



Epistemic Violence and Colonialism: A Study of Coetzee's "Foe" with special reference to Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

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Keywords:

Subaltern; Colonized; Epistemic: Violence; Tongue less.

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Funding Information:

No funding information provided.

Received:

February 2014; Accepted: April 2014

International Journal of Scientific
Footprints 2014; 2(2): 13–17

Abstract

Spivak's *Can the subaltern speak* questions the legitimations of the western discourse over the colonized subject. The colonized subject has been the area of studies for most of the occidental writers and the way they projected the so-called 'others'. The validity of an authentic 'self' of the colonized 'subject' is the center of query in Spivak's essay. The subaltern has become a standard way to designate the colonial subject that has been constructed by European discourse and internalized by colonial peoples who employ these discourses.

Introduction

"As long as you close your ears to me, mistrusting every word I say as a word of slavery, poisoned, do you serve me any better than the slavers served Friday when they robbed him of his tongue?" (Foe, p-150)

Prologue:

Subaltern is a British word for someone of inferior military rank and combines the Latin terms for 'under' (sub) and 'other' (alter). According to Spivak the term Subaltern refers

to the people who have been as equally instructed in history as the Europeans but have been under representation. The most significant intellectual sources for Spivak's definition of the subaltern are the early twentieth-century Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci and the work of the mainly Indian-based Subaltern Studies Collective. Gramsci used the term to refer in particular to the unorganized groups of rural peasants based in Southern Italy, who had no social or

political consciousness as a group and were therefore susceptible to the ruling ideas, culture and leadership of the state.

Objective:

The objective of my paper is to probe out the ideological epistemic violence of the colonizers upon the subaltern through the study of J.M. Coetzee's "Foe" with special reference to Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern speak?"

Methodology:

The paper is based upon the literature review of the secondary information in the context of Coetzee's "Foe" and Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern speak?" and sources of these literatures include journals, reviews, books, published research articles and website sources.

Discussion:

Spivak's critique of Subaltern Studies Collective sheds light on the position of a subaltern through her essay "Can the Subaltern speak?" Spivak's answer to the question 'Can the Subaltern speak?' is a strict no. Spivak essay starts with the most striking sentence "Here is a woman who tried to be decisive in extremes." Through this line Spivak tries to establish that subaltern cannot

speak by drawing the fact that even women don't want to hear a woman which compels her to become a subaltern- a person without lines of social mobility. It implies what a woman speak it doesn't make any sense for the patriarchal society as well as for the colonizers. In Coetzee's "Foe", we are confronted with this pathetic situation which transforms Susan Barton from a female to a subaltern.

"I do not wish to hear of your desire," said

Cruso. (Foe, p-36)

Spivak also deals with the idea that the leftists' intellectuals represent the subaltern by imposing their own ideologies. For Spivak, the problem with Foucault and Deleuze is that they efface their role as intellectuals in representing the disempowered groups they describe. Western intellectuals begin to take the aesthetic dimension of political representation into account. Spivak argues that these intellectuals will continue to silence the voice of subaltern and the representators try to be the master of the subaltern. There the thing is that the Western intellectuals by re-presenting and representing the epistemic violence to the subaltern.

In "Foe", Friday is "re-presented" (re-presentation as aesthetic portrait) and "represented" (representation by political

proxy) by Coetzee as:

*“Firewood is the word I have taught him,”
said Cruso. “Wood he does not know.” (Foe,
p-21)*

It is Cruso in the novel who is determining how many words Friday needs in the name of representing him and it is Coetzee who compel Friday to be destined as a subaltern in the name of re-presenting him.

Spivak also gives a critique of the individual agent and thereby of the subjectivity of the collective agency. She cites an example of Bhubaneswary Bhaduri who was an active agent of a particular group. By mentioning her act, Spivak tries to establish the fact that the subaltern has to entrap in social structure and has to hold his/her tongue then where is his/her agency.

In “Foe”, Susan Barton is such a character, or we can say subaltern, who has to “make a vow to keep a tighter rein on her tongue”, whenever she wants to say something against the wrong deed of Robinson Cruso as well as the author figure “Foe”. Though she considers herself as an individual agent then where is her agency?

In her essay Spivak also talks about the uneasy separation between the disciplinary formations in Sanskrit studies and the native

within the former, the cultural explanations generated by authoritative scholars matched the epistemic violence of the legal project.

Susan likewise is also trying to impose her own language, her ‘high culture’ upon Friday in the name of teaching language through some stereotypical representation:

*“Africa I represented as a row of palm trees
with a lion roaming among them.” (Foe, p-
146)*

For Spivak the term ‘subaltern’ is useful because it is flexible; it can accommodate social identities and struggles that do not fall under the reductive term of ‘strict class-analysis’.

Friday is also a character free from the strict class-analysis, a subaltern who is flexible:

*“I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a
cannibal; I say he is a laundryman and he
becomes a laundryman.” (Foe, p-121)*

The basic discourse in the essay discussed by Spivak is the sati system. Here she emphasizes how the benevolent, radical western intellectual can paradoxically silence the subaltern by claiming to represent and speak for their experience, in the same way that the benevolent colonialist silenced the voice of the widow, who “chooses” to die on

her husband's funeral pyre. 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. Here sati can't speak because she is already represented by two dominant ideologies, then where is her scope to speak?

In the novel "Foe" Coetzee very meticulously plays with the idea of 'tonguelessness' and 'speechlessness'. Because perhaps, he is the follower of the idea that "subaltern cannot speak". In the novel the reason of mutilation of Friday is given by two western intellectuals, Robinson Crusoe and Susan Barton. But here Friday gets no space to speak and Susan tries to impose her own ideology upon Friday that Crusoe had cut out his tongue by presenting various paintings, related with the cut of his tongue, in front of him. But the fact might be like that, perhaps, in the native community, the men cannot speak; only the women are allowed to speak. In this novel, there are examples of epistemic violence and the stereotypical colonial discourse in the novel. For instance, Susan again and again tries to impose her own ideology upon Friday in the name of civilization, in the name of freedom. Another instance might be the definition for freedom for Susan might not be the same definition for Friday. Thus Susan

says:

"There is an urging that we feel, all of us, in our hearts, to be free; yet which of us can say what freedom truly is? When I am rid of Friday, will I then know freedom?"

Susan tries to set free Friday and manages to send him Africa as she believes Africa is Friday's native land, but who knows Susan liked it or not? Susan also wants Friday to mimic her when she commands him "watch and do", but the thing is that Friday might not be ready to bow down to his enslavement imposed by Susan.

Epilogue:

According to Spivak when we go through the colonizer and colonized study we find the male dominance. The 'elite' people choose the 'non-elite' people to represent. In her essay she criticizes the Subaltern Studies Collective, because they are intellectuals, uncommon men and going to represent a common man.

In "Foe", the author 'Foe' is such a character, who is a fruit of orientalism. He tries to impose his own ideologies into the story of Susan, by dragging some interventions in the story. He tries to give his own color to the story of post-colonial character, Susan Barton. Here, an intellectual, an uncommon man

represents the story of a common man. It seems that Susan's story does not make any sense for the author, by doing so Foe defines Susan as a "subaltern." Thus the authentic 'self' of the oppressed colonizers are deconstructed time and again and the quest to find an authentic 'self' remains a very distant proposition. Their identity is so much muddled up with the existing discourse and ideology that the voice of the "subaltern" is suppressed to silence.

"I would not rob you of your tongue for anything, Susan. Leave Friday here for the afternoon. Go for a stroll. Take the air. See the sights. I am sadly enclosed. Be my spy. Come back and report to me how the world does." (Foe, p-150)

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