

## *Full Length Research Paper*

# **Retracing the concept of the subaltern from Gramsci to Spivak: Historical developments and new applications**

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**The aim of this paper is to retrace the historical developments and new implications of one of the most disputed concepts in post-colonial theory. The study of the concept of the subaltern deals first with preliminary definitions of this concept as it was initially used by the Italian Marxist political activist, Antonio Gramsci, in his widely known book "Prison Notebooks". Later, this paper examined the new reflections of the subaltern concept as explicated by those critics and historians who defined themselves as members of the Subaltern Studies Group. A particular focus at this stage is laid on the key insights of the forefather of the group, Ranajit Guha, and on the latest assumptions and ideas provided by the prominent deconstructivist, post-colonial critic, Gayatri Spivak, mainly in her seminal essay: "Can the Subaltern Speak?" The study finally tackled some of the present day implications of the subaltern concept as it unfolds in a post-modern condition. The analysis at this stage focused on key ideas introduced by the post-modern scholar, Jean Baudrillard, and post-colonial critic, Homi Bhabha.**

**Key words:** Subaltern, post-colonialism, colonial discourse, subaltern historiography, political mobilization, domination, sexual division of labor, history, third world women, Sati women, globalized post-modern world, difference, identity, consciousness of subalternity, revolutionary voice, liminality, third space of enunciation.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Post-colonial theory as a recent field of study has lately become one of the most attractive academic disciplines - if it can be called a discipline - that incessantly triggers piles and piles of literature written by art of critics, social reformists, political scientists, literary critics and political economists. The continuous expansion of post-colonialism in its recent version made its own domains of interest and areas of functionality overlap with other fields of global academic studies such as African American literature, literary theory and criticism, anthropology and cultural studies. One of the latest subdivisions of post-colonial theory is the Subaltern Studies Group or the Subaltern Studies Collective that was launched in the 1980s by a group of eminent Indian scholars.

The Subaltern Studies Group, in its immense effort to restudy the Indian history and society as a narrative, provoked a great number of controversial issues; among them is the problematic issue of the subaltern subject and

its constitution in the Indian historiography. This controversial concept of the subaltern caused a great deal of confusion all over the academia and left students of colonial discourse and post-colonial theory perplexed while wallowing in labyrinthine postulations of specialized scholars. In this study, the author did not pretend perfectly master in any way the premises expressed by those scholars nor did he encompass the scopes of their inquiries, but his intention in this article is to trace the birth of the subaltern as a critical concept of extreme importance in post-colonial theory. As such, this notion of the subaltern was traced following it through its historical developments as it was first coined before coming to its latest applications in post-modern conditions. So as not to drift into unnecessary excavations that may lead this study astray, a genealogical study of this concept (the subaltern) was chosen on three predominant thinkers with whom it is essentially associated: Antonio Gramsci,

Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Throughout its history since the beginning of the twentieth century, the concept of the subaltern remains one of the most slippery and difficult to define. This difficulty is due in part to the manipulations of critics and writers whose, "unscrupulous, instrumental, or merely selective readings of Gramsci have been animated by the impulse to make him appear relevant to the present time, particularly when he has been used to lend authority to or legitimize a specific political stance, ideological tendency, or theoretical position" (Francese, 2009).<sup>1</sup>

### GRAMSCIAN EXPLORATIONS OF THE CONCEPT OF THE SUBALTERN AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE SUBALTERN STUDIES GROUP

The approach that was used in this study consists mainly of retracing the concept of the subaltern in its historical development as it was first used by Gramsci before trying to relate it to the current developments in our post-modern times. So, it became evident that the approach is a historical approach that attempts to excavate the origins of the concept of the subaltern by referring to a genealogical study of the foundational academic theoretical works which dealt with this notion of the subaltern. The material used consists mainly of major books written by Gramsci, Ranajit Guha and Spivak.

The notion of the subaltern was first referred to by the Italian Marxist political activist Antonio Gramsci in his article "Notes on Italian History" which appeared later on as part of his most widely known book *Prison Notebooks* written between 1929 and 1935. Gramsci's standpoint is fundamentally instrumental to any student who reaches an understanding of the origin of the notion of the subaltern because it tends to detach itself from the mechanistic and economic form that narrowly characterizes most of the Marxist traditional studies. The subaltern classes refer fundamentally in Gramsci's words to any "low rank" person or group of people in a particular society suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as active individuals of the same nation. Gramsci's intentions when he first used the concept of the subaltern are clear enough to be given any other far-fetched interpretations. The only groups Gramsci had in mind at that time were the workers and peasants who were oppressed and discriminated by the leader of the National Fascist Party, Benito Mussolini and his agents. Gramsci became interested in the study of the subaltern classes of consciousness and culture as one possible way to make their voice heard instead of relying on the historical narrative of the state which is by the end, the

history of the ruling and dominant classes. In this study, Gramsci envisages to carry out the legitimized fact given thus:

"The subaltern classes by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a "State": their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States (Gramsci, 1971)."<sup>2</sup>

In order to study the history of the subaltern groups, Gramsci designed a plan composed of six steps that are found to be explained in details in his book, which was mentioned earlier. He intends to study: firstly, their objective formation by changes taking place in economic production; secondly, their active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formations and their attempts to influence their programs; thirdly, the birth of new parties and dominant groups, which are mainly created for the subjugation and maintenance of the subaltern; fourthly, the formations which the subaltern group themselves made to vindicate limited rights; fifthly, new formations which maintain the subaltern groups autonomy within old frameworks; sixthly, those formations which may help to affirm their entire autonomy (Gramsci, 1971).<sup>3</sup> Ironically, Gramsci argued that the subaltern classes have the same complex history as that of the hegemonic classes, although the latter constitutes the most officially accepted. The subaltern groups' history in Gramsci's opinion has no evident unity and it seems to be in its very episodic totality because of their submission to the authority of the ruling groups even when they break with the established system. This deplorable state of affairs imposed this sort of non-accessibility to the means by which they may limit and control their own representation and consequently lack an access to the social and cultural institutions of their state. Though, it takes a long time, the only possible way from Gramsci's perspective was to reach the state of freedom through a 'permanent' victory which necessarily guarantees a dismantling of the master/slave pattern.

This dismantling is to be realized within Gramsci's theoretical framework, by releasing the subordinated consciousness of non-elite group from the cultural hegemony exercised by the ruling class. His groundbreaking and newly revealed ideas about the vital role of peasantry as a distinct group within the subaltern division, distinguished Gramsci from the previous founders of Marxism who confidently took for granted the impending expiry of the peasantry in the face of the class-conscious proletariat produced by the conditions of a post-industrial capitalist society. His deeply formulated ideas, especially those written during his imprisonment, about the class of peasants as a social, cultural and political force aware of its distinct consciousness of

<sup>1</sup> Perspectives on Gramsci: Politics, Culture and Social Theory, ed. Joseph Francese. Routledge: Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971.

<sup>3</sup> Gramsci, 1971

subalternity made other subsequent 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars working on the issue of Indian peasantry historiography resume his effort. These scholars led by Ranajit Guha came to be known as the Subaltern Studies Group. With the emergence of the Subaltern Studies Group or Subaltern Studies Collective, as it is also called, in India back in the early 1980s, the subalternity as a concept, gained a worldwide currency. This group was founded by Ranajit Guha, comprises a number of other south Asian historians, social critics and scholars, mainly from Touraj Atabaki, Shahid Amin, Dipesh Chakrabarty, David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee, David Hardiman, Gyan Pandey and Sumit Sarkar who dissented from the group due to its disappointing turn to post-modernism. Their elaborate and systematic strategies of reading of the Indian and south Asian histories are in principle inspired by Gramsci's views as expressed in his book "the Prison Notebooks", but they were also further developed by their well-known forefather, Ranajit Guha, first in his 'manifesto' in *"Subaltern Studies I"* and later on in his famous, classical treatise titled *The Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*.

In this latter book, Guha attempted to show that the Indian peasants were socially and politically aware of the effect that their uprising would have on the colonial administration, which rarely sees insurgency as a struggle for social justice. Guha seeks to do justice to the Indian peasants by examining the interplay of domination and subjugation relations in Indian context from 1783 to 1900.

Ranajit Guha defined the Subaltern Studies as, 'a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way (Guha, 1982).'<sup>4</sup> The subaltern for him is that clearly definite entity, which constitutes "the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the 'elite' (Guha, 1982)."<sup>5</sup> Guided by the foundational views of Guha, the group members aimed at studying the subaltern groups as an "objective assessment of the role of the elite and as a critique of elitist interpretations of that role (Guha, 1982)."<sup>6</sup> This concern originated from the assumption that the writing of Indian national history has been controlled by colonial elitism as well as nationalist-bourgeois elitism which were both produced by the British colonialism in different historical periods. Consequently, Guha affirmed that this kind of historiography cannot possibly transmit, analyze or acknowledge the kind of changes or contributions brought by common people themselves as individual subjects were independent from the elite groups. Such a difficulty in acknowledging these contributions of common people by this elitist historiography is clear enough in a

'politics of people' that persists to exist even when the elite politics dissipate.

This distinct difference between the elite and the subaltern is evident when we conceived it through the notion of political mobilization. The elite political mobilization is fulfilled through appropriation of or adjustment to the British parliamentary institutions and laws whereas the subaltern political mobilization is founded on classical forms of social organization such as: blood relationships and kinship, territoriality, traditional and tribal affiliations where popular mobilization take the form of peasant insurgencies and regional demonstrations. No matter how heterogeneous the subaltern groups may be, there is a constantly unchanging character which defines them: that is, the notion of resistance to the imposed domination of the elite class. The final result of this interplay was summarized in the fact that the Indian bourgeoisie failed by the end to speak for the nation, a position which confirmed the failure of Indian nation to objectively exist without any representations formed and cherished by the colonial regime. This failure, in Guha's opinion, consists of the critical problem of the historiography of colonial India. To protect himself from any essentialist views that may cling to his conception of subalternity, Guha points to the fact that there is a distinctive difference between the subaltern groups and dominant indigenous groups at the local levels. These precautions which Guha took against essentialism in Spivak's opinion only seem to further complicate the problem of the subaltern.

## GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY'S RECONSIDERATIONS OF THE CONCEPT OF THE SUBALTERN

The concept of the subaltern moved to a further more complex theoretical debate with the intervention of the Indian-American post-colonial feminist critic, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who was criticized in her groundbreaking essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) the assumptions were projected by the Subaltern Studies Group. Due to the limits of space in this paper, I her essay cannot be thoroughly discussed, but I would rather point to its general examination of the notion of the subaltern.

The complexity of Spivak's stance might be attributed to her erudite and skillful, but sometimes, unclear implementation of structuralist and post-structuralist theories, particularly deconstructionist strategies of reading, in colonial and post-colonial spaces of divergence and inversion. In her seminal essay, Spivak reconsidered the problems of subalternity within new historical developments as brought by capitalistic politics of undermining revolutionary voice and divisions of labor in a globalized world. She disapproved the first place of Gramsci's assertion of the autonomy of the subaltern groups. Her justification of this rejection of Gramscian view is based on her view that this autonomy results in

<sup>4</sup> Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies*, Vol. VII (Oxford, 1982)

<sup>5</sup> Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India". *Subaltern Studies*. Oxford, 1982. pp. 1-8.

<sup>6</sup> Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies*, Vol. VII (Oxford, 1982)

homogeneity of the subaltern group and subaltern subjective identity. Spivak's second criticism of Subaltern Studies Group lies in her belief that no methodology, even the most ambitious Marxist one, can avoid a sort of essentialism in its attempt to define who or what may constitute the subaltern group. Consequently, Spivak chooses to adopt the notion of the subaltern essentially because, "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 proletariat 'subaltern.' That word, used under duress, has been transformed into the description of everything that does not fall under strict class analysis. This is so, because it has no theoretical rigor (Spivak, 1991)."<sup>7</sup>

Spivak, faced with this difficulty of specifying the realm of subalternity, shifts to reconsider the issues of the subaltern groups by dealing with the problems of gender and particularly Indian women during colonial times. She reflected on the status of Indian women relying on her analysis of a case of Sati women practices under the British colonial rule. Sati women as a subaltern group, Spivak arguments were lost between two polarities: the British humanist discourse calling for individual freedom of Sati women and the Hindu native policy calling for voluntary participation in the ritual. The conflict between these two positions produced two different discourses with no possible solution; one postulates that, "white man [are] saving brown women from brown men," the other maintains that, "the woman actually wanted to die (Spivak, 1991)."<sup>8</sup> Here, it becomes clear that the Hindu woman loses their voice in such a contradictory position between two antagonistic poles that constantly teases her to make a conscious decision. The 'voice' of the Hindu woman herself disappeared while these two discursive groups tried to give her a voice; the representation of Sati women contributes so much to a certain appropriation of their own free will to decide and deprived them of their subjectivity and a space to speak from. Finally, the Hindu woman "disappeared, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling, which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization (Spivak, 1991)."<sup>9</sup> Spivak came to conclude by the end that 'the subaltern cannot speak'. This last declaration that she made in her essay was controversially interpreted.

It was interpreted as a declaration of the impossibility of voicing the oppressed groups' resistance because of their representations by other dominant forces as the same as

a statement which affirmed the fact that the subaltern as a distinctly conscious subjectivity only possessed a dominant language or a dominant voice to be heard. From this stance, one may go further to assume that the whole discourse of post-colonial theory itself is to be considered as a speaking for the voiceless and politically marginalized groups by their intellectual representatives. To cut short a debate that may demand more time and space which cannot be afforded in this paper, a conclusion shall be made by pointing to the surplus value brought by Spivak's debate. By excavating the history of deprived women, Spivak managed to elaborate on the original demarcation of the notion of the subaltern as it was first developed by Ranajit Guha and the others through her fundamental exploration of the experiences and struggles of women in general, either from the upper middle class or the peasantry and sub-proletariat class. She stands for women as a differentiated gender because of the outrageous exclusion of their participation in anti-colonial history. Spivak contends, "The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is 'evidence'; rather, both were used as object of colonialist historiography and as a subject of insurgency, though 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 (Spivak, 1988)."<sup>10</sup>

## CONCLUSION

It becomes clear nowadays with the postmodern turn as conceived of in Baudrillard's terms of the disappearance of the real and the death of originality that the subaltern becomes defined in descriptive terms according to a particular marginalized subject position in any given cultural or social context. Subalternity as a condition becomes an umbrella concept which gained an extended attractive fashion. People in the present time would willingly like to occupy the position of a subaltern whose silence is possibly voiced through the advocating representation of an intellectual. Spivak warns in advance from such a position of accepting the condition of a permanent subordination. She affirmed that the task of an intellectual is to pave way for the subaltern groups and let them freely speak for themselves. It became quite difficult for all the changes taking place in a globalized post-modern world to define the subaltern as a distinct category. Ironically, Professor Gyanendra Pandey, in his attempt to trace the developments which took place in the politics of the subaltern, points to a drastic movement in the demands of the marginalized groups from "the

<sup>7</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Theory in the Margin: Coetzee's *Foe* Reading Defoe's *Crusoe/Roxana*", in Jonathan Arac and Barbara Johnson (eds) *Consequences of Theory: Selected Papers of the English Institute, 1987-1988*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991, pp. 154-180.

<sup>8</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.). Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, pp. 271-313.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, London: Macmillan (1988), pp. 271-313.

struggles for recognition as equals” to “the demand for a recognition of difference (Pandey, 2006).”<sup>11</sup> The societies of the ‘third world’ became influenced to a great deal by their contemporary European neighbors as a result of the economic imperatives to the extent that the peasant/worker positions become intermingled in different settings while moving between urban and rural spaces.

Finally, Spivak might perhaps, with the uncontrolled changes in human social system, be disillusioned in those who want to speak for subaltern when she chooses in one of the interviews with Leon de Kock to interrogate him, “Who the hell wants to protect subalternity? (Spivak, 1992)”<sup>12</sup> The difficulty to encompass the realm of subaltern studies is more evident with the post-modern turn which cherishes everything that may act against the values of European enlightenment rationalism. The subaltern perhaps does not exist anymore in a post-modern capitalistic world where everything seems to move freely in that ‘third space of’ liminality, ambivalence and mimicry as Homi Bhabha argues in his groundbreaking book “The Location of Culture”. Judging from Bhabha’s postulation that any discursive system is inescapably fragmented in a realm of enunciation, it becomes implicitly legitimate to think that the colonialist text already carried the native voice of the subaltern through its imperialistic ambivalence. Perhaps, the

subaltern has already spoken in that sphere of gaps which characterize any system of representation.

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<sup>11</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, “The Subaltern as Subaltern Citizen”, Economic and Political Weekly November 18, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa” (Interviewer Leon de Kock). Ariel: A Review of International English Literature (1992), 23 (3): 29-47