Gayatri Chakravorty- Spivak: An Indian Literary Theorist

Dr. Ramesh Tibile
Associate Professor in English,
Dr. Ghali College, Gadhinglaj-416502.
Dist. Kolhapur. (M. S.)

Introduction:

Gayatri Spivak is a literary critic and theorist. She is best known for the article, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” which is considered a founding text of post-colonialism. She is also known for her translation of Jacques Derrida’s ‘Of Grammatology’. This translation brought her to prominence. After this she carried out a series of historical studies and literary critiques of imperialism and feminism. She has often referred to herself as a “Marxist, Feminist and Deconstructionist.” Her ordering ethic-political concern has been the tendency of institutional and cultural discourses/practices to exclude and marginalize the subaltern, especially subaltern women.

“I am not erudite enough to be interdisciplinary but I can break rules”. (Spivak, 1990:27)

Breaking rules of the academy and trespassing disciplinary boundaries have been central to the intellectual projects of Gayatri Spivak, one of the leading literary theorist and cultural critic. She is known not only as a scholar of deconstructive textual analysis of verbal, visual and social texts but also as a global feminist Marxist. She is widely acknowledged as the conscience of the metropolitan politics of identity. While she is best known as a postcolonial theorist, Gayatri Spivak describes herself as a “Para-disciplinary, ethical philosopher”.

“My position is generally a reactive one. I am versed by Marxists as too codec, by feminists as too male-identified, by indigenous theorists as too committed to Western Theory. I am uneasily pleased about this” (1990:67).

Despite her outsider status, Spivak is widely cited in a range of disciplines. Her work is nearly evenly split between dense theoretical writing peppered with flashes of compelling insight and published interviews in which she wrestles with many of the same issues in a more personable and immediate manner. Her literary analysis and theoretical writings have invariably dealt with the deconstruction of neocolonial discourses and a feminist-Marxist approach to postcolonialism, particularly to the schematized forms of representing women in the Third World. She combines Marxism and deconstruction in the name of postcolonial feminism, and at the crossroads of literary studies and philosophy.

Known for her ample erudition and opaque theoretical texts, Spivak combines abstract philosophical speculation and personal reflection, creating a discourse that is both intimate and obtuse. Far from unconsciously absorbing the influences of other thinkers, she engages herself in a perpetual dialogue with the authors that inform her, reflecting on the inner conflicts and paradoxes inherent in her own theoretical position. Approaching discourses and institutions from...
the margins is more than a preference for Spivak, as she is often cast as an outsider or marginal figure herself. Spivak being an elite intellectual, the "Third-World woman", a "hyphenated American", and a Bengali exile living in the West, inhabits an identity that is nothing if not heterogeneous. She brings this personal eclecticism into her work. Due to drawing from Post-Colonial theory, philosophy, literary criticism, and economic theory, her texts are intellectual hybrids. The course of a single essay shifts among disparate disciplines, simultaneously playing texts off of one another and weaving them together. She does not only analyze Post-Colonial entanglements of discursive power; but her texts exemplify and enact these same entanglements.

Gayatri Spivak’s reputation initially stemmed from her translation of Jacques Derrida's Deconstructive monograph “de la grammatologie”. Her introduction (Translator’s Preface) for the book enjoys a reputation as one of the few texts that rivals the opacity of Derrida's own writing. Being highly abstract and decidedly oblique, she brings an intensely personal, ethical perspective to her work. She is fascinated by human relations: encounters with otherness, intimacies created in the midst of differences, the responsibility implicit in every act of communication. She works to articulate a relation to others that is always singular, never preceded by socially produced categories. According to Spivak, the ideal relation to the other is "an embrace, an act of love".

Gayatri Spivak is a leading postcolonial critic who closely follows the lessons of deconstruction in addition to defiantly unassimilated ethics of deconstruction; she draws too, on Marxism and Feminism. She sometimes regarded as the ‘Third-World Woman’, convenient marginal or awkward special guest, the eminent but ‘visiting’ American professor, the Bengali middle-class exile, a success story in the star system of American academic life. She cannot be simply singly positioned, or ‘centred’, biographically, profession or theoretically but her thought and writings regarding the process, conditions and her rational ways could title her as an ‘other’. Like Derrida she is interested in ‘how truth is constructed rather than in exposing error’. She confirms: ‘Deconstruction can only speak in the language of the thing it criticizes……. The only things one really deconstructs are things in to which one is intimately mired’.This approach makes it very different from ideology critique. She also states in another occasion as: deconstructive investigation allows us to look at the ways in which we are complicit with what we are so carefully and cleanly opposing. Postcolonial criticism draws attention to question of identity in relation to broader national histories and destinies. Spivak’s work is of special interest as she has made the unsynchronized and contradictory factors of ethnicity, class, and gender that compose such identities her own subject. She traces this ‘predicament of the postcolonial intellectual’ in a neo-colonized world in her own case as well as in the texts of the Western or Indian traditions she examines.

Spivak’s literary criticism has worked to criticize the ideological function of English literature in the colonial context. Spivak’s intellectual work has been shaped by the experience of postcolonial migration from India to U.S.A., where she currently teaches. The intellectual tradition of left-wing, anti-colonial thought that was prevalent in India since the early twentieth century continued to tacitly influence Spivak’s work. Of Grammatology is a translation work. It is a translation of the leading French philosopher, Jacques Derrida’s de la grammatologie. She ordered Jacques Derrida’s book out of a catalogue in 1967 and began working on the translation some time after that. This book is a detailed discussion of the evolution of Derrida’s ideas
concerning language. There are seven major topics in this book divided into two parts. The first part includes three and the second four topics respectively. Her translator’s introduction to Derrida’s Of Grammatology has been variously described as “setting a new standard for self-reflexivity in prefaces.” Her introduction helped readers to make Derrida much more enjoyable. Here Spivak seems to be highly abstract and decidedly oblique as she brings an intensely personal, ethical perspective to her work. Spivak is fascinated by human relations. She works to articulate a relation to others that is always singular, never preceded by socially produced categories. Here she strongly states that the ideal relation to the other is “an embrace, an act of love”.

Her critical theories are divided as:

Deconstruction Theory
Marxism.
Feminism.
Subaltern Theory

Spivak’s chief concern can be summarized as a wariness of the limitations of cultural studies. Her critical work indicates the thought that postcolonial predicament is the uneasy marriage of Marxism, Feminism and Deconstruction.

Deconstruction Theory:

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak uses deconstruction to problematize the privileged academic postcolonial critic’s unknown participation in the exploitation of the Third World. She points towards deconstruction’s limitations in conceptualizing and sustaining an engagement of hierarchical binary oppositions, the postcolonial critic aiming at substantive social transformation or revolution finds herself with inadequate power to revise dominant power structures. Spivak has persistently and persuasively demonstrated that deconstruction is a powerful political and theoretical tool. To plead the political value of deconstruction, she focused on the rhetorical blind spots or grounding mistakes which stabilize conventional notions of truth and reality. She has fore grounded the textual elements that shape our understanding of the social world, and thereby questioned the binary opposition between philosophical or literary texts and the so-called real world. According to Spivak, deconstruction in the narrow sense domesticates deconstruction in the general sense. She states further as:

Deconstruction in the general sense, seeing in the self perhaps only a (dis)figuring effect of a radical heterogeneity, puts into question the grounds of the critic’s power. Deconstruction in the narrow sense, no more than a chosen literary-critical methodology, locates this signifying or figuring effect in the text’s performance and allows the critic authority to disclose the economy of figure and performance. (1998:22)

The above opinion indicates that there are two meanings of the Deconstruction: meaning with narrow sense and with the general sense. It challenges the critic’s power and can be called as a literary-critical methodology. She used the concept ‘deconstruction’ with a specific intellectual and political purpose to focus the reality of the dominant culture and to escape its stereotyped
identifications. Deconstruction came simply to name the last privileged defense of the canon being reduced to a powerful method which would reveal the sameness and the greatness of the major literary texts.

The concept, ‘deconstruction’, for Spivak, is neither a conservative aesthetic nor a radical politics but an intellectual ethic which enjoins a constant attention to the multiplicity of determination. She is absolutely committed to pinpointing and arresting that multiplicity at the moment in which an enabling analysis becomes possible. The difference between Spivak and Derrida is seen in their respective attitudes toward the pathos of deconstruction. Derrida writes: ‘the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work’. According to Spivak, the abiding question is a limit which cannot obscure the value, however provisional, of the rigorous analyses that deconstruction enables. So, to grasp the interest of Spivak’s work necessitates going beyond the binary opposition between the First World intellectual production and the Third World physical exploitation.

Applying the strategies of Deconstruction to post-colonialism, Gayatri Spivak seeks to undermine the power of centralized discourses in the interest of cleaning a space for marginalized voices. For her, Deconstruction is not simply the practice of breaking things down. She states that it (Deconstruction) is not the exposure of error but constantly and persistently looking into how truths are produced. It means that Spivak does not challenge truths head on, but descends to the level of the cultural and political formations that produce them. From the margins of central discourses, she interrogates the operations that engender them and hold them in place.

Spivak applies the concept Deconstruction to analyze the public-private hierarchy. She tries to explain it in relation with feminist activity. In the interest of the effectiveness of the women’s movement, emphasis is placed upon a reversal of the public-private hierarchy. Here she states:

Because in ordinary sexist households, educational institutions or workplaces, the sustaining explanation still remains that the public sector is more important, at once more rational and mysterious, and, generally, more masculine, that the private, the feminist, reversing this hierarchy, must insist that sexuality and the emotions are, in fact, so much more important and threatening that a masculinist sexual politics is obliged, repressively to sustain all public activity. (1998:140)

The above discussion highlights the sex discrimination tradition. Here she applies the term deconstruction to wipe out this fixed construction or structure and bring forth the women to acquire the public sector reversing them. As per above thinking, Spivak seems to be feminist-deconstructionist. The opposition is thus not merely reversed; it is displaced. So she states further that this practical structure of deconstruction of the opposition between private and the public is implicit in all, and explicit in some, feminist activity. And then feminist activity would articulate or strive toward that fulfilled displacement of public (male) and private (female): an ideal society and a sex-transcendent society. It means that deconstruction teaches one to question all transcendental idealisms.

Marxism:
Spivak points out Marx’s Marxism which cannot account for the social injustice of capitalism in the terms of its own philosophical system. She traces incalculable moments in Marx’s discussion of value which are the conditions of possibility for a future social justice and political transformation. By emphasizing how socialism cannot manage without the capital relation, Spivak deconstructs the binary opposition between capitalism and socialism, which has traditionally grounded classic Marxist theories of emancipation. She also points out that the political independence has not led to the economic independence of many ‘Third-World’ countries due the huge national debt repayments to the ‘First-World’ banks and the gendered international division of labour. In Conclusion, Spivak’s persistent attempt to deconstruct capitalist system of value determinations is not simply a corrective theoretical reading of Marx, but an urgent call to articulate the cultural, political and economic conditions which silence the ‘Third-World’ woman in the hope that those oppressive conditions will eventually change.

Spivak also points out how global capitalism operates by employing working class women in developing postcolonial countries. It is not only as these women workers have no effective union representation, or protection against economic exploitation, but their gendered bodies are also disciplined in and through patriarchal social relations. According to Spivak, geographical dispersed conditions of contemporary capitalism are responsible for this situation. Spivak attracts our attention by emphasizing the thought how women’s productive bodies are site of exploitation under contemporary transnational capitalism.

Spivak, referring to Marx’s concept of value, states that the worker produces capital, because the worker, the container of labour power, is the source of value. She proceeds ahead and points out that ‘by the same token it is possible to suggest to the so-called the ‘Third-World’ that it produces the wealth and the possibility of the cultural self-representation of the ‘First-World’ (1990:96). She also insists to apply Marx’s labour theory of value to contemporary readings of culture and politics. Spivak reasserts the importance of the economical in critical and cultural theory by emphasizing how the exploitation of women workers in the ‘Third-World’ provides the wealth and resources for intellectual culture in the ‘First-World’. Spivak further points out that the working-class women in the ‘Third-World’ are the worst victims of the international division of labour. (1998:167)

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Feminism:

Spivak’s feminism may well seem as initially unreadable as her deconstruction. This stems from her conjunction of any essentialism with an emphasis on the crucial importance of examining and reappropriating the experience of the female body. Here Spivak speaks about what she can do within literary criticism as a woman. She strongly denies the common definition of ‘woman’ which rests on the word ‘man’. She tries to provide a definition of woman with a deconstructive perspective. She also pleads the necessity of definition which allows to them going and take a stand. She refers Marx and Freud while formulating her assumptions regarding feminism. She opposes these two as they argue in terms of a mode of evidence and demonstration. According to her, they seem to bring forth evidence from the world of man or man’s self. Here she comments that there is the idea of alienation in Marx and the idea of normality and health in Freud. She also refers the concepts of use-value, exchange-value and surplus-value of Marx for analyzing the woman. She strongly opposes the concept of “wages” (formed by men) only a mark of value-producing work. She also rejects the deliberation of men for tactfully rejecting women entry into the capitalist economy. Spivak argues the importance of woman’s product as:

In terms of the physical, emotional, legal, custodial and sentimental situation of the woman’s product, the child, this picture of the human relationship to production, labour and property is incomplete. The possession of a tangible place of production in the womb situates the woman as an agent in any theory of production. (1998:106)

According to Spivak, the idea of the womb as a place of production is avoided both in Marx and in Freud. She states that if this is taken into consideration, the notion of penis-envy will be replaced by womb-envy to challenge the male dominancy. She gives the reference of the present situation where woman’s entry into the age of computers and the modernization of women in development imposes us to confront the discontinuities and contradictions in our assumptions about women’s freedom to work outside the house and the sustaining virtues of the working class. Spivak refers the remark of Christine Delphy to focus the concept of the ‘new feminism’ as:

The ‘new feminism’ is currently developing the thesis that no society, socialist or capitalist is capable of favorably responding to the aspirations of women ..................... If we direct against men the action necessary for women’s progress, we condemn the great hopes of women to a dead end. (Amherst, 1980:128)

According to Spivak, here the lesson of a double approach---against sexism and for feminism --is suppressed.

Gayatri Spivak points out the significance of the female body pointing two radical different directions: one is she wishes to stress the clitoris as the site of a radical excess to the cycle of reproduction of production and two is to emphasize that the reproductive power of the womb is absent in any account of production in classical Marxist. Spivak tries to differentiate psychoanalytical feminism from Marxist feminism and states that:
With psychoanalytic feminism, then an invocation of history and politics leads us back to the place of psychoanalysis in colonialism with Marxist feminism, an invocation of the economic text foregrounds the operations of the New Imperialism. (1998:112)

Here Spivak points out that psychoanalytical feminism reminds history and politics whereas Marxist feminism economics. Gayatri Spivak reminds to the positivist feminist colleagues that are in charge of creating the discipline of women’s studies and anxious students that essentialism is a trap. It seems more important to learn to understand that the world’s women do not all relate to the privileging of essence, especially through fiction or literature. The work written under the sign of woman generally becomes solipsistic and marginal as it is experienced by Derrida.

Subaltern Theory:

The term ‘subaltern’ is a creation of the British Colonial contact with India. In other words, subaltern means ‘Subordinate’ or ‘inferior’. It is by implication ‘inferior modes of knowledge’. The subaltern historiography seeks to establish the balance of knowledge by demonstrating that the ‘inferior’ is made so through discourses of power and politics. Spivak preferred to use the ‘subaltern’ to encompass a range of different subject positions which are not predefined by dominant political discourses. She states that this term suits as it can accommodate social identities and struggles of women and colonized. According to her, the flexibility of this term is very important as it can include all types of subjects especially of neglected group to bring them into the main stream.

Spivak accepted the subaltern movement because she herself is committed to articulating the lives and histories of such groups in an appropriate and non-exploitive way. She observed the social and political oppressions in postcolonial societies that got place in her writings. Her writings, including translations and textual commentaries provide a powerful counterpoint to the erasure of women, peasants and tribals from the dominant historical and political discourses in India.

The term, ‘Subaltern’ was popularized by Spivak’s essay entitled, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1985) where she says:

The Subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundrylists with ‘woman’ as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish. (Nelson and Grossberg, 1988:308)

Spivak expands the original definition of subaltern developed by Ranjit Guha and asks to include the struggles and experiences of women from the ‘Third World’. The emphasis on the gendered location of subaltern women expands and complicates the established concept of the subaltern. Spivak objects Western female dominancy as like male dominancy in the social activities. Asking the question, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, Spivak Challenges the gender blindness of earlier postcolonial theories from a feminist standpoint. It also demonstrates how Spivak expanded the definition of the term- Subaltern to include women (avoiding narrow class based definition). Spivak argues that there is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak. She
concludes further stating that the subaltern cannot speak because the voice and the agency of subaltern women are so embedded in Hindu Patriarchal codes of moral conduct and the British Colonial representation of subaltern women as victims of a barbaric Hindu culture that they are impossible to recover. Spivak also states that subaltern as female cannot be heard or read in the male-centred terms of the national independence struggle. According to her, the subaltern cannot speak means that even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard. In other words, their speech acts are not heard or recognized within dominant political systems of representation. Here Spivak would not want to deny the social agency and lived existence of disempowered subaltern women that receive their political and discursive identities within historically determinate systems of political and economic representation (Morton, 2003:67).

Spivak’s silencing of the ‘subaltern’ refers to all women in India but we know that women in colonial India cannot be put in one category. Benita Parry criticizes Spivak’s notion of silent subaltern as:

Since the native woman is constructed within multiple social relationships, and positions as the product of different class, caste and culture and testimony of women’s voice on those sites where women inscribed themselves as healers, ascetics, singers of sacred songs, artisans and artists, and by this to modify Spivak’s model of the silent subaltern. (1998:35)

The question of Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ is ambiguous. That is because; we don’t know who asks this question, the subaltern or the superior imperialist. Subaltern has not lost her voice for ever she has spoken. According to Benita Parry, Spivak’s use of poststructuralist methodologies to describe the historical and political oppression of disempowered women has further contributed to their silencing. (1998:39) Responding to Spivak’s work, Bart Moore-Gilbert states that there are clear historical examples where the resistance of subaltern women to the colonial world is recorded in dominant colonial discourse. (1997:107) In their article, ‘Can the Subaltern Vote?’, Medevoi, Shankar Raman and Benjamin Comment that Spivak does not offer any perfect political solutions or theoretical formulas for emancipating subaltern women, but rather exposes the limited and potentially harmful effects of speaking for such disempowered groups (Medevoi et. al, 1990:133). while locating Spivak’s historical investigating of Sati in relation to Jacques Derrida’s subsequent work on the archive in ‘Archive Fever’, Sandhya Shetty and Elizabeth Jane Bellamy state that Derrida’s concept of the archive is ‘crucial’ for a more sympathetic understanding of Spivak’s new notorious “silencing” of subaltern women. (Shetty and Bellamy, 2000:25) Publishing an article entitled ‘Can the Subaltern Hear?’ Colin Wright provoked angry response to Spivak’s question, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ (Eagleton (ed), 2000:34) In conclusion, Spivak’s theory of the subaltern is a part of a longer history of left-wing anti-colonial thought that was concerned to challenge the class-caste system in India. Spivak could produce a better reading strategy that responds to the voices and unwritten histories of subaltern women, without speaking for them.

Summing Up:

In Indian critical tradition, Gayatri Spivak proved herself to be a great scholar and critic. It is observed that Spivak is strongly influenced by the Western scholars, theorists. Her work reflects
the strong impact of French philosopher, Jacques Derrida. She expressed her views on ‘deconstruction’ being impressed by Derrida. She has proved to be a leading postcolonial critic who uses deconstruction to problematize the privileged, academic postcolonial critic’s unknowing participation in the exploitation of the Third World.

Spivak’s work reflects the influence of Jacques Derrida, Karl Marx, and Antonio Gramsci. Spivak plainly confessed that she gave more attention towards- Immanuel Kant, George Wilhelm, Fredrich Hegel and Karl Marx as her writing was copied from them. Spivak is the best cultural and literary theorist who addresses a vast range of political questions with both pen and voice. Her texts lively reflect her unmistakable voice as she speaks on questions of representation and self-representation, the politicization of deconstruction; the situation of postcolonial critics; pedagogical responsibility; and political strategies.

The most interesting about her engagement of the postcolonial predicament is the uneasy marriage of Marxism, feminism and deconstruction that underlies her critical work. Spivak combines Marxism and deconstruction in the name of postcolonial feminism. This mixing style of Spivak seems to be very complicated for a common reader. Due to interlink of different theories in her critical work, it becomes very difficult to identify where ends one theory and begins another. This mixture of theories proves her a stalwart in critical tradition of India.

In short, her critical work has contributed much to the study of literature as a colonial discourse. It also tries to challenge the authority of colonial master narratives in Classic English Literary Texts. Her translations and commentaries on Mahasweta Devi’s work emphasize the importance of Devi’s work to articulate the unwritten histories of tribal, subaltern women and to at least to begin to imagine an alternative to contemporary social, political and economic oppression. Her relentless ability to revise and rework earlier concepts and debates about postcolonialism is her great contribution to contemporary critical theory and public intellectual culture. Spivak’s feminist critique of the links between socialism and capitalism helped for the intellectual development of African American women. Her thought has gained a wide international public audience. The restless process of Self-criticism and revision demonstrates the importance of Spivak’s earlier postcolonial thought and its continued relevance to the contemporary world.

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