

Spivak and Western Feminism

- Ashutosh Singh

Abstract: The objective of this paper is to explore Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as a third world 'deconstructivist, feminist, Marxist, postcolonial theorist and critic' of literature and other cultural texts, and to provide a critical perspective on Western feminism vis-à-vis Spivak's arguments. In doing so, I shall focus primarily on feminist criticism of Spivak, and how she approaches Western feminist criticism in general and their Third World criticism in particular. The works of Spivak and Western feminism reveal confrontations that emerge from their different socio-cultural backgrounds, and the prevailed situations. Spivak's work is concerned with the suffering of 'subaltern' and engages with 'world politics particularly the politics of Third World/First World relations and of the exploitation of the Third World Labour,' whereas Western feminism creates the 'discursive homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the Third World'. In this way, my paper focuses on the relations of First World and Third World feminist criticism and how they intervene in each other's territory. In this way, this paper also focuses on the question—can Western women appropriately deal with the experiences of the Other or do only Third World women talk about their experiences? This paper attempts to situate and evaluate feminism geographically with special emphasis to the condition of coloniality. Finally, the paper concentrates on cultural relativism and how Western feminism has failed in their goal of liberating women in non-Western societies. This paper is divided in two sections. The first section deals with Spivak's contribution to the Third World feminism, and the second and last section explores Western feminism's engagement with Third World women and its critique by Spivak and others.

Keywords: western feminism, postcolonial, Spivak, third world.

I

Spivak champions the voices and texts of minority groups, and challenges some of the dominant ideas of the contemporary era. She is of the opinion that the impact of European colonialism does not end with independence of the nation, but, instead the social, economic and political structures established during the colonial regime keep on inflecting the cultural, political and economic life of postcolonial states. In "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" for example, Spivak argues that "[i]t should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English" (243). Spivak focuses on the experiences of subaltern women in her study of the historical research on the Subaltern Studies. In "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern" Spivak argues that the Bengali language fiction writer Mahasweta Devi powerfully articulates the history of subaltern women through her

female protagonist, Jashoda, in the story “Breast Giver”. The story depicts the decay of Jashoda's maternal body after she is employed as a professional mother in a wealthy Brahmin household. For Spivak, Jashoda's brutalized maternal body powerfully highlights the failure of Indian nationalism to emancipate lower-class, subaltern women, and also challenges the assumption, predominant in western society and culture, that women's reproductive labour is unwaged, domestic work. Devi's fiction is important in the sense that it shows how female subaltern characters of Devi provide an important counterpoint to the silencing and erasure of women in the British colonial archives and elite nationalist historical writing in India. In this respect Stephen Morton writes:

Since official historical discourse tends to privilege men as the main actors of revolutionary politics in India, Spivak suggests that literature can provide a different space to articulate subaltern women's insurgency and resistance in the social text of postcolonial India. More specifically, the historical fiction of Mahasweta Devi provides Spivak with a concrete articulation of subaltern women's agency and resistance in the postcolonial world (*Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* 55).

In her most famous and controversial essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” she critiques representation in the work of French intellectuals Michel Foucault (1926–84) and Gilles Deleuze (1925–95), and then examines the representation of widow sacrifice in the nineteenth century colonial archives and the Hindu texts of antiquity which leads her to arrive at a provocative assertion that “there is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak”. For Spivak, there is an element of double oppression for women in colonial situation. In this context, she categorically writes:

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 subject 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.* [Indeed, Spivak observes that “if you are poor, black, and female you get it in three ways”.] (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 32, emphasis mine).

The extract raises the issues of recovering of the silenced voices of oppressed women from the archive, and centralization of subaltern women confined in the shadow of colonial history and representation. Robert Young gives a very illuminating insight of the essay in his in his *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, as he writes, the problem which Spivak is concerned with is “not that the woman cannot speak as such, that no record of the subject consciousness of women exist, but that she is assigned no position of enunciation [and therefore] everyone else speaks for her, so she is rewritten consciously as the object of patriarchy or of imperialism” (cited in *Beginning Postcolonialism* 193). The intellectual critical perspective of Spivak is shaped by the discourses of Poststructuralism. She highly borrows the ideas of Jacques Derrida and

Paul de Man, and applies in British colonial archives and official Indian historiography. She regards deconstruction as a “powerful political and theoretical tool,” which focuses on “the rhetorical blind spots or grounding mistakes which stabilize conventional notions of truth and reality” (*Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* 4). Like Edward Said and Jacques Derrida, she examines how the real world is constituted by “the dominant perspective and geopolitical location of the 'First World' to the exclusion of other disenfranchised groups” (5). Spivak's deconstructive approach towards subaltern insurgency often frustrates readers, since it does not provide any political solution to the plight of oppressed groups. Neil Lazarus, for instance, writes that the fact of “an investigation of the history of 'Third World Women' is typically deferred in [Spivak's] writing” (*Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World* 113). But Spivak's application of deconstructive strategies does not make the considerations of subaltern insurgency and resistance entirely absent from Spivak's thought. Indeed, subaltern women's resistance in Third World is often found in Spivak's engagements with literary texts. In “A Literary Representation of the Subaltern,” Spivak writes that literary texts can provide an alternative means for articulating the histories of subaltern women. Spivak justifies her arguments based on the fiction of Mahasweta Devi. The stories of Devi are based on events in twentieth century Indian history. In “Draupadi,” for instance, Devi recounts the struggle and brutal rape of a female revolutionary, Dopdi Meihen. For Spivak, Dopdi's final moment of resistance comes from when she stands naked and defiant against the military commander, Senanayak, and her protest provides an “allegory of the woman's struggle within the revolution in a shifting historical moment” (*In Other Worlds* 184).

Spivak's writings on women in Third world women are concerned with what Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford call the “double colonization” of women. The term refers to the ways in which women simultaneously experience the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy. Spivak is not alone who is arguing against Western feminism. The most famous critics and essays in this context are Hazel Carby's “White Women Listen! Black Feminism and Boundaries of Sisterhood” and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse”. These two essays expose the limitations of the Western feminist discourse. What I am arguing here is that the critical responses of Spivak emerge also from the insights of her contemporary Third world critics. In addition, Spivak is highly concerned with the influence of Western feminist's discourse on the psychology of Third World feminism. In “French Feminism in an International Frame” she takes up this issue and explores in the context of a young Sudanese woman in the Faculty of Sociology at a Saudi Arabian University who claims to have written “a structural functionalist dissertation on female circumcision in the Sudan” (154). Here her main concern is not the use of the sexist term “female circumcision” instead of “clitoridectomy,” but with the use of structural functionalism which takes a “disinterested” stance on society as functioning structure. Its implicit interest is to

applaud a system—in this case sexual—because it functions” (154). Here, Spivak's concern is, can this Sudanese woman ever take a disinterested approach to clitoridectomy? Moreover, what Spivak want to say is that the dominance of the structures of intellectual thinking build in Western scholarship governs the perspective which is not suitable in a culturally divergent context:

When one attempted to think of so-called Third World women in a broader scope, one found oneself caught, as my Sudanese colleague was caught and held by Structural Functionalism, in a web of information retrieval inspired at best by: "what can I do for them?" ("French Feminism in an International Frame" 155).

II

Spivak's rearticulation of subaltern women's histories in “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” “French Feminism in an International Frame,” “Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” her commentaries on the writing of Mahasweta Devi and other essays have radically transformed the terms and focus of western feminist thought. Indeed, one of the most important contributions that Spivak has made to contemporary feminist thought is her consistent demand that feminism seriously consider the material histories and lives of “Third World” women in its account of women's struggles against oppression. Western or First World feminism has come under severe criticism from Third World critics due to the lack of attention paid to the problems faced by women of those countries which have a history of colonialism. Spivak argues that the day to day experiences of many “ThirdWorld” women are very complex and unsystematic that they cannot be depicted in any clear-cut way by the vocabularies of western critical theory. In this respect, any attempt to represent the lived experiences of such women can be seen as a distortion of knowledge in Western feminist theory. Such depiction foregrounds unfaithful and remote claims by privileged intellectuals on behalf of oppressed groups. “These risks,” writes Stephen Morton, “include the danger that the voices, lives and struggles of 'Third World' women will be silenced and contained within the technical vocabulary of western critical theory” (*Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* 7). It is for this reason, Spivak, in her writings on Mahasweta Devi's fiction, frequently engages with the singular histories and lives of Third World, subaltern women in order to disrupt the codes and conventions of western knowledge.

Spivak criticizes Western feminism for their universal perspective on Third World women, and their negligence of class, culture, religion, language or nationality. She claims that even in Third world, the women have different problems based on their social status and cultural position. Indeed, as Spivak asserts, the experience of social and political oppression in postcolonial societies, for instance in India, embodies differences in class, region, language, ethnicity, religion, generation, gender and citizenship. Due to these vast differences, any general claims or theoretical statements made on behalf of disempowered subaltern populations by educated, metropolitan-based intellectuals will overlook crucial social differences between particular subaltern groups. Such

monolithic homogenization always leads to the silencing of the disempowered groups. She questions the "lie" of a global sisterhood between "First World" and "Third World" women, pointing instead to the complicity of western feminism and imperialism. By doing so, Spivak expands and complicates the critical terms and political objectives of feminism in a way that is more sensitive to questions of difference. Spivak points out that during imperialism the British assumed the authority and privilege position to speak for the oppressed native women, especially on the colonial discourse on Sati-system (burning of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre). Thus they homogenize this issue and regard it as universal in India. And in their very attempt to put forward the arguments, they forget the vast diversity of India based on religion. India had a vast population of Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians apart from Hindu. In this context Spivak writes, "[t]he rite was not practices universally and was not caste- or class-fixed. The abolition of this rite by the British has been generally understood as a case of 'White men saving brown women from brown men'" ("Can the Subaltern Speak" 33). Thus, Spivak rejects the universalisation. Chandra Talpade Mohanty also criticizes Western feminism for its assumption that all women exist as a "coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location". She also dismisses the production of "third world woman" as "a singular monolithic subject in some recent Western feminist texts. This categorization emerges from essentialization of the oppression of women in dissimilar contexts. They regard that every woman is victim of the same kind of patriarchal violence, economic structure and so on. Such homogenization makes Mohanty to take a very radical step at the very beginning of her essay, "Under Western Eyes": Any discussion of intellectual and political construction of "third world feminism" must address itself to two simultaneous projects: the internal critique of the hegemonic "western" feminism, and the formulation of autonomous, geographically, historically, and culturally grounded feminist concerns and strategies. The first project is one of deconstructing and dismantling; the second, one of building and constructing. ... the task of formulating and understanding the "third world feminism" is delineating the way in which it resists and *works against* ... "Western feminist discourse," an analysis of the discursive construction of "third world women" in Western feminism is an important step (381, emphasis in the original). Spivak points out that "the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous" (*A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 270). Hence, she rejects any possibility of the intervention of Western feminists to rescue their "black and brown sisters". Even radical intellectuals, she explains who would speak on behalf of the oppressed, effectively romanticize and essentialise the Other, as she says, "the intellectual is complicit in the persistent constitution of the Other as the Self's shadow" (266). Western feminist view the Other as a projection or shadow of oneself. For instance, a Western feminist's imposition of her approach for liberation of women in colonized area might overlook the culturally specific character of both oppression and liberation. Therefore, she opposes the radical discourses

of Western feminism for its essentialism agenda. Hazel Carby in her essay, "White Women Listen," points out that Black and Asian women are rarely made visible in the discourses of Western feminism, and whenever they have tried to represent Asian women, their representation gets an orientalist turn due the primitive, backward and barbarous construction of image. Carby further suggests that Western feminism suffers from ethnocentric bias when they presume that their strategies of countering suppression are applicable to all. For instance, Western feminism tries to demolish the conventions of arrange-marriage due to its oppressive structures. In carrying their project forward, Western feminism do not consider the opinions to Asian women, and, instead assume their task "progressive and liberating. As she writes:

The 'feminist' version of this ideology presents Asian women as being in need of liberation, not in terms of their own herstory and needs, but *into* the 'progressive' social mores and customs of the metropolitan West. The actual struggles that Asian women are involved in are ignored in favour of applying theories from the point of the view of a more 'advanced', more 'progressive' outside observer. (Cited in *Beginning Postcolonialism* 182)

In "French Feminism in an International Frame" Spivak argues against the colonial benevolence of western feminism, and criticizes Julia Kristeva's Eurocentric feminist self in the book, *About Chinese Women*. Kristeva's discussion of female sexuality in *About Chinese Women* leads Spivak to rethink "female clitoridectomy as the symbolic condition of all women's social and economic oppression" (*Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* 10). Spivak also questions the role of Western feminist discourse in trying to recover the "gendered subaltern". In her reading of Kristeva's *About Chinese Women*, Spivak suggests that Kristeva is speaking for the Chinese women, in her own identity as a liberal Western feminist, and in consequence, creates a "wishful use of history" (160). Spivak regards this position very dangerous, and goes on to the extent of stating that this is an "epistemic violence," an authoritative and untimely colonial knowledge about the Other. In this context, she goes to the extent of saying, "in order to learn enough about Third World women and to develop a different readership, the immense heterogeneity of the field must be appreciated, and the First World feminist must learn to stop feeling privileged *as a woman*" (156-157 emphasis in the original). Spivak problematizes the relationship between Third World women and their representation by the discourses of the First World. In her essay, "French Feminism in an International Frame," she rejects the sympathetic attitude of First World feminism and their liberating attempt to rescue Black/brown sisters. The argument of "French Feminism in an International Frame" regarding *About Chinese Women* is carried forward in "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," where Spivak considers the erasure of female individualism of a colonial woman, Bertha Mason, in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Spivak through her reading of *Jane Eyre*, argues that even in liberal Western feminist text that apparently valorizes the individualist and independent woman, the figure of the "native woman" (Bertha Mason, the White Creole from the

Caribbean) is effaced. Spivak is of the opinion that the individualism of Jane Eyre is constructed out of the effacement of the gendered subaltern. Bertha's self-immolation is the displacement to the margins of her very existence. In fact, the West's praise of the individualist woman conceals the irony that this individualism was based on a series of exclusions and sacrifices, that is, the native woman never figure in the discourse of triumphant feminist individualism. The native woman is doubly marginalized by virtue of her relative economic oppression and gender subordination. In her study of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Spivak asserts that the construction of the monster is the project of the subject-constitution of the colonial Other in denying the right of the monster to reproduce itself, and having failed to turn the monster into the Westerner's mirror image, Frankenstein refuses it an identity. Spivak argues that Shelley's novel suggests that the Other have properties that cannot be "selfed" or contained. Thus, by raising the questions of the inability of Western feminists over the subject of Other, Spivak aim to overturn the epistemological authority of Western feminist's discourse. Moreover, this deconstructive project resists replacing one discourse with another, and rather demands, as she suggests, constant and persistent interrogation of truth claims. The essay "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" explores how the subaltern's mute and shadowy existence stems from the fact that history is written by those who are privileged. Spivak claims that the suppressed and erased voices of the subalterns can be retrieved from literary criticism. Spivak's reading of *Jane Eyre* exposes that Bertha is constructed as a monster Other in order to legitimate the ultimate authority of the English heroin Jane Eyre. The novel is read by the Western feminists as triumph of female individualism. But Paul Goring *et al* argue that Spivak has a different perspective on this claim. They write, "[T]his triumph is achieved at the expense of the silenced colonial subject. Typically for Spivak, her critique is two-pronged: she exposes what she sees as political failing in the novel, while at the same time confronting the limitation of a [Western] feminism which is blind to NARRATIVES extrinsic to white ... experience" ("SPIVAK, Gayatri Chakravorty" 391). In her critique of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwomen in the Attic*, Spivak, according to McLeod, raises important theoretical questions—"to what extent is the work of Western, or 'First World' feminists useful in addressing in 'Third World' concerns? Might 'First World' feminism suffer from its own complicity with some of the assumptions of colonial discourses?" (*Beginning Postcolonialism* 183).

To conclude, Spivak's contribution to feminist thought includes essays on contemporary French feminist theory, nineteenth-century English women's writing, Marxist feminism and feminist critiques of political economy. Spivak offers original and engaging commentaries on Julia Kristeva in particular, and other Western feminists like, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous in general. In particular, Spivak challenges the universal claims of feminism to speak for all women. Together with the postcolonial feminist Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Hazel Carby, Spivak

has generated an important rethinking of feminist thought. Such a rethinking has challenged the assumption that all women are the same, and emphasized the importance of respecting differences in race, class, religion, citizenship and culture between women. Spivak challenges the universal humanist assumption of Western feminist thought, that all women's lives and histories are the same, and emphasizes the importance of strategic essentialism for rethinking feminist thought from the perspective of different non-western women's lives and histories. The question "Can the subaltern speak?" seems to me very problematic and I have a different take on this issue, that is, *can the elite listen*. It is the matter of the lack of voice in the subaltern women, rather is the matter of the privileged's disinterest in Other. The elites do not know how to listen the subaltern. Therefore the silence of the subalterns results from the failure of bilateral communication and a failure of interpretation. Spivak does not dismiss Western feminism completely. In this way, she avoids the charges of ethnocentrism, and refuses the claim that only Indian can speak for other Indian women. Spivak's contribution to contemporary feminist thought has certainly been informed by French feminist thinkers such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, and the poststructuralists like Derrida and de Man. Spivak has shifted the focus of the essentialist debate from a concern with sexual difference between men and women to a focus on cultural differences between women in the Third World and women in the First World. In the regard I agree with Susheila Nasta opinion of "creative dialogue" between First World and the Third World, which helps us to learn from each other. This argument shows that feminists must speak *to* women not *for* women.

References :

- Lazarus, N. *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse". in Neil Badmington *et al* (ed). *The Routledge Critical and Cultural Theory*. London: Routledge, 2008). pp. 381-405.
- Morton, Stephen. *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Paul Goring *et al*. "SPIVAK, Gayatri Chakravorty" in their *Studying Literature: An Essential Companion*. London: Arnold, 2001. pp. 388-391.
- Spivak, G.C. "French Feminism in an International Frame". *Yale French Studies*, No. 62, 1981. pp. 154-184.
- ---. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1), 1985. pp. 243-61.
- ---. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, with a preface by Colin MacCabe, New York: Methuen, 1987.
- ---. "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern," Ranjeet Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies*, vol. V. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- ---. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. London: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- ---. "Can the Subaltern Speak" in Ashcroft, Bill *et al* (ed). *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 2008. pp. 28-37.

