



GAYATRI'S VOICE OF DISSCENT IN "CAN THE SUBALTERN SPEAK?"

English

Dr.N.PRIYADHAR Asst. Professor Department of English Periyar University college of Arts and Science
SINI Mettur.

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION:

Speak has become an authoritative voice of the post-colonial period since the publication of her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" She has extended her discourse to a large variety of topics such as Marxism, Feminism and Deconstruction. Spivak, the post-colonial intellectual, was born in Calcutta on 24 February 1942.

Spivak, through her cultural and critical theories, tried to challenge the legacy of colonialism. She refused to admit the notion that the Western World is having an upper hand over the Third World as it is more purified from the grossness of acute barbarism. Her critical discourse raises the issues the issues of marginal subjects such as the place of the subaltern women in the society and their empowerment. Though the people could surpass the colonial rule, they are not actually free from its influences and power structures.

Spivak borrows the term 'subaltern' from Gramsci, to refer to the unrepresented group of people in the society. In the Indian cultural context, the term 'subaltern' acquires more significance as the people have struggled hard for Indian independence. She prefers the term 'subaltern' as it encompasses the exact picture of the lower class people.

KEYWORDS

Feminism, post-colonial, controversial, self-immolation, patriarchy, martyrdom, Emphasis, etc.

CAN THE SUBALTERN SPEAK:

In the highly controversial essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak rakes various issues related to sati, the practice of widow self-immolation. It was the finest example to support the argument that the subaltern women didn't get the opportunity to transact their ideas and convince the society about their dissenting voice. The Britishers were the rulers of the colonial India and they tried to abolish the age old custom of widow sacrifice in 1828. Sati is a Sanskrit word for widow and she becomes a good and loyal wife to her husband when she ascends the pyre of her that husband and unites with her husband in the act of self-immolation.

The Britishers preferred the term *suttee* instead of *sati* and the abolition of this evil practice was taken up by the colonial rulers as part of their civilizing mission (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* 297). The message from the colonial rulers was that "white men saving brown women from brown men" (293). But to their greatest disappointment, the Britishers never knew that some of the women in India really wanted to join with their dead husbands in the funeral pyre as a noble act of self-immolation. Both *Dharmasastra* and *Rg-Veda*, ancient Hindu religious texts, treat the practice of widow self-immolation as a sacred ritual for the dead husband, rather than an act of suicide:

People carried out the practice of widow self-immolation as it was permitted in the *Dharmasastra*. Spivak challenges the validity of this horrible human sacrifice by stating that "this is not the proper place for the woman to annual the proper name of suicide through the destruction of the proper self" (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 300). Self-immolation has attained a spiritual significance and the rite is highly male oriented where the domination of patriarchy is made visible through the accomplishment of this widow sacrifice. The practice of *sati* helped the males to demand respect from women. Women in the pre-independent India played the role of a parasite. A parasite is a separate living organism like a woman and it does not have independent existence. Once the main tree falls, down the existence of the parasite is under threat. The tree and the parasite cease to exist at the same time. The women is not different from the parasite. The moment her husband dies, the woman loses her identity as an individual and regains her individuality with her husband on the funeral pyre.

Spivak is of the view that due to the religious halo behind the self-immolation, the act of widow sacrifice cannot be considered as an act of suicide but "a simulacrum of both truth-knowledge and piety of place"

In "can the Subaltern Speak?", Speak comes up with the contention that "Sati should have been read with martyrdom" (302). A martyr does

not die for himself/herself. His /her blood is spilled for the cause of others in which she has no personal advantage. The women who burnt themselves as *satis* were martyrs. This martyrdom was in fact a kind of protest against the society, since it failed to recognize their role in the society along with the kith and kin of their family.

In "can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak lashes out her stringent criticism against Edward Thompson's *Suttee* for two obvious reasons: first of all "Thompson's finessing of the word *sati* as "faithful" in the very first sentence of the book "and the second one is for Thompson's praise for General Charles Hervey's stand on this subject matter that "brings out the pity of a system which looked only for prettiness and constancy in woman" (305).

SUBALTERN CANNOT SPEAK:A DISCOURSE UPON THE THEROY OF COMMUNICATION:

The act of speaking and talking are completely different from each other. The act of speaking is more active and it involves the participation of at least one listener whereas the act of talking is passive and it can either be a soliloquy or *sonnambulism*. Speaking comes under interpersonal communication⁵ and it involves a situation in which two people try to communicate things face to face. In this type of communication, the person can use gestures and facial expressions so as to make the communication more effective. The element of feedback is instant and it is the most effective way of knowing that the communication has achieved its specific objective.

The elements of communication include: sender, receiver, message, channel, effect, feedback and noise. Sender is the one who sends and the message and the person who receives the message is the receiver. Message is the information that is being passed over to the receiver by the sender and the medium that is used in communicating the message becomes the channel. Effect is the attitudinal change that is found in the receiver as a result of getting the new information. Physical context is the geographical setting in which the communication does take place.

Psychological context is the relationship that exists between the sender and the receiver. If there is a good rapport with the sender and the receiver, the communication can be more effective and there will be a genuine interest from the part of the listener towards the communication process. Temporal context refers to the time at which the communication takes place.

The communication that takes place between a subaltern and a non-subaltern is actually lost due to the element of noise. The element of noise is influenced by the racial, cultural and socio-economic factors. The goal of communication is achieved only when the desired message is conveyed to the receiver. Though the sender tries his / her level best,

the communication is interrupted by the element of noise. Spivak substantiates her argument in *The Spivak Reader* as:

By "speaking" I was obviously talking about a transaction between the speaker and the listener. That is what did not happen in the case of a woman who took her own body at the moment of death to inscribe a certain kind of understanding – too weak a word – a certain kind of annulment of all the presuppositions that underlie the regulative psychobiography that writes sati. When we act we don't act out of thinking through details; we act I something that Derrida calls, following Kierkegaard, the "night of nonknowledge"... We act out of certain kinds of reflexes that come through learning habits of mind, rather than by merely knowing something. That is the way in which her action was inscribed in her body. And even that incredible effort speak did not fulfil itself in a speech act. And therefore, in a certain kind of theoretical anguish after the accounting of this, I said, "the subaltern cannot speak" (289).

The Barbaric act of the Britishers was questioned by the subaltern insurgency as they became the constant victims of the flood. The subalterns were shattered into pieces and the Britishers never had the patience to listen to the subalterns. The imperial government appointed a water-works inspector to study the entire situation in detail. He came up with a fact finding report that "these waterways had in fact been an irrigation and flood management system" (291). It is only by restoring the 'ancient waterways' the people can have a calm and serene life. Spivak is speculative about the restoration of the ancient waterworks as she says. They cannot be built because the way that had been built was slowly, respecting the rhythm of those very young rivers, whereas the way things would be built today be capital-intensive, cost-efficient, and fast (*The Spivak Reader* 291).

The place of the funeral pyre of her dead husband turns out to be the first and the last platform for a woman to speak. In the roaring outburst of loss, the woman may try to speak but others won't have the patience to listen to her. The communication system fails when the speaker is not able to convince the receiver. The society does not give room for the person speak and I "Can the Subaltern Speak?". Speak makes the point clearer when she says, "There is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak" (307). McLeod agrees:

Their muteness is created by the fact that even when women uttered words, they were still interpreted through conceptual and methodological procedures which were unable to understand their interventions with accuracy. It is not so much that subaltern women did not speak, but rather that others did not know how to listen, how to enter into a transaction between speaker and listener. The subaltern cannot speak because their words cannot be properly interpreted. Hence, the silence of the female as subaltern is the result of a failure of interpretation and not a failure of articulation (195).

CONCLUSION:

Spivak's theory of subalternity is still relevant as people suffer in the name of gender, class and creed. As change is the only permanent thing in the world, the subalterns should continue to make their position clear before the authorities. It is only when the authorities heed to the pleas of the subalterns that the new dawn of like may be enjoyed by the subalterns in its fullness.

This chapter has examined Spivak's theory of subalternity. The theory proposes that 'the subalterns cannot speak' by giving special emphasis on the element of noise. The next chapter of the thesis deals with 'Art: Arundhati Roy's Fictional World.' It focuses upon the extraordinary genius of the author in the realm of fiction with all its innovative, non-conformist and artistic elements.

WORK CITED:

1. Speak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Women's Text from the Third World." In *Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Methuen, 1987. 241-268.
2. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. London: Macmillan, 1988. 271-313.
3. *The Speak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Speak*. Ed. Donna Landry and Gerald Mac Lea. New York: Routledge, 1996.
4. Thompson, Edward. *Suttee: A Historical and Philosophical Enquiry in the Hindu Rite of Widow-Burning*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1928.
5. Wafia, Shelley. *Postmodern Encounters: Edward Said and the Writing of History*. U.K: Icon Books, 2001.