

CHAPTER-II

THEORETICAL NOTES ON SUBALTERN

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2.01. THE TERM SUBALTERN

Etymologically the term ‘Subaltern’ means ‘inferior in status or rank’ or ‘inconsequential’. Labourers, peasants and all other groups that are denied access to the hegemonic power controlled by the ruling classes are Subaltern.¹ Thus there prevails a common tendency to use this term as a binary opposition of the dominant class of the society who are exploited on social, political, cultural and religious grounds. Subaltern literature addresses different issues related to gender discrimination, subjugation of lower working classes, marginalization, disregarded woman, oppression, displacement, deportation, conflict etc. of the inferiors because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and religion. The term ‘subaltern’ has various interpretations in postcolonial usage. Ranajit Guha(1923-), the first editor of *Subaltern Studies*, uses the word *to define the general attributes of subordination in South Asian society, whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way. Thus the term ‘subaltern’ indicates a heterogeneous group*²

2.02. EVOLUTION

Derived from original Latin term ‘Subalternus’, where ‘sub’ stands for ‘next below’ and ‘alternus’ means ‘every other’, the word ‘Subaltern’ has a long past. According to *The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, ‘Subaltern’ as a noun means any officer in the

¹See Ashcroft Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin’s *Post-Colonial Studies-The Key Concepts*,2007,p-198

²Guha, Ranajit, *Subaltern Studies I*,2008,p- vii

British Army below the rank of Captain, especially a second Lieutenant and as an adjective it means 'of lower status'. In late medieval English, the term represented vassals and peasants. By 1700, the term started referring to the lower ranks in the military suggesting peasant origins. By 1800, several authors wrote novels and histories about military campaigns in India and America from a subaltern perspective; and G.R. Gleig (1796-1888) was known as the master of this genre and he wrote biographies of Robert Clive, Warren Hastings and Thomas Munro. The Great War brought into focus the popular accounts of subaltern life in published memoirs and diaries. Immediately after the Russian revolution, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) started using the term in non-military sense in his theories of class struggle. He used the term in his *Prison Note book* which was written during 1929 to 1935 when he was put behind the bar by Mussolini. To escape the close scrutiny of the Mussolini government, Gramsci avoided the use of common and widely used Marxist terms and invented new ones. 'Subaltern' was one such term. However, Gramsci was not well known amongst the English-readers, until Raymond Williams (1921-1988) promoted his theory in 1977 after the translations of *The Modern Prince* (1957) and *Prison Notebooks* (1966) had appeared. Thus Gramsci's ideas were circulated in the world. By the late 1970s, a rapid decline in state-centered historical research had already occurred and social history 'from below' was flourishing incorporating the perspectives of the lower class. Thompson's (1924-1993) 1963 book *The Making of the English Working Class* is often cited as an inspiration for the growing number of 'bottom up' studies of people whose history has been previously ignored. In 1982, Eric Wolf (1923-1999) produced his famous book *Europe and the People without History* which can be called the first global history from

below. In this book Wolf criticized the popular European history for ignoring the contributions of the powerless non-Europeans in the global process.

In South Asia, this history of Subaltern groups was thriving, though they were not called that then. In the 1970s, the term began to be used as a reference to colonized people in the South Asian subcontinent. It provided a new knowledge of the history of a colonized place from the perspective of the colonized rather than from the perspective of the hegemonic power of the colonizers. Marxist historians had already begun to view colonial history from the perspective of the proletariat, but this approach also failed to represent the poor and weak natives totally as it was still a Eurocentric way of viewing the globe. Subaltern Studies under the intellectual leadership of Ranajit Guha began in the early 1980s as an indigenous intervention in South Asian historiography. While it began as a model for the Subcontinent, it immediately became a potent force in postcolonial criticism. Subaltern is now regularly used as a term in history, anthropology, sociology, human geography, and literature. In the last five decades, scholars have produced countless studies of societies, histories and cultures 'from below' which have dispersed terms, methods and bits of theory used in Subaltern studies among countless academic sites. Subaltern Studies Group deployed some of Gramsci's ideas at a critical juncture in historical studies.

As the postcolonial theory develops, the term 'subaltern' has also got new momentum. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942-) has used the term to encompass the lower class people. With deep insight, she has raised the issues of marginal classes, especially subaltern women in the society. With her powerful discourse to a large variety of topics such as Marxism, Feminism and Deconstruction, Spivak has challenged the legacy of colonialism. In the process she has also shown the hollowness of the claim that the

Western world is more purified and humanitarian than the third world which, according to the discourse of the West, is full of grossness and acute barbarism.

2.03. GENESIS OF THE SUBALTERN HISTORIOGRAPHY

History of human civilization tells that from time immemorial, there exists only two kinds of people: superior and inferior. Different binaries like rich-poor, haves-have-nots, the ruler- the ruled, oppressor-oppressed etc. may be used in different academic discourses, but these binaries refer to these two classes only. Like all other spheres of the society, in literary and historical representation also, the superior class has been given more importance. There is obviously myth regarding the superior class in the conventional history which is either written by the superior or written under the patronage of the superior and which represents the inferior class to suit the interest of the superior.

The genesis of Subaltern history in India can easily be traced back to the insurgency, Nationalism, Social theory and increasing class divide. In the year 1857 India witnessed new histories of rebellion. Romantic heroism has always been attached to old rebel histories, but the 1860s and 1870s raised concern about revolution in the present. Several philanthropists, inspired by the western ideas, advocated the cause of the weaker sections of the society. Many of them tried to eradicate social evils such as child marriage, dowry, *sati rites*, untouchability etc. In a sense, the British rule gave the educated Indians an opportunity to come out of the age old social evils very much prevalent in Indian society. With the spread of education, initiated by the Britishers and disseminated by the educated Indians, people became aware of their rights and started to raise their voice against all kinds of oppressions. The patriotic zeal of the educated lot

made the downtrodden stronger. Apart from fighting their common enemy- the Britishers, they joined hands to fight against social evils. Slowly came Indian theories of peasant revolt and tribal rebellions. After the independence, the patriotic fervour diminished and the number of educated and affluent class people advocating the cause of the weaker sections drastically decreased. One section of the weaker class, however, have already equipped itself with education and learnt to raise their voice to cause social change. The other section of the subaltern still needed the support of the stronger class which was not there and they remained subaltern. This class gained academic interest in the 1970s and the upward trend in popular research increased. By 1980s scholars were already writing two kinds of national history: one, a people's history filled with native culture and popular insurgency; the other, an official history filled with elites and political parties.

2.04. SUBALTERN IN COLONIAL PERIOD

For fulfilling their mission, the white settlers used the divide and rule policy, taking advantage of the already existing wide gap between the native elites and the commoners. In lieu of few privileges the native elites extended their whole hearted support to the white settlers in suppressing the marginalized class. Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980), in his preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, comments:

*The European elite decided to fabricate a native elite; they selected adolescents, branded the principles of Western culture on their foreheads with a red-hot iron, and gagged their mouths with sounds, pompous awkward words that twisted their tongues.*³

³Sartre, Jean Paul, *Preface* in Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, 2004,p- xliii

After giving the privileged natives a taste of sophisticated European life, the natives were sent back to their home infusing in them a sense that they were different from the masses. The native elites thus forged an affinity with the intruders and found it below their dignity to support the cause of the poor natives. Most of the resentment against the white settlers came from the down trodden class. But without the support of the powerful elites, these protests were short lived and crushed by the shrewd settlers. Thus the situation in India during the colonial rule resembled the one predicted by Franz Fanon (1925-1961):

*This compartmentalized world, this world divided in two compartments, is inhabited by different species..... Looking at the immediacies of the colonial context, it is clear that what divides this world is first and foremost what species, what race one belongs to. In the colonies the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure. The cause is effect: you are rich because you are white; you are white because you are rich.*⁴

The inequalities in economic and social sphere amongst the natives had been the real strength of the intruders. The native elites and the commoners both failed to realize the real intention of the intruders and as a result did not rise in unison against their atrocities. The settler-native relationship formed another binary like the master-slave relationship. While the settlers became the masters of the land, the natives were treated as third class citizens. They were driven out of the powerful discourse and made subaltern.

2.05. THE POSTCOLONIAL SUBALTERN

The effect of the colonialism does not end with the transformation of power. Not only the land, but also the minds of the natives are colonized as Fanon puts it:

⁴Fanon, Frantz opcit,p-5

*The colonist makes history. His life is an epic, an odyssey. He is invested with the very beginning: "We made this land." He is the guarantor for its existence: "If we leave, all will be lost, and this land will return to the Dark Ages."*⁵

With a powerful discourse, the colonial power infuses a sense of inferiority in the mind of the natives and the natives internalize the manipulated history created by the colonist. This history often refers to the European nations as the torch bearer of civilization and native culture is presented as uncivilized.

Post-colonialism can be seen as the effects of colonization on culture and society. The term 'Post' in 'Post-colonialism' certainly has a chronological reference meaning the post-independence period, when colonial power withdrew from the former colonies. However, from the late 1970s, the term has been used by literary critics to discuss the various cultural affects of colonization.⁶

The exact meaning of the term 'subaltern' in current philosophical and critical usage is varied and disputed. Some thinkers use it in a general sense to refer to marginalized groups and the lower classes - a person rendered agency less by his or her social status. Others, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak use it in a more specific sense. Spivak, in her 1985 article *Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice* opines that the subaltern cannot speak. She intends to convey that the subaltern cries out in various ways, but Subaltern talk, does not achieve the dialogic level of utterance. Spivak also objects to the sloppy use of the term and its appropriation by other marginalized, but not specifically "subaltern" groups. "Subaltern," Spivak insists, is not just a classy word for oppressed, rather it signifies "proletarian," whose voice could

⁵ Fanon, Frantz ,opcit, pp-14-15

⁶ See Ascroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, Opcit,p-168

not be heard, being structurally written out of the capitalist bourgeois narrative. In postcolonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern -- a space of difference. Moreover, she opposes the idea of someone advocating the subaltern and trying to give them a voice since they do not have theirs. The subalterns do not get a platform to raise their voice against the exploitation and the kind of treatment they are meted out to. Even though, someone raises the voice he does not get the necessary support from his fellow sufferers. Most of the time opposition against the authority by the subaltern amounts to self-sacrifice. As they do not have a unified voice, the subaltern cannot change the existing social order. In this respect, they are different from other marginalized groups who have their own platforms to fight for their rights. Despite being poor and down trodden they can cause a change in social order and hence, they are not subaltern. Spivak criticizes the Subaltern Studies Group because she feels that the gendered subaltern as a subject does not find place in the construction of the agency of the other subaltern groups. But Spivak also does not clearly define who the gendered subaltern is. Her different essays give the hint that all the women who are rendered agency less by the hegemony of the powerful class and have not been able to feel the difference between imperialism and nationalism belongs to this category.

At times, while defining the term 'subaltern', Spivak tends to be more specific as to what makes one subaltern. The definition of the subaltern does not follow a rigid centre-margin binary. Whoever is in the centre in a particular situation may be pushed to the margin with the change of situation. Mrinalini Sebastian in her book *The Novels of Shashi Deshpande in Postcolonial Arguments* offers a solution. She suggests that rather than trying to find out who subaltern is, it would be more effective to identify the place

occupied by the subaltern.⁷Subaltern occupies the margin where one is not part of discourse making, a place where one must learn to follow the diktats of the dominant group.

2.06. GENDERED SUBALTERN

However, ‘the gendered subaltern’ is the most talked about category. Due to the dominance of patriarchy, the gendered subalterns have to bear the extra burden. Childhood, unfulfilled dreams, puberty, the rules of orthodox Hindu society, widowhood, untouchability and quest for a space of their own have added different dimensions to the subaltern studies. They have revealed different classes of subaltern in society. A study of their psychology will be a help to understand the society better. The Subaltern Studies group, by focusing on the history from below that have long been neglected, has hinted at a change that is helpful to understand the structure of the society. However, the women issue does not find enough space in the writings of the Subaltern Studies group.

Spivak’s definition of the subaltern as sections that remain disempowered even after the political independence becomes doubly true when applied to the gendered subaltern. The gendered subaltern is the class that is created by the over dominance of the patriarchy and it is very much possible that men will enjoy the benefits of political power, but the women will continue to be subordinate. In the words of Spivak,

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effected..... If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no

⁷ See Sebastain, Mrinalini. *The Novels of Shashi Deshpande in Postcolonial Arguments*,2000,p-114

*history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.*⁸

In the evolution of the subaltern theory contributions three intellectual giants play instrumental role. They are Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, Ranajit Guha, the founder member of Subaltern Studies Group and Postcolonial critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

2.07. ANTONIO GRAMSCI AND THE TERM SUBALTERN

The notion of the Subaltern, meaning the ‘inferior rank’ was adopted by Antonio Gramsci as a concept referring to groups in society that are subjected to the hegemony of the dominant ruling classes. More concretely, Gramsci first used the term as a euphemism or original covert usage for the proletariat in his *Prison Notebooks*. He also claimed that subaltern classes had just as complex a history as the dominant classes. However, this unofficial history was necessarily fragmented and episodic.

Gramsci used the term “Subaltern” in two contexts. Firstly, the term is used as a synonym of ‘proliterate’. In the capitalist system, subaltern class refers to the working class who are governed and exploited. Its binary opposition is the hegemonic classes, the bourgeois. The ruling or dominant class creates hegemony in every sphere of life- be it political, social, economic or cultural and thus dominates the subaltern class. In the second context, the term has wider implications. Here it does not simply mean the working class. Anyone without agency or a platform to raise their voice is a subaltern.

⁸ Spivak , Gayatri Chakravorty, *Can The Subaltern Speak?*in Bill Ashcroft’s(ed)*The Post Colonial Studies Reader*,2003,p-28

In his *Notes on Italian History*, Gramsci outlined a six point plan for studying the history of the subaltern classes which included i) their objective formation ii) their active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formation iii) the birth of new parties and dominant groups iv) the formations that the subaltern groups produce to press their claims v) new formations within the old framework that assert the autonomy of the subaltern classes and vi) other points referring to trade unions and political parties.⁹

Gramsci's use of the term 'Subaltern' certainly has an Indian connection. His description of the Subaltern resembles the condition of the poor, the lower class and peasantry in India. One reason for this similarity is because of his comparison between the division of labour in Mussolini's Italy and the division of labour in colonial India. Gramsci pointed out a solution to the oppression of the rural peasantry in Southern Italy, often referred to as *southern problem* could be solved to a large extent by forming an alliance with the urban working class, or through developing class consciousness among the farmers.¹⁰ To rise in unison with a sense of belonging by the weaker peasantry surely would weaken their oppressor.

2.08. RANAJIT GUHA AND SUBALTERN STUDIES GROUP

Ranajit Guha is one of the most influential figures in postcolonial and subaltern studies. He migrated to the U.K. in 1959 and joined the University of Sussex as a Reader in History. Later he became the Professor of History in Research School of Pacific Studies. He is the first who tried to write history of the Subaltern from the subaltern's

⁹ Ascroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Op cit*, pp-198-99

¹⁰ See Morton, Stephen. *op cit*, pp-47-49

perspective. Following Gramsci's theory, Ranajit Guha along with Sahid Amin, David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee, David Hardiman, Gyan Pandey and Dipesh Chakrabarty have formed the Subaltern Studies Group and made people aware of the subaltern class. They have revealed different classes of subaltern in society. Ranajit Guha has been the guiding force of this group of historians known as Subaltern Studies group. He firmly believes that the politics of the peasants and other marginalised groups constitute a domain of its own as it does not originate from the elite politics. He laments that these groups are denied recognition as a subject of history in their own rights. Guha has raised several questions regarding the authenticity of conventional history in general and Indian history in particular in his famous essay *Chandra's Death*. The following questions in a way also tells the necessity of "History from the below".

- i) How is Indian history to be written outside the historically dominant frameworks, and later of elite nationalism?
- ii) Who is the 'one' who interprets historical events?
- iii) How have documents been read?
- iv) What is history and to what ends is it written?¹¹

The subaltern School of Historiography also termed by many as the Indian version of 'The History from Below' emerged in the 1980s with the sole purpose of challenging the conventional mode of Historiography which prioritize the elite class. By its relentless postcolonial critique, this new school has criticised the Nationalist and Cambridge schools and questioned the authenticity of their elite based analysis of history. This group has so far published eleven Subaltern Studies volume consisting of

¹¹See Guha Ranajit, *Chandra's Death* in Ranajit Guha(ed)*Subaltern Studies V*, 2008.

more than eighty essays. In the preface to the first volume, Ranajit Guha, the editor of the first six volumes, states,

*The aim of the present collection of essays, the first of a series, is to promote a systematic and informal discussion of subaltern themes in the field of South Asian studies, and thus help to rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much research and academic work in this particular area.*¹²

Subaltern studies aim at representing the neglected inferior class and it is expected in subaltern studies to write the history again, making it free from the superior bias. This trend of writing consists of the agony of the exploited workers, labourers, oppressed caste, women etc. Subaltern studies show them as human beings, who think, take decisions, decide the way to live and grow in the society. The autonomy of the lower class regarding consciousness is the foundation of subaltern studies. Members of this group believe that the historiography of Indian nationalism had been dominated by two kinds of elitism- the elitism of the colonial power and bourgeois-nationalist elitism which is a product of the colonial power. These two kinds of elitism did not end with the attainment of political freedom by India and survived the transfer of political power to influence policy making in independent India.¹³

Guha has used the term 'elite' to signify dominant groups, foreign as well as indigenous. The foreign group includes British officials of the colonial state, foreign industrialists, merchants, financiers, planters, landlords and missionaries. The dominant indigenous groups operate at two levels. At the all India level there are the biggest feudal magnets and native who climb up to the uppermost levels of the bureaucracy. At

¹²Guha Ranajit (ed), *Subaltern Studies I*, 2008,p-vii

¹³ See Guha, Ranajit, *On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India*, in *Opcit*, p-1

the regional and local level, there are the people who either belong to dominant all-India group or the locally important people who are hierarchically inferior to the dominant all-India group. The third group often works as a buffer group between the dominant groups and subaltern classes.¹⁴

Since the ordinary apparatus of historiography cannot properly project the subaltern, the subaltern studies group, led by Guha has focused mainly on minor characters ignored by elite history, local legends and village scandals. Their writings might appear as isolated case studies, but this group has set new trends against the tradition that tends to ignore the small drama and fine detail of social existence, especially at its lower depths. Priyamvada Gopal (1968-) writes,

*If historical events are only available to us through narrative, Guha states the case of historian's responsibility to write contextualized and full narratives.*¹⁵

By contextualizing the small isolated incidents, the Subaltern Studies Group has shown the importance of the history of the neglected class. They also show the heterogeneity of the history of the peasants. Thus, this group led by Ranajit Guha provides an alternative to the state sponsored history and challenges the strong voice of the state.

This attention to the ignored history is influenced by Foucault (1926-1984). Using the tool of narratology which had been developed in linguistics and literary studies, the subaltern historiography has given critical attention to plot, character, authority language, voice and time and thus made a discourse of their own. These historians have pursued a consistent interest in the staging of violence and narrative construction of the

¹⁴Guha Ranajit (ed), *Op cit*, p-8

¹⁵Priyamvada Gopal, *Reading Subaltern History* in Neil Lazarus's (ed) *Cambridge Companion To Post Colonial Literary Studies*. 2004, p- 140

crime. Subaltern studies group has also questioned the role of Marxism as Meta narrative and pointed out that Marxism has failed to understand the role of caste and religion in shaping Indian history. As such, they failed to collect historical data from experiences of the oppressed and marginalised classes that were submerged in religious and social customs. This group makes sincere effort to understand the subaltern group in binary relationship with the dominant group- the mass culture and the elite culture. The understanding that the subaltern groups are perpetually influenced by the activities of the ruling class is basic to the historians of Subaltern Studies Group. It is easily understood how the powerful ruling class is involved in oppressing the subaltern groups, but the Subaltern Studies Group traces the involvement of the ruling class even when the subaltern groups rise to rebel against the powerful group.

The insistence on a solidarity that would not reduce individual voices, styles, and approaches to a flat and undifferentiated uniformity has been the hallmark of the Subaltern Studies Group. Despite their diversities, the subaltern groups share a common feature- a tendency to resist the elite domination. The Subaltern issue got importance in postcolonial theory and different postcolonial critics have brought forward different facets of subalternity. Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak in her famous essay *Can The Subaltern Speak?* has raised several questions related to the representation of the subalterns by different schools of thoughts.

2.09. GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK AND POST COLONIAL LITERARY THEORY

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has given the term subaltern new momentum by focusing on the gendered subaltern and by examining the position of Indian women she declares that subaltern cannot speak.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was born on 24 February, 1942 in Calcutta. After completing her graduation from Presidency College of the University of Calcutta in 1959, she joined the Cornell University, U.S.A. for her Masters' degree. Then she went to Girto College, Cambridge, England on a year's fellowship. After that she returned to U.S.A. and joined the University of Iowa as an Instructor. At the same time, she also completed her doctoral dissertation on the works of Irish poet W.B. Yeats under the guidance of Paul De Man (1919-1983), a famous literary critic, at Cornell University.

Combining abstract philosophical speculation and personal reflection, she creates her discourse to challenge the hegemony of the west. She is even very critical of her own position as an educated intellectual and constantly aware of the effect of her intellectual exercise on the lives of the disempowered, subaltern groups that she describes. By focusing on the singular histories and lives of subaltern women, Spivak questions the codes and conventions of western knowledge. She holds the view that in order to acquire real knowledge about the economic text of globalisation or patriarchal oppression of 'Third World' women, one must first unlearn the privileged systems of western knowledge, because it serves the interests of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Spivak describes herself as a para-disciplinary ethical philosopher, one who always questions the established theories pointing out the blind spots. As a result, each school of theory terms her a member of the opposite school, a status she is pleased about.¹⁶

She is also an expert in breaking rules set by the prevailing literary theories and philosophies. By pointing out the limitations and blind spots of western feminist theory, Spivak challenges the claim of feminism to represent all women and the concept of 'Global sisterhood' to include all the women of the 'First World' and the Third world'. Stating that all women are not the same, Spivak has emphasised the need of respecting differences in race, class, religion, citizenship and culture.

As a postcolonial critic Spivak is known for her ample erudition and opaque theoretical text. Because of her aphoristic and provisional style, readers often find her difficult to comprehend. Spivak has also coined new terms like 'worlding', 'epistemic violence' etc. Edward Said (1935-2003) is opposed to the jargons of literary theory as he feels that jargons alienate the non-specialist reader and retreats from the social and historical world. Terry Eagleton (1943-), the British Marxist literary critic has accused Spivak of deliberately using high handed jargons to make her writings obscure. There is a common perception that Spivak is difficult to understand, which is true also. However, she uses jargons and complex approach to different theory to understand the intricacies that cannot be explained by simple sentences.

Spivak uses the term 'epistemic violence' to show how western knowledge or epistemology has been used by the west to justify their violent political and military exercise over non-western culture. Epistemic violence is the use of law or language to

¹⁶ See, Morton, Stephen. *opcit*, p- 67

marginalize or victimize specific people and groups. Spivak defines epistemic violence as the violence of knowledge and it includes the distortions, stereotyping and generalizing of third world women's conditions, as if they were all homogenously belaboured lacking agency. The powerful west and the dominant patriarchy create discourse to marginalize the weaker section, mostly the women.

In order to understand Spivak's critical writings, it is important to understand 'discourse'. Originally developed by French philosopher Michel Foucault, study of discourse aims at understanding how the world is constructed and controlled by words and sentences. For Foucault, discourse has little to do with the act of speaking in its traditional sense. Rather it is strongly bounded area of social knowledge; a system of statement within which the world can be known and through discourse the world is brought into being. Discourse is important because it joins power and knowledge together. Powerful people have control of what is known and the way it is known. Those who have such knowledge, have power over those who do not have.

*Until the lions produce their own historian, the story of the hunt will glorify only the hunter.*¹⁷

This African proverb beautifully sums up the importance of discourse making. Until the later part of the Twentieth Century, 'Discourse' meant the ordered exposition in writing or speech of a particular kind. It is the context in which knowledge is produced, often defining the limits of what can be said and what is prohibited. In contemporary context, discourse is also about power and regulation as it sanctions and legitimizes knowledge. It now refers to a platform for studying the nature and use of language from different

¹⁷Achebe, Chinua. Home and Exile, 2001,p- 73

angles. Study of discourse making has got momentum because man continuously makes story to justify his action and to create myth.

If the purpose of story making or discourse making is to defend one's action, one must be skeptic about its innocence. Although fictions are undoubtedly fictitious, it can also be true or false. However, the truth or falsehood of fiction is not same with that of a news item or a statement. It can be judged from the intention and integrity of the fiction writer. Societal discourse plays powerful role in shaping the society by teaching people how to lead life and such discourses are created by the powerful class to protect their interest as class and individuals. Thus such discourses often exploit the weaker class.

The base of Spivak's approach is essentially deconstructive. Influenced by Derrida (1930-2004) and her Ph.D. supervisor Paul De Mann, Spivak has employed deconstruction to interrogate the critical works of several great thinkers including Marx. Spivak believes that Deconstruction does not negate history, truth or subject in totality. It is a method to persistently question to arrive at truth. Rather than viewing it as a method to expose errors, deconstruction should be viewed as a way to know how truth is produced. In an interview with Alfred Arteaga (1950-2008), Spivak expresses her idea of deconstruction in the following words

*Deconstruction, if one wants a formula, is, among other things, a persistent critique of what one cannot not want.*¹⁸

¹⁸Landry, Donna and Gerald Maclean. *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, 1996, pp-27-28

2.10. GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK'S *CAN THE SUBALTERN SPEAK?*

Can the Subaltern speak? is Spivak's best known and most controversial essay. Her main argument in the essay is that postcolonial critics, like many of the feminists, advocate giving the silenced 'others' a voice, but even the most benevolent effort only succeeds in silencing the voice further. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak brings to light the manner in which Western Culture investigates other cultures with the help of the *Sati* rites prevalent in India during British rule. She also questions the innocence of western culture in investigating other cultures. Knowledge is never innocent and it expresses the interest of its producer. Like other commodities, knowledge is also imported from West to third world country.

The first part of the essay presents the ethical problems of investigating a different culture with the framework of a universal concept. With her wealth of knowledge, Spivak makes the essay discursive and difficult to comprehend scrutinizing an array of western writers – Marx (1818-1883), Foucault, Deleuze (1925-1995) and Derrida. Spivak States that western academic thinking is not innocent and it has a hidden agenda to supports western economic and other types of interest. Spivak then turns first to the works of Michael Foucault and Gilles Deleuze who as poststructuralists have challenged the prevailing belief that an individual is a sovereign subject with autonomous agency over his consciousness. She starts criticizing these two philosophers on the basis of the belief that the structures that underpin aesthetic representation may also suppress political representation. Thus this essay can be seen as a reaction to the notion that the subaltern can speak and know their condition. Pointing to the Marxian

use of the terms *vertreten* (substituting) and *darstellen* (representing), Spivak opines that the poststructuralists have overlooked the category of representation.

Spivak rhetorically asks the question to drive home the point that though the Subaltern speaks, others do not have the patience to listen to them. The contents of the message sent by the Subaltern does not reach the intended receiver as it passes through different scanners that manipulate the real spirit of the message. Subaltern does have articulation power, which is an involuntary act of human beings, but listeners who matter lack the conscious effort to decipher the real meaning. Most of the controversies regarding her essay lack certain basic understandings. This essay no way denies social agency to the gendered subaltern. Spivak only questions the authenticity of the identity- both political and discursive- given to them within a biased system of political and economic representation.

In order to understand the true essence of Spivak's opinion, it is important to understand the difference between the two terms 'speak' and 'talk'. Many have used these two words as synonym and hence there are controversies. The act of speaking invariably involves one or more listeners and the act of talking can be a soliloquy and comes under intrapersonal communication. The subaltern cannot speak but they talk. However, their utterances do not reach the intended listener and so their talks fail to bring any change. By speaking Spivak intends to mean the transaction of meaningful words that takes place between the speaker and the listener(s). Spivak says,

*That is what did not happen in the case of a woman who took her own body at the moment of death to inscribe a certain kind of annulment of all the pre suppositions that underlie the regulative psychology that writes Sati.*¹⁹

Using deconstruction method, Spivak tries to find out how the third world subject can be studied without the help of the West. Mass movement in India has succeeded in overthrowing the colonial rule. But colonial power structure continued to influence the lives of the poor masses.

The colonial social, political and economic structures continued to influence the conditions of postcolonial nation states. Their new found political freedom has failed to bring any positive change to their social and political conditions. Indian women, apart from bearing the burden of the colonial power structure, have to suffer the dominance of patriarchy and in this sense they are doubly oppressed.²⁰

During the colonial period, the women were dominated by the British on one hand and by the Indian patriarchy on the other. In the postcolonial period, they are again put outside the hegemonic power structure and the dominance of the patriarchy continued. A section of the Indian elite functions as native informants for the first world intellectuals interested in the voice of the 'Other'. But one must nevertheless insist that the colonised subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous.

The Hindu practice of burning a widow on her husband's funeral pyre known as *Sati* rite was prevalent in parts of India among a few communities during the colonial period.

¹⁹Landry, Donna and Gerald Maclean. Opcit, p-289

²⁰ See Morton, Stephen, opcit,pp-1-2

This gave the colonizer the opportunity to destroy the whole edifice of rich Indian culture and establish the supremacy of the white culture.

Sati, the practice of widow self-immolation on the pyre of their dead husband, is the finest example to support Spivak's argument that subaltern women do not get the opportunity to voice their ideas and their voices do not reach the dialogic level of utterance. As part of their civilizing mission, the Britishers tried to abolish the age old custom of widow sacrifice in 1829. The message that the colonizer tried to convey to the west was that white men (the British) saving brown women (Indian women) from brown men (Indian men).

While Spivak strongly opposes such an inhumane practice, she also points out that the colonizer has ignored certain aspects of this tradition. To start with, they misspell the term '*Sati*' as '*Suttee*'. No doubt, by legally banning this brutal tradition, they have saved lives of some Indian women. But they also used this tradition to secure British power in India and to create a binary – 'British civilization' and 'Indian barbarism'. The age old and rich Indian culture was thus denied any legitimacy.

In this whole process the fact was totally ignored that some of the Indian women really wanted to die with their husbands in the same funeral pyre and they considered it a noble act. The two Holy Scriptures of Hindu religion *Dharmasastra* and *Rg-Veda*, treat the practice of *Sati* as a sacred ritual, rather than an act of suicide. Spivak points to the provision mentioned in *Dharmasastra* that legitimizes certain forms of suicides.

Widow's self immolation in the same pyre with her dead husband, known as *sati rites* has been held in high esteem by the scripture.²¹

This is clearly a discourse of the patriarchy and a ploy to command respect from women. Such discourses reduce the position of a woman to a parasite- someone without an individual identity. Spivak opines that the respect given to a sati by religion has made this inhumane act *a simulacrum of both truth-knowledge and piety of place*.²²

Any woman who denies to *gosati* is treated with contempt and society makes her widowhood worse than hell. On the other hand, her self immolation, though inhuman, earns her respect and more importantly, it brings an end to the endless drudgery she has to face as a widow. So Spivak writes:

*By the inexorable ideological production of the sexed subject such a death can be understood by the female subject as an exceptional signifier of her own desire exceeding the general rule for a widow's conduct.*²³

Spivak believes that Sati should be treated like a martyr, who dies for others. This martyrdom is a kind of protest against the society that does not recognise their role in the society. She is also very critical of Edward Thompson's view expressed in his essay *Suttee: A Historical and Philosophical Enquiry in The Hindu Rite Of Widow Burning*. Thomson states that white men, in their effort to save brown women from brown men impose upon the women another ideological constriction, different from the previous one, by absolutely identifying within discursive practice good-wifeness with self-immolation along with the body of her dead husband. He uses the word 'Suttee' as a

²¹ See Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* in Nelson, Cary and Lawrence Grossberg's *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, 1988, p-299

²² Ibid, p-300

²³ Ibid, p-300

synonym of 'faithful' and supports General Charles Hervey's terming of the Indian system which looked only for prettiness, obedience and constancy in woman. However, such an effort on the part of the colonizers is not without their interest. The British colonial power uses it as an opportunity to prove to the western world that India is an uncivilized country and in the greater interest of the human race, the British must civilize them. Thus the victim widow's body is used by the colonial power to fight an ideological battle to justify their colonial expansion which they want to believe the world as the 'civilizing mission'²⁴

By denying the Indian women the right of self-immolation, this system has robbed them of the option to choose between the brutal but quick death (Sati rite) and the slow but agonising death (to live as a widow within the strict restriction of rules of the patriarchy). Through this essay, Spivak tries to drive home the point that subaltern cannot speak and the condition of the gendered subaltern is even worse.

²⁴ See Morton, Stephen, *opcit*, pp-63-64