

Gender Subalternity and the Role of Women in the Society in Gaytri Spivak “Can Subaltern
Speak”

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes up the concept of subalternity espoused by the Subaltern Studies historians to identify and analyse the silences and omissions in nationalist historiography. In the outset of gender subalternity, it is relevant to delve deep into the roles of women in the society. In the Indian cultural scenario, the historiography failed to represent the contribution of women towards the materialization of Indian independence. It would be now difficult to retrieve the voice of the subaltern or trace the tyrannical process behind the subaltern classes. The issue is further complicated when they do not have a proper history to reclaim their own past. Women had a very limited role to play in the society as they were not allowed to think independently. They are pleased to live with their men and they carry out a lot of household duties that come under the category of unpaid labour.

Keywords: Subaltern ,Womanism, Female Consciousness, Oppression.

Spivak’s writings reflected the background of women’s struggle and oppression in the Third World Countries. Spivak’s writings on feminism had an iconoclastic effect as she challenged some of the basic assumptions of feminism in general. All women are not the same and there are a lot of variations existing even among women with regard to class, colour and creed. Spivak is not against feminism but her very arguments strengthen the fundamental principles of feminism .

Spivak, through her cultural and critical theories, tried to challenge the legacy of colonialism. She refused to admit the notion that the Western World is having an upper hand over the Third World as it is more purified from the grossness of acute barbarism. Her critical discourse raises the issues of marginal subjects such as the place of the subaltern women in the society and their empowerment. Though women are proficient in doing many jobs, they are not allowed to make any kind of initiatives in their lives. The gendered subalterns are playing the role of mere shadows to please their men. The role of the shadow comes to an end when the light goes out of her husband. Then the woman has no more existence except to trace the shadow of the dead. Women are being treated as the 'other' since they are subordinated to their men. The condition of the Third World Women is even more pathetic. They are doubly segregated; first of all from their men and also from the white upper class. The third world women are discriminated on the basis of gender, colour and caste. The concept of the 'other' comprises not only of the women of the third world but all the unwanted people like mentally retarded, mentally derailed and people with homosexual activities. Spivak revitalized the feminist discourse in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In this essay, she focuses upon some of the problems of the Third World Women. They have never been mentioned in the international framework. Spivak's writings reflected the background of women's struggle and oppression in the Third World Countries. Feminism as a theory could not take into consideration the views and aspirations of all the women in the world. There are regional differences everywhere and the history that has played a key role in their formation should be analyzed more vividly. Spivak's writings on feminism had an iconoclastic effect as she challenged some of the basic assumptions of feminism in general.

All women are not the same and there are a lot of variations existing even among women with regard to class, colour and creed. The will and aspirations of the European women are totally different from the women of the Asian Continent. The European women are more or less liberated from their patriarchal dominance whereas women from the Third World Countries are struggling to cope with the European women. It would be very difficult to create a universally agreeable female gender and the time has now come for the people to respect the differences within the gender. Spivak is not against feminism but her very arguments strengthen the fundamental principles of feminism. She reiterates the fact that there are differences in the case of race, class, religion, citizenship and culture among women. The 'other' always occupies a position outside the mainstream of life and they are treated as marginal's who do not contribute anything to the welfare of the society. The psychological reason behind the treatment of women as the 'other' is to subjugate them under the patriarchal dominance and utilize their servile existence whenever needed. The ideal women were embodiment of traits that adhered to family responsibilities. The Subalterns are oppressed subject or that inferior rank. The subalterns were subjected to the colonial rule and only the colonizer had the voice. The gendered Subaltern is playing the role of mere shadows to please their men. The subalterns are not able to have transactions with others because of the disparity that exists in the society. The society has identified the woman as a person who belongs to the 'fairer sex.' It is equal to say that a female is perceived by the society from the point of view of sex. Males and females co-exist in this society for the harmonious growth and development of the nation. They share equal responsibilities in supporting the family but at the same time gender difference occurs even in

the family. Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him: she is not regarded as an autonomous being. The body of man makes sense in itself quite apart from that of woman, whereas the latter seems waiting in significance by itself. Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. Males themselves cannot live in the society, so they consider women as their supporters and treat them as secondary. 'Can the subaltern speak?' is a rhetorical question asked by Spivak and her intention was not to invite any kind of reply but to state the impediments of the subalterns. . Though women obeyed the whims and fancies of their men, they had a voice within themselves, a voice of dissent and disapproval. All women who became victims of patriarchal violence and atrocities had something to say or they wanted to make their position clear whether they were for or against a proposition. Spivak states that 'the subaltern cannot speak' by attaching a special emphasis on the element of noise. The communication that takes place between a subaltern and a non-subaltern is actually lost due to the element of noise. The element of noise is influenced by the racial, cultural and socio-economic factors. The goal of communication is achieved only when the desired message is conveyed to the receiver. The subalterns have the capacity to articulate things well and they can go to any extent so as to make their stand clear before the authorities. The psychological context hardly exists when a subaltern tries to speak; as a result, the communicative system fails to achieve its target. When the subalterns try to speak, the message that they try to communicate becomes totally distorted. It happens in a continuous process because others are not ready to listen to them. Spivak's theory of subalternity is still relevant as people suffer in the name of gender, class and creed. . It is only when the authorities heed to the pleas of the subalterns that

the new dawn of life may be enjoyed by the subalterns in its fullness.

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