

Theorizing Resistance in Spivak's Deconstructive-Marxist Postcolonial Criticism¹

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Abstract: Resistance has been an important subject of debates in recent postcolonial studies. This paper discusses the problematic of resistance in Gayatri Spivak's deconstructive-Marxist postcolonial writings by focusing on her critical concepts "the subaltern" and "strategic essentialism." It concludes that though her deconstructive-Marxist postcolonial criticism is suspicious of valorizing the constitutive effect of the colonial discourse on colonized subjectivities and debilitating their power of initiating resistance, Spivak's problematization of the colonized subjective agency in terms of imperial epistemic violence and its heterogeneity and the intellectual's positioning helps interrogate the notion of identity as independent and self-sufficient consciousness, thus exposing the danger of reproducing the imperial power structures and re-silencing the subaltern involved in the process of postcolonial textual re-writing.

Key words: Resistance; Spivak; Subaltern; Intellectual; Strategic essentialism

CAN THE SUBALTERN SPEAK?

If Bhabha continuously interrogates the nature of colonial discourse and relationship in terms of its ambivalence and hybridity, it is Gayatri Spivak's works that persistently problematize the constitution of the colonized subjective agency from various angles. She endeavors to theorize the possibility of counter-knowledge of the subaltern, such as those constructed by colonizers or scholars of the Subaltern Studies group. In her frequently quoted essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?"³ Spivak engages with the effect of the "epistemic violence" imposed by colonialist and imperialist discourses on the colonized native subjectivity and the complex issue of the denial of subjectivity to the native subaltern women in nationalist histories. She examines the pitfalls and aporias into which even the radical Subaltern Studies group may fall through a deconstructive problematization of the category of "the subaltern" and a further analysis of the

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³ Titled "Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow-Sacrifice," it is initially published in *Wedge* 7/8 (Winter/Spring, 1985) and later reprinted in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg eds. (London: Macmillan, 1988), and recently revised (the concluding argument remains the same though with new details) in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

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subaltern women who are ignored even by the revisionist histories. Meaning as “a junior ranking officer in the British army” and “of inferior rank” (*OED*), the term subaltern is used by Gramsci to refer to those social groups subjected to the hegemony of the ruling classes in his “Notes on Italian History” (1934-5). Gramsci uses this term to cover a great variety of people, including peasants, workers and other groups having no access to hegemonic power. Thus the history of the subaltern is necessarily fragmented and episodic because they are always subjected to the hegemony of the ruling classes even in their rebellion. It is obvious that the subaltern has less access to cultural capital and social institutions to produce their own representation. According to Gramsci, only a permanent revolution of class adjustment can break this pattern of subordination of the subaltern class (*Prison Notebooks* 52-54). This term was adopted in the Subaltern Studies collective “as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (Guha vii). This group argues that, the problem with the historiography of Indian nationalism lies in the fact that it is dominated by both colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism. Therefore, it defines its goal as examining the subaltern “as an objective assessment of the role of the elite and as a critique of elitist interpretations of that role” (Guha vii).

Spivak’s critique of the Subaltern Studies group is aimed to problematize the concept of the subaltern. She interrogates Guha’s assumption of an autonomous subaltern consciousness even though acknowledging his definition of the people as “an identity-in-differential,” arguing that Guha can never escape the charge of an essentialist conception of the subaltern because the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous. According to Spivak, there is no methodology that can both determine what constitutes the subaltern and avoid essentialism. As she explains:

For the true subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak it; 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 [...] How can we touch the consciousness of the people, even as we investigate their politics? With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak? (“Can the Subaltern Speak” 27)

Thus no one can construct the category of the subaltern as a clear and unproblematic voice that does not simultaneously occupy many other possible speaking positions.⁴ The subaltern, like most master words such as the people, is at best a catachresis—a word without an adequate reference. The essentialist idea of the subaltern as pure consciousness might be in danger of objectifying the subaltern “through knowledge even as they restore versions of causality and self determination to him” (*Spivak Reader* 210). However, this persistent interrogation of the heterogeneity of the subaltern can be politically disabling because “we need universals to produce critical readings of social injustices” (Chakrabarty 254).⁵

Spivak further interrogates the idea of regarding the subaltern as a sovereign subject of independent consciousness. The pure authentic subaltern consciousness is irretrievable not only because of the imposition of the imperial and colonial epistemic violence but also because “It is only the texts of counterinsurgency or elite documentation that gives us the news of the consciousness of the subaltern” (*Spivak Reader* 203). This way she further examines the subaltern subject as an effect of the dominant discourse of the elite, arguing that, “the texts of counter-insurgency locate [...] a will as a sovereign cause when it is no more than an effect of the subaltern effect” (*Spivak Reader* 204). In consequence, in Spivak’s view, the subaltern’s subjective agency is always already constituted by the dominant colonialist and nationalist discourses and consequently becomes its after effect. This claim of the subaltern subject as

⁴ In a similar manner, Perusek critiques the subaltern consciousness as an autonomous concept in the historical context of Indian Rebellion of 1857, arguing that to the subaltern historians “‘subalternity’ as a theoretical concept seems more like a description of identity as an oppressed group rather than of differences in degree of the kind of oppression suffered, or of divergent interests within those groups once a particular source of oppression is removed” (296). For a similar argument see Prakash, “Writing Post-Orientalist Histories.”

⁵ Neil Lazarus points out that Spivak’s conceptualization of the subaltern “come(s) close to fetishizing difference under the rubric of incommensurability” and her relentless problematization of the gap of representation tends to ignore “the relation between theory and practice” (“Introducing Postcolonial Studies” 10). For a similar criticism see Larsen.

discursive effect might be suspicious of removing the ground for imagining anti-colonial resistance and opposition.⁶

As illustrated above, Spivak's problematization of the subaltern concept seems to suspend the elaboration of an alternative way of effective resistance. Yet this does not justify a hasty conclusion that "considerations of subaltern insurgency and resistance are entirely absent from Spivak's thoughts," considering her suggestion that literary texts can provide an alternative rhetorical site for subaltern women's resistance (Morton 55). In fact, Spivak's reluctance to "find a [subaltern] consciousness [...] in a positive and pure state" reveals her own paradoxical intellectual position within the postcolonial contexts (Spivak, *Other Worlds* 198). The seemingly benevolent attempt to represent and speak for the subaltern might, due to the irreducible heterogeneity of the subaltern and its pre-constitution by the colonial discourse, appropriate the voice of the subaltern and silence them in consequence. In response to Foucault and Deleuze's proposal that the oppressed can make a free representation of themselves, Spivak makes a difference between two senses of representation: representation as "speaking for" (*vertreten*) in politics and representation as "re-presentation" (*darstellen*) in art or philosophy and charges their running together of these two senses of representation (*Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 256). Conceptualizing the subaltern as coherent and autonomous subjects capable of free self-representation makes their agency subordinated by the voice claiming to speak for them. In consequence, the artistic or philosophical re-presentation—a symbolic representation of the subaltern as coherent and autonomous subject—is mistaken as a transparent expression of their desire and power.⁷ According to Spivak's further close examination of Marx's famous sentence "They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented" in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (124), the radical practice like the Subaltern Studies Group "should attend to this double session of representations rather than reintroduce the individual subject through totalizing concepts of power and desire" (*Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 264). Foucault and Deleuze's proposition that the oppressed can speak for themselves reintroduces the constitutive subject as "an irreducible methodological presupposition" of the "Subject of desire and power" and "the self-approximate, if not self-identical subject of the oppressed" (*Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 264-265). In consequence, the intellectuals become transparent as they just report on the non-represented subject without considering them as "the surreptitious subject of power and desire" inevitably implicated within the dominant discursive and institutional practices and "belongs to the exploiters' side of the international division of labor" (Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 265).

STRATEGIC ESSENTIALISM

In addition to her persistent, relentless critique of the conception of a pure subaltern consciousness and the assumed intellectuals' transparency in representation, Spivak offers other alternative ways to theorize resistance. On the one hand she recognizes the difficulty and danger of speaking in the name of others as "a real phobia" and feels hard to "think up strategies for undermining that" (*Post-colonial Critic* 63), while on the other she insists on both "strategic essentialism" and positive complicity. As she remarks in an interview:

Assuming one's ontological commitment as susceptible to an examination of value coding and then presuppose a catachrestic name in order to ground our project and our investigation allows

⁶ For example, Benita Parry criticizes Spivak because she "gives no speaking part to the colonized, effectively writing out the evidence of native agency recorded in India's 200 year struggle against British conquest and the Raj [...]" ("Problems" 37). Neil Lazarus makes a similar critique, arguing that Spivak is not really concerned with "native agency at all, but a theory of the way in which the social and symbolic practice of the disenfranchised elements of the native population are represented (or more accurately, not represented) in colonialist-elitist discourses" (*Nationalism* 112).

⁷ Elsewhere Spivak provides an easier understanding of this point in an interview: "The relationship between the two kinds of representation brings in, also, the use of essentialism because no representation can take place—no *Vertretung*, representation—can take place without essentialism. What it has to take into account is that the 'essence' that is being represented is a representation of the other kind, *Darstellung*" (*Post-Colonial Critic* 108-109).

us to be thoroughly empirical without necessarily being blind essentialists. (Outside in the Teaching Machine 16)

This discloses the general methodology of her critical project as a strategic combination of deconstructionist epistemology with a Marxist ontology.⁸ The persistent problematization of the constitution of the subaltern consciousness and the assumed transparency of the intellectual's representation is epistemologically deconstructionist while recognizing the necessity of "strategic essentialism" and positive complicity is ontologically Marxist.

In response to the negative interpretation of her problematization of the subaltern as irreducible difference and effect of dominant discourse, or perhaps in order to reassert the political potency of her theory, Spivak proposes "strategic essentialism," asserting the necessity of essentialist formulations in resisting the colonial and neocolonial domination and oppression. In an interview she reflects on her deconstructive methodology:

So, I am fundamentally concerned with that heterogeneity, but I chose a universal discourse in that movement because I felt that rather than define myself as repudiating universality—because universalisation, finalisation, is an irreducible moment in any discourse—rather than define myself as specific rather than universal, I should see what in the universalizing discourse could be useful and then go on to see where that discourse meets its limits and its challenge within that field. I think we have to choose again strategically, not universal discourse but essentialist discourse. I think that since as a deconstructivist—see, I just took a label upon myself—I cannot in fact clean my hands and say, "I am specific." In fact I must say I am an essentialist from time to time. (Post-colonial Critic 11)9

And later in the same interview Spivak regards standing against the discourses of essentialism as "absolutely on target, but *strategically* we cannot" (11). This insistence on the necessity of holding a strategic position suggests that, for the colonized in their resistance against the colonial domination, the essentialist idea is quite a necessary part of asserting the illusion of a unified, stabilized identity and the essentialist construction of the value and dignity of the pre-colonial native cultures.¹⁰

As examined in the above discussion, Césaire, Senghor, Cabral, and Fanon in their early anti-colonial writings have already explored the complexities of constructing the ethnic identity and national culture in the context of their strategic significance for anti-colonial resistance and national independence. They make use of the essentialist discourses such as negritude and national culture as strategic positions for initiating and sustaining anti-colonial resistance while making every effort to keep vigilant about the potential dangers underlying their narrow politics of identity. The difference is that Spivak theorizes the issue in a more subtle and complicated way.

⁸ Specifying a dynamic of essentialism and anti-essentialism, Spivak suggests that: "In Marx it is the slow discovery of the importance of the question of value that has opened up a lot of things for me. In Marx, there is a strong sense that all ontopolitical commitments (just as in our neck of the woods, all ontocultural commitments), that is to say, ontological commitments to political beings historical agents, should be seen as negotiable, in terms of the coding of value" (*Outside in the Teaching Machine* 11-12). For more information about Marxism and value see Spivak, *Other Worlds* 154-175.

⁹ In another interview Spivak elaborates more on strategic essentialism, explaining strategy's difference from theory: "Strategy works through a persistent (de)constructive critique of the theoretical. "Strategy" is an embattled concept-metaphor and unlike "theory," its antecedents are not disinterested and universal (*Outside in the Teaching Machine* 3). She goes on: "With essences, at least I feel that they are so useful that they can become dangerous. With theory, I feel that, for the moment, for me, at least, it's best to keep it at a distance, see it as the practice of its production. Even so, I must ask why essentialism is confused sometimes with the empirical" (*Outside in the Teaching Machine* 15-16).

¹⁰ Other scholars offer similar ideas stressing the importance of the politically constituted identity for interventional practices. Stuart Hall proposes "the notion of provisional, politicized ethnic identity" in the analysis of black diasporic experience ("Mimimal Selves," "New Ethnicities"). Diana Fuss makes a distinction between "deploying" or "activating" essentialism and "falling into" or "lapsing into" essentialism. For more discussions see Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker 231-232, 238-239.

What Spivak aims to propose is, rather than a denial of the subaltern agency and their capability to speak out, the potential risk underlying the attempt to conceptualize the subaltern as isolable in some absolute essentialist terms from the constitution of dominant discursive and institutional practices, which are needed to help the subaltern utter their own voice. Actually the subaltern can indeed speak, but they cannot be heard. Furthermore, once they can speak they are not subalterns any more (Spivak *Post-Colonial Critic* 158).¹¹ Nevertheless, this aporia does not abtain intellectuals' responsibility from representation.

As to the positive complicity of the intellectual's representation of the subaltern, Spivak unceasingly insists on the strategy of "unlearning one's privilege as one's loss." Her critique of the intellectual as part of the larger postcolonial situation that they describe is perhaps the most pertinent and the most persistent in postcolonial studies. The inevitable implication within the power structures of imperial discursive and institutional practices does not necessarily paralyze the postcolonial intellectual if examined from a deconstructive perspective. As Derrida suggests:

The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them in a certain way, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say, without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work. (Of Grammatology 24)

This might be what Spivak learns from the translation of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. In the long introduction of this translation and her many other works, she gives a political reading of Derrida and regards it as the greatest gift of deconstruction, which is summarized as "to question the authority of the investigating subject without paralyzing him, persistently transforming conditions of impossibility into possibility" (Spivak, *Spivak Reader* 210). According to Spivak, the deconstructive methodology does not deny the very existence of subject, truth, and history since it "simply questions the privileging of identity so that someone is believed to have the truth" and serves as "a persistent critique of what one cannot not want" (*Spivak Reader* 27-28). So postcoloniality can be further analyzed as a case of deconstructive philosophical position, which critiques the imperial structure yet inhabits within it intimately (Spivak, "Making of Americans" 794).¹²

In accordance with her deconstructive methodology, Spivak understands her position as inevitably implicated within the dominant discourses and institutions because she cannot fully construct another position that is different from the one she now occupies. She comments on her own position as a postcolonial intellectual from the Third World:

Remaining in the United States was not at any point an examined choice, a real decision made [...] I have two faces. I am not in exile. I am not a migrant. I am a green-card-carrying critic of neocolonialism in the United States. It's a difficult position to negotiate, because I will not marginalize myself in the United States in order to get sympathy from people who are genuinely marginalized. (Spivak Reader 18)

These reflections on her own positioning can be regarded as self-critique, which interrogates claims made on her personal behalf and reveals her complex identity and ambivalent positioning within the Western metropolitan academy. Elsewhere, Spivak compares her criticism of metropolitan postcolonialism with that of Ahmad, defining her position as "less locationist, more nuanced with a productive acknowledgment of complicity" (*Critique of Postcolonial Reason* xii). In contrast with some severe criticisms of the postcolonial intellectuals' complicity within the Western metropolitan institution and their being suspicious of producing neocolonialism (Ahmad 196, 200-210; Miyoshi, "Borderless World" 751),¹³

¹¹ For more studies on Spivak's strategic essentialism of the subaltern see Gopal 146-150.

¹² Here Spivak's deconstructive methodology is similar to Said's "voyage in" in their emphases on producing resistance from within the dominant power structures of discursive and institutional practices, but Said deviates from poststructuralism in developing his notion of worldliness through a critique of textuality.

¹³ There are many other similar comments. Kwame Anthony Appiah describes postcoloniality as "the condition of what we might ungenerously call a comprador intelligentsia: of a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained, group of

what Spivak offers is an intellectually sophisticated and morally courageous stance to acknowledge a responsible, positive complicity of postcolonial intellectuals' necessary location within the metropolitan discursive and institutional power structures—which provides much insight in theorizing resistance in recent postcolonial studies.

CONCLUSION

Compared with the conception of resistance strategy as principally based upon a relatively autonomous and coherent notion of ethnic or national identity in the early anti-colonial writings, Spivak's problematization of the constitution of colonized subjective agency in terms of imperial epistemic violence and its heterogeneity and the intellectual's subjective position of power and desire helps interrogate the notion of identity as independent and self-sufficient consciousness, exposing the danger of reproducing the imperial power structures and re-silencing the subaltern involved in the process of postcolonial textual re-writing. However, the implication of this theorization and problematization consequently overemphasize the constitutive effect of the colonial discourse on colonial subjects, going so far as to disable their agency to initiate and sustain anti-colonial resistance and fail to get out of the captivating concept of discourse and power to imagine alternatives for effective resistance.

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writers and thinkers who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of Western capitalism at the periphery" (149). Arif Dirlik regards "postcoloniality as the condition of the intelligentsia of global capitalism" (329, 356).

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