

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK

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Abstract: Born in Calcutta in 1942, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, is a renowned critic and literary theorist, best known for her article “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, and also for her translation of Derrida’s *of Grammatology*. As a feminist critic, she stands on a unique ground in how she uses Marxism and deconstruction as a literary tool to analyse and present the third world subaltern women’s lives and their problems in her writings. Also her feminist critique is unique in the manner in which it analyses the first world feminist thought and questions its validity as a befitting tool to understand and solve the third world subaltern women’s problems.

This paper attempts to analyse Spivak’s feminist trajectory with a purpose to present and analyse her views. Also the paper traces the evolution of her feminist perspectives with the changing times. The paper uses discourse/textual analyses as a methodology to analyse some of the important Spivak’s critical essays relating to her feminist critique. Select primary sources including essays like “Feminism and Critical Thought”; “French Feminism in an International Frame”, “Can the subaltern Speak?”, “French Feminism Revisited” are used for the discourse analyses, and secondary sources including reviews of her various works are analysed to understand the concepts she presents and to assimilate her key feminist perspectives in a simplified and organized manner.

Keywords: Feminism, Marxism, Deconstruction, Subaltern, Discourse Analyses.

Introduction: Gyatri Chakraborti Spivak, born in Calcutta in 1942, is celebrated in literary circles as a “Marxist, feminist and deconstructivist. Her writings have often sparked debate regarding her brand of feminism, as her thoughts and readings of literary texts offer a new perspective on the existent feminist theories. Spivak champions for giving voice to the subaltern third world women and challenges the utility and sufficiency of feminist writings in doing so. Also her feminism utilizes Marxian concepts of use value and surplus value to delineate the plight of subaltern women. Deconstruction for Spivak, acts as a tool to analyse and present her concerns on the subaltern women in a befitting language.

Spivak’s feminism is, perhaps, best defined in her deconstructivist approach as she declares that the very definition of ‘woman’ is built on the word ‘man’. It emphasizes the importance of examining and reappropriating the experience of a female body. It alienates both the Marxist feminism and Freudian Psychoanalyses: the former for being exclusive of any reference to the reproductive power of the womb, and the latter for being excessively centred on a part of female body. Tibile (2012) argues that she finds in ‘psychanalytical feminism’ what she calls “an invocation of history and politics” leading readers to colonial times, by juxtaposing it with Marxist feminism, foregrounding “the operations of the New Imperialism” about the economic text.

Her feminism uniquely points out to the dichotomy of the White European female being considered socially and culturally superior to the non-western woman. She finds this dichotomy foregrounded by western colonial discourse as a by-product of imperial expansion. Her feminism acknowledges the intellectual transformations achieved by western feminism, even as her critical thought is centred on the need for creating a universal feminist philosophy inclusive of lives and histories of all women. (Morton 2003: 90)

Maccandles(2015) feels that Spivak introduces an important division in western feminism, as she objects to Culler's suggestion that the questioning of muting of subaltern women is "to produce difference by differing", in "Can the Subaltern Speak?". This division McCandless feels that Spivak's stance on the "territorial debate" (US versus European feminism) is clear as she renders both insufficient as both fail in making the mute conscious of subaltern woman accessible.

Barte Moore-Gilbert (2005), speaking of Spivak's concern for the subaltern, speaks of her "consistent interest" in the plight of female subaltern, whom Moore – Gilbert feels Spivak represents as even more economically, culturally and politically marginalized than her male counterpart. Thus he says that "Spivak's affiliations to certain forms of feminist politics are clear. Her analyses of colonizing culture clearly marks her interest in the "specifications of women's experience". He refers to her essays like "Three Women's texts and a Critique of Imperialism" (1985) and "Imperialism and Sexual Difference" (1986) where she focuses on agency of western woman with colonialism. Moore- Gilbert observes in Spivak's feminist critique the consistent theme of criticizing western feminism for failing to "dehegemonize" and "decolonize" its own guiding presuppositions. He asserts that Spivak comes out quite strongly against "certain strands of Western feminism" which she feels portray "a self interested intervention on behalf of the subaltern woman". In her essays like "French Feminism in an International Frame" (1981), and "Three Women's Text and a Critique of Imperialism", Spivak is especially critical of Julia kristeva's *About Chinese Women* (1977), as she asserts that Kristeva's interest in the subaltern Chinese woman is a classic example of how first world feminists exploit third world women in keeping with the western discourse traditions of the exploiting agencies. Moore-Gilbert cites "Three Women's Text and a Critique of Imperialism" that brings out the shortcomings of her views as laid down in the essay as he shares:

For Spivak, the principal problem represented by Anglophone feminism's exorbitant admiration for texts like *Jane Eyre*, which triumphantly record the historical emergence of the western (proto)feminist subject, is that the role played by the nonwestern woman in this narrative of empowerment tends to get forgotten.

Moore-Gilbert speaks of how Spivak delineates the "western feminism's (non)engagement" with the subaltern women as she criticizes Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, where she feels that the subaltern woman's voices again silenced as Christophine' (dissenting black servant), is "expelled from the text" without any explanation. Spivak advises the western feminists that the remedy to their particular flavour of feminism lies in trying to "learn from" and "Speak to" the Subaltern women.

Landry and MacLean (1996) refer to "Echo" where Spivak read Ovid's and Freud's narratives of Echo and Narcissus respectively. Spivak had questioned Freud's and Lasch's attribution of Narcissism to women, when Narcissus was actually a boy. Also Spivak has questioned the absence of Echo's representation as a woman in the story. Landry and MacLean also refer to Spivak's claim that her feminist reading is an attempt on her part to feminize Echo; to deconstruct Echo out of "traditional and deconstructive representations". Also Larry and MacLean assert that through her translation of and preface of texts by Mahasweta Devi and Algerian writer Assia Djebar, Spivak is applying a new ethic to the "question of feminism and decolonization". This ethic she had invented through her feminist readings of *Echo*. In her preface to *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak declares that the book is a feminist one:

This is a feminist book. Feminist issues are "pre-emergent" (Raymond William's word) in the first chapter. They are the substance of the rest. In the fourth, a critique of contemporary culturist universalist feminism is offered.

So Spivak herself opens the dialogue towards her being a feminist critique as she acknowledges being in league with authors like Bell Hooks, Deniz Kandiyoti, Ketu Katak, Wahaneema Lubiano, Trin-ti-Minh-ha, Chandra Talpade, Aiwan Ong, Sara Suleri and several others. Landry and MacLean, referring to Spivak's "Subaltern Studies Deconstructing Historiography" share that Spivak has asserted in the essay that "gender and figure of woman operate in relatively unexamined ways in the subaltern texts." Also,

they state that Spivak's preface and afterword to Mahasweta Devi's *Imaginary Maps* is most "up-to-date word on gendered subaltern". Landry and MacLean refer to Spivak's analyses of R.K. Narayan's 1980 novel *The Guide* and the subsequent movie *Guide* based on it, in the revised version of her essay "How to teach a 'Culturally Different' Book", and share that it clearly lays out Spivak's belief that a feminist stance is vital when performing a neo-colonial textual analyses (the context here was representation of devdasi). Landry and MacLean comment:

Spivak's guide to *The Guide* offers a rich instance of problems of a too quick embracing of the other grounded in neo-colonial notions of national identities and ethnic minorities. For her feminism remains crucial to any project of decolonization and provokes us to ask again: who decolonizes and how?

Wagoner (2005), in his review of Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* clearly states Spivak's belief that first world feminists efforts towards upliftment of third world woman, although appreciable, are yet a failed effort as these efforts are made towards fashioning the third world women into the first world feminists. Thus the efforts are merely further compromising the identity of *other*.

In the second case, Spivak refers to various forms of the practice of gender training, in which first world feminists travel to third world sites and set up schools, workshops, or other sorts of local training programs designed to educate women about things like domestic abuse, gender discrimination, and sexual self-determination... At the same time, the unstated premise at work in this model is that the goal of feminist intervention should be to refashion third-world women into first-world feminists.

Limmerich (2008), agrees that Spivak is reproachful towards the prevalent Eurocentric attitude towards western feminism as she labels "international feminism" as "Northern discourse" that excludes voices of their southern subaltern counterparts. Limmerich also speaks of Spivak's antagonism against what can be only termed as "strategic essentialism" as it ignores the cultural, socio-political phenomenon impacting women's lives world over, therefore rendering it unfit.

Morton (2003), proclaims that Spivak's "rearticulation of subaltern women's histories"¹ have "radically transformed" the terms and focus of western feminist thought". Also he feels Spivak had challenged the claims of feminism that it is universal in its articulation of women's voices. Spivak's feminism considers the definition of feminine identity as a "social construct". Morton refers to her essay "Feminism and Critical Theory" where Spivak had declared that her definition of woman rests on the word "man". She accepts her position in that context as a reactionary one and she seeks to design an independent definition of herself as a woman. Thus Morton believes that here is the hint of the suggestion that "independent definitions of women are at risk of "falling prey" to the very binary opposition that cause women's subordination. Morton refers to "French Feminism in an International Frame" (1981), where Spivak had identified and is critical of French feminists' tendency to describe the experiences of third world women in the same cast as western female subject. She is critical of this tendency because it excludes differences in culture, history language and social class. She is also critical of western French feminists' eulogization of women's non-reproductive sexual pleasure and renders it an ineffectual political goal for third world women. Thus Spivak demands "geography for female sexuality".

In conclusion one may say that Spivak's views on Western feminism are clear as she considers it inadequate in representing and voicing the concerns of subaltern woman of third world. She advises the western feminists to first speak and listen to the subaltern women before they attempt to voice their issues. Spivak points at the dichotomy of western feminism where Western feminists consider themselves superior to their non-western female counterparts. She accuses the western feminist discourse as participative in the silencing of the marginalized. Also, Spivak challenges the claims of feminism that it is universal in articulation of women's voices. She is critical of French feminists' tendency to locate and describe the needs of subaltern third world women from the same focal point from where they speak for the western female. This tendency, she claims, excludes the cultural,

historical and socio-economical differences that are pivotal in understanding the real concerns faced by these women and helping to provide them with an adequate agency.

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