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The Representation of Subaltern

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The word 'Subaltern' means 'of inferior rank' was adopted and popularized by Italian Marxist Gramsci in a non –military sense to those groups in society who were destined to be subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers, women and other groups who are denied access to hegemonic power. Those groups are expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office. This term has also been adapted by post – colonial studies group of historians, who intended to endorse a systematic discussion of subaltern themes in South – Asian studies. Gramsci identified the social groups that are excluded from the traditional structures of the society for political representation by medium of which people can have a voice to speak in the society. Subalterns do not have a voice and are lost in a world owing to assimilation and colonialism. They have no representation and are not able to raise their voice and opinions or share their stories. No one is conscious of their daily struggles. This term has gained huge popularity in the field of History, Anthropology, Political Science, Sociology, Literature and Literary Criticism.

Antonio Gramsci particularly used the term to refer to the unorganized groups of rural peasants based in Southern Italy, who had no “social or political consciousness as a group, and were therefore vulnerable to the domination of the ruling ideas, culture and leadership of the state” (Hawthorn 248). In literary and cultural theory subaltern thus refers to “the members of those marginalized groups in society who are subjected to the hegemony of the ruling classes.” (Ashcroft, Tiffin 218)

There are multiple interpretations of the term subaltern. Even Antonio Gramsci coined the term “subaltern” in his *Prison Notebooks* (1973), but never overtly defines the subaltern. Gayatri Chakraboty spivak in an essay titled, “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*” writes:

The Subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with woman as a pious. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual has a circumscribe task which she must not disown with a flourish. (Spivak 308)

Finally the question arises as to who are the subalterns? Are the subalterns just a group of people who are connected through collective experience? Or does the label subaltern have any other political dimension? How they are collectively represented in texts? The representation of the subaltern is always problematic and controversial; always complicated by their position in literature, politics and history. Indian feminist deconstructive critic Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak suggests in her book *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (1988) that the phased development of the subaltern is complicated by the imperialist project. At the same time, “she attempts to formulate a critical vocabulary that is appropriate to describe the experiences and histories of particular individuals and social groups who are historically repressed and exploited by the European colonialism.” (Morton 47)

Spivak proposes to use the word subaltern to conceptualize a range of different subject positions which are not predefined by dominant political discourses. As Spivak claims in an interview published in *Polygraph*:

I like the word ‘subaltern’ for one reason. It is truly situational. Subaltern began as a description of a certain rank in the military. The word subaltern used under censorship of Gramsci: he called Marxism ‘monism,’ and was obliged to call the proletarian ‘subaltern.’ That word, used under duress, has been transformed into the description of everything that doesn’t fall under strict class analysis. I like that because it has no theoretical rigor. (Spivak 141)

Thus the concept of “subalternity” spread out from the academic field of postcolonial studies to explain a subpopulation of marginalized people. When one group is given priority naturally creates the ‘other’. Pushing certain groups to the margin, to the periphery, away from the vitality and vivacity of the centre necessarily involves the process of cultural “Othering”. Simone de Beauvoir elaborates the process of cultural “Othering”:

She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the other. (16)

This is the way as to how the subaltern is created, with the subordinated dimensions always on the right side of the binary oppositions. It is, however, very significant to note that in postcolonial theory, the concept of subaltern is an overused term, randomly used to refer to anyone who is politically/economically marginalized. Such academic co-options of the term became instrumental to lead Spivak to criticize academic opportunism that seeks to gain a privileged space in the name of subaltern representation. In her influential essay on the issue “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*” Spivak claims that the historical and structural condition of political representation does not guarantee that the interests of the particular subaltern groups will be recognized or that

their voice will be heard. She further mentions that the general difference between aesthetic and political structures of representation is that aesthetic representation tends to foreground its status as a re-presentation of the real, whereas political representation denies this structure of representation. “A subaltern is a person without lines of social mobility.” (Morton 54)

The subaltern is tainted with the negatives at all levels, be it social, cultural, sexual or personal. The subaltern is the one who is denied an authentic presence. He/ She is the one bereft of voice or dignity: one who is a mere zero, a cipher with no essential meaning or a sense of being. The gravity of the situation is intensified when the subaltern is a woman. She is even denied a subject position. Being at the precarious juncture, criss-crossed by multiple forces of oppression, she is the one who occupies the lowest position in the social ladder. Her presence is not even authenticated; if at all it is done, it is only to put in force the superiority of the male counterpart. She is the deviant, the deformatant, signifying all the lacks, the voids.

In the other word subaltern can be defined as ‘the general attribute of subordination... whether it is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way’ (Guha 3). The predicament of the female subaltern is the most miserable of all oppressive states. It is a lethal combination for the subaltern to be a woman. Her life, dreams, hopes and the basic right to a dignified survival is let down by multiple forces of oppression. She is a victim of racism, classism, and most importantly, of the primarily subjugating ideology of patriarchy.

In the post-colonial theory, the term describes the lower classes and the social groups who are on the margins of the society. The term ‘Subaltern’ is used as synonym for the proletariat in the Marxist theory. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak in an essay titled, “Can the Subaltern Speak”? Writes:

The Subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with woman a virtuous. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual has a circumscribe task which she must not disown with a flourish. (308)

She cited the examples of widows burnt at the pyre of the husband in her essay. She emphasized the condition of women who are doubly oppressed – firstly by patriarchy and secondly by colonialism.

The ‘Subaltern’ is really a vast umbrella which attempts to characterize individuals whose voices and actions have been muted, drastically re – interpreted, lost, or consciously swept away. Implicit in the term are related question of power, agency, and representation. Does the subaltern have the ability to define or represent her/ him in the public arena in any sort of lasting way? In different historical contexts, the subaltern has been understood as synonymous with women, children, colonial subjects, the poor, and the ethnic minority.

Today's subalternist scholars, however, do not intend for the term to be reduced to any single oppressed group or minority. Gayatri Spivak expresses her view that the subaltern is a person or a group of voiceless people who have been excluded from the society and their voices have been lost under the bondage of colonialism. Subalternity of women is seen even in the ancient scriptures and teachings of the great men and sages. For example, Manu who is regarded as the law giver of the Hindu vividly portrayed an inferior position of women in his writings. According to him, a woman should always be under the dominance of male shadow i.e. during her childhood she is subject to the authority of her father, after marriage to her husband and in old age her son.

Here is the right platform to relate the story of Sita who is a symbol of purity and a perfect wife also could not escape the doubtful thoughts of her husband, who could be easily influenced by a mere question raised by a washer man. This shows that women were in subaltern group right from the ancient times and women had to accept her faith as she did not have a voice. She was subordinate, ignorant of what to do and how to do. She was always subjected to domination and subordination by patriarchy. There were strict codes of conduct laid for women by a male dominated society in matters of her dress, behavior, manners, speech etc. The ideologies, attitudes, and beliefs propagated by the society in matters related to women promoted Subalternity.

The women in postcolonial society is doubly marginalized in the hierarchy of structural oppression, there are women who are placed further down the scale. Tribal, lower caste, differently-abled, lesbian, lower class women all come in the lower end of the hierarchy of women. In India, women, specifically the illiterate women, dalits, tribals, the rural population, and immigrant labors are the subaltern. The subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of the ruling group even when they rebel and rise up. The folktales and folklores of the different ethnic groups of India not only glorify the birth of a male child but project an inferior image of a female child. Therefore, women are always blessed: 'may you be a mother of hundred sons'. This shows clearly that women are subaltern group. The practice of Sati, female infanticide, female feticide and dowry in an Indian society are all good examples of subaltern. Not only socially, but even economically, politically, educationally, women are marginalized as subaltern. Indian women have long been continuing the lopsided conduct which throws them on the periphery of Social structure. The gendered identities are wrought on them and disgusting codes of conduct attributing them a subordinate are made obligatory. In spite of modernization and the spread of education, most of societies are unable to applaud an independent, open minded and successful woman.

It is argued only in the common places that the roles assigned to men and women grant a dignified position to women. But with rapid changes, especially in the field of behavioral patterns, the whole harmony between them has broken down. The reason is that the traditional and modern values affect the position of women in society. Evidently, the traditional values, which insist on truthful devotion and love, have been continually

evolving from generation to generation to cripple the growth of women and thwart the development of their personality. So they work against the 'mortiferous values' in order to safeguard their position. Their voice against the so called 'cultural conditioning' is termed as 'liberation'. Women do not have a right in decision making in purely a male dominating society from the political point of view. Women have no property and inheritance rights and even their work is not considered to be of economic values. They are left and from the purview of education and there is a general indifference prevailing in our Indian cultural to send a girl child to school. When it comes to matters of comfort, nutrition, enjoyment and health, she is always at the negative end.

Women are not only oppressed in every sphere of life but even her role as mother, wife and daughter is subjected to subordination. At home she is often subjected to domestic violence, male authoritarianism, deprivation of her basic psychological and physical needs, over work etc. and even in her home which she calls it her own she has no, representations and is not able to voice her opinion and share her story. No one is aware of her daily struggles and she is excluded from her expected and congenial family life. It's been a fact that subaltern women are mainly cut away from all possible means of communication. It is both ways cut off. The men very rarely recognize the fact that the women who are the victim of oppression are actually victimized. To them it is a normal course of societal progress.

The women are meant to be for that they are in their present condition. This belief creates a barrier to communication. The women who are oppressed also believe that they are meant to be treated in that way as this is the social norm. They too create a barrier for themselves to communicate with this thought. It has been widely asked "Can the Subaltern speak". An easy way of giving the answer is to simply say "yes" or "no". But we really need to investigate before we give answer to it. According to Spivak, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is more deeply in shadows. Homi Bhabha, a key thinker within post colonial thought, emphasizes the importance of social power relations in his working definitions of 'subaltern' group as oppressed, minority groups whose presence was crucial to the self definition of the majority group: 'subaltern social groups were also in a position to subvert the authority of this who had hegemonic power.

It has been believed by the women that they are an important part of the society and without their existence the society cannot function. If this belief is imbibed by the women, then they need to understand that the society can become strong and grow when the position of women in the society is strengthened. They need to share their present condition with the members of the society and voice their concerns. They also need to find a possible solution to their problem. In this way, the small countries like Nepal and Bangladesh have proved that a country can grow only by empowering women and taking them out from the existing condition of being oppressed. No nation has progressed which keeps its women oppressed.

The social construct of any society should be built up on the social consciousness; as it is well set up that the dominant ideology determines the social consciousness of the society. The social consciousness of the society, by its very nature, excludes the real agonies of the people. There are many theories about consciousness in the history. Self-consciousness is being conscious of something correlated to one's life; in this sense, consciousness means knowing oneself or understanding the surrounding of our own.

Everyone has consciousness of what he possesses, but until they create a general code of conduct it is impossible to create a general will on the problems they face. So the self-awareness and consciousness on the part of the degraded and marginalized societies become essential in order to oppose the situations which produce the degradation they suffer from.

By the use of philosophical and religious texts, rituals, festivals and art forms, the dominant group suppresses other cultural and religious expressions and parallel objects that belong to the communities other than the dominant group. Actually, the folklores of the world and especially those of India were either distorted or marginalized to serve the interests of the dominant group. Gradually the subaltern notion or consciousness of the working people who used to or were forced to create all beauties of the world gets degraded or marginalized. The primary dominating sectors of the society like governance and education facilitated the upper class to hold and practice their social order in every sphere of life. As a result, a large number of people were bound to remain in the backyards of the socio-economic and political progress. The dominant group enjoys superior status in the dominion of culture and politics. This hierarchy is clearly visible in the Indian social order where "subaltern classes" remain as a mere means to attain the wealth and power for the leisure/superior class.

The hierarchy based on birth is a social concept that people used to take it for granted as reality without questioning its legitimacy. The Caste system is so closed one that the interaction among these castes are restricted in the name of purity by the upper class. The upper class/caste used the 'caste ideology' as a means to secure their political and economic power and sustain their domination in the society. The compartmentalization of caste is so perfect that the populace from the lower strata/caste failed to share their feelings, etiquettes rationale etc., and thus unable to generate and share protests against the ruling social order.

The intellectuals, as defined by the Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci, play an important role in the creation and maintenances of social orders. They create the world based on their own ideas, where they placed man in different caste/social categories. The 'mental servitude', accordingly is made possible by the ideology of the dominant group which acts as hegemonic power in the society. Here, the 'hegemonic power' means the ruling ideology which knowingly or unknowingly subjugates all other groups and their visions.

The hegemonic ideology keeps up a social order based on purity of the upper castes. Gramsci defined hegemony as the consent produced in any society by the organization of civil society, contrary to the State with its apparatus of coercive power. The hegemony within civil society supports the leading group's authority over political society. This is supported by the juridical apparatus of the political society that protect the dominant group's hegemony within civil society through coercive measures. In this sense, the integral state comprises not only political society and civil society, but it also includes dictatorship and hegemony. In basic terms, hegemony is protected by coercion and coercion is protected by hegemony, and these together protect the dominant group's political and economic positions.

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