

Charting Subaltern Studies and Marginal Literatures

Dr. H. Kalpana

Associate Professor of English, Silver Jubilee Campus
Pondicherry University, Pondicherry, India

(This paper was presented by the author at the International Conference on English Literature held in September, 2012 at Kilakarai, Tamilnadu, India)

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the historical roots of the terms ‘marginal’ and ‘subaltern’ in order to explain the nature of marginalization as well as to reveal how subalternity occurs. The term, subaltern has progressively changed from the work of Antonio Gramsci to Gayatri Spivak and others. It is clearly understood that subaltern studies began as a kind of protest and as a form of alternative history to the one present. However, in recent reviews of the word ‘subaltern’ there has been some discomfort regarding the nature of subaltern studies. Writers and critics have wondered whether the term per chance emerged from a Brahminical arrogance to depict the nature of marginal writings. There have also been views that without the emergence of subaltern studies many meta-narratives and alternate views may not have emerged. The subaltern movement allowed for voicing the voices of the voiceless irrespective of who they were. The article besides reading the emergence and history of subaltern studies and literatures would also probe into the discursiveness of how scholars receive the notion of marginal or subaltern literature. This article’s focus is on bringing together the history and the politics of subaltern studies and the issue of literature of the marginalized. The first part of the paper’s discussion on literature of the subaltern pays attention to the definition, the history, the various works and writers who come under this umbrella term. The second part of the paper deals with how the marginalized is viewed and the focus of writers in this field.

KEYWORDS

Subaltern; Marginal Writing; History.

“Who the hell wants to protect subalternity? Only extremely reactionary, dubious anthropologicist museumizers. No activist wants to keep the subaltern in the space of difference . . . You don’t give the subaltern voice. You work for the bloody subaltern, you work against subalternity”. (Spivak in an interview)

Definition and History

The term, ‘subaltern’ according to records was used by Gramsci in his prison notebooks. Gramsci was concerned with the term in the sense of the civil society and

he used the term to refer to the industrial proletariat. Moreover, he utilized the term to refer to distinctions emerging in society due to domination and subordination. He specifically was referring to the peasantry

in Italy. According to the OUP dictionary, the term is a noun that refers to “an officer in the British army below the rank of captain, especially a second lieutenant”. As an adjective it refers to a lower status. The origin of the word is from Latin *subalternus*, from Latin sub- 'next below' + *alternus* 'every other'

The subaltern studies movement began in 1982 when Ranajit Guha along with other scholars began the Subaltern Studies volumes. Discussing this aspect of definition, Spivak in an interview explains that Gramsci had used it in a military sense and that being in prison he “was obliged to censor himself in prison”. Gramsci, being in prison, according to Spivak, realized that in the context of Southern Italy, “just class-formation questions were not going to solve anything.” Therefore, the word “subaltern” began to have richer connotations. She narrates how the subaltern studies made use of this term:

The subalternist historians take it from Gramsci and change it. They define it as the people, the foreign elite, the indigenous elite, the upwardly mobile indigenes, in various kinds of situations: everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference. Now, who would say that’s just the oppressed?(Interview)

Guha’s editing of the first six volumes revealed his agenda: “The historiography of Indian nationalism, has for a long time been dominated by elitism—colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism” (1-8). This set the later, contemporary trend for constituting and theorizing literatures as being subaltern. The studies have become so widespread that they now straddle fields of history, postcolonial theories, politics, issues of nationalism and orientalism.

One of the major focus and development for subaltern studies came

from history. History by the post-independence period had assumed the idea that it was two pronged. On one side it was a beneficial encounter for it led to the modernization of India and also led to a geographical drawing of the landscape. On the other hand, it was an encounter that clearly depicted the hegemony of the British and the cultural imperialism that led to an effacement of large set of cultural paradigms. It is interesting to note that Bipin Chandra an important historian thought that the conflict between the British and the Indians was the most crucial question. Dipesh Chankaraborty explains this idea of Chandra:

He saw it as a regenerative force, as the antithesis of colonialism, something that united and produced an “Indian people” by mobilizing them for struggle against the British. Nationalist leaders such as Gandhi and Nehru were the authors of such an anti-imperial movement for unity of the nation. Chandra claimed that the conflict of interest and ideology between the colonizers and the “Indian people” was the most important conflict of British India. All other conflicts of class or caste were secondary to this principal contradiction and were to be treated as such in histories of nationalism (13).

Parallel to this development was also the works of a number of historians in the west and India such as Gyanendra Pandey, David Hardman, and Kapil Kumar who through their intellectual discourses revealed that the nationalist leaders suppressed a number of minor and yet important struggles that happened during the colonial period. The group used the word as an umbrella phrase covering all sections of society such as peasants, the labourers and so on. The main idea of the group was to rectify or correct history. Guha in his influential essay “On Some

Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India” (1988:37-44) stated that the goals of the group stemmed from the belief that the historiography of the victorious pro-independence movement in India was dominated by elitism – both British colonialist and local bourgeois nationalist. Such historic literature suggested that the development of Indian national consciousness was an exclusive elite achievement and failed to acknowledge or interpret the contribution made by “the people on their own”, that is, “independently of the elite” (39). In this respect, “the politics of the people” (40) should be understood as an autonomous domain that operates outside elite politics (43). One can sum up this in the words of Partha Chaterjee:

In setting their agenda against the two elitisms, the historians of Subaltern Studies focused on two main issues. One was the difference between the political objectives and methods of colonial and nationalist elites on the one hand and those of the subaltern classes on the other. The second was the autonomy of subaltern consciousness (291).

Taking up the binary of the elite and subaltern politics, a series of books and essays were published by the group. The group’s initial readings were connected to the peasant revolts and illustrative of this phase were Ranajit Guha’s *Elementary Aspects* and Gautam Bhadra’s *Faith and the Flag: An Aspect of Peasant Consciousness in Bengal*. Both these works revealed the anticolonial stances that had not been taken into consideration in the reading of the Indian Nationalist Struggle. Other notable works on these issues are Gyanendra Pandey’s *The Ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh 1926-1934* and *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial India*, David Hardman’s *Peasant Nationalism of Gujarat*, Sumit Sarkar’s *Popular Movements and Middle Class*

Leadership in Late Colonial India and *Shahid Amin’s Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-92*. Similarly, Dipesh Chakraborty in *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal (1890-1940)* and Partha Chaterjee in *Nationalist Thought and The Colonial World: a Derivative Discourse* and *The Nation and its Fragments Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* revealed the split and politics’ of the urban working class and the growth of nationalist thought. This first phase of the subaltern studies was received differently. If one set of scholars thought that this was yet another instance of intellectualism, few others were of the opinion that this was a romantic nostalgia to present the peasant in the national struggle. However, many also lauded these historians for pointing out that the nationalist struggle was not a homogenous movement. The first phase highlighted how if the consciousness of the subaltern was built up in one particular phase of history then would it remain so forever and why the peasant had no transformation in spite of the national struggle.

In the second phase questions regarding the subaltern consciousness and the subaltern as an active historical agent cropped up. The same politics of autonomy paved the way for Spivak’s famous essay, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ (1985). Spivak in the essay contested the idea of homogenizing the subaltern and claimed that the subaltern had no voice as she could not represent herself. She clarifies this point in an interview with De Kock:

“Can the Subaltern Speak?” comes out of the recounting of an incident. Now the incident is a situation where a subaltern person had tried extremely hard to speak, to the extent of making her damned suicide into a message. I cannot think of a situation where somebody really tries to communicate that is more urgent than this. ...But every person has decided not to...This is a proof that the subaltern cannot speak:

nobody relates it to the damned suicide, not a person. In fact, every accusation that G. C. Spivak is not letting the bloody subaltern speak is a proof that the subaltern cannot speak, because that's spoken in rage and disappointment by one woman hearing through the most nonmasculine network—mother to daughter, see that's my grandmother's sister. My mother said to me that my grandmother's sister had done this and left a message and waited until menstruation and all that stuff, and in my generation the women have forgotten it. It's the least phallogocentric way of networking and it has failed, so not only has she not been able to speak, her grandniece trying to make her speak has also failed because not one critic has related it to the example which proves for me that the subaltern cannot speak.

Moreover, since the language is of the dominant, there is no choice of language for the subaltern. There is always the point of appropriation and yet Spivak does not accept it for she states:

Guha suggested that while Subaltern Studies would not ignore the dominant, because the subalterns are always subject to their activity, its aim was to "rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much research and academic work" in South Asian studies. The act of rectification sprang from the conviction that the elites had exercised dominance, not hegemony, in Gramsci's sense, over the subalterns. (1477).

Another concern of subaltern studies was the aspect of nationalism and nationalist thought. If Guha had maintained giving autonomy to the subaltern and Spivak had discussed the

voicelessness of the subaltern, Chatterjee delineates the effort exerted on representing the masses. He was of the view that:

The nationalists dealt with this problem by marginalizing certain forms of mass action and expression that run counter to the modernity-driven goals that they derived from the colonial discourse (1478).

In his work *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993), he reveals "how the elite normalized the subaltern desires so as to create a modern state" (1482). The subaltern is not only a descriptive notion whereby, since the subaltern cannot speak, they need an advocate to speak on their behalf. As Spivak objected ("Intro" Selected Subaltern Studies) one of the main themes in subaltern theory is not passively accepting a condition of permanent subordination. It is also accepting "subaltern consciousness as emergent collective consciousness" (15) and this also requires "the strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political project" (13). Therefore, inhabiting the condition of subalternity also means consciously reclaiming the political in order to bring about the conditions to step out from subalternity. Two issues at this point need to be comprehended. First, subaltern is a position in a relationship, and one that describes the situation of many who are not at the bottom of one giant social heap. Secondly, dominance and subordination - the relation of subalternity - is produced historically, and therefore may also be altered historically (4737-4738).

Who Are The Subalterns?

This by itself is a difficult query as all classes of individuals wish to be identified as subalterns. One might examine the history and politics of elite groups linked with historically subordinated populations: the African-

American and the dalit middle classes for example, the "black bourgeoisie" and "dalit brahmins". At another level, one could take up for investigation what Partha Chatterjee has called "political", as distinct from "civil", society: populations of slum dwellers, domestic servants, cheap labour in hotels and small businesses, construction workers, road builders, seasonal labourers on farms, whose legal standing remains uncertain, who may seek and obtain a degree of protection and support from the state and ancillary institutions, but who can still scarcely be counted as members of civil society (4738). Spivak in her interview debates on this topic and thinks the subaltern needs to be decided upon by the nature of discrimination:

The penultimate thing is (I want to say something about the work of the subalternist historians), many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being in a discriminated against minority on the university campus, they don't need the word subaltern, and they don't need Spivak as a whipping girl because she said out of that position that the subaltern cannot speak. They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are, and since they can speak, as they tell me—yes they can speak—I quite agree, they're within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of the pie and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They shouldn't call themselves subaltern...(18)

In fact this has been one of the major issue in literary debates as all classes and sects are liberally utilizing the term and considering that they need to be read through this lens.

Importance of Subaltern Studies

Subaltern studies, has not been received with a warm applause all the time. Although historians acclaimed it and it pervaded postcolonial studies yet some of the scholars point out that the studies are not innovative. One such statement is made by Arif Dirlik (1996, 302) who thinks that the Subaltern Studies, were not as innovative as it seemed and that it had emerged as a methodology initiated by the Marxist historians. He wrote:

Most of the generalizations that appear in the discourse of postcolonial intellectuals from India may appear novel in the historiography of India but are not discoveries from broader perspectives. . . . the historical writing[s] of Subaltern Studies historians . . . represent the application in Indian historiography of trends in historical writings that were quite widespread by the 1970s under the impact of social historians such as E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, and a host of others (10).

If one examines the cause as to why subaltern studies are important one has to understand that at a time when studies in history were one sided it paved the way for a new methodology. At the same time, it also provided countries like India which had a rich base of tribal and other groups of people a discourse that made them prominent. It is now that literary studies have taken over providing a rich and reliable source of study of the subordinated groups. It is, however, to be recognized that the subaltern studies was quite male oriented and although women are part of the struggle they are not the key figures. Second, there was inherent scheme of spiritual consciousness that belonged to the upper classes.

Marginalized/Subaltern

The debate on all of these papers revealed that the subaltern studies project

is standing at something of a crossroads, and that it could go in either of two directions. One road leads towards greater concentration on textual analysis and a stress on the relativity of all knowledge; another towards the study of subaltern consciousness and action so as to forward the struggle for a socialist society. The subaltern studies in the modern era became a part of textual analysis paving the way to comprehend the civil society. As Partha Chatterjee mentions:

Much-studied subjects such as the expansion of colonial governance, English education, movements of religious and social reform, the rise of nationalism—all these were opened to new lines of questioning...The other direction of research concentrated on the modern state and public institutions through which modern ideas of rationality and science and the modern regime of power were disseminated in colonial and postcolonial India.

In recent years, subaltern studies are contesting three important areas, religion, caste and women's status. The religious debates between fundamentalists and secularists have become a popular force in media and elsewhere. Similarly,

the caste issue especially with the rise of dalit literature has become another field of study while women's positions are continuously determined by a intervention of class, caste and communal identities. Today a large body of writing in the guise of subaltern literature is being pushed under the terminology of marginalized literature. Literature that deals with the marginal can be placed under this definition. Marginality in sociological terms been pushed to the edges while another form of definition could be that it is a state of being in which an individual or a community is marginalized by a dominant force/ forces. Hence, simplistically speaking marginalization is a process of domination and subordination. This premise partly answers the question who marginalizes whom? Besides this understanding, there are complex issues involved when we theorize domination and subordination. Subaltern writing could be marginal works but not all marginal literature needs to be subaltern. Works that deal with the minorities such as David Esther's *Walled City*, or Rohinton Mistry's *Tales From Firozsha Baag* are marginal literature but not subaltern studies. It is therefore important to distinguish between the two terms and use them judiciously.

WORKS CITED

- Baer, Ben Conisbee. "Shit Writing: Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable, the Image of Gandhi, and the Progressive Writers' Association". In *Modernism/ Modernity*. Vol. 16, No. 3, Sept 2009, pp. 575-595.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "Radical Histories and Question of Enlightenment Rationalism: Some Recent Critiques of 'Subaltern Studies'" *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 30, No. 14 (Apr. 8, 1995), pp. 751-759. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4402598>. Accessed: 17/09/2012 06:45.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography". *Views from South*, Volume 1, Issue 1, 2000, pp. 9-32 (Article). Access Provided by Pondicherry University at 09/17/12 11:06AM GMT <http://muse>.
- De Kock, Leon: "Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa". *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 23:3, July 1992.

- Hardiman, David "'Subaltern Studies' at Crossroads". *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 21, No. 7 (Feb. 15, 1986), pp. 288-290
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4375333>. Accessed: 17/09/2012 06:45.
- Mani, Lata. *Cultural Traditions: The Debate in Colonial India in Cultural Critique*, 7 (Fall 1987).
- Natarajan, Nalini. "South Asian Area Studies in Transatlantic Dialogue". *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Volume 27, Number 3, 2007, pp. 591-600 (Article)
- Pandey, Gyanendra. "The Subaltern as Subaltern Citizen". *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 41, No. 46 (Nov. 18-24, 2006), pp. 4735-4741. URL:
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4418914> . Accessed: 17/09/2012 06:42.
- Pandian, M. S. S. "Kumbakonam Encounters Subaltern Studies". *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 32, No. 8 (Feb. 22-28, 1997), pp. 398-399 URL:
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4405115> . Accessed: 17/09/2012 06:41.
- Prakash, Gyan. "Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography". Social Text. No 31/32. *Third World and Post-Colonial Issues*, 1992. pp 8-19.
- Sawhney, Simona. Review of Subaltern Studies XI. Edited by Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jeganathan. *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 3:3, 2002.
<http://criticalstew.org/?p=43>
<http://leflaneur.tumblr.com/post/550889176/excerpt-from-an-interview-with-gayatri-chakravorty>: Excerpt from an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak by Leon de Kock