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Spivak or the voice of the subaltern

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is considered to be one of the most influential theoreticians in contemporary thought. Born in Calcutta in 1942, she moved to the United States in the mid-1960s to take a PhD in Comparative Literature. Since then, a solid academic career has turned her into one of the best-known critical voices of the moment. Her work displays a broad range of interests and influences, including deconstruction, Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis and education, though it is in the area of post-colonial studies that her influence is strongest. Her work has often been classed as heterogeneous and fragmentary: heterogeneous both in its interests and in its defence of a postcolonial reality which is in itself disparate and impossible to homogenise; fragmentary, because her work, which owes much to deconstruction and psychoanalysis, resists any total or totalising representation.

A heterogeneous and fragmentary work

For this Indian author based in the United States, the postcolonial issue is in many ways heterogeneous but, it is in all cases a category that is run through by gender. Indeed, this is a crucial question which can be seen throughout her career: interrogating, searching, building the place of the gendered postcolonial subject. Although her readings and interpretations of literary texts have often taken the stance of feminist theory, Spivak has gone to great lengths to stress the dangers of a feminist individualism that repeats and even exacerbates the postcolonial discourse without managing to escape the effects of its power. In one of her most famous articles “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism”, she re-interprets Charlotte Brönte’s *Jane Eyre* in the light of a new interpretation of the role of Rochester’s first wife, the Creole Berthaⁱ Mason, in opposition to the canonical teachings of feminist criticism. Instead of seeing Bertha Mason as Jane’s alter ego, Spivak argues that she cannot be understood outside the “epistemic violence” of the discourse of nineteenth-century imperialism. The necessary counterpoint to Jane’s supposed liberation is the “animalisation” of the “native” subject.

But as well as heterogeneous, Spivak's work has also been classed as fragmentary. This is partly because it cannot easily be appropriated by any school of thought, even if she herself considers that she is indebted to several of them. At the very least, her theoretical affiliations must be classed as complex. She played a pivotal role in the spread of what came to be known in the United States as "French literary theory" (principally deconstruction): in 1976 she made an English translation of Jacques Derrida's work *Of Grammatology*, a key text in understanding the philosopher's emergence in American academic circles. Since then, Spivak has championed the utility of deconstruction. Unlike those who see it as being a textual and textualist practice, difficult to politicise, she insists that deconstructionist strategies enable an analysis and critique of the conditions that allow the colonial discourse. She therefore uses deconstruction to demonstrate that any narrative is in itself a rhetorical knot that should be interpreted against the tide, to reveal what the text silences or hides—that which remains opaque though deeply significant. Her literary analyses, whose origins also owe much to psychoanalysis, pursue in the most marginal aspects, in the interstitial area of every text, that element which sustains its most purely ideological value, where the colonial discourse is produced and reproduced. Spivak uses deconstruction in a political sense and in two directions; on the one hand to unmask the strategies of colonial power and, on the other, to trace (to use her own expression) the itineraries of the silencing of subjects who have been written out of history. The purpose, then, is not to turn the colonial discourse on its head, which would simply be another way of reinforcing it, but to reveal its blind angles, its very opacity, to allow new paths of negotiation and criticism. Unlike other theoreticians of postcolonial studies who strongly criticise the cultural assumptions of the west, Spivak does not relinquish the possibility of keeping an ambivalent position, sitting as she does on both sides of the spectrum, colonial and metropolitan. She unashamedly calls herself a pro-European, and defends strategies of negotiation to subvert the colonial discourse.

Deconstruction also allows her to escape the dangers of what one might term postcolonial fundamentalism. Her idea of the colonial subject does not mean imaginizing a pure pre-colonial subject incarnating the essence of a supposedly uncontaminated civilization. Far from it: Spivak is critical of identity politicsⁱⁱ which she allows only a "strategic" margin of political action, feeling that they must immediately be called into question. She invokes the notion of a decentred subject

which cannot be reduced to an idea of origin or even of belonging. The subject is not the result of a pure essence, but an effect of the discourse and hence must *always already*ⁱⁱⁱ be discontinuous. This is a “subject-effect” rather than an actual subject, the result of a heterogeneous constellation of discourses. Here, Spivak uses the Lacanian idea of the subject as an effect of the inscribing of the signifier on the being and Foucault’s idea of the subject as a place of multiple textual positions. Thus the subject can never be pinned down and immobilised, as identity politics might have one believe. For this reason too, she specifically rejects any semblance of “reverse ethnocentrism”, of “nativism”, of “uneasy colonial conscience” that might represent a nostalgia for a better, purer, more authentic colonial subject, echoing the notion of the noble savage—a better subject, in short, than the Western subject. The only possible concession to identity may be strategically oriented. She has recently coined the term *synechdoching*^{iv} to refer to the way in which a subject can choose from a range of forms of identification for political purposes. Choosing to wear a sari or jeans, for example, takes on a political aspect which can allow a woman to champion certain identifying aspects at certain times. Spivak has said that this possibility of choosing *ad hoc* identifications is only available to educated middle class women, and that the liberation of the subaltern would involve an extension of this *synechdoche* to the more marginal classes. However, this “strategic essentialism” does not touch on the actual structure of the subject’s alienation from identity signifiers of identity and their effects. It might also be worthwhile analysing in greater depth what the current ideological conditions are that make it possible for ephemeral identifications to exist. The fact that this is possible in the case of westernised subjects and not in the case of those who live in more traditional societies seems to suggest that it is not merely a question of class, as Spivak maintains, but of the subject’s relationship with the discourse in a much wider and more complex way.

Can the subaltern speak?

The question asked by Spivak in 1988, “Can the Subaltern speak?” has had a considerable influence on the field of postcolonial studies, and cultural studies in general, over the last two decades. It is probably one of the most frequently quoted articles in contemporary critique. The term subaltern is used in Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* to refer to the underclasses, especially the rural proletariat. From the 1980s, Ranajit Guha^v’s *Subaltern studies group* used it to refer to the Indian rural

classes. Their epistemological quest was to recover the voice of the subaltern, which had been silenced by hegemonic historiography, and to force a crisis in that hegemonic historiography. The subaltern is seen as the colonial subject but also as an agent of change and insurgency.

Spivak's famous article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" addressed the presuppositions of subaltern studies and highlighted two difficulties. Firstly, she answered that the subaltern subject cannot speak because he or she has no site of enunciation where this is possible. Secondly, she argued that women occupy that radical place because of their twin condition as women and colonial subjects. The subaltern was thus held up as a figure of radical difference, the Other who cannot speak not because they literally cannot—evidently women in traditional Indian society did speak—but because they do not form part of the discourse.

The article sparked great controversy and the author herself refused to allow it to be included in a collection until she could clear up what she considered to be certain confusions caused by some interpretations of the text. The main thrust of the criticism was directed against the end of the article, where Spivak illustrated her argument with the suicide of a woman, Bhuvanewari Bhaduri, and went on to interpret the meaning of this the act. She was admonished for choosing a representative from the bourgeois nationalist elite as an example of the subaltern, in clear contradiction to the other definition she had given of subaltern status which only included the oppressed classes. Secondly, she was reproached for restoring the subaltern's consciousness, by offering an interpretation of Bhuvanewari Bhaduri's act as if she were capable of revealing the meaning and the truth of her suicide, clearly contradicting the idea that the subaltern is incapable of speaking.

Spivak's concept of the subaltern was also criticised for its confused relationship with the agency. Critics pointed out that the term appears to refer to a radical Other^{vi} which would be entirely inaccessible, a kind of blank page which cannot be included in the discourse. Here, the subaltern would be seen more as a conceptual category than a subjective designation, given that it would be difficult to maintain that women in colonial societies have remained radically at the margin of the patriarchal and

hegemonic discourse. The subaltern is thus irremediably trapped in the silence, as its very condition of possibility^{vii}.

Spivak has answered these criticisms by providing another notion of the subaltern as the third-world woman who cannot speak because the discursive conditions do not exist to allow her to, but in any event, this should not be the case^{viii}. In her most recent declarations, Spivak has gone to some length to point out that her aim is to trace an itinerary of silencing so that the subaltern can have access to a site of enunciation where her voice can be heard. Hence too, her interest in teaching, as practice and as politics. Spivak has frequently moved her work to India and most recently to rural China, to look for ways of making the subaltern voices heard, and she asks how new spaces can be opened for enunciation. She does not let difficulties get in the way of her work; on the contrary, these difficulties are included in the search for new responses to the challenges of contemporary society.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

ⁱ Es el nombre de la primera mujer de Rochester en Jane Eyre.

ⁱⁱ Creo que el término “politics” es mejor en este contexto y se ajusta un poco más al uso que se hace en la teoría crítica en inglés.

ⁱⁱⁱ Es la traducción al inglés comúnmente aceptada de la expresión de Jacques Derrida “toujours déjà” que creo que a su vez procede de Heidegger.

^{iv} Es el término que Spivk utilizó en Barcelona y que refirió como su propia invención.

^v Este nombre es correcto.

^{vi} Faltaba este término!

^{vii} El “su” en el original se refiere a silencio y no al sujeto subalterno. Creo que la traducción adecuada es la que doy.

^{viii} Esta frase quiere indicar que Spivak no hace una defensa de que el sujeto subalterno no deba hablar. Al contrario, si las condiciones para que lo haga no existen, hay que crearlas.