

Postcolonial Literature

Lecture 18

Dr. Sayan Chattopadhyay, IIT Kanpur

Welcome back to this series of lectures on postcolonial studies. During the course of this lecture and the next, we will try to understand Spivak's theorisation of the subaltern position through Mahasweta Devi's short story titled "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha". However, before we start exploring the story itself, I would like to revisit Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern speak?" to highlight the connecting threads that link Spivak's theoretical position with Devi's narrative.

Ethical response to the subaltern

As you will remember from our previous discussion, we had defined subaltern as a position of disempowerment and marginalisation. We had also talked about Spivak's argument that for someone within this position of subalternity, it is impossible to generate discourse about one's desires, interests and self-identity. This is the basic argument that is coded in the form of the cryptic but powerful statement: "the subaltern cannot speak".

However, it is important to note here that Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is not merely limited to showing that the subaltern cannot speak. Indeed, this observation that the subaltern is unable to generate discourse about herself, her interests and her desires, acts in Spivak's essay as a trigger for ethical intervention. In other words, this observation leads Spivak to another very crucial question: If the subaltern cannot speak then what should be our ethical response to it? And here when I say "our response" I mean the response of those who have agency and whose speech is recognised as meaningful discourse.

A simplistic answer to this question would be to state that since the subaltern cannot speak for herself, we who are the elites (following Ranajit Guha's categorisation), should speak for her. Now, on the surface, speaking for or representing the oppressed and the disempowered sounds like a very valid ethical gesture. But as Spivak points out in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" this desire to "speak for" someone else is fraught with its own dangers because what might happen and indeed what does often happen when the elites try to represent the subaltern is that they impose on the subaltern their own interests and their own desires. In other words, what gets *represented* as the voice of the subaltern is not her voice at all, but the voice of an elite trying to pass off his own desires and interests as the interests and desires of the subaltern.

According to Spivak, any such attempt to speak for the subaltern still leaves the subaltern speechless and bereft of agency.

Sati as the subaltern

To exemplify the dangers of such attempts to represent the subaltern, Spivak in her essay refers to the debate surrounding the ritual of “sati” in which an upper-caste Hindu widow mounts the funeral pyre of her husband and ends her own life. According to Spivak, though a lot of discourse is available on sati, the figure of the sati herself is a typical example of a subaltern who cannot speak. This is because the different elite groups discoursing on sati, though they claim to represent or speak for the woman who immolates herself with her dead husband, ultimately end up speaking for their own self-interest. To understand this better, let us start our enquiry from the year 1829. This was the year when the then Governor General of British India, Lord William Bentinck, passed a legal act banning the practice of sati in the Indian territory under British jurisdiction. This act formed part of the nineteenth century colonial discourse which characterised the rite of sati as a brutal and barbaric custom, in which the Hindu men “punished” the Hindu widow by forcing her to mount the funeral pyre of her dead husband. In this colonial discourse, the rite of sati was nothing less than murder sanctioned by the Hindu patriarchy. The Hindu widow who mounts the fire, is thus presented by the coloniser as the helpless victim of Hindu male’s sadistic desire to punish and torture the weaker sex. The law passed by the colonial government banning this ritual of widow sacrifice therefore becomes an attempt by the British coloniser to speak on behalf of the subaltern Hindu widow who otherwise cannot express her desire or assert her authority against the aggression of the Hindu male.

According to Spivak, the colonial discourse made it out to be a case of “white men saving brown women from brown men”. However, Spivak argues that though the colonial discourse tried to argue that the banning of sati was an attempt by the colonial government to provide agency to the otherwise powerless Hindu widow, the ulterior motive behind this legislative act was different. By portraying the rite of sati as a barbaric practice, the colonisers could justify the colonial rule as a civilizing mission. The very fact that brown women needed protection from brown men cast the white coloniser into the role of a benevolent protector whose civilizing efforts were needed to root out the cruel and savage practices that plagued the Hindu society in particular and the Indian society at large. So in other words, the colonial discourse on sati was not really about helping the Hindu widow out of the position of subalternity. Nor was it really guided by a desire to enable her to speak in her own voice to establish her own

identity and her own desire. The colonial discourse, though it claimed to be the voice of the sati is revealed by Spivak to be simply the voice of the coloniser which is informed not by the desires and interests of the Hindu widow but by the desires and interests of the British overlord justifying the colonial subjugation of India.

If you read Spivak's essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" you will note that Spivak also makes a similar argument about the male Hindu nativists who opposed the colonial intervention in banning the rite of sati, and who too claimed to speak on behalf the Hindu widow. Contrary to the colonial view, these Hindu nativists, and they included people like Rabindranath Tagore and Ananda Coomaraswamy, constructed the image of the Hindu sati not as a victim of male sadism but rather as someone who mounts the pyre of her husband out of her own desire. Spivak argues that, in spite of being a contrary discourse, this Hindu nativist argument too, just like the colonial discourse does not help us listen to the voice of the widow. Spivak points out a number of ways in which the widow's voice gets suppressed within this Hindu nativist discourse, but we lack the time to go into further details now. However, what we need to remember here is the larger point that Spivak is making: any attempt to "speak for" the voiceless subaltern often ends up in creation of discourses which are underlined by the desires and interests of the elites rather than of the subalterns, just like the colonial and the nativist discourse about Sati ends up reflecting the desires and interests of the colonisers and the Hindu males, and not that of the widow.

But then what is the way forward? What should we do as ethical individuals to address the situation of the disempowered and voiceless subaltern? According to Spivak, since we cannot really "speak for" the subaltern – the more ethical move would be to create enabling conditions for the subaltern to speak for herself and thereby come out of the disempowered position of subalternity. And it is in this light that we should read Spivak's work as a teacher among the landless illiterate population in the villages of West Bengal. But for Spivak, even this act of creating enabling circumstances for the subaltern to speak comes later. The first step is to try and learn from the subaltern and sensitize ourselves to her needs and desires. The process of learning from the subaltern who cannot speak is itself a difficult task and so the starting point is to learn the process that will enable us to learn from the subaltern. And here again we come across one of Spivak's cryptic but powerful statements – we should "learn to learn from the subaltern". It is only when we face the subaltern as a learner, as a listener, that we can perhaps empower and enjoin the subaltern to speak.

To explore Spivak's theorisation of the subaltern through a literary text, let me now turn to Mahasweta Devi's short story. The story that we are going to read is one of the three tales by Devi contained in the book "Imaginary Maps", and all of these three stories are translated by Spivak. Today we will be focussing on the story which, in its translated form, bears the title "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha". But before we go on to this story, let me introduce Mahasweta Devi to you.

Mahasweta Devi

Devi, a well-respected author and social activist, was born in 1926 in Dhaka, which is now the capital of Bangladesh. After the partition of the subcontinent during independence, Devi moved from Dhaka to West Bengal where she completed her tertiary education in English literature first in the Viswabharati University and then in the University of Calcutta. She started her career as a teacher in a college in Kolkata but then navigated towards journalism and creative writing. Her career was also marked by social activism and a strong commitment towards the tribal population of India. As Devi has pointed out in several occasions, this tribal population, which forms about one sixth of the total population of India, has long suffered unimaginable oppressions from the people who are in the mainstream. With every wave of migration that has arrived at this subcontinent, the position of the indigenous tribal population has been made more and more precarious. The forest, which is their habitation, has been gradually taken away from them, and their ways of life have been brutally crushed. Devi traces back this oppression of the tribal population back to the days of the Hindu epic *Ramayana* and argues that the oppression has not stopped yet. Under the British rule many of the Tribals were branded as criminals and their rights to the forest curtailed. Such curtailment of tribal rights has continued even in post-independence India. Thus, here we are confronted with a form of oppression akin to colonialism, and the tribal emerge as the archetypal subaltern whose voice has been systematically gagged and marginalised for centuries. Both as a social activist and as an author, Devi stood up for the rights of the disempowered Tribals and her work has been widely acknowledged both in India and abroad. She has been the recipient of numerous awards including the Sahitya Akademi Award, Padma Shri, the Ramon Magsaysay award and Padma Vibhushan.

One of the reasons I chose the story "Pterodactyl" for our reading in this course is because Devi herself in an interview with Spivak identifies it as the summation of the entire experience she has obtained while working with the Tribals. She also identifies the story as the distillation of

the agony of the Tribals that she had learnt to perceive through her sustained engagement with them. In Devi's own words, "If read carefully, *Pterodactyl* will communicate the agony of the Tribals, of marginalized people all over the world. [...] *Pterodactyl* wants to show what has been done to the entire tribal world of India." Devi then goes on to add that, "Each tribe is like a continent. But we never tried to know. Never tried to respect them. That is true of every tribal. And we destroy them." *Pterodactyl* confronts this story of destruction which is continuing even today, in modern day India, in the name of development. It speaks of our ethical obligation to stop this wanton destruction and to reach out to the Tribals, not in the role of subjugators or even patronising superiors but as empathetic listeners and learners. To quote Devi, "Our double task is to resist 'development' actively and to learn to love".

We will elaborate on this double task in our next lecture. But I would like to end today's lecture by briefly commenting on how *Pterodactyl* and the story of Devi's engagement with the Tribals that it narrates connects with the concerns of postcolonial studies. Well this story contributes to our understanding of the postcolonial situation in at least two distinct. Firstly, by speaking about the subalternisation of the Tribals in India that has continued from the period of the British Raj to present day, it points out the fact that even as an independent nation, we are still burdened with a lot of colonial baggage and we have not really been able to dismantle the colonial structures of coercion. Secondly, this narrative about the Tribals whose world we have destroyed and continue destroying questions the narrative of nationalism and postcolonial freedom. It forces us to reconsider the kind of freedom that we have earned because this freedom and sense of agency has definitely not reached the hundred million strong tribal population of India. "*Pterodactyl*" asks us to question the kind of nation we have built for ourselves – a nation in which the Tribals who are, as the Indian word "Adivasi" suggests, the original or the primitive inhabitants of this land has no place. We will take up this powerful story of Devi as well as the difficult questions it raises for us in our next lecture. Thank you.