

## **Postcolonial Literature**

### **Lecture 17**

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Hello and welcome back to this lecture series on postcolonial literature. Today we are going to take up the writings of Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak who is one of the most influential theorists in the field of postcolonial studies. I am sure that by now, after going through the previous lectures in this series, you have realised that at the most fundamental level, postcolonial studies is an exercise in ethics. One of the main agendas of postcolonial criticism has been the dismantling of the Eurocentric worldview which colonialism had naturalised and which had in turn marginalised numerous indigenous cultural and epistemic traditions across the colonised parts of the world. The other agenda of postcolonial studies has been to foreground the voice of the oppressed, and to create conditions, at least within the academic institutions, so that the people subjugated by colonialism can be heard. Both of these efforts are already prominently displayed in the works of the founding figure of postcolonial studies, Edward Said, and in Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak we find a continuation of this ethical imperative of postcolonial studies. Spivak's ethical intervention is most associated with her work with the subaltern, and here when I am talking about "work" I am thinking both about her academic writings as well as her work as a teacher and activist among the landless illiterate population in the villages of West Bengal. Indeed, within the academic circles at least, Spivak's name is today most widely associated with the highly influential essay "Can the Subaltern speak?" In this lecture we will try and understand the contribution of Spivak in the field of postcolonial studies by focussing on her elaboration of the term subaltern. But before we do so, let me introduce Spivak to you.

#### **Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak**

Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak was born in Calcutta in 1942. It was a time when the British Raj was fast losing its political grip over the Indian subcontinent and these last years of the colonial rule was marked by calamitous violence. The Bengal famine of the early 1940s, which was triggered by the opening up of the Pacific theatre during the Second World War, left literally thousands of skeletal human bodies dying in the streets of Calcutta. If you remember, I had mentioned in one of my early lectures that although we are primarily going to talk about colonialism and resistance to colonialism in cultural terms during this course, we should never lose sight of the physical violence that informed colonial rule. And so as we see here, Spivak who was to emerge as one of the foremost postcolonial theorists, grew up witnessing some of

the most gruesome incidents of violence that were brought about by the colonial rule and, ironically, by middle-class nationalism which in a place like India touted the promise of ending the British rule and its evils. Indeed, for someone living in Calcutta during the 1940s, the violence of the artificially created Bengal famine was only surpassed by the violence that marked the birth of India and Pakistan as nation-states in 1947. The middle class nationalists and the British colonialists had made a pact to carve up the communities living together in the subcontinent into citizens and for the young Spivak in Calcutta this pact did not translate so much into the abstract idea of freedom as the more real spectacle of blood on the streets. Thus in her essay “Nationalism and the Imagination”, Spivak writes that her earliest memories as a child are precisely these: blood on the streets. The very fact that Spivak recalls these memories later on as a postcolonial intellectual to think through the idea of nationalism and the role of aesthetic imagination in it shows how postcolonial high theory can grow out of one’s engagement with the physical violence that has underlined colonialism and its legacies.

Along with this raw physical violence of colonialism/nationalism, Spivak as a child was also exposed to some of the forces resisting this carnage, which primarily included the street theatres and songs of the influential Indian People Theatre’s Association, an association of leftist artists. Indeed, political leftism and engagement with the writings of intellectuals like Marx and Lenin have remained prominent characteristics of Spivak’s work. Apart from this leftist current, Spivak’s intellectual horizon was also shaped by a thorough exposure to British literature which she received as a student at the University of Calcutta. After graduating in 1959, Spivak moved to the West where she completed her Masters degree at Cornell University in the United States followed by a year of fellowship at the University of Cambridge. For her PhD, she returned to the Cornell University to work on the poetry of W.B. Yeats under the supervision of Paul De Man. De Man is noted for, among other things, his efforts to import the insights of Jacques Derrida’s philosophy of deconstruction into the field of literary studies, and Spivak too, following the lead of De Man has remained strongly enthusiastic about deconstruction throughout her career. Indeed, Spivak first came to international limelight as a critic when in 1976 she published an English translation of Derrida’s *De La Grammatologie* under the title *Of Grammatology*, along with an extensive commentary on the text as part of the “Translator’s Preface”. Since then, Spivak has gone on to publish a number of books including *In Other Worlds*, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, *Death of A Discipline*, *Other Asias*, and more recently *Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. However, as I have told you near the beginning of this lecture, Spivak’s most influential and

recognisable work has remained “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, whose first version – and the essay has a number of versions – was published in 1985 in a journal called *Wedge*. Let us now turn to the notion of the subaltern and to the question that Spivak so famously asks in the title of her essay – can the subaltern speak?

### **Who/what is the subaltern?**

Now it is essential to clarify at the very onset that though Spivak has occasionally been mistaken as the founder of the concept of the subaltern, the concept did not originate in Spivak’s writings. In fact, in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” we see Spivak engaging with versions of the concept of the subaltern which was already strongly established before her essay came out. But the very fact that today the word subaltern immediately conjures up the name of Spivak tells us something about the impact that Spivak has had on elaborating the notion of the subaltern.

### **Antonio Gramsci**

If we consult the dictionary we will see that the word subaltern originally meant a junior ranking military officer. Indeed, this particular use of the word subaltern is still very much prevalent within the military today. But in the field of critical theory, the term can be traced back to the writings of the early twentieth century Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci, a foremost Marxist theoretician, used the word subaltern to signify a section of people who were subordinate to the hegemonic groups or classes.

To fully understand this definition we need to first comprehend the notion of hegemony in Gramsci. Hegemony is a mode of exercising authority. Now if you think about the concept of authority you will notice that one of the most obvious ways in which authority is asserted is through the exercise of brute physical force. If I have a gun for instance and I can terrorise you into submission, then that will be one way of asserting my authority over you. We can see how this form of authority works within a society if we think about the role of the police force for instance.

However, Gramsci argues that there is also another way in which one can exert one’s authority over another. Thus, for instance, if I can somehow convince you that whatever I do for my own wellness also serves your good and that my self-interest is also your self-interest then that is a more effective way of asserting my authority over you than using physical force. According to Gramsci, within a society the ruling class mostly assert its authority by this non-coercive

method – that is by convincing the entire population that the interest of the ruling class is the interest of the entire population. This non-coercive assertion of political authority by a particular class over other groups of people is referred to by Gramsci as hegemony.

To understand how this works, let us go back to the discussions about Indian nationalism that we have had in our previous lectures. Now if you remember, we have noted in those lectures that most of the figures who led the charge against the British belonged to a particular social class which we had referred to, following Sumit Sarkar, as the middle class. And be it CR Das or MK Gandhi or Jawaharlal Nehru or Subhas Chandra Bose, they all shared similar career trajectories. But when we think about them, we do not conceive them as middle-class heroes but as national heroes—heroes who spoke not on the behalf of one particular class but on the behalf of the entire nation. Gramsci would argue that such ready acknowledgement of middle-class heroes as national heroes is as an example of the hegemony that the middle class has exercised in postcolonial India over all the other groups of people, convincing them that what is in the interest of the middle class is also in the interest of the nation in general.

Now, if this is hegemony then what is the subaltern? Well the subaltern in Gramsci's writings refers to the groups of people who are led by the hegemonic class. A subaltern does not exert any hegemonic authority himself. Rather he is taken in by the illusion that his interest is reflected in the self-interest of the ruling class.

### **Subaltern Studies Collective**

This Gramscian understanding of the term “subaltern” was taken up by the influential group of South Asian historians who formed the Subaltern Studies collective in the 1980s. One of the most significant figures within this group was historian Ranajit Guha, and his essay “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India” gives us an account of how the group was using the word subaltern. In his essay Guha presents the term “subaltern” in oppositional relation to the term “elite”. For Guha, who in his essay was working within the context of colonial India, the elite was constituted not only of the European colonisers but also of the dominant indigenous groups who had access to hegemony either through their association with the colonial government or through their western style education or, in case of big landowners for instance or industrial and mercantile bourgeoisie, through their wealth. Thus, in a more general context, the term elite represents all the sections of a society which have political and economic agency. In other words, the elites are the people who can intervene and articulate their self-interests within the field of politics and economics.

Guha defines the subaltern as all those people within a society who do not fall under the category of elite. So here subaltern is not really defined as a special class or caste or race of people. Rather subalternity represents a negative space or a negative position. It is a position of disempowerment, a position without social political or economic agency, a position without identity.

### **Can the subaltern speak?**

For Spivak the characterising feature of this subaltern position is that no speech is possible from here. In other words, the subaltern cannot speak. The terseness of this assertion has often led to confusion about Spivak's intent, and she has even been criticised for silencing the subaltern. But Spivak's argument is really simple to grasp if we understand "speaking" as "generating discourse". Now if you can recall our discussion on Michel Foucault and discourse in one of our lectures, you will know that we had defined discourse as "meaningful utterances" and we had also discussed how within each society there are checks and filters which allow certain utterances to be accepted as discourse and certain others as not. So theoretically, though anyone can speak or write infinitely on any given topic under the sun, what will be accepted as discourse and what will not, is ultimately determined by the power equations that underline the society. Thus for instance in a society where the dominant power structure equates reproductive heterosexuality with normalcy, it is very difficult if not impossible, to generate discourse regarding the rights of homosexuals. So the position of the homosexuals in a society underlined by "reproductive heteronormativity", which is to say regarding reproductive heterosexuality as the only "normal" mode of sexuality, is a subaltern position. It is a position of disempowerment, a position without any access to agency that will enable one to define one's own identity. In other words, it is impossible to generate discourse from within a subaltern position.

This is however not to say that the physical act of speaking is impossible from within the subaltern position, but it is to suggest that this speech never gets accepted as meaningful utterances which carries the weight of socio-political agency and which can articulate self-interest and self-identity. It has been argued by some scholars that rather than saying the subaltern cannot speak, it is more apt to say that the subaltern cannot be heard by the society, just as the mad person cannot be heard because her speech is considered as vacuous. Such rephrasing of Spivak's insight is therefore perfectly alright provided we understand that both the statements "subaltern cannot speak" and "subaltern cannot be heard" refers to the same inability to generate discourse from within the subaltern position.

We will continue this discussion on the subaltern in our next lecture. Thank you.