Lecture 34

Postcolonial Theory II: Bhabha and Spivak

Hello and welcome back to another lecture on literary theory. Today we are going to carry forward our discussion on postcolonial literary theory and we are going to do so by focusing on the works of Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In our previous lecture on Edward Said, we have seen how postcolonial theory seeks to delegitimize the Eurocentric grand narrative of colonialism especially through the technique of contrapuntal reading. In this lecture we will see how postcolonialism addresses the question of alternative discourse formations that challenge the hegemony of the colonial grand narrative.

Homi Bhabha

Now if you look back at Orientalism, which is the example of colonial discourse that we had discussed in our previous lecture, you will see that it is pivoted on a notion of essentialism. What do I mean by this? Well the European colonizer who justified their colonial rule through a discourse like Orientalism thought of themselves as *inherently* or *essentially* superior. In contrast, the subjugated Orient are looked upon as *inherently* or *essentially* inferior. The grand narrative of European colonialism posits that since the native culture of places like India for instance, or Africa, or Southern America is inferior, the imposition of the "superior" European culture through colonialism acts as an ennobling influence. Colonialism from within this grand narrative is therefore perceived as a civilizing mission. Now what is important to note here is the way "superior West" and "inferior East" act as two sides of a binary. This means, that in spite of the colonial contact and cultural engagement, the grand narrative of colonialism perceived the colonizing West and the colonized East as mutually exclusive opposites. No matter how much

the coloniser's culture comes in contact with other cultures it retains its essential superiority and on the other hand, no matter how much the colonized population tries to "civilize" themselves by adopting the cultural traits of the colonizer they cannot shed their essential inferiority. Homi Bhabha's intervention in the field of postcolonial theory is marked by his conceptualization of a non-essentialist theory of culture which both undermines the colonial grand narrative and provides a lens through which to identify the dynamics of alternative counternarratives. And the two major ideas that Bhabha foregrounds in this regard are "hybridity" and "mimicry". We will come to these two ideas one by one but first let me briefly introduce Bhabha to you.

Homi Bhabha was born in the city of Bombay in 1949. He completed his graduation from the Bombay University and then went on to do his doctoral degree from the University of Oxford. He started his teaching career in England at the University of Sussex and is currently a chair professor at the University of Harvard. He is most well-known within the field of postcolonial studies for his book titled *The Location of Culture* which was first published in 1994. It is in fact in this book that Bhabha presents the two crucial concepts of hybridity and mimicry. And so let us start by examining the notion of hybridity.

Hybridity

Now, as I have stated earlier in this lecture that the notion of hybridity is pivoted on a non-essentialist understanding of culture. Which means that culture is not looked upon as a static entity that remains unchanged irrespective of the context. Rather, culture here is understood through the metaphor of a melting pot where disparate elements come together to form a whole. But what is important to remember here is that this whole is not a final form but subject to change and flux. As new elements continuously get integrated within the melting pot, the flavor

of the cultural whole also goes on changing. It is this mixed-ness of culture that Bhabha signifies through the term hybridity.

So to sum it up, cultural hybridity is a non-essentialist notion. In other words, within this framework of understanding culture there is no notion of an eternal and universal Indianness or Africanness or Britishness. Secondly, cultures are regarded as both spatially and temporally fluid, and hybridity understands the cultural landscape as a site of constant intermixing of new and disparate elements. But how does this alternative vision of culture undermine the grand narrative of European colonialism? Well, if we follow Bhabha and regard culture as a dynamic process that is characterised by hybridity, then the superior/inferior and self/other binary underlying a colonial grand narrative like Orientalism starts to break down. This is because, the talk about a superior West which represents the colonial self and an inferior Orient, which represents the other cannot operate without assuming culture as static, fixed and unchangeable. So once the idea of culture as an isolated essence is challenged the entire edifice of colonialism as a civilizing mission comes crashing down and colonialism is revealed just as it is – an exploitation of other people's land and resources through brute force.

Mimicry

Now, let us move from the concept of hybridity to the concept of mimicry which presents an account of how the colonized subject punctures the hegemony of the colonial discourse and asserts his or her identity in a way that is "menacing" to the edifice of colonialism. To understand this "menace of mimicry" that Bhabha talks about, let's start with the term mimicry. Now the term mimicry has at its root the word mime which is connected with the Greek concept of mimesis. So at the most fundamental level, mimicry is imitation. But in English language, the term mimicry means not only imitation, but something more. This is evident in the definition of

the term mimicry which can be found in Oxford English Dictionary. There mimicry is explained as the “imitation of the speech or mannerisms of another in order to entertain or ridicule”. Now, this word is ridicule is crucial to Bhabha’s concept of mimicry but let us for a moment focus on the aspect of imitation within the colonial context.

Now, if a colonial discourse presents the act of colonization as a civilizing mission, it automatically expects the colonized subject to perform the role of imitators because it argues that it is only by trying to become like the colonizer that the colonial subject would emerge from his state of barbarity. This emergence will, however, never be sufficient to make the colonized subject exactly like the colonizer because, as Bhabha points out, the colonized would forever remain “not quite, not white”. But, nevertheless, the emergence would be sufficient enough to make the colonized subject more civilized and more mature than what he is in the present. Now, if making the colonized subject imitate the colonizer is part of the latter’s agenda, then how can we understand mimicry as an assertion of agency by the colonized subject? Well, here the notion of mimicry as ridicule comes to the foreground. Bhabha points out that the very act of the inferior, colonised imitating the superior colonizer, turns the latter into a subject of ridicule. In other words, the adoption of the coloniser’s speech, mannerism, etc. by the colonized subject turns his acts into a sort of mockery of the “superior” coloniser’s culture. It becomes the equivalent of a clown picking up the manners of a suave gentleman and then repeating it after him in the most exaggerated and comic manner. This comic undermining of the coloniser’s position by the colonized through distorted imitation is what Bhabha refers to as the “menace of mimicry”.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

But rather than ridicule through mimicry, can't the colonized simply create an alternative discourse? That is to say, can't the colonized subject simply emerge out of the colonial hegemonic discourse by articulating a different discourse of his own? These questions bring us close to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and the story that it tells of Bhubaneshwari Bhaduri's attempt to emerge from the confines of subaltern silence. But before we take up that essay and start exploring the concept of subaltern vis-à-vis the question of discourse formation, let me introduce Spivak to you.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was born in 1942 in Calcutta and grew up amidst some of the worst years that this erstwhile capital of the British Raj has ever experienced. The horrific Bengal famine of the 1940s had brought to the streets of Calcutta a multitude of refugees from the villages whose malnourished and skeletal bodies were seen rotting all over the streets of this metropolitan city in the years leading to India's independence. This was followed by the communal violence that preceded the partition of Bengal in 1947. In 1959, Spivak graduated from the Presidency College of Calcutta, which was originally established as the Hindu College – the first institute of Western style higher education in the whole of India. Subsequently, Spivak did her PhD on W.B. Yeats from America's Cornell University under the guidance of the famous deconstructive literary critic, Paul de Man. Currently she is a chair professor at the Columbia University in New York. But in one of her latest books, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, she not only introduces herself as a professor at Columbia but also as a trainer of elementary school teachers in West Bengal. This particular aspect of her career is important because, as we will soon see, this relates to her efforts to create enabling conditions for the subaltern to speak. But let us first try to understand what or who is a subaltern because this

concept of the subaltern is at the heart of Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", which incidentally, was first published in 1985 in a journal called *Wedge*.

Subaltern

The term subaltern is originally derived from the language of the military where it is used to signify a junior ranking army officer. But this term gained currency within the field of contemporary intellectual discourse after Antonio Gramsci used it in his writings to signify a section of people who are subordinate to the hegemonic groups or classes. As you will know from our earlier discussion of Gramsci's ideas, hegemonic class refers to that group within a society which exercises its control over the rest of the society through non-coercive means and by creating consent. Now within the Gramscian framework the section of the population that is led and controlled by the hegemonic class is the subaltern. So in other words, society is divided into two groups of people – the hegemonic group who exercise political power and agency, and the subaltern group which is led by the former. This is because the subaltern group is taken in by the illusion that their interest is reflected in the self-interest of the dominant hegemonic class. Now this Gramscian definition of the subaltern was very powerfully adopted by the group of Indian historians who rose to prominence during the 1980s and came to be known as the Subaltern Studies Collective. The leading figure in this collective was Ranajit Guha, who used the British Indian colonial context to define the subaltern as that section of the population who do not belong to the elite class. So for Guha, subaltern is whatever is not elite. But then what is elite? Well, according to Guha, within the colonial context the social 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. The subaltern represented the rest of the population which, unlike the elite, did not have political or economic agency. So here we see the subaltern being defined not as a specific social class but simply as a negative space – a site of lack – where there is no sense of agency or distinctive identity. The subaltern is therefore a position of absolute social disempowerment. And Spivak argues that it is a position from which speech is not possible.

Now this statement, that the subaltern cannot speak, might at first strike as somewhat banal because it seems to suggest that any person without politico-economic agency and without a sense of class identity is dumb. But the real depth of Spivak's argument becomes evident if we read "speech" as "discourse". So what I am saying here is that Spivak's argument starts making eminent sense if you consider speech not just as utterances but as "meaningful utterances". The argument here is that the subaltern is not dumb or speechless in any physical way. Rather the subaltern is someone who cannot generate a discourse. And the reason why the subaltern who lacks political or economic agency within a society cannot generate a discourse is not very difficult to understand. Now as you will remember from our earlier discussions on Michel Foucault, within any social milieu, utterances are accepted as meaningful only when certain conditions are met. And one of the most important conditions is institutional ratification. So, any utterance that is not ratified by institutions like schools and colleges, the publishing industry, the news agencies, learned societies, etc is not regarded as discourse. Now, these are also precisely the institutions through which the dominant classes or the elites assert their agency and control over the society. So, these institutions almost exclusively ratify the speech of the dominant or the elite class. The subaltern, who by definition does not have any agency within the society, cannot generate a discourse because their speech does not receive institutional ratification. This is why

in a colonial society someone like a landless peasant or an illiterate tribal who occupies the position of absolute disempowerment cannot generate a discourse. In Spivak's terminology, he or she is a subaltern who cannot speak.

This, therefore, brings us to a whole new aspect of postcolonial theory. With Said, we had seen how the colonial discourse can be dismantled through contrapuntal reading? With Bhabha, we have seen how sections of the colonised subject who imitated the coloniser could assert their agency through the menace of mimicry? With Spivak, we encounter the fact that a vast section of the postcolonial society is bereft of agency to the point that they cannot even generate their own independent discourse. It is important to note here that Spivak's engagement with this postcolonial position of disempowerment takes on the form of activism. The goal becomes not merely to theorise the speechlessness of the subaltern position but to create enabling conditions through which the subaltern can emerge from their position of disempowerment and start speaking for themselves. And this is precisely what Spivak has been trying to do through her teacher training programme in some of the poorest parts of the Indian state of West Bengal.

So with this, we will wrap up our discussion on postcolonial theory. But before bidding you goodbye, I would once again remind you that if you find any of the topics that I have discussed in my two lectures on postcolonialism to be cryptic or difficult, please listen to the lectures of my ten-hour NPTEL course on Postcolonial Literature. There I have dealt with all of these topics in a much more elaborate manner. Good bye.