Chapter 3

GAYATRI SPIVAK’S THEORY OF SUBALTERNITY
Contents

3.1 Introduction 115 - 118

3.2 Colonialism and Racial Subalternity 118 - 122
   3.2.1 Post-colonialism and Subaltern Identity 122 - 125
   3.2.2 Third World Women and the Concept of the ‘Other’ 126 - 131

3.3 Gender Subalternity and the Role of Women in the Society 131 - 133
   3.3.1 Voice of Dissent in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 134 - 138
   3.3.2 Subaltern cannot Speak: A Discourse upon the Theory of Communication 138 - 143

3.4 Conclusion 143 - 145

Notes 145 - 146

Works Cited 147 - 149
3.1 Introduction

Spivak has become an authoritative voice of the post-colonial period since the publication of her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” She has extended her discourse to a large variety of topics such as Marxism, Feminism and Deconstruction. Spivak, the post-colonial intellectual, was born in Calcutta on 24 February 1942. She graduated from Presidency College of the University of Calcutta in 1959 with first-class degree in English. She left India in the same year to take a Master’s degree at Cornell University in the U. S. A. and it was followed by a year’s fellowship at Girton College, Cambridge, England. Spivak returned to the U. S. A. after the completion of the fellowship in England for taking up the position of an Instructor at the University of Iowa. Meanwhile she completed her doctoral dissertation on the Irish poet W. B. Yeats and the research work was guided by the literary critic Paul de Man at Cornell University, New York. At present she is Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University, New York. Her translation of Jacques Derrida’s Of Grammatology brought international recognition for Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

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 the people could surpass the colonial rule, they are not actually free from its influences and power structures. Morton says:
The social, political and economic structures that were established during colonial rule continued to inflect the cultural, political and economic life of Post-colonial nation states ranging from Ireland to Algeria; from India to Pakistan and Jamaica to Mexico. In common with many anti-colonial intellectuals, including Frantz Fanon (1925-61) and Partha Chatterje (1947 - ), Spivak emphasizes how anti-colonial nationalism assumed a distinctively bourgeois character, and was thus perceived by many to reproduce the social and political inequalities that were prominent under colonial rule (1 - 2).

Spivak borrows the term ‘subaltern’ from Gramsci, to refer to the unrepresented group of people in the society (Gramsci 55). In the Indian cultural context, the term ‘subaltern’ acquires more significance as the people have struggled hard for Indian independence. She prefers the term ‘subaltern’ as it encompasses the exact picture of the lower class people. Morton quotes the words of Spivak as:

I like the word subaltern for one reason. It is totally situational. Subaltern began as a description of a certain rank in the military. The word was 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 (46).

India is a land of varieties and vitalities. It is divided into different states in the name of class, religion, language, ethnicity, gender and citizenship. In this scattered outlook, the condition of the subaltern is all the more pathetic. Spivak
came to the forefront of literary circle with her celebrated essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” The essay vindicates the apprehensions of women in India who practise the widow-sacrifice known as sati\(^1\). The practice of sati in the pre-independent India was considered as part of a barbaric culture by the Western World.

Spivak proposes a theory of subalternity in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In this essay, she vindicated the limitations of the subalterns, asking “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (283). By ‘subaltern’ Spivak means the oppressed subjects or more generally those “of inferior rank” (283). She goes on to add that “In the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (287). Spivak concludes the essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” by reiterating her standpoint that “the subaltern cannot speak” (308). Her statement “subaltern cannot speak” has litigated flames of controversy in the post-colonial context. Spivak’s statement is actually a one-stop answer for all the questions. It is an outcome of her lifelong search for truth and it is being formulated on the basis of socio-cultural backgrounds. The theory formulates that the subaltern can speak but others do not have the patience to listen to them. The message conveyed by the sender does not reach to the receiver as it is hindered by the element of noise\(^2\). Articulation is an involuntary act by the human beings but to interpret things in the real sense takes conscious effort on the part of the listeners. Morton clarifies the wide discrepancy between articulation and interpretation of the subaltern women in the following words:
Spivak’s conclusion that the subaltern cannot speak is often taken out of context to mean that subaltern women have no political agency because they cannot be represented. Such a reading is actually contrary to the very situated theoretical framework that Spivak establishes in ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ Spivak would certainly not want to deny the social agency and lived existence of disempowered subaltern women. The crucial point, however, is that these disempowered women receive their political and discursive identities within historically determinates systems of political and economic representation (66 - 67).

3.2 Colonialism and Racial Subalternity

Racial discrimination began with the advent of colonialism. The European forefathers had set out their expeditions to various countries with the purpose of establishing trade and commerce. Colonialism had a specific game plan behind the venture. In the name of civilizing the East and purify them from barbarity, the European forefathers imprinted their foot-marks on various countries as a source of autonomous power. In order to carry out the administration in new colonies, the Europeans established political order and it was executed either by force or by hegemony. The strategic plan of colonialism is described by Walia as:

Colonialism is accompanied by exploitation, annexation and conquest. Its hegemonic power rests on creating the binary opposition of self/other, white/black, good/evil, superior/inferior, and so on. Thus a part of the world
was able to enjoy supremacy because it convinced the rest of the world about the ‘white man’s burden’ and his ‘civilizing machine’ (77).

The binary oppositions led to the creation of racial discrimination between the white settlers and the natives. The so-called native elites tried to identify themselves with the white settlers and the issue became all the more complicated. The white settlers took advantage of this situation in exploiting the country. They joined hands in executing various programmes so as to bully the native subalterns. In order to carry out the smooth functioning of all the activities, the white imperialists advocated the policy of ‘Divide and Rule.’ The native elites extended their whole hearted support to the white settlers in suppressing the insurgency of the subalterns. In the preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, Sartre says:

The European elite undertook to manufacture a native elite. They picked out promising adolescents; they branded them, as with a red-hot iron, with the principles of western culture; they stuffed their mouth full with high-sounding phrases, grand glutinous words that stuck to the teeth. After a short stay in the mother country they were sent home, white-washed (7).

As the colonies prospered in many parts of the country, the white settlers had to face stiff opposition from the natives. In this crucial juncture, the native elites found it below their dignity to support the uprising of the lower classes. The criterion for racial superiority or inferiority was on the basis of colour and wealth. In order to share the qualities of European masters of colonialism, the native elites
discriminated the subalterns and joined hands with the white settlers. The society was divided on the basis of racial issues:

The world divided into compartments, this world cut in two is inhabited by two different species. The originality of the colonial context is that economic reality, inequality and immense difference of ways of life never come to mask the human realities. When you examine at close quarters the colonial context, it is evident that what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species. In the colonies the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because your are white, you are white because you are rich (Fanon 30 - 31).

The subalterns were made to believe that they belonged to an inferior race and so not fit for making any real contribution to the society. The white settlers always emerged as champions of the superior race. Such type of comparisons subjugated the will and aspirations of the subalterns. The white settlers very often resorted to violence for the implementation of various policies. The imperialists acted on the principle that offence was the best form of defence:

In the colonies, the foreigner coming from another country imposed his rule by means of guns and machines. In defiance of his successful transplantation, in spite of his appropriation, the settler still remains a foreigner … The governing race is first and foremost those who come from elsewhere, those who are unlike the original inhabitants, ‘the others’ (Fanon 31).
In the colonial period, the settler-native relationship could be compared to that of a master and a slave. The natives are conscious of their rights and free will so as to be the soul masters of their land. But the natives are treated as secondary citizens in their own land and this subjugation is made possible in the name of racism. Indians were referred to as ‘brown’ and Africans as ‘black.’ The subalterns tried to retaliate against the white supremacy for the sufferings that they had undergone. Even though they tried to communicate their resentment, the authority could not have the patience to listen to their plea. In the colonial countries, the natives suffered a lot as they were not equal with the so-called whites and never a threat to their relentless leadership. The outcome of colonialism is that the ‘West’ still occupies the position of an ideal state in the minds of the colonized people. Not only the lands but their minds were also being colonized:

The settler makes history; his life is an epoch, an Odyssey … And because he constantly refers to the history of his mother country, he clearly indicates that he himself is the extension of that mother country. Thus the history which he writes is not the history of the country which he plunders but the history of his own nation in regard to all that she skims off, all that she violates and starves (Fanon 39 - 40).

In The Empire Writes Back, Ashcroft makes a distinction between colonialism and post-colonialism. Colonialism is used to denote a “period before independence” and post-colonial is used to “cover all the culture affected by imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (2). Racial subalternity continues to evolve its repercussions even after the colonial rule. In the post-colonial studies, the
term ‘race’ has paved way for ‘ethnicity’ so as to account for human variation in terms of culture, traditions, social patterns and ancestry (Ashcroft 207). The significance of ‘race’ is being enumerated by Ashcroft as:

Race continues to be relevant in post-colonial theory for two reasons: first, because it is so central to the growing power of imperial discourse during the nineteenth century, and second, because it remains a central and unavoidable ‘fact’ of modern society that race is used as the dominant category of daily discriminations and prejudice (207).

3.2.1 Post-colonialism and Subaltern Identity

Post-colonialism marks the end of colonial period and the dawn of the new era. The post-colonial period is a significant one for the subalterns because both the nation and the people have just been relieved from the terrible clutches of colonial rule. This period embarks on a mission to reproduce the colonial experience of the subalterns in literary works. Post-colonialism became a hot topic of discussion in the literary arena with special reference to the subalterns after the publication of *In Other Worlds* by Spivak in 1987, *The Empire Writes Back* by Ashcroft in 1989, *Nation and Narration* by Bhabha in 1990 and *Culture and Imperialism* by Said in 1993. The earliest attempt to define post-colonialism goes back to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. In *Beginning Theory*, Barry sums up the views of Fanon as:

The first step for colonised people in finding a voice and an identity is to reclaim their own past. For centuries the European colonizing power will have devalued the nation’s past, seeing its pre-colonial era as a pre-civilized
limbo, or even as a historical void. Children, both black and white, will have been taught to see history, culture and progress as beginning with the arrival of the Europeans. If the first step towards a post-colonial perspective is to reclaim one’s own past, then the second is to begin to erode the colonialist ideology by which that past had been devalued (192).

Feminist criticism has got a lot of similarities with post-colonial criticism as both of them are in search of retrieving the past into the present. The feminist criticism had been the most isolated and least understood of all approaches to literature. In “Towards a Feminist Poetics”, Elaine Showalter argues that the main reason that made it appear like a non-linear and non-rationalistic body of writing was the feminist weariness of rigid theorization. The feminist suspicion of theory had been based on the conviction that all existing theories are male oriented (148). Showalter points out that the feminist fear of theory has been helping the male critics to occupy the centre stage in literary studies. One of the important tasks of Feminist Criticism is to reconstruct the past of women’s literature; that is, to discover and establish the continuity of a female tradition, instead of moving from great women writer to another as the male centered literary criticism had so far been doing (153). Showalter undertakes such a project in her well known book A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing and identifies three prominent phases in the evolution of English women’s writing. She describes them as feminine, feminist and female phases in women’s literature (Showalter, Towards a Feminist Poetics 153).
All the colonialised nations of the world have a subaltern identity. It is only in the post-colonial context that they do realize their past-subordination. It is a Herculean task for the people of the subaltern nations to reclaim their own past. To their great chagrin, the subalterns recognize the fact that their minds are colonized and it is very difficult to erode the colonialist ideology. The subaltern identity is the identity of difference and the subaltern “celebrates hybridity, and cultural polyvalency” (Barry 198). Barry says:

The notion of the double, or divided, or fluid identity which is characteristic of the post-colonial writer explains the great attraction which post-structuralism and deconstruction have proved to be for the post-colonial critic. Post-structuralism is centrally concerned to show the fluid and unstable nature of the personal and gender identity, the shifting, ‘polyvalent’, contradictory currents of signification within texts, and the way literature itself is a site on which ideological struggles are acted out. This mind-set is admirably suited to expressing the numerous contradictions and multiple allegiances of which the post-colonial writer and critic is constantly aware (195 - 196).

The term post-colonialism was rapidly undergoing changes since the Second World War. The term ‘post-colonial’ refers to the post-independent period but in the late 1970s “the term had been used by a few literary critics to characterize the various cultural effects of colonization” (Ashcroft 197).

In *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft uses the term post-colonial to refer to “all the culture affected by imperial process from the moment of colonization to the
present day” (2). The definition given by Ashcroft in *The Empire Writes Back* has provoked mixed responses from every nook and cranny of the world. The authors of *The Empire Writes Back* are of the opinion that “no society can ever be entirely free of such effects and that contemporary forces such as globalization are evidence of continuing control of the West over the Rest” (194). The term ‘post-colonialism’ has been deliberately hyphenated throughout the book *The Empire Writes Back* so as to add a stress on the “discursive and material effects of the historical ‘fact’ of colonialism, resisting an increasingly indiscriminate attention of cultural difference and marginality of all kinds” (198).

Said has the credit of “initiating the discourse of post-colonialism” (Ashcroft 198) whereas authors of *The Empire Writes Back* appropriated and gave wide currency to the term ‘post-colonialism’ from the works of those African, Caribbean and Indian writers, artists and social theorists who were “actually engaging the power of imperial discourse – who were writing back.” Spivak, the post-colonial critic, incorporated all the original ideas behind post-colonialism and preferred the term subaltern:

Over the last decade of the nineties Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak have had a complicated and uncertain relationship with post-colonial studies. Both, for different reasons, have come to reject the post-colonial: Said from an aversion to any systematic theory (all of which he regards as ‘theological’), and Spivak in favour of what she regards as the more inclusive term subaltern” (Ashcroft 198).
3.2.2 Third World Women and the Concept of the ‘Other’

Feminism as a movement never had a commonly approved methodology in combating differences that existed within the sex. British Feminism has so far been more Marxist and theoretical in orientation, with its concern mainly with questions of representation and genealogy (Showalter, *Feminist Criticism in Wilderness* 336). American Feminism, on the other hand, has been more concerned with women’s writing and involved in the task of retrieving lost traditions of women’s literature. Showalter points out that feminist criticism could be classified into two broad categories. One of these is mainly concerned with women as readers and thus consumers of male texts while the other preoccupies itself with women as writers. The former strives to change our apprehension of male texts by providing a ‘feminist critique’ which probes the ideological assumptions of literary phenomena. Showalter describes the latter by the name ‘Gynocritique’ as its primary concern is with women as the producers of textual meanings, along with the history, themes, genres and structures of literatures by women (Showalter, *Towards a Feminist Poetics* 146 - 147).

Gynocritics uphold the principle of difference in their relationship with men. They have been trying to define ‘difference’ on the basis of biology, language, psychoanalysis and culture. Showalter observes that English, American and French feminist criticisms have been attempting to theorize ‘difference’ in various ways. English feminist criticism stresses on oppression, the French focuses on repression and the Americans are more concerned with expression (Showalter, *Feminist Criticism in Wilderness* 336).
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. Feminism needs to concentrate on this variation that exists among women and help them to achieve their personal goals.
In “French Feminism in an International Frame”, Spivak analyses the experiences of Third World Women as being shadowed by the doctrines of French High Feminism (141). Such a point of view ignores the crucial differences in culture, history, language and social class. In her reading of Mahasweta Devi’s short story “Breast Giver”, Spivak challenges the tenants of Western Feminism. In “Breast Giver” Jashoda is a typical high-class poor Brahmin woman with an ardent devotion to her husband Kangalicharan and her numerous children. The female subaltern protagonist Jashoda challenges the assumptions of the Western Feminism that childbirth is an unwaged domestic burden. Jashoda becomes a professional mother, feeding the children in lieu of money for looking after her family:

Motherhood was always her way of living and keeping alive her world of countless beings. Jashoda was a mother by profession, professional mother. Jashoda was not an amateur mamma like the daughter and wives of the mother’s house. The world belongs to the professional. In this city, this kingdom, the amateur beggar – pickpocket-hooker has no place. Even the mongrel on the path or side-walk, the greedy crow at the garbage don’t make room for the upstart amateur. Jashoda had taken motherhood as her profession (Devi 222).

In “A Literary Representation of the Subaltern”, Spivak analyses Jashoda’s story from a subaltern perspective. Jashoda lives for her husband, children and Haldar family. In Marxist feminist perspective, the logic of production-distribution values can be applied in the case of Jashoda. To her, the logic of sexual production is her production:
The milk that is produced in one’s own body for one’s own children is a use-value. When there is a superfluity of use values, exchanges value arise. That which cannot be used is exchanged. As soon as the (exchange) value of Jashoda’s milk emerges, it is appropriated. Good food and constant sexual servicing are provided so that she can be kept in prime condition for optimum lactation. The milk she produces for children is presumably through “necessary labor.” The milk that she produces for the children of her masters’ family is through “surplus labor” (Spivak, **Literary Representation of the Subaltern** 248).

By placing her story in a gender context, Jashoda’s position is that of a slave. The milk-sons abandoned Jashoda when she was afflicted by breast cancer. She has now ceased to be of any use to the society and she had to face a tragic end in her life without the assistance of anybody in the end.

The concept of the ‘other’ is a universal phenomenon in which the self claims to be the subject and all the rest come under the category of the ‘other’. The term ‘other’ is highly relative and it goes on changing its significance according to the context. There is supremacy of male domination over women in the society. The dominance of patriarchy has been achieved through historical forces. From the time immemorial, the male-folk went for work and they were the bread-earners of the family. Women were confined to the four walls of their houses, looking after their children and household duties. They never went out for anything and as a result they lacked vigour, vitality, exuberance and mobility. Physiologically a lot of changes do take place in the body of a woman especially when she bears a child in
her womb. The bodily changes along with the strict restriction on movement resulted in the complete subjugation of women. This historical factor has paved the way for the treatment of women as the ‘other’. In the introduction to *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir speaks about the concept of the ‘other’ as:

> The category of the Other is as primordial as consciousness itself. In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of a duality – that of a Self and the Other. This duality was not originally attached to the division of the sexes, it was not dependent upon any empirical facts. It is revealed in such works as that of Granet on Chinese thought and those of Dumezil on the East Indies and Rome. The feminine element was at first no more involved in such pairs as Varuna-Mitra, Uranus-Zeus, Sun-Moon, and Day-Night than it was in the contrasts between God and Evil, lucky and unlucky, right and left, God and Lucifer. Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought (16 - 17).

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. The ‘other’ always occupies a position outside the mainstream of life and they are treated as marginals 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. Wolfreys quotes Spivak as:

In the case of academic feminism the discovery is that to take the privileged male of the white race as a norm for universal humanity is no more than a politically interested figuration. It is a trope that passes itself off as truth and claims that woman or the racial other is merely a kind of troping of that truth of man – in the sense that they must be understood as unlike (non-identical with) it and yet with reference to it (172).

3.3 Gender Subalternity and the Role of Women 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. Females play a vital role in the reproduction process and still they are labeled as ‘the second sex or the weaker sex.’ De Beauvoir says:

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. And she is simply what man decrees: thus she is called ‘the sex’, by which is meant that she appears essentially to
the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less. 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).

The concept of the ‘Subject’ and the ‘Other’ points to the proposition that only the males have the right to live in this society. Males themselves cannot live in the society, so they consider women as their supporters and treat them as secondary. It is only at this juncture that the practice of sati becomes a topic of hot discussion. Once the husband dies, the wife has no more role to play except to join with her husband in the funeral pyre. It was an accepted system that prevailed in the country and it was abolished by the Britishers as part of their ‘White Man’s Burden’3. In India the practice of sati was very common and many women who became part of the rituals did it out of their love for their husbands. The society has played a major role in making sati a common phenomenon in the country so as to deny separate existence from men. Once the ‘Subject’ is gone, the ‘Other’ cannot remain as a single entity and the widow has to join with the dead husband in the funeral pyre for the completion of the cyclical process. In “Can the Subaltern speak?” Spivak says:

As object 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 (287).
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. 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.

The original title of the essay “Can the subaltern Speak?” was “Power, Desire, and Interest” (Spivak 271). The essay became a controversial subject of thought with Spivak’s statement “the subaltern cannot speak” (308). The essay challenges the basic tenets of colonialism. Spivak substantiates her argument that subaltern cannot speak by taking the example of widow self-immolation in India. The practice of sati continued to flourish in the colonial India as it was seconded by the patriarchal culture which in fact made it extremely difficult for the subaltern women to utter their thought.
3.3.1 Voice of Dissent in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

In the highly controversial essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak rakes various issues related to sati, the practice of widow self-immolation. It was the finest example to support the argument that the subaltern women didn’t get the opportunity to transact their ideas and convince the society about their dissenting voice. The Britishers were the rulers of the colonial India and they tried to abolish the age old custom of widow sacrifice in 1829. Sati is a Sanskrit word for widow and she becomes a good and loyal wife to her husband when she ascends the pyre of her dead husband and unites with her husband in the act of self-immolation. The Britishers preferred the term suttee instead of sati and the abolition of this evil practice was taken up by the colonial rulers as part of their civilizing mission (Spivak, Can the Subaltern Speak? 297). The message from the colonial rulers was that “white men saving brown women from brown men” (293). But to their greatest disappointment, the Britishers never knew that some of the women in India really wanted to join with their dead husbands in the funeral pyre as a noble act of self-immolation. Both Dharmasastra and Rg-Veda, ancient Hindu religious texts, treat the practice of widow self-immolation as a sacred ritual for the dead husband, rather than an act of suicide:

The two moments in the Dharmasastra that I am interested in are the discourse on sanctioned suicides and the nature of the rites for the dead. Framed in these two discourses, the self-immolation of widows seems an exception to the rule. The general scriptural doctrine is that suicide is reprehensible. Room is made, however, for certain forms of suicide which, as
formulaic performance, lose the phenomenal identity of being suicide (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* 299).

People carried out the practice of widow self-immolation as it was permitted in the *Dharmasastra*. Spivak challenges the validity of this horrible human sacrifice by stating that “this is not the proper place for the woman to annul the proper name of suicide through the destruction of the proper self” (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 300). Self-immolation has attained a spiritual significance and the rite is highly male oriented where the domination of patriarchy is made visible through the accomplishment of this widow sacrifice. The practice of sati helped the males to demand respect from women. Women in the pre-independent India played the role of a parasite. A parasite is a separate living organism like a woman and it does not have independent existence. Once the main tree falls down, the existence of the parasite is under threat. The tree and the parasite cease to exist at the same time. The woman is not different from the parasite. The moment her husband dies, the woman loses her identity as an individual and regains her individuality with her husband on the funeral pyre.

Spivak is of the view that due to the religious halo behind the self-immolation, the act of widow sacrifice cannot be considered as an act of suicide but “a simulacrum of both truth-knowledge and piety of place” (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 300). The denial of self-sacrifice on the funeral pyre of her dead husband is treated with contempt and the society will consider her as a living example of nuptial ingratitude:
It is in terms of this profound ideology of the displaced place of the female subject that the paradox of free choice comes into play … By the inexorable ideological production of the sexed subject such a death can be understood by the female subject as an exceptional signifier of her own desire, exceeding the general rule for a widow’s conduct (300).

In “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak comes up with the contention that “Sati should have been read with martyrdom” (302). A martyr does not die for himself/herself. His/her blood is spilled for the cause of others in which s/he has no personal advantage. The women who burnt themselves as satis were martyrs. This martyrdom was in fact a kind of protest against the society, since it failed to recognize their role in the society along with the kith and kin of their family.

British colonial administrator Edward Thompson published his *Suttee: A Historical and Philosophical Enquiry in the Hindu Rite of Widow-Burning* in 1928. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak argues that Thompson has made the entire situation worse and more complicated by stating that “white men, seeking to save brown women from brown men, impose upon those women a greater ideological constriction by absolutely identifying, within discursive practice, good-wifehood with self-immolation on the husband’s pyre” (305). The British rulers in India tried to put an end to the practice of sati so as to justify imperialism as a part of their civilizing mission:

Such a claim repeats the silencing of the Hindu woman’s voice, which is already displaced on to her dead husband’s funeral pyre in the traditional
Hindu religious codes … Rather than defending the woman’s agency, however, the British colonial administration used the body of the widow as an ideological battle-ground for colonial power. In doing so the British were able to justify colonialism, or the systematic exploitation and appropriation of territory, as a civilizing mission. In both the Hindu and British discussions of widow sacrifice, the voice and political agency of the woman is thoroughly repressed from official historical discourse and political representation (Morton 63 - 64).

In “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak lashes out her stringent criticism against Edward Thompson’s *Suttee* for two obvious reasons: first of all “Thompson’s finessing of the word sati as “faithful” in the very first sentence of the book” and the second one is for Thompson’s praise for General Charles Hervey’s stand on this subject matter that “brings out the pity of a system which looked only for prettiness and constancy in woman” (305).

‘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. The essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” discusses the problem of widow sacrifice in great detail and Spivak reiterates her standpoint that subaltern cannot speak and the condition of the woman is even more complicated. 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. The historian failed to record
the voice of dissent and especially that of the subaltern women. It would be now very difficult to recover the dissenting voice of the subaltern and the case is further complicated as they lost between colonial power structure and the Hindu religious codes:

The British government put a ban on the custom of sati, but as a result of that several women who could have died a cruel but quick death when husbands died now have to face an agonizing slow death (Tharu 363).

3.3.2 Subaltern cannot Speak: A Discourse upon the Theory of Communication

Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” provoked a flood-gate of controversies from every nook and cranny of the world. The essay became controversial because Spivak reiterated her opinion that the subaltern could not speak and that the condition of women was more pathetic. One of the reasons for this controversy was the comparison of the words ‘speak’ along with ‘talk.’ Spivak regrets for the way in which the entire concept of the essay is misconstrued by replacing the word ‘talk’ instead of ‘speak’. Many critics use the sentence “subaltern cannot talk” as against the sentence “subaltern cannot speak.” (Spivak, The Spivak Reader 289). The act of speaking and talking are completely different from each other. The act of speaking is more active and it involves the participation of at least one listener whereas the act of talking is passive and it can either be a soliloquy or somnambulism. Speaking comes under interpersonal communication and it involves a situation in which two people try to communicate things face to face. In this type of communication, the person can use gestures and facial
expressions so as to make the communication more effective. The element of feedback is instant and it is the most effective way of knowing that the communication has achieved its specific objective.

The act of talking comes under intra-personal communication. It is an act of talking to oneself and such kinds of expressions are not supposed to be heard by others. Meditation, prayer and soliloquy come under intra-personal communication. The elements of communication include: sender, receiver, message, channel, effect, feedback and noise. Sender is the one who sends the message and the person who receives the message is the receiver. Message is the information that is being passed over to the receiver by the sender and the medium that is used in communicating the message becomes the channel. Effect is the attitudinal change that is found in the receiver as a result of getting the new information. Feedback is the response from the receiver that is to be returned to the sender for more clarification. Context is the setting in which the process of communication takes place which can be classified into three: Physical, Psychological and Temporal. Physical context is the geographical setting in which the communication does take place. Psychological context is the relationship that exists between the sender and the receiver. If there is a good rapport with the sender and the receiver, the communication can be more effective and there will be a genuine interest from the part of the listener towards the communication process. Temporal context refers to the time at which the communication takes place. The last but the most important element of communication is noise. It is said of anything that distorts / hinders / hampers / prevents the proper reception and understanding of the message.
In her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, 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. Though the sender tries his / her level best, the communication is interrupted by the element of noise. Spivak substantiates her argument in *The Spivak Reader* as:

By “speaking” I was obviously talking about a transaction between the speaker and the listener. That is what did not happen in the case of a woman who took her own body at the moment of death to inscribe a certain kind of understanding – too weak a word – a certain kind of annulment of all the presuppositions that underlie the regulative psychobiography that writes sati. When we act we don’t act out of thinking through details; we act in something that Derrida calls, following Kierkegaard, the “night of nonknowledge”… We act out of certain kinds of reflexes that come through learning habits of mind, rather than by merely knowing something. That is the way in which her action was inscribed in her body. And even that incredible effort to speak did not fulfil itself in a speech act. And therefore, in a certain kind of theoretical anguish after the accounting of this, I said, “the subaltern cannot speak” (289).
In an interview with the editors of The Spivak Reader, Spivak substantiates her argument that subaltern cannot speak with an example taken from the colonial period. In Eighteenth Century, the Britishers came into the region of Bengal, the present Bangladesh. They were surprised to see the fully developed “ancient water works” (290). The complicated water canals were equipped to check the ravishing flood. The Britishers could not tolerate the existence of feudal system in Bengal where the feudal chiefs made the lower class people work hard for them. With the advent of the Britishers, the feudal system was turned up-side down and the feudal chiefs became tax collectors. As a result of constant negligence on the part of the Britishers, the irrigation canals soon became “stagnant, infested with mosquitoes, and so they started to destroy the canals” (290). The Barbaric act of the Britishers was questioned by the subaltern insurgency as they became the constant victims of the flood. The subalterns were shattered into pieces and the Britishers never had the patience to listen to the subalterns. The imperial government appointed a water-works inspector to study the entire situation in detail. He came up with a fact finding report that “these waterways had in fact been an irrigation and flood management system” (291). It is only by restoring the ‘ancient waterways’ the people can have a calm and serene life. Spivak is speculative about the restoration of the ancient waterworks as she says:

They cannot be built because the way that they had been built was slowly, respecting the rhythm of those very young rivers, whereas the way things would be built today would be capital-intensive, cost-efficient, and fast (The Spivak Reader 291).
Spivak’s controversial statement ‘the subaltern cannot speak’ implies a lot of inner meanings. 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 real problem lies in the receiver as s/he is not ready to listen to the sender of the message. The receiver is neither interested in listening to the message nor in a position to decode the message of the sender. The element of noise distorts the proper reception of the message and when a subaltern tries to speak, the dormant element of communication becomes a prominent one. It is due to the social and economic factors that exist within a region. The psychological context hardly exists when a subaltern tries to speak; as a result, the communicative system fails to achieve its target. As women were tied down to the four walls of their bedrooms, they hardly had an opportunity to speak and even when they spoke something they could not transact the proper message and convince others of their stand. The place of the funeral pyre of her dead husband turns out to be the first and the last platform for a woman to speak. In the roaring outburst of loss, the woman may try to speak but others won’t have the patience to listen to her. The communication system fails when the speaker is not able to convince the receiver. The society does not give room for the person to speak and in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak makes the point clearer when she says, “There is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak” (307). Mc Leod agrees:

Their muteness is created by the fact that even when women uttered words, they were still interpreted through conceptual and methodological procedures which were unable to understand their interventions with accuracy. It is not so
much that subaltern women did not speak, but rather that others did not know how to listen, how to enter into a transaction between speaker and listener. The subaltern cannot speak because their words cannot be properly interpreted. Hence, the silence of the female as subaltern is the result of a failure of interpretation and not a failure of articulation (195).

3.4 Conclusion

In “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak propounds her theory of subalternity. The crux of her theory is that ‘the subalterns cannot speak.’ The tenets of the theory became controversial as they were interpreted with false conviction. Spivak’s theory of subalternity does not admit the concept that subaltern cannot talk. Spivak has attached a special significance to the term ‘speak’ in her essay. By speaking, Spivak means transaction between speaker and receiver. 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. As people turn a deaf ear to the pleas of the subalterns, communication system fails and no transaction takes place. The subalterns are not able to have transactions with others because of the disparity that exists in the society. The subalterns were subjected to the colonial rule and only the colonizer had the voice. The entire concept of ‘voice’ is determined by the ‘subject’ and the category of the ‘other’ does not have a voice of his/her own. After the colonial rule, the subalterns were again subordinated to the elite upper class. The subaltern women continue to suffer and there is little scope for further improvement. In an interview with the editors
of *The Spivak Reader*, Spivak further explains the controversial statement ‘the subaltern cannot speak’ as:

It means that even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard, and speaking and hearing complete the speech act. That’s what it had meant, and anguish marked the spot (292).

Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, the editors of *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*, have done a tremendous job in gathering the works of the women writers with a special emphasis on their lives and limitations. The pathetic plight of a widow is recalled as:

Once the husband dies, the torture of his wife begins, as if the messengers of the death god Yama themselves have come to take away her soul. None of her relatives will touch her to take her ornaments off her body. That task is assigned to three women from the barber caste. Their number varies from three to six. No sooner does the husband breathe his last than those female fiends literally jump all over her and violently tear all the ornaments from her nose, ears, etc. In that rush, the delicate bones of the nose and ears are sometimes broken. Sometimes while plucking the ornaments from her hair, tufts of hair are also plucked off. If she is wearing any gold or silver ornaments, these cruel women never have the patience to take them off one by one: they pin her hands down on the ground and try to break the bangles with a large stone. Why, these callous women torture even a six – or seven – year –
old girl, who doesn’t even know what a husband means when she becomes a widow! (Tharu 359).

Spivak’s theory of subalternity is still relevant as people suffer in the name of gender, class and creed. As change is the only permanent thing in the world, the subalterns should continue to make their position clear before the authorities. 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.

This chapter has examined Spivak’s theory of subalternity. The theory proposes that ‘the subalterns cannot speak’ by giving special emphasis on the element of noise. The next chapter of the thesis deals with ‘Art: Arundhati Roy’s Fictional World.’ It focuses upon the extraordinary genius of the author in the realm of fiction with all its innovative, non-conformist and artistic elements.

Notes

1 Sati: An act of self-immolation by a woman in the funeral pyre of her dead husband. Dharmasastra and Rg-Veda, ancient Hindu religious texts, treat sati as a ritual rather than an act of suicide.

2 Noise: One of the elements of Communication. It is the element that disturbs the communication process.

3 White Man’s Burden: The Britishers came to India for trade and commerce but during their stay they took it as their mission to civilize the natives. The civilizing mission is referred to as ‘White Man’s Burden.’
4 Suttee: The conventional transcription of the Sanskrit word for the widow would be sati. The early colonial British transcribed it as suttee and Edward Thompson, British colonial administrator, published his work on the widow self-immolation in 1928 under the title *Suttee: A Historical and Philosophical Enquiry into the Hindu Rite of Widow-Burning*.

5 Interpersonal Communication: It is one of the types of Communication in which two people try to communicate without the intervention of any machine. The other types of Communication include: Intrapersonal, Group, Public and Mass Communication.
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