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RETHINKING OF INTELLECTUAL INTERVENTION ON THE SUBALTERN VOICE

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Abstract: Postcolonial theory on subaltern is presented in order to examine the subaltern's voice in which its status is still debatable, whether they can voice for themselves or not. According to Spivak, subaltern does not have their own voice. She then proposes the idea of letting the intellectual intervention in voicing subaltern's voice. However, her proposal is opposed by some theorist; one of them is Homi Baba. He believes that there is no need to borrow intellectual voice because the subaltern voicing themselves, due to the ambivalence of the colonizer's power. This paper will examine how the debate related to the intellectual intervention in voicing the subaltern voice by contextualizing in the case of Sati and Bhuvanewari.

Keywords: Subaltern's voice, Postcolonial studies, Spivak.

INTRODUCTION

According to Oxford dictionary, subaltern is a person holding a subordinate position; a particular proposition that follows immediately from a universal. Tracing back to the history, the first person who introduces the term subaltern is Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist political activist, in his famous book

Prison Notebooks written in 1929-1935. According to Gramsci, the subaltern refers to any "low rank" person or group of people in a particular society suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class (Louai, 5). This term is influenced by the time when the workers and peasants are oppressed and discriminated by the leader of the

National Fascist Party, Benito Mussolini and his agent (Louai, 5). In this case, Gramsci is interested to study about subaltern in order to voice out subaltern voice, because he does not rely on the elitist or ruling party that sometimes oppress them. The subaltern group is established and maintained by hegemony. Hegemony is the internalized form of social control which makes certain views seem 'natural' or invisible (Barry, 111). It can be maintained through two structures (Althusser concept), repressive (by force) and ideological structure, that can influence the subaltern to be submissive to the authoritative party. Repressive structures refer to the institutions, like the law, court, prison, police, or army. Ideological structures refer to political parties, schools, media, church, family, and art which introduces certain ideology.

In the context of post colonialism subaltern means the group which is in the inferior position due to the colonization. There is a debate in society that question the status of subaltern. The oppositional party believes that subaltern cannot speak

due to their inferiority in society. "One never encounters the testimony of women's voice-consciousness, There is no space from where the subaltern (sexed) subject can speak, The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read, The subaltern cannot speak" (Parry, 36). The question will be is there any possible action to voice out subaltern's voice? According to Spivak one way for their voice is heard is by asking for the superior party to voice out their voice. The next question will be who is the superior party that can represent their voice? White men, White women, Non-Europe men? Using that logic the problem will be they will stay in their endless cycle of colonialism. However, the subaltern can speak due to the ambivalence of power, "relation of power and knowledge function ambivalently... is able to intercede against and resist this mode of construction" (Parry, 41). That is why this paper will study about the postcolonial debate on Spivak's *Can Subaltern Speak?* focusing on the intellectual intervention in voicing subaltern.

METHODS

This study employs qualitative research method. The primary sources are Spivak seminal essay which is *Can Subaltern Voice?*. This study employs three steps in interpreting the data; describing, analysing, and deriving a conclusion. First, this study describes the framework of subaltern. Second, this study compares Spivak's *Can Subaltern Voice?* and *Intellectual Intervention*. Third, this study tries to derive the conclusion about subaltern.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

***Can Subaltern Speak?* by Gayatri Spivak**

Spivak's essay on "Can Subaltern Speak?" is about how the subaltern's voice cannot be heard because of their inferiority, so they need intellectual intervention to voice out their voice. In this case, the term 'cannot speak' should not be understood literally but metaphorically which means the injustice condition, related to subaltern's status in the colonized country. Tracing the history, subaltern is muted due to their status as "the Other" signifying the East/inferior and "Self" as the Western/superior. The

term "the Other" is used as the projection of the characteristics that Western people are not admitted, like cruelty, sensuality, decadence, laziness, and soon (Barry, 128). Barry explains further that the East is to be seen homogeneously in which they are treated as their group (black, Asian, or Orientals) rather than their individual status (Barry, 128). Therefore, this construction is established in order to justify the operation directing to "the Other," "The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be 'Oriental' in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth century European, but also it *could be* – that is, submitted to being – *made Oriental*" (William and Chrisman, 133). This concept of other/self closely related to Michel Foucault's understanding of "epistemic violence" that is used by Spivak to constitute colonial subject as the Other defined by West (William and Chrisman, 76). The example of epistemic violence is the abolition of Sati by British colony in India. Sati is the Hindu widow ascends the pyre of the dead husband and immolated

herself upon it. This is widow sacrifice (William and Chrisman, 93).

This abolition can be understood as epistemic violence in a way that it weakens the status of Indian men, in this case they become more characterized as barbaric and uncivilized. The abolition can be understood as “White men are saving brown women from brown men” because it gives a narrative that the colonizer/White men are perceived as savior from the evil of brown men by brown women. In the end, it legitimates India as barbaric or uncivilized country needs western intervention to civilize them. In the end, the subaltern is hard to resist the White power. The second possibility from the case of sati is that it is a proof on how subaltern loses their voices. This is because the colonialism and patriarchy unite to oppress and marginalize the subaltern, in this case they cover women’s voice. In fact, the one who gives testimony of sati is either colonizer or men. Seeing the case of sati it can be seen that the subaltern existence is exactly disappear, so it is impossible to trace their voice in society.

She also gives the example of Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri who is hanging herself in her father’s modest apartment in North Calcutta in 1926 (William and Chrisman, 103), there is an argument that she commits suicide because of illicit pregnancy. However, people are confused with the suicide because Bhuvaneswari is still menstruating, it means that it is not a case of illicit pregnancy. Actually, her suicide is because of her incapability in accepting the task from the group, which is conducting political assassination.

Nearly a decade later, it was discovered that she was a member of one of the many groups involved in the armed struggle for Indian Independence. She had finally been entrusted with a political assassination. Unable to confront the task and yet aware of the practical need for trust, she killed herself (William and Chrisman, 101).

Actually, her suicide signifies his internalization of the subaltern values in which they have to be silent in every condition. Therefore, as a form

of last resort, she chooses to commit suicide. The question will be why she does not tell to other people or women? because there is a relation with the inability of subaltern, especially women, to speak. According to Spivak, women get the worst treatment in the colonized country due to their status as women and colonized. Therefore, their inner thought and desperation will not be heard to other people or women. It is a proof that the oppressed person is impossible to be heard because they never speak at the beginning.

Spivak's argument that the subaltern does not have voice is being counteracted by Homi Bhaba. He believes that subaltern can speak since the colonial discourse and power are always ambivalent. The relation between colonized and colonizer is not fix, it is open to any reversal. It can be said that by using the notion of "hibridity", it is possible for the subaltern resists the power of their colonizer. "Hybridity is central to Bhaba's work in challenging notions of identity, culture, and nation as coherent and unified entities that exhibit a linear historical development.

Hybridity expresses a state of in betweenness" (750).

Bhaba believes that his notion of "hybridity" or "mimicry" can make the subaltern showing their voice in both discourse and society by imitating the colonizer's style, but having their own stance. In other words, mimicry is the need for acknowledging the other that is similar like the colonizer though they are not really the same.

The master discoursed can be interrogated by the natives in their own accents and then the subaltern can produces an autonomous position from colonial reading. He strengthen his argument by arguing that what the native rewrite is not a copy for colonialist original, but a qualitatively different thing (Parry, 42).

However, the problem with Bhaba's hibridity is that how the subaltern's can separate their writing with colonizer's idea. Similar to Homi Bhaba, Benita Parry also disagrees with Spivak's understanding on the inability of subaltern in voicing their voice. Parry argues that Spivak seems giving much power to the hegemonic

discourse by silencing the subaltern. Actually, that is the reason why Spivak cannot clearly see the resistance of subaltern in reading *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In Spivak's reading she is just claiming that the Other (Antoinette, white Creole) is impossible to be the Self seeing his cultural identity which is not pure White. Spivak believes that Antoinette just mirroring Tia (Parry, 39).

We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her... When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it... I looked at her and I saw her face crumble as she began to cry. We started at each other blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass (parry, 39).

Intellectual Intervention

Related to the subaltern's voice, Spivak proposes the use of intellectual intervention in voicing subaltern voice. Actually, it has already been granted its success. This strategy has already done

by Foucault in representing those who are not in power. For this case, Spivak proposes that intellectuals must attempt to disclose and know the discourse of society's Other (William and Chrisman, 66). The representative's bias and ideology will be there, one thing that should be remembered is that they have already understand aware of subaltern's condition, so they are truly speaking on the behalf of the subaltern's voice. At first, she is against this kind of essentialist group, like Marxist which speaks for the working class, feminism which speaks for oppressed women, and so on, because she believes that people should be treated by their individuality not their group. However, Spivak thinks that the violence of subaltern has already been severe in term of epistemic, discipline, and social, it is very possible to make an essentialist claim. "Spivak points out the suggestion that all third world peoples stand in the same relation to global capitalism and should respond to it in the same way is essentialist" (Patel, 127).

CONCLUSION

The term 'subaltern' has already created debate in society. For Spivak, subaltern cannot speak, for Benita Parry Spivak's action in not acknowledging the subaltern's voice is a form of western representation, for Homi Bhaba subaltern can speak due to the ambivalency of the colonizer's power. Subaltern will always be subaltern because the intervention of colonizer hegemony. However, it can be said that subaltern has their voice but there is no other willingness to hear their voice, especially for the colonizer or dominant party. Therefore, it justifies for intellectual intervention to help women in voicing their voice. For this case, the intellectuals should not directly speak for them but opening the way for subaltern to speak by their own self, acknowledging and giving them the access to vote or write for example. In the end, they will feel their presence is acknowledged by others and start to speak for their own voice though it will take much effort and time.

Suggestion for Further Research

For further research, it can also analyze Spivak's idea of intellectual intervention in speaking up the subaltern but focusing on the literary works.

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