine of the 1940's had brought to the streets of Calcutta, a multitude of refugees from the neighbouring villages and their malnourished and skeletal bodies were seen rotting all over the streets of this metropolitan city in the years leading up to India's independence. This catastrophe was followed by the catastrophe of communal violence that preceded the partition of Bengal in 1947. And these were the years through which Spivak lived through which, she grew and these left indelible traces in her memory and she later incorporated these memories into how she theorized the post colonial condition.

In 1959 Spivak graduated from the presidency college of Calcutta, which was originally established as a Hindu college, which was in fact, the first institution of western style higher education in the whole of India actually. Subsequently as Spivak went to America, where she did her PhD on WBH from Cornell University, under the guidance of the famous deconstructive literary critic, Paul Demand and currently, she is a university professor, which is sort of the highest ranking professor at the Columbia University in New York.

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*An Aesthetic Education in the Era of
Globalization (2012)*

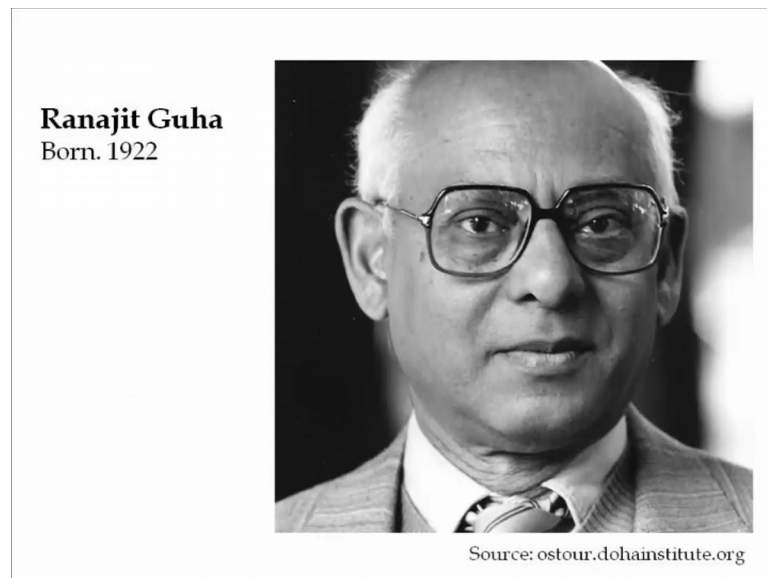
But interestingly, in one of her latest books titled *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, she not only introduces herself as a professor at Columbia, but she also introduces herself as a trainer of elementary school teachers in West Bengal. And this particular aspect of her career is important because, as we will soon see, this relates to her efforts to create enabling conditions for the subaltern to speak.

But let us first try to understand what or who is a subaltern because, this concept of the subaltern is at the heart of Spivak's major essay; can the subaltern speak, which incidentally was first published and there are a number of versions of this essay that are available. But it was first published the first version of this essay was published in 1985 in a journal called *Wedge*.

So, the term subaltern is originally derived from the language of the military, where it is used to signify, a junior ranking army officer. But this term gained currency within the field of contemporary intellectual discourse after, the Italian scholar; Marxist scholar Antonio Gramsci used it in his writings to signify a section of people, who were subordinate to the hegemonic groups or hegemonic classes. As you will know from our earlier discussion of Gramsci's idea, hegemonic class refers to that group of people within a society who exercises its control over the rest of the society through, non coercive means and by creating consent.

Now, within the Gramscian framework, the section of the population that is led and controlled by the hegemonic class is the subaltern. So, in other words society, according to Gramsci is primarily divided into 2 groups of people; the hegemonic group, who exercise political power and agency and the subaltern group, which is led by the former, which is led by the hegemonic class and they are led by the hegemonic class because, the subaltern group is taken in by the illusion that their self interest is reflected in the self interest of the dominant class of the hegemonic class. Now, this Gramscian definition of the subaltern was very powerfully adopted by a group of Indian historians, who came in to prominence during the 1980's and who were known by the name subaltern studies collective.

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The leading figure in this subaltern studies collective was Ranajit Guha, who used the British Indian colonial context to define the subaltern as, that section of the population who do not belong to the elite class. So, for Guha, subaltern is whatever is not elite right. But then, what is elite? Well according to Guha, within the colonial context the social elite is constituted not only of the European colonizers, but also of the dominant indigenous groups, who have access to hegemony, either through their association with the colonial government or through the restaurant style education or in case of big landowners for instance or industrial and mercantile bourgeois through their wealth.

The subaltern represents the rest of the population, which unlike the elite do not have political or economic agency. So, here what we need to note is that, the subaltern is defined not as a specific social class; rather the subaltern is defined simply as a negative space, as a negative social space. It is a site of lack where there is no sense of agency or no sense of a distinctive identity right. The subaltern is therefore, a position of absolute social disempowerment and Spivak is used that it is a position from which speech is not possible.

Now, this statement that the subaltern cannot speak, which is actually the answer to the question that is posited with the title of the essay, can the subaltern speak might at first strike as somewhat a banal because, it seems to suggest that any person without political economic agency and without a sense of distinctive identity class identity is dumb. But the real depth of Spivak's argument becomes evident if we read speech as discourse.

So, in other words, what I am saying is that Spivak's argument starts making eminent sense if, we consider speech not just as utterances, but as meaningful utterances, which if you remember was how we defined discourse in some of our earlier lectures. So, the argument here is that the subaltern is not a dumb or speechless in any physical sense, rather the subaltern is someone who cannot generate discourse, who cannot generate meaningful utterances. And the reason why the subaltern who lacks political or economic agency within a society cannot generate a discourse is not very difficult to understand.

Now, as you will remember from our earlier discussion on Michel Foucault, within any given social milieu, there are certain important factors that regulate if an utterance is to be considered meaningful or not. And, one of the most important conditions which regulate this is the condition of institutional ratification.

So, any utterance that is for instance, not ratified by institutions like schools, colleges, publishing industry, the news agencies, learned societies, libraries is not regarded as discourse. Now these are also precisely the institutions through which, the dominant class or the elite class assert their agency and their control over the society. So, these are the institutions through which hegemony is exerted.

So, these institutions needless to say, almost exclusively ratify the speech or the utterances of the dominant or the elite class. The subaltern on the other hand, who by definition does not have any agency within the society cannot generate a discourse

because, their speech does not receive institutional ratification, their speech is not ratified by these various institutions through which, hegemony is otherwise exercised hegemony of the elite class.

So, this is why, in a colonial society someone like a landless peasant for instance or an illiterate tribal, who occupies the position of absolute disempowerment cannot generate a discourse. So, in Spivak's terminology, a landless peasant or an illiterate tribal would be a subaltern, who cannot speak. So, this therefore, brings us to a whole new aspect of post colonial theory; which side we had seen how the colonial discourse can be dismantled through contrapuntal reading.

With Bhabha, we have seen how sections of the colonized subject who imitates the colonizer can assert their agency through the menace of mimicry. Which Spivak, we encounter the fact that a vast section of the post colonial society is bereft of agency. And, bereft of agency to the point that, they cannot even generate their own discourse; neither can they assert their own distinctive identity.

It is important to note here that, this understanding leads to social activism as far as Spivak's is concerned. So, Spivak's engagement with this post colonial position of disempowerment, takes on the form of activism. And this is a very specific characteristic of the work of certain theorists like, Spivak for instance or like Edward's Side, we have not talked about it, but Edward's Side just theorized colonialism, but also made it a part of his anti Israeli activism right because, he considered the state of Israel to be a colonial state. And even in Gayatri talk about the Spivak work, we see that kind of activism coming from theorization.

So, the goal for Spivak becomes not merely to theorize the speechlessness of the subaltern position, but to create as I have mentioned before enabling conditions through which, the subaltern can emerge from their position of disempowerment and start speaking for themselves. And this is precisely what Spivak has been trying to do through her teacher training program in some of the poorest parts of the Indian state of West Bengal.

So, with this we wrap up our discussion on post colonial theory. But before bidding you goodbye, I would once again remind you that, if you find any of the topics that I have discussed in the 2 lectures on post colonialism here to be cryptic or to be difficult, so

please listen to the lectures of my 10 hour NPTEL course on post colonial literature, which is available online. There I have dealt with all of these topics in a much more elaborate manner.

Goodbye.