

Debika Saha

Breaking the Silence: Feminism and Post humanism

Abstract

Postmodernism starts its journey by challenging the master narratives of metaphysics and philosophy. In this journey the narrative get replaced either by an emancipation from narratives that claim to possess eternal truth or by a turn to a kind of informative technology. But both the ways keep at their centre the process of “denaturing” or disassociating something of its natural qualities. This postmodernist turn has now taken a new form. The choice is not limited between the natural body and the culturally constructed body, but between different areas of bodily reconstruction bearing different social and cultural implications. As Spivak in her famous writing raises the question «Can the subaltern speak?» In fact, Spivak narrates how the marginalized, the less privileged depend upon the benevolence of the more privileged. To engage with the other means not only to talk, listen, learn or know about her but also to identify with her. There must be some ways for open dialogues that can diminish the effects of cultural dominance. The imperial silence should be broken.

Keywords: marginalization, subaltern, cultural dominance, other

The present 21st century offers us a wide range of perspectives in the forms of difference and diversity, of individual identity, experience and attitude. The term “Globalization” which has now become a cliché faces the questioning of stereotypes of oppression and marginalization in a new form. The process of globalization needs to be seen in the context of post human bodies. Challenges to post modern relations posed by the trends of globalization are matched by its challenge to the distinct social and cultural life of different parts of the world. In today’s world the post human

bodies are the causes and effects of postmodern relations of power and pleasure, virtuality and reality. The post human body is a result of fine technology, a kind of a projected image; it may be termed as a techno-body or a kind of a queer body. N. Katherine Hayles defines posthuman as an agent susceptible to self-organization into a larger system. She is critical towards the transhumanist attitudes that want to digitalize the body by merely repressing the Cartesian mind-body dualism problem (Hayles, 1999). But Halberstam and Livingston's *Posthuman Bodies* focus on the material effects of changes to human embodiment. The posthuman is changing its dimensions and is open to multiple viabilities (Halberstam & Livingston, 1995) Though the choice is not between the natural body and the culturally constructed body, but between different areas of bodily reconstruction bearing different social and cultural implications, still the positions of the marginalized remain the same. The shades of relation have undergone a new colour but the faces of oppression remain the same.

This paper focuses on the discourses of the unheard voices of those oppressed marginalized and tries to explore the untold tales following mainly Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's writings besides other thinkers. In her path-breaking article *Can the Subaltern Speak* Spivak analyses the radical claims of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze regarding the self-righteous claims of British colonialism to rescue native women from the practice of Hindu widow sacrifice in 19th century India. The point is to show how the kind radical Western intellectuals can paradoxically silence the subaltern by claiming to represent and speak for their experiences, in the same way that the kind colonialist silenced the voice of the widow who "chooses" to breathe her last with her husband's funeral pyre.

Let us first unveil the reason for using the word "subaltern" in Spivak's article. She is attracted by this particular term as it is flexible and it can describe the social identities and struggle of the oppressed class. As she comments:

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 was used under censorship by 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 [Harasym, 1990, 141].

Later on, this term has been taken by a group of historians like Ranajit Guha to describe the positions of the oppressed class in South Asian society.

She uses this term mainly to accommodate for the oppressed and the colonized. In fact by showing mercy toward the subaltern group, the attempt is made to silence them. It is an accepted theory that it is possible to escape from exploitation if the subalterns join the political group. But Spivak shows that there is no guarantee that the interests of particular subaltern groups will be kept or their voices will be heard if they joined the political group. The voice of “the worker” or “the woman” in the political discourse is often represented by an elected representative who acts on behalf of these constituencies. The powerful political group used to represent these empowered classes as if they were speaking collectively for them. But in reality as Spivak shows this coherent political identity is always already an effect of the dominant classes, rather than a true image of the real worker or the real woman. In presenting her critique on Foucault and Deleuze, Spivak shows the structures underpinning aesthetic representation also underpin political representation. The difference between the two is that aesthetic representation tends to foreground its status as a re-presentation of the real, whereas political representation denies this aspect of representation. Both of them efface their role as intellectuals in representing the disempowered classes they describe. It is as if a kind of masquerade in which the intellectual plays like an «absent nonrepresenter [...] lets the oppressed speak for themselves» (Spivak & Guha, 1988, 292). There is no doubt that Foucault and Deleuze are honest in portraying the subjects through discourse and representation but Spivak points out when the questions arise to discuss the real, historical examples of social and political struggle, both of them fall back on a transparent model of representation in which «oppressed subjects speak, act and know» (1988, 276) their own conditions.

To Spivak, these two meanings of representation are conflated. A kind of political proxy speaks on behalf of the disempowered classes. As a result of this conflation the aesthetic image-symbolically representing disempowered people as coherent political subjects is often taken as a transparent expression of their political interests and desires. And this act of rhetorical conflation may reveal injurious effects on the oppressed classes. Spivak in her attempt always stands by the sides of disempowered and silenced voices and while excavating with the voices of the disempowered she expands the

original definition of the subaltern as given by Ranajit Guha to include the struggles and experiences of women. The role that women played during national independence is not even properly protected. Spivak comments:

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labour, for both of which there is “evidence”. It is, rather, that, both as objects of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow [1988, 287].

Spivak applies her deconstructive method in the context of political representation. She shows how the language of universal political struggles of the disempowered can be erased by the fixed terms of radical political discourse that claim to represent them. She finds a way to meet this position in Derrida’s writings where he offers a more flexible and responsible approach to read the singular circumstances and material conditions of people’s lives which «marks radical critique with the danger of appropriating the other by assimilation» (1988, 308). From here it is possible to rethink ethics as a responsibility to the other. It is one of the boldest moves that Spivak undertakes when she has tried to displace the fixed Self-Other dichotomy in favour of an ethical response to the lives and struggles of the oppressed people in the “Third World”. It is here that Spivak refers to ethics as an experience of the impossible (Spivak, 1995, xv). Spivak correctly points out, in case of oppression there is no division between east and west. It is nothing but a kind of universalist errors of masculine-centred truth claims or objective knowledge that all women throughout the world suffer from the same sort of oppression simply because they are women.

Regarding western feminist movement Spivak’s role is also noteworthy. Before analyzing how Spivak’s writing has contributed to western feminist thought, it is necessary to place her work in relation to major debates in early feminist thought. As it is well known the western philosophical tradition of the liberal humanism flourishes in the latter half of the 20th century. The main idea of humanism refers that all human beings are same; sharing the same values and should have the same basic human

rights. Simone de Beauvoir, in her writings had defined woman as the “Other”. In fact, the first and second waves of feminism wanted woman’s equal pay, reproductive rights and equality in the work place. But the traditional humanist thought had acknowledged the difference between men and women as a natural fact, depending on the biological foundation that is prior to social and cultural surroundings. Simone de Beauvoir through her writings revolted and asserted that «one is not born a woman, one becomes a woman». She challenged the gender identity and asserted that gender is a social construct and this construct can be resisted through social and political struggle. Later Judith Butler argues it is the discourse, that is, the power of language in the hands of dominant social institutions that determine the human identity. Whenever a girl child is born, the midwife’s declaration that it is a girl immediately defines and binds the child according to the rules and norms of a patriarchal society.

There are other French feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva who like Butler agree with Beauvoir that feminine identity is a social construct. But by upholding this, it does not follow that it is possible to avoid this identity easily. There are a number of strong and powerful institutions like the family, the state, the law and others who control the discourse of gender identity. While framing her own position Spivak gets influenced by Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. In *Feminism and Critical Theory* Spivak writes:

My own definition of a woman is very simple: it rests on the word “man” as used in texts that provide the foundation for the corner of a literary criticism establishment that I inhabit. You might say that this is a reactionary position. Should I not carve out an independent definition for myself as a woman [1987, 77]?

Here Spivak’s tone sounds the same like Irigaray who comments, «For the elaboration of a theory of woman, men I think suffice» (Irigaray, 1985, 123). Spivak’s argument suggests that any independent definitions of women always has the chance to get caught in the web of binary cultures that bind women’s subordination in culture and society.

To avoid this binary system of thinking, Spivak proposes a strategy which is known as strategic essentialism. Now what is essentialism? In philosophy this term denotes to represent the true essence of things. Spivak interprets strategic essentialism in a novel way. It accepts that essentialist categories of human identity should be criticized, but

emphasizes that it is not possible to avoid using such categories at times in order to make sense of the social and political world. Spivak shows that a «strategic use of essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest» helps the minority groups to reaffirm their identity. She also asserts that a strategy suits a situation; a strategy is not a theory. This can be used in a context-specific situation, but it fails to provide a long-term political solution to end oppression and exploitation.

Spivak is critical in presenting a tendency in some French feminist thoughts which treat the experiences of “Third World women” in terms of western female subject constitution. There are certain differences in culture, history, language and social class which Spivak develops by narrating one of her reading of the short story «Breast-Giver» by Mahasweta Debi. Spivak presents the story of the subaltern female protagonist named Jashoda who has been hired by an upper-caste Brahmin family as a professional mother to support her crippled husband. Here the depiction of Jashoda as a professional mother challenges the assumption prevalent in western feminism that childbirth is unwaged domestic labour. Spivak also shows how the continued exploitation of Jashoda’s maternal body ultimately causes her to suffer a painful death from untreated breast cancer. Through this fictional character Spivak argues that the character of Jashoda «calls into question that aspect of Western Marxist feminism which, from the point of view of work, trivializes the theory of value and, from the point of view of mothering as work, ignores the mother as subject» (Spivak, 1987, 258). So the character of Jashoda as a professional mother thus challenges the western feminism to speak for all women.

Spivak has raised voices regarding the claims of some western feminists regardless of cultural differences. In *French Feminism in an International Frame* Spivak explores that Julia Kristeva treats the histories and lives of Chinese women through the lens of western female constitution. While discussing the reading of Kristeva, she cites her own case as an upper-class educated Indian woman who emigrated to US in the early 1960s. She writes:

The “choice” of English Honors by an upper-class young woman in the Calcutta of the fifties was itself highly over determined. Becoming a professor of English in the US fitted in with the “brain drain”. In due course, a commitment to feminism was the best of a collection of accessible scenarios [Spivak, 1987, 136].

In this essay Spivak muses over her childhood memories and recalls of overhearing a dialogue between two washerwomen about the ownership of the land by the East India Company. Later this dialogue helps Spivak to understand her own class-based assumptions about the women. The experiences that Spivak narrates may sound a bit personal but it places Spivak's critique of western feminism in relation to the historical experiences and daily lives of disempowered women in the Third World. She comments: «in order to learn enough about Third World women and to develop a different readership, the immense heterogeneity of the field must be appreciated» (Spivak, 2012, 187).

Spivak senses this problem while discussing about Julia Kristeva's book *About Chinese Women*. Spivak's critique of Kristeva centres initially on her self-conscious description of a scene in Huxian, a village that is away from Xi'an, the first capital of China after it was unified in the 2nd century BC (Kristeva, 1977, 11). Here Kristeva describes a meeting between her and a group of Chinese peasants in the village-square.

An enormous crowd is sitting in the sun: they wait for us wordlessly, perfectly still. Calm eyes, not even curious, but slightly amused or anxious: in any case, piercing, and certain of belonging to a community with which we will never have anything to do [Kristeva, 1977, 11].

The point that Spivak places is the following. Kristeva seems more occupied to show her own identity as a western woman before the silent faces of Huxian. The encounters with different cultures come out clearly with the next question that Kristeva poses, «Who is speaking, then, before the stare of the peasants at Huxian?» (Kristeva, 1977, 15) For Spivak, the question shows a western poststructuralist tendency to invoke other cultures as a way of challenging the authority of western knowledge and subjectivity. Spivak narrates:

In spite of their occasional interest in touching the other of the West, of metaphysics, of capitalism, their repeated question is obsessively self-centered: if we are not what official history and philosophy say we are, who then are we [not], how are we [not] [Spivak, 1987, 137]?

Kristeva fails to reach «the other of the west» and her project remains «obsessively self-centred» (Spivak, 1977, 137). She realizes that it is not easy to define the vacant look of the peasants and she remains an outsider to them. The ancient matriarchal origins of China attracts Kristeva as it presents an alternative of patriarchal monotheism of western thought. While trying to trace the origins Spivak claims that Kristeva makes some sweeping generalizations about women's historical positions about China. In *French Feminism in an International Frame* Spivak shows that Kristeva is not primarily concerned with the historical position that women occupy within Chinese culture and society per se. Spivak claims that Kristeva's view of the ancient Chinese matriarch effectively ignores the contemporary cultural practices of women in China: «the “classical” East is studied with primitivistic reverence, even as the “contemporary” East is treated with realpolitikal contempt» (Spivak, 1977, 138). Kristeva tries to link the general theory of the “feminine” with the ancient matriarchal kinship structures in China and this is problematic.

Spivak, in her relentless search, tries to find out the appropriate methods for meeting across differences in our contemporary world. For Spivak, ethics is not a problem of knowledge but a call for a relationship, that the ideal relationship to the Other «is an embrace or act of love». And an intimate relationship cannot be based on the merciful attitude of the more privileged towards the less privileged. According to Spivak, to think of the ethical relation as an embrace means that each individual regardless of culture, gender or class needs to find in others an echo of him or herself. She emphasizes that a relationship between varied groups or individuals is not established by intellectuals attempting to represent oppressed classes or pretending that they let the other to speak for her. To engage with the other means not only to talk, listen, learn or know about her but also to identify with her that is, a kind of intimate relationship across cultural, class and gender borders. There must be some ways for open dialogues that can diminish the effects of cultural dominance.

The same kind of empathy and openness can be observed in Maria Lugones article *Playfulness, World-Travelling and Loving Perception*. She suggests that the art of perceiving the world lovingly may be organically connected to the experience of the marginalized. Normally whenever the question of world-travelling comes, it evokes images of privileged tourists. But Maria argues, it is not the privileged person who is a typical globe-trotter, on the contrary, it is the person outside dominant society who

acquires the flexibility to shift between worlds. It is possible to form a flexible identity through her playfulness. She can resist what Maria deems characteristic of the culturally dominant attitude and the opposite of “arrogant perception”. The unheard voices can be heard through this attitude. Poised between action and representation, post human bodies are bodies living outside national, sexual, economic borders. They erase borders by turning bodies into acts and actions into representations. Erasing the distinctions between action and articulation, deed and word, the post human body is still saturated with the tales of humanity that circulate around it (Lugones, 1987). Like Maria Lugones tale, Sherry Turkle in her most recent book, *Alone Together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*, argues that the social media we encounter on a daily basis are presenting us with a moment of temptation. The digital life creates an illusion of companionship without the demands of intimacy, so we confuse easily the postings and online sharings with authentic communication. We are drawn to sacrifice conversation for mere connection. Turkle suggests that just because we grew up with the internet, we tend to accept it as necessary part of our life. The feeling that “no one is listening to me” drives us to spend more time with machines that seem to care us. Turkle comments that we expect more from technology and less from each other (Turkle, 2012). The posthuman bodies are left, as if inside a circle, where there is no way to come out easily.

It tells the stories, however, through those already told; it rips off the past to refuse the future. And so the post human, alien and marginal like the subaltern probably cannot speak because it is always spoken through the stories that someone has already told [Halberstam & Livingston, 1995, 97].

References

- Devi, Mahasweta (1995). *Imaginary Maps*. Translated by Spivak Gayatri Chakrovorty. New York: Routledge.
- Halberstam, Judith M. & Livingston, Ira, I. (1995) (eds). *Posthuman Bodies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Harasym, Sarah (1990) (ed.). *The Post Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Hayles, N. Katherine (1999). *How We Become Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Irigaray, Luce (1985). *This Sex Which is Not One*. Translated by Catherine Porter, Carolyn Burke. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press.
- Kristeva, Julia (1977). *About Chinese Women*. Translated by Anita Barrows. London: Mariyon Boyars.
- Lugones, Maria (1987). Playfulness, "World" Travelling and Loving Perception. *Hypatia*. 2 (2), 3-19.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakrovorty (1987). *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Methun.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakrovorty & Guha, Ranajit (1998) (eds). *Selected Subaltern Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakrovorty (2012), *In Other Worlds*. Routledge: Indian Reprint.
- Turkle, Sherry (2012). *Alone Together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. Basic Books.

Debika Saha is Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy, University of North Bengal, India. She has a number of articles in her credit published in National and International Journals. She did her post-doctoral research on Justice as a Visiting Scholar in the Department of Philosophy, Purdue University, West Lafayette, U.S. in 2012.