



Gayatri Spivak

b. 1942

Biography and Works

- ◆ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was born on February 24, 1942 in Calcutta.
- ◆ Received a B.A. from the University of Calcutta and her Ph.D. in literature at Cornell University. Wrote her dissertation on William Butler Yeats.
- ◆ Currently serves as a University Professor at Columbia University.
- ◆ One of her first pivotal works was an introduction/translation of Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* in 1977.
- ◆ Has written over 200 articles, but is most well known for her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak," which became a part of her book *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* in 1999.
- ◆ Marked by a continual questioning of assumptions, often revising her very own works.

Influences

- ◆ Derrida's Deconstruction and French theory
- ◆ Marxism
- ◆ Feminism
- ◆ Postcolonialism
- ◆ Freudian analysis
- ◆ Essentialism (to a degree)
- ◆ Literature

Epistemic Violence

- By constituting the colonial subject as the Other, colonialism/imperialism performs **epistemic violence**.
- What does this violence consist of? Within the context of the theory of **Gayatri Charkravorty Spivak**, it represents using the knowledge, i.e. epistemology of the West in order to justify the political and cultural domination over the non-West;
- foreclosing the colonial Other from any valid discourse of knowing and feeling;
- preventing the appearance in this Other of any awareness of self, his situation and the manner of seeking a way out of it;
- causing his existence in conditions of marginality and fragmentation, inability to achieve unification with others who share his lot and, consequently, forcing him to play merely an episodic role in history.

- A result of the epistemic violence of imperialism is the absence of almost any valid knowledge coming from the non-West that can exist only by virtue of its intrinsic value, without having to be compared to what comes from the West or to be benevolently “adopted” by it.
- The epistemic violence of imperialism has also brought about the destruction and degradation of nonwestern cultures and worldviews, which, in turn, has installed European epistemology in a position of universality and an entelechy of universal values.

. Epistemology is the study of knowledge

- The word “episteme” is derived from the Greek ἐπιστήμη, meaning ‘knowledge’ or ‘science’; the corresponding verb ἐπίσταμαι signifies ‘to know, to understand’. The episteme is different from τέχνη = skill, knowledge or art.
- In the philosophy of Michel Foucault, episteme is the corpus of knowledge and ideas current in a certain period. However, the term refers not only to the corpus of knowledge defining a certain period, but also that which conditions the possibility for the appearance of that knowledge, that which determines what is actually possible to know in a certain period.
- In other words, the episteme is an unconscious category that determines the appearance and development of thought and refers to the “unconscious structures underlying the production of scientific knowledge in a particular time and place.

- Foucault establishes an unbreakable, symbiotic relation between knowledge and power, which later on Edward Said, in his seminal book *Orientalism* (1978), will apply in the colonial context.
- Said's basic premise is that colonial "discourse, [which represents a] way of knowing the 'Orient', is a way of maintaining power over it". Knowledge of the Orient (and, by analogy, of anything that is not Europe/the West) was tarnished by imperialist ideology and the complicity between them necessitated the creation of a deep ontological and epistemological difference between the Orient and the Occident.

- This difference polarized the self (the Occident) and the other (the Orient) by attributing to them pure racial, cultural and civilizational essences that homogenized the Oriental Other into an object of western representation that was invariably static, inferior, silent, non-individualized and collective.

- In her book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Spivak analyses the status that the native informant, as a mediating category between the colonising elite and the native subaltern masses, has in European philosophy, literature, history and culture.
- Spivak takes over the term “**native informant**” from ethnography; although a source of information, the native informant remains unrecognized as such and anonymous – the European has the exclusive right to be a discoverer, theoretician, epistemologist.

- The role of the native informant in the (post)colonial situation is dual: on the one hand, he is invoked to provide the ethnographer information on his native culture, while on the other, he is marginalised because he himself is not positioned as a subject/narrator. He is excluded from the European historical, philosophical, literary and cultural narrative and does not have a space for articulation as a valid possessor of knowledge.

“Can the Subaltern Speak?”

- ◆ Spivak’s initial answer: No
- ◆ Subaltern = often impossible to define. Those resting outside of political, social and economic power. A “general nonspecialist, nonacademic population,” including “illiterate peasantry, Aborigines, and the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat” (2116).
- ◆ “Possibility that the intellectual is complicit in the persistent constitution of the Other as the Self’s shadow” (2114).
- ◆ Even well-meaning intellectuals and other elites can reinforce current power structures. For example, leftists often “romanticize” the oppressed, which only helps support the colonial practices they claim to oppose.
- ◆ Dominant discourse = the intellectual. “Subaltern is not similarly privileged, and does not speak in a vocabulary that will get a hearing in institutional locations of power” (2125).

“Can the Subaltern Speak?” Continued...

- ◆ ALL discourses exclude something or someone by virtue. We can only hope for an “attunement to the unheard” which Spivak terms moral love.
- ◆ Criticizes Antonio Gramsci’s more inclusive definition of the “subaltern classes” for likening subaltern to the proletariat. Subaltern is much lower than this. “Simply by being postcolonial or the member of an ethnic minority, we are not ‘subaltern’” (2125).
- ◆ Sides with Ranajit Guha, member of the Subaltern Studies group, that much discourse is shaped by Indian elitists, who often narrate the subaltern’s stories.
- ◆ Michel Foucault’s epistemic violence – or the forcible replacement of one structure of beliefs for another. Seen with the “Other” or subaltern of colonialism.

- In Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, this exclusion/foreclosure of the Other (read: the native intellectual/informant or the subaltern masses) becomes an inability to speak.
- Originally denoting a military rank, the term “**subaltern**” is transformed in the political theory of Antonio Gramsci as a modification of Marx's position that the industrial working class in Europe, understood as homogeneous and of identical interests, will usher in political changes.



- As opposed to Marx's model of a unified and coherent working class, Gramsci uses the term "subaltern" to signify any subject, non-hegemonic group lacking cultural and political self-awareness as a group, devoid of systematicity in its oppositionality to the state and other factors of power, incoherent in the political and economic interests of its members
- Spivak uses the term situationally and in her theory it represents various social locations – it comprises varying subject positions that cannot be subsumed under a given social class or a coherent group.

○ In the beginning of her essay, Spivak engages in a polemic with the French philosophers Foucault and Deleuze concerning representation – the two philosophers claim that representation is no longer necessary because the masses/the subaltern can speak for and represent themselves.

○ Spivak, however, categorically denies this – the subaltern cannot speak and even if he could express his position, he would not be heard; moreover, subalternity as silence implies an inability on the part of the subaltern not only of self-articulation, but also of understanding or using any type of dominant discourse, just like that same dominant discourse is unable to understand the subaltern.

- Spivak attributes this to two fundamental factors: first, the subaltern as a homogeneous class does not exist, he is by definition fragmentary, as was the stance of a group of mainly Indian historians gathered around the **Subaltern studies group**, of which Spivak was also a member. The characterization of the subaltern as a universal subject is wrong, because it prevents their realization in their particular local heterogeneity.
- It seems that Spivak here performs a new split in the authority of western (colonialist) discourse because she refuses to constitute the Third World subject as transparent for the analysis of western intellectuals, be they Foucault and Deleuze, while opening new horizons for postcolonial criticism

- The second factor is the operation of power – the subaltern is by definition marginalized by the centres and discourses of power, which are not capable of hearing his voice, i.e. of establishing communication with him.
- Thus, the lowest groups of the multilayered Indian social hierarchy are unable to realise themselves even in their new, national state, there is no place reserved for them in the new order, because they are yet again placed in the position of the social other by the new centre of power – the native political elite, which has positioned itself in the place vacated by the British colonized

Subalternity and Gender

- The subaltern cannot speak precisely because of the operation of the epistemic violence, the most evident example of which is, according to Spivak, gendered subalternity – namely, the female subaltern is a victim of a double epistemic violence – that of colonialism and that of the domestic patriarchal order.
- The framework within which Spivak analyses gendered subalternity is dual: on a general plane, it the custom sati – the burning of widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands; on a more specific plane, it is the destiny of a woman from her family, who committed suicide when she was 17 years old.

- The custom sati, be it understood as a barbaric act, as it was in the eyes of British colonisers, or a necessary domestic tradition, as it was for the Indian patriarchal order, does not leave the woman much space for self-articulation – as a subject, she disappears from the arena of discussing whether to abolish the custom or not: if the patriarchal order immolates her in the flames of the funeral pyre, she will be irrevocably silenced in death; if she is given the opportunity to choose/speak, it will be given and limited by the conceptual boundaries set by the coloniser and Indian patriarchal society.

- The subaltern woman, who embodies threefold subalternity – gendered, ethnic and social – appears in the archive, like the rani of Sirmur, only when this serves the colonial or domestic-patriarchal interests.
- Everything she wants/ed to say through her act is lost in these two global discourses that exclude and misunderstand her – the significance of the act of her immolation on her husband's pyre is exhausted between the interpretation thereof as a barbaric act by the British coloniser, the eradication of which justifies his colonialist ideology and colonial presence in India, and as a laudable act of self-sacrifice that defines the virtuous woman by Indian patriarchal society

- The silence of the subaltern woman (which should not be understood literally – as an inability to speak, but rather in the meaning that whatever she says is either unheard or not understood properly by a dominant discourse) occurs because of the inability of dominant discourses to embrace her in all her heterogeneity.

- An example of this is the reactions to the suicide of Spivak's great-aunt, **Bhubaneswari Bhaduri**, who for ideological reasons, in the turmoil around the national awakening on the Indian subcontinent, committed suicide, deliberately choosing a moment when she was having her period in order to avoid that her act be understood as despair due to an illicit love affair or unwanted pregnancy.
- Unable to speak with her voice, she sent a message through her body, but even thus she was not understood – the opinion that she committed suicide out of a personal, selfish motive prevailed, although what she did was essentially a profound social and ideologically motivated act.

- In this context, Spivak analyses the short story “**Breast Giver**” by Mahasweta Devi, an Indian writer writing in Bengali. The breast giver in the title is Jashoda, a low-caste woman, who, in order to feed her family, works as a wet-nurse for a rich Brahmin family, in the process of which her body becomes a terrain for economic exploitation by the family and ends up diseased by cancer, exhausted, numbed.

- The story of Jashoda is, according to Spivak, a parody of the nationalist idea of Mother India, evoked during the passive resistance of Mahatma Gandhi and the anticolonial movements of resistance against the British coloniser, when nationalists mobilised powerful female figures from Hindu mythology such as Kali, Sita, Draupadi, Savatri and others to inspire women in their struggle and to create a sense of Indian national identity

- However, after this episodic role in national history, women, in particular subaltern women, continue to exist in abject poverty, political irrelevancy and economic impasse.
- “Like the protagonist Jashoda, India is a mother by hire. All classes of people, the post-war rich, the ideologues, the indigenous bureaucracy, the diasporics, the people who are sworn to protect the new state, abuse and exploit her”.
- This radical position of equating subalternity with silence has been met by outraged rejection by the majority of postcolonial theoreticians.

- Although colonialism was officially brought to an end half a century ago, the current international division of labour, particularly the exploitation of the Third World by the multinational corporations of the First, continues the process of subjection, ideological-economic domination and subalternisation practiced by colonialism. The subaltern today, as then, is silent.

Feminism and the Subaltern

- ◆ “If, in the contest of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and can’t speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (2120).
- ◆ “White men are saving brown women from brown men” (2112).
- ◆ The “masculine-imperialist ideological formation” constructs “the monolithic ‘third-world woman’” (2122).
- ◆ Although essentialism was criticized among feminists for its generalities, strategic essentialism argues to temporarily accept an essentialist position while still remaining aware of the differences among groups of women.
- ◆ Feminism = “how society is not nice to women and queers”

