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### Review Article: The Muted Objects: A Critical Review of Epistemological Violence in Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

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#### Abstract

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) remains a cornerstone of postcolonial theory, critiquing the limits of representation and epistemic violence inflicted on marginalized groups. Spivak challenges Foucault and Deleuze's claim that the oppressed can transparently articulate their conditions once ideological constraints are lifted, arguing that such views obscure the West's sovereign subject position and the international division of labor. She defines the subaltern as those excluded from social mobility, with women doubly silenced by native patriarchy and colonial imperialism. Distinguishing *Vertretung* (political proxy representation) from *Darstellung* (discursive portraiture), Spivak warns against their conflation, which enables essentialist portrayals. Through the colonial sati debate and Bhubaneswari Bhaduri's misinterpreted suicide, she illustrates how subaltern voices—even bodily ones—lack transactional significance within hegemonic discourses, leading to her famous conclusion: "the subaltern cannot speak." Engaging Benita Parry's critique of denied agency, Spivak defends her position against romantic essentialism. The framework applies today to NGO imagery, digital activism, and refugee representation, where empathetic *Darstellung* rarely yields genuine *Vertretung*. Spivak urges intellectuals to unlearn privilege and practice ethical listening rather than patronizing voice-giving.

**Keywords:** Subaltern, Epistemic Violence, Representation, Spivak, *Vertretung* *Darstellung*, Postcolonial Critique

#### 1. Introduction

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), stands as one of the profound pillars of postcolonial theory, representing the authentic picture of the oppressed "Other." In her outstanding essay, Spivak indeed wages a systematic critique, arguing that the assumption of Western intellectuals represented by Foucault and Deleuze, who claim that subalterns can introduce themselves once ideological restrictions are eliminated. Apparently, Spivak contends that the assumption denigrates the rights of marginalized people by neglecting the epistemic violence of the pseudo-project of colonialism, which has muted the hyphenated. Consequently, the current review investigates Spivak's major thesis, the criticism of essentialism, and the polemical consequence that the subaltern cannot speak within the present discourse of power.

##### 1.1. Criticism of Western Intellectuals

Obviously, Spivak guides her harsh criticism towards the "transcendental" Western subject. She goes beyond this issue, accusing the radical thinkers like Foucault and Deleuze of unintentionally supporting the "Sovereign Subject" of the West by neglecting the international division of labor. In this context, Foucault argues that the "right to take life or let live" (241), represents the significance of power in controlling labor. Moreover, by asserting that the marginalized can express themselves freely, they hide their true participation in the production of knowledge.

In his outstanding book, *Orientalism*, Edward Said argues that the West has a wealth of experience in generating a "theatrical stage" where the Orient is merely a representative, not a participant (63). Once more, Spivak highlights the responsibility of critics and thinkers in committing another form of "epistemic violence" since they assume that the subaltern is a decision maker, self-aware object.

### 1.2. Defining the Subaltern

The essential focus of Spivak's article centers on submitting a fundamental and comprehensive definition of the term "subaltern", allowing intellectuals to be familiar with the suppressed voices. Going beyond Antonio Gramsci's scope, Spivak, in her interview named "The New Subaltern: A Silent Interview," sheds light on those who are "removed from all lines of social mobility" (269).

**The Gendered Subaltern:** Spivak claims that if the marginalized is muted, the subaltern woman is silenced twice. In other words, the hyphenated woman can be a victim of the "patriarchy" of the prevailing culture and the "imperialism" of colonization (Subaltern speak 306).

**The dilemma of Representation:** Spivak differentiates between *Vertretung* (proxy representation/speaking for) and *Darstellung* (portrait/re-presentation). She is cautious that combining these two generates the "essentialist" mistake of thinking a speaker can indeed represent the marginalized heterogeneous identity.

### 1.3. Epistemic Violence and the Sati Debate

Spivak introduces her argument in a historical context to analyze Sati (widow burning) in colonial India. Arguably, she emphasizes the dispute between British colonial law "White men saving brown women from brown men" (Subaltern speak 296), and the code of the Hindu patriarchal. In the midst of war, the woman's social, cultural, and scientific agency is totally disregarded.

Critic Homi K. Bhabha often examines "mimicry" as a means for the colonial object to survive. Yet, Spivak seems more pessimistic. While Bhabha believes in the "blurring" of identity, Spivak, on the contrary, sees an entire elimination. That is to say, Spivak concludes that hyphenated people cannot express themselves in a way that attracts the attention of others. That is why she finally concludes, "The subaltern cannot speak" (308). Yet, this phrase does not exactly mean that those people cannot make at least sounds or have ideas; it means their sounds do not include any transactional significance in the prevailing course.

### 1.4. Endorsing Critical Perspectives

To shed light on the discussion of Spivak's complexity, one must consider Benita Parry, who notoriously critiqued Spivak for denying true resistance movements. Parry contends that Spivak "deafens herself" through neglecting the oppressed voices of the people who struggle under colonial domination (Problems 35). In other words, Parry believes that Spivak highlights the "discourse" of the elite.

Nevertheless, supporters like Judith Butler believe that Spivak's opinions represent a serious warning against "strategic essentialism"—the notion that one can provisionally adopt a united identity to achieve some political leverage while conceding that the identity itself is a construct.

### 1.5. Conclusion: The Ethical Commitment

The utmost goal of Spivak's project is not merely an invitation to silence, but a call to "unlearn our privilege as a loss" (*Post-Colonial* 9). Spivak wages a challenge to the academic to not "give" the marginalized a voice (which is patronizing), but to support them to be heard based on their conditions:

#### The Theoretical Lacuna: *Vertretung* vs. *Darstellung*

Needless to say, Spivak's most prominent critical involvement is her linguistic analysis of the word "representation." Following Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, she differentiates between two German terms that scholars often mix in English: *Vertretung* and *Darstellung*.

#### *Vertretung* (Proxy):

Actually, this type stands for a representation within a political framework. That is to say, "stepping into someone's shoes" to represent a group or a community in a legal or state apparatus. Accordingly, it is the "proxy" that an elected official or a lawyer provides.

#### *Darstellung* (Portrait):

This term stands for a representation within an aesthetic or philosophical framework. In other words, the "re-presentation" of a certain subject as an object of knowledge. Moreover, it refers to the "portrait" or the depiction in which an image of a group can be generated.

In "Can the subaltern speak?" Spivak claims that intellectuals are often smart in *Darstellung* (creating a portrait of the "oppressed") while asserting it is only *Vertretung* (speaking for them) (275-76). This is questionable because the portrait made by the intellectual often denies the factual reality of the marginalized.

### 2. The role of contemporary NGOs and Political currents

In the modern landscape, the diversity in the function of International NGOs is noticeable. In other words, some well-known organizations show images of "vulnerable" women in the Global South to gain the Western community's sympathy for funding. To clarify, those organizations are performing *Darstellung*; i.e., drawing a portrait that suits Western anticipations of victimhood. Indeed, they contend that they supply *Vertretung* (political advocacy). Yet, the "portrait", which has often been drawn by organizations, hides the real political needs of the people they represent. Therefore, Spivak shows some fears; it is necessary to be "scrupulously vigilant" against the "waves of benevolence" that portray the subaltern as a means of charity rather than an effective people of history.

#### 2.1. The Body represents the Text:

To confirm that the subaltern cannot speak, i.e., the prevailing social text never welcomes the voices of the hyphenated, Spivak aptly uses Bhuvanewari Bhaduri's historical case. For Spivak, Bhuvanewari's story is an ideal example of a subaltern who achieves her goals by hanging.

To gain insight into Bhuvanewari Bhaduri's tragedy, one should acknowledge that the tragedy lies not only in her suicide, but in the inability to transfer her message skillfully. That is to say, in such communities, the suicidal acts are illustrated as an "illicit pregnancy" (a patriarchal "portrait").

To validate her "purity", Bhuvaneswari waited for the time of her menstruation to commit suicide. She deliberately wishes to send a message that her death was political—likely connected to her participation in the anti-colonial independence movement.

Nevertheless, Bhaduri's family and society misinterpreted the major motives of her message, despite her physical "speech". For decades, Bhaduri's death was only seen as an "unrequited love." Spivak attempts to prove that even when the marginalized employ their own body to express their injustice, the "epistemic violence" of the dominating discourse (both colonial and patriarchal) is much stronger than the message is distorted or eradicated. Accordingly, Spivak, in an effective style, writes, "The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" (Subaltern speak 308)

### 3. The Critique of Foucault and Deleuze

Spivak's criticism of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze vividly pivots on their renowned conversation, "Intellectuals and Power." She absolutely discovers their viewpoints "naively dangerous." These intellectuals opined that the marginalized "know perfectly well" their real situation and can speak and defend themselves without any representation from other educated thinkers or intellectuals. Therefore, Spivak determines two considerable defects in this "desire for transparency":

#### 3.1. Disregarding the Global Division of Labor:

One of the main flaws in Foucault and Deleuze's perspectives is their excessive focus on the Western worker, on the one hand. On the other hand, they deliberately neglect the international economic structures that force the hyphenated in the Global South out of the "circuit of speech".

**3.2. The Transparency fable:** By arguing that they are not "representing" the marginalized, they certainly ignore their right in power. They claimed to be inconspicuous observers. Unconsciously, they restore the "Sovereign Western Subject" as the paramount origin of knowledge.

#### 4. Contemporary Application: Digital Activism and the Refugee Situation

It is undeniable that Spivak's inquiry is revived in the 21st century. Spivak totally contradicts the notion that adopting social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter) or TikTok gives "everyone" a voice.

It is widely recognized that although refugees are indeed dominating the headlines, unfortunately, they are seen as "subaltern". Therefore, the images of those "subalterns" are utilized to gain the empathy of Western communities (Darstellung). Yet, they occasionally have the opportunity to have a legal standing or political platform (Vertretung) to impose policies. Actually, digital platforms are often seen as a "double-edged sword". In other words, those platforms permit self-expression, but that expression is often restricted by some Western digital architectures that impose "consumption" over "transactional speech."

#### 5. The Dispute on Resistance: Benita Parry vs. Gayatri Spivak

A substantial part of the academic discourse concerning "Can the Subaltern Speak?" entails the harsh critique from Benita Parry. In her essay, "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse," Parry levels accusations against Spivak

of "deafening herself" to the real sounds of struggle.

Parry's Counter-argument (Restoring of Agency): Parry contends that by suggesting that the subaltern "cannot speak," Spivak efficiently eradicates the legacy of anti-colonial resistance. Parry believes that the colonized were not just "silent objects" of epistemic violence but were alive "combatants" who held renewable traditions and knowledge. She claims that Spivak's interest in deconstruction and "textuality" restricts resistance to linguistic skillfulness, rather than factual social uprising.

Spivak's Defense (The trick of Essentialism): Spivak believes that Parry's suggestion leads, in one way or another, to the illusion of "romanticizing" the marginalized. To insist on her claim that the subaltern has a "pure" or "authentic" representation is, to Spivak's viewpoint, a way of essentialism. To be more specific, Spivak argues that the subaltern's speech is of no value within social, cultural, and scientific circles, such as universities, the law or even the international state. That is to say, Spivak Comprehends that the subaltern is not physically restricted, but that their voice is not distinguished as knowledge within the various facilities of the society. In this respect, Parry states:

What Spivak uncovers are instances of doubly-oppressed native women who, in their triple-displacement as proletarian, colonized and female, are caught between the domination of a native patriarchy and a foreign masculinist-imperialist ideology (34)

#### 5.1. The Critique of Foucault and Deleuze: The "Sovereign" Subject

The critique that is done by Spivak on the conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze ("Intellectuals and Power") is certainly her outstanding and skillful contribution. In this respect, she claims that Foucault and Deleuze sustain the "West as Subject", even though they pretend to be radical .

She clearly reveals their attempt to involve a "desire for transparency" within their work, i.e., the notion that the intellectual should merely "clear the way" so the marginalized can express themselves. Spivak names this "naively dangerous" for two reasons:

**Fiscal Myopia:** They neglect the international classification of labor. They ignore the actual hyphenated woman who works in a garment factory. They actually focus on the Western "Worker" who possesses all legal rights .

**The Master's Mask:** Foucault and Deleuze assume that they are not adopting the issue of anyone. Acting in this way, they conceal their privilege. They behave as if they are unseen viewers, which Spivak contends is a way of reintroducing the Western masculine intellectual as the epicenter of the universe.

#### 6. Contemporary Application :The Digital Subaltern and the Refugee Dilemma

One might inquire: Can refugees speak? Spivak's proposal, whether the subaltern can express their entity, remains applicable in the current time.

In the present refugee crisis, we see an abundance of Darstellung (representation as objects). We notice pictures of refugees on sinking ships and boats or even on the walls of camps. Accordingly, these images may cause empathy or

anxiety within Western society.

Nonetheless, there is nearly no *Vertretung* (political representation). Therefore, most refugees seldom joined the UN or the EU to participate in preparing the laws that organize their lives.

Similarly, social media deliberately attempts to deflect the subaltern's actual dilemma. Their messages are often "curated" by biased algorithms. A video of a protest in a developing country is considered "content" by Western people. Yet, the actual political request is often modified through translation, just as Bhuvanewari Bhaduri's message was forgotten.

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