

"Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Plain English: an Explainer

"Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Plain English: an Explainer for Teachers and Students

"Clearly, if you are poor, black, and female you get it in three ways." –Gayatri Spivak

"White men are saving brown women from brown men..." –Gayatri Spivak

"The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with "woman" as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish." – Gayatri Spivak

This 1988 essay by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is a hugely influential work of postcolonial theory; on Google Scholar, it appears to have been cited nearly 34,000 times! By contrast, Homi Bhabha's nearly contemporaneous "Signs Taken For Wonders" (1985) essay shows 2400 citations. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is clearly a foundational text for postcolonial theory, and it remains a rich text with which to engage for people interested in postcolonial studies, South Asian studies, transnational/global feminism, and indeed, broader questions related to the role of intellectuals in any number of contexts.

Bibliographical: All citations from Spivak below are from the first version of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" published in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 271-313, 1988.

Core argument: "Can the Subaltern Speak?" remains so salient in part because Spivak's central concern is with what is sometimes called the "politics of representation" – who speaks for whom? Under what circumstances, if any, can a privileged intellectual (who could be an academic, novelist, journalist, etc.) claim to *represent* the voices of marginalized communities? Spivak is not saying that people in positions of privilege should never engage *with* marginalized voices, but first and foremost, we need to be wary of any privileged intellectual's claim to know or speak *for* the 'Other'. Second, because of structural disadvantages, it's extremely difficult to find instances where marginalized (subaltern) women can in fact insert themselves into public conversation authoritatively without mediation. The 'subaltern as woman' may literally be able to *speak*, but those mediating factors -- institutional gatekeepers who police what is thinkable or sayable, privileged actors who are motivated by their own self-interest, and many others -- mean that we may not ever be able to *hear* her voice directly.

On the difficulty of this essay: Admittedly, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is also a text that many readers over the years have struggled with, from the precise definition of Spivak's use of the word "subaltern," to her assertion, confusing to many readers, that the "subaltern cannot speak." Spivak was deeply influenced by French poststructuralism, Freudian psychoanalysis, certain traditions in Marxian theory, and the Subaltern Studies school of colonial Indian history. How it all fits together can be difficult to ascertain, especially if you don't have competency in all of those areas! Below, I've attempted to summarize the key

points from each section below as much as possible in “plain English,” and I’ve aimed to provide links for further reading for each section.

If you’re in a rush: The ‘heart’ of the essay is really Section IV – where Spivak engages most directly with the vexed representation of *Sati* (mistranslated as ‘widow immolation’) in colonial India. It’s there that she has her famous formulation that “White men are saving brown women from brown men,” and it’s also there that she most directly explicates *why* and *how* the voice of the ‘subaltern as woman’ cannot be easily or directly accessed in the historical record.

Section 1: Critique of Foucault and Deleuze

Helps if you read: Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, “*Intellectuals and Power*” (1972); Karl Marx, “*Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*” [especially chapter 7] (1852)

The first sections of the essay engage several strands of theory, from Marx himself, to a number of French poststructuralist theorists, most importantly Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. For most readers today, the particulars of her critiques may not matter that much – nor need we think of them as offering the last word on especially Deleuze or Foucault (she is very critical of “*Intellectuals and Power*,” but elsewhere in the essay she approvingly cites other Foucault texts). Most of her discussion in the first section is in response to claims made by Foucault and Deleuze in a conversation they had that was published as “*Intellectuals and Power*” (1972), which was translated into English in a volume of essays called *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (1977).

One pattern Spivak sees is a persistent Eurocentrism in Foucault and Deleuze, which in her account diminishes their self-presentation as radical intellectuals in the early 1970s. With Deleuze, Spivak engages a passage where he refers to the “workers’ movement” in somewhat simplistic terms. Spivak notes:

The apparent banality signals a disavowal. The statement ignores the international division of labor, a gesture that often marks poststructuralist political theory. The invocation of the workers’ struggle is baleful in its very innocence; it is incapable of dealing with global capitalism Ignoring the international division of labor; rendering “Asia” (and on occasion “Africa”) transparent (unless the subject is ostensibly the “Third World”); reestablishing the legal subject of socialized capital—these are problems as common to much poststructuralist as to structuralist theory. *Why should such occlusions be sanctioned in precisely those intellectuals who are our best prophets of heterogeneity and the Other?* (Spivak, 272)

That last question seems like the key one to consider: these are two theorists who have been interested in power, represented by institutions such as the prison, the school, and the medical establishment (see Foucault’s influential books, *Madness and Civilization*, and *Discipline and Punish*, and Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*). Their work criticizing these institutions had an outsize impact at the time – so it’s perhaps not surprising they felt comfortable assuming their theoretical projects aligned with revolutionary political movements. But Spivak is rightly skeptical of their abstract support for “revolution” and hostility to “power.”

Their use of highly abstract terms overlooks actual, concrete struggles for liberation that were occurring at the time.

Towards the end of the section, Spivak pivots from Foucault and Deleuze to Marx himself on the question of representation and class formation. She quotes a passage from Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* to the effect that class formation was not a given or a matter of fixity, but a dynamic and somewhat unstable *process*. Moreover, Marx was aware that the matter of representing classes was a complex one, and she explores two German words that have slightly different meanings, "Darstellen" (to represent as in a picture) and "Vertreten" (to represent as in to stand in for). Spivak argues that we need to disentangle these two senses of "representation." She acknowledges they can't be entirely separated, "but running them together, especially in order to say that beyond both is where oppressed subjects speak, act, and know for themselves, leads to an essentialist, utopian politics" (276).

That last phrase above is a core Spivakian rhetorical gesture – her radical skepticism of anything that smacks of "essentialist, utopian politics." And she appears to be suggesting that a version of this skepticism was available even in Marx himself -- as he indicates in the seventh chapter of "The Eighteenth Brumaire" that it seemed to be impossible for poor peasant farmers to represent themselves, anticipating quite directly (but without gender or acknowledgment of the 'global division of labor') her own argument.

Section II: Introducing the "Subaltern"

Helps if you read: Antonio Gramsci, "Some Aspects of the Southern Question" (1926); Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India" (1982)

Near the beginning of Section II of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak begins to engage more directly with the question of subalternity as subject and object of representation. Here she starts with the thinking of Antonio Gramsci, who first conceived of the "subaltern" as a subordinate class (the term earlier had referred to lower-ranking officers in the British army), and then moves on to the Subaltern Studies school of historians of colonial India. Subaltern Studies was a highly influential community of scholars that emerged in the 1980s, influenced by poststructuralist theory as well as Marxian thinking, many of them from Bengali Indian backgrounds with elite, Anglophone educations; in some ways, Spivak herself may be seen as an affiliate member of the group:

Let us now move to consider the margins (one can just as well say the silent, silenced center) of the circuit marked out by this epistemic violence, men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat. According to Foucault and Deleuze (in the First World, under the standardization and regimentation of socialized capital, though they do not seem to recognize this) the oppressed, if given the chance (the problem of representation cannot be bypassed here), and on the way to solidarity through alliance politics (a Marxist thematic is at work here) *can speak and know their conditions*. We must now confront the following question: On the other side of the international division of labor from socialized capital, inside and outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text, *can the subaltern speak?* (283)

The rhetorical question end of the paragraph above might be taken as a defining question for the essay as a whole. It's also hard not to see it as somewhat of a 'leading question' – in the sense that communities on "the other side of the international division of labor," people who are "outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education" – people who are in various ways positioned as *subalterns* – are not going to be likely to speak and be heard.

Spivak gives a second formulation of the seeming impossibility of subaltern self-representation after introducing Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies school of Indian historiography. Guha and his colleagues are deeply invested in breaking the elitist dominance – both domestic and foreign – in narratives of Indian history. But against it, he posits a category called the "subaltern" that, Spivak argues, he cannot really define, much less access in any convincing sense.

For the "true" subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation. The problem is that the subject's itinerary has not been traced so as to offer an object of seduction to the representing intellectual. In the slightly dated language of the Indian group, the question becomes, How can we touch the consciousness of the people, even as we investigate their politics? With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak? (285)

As she proceeds, Spivak challenges the vagueness of Guha's description of subalternity in the Indian context, a concept that is quite loose – does it include Adivasis ('tribals'), Dalits, poor people of high or intermediate castes, Muslims? All of the above, apparently. For Spivak, it is hard to imagine a coherent historical project emerging out of such a heterogeneous constellation of communities.

Moreover, what about women? Even as Guha seems to have under-theorized the category of the subaltern, there appears to be a glaring blind spot in his thinking with respect to a whole category of unheard 'others' along the lines of gender.

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is "evidence." It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. *If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.* (287, emphasis mine)

After briefly engaging Guha and a Marxist critic of Guha's, Ajit Choudhury, Spivak returns to Foucault and Derrida to close out section II. Here she faults Foucault and Deleuze for failing to include a plausible critique of imperialism in their theorization of the role of the intellectual against institutional power, a failing made worse by the fact that they repeatedly *gesture* towards third-world liberation movements without substantively engaging any of them. The problem she is interested in is crystallized in the passage below:

Outside (though not completely so) the circuit of the international division of labor, there are people whose consciousness we cannot grasp if we close off our benevolence by constructing a homogeneous Other referring only to our own place in the seat of the Same or the Self. Here are subsistence farmers, unorganized peasant labor, the tribals,

and the communities of zero workers on the street or in the countryside. To confront them is not to represent (*vertreten*) them but to learn to represent (*darstellen*) ourselves. (288-289)

The final sentence in the passage above is particularly intriguing. For Spivak, the first challenge for the privileged intellectual is not to find the 'right' language to represent the Other, but to be transparent about the nature of her own privilege.

Section III. Introducing Derrida

Helps if you read: Jacques Derrida, "Grammatology as a Positive Science" (in Of Grammatology, pp. 74-93 [1965])

Spivak sees in Derrida a more thoughtful and self-reflexive approach to engaging with the cultural Other. She is clear that she doesn't see Derrida's writing as a panacea. Rather, she says she aims to explicate, somewhat humbly, a "few aspects of Derrida's work that retain a long-term usefulness for people outside the First World" (292).

Spivak then offers a passage from *Of Grammatology* that speak to the failures of a certain historical western approach to linguistic differences – the 'grammatologist' biases regarding scripts very different from Roman scripts: "Our century is not free from it; each time that ethnocentrism is precipitately and ostentatiously reversed, some effort silently hides behind all the spectacular effects to *consolidate an inside* and to draw from it some domestic benefit." (293, emphasis mine) In effect, she sees in Derrida a thoroughgoing suspicion of 'empirical' European accounts of cultural otherness, and points to the motivation for those accounts – they aim to 'consolidate an inside', and tell us more about the fantasies of European scholars than they do about the cultures and communities they describe. In many ways, Spivak reads Derrida here as making arguments that anticipate Edward Said's hugely influential arguments in books like *Orientalism* and *Culture and Empire*.

Here might be Spivak's key account of her reading of Derrida:

As a postcolonial intellectual, I am not troubled that he does not *lead* me (as Europeans inevitably seem to do) to the specific path that such a critique makes necessary. It is more important to me that, as a European philosopher, he articulates the *European Subject's* tendency to constitute the Other as marginal to ethnocentrism and locates that as the problem with all logocentric and therefore also all grammatological endeavors ... *Not* a general problem, but a *European* problem. (293)

In addition to the echoes of Edward Said here, one also sees arguments anticipating subsequent postcolonial theorists, who would advocate for the 'provincializing of Europe' (Dipesh Chakravarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 2008). Again, she does not see in Derrida all the answers, but rather a rigorous self-reflexivity and self-criticism that aims to critique (or more specifically, to "deconstruct" from within) a whole array of claims and categories of European 'knowledge' about peoples outside of Europe. What she sees in Derrida is not an assertion of Knowledge about the Other, but rather a "rendering *delirious* that interior voice that is the voice of the other in us" (294).

Section IV. Why The Subaltern-as-Woman Cannot Speak: Debates over Sati; “White Men Are Saving Brown Women From Brown Men”

Helps if you read: Background on ‘Sati’; Sigmund Freud, “A Child is Being Beaten” (1918)

Spivak begins section IV with an account of European feminist theory, specifically the idea that ‘woman’ is a special or privileged category of ‘otherness’. Spivak was writing long before the idea of intersectional feminism came into vogue, but her approach here strongly aligns with what we now recognize as intersectionality: she speaks of ‘unlearning’ (296) certain assumptions from Western feminism, and of being transparent about her status as a privileged (if still often ‘othered’) intellectual. Spivak also has formulations like, “Clearly, if you are poor, black, and female you get it three ways” (294), though she goes on to question specious forms of solidarity that might be assumed to exist across geographic or economic lines.

Spivak also suggests that she’s putting forward the sentence “White men are saving brown women from brown men” as a formulation loosely analogous to the famous (or infamous) essay by Sigmund Freud, “A Child is Being Beaten.” In that essay, Freud describes a class of patients who are excited by the childhood memory of *other* children being beaten. According to Spivak (via Sarah Kofman's *The Enigma of Woman*), the other child’s pain is understood as a fantasy of closeness between the daughter and the father. Spivak is not interested in any literal alignment between Freud and her own thinking here; rather, the point is the *three-way dynamic* – Party X (the other child) suffers in order to enable an essentially taboo dyadic structure of desire between father/authority figure (Party A) and self/loved child (Party B) to be possible. In both Freud’s formulation and Spivak’s own formulation (“White men...”), Party X is cut out of the conversation (*abjected, silenced*) while Parties A and B are drawn together. So if “White men are saving brown women from brown men,” there is a structure of desire imagined that brings white men and brown women together, and excludes “brown men.” This is a structure of fantasy that is grounded in the erotic, but that also has broad sociopolitical implications.

Spivak is also suspicious of the way Freud figures the woman patient as a “scapegoat” for a “masculine-imperial ideological formation.” In effect, she suggests, the fantasy structure described in “A child is being beaten” may be operating as a fantasy invented by the male psychoanalyst to serve his own interests (i.e., being figured as the object of desire / the father).

The core of Section IV is really the discussion of *Sati* (or more precisely *Satipratha*), a Hindu religious practice that was the object of considerable attention under British colonial rule in the early 19th century. For those unfamiliar with the topic, the essential story is this: when their husbands passed away some Hindu widows either elected voluntarily or were coerced into being immolated alive on their husbands’ funeral pyres. The British claimed to find this practice barbaric and enacted a law to ban it in 1829, and this law was (briefly) resisted by many elite Hindu men who had positions of authority under British rule. (The reformer Raja Rammohun Roy supported the banning of *Sati*.) The banning of the practice represented a relatively anomalous level of involvement in Hindu religious practices – in most other respects, the British left Indian religious traditions alone through the mid-19th century (additional laws were passed in 1856, 1870, and 1891). Both at the time and subsequently, the British engagement with this aspect of Hindu Law was seen by critics as a way of increasing their overall footprint and legal power under the guise of a humanitarian intervention.

The particular dynamic entailed in the banning of the practice of Sati fits the dynamic of Spivak's "white men are saving brown women from brown men" quite directly. Here is how Spivak presents the basic scenario:

The Hindu widow ascends the pyre of the dead husband and immolates herself upon it. This is widow sacrifice. (The conventional transcription of the Sanskrit word for the widow would be sati. The early colonial British transcribed it *suttee*.) The rite was not practiced universally and was not caste- or class-fixed. The abolition of this rite by the British has been generally understood as a case of "White men saving brown women from brown men." White women—from the nineteenth-century British Missionary Registers to Mary Daly—have not produced an alternative understanding. Against this is the Indian nativist argument, a parody of the nostalgia for lost origins: "The women actually wanted to die." (297)

Towards the end of this passage, Spivak suggests that white feminism did not at the time (or subsequently) have an account of the suffering of "brown women" that differed from the "masculine imperialist" framing offered by British authorities. The only counter-narrative was offered by elite Hindu men, who, as Spivak indicates, defended *Sati* by arguing that, as Spivak puts it, "the women actually wanted to die."

Spivak later points out that since Bengal was one of the few regions of India where "widows could inherit property," it's possible that Hindu men were motivated to encourage widows to commit *Sati* because it took them out of the equation and granted more power to their sons (300). Spivak also engages various references to suicide in ancient Hindu scriptures, at one point noting that a text sometimes used to justify widow suicide might have actually been misread ("agre" [threshold/domicile] replaced by the word "agne" [fire]) (304). Spivak also questions the interpretations of Edward Thompson, who published a book called *Sati* in 1928.

In all of the debates over Sati that took place in British India, the voices of Hindu women were either not included or not *heard*. Due to the intense patriarchal dominance within Hindu society as well as within the English colonial legal authority, it was not really structurally possible for "brown women" to enter the public conversation about their own legal rights in early 19th-century British India.

(Since Spivak's essay was first published in 1988, there has been a great deal of additional scholarship on *Sati* that fills in aspects of the tradition and the debate that Spivak passes over a bit loosely; a good place to start might be Lata Mani's *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* [1998]. In her footnotes, Spivak acknowledges that she spoke with Mani as early as 1983, when Mani was writing a Master's thesis on *Sati* at UC Santa Cruz. That said, the overwhelming weight of recent ethnographic and historical scholarship appears to support Spivak's key claim – that the voices of women impacted by the practice were consistently marginalized in these debates.)

Spivak ends with an example of a Bengali freedom fighter named Bhuvanewari Bhaduri, who hanged herself in 1926. Bhuvanewari (the Bengali convention is to use first names in narrative accounts) knew that others would interpret her suicide as linked to an illegitimate pregnancy, so she intentionally performed her suicide while she was menstruating. Her death cannot properly be understood as an act of *Sati*, but like the deaths of Hindu widows in the

19th century, Spivak argues that there are structural blocks in place that prevent her action from being understood: “The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read” (308).

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