

The Question of Representation— Spivak

The **subaltern**, according to my OED (a very useful book!), is one of inferior status or rank; subordinate; hence, of rank, power, authority, action. The subaltern is the social group who - politically, socially and often geographically - is outside of hegemonic discourse. Usually, this is in terms of the colonial power; as you may notice, this continues our work on Gramsci. According to this theory, the subaltern is excluded from a society's established structures for political representation, the means by which people have a voice in their society.



“For me, the question ‘Who should speak?’ is less crucial than ‘Who will listen?’” (Spivak 594)

“But the real demand is that, when I speak from that position, I should be listened to seriously; not with that kind of benevolent imperialism” (Spivak 595)

“On the other hand, it is very important to hold on to it as a slogan in our time. The question of ‘speaking *as*’ involves a distancing from oneself. The moment I have to think of the ways in which I will speak as an Indian, or as a feminist, the ways in which I will speak as a woman, what I am doing is trying to generalise myself, make myself a representative, trying to distance myself from some kind of inchoate speaking *as such*. There are many subject positions which one must inhabit; one is not just one thing [emphasis original]” (Spivak 595).

“[T]he whole *notion* of authenticity, of the authentic migrant experience, is one that comes to us constructed by hegemonic voices; and so, what one has to tease out is what is not there [emphasis original]” (Spivak 595-6).

Spivak’s “commitment to rendering visible the historical and institutional structures from within” (600)

No one can quite articulate the space she herself inhabits. My attempt has been to describe this relatively ungraspable space in terms of what might be its history. I’m always uneasy if I’m asked to speak for my space—it’s the thing that seems to be most problematic, and something that one really only learns from other people. (601)

I am not interested in defending the post-colonial intellectual’s dependence on Western models: my work lies in making clear my disciplinary predicament. My position is generally a reactive one. I am viewed by the Marxists as too codic, by feminists as too male-identified, by indigenous theorists as too committed to Western theory. I am uneasily pleased about this. One’s vigilance is sharpened by the way one is perceived, but it does not involve defending oneself. (603)

“The idea of neutral dialogue is an idea which denies history, denies structure, denies the positioning of subjects. I would try to look how, in fact, the demand for a dialogue is articulated” (605).

“Why not develop a certain degree of rage against the history that has written such a script for you that you are silenced” (597)

1. How does a hegemonic discourse of male superiority limit (or deny) a female voice? Further, how does a hegemonic discourse of white superiority perform the same denial to 'black' (read non-white) voices?

2. Building on this, I'm curious to discuss why, as well as the implications of, David Lodge and Nigel Wood selected extracts from two interviews with Spivak for inclusion in the Lodge, especially when she's written so many critical essays ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" is possibly her most well-known).

3. Spivak deals thoroughly with issues of representation, particularly two kinds: 1) 'representation' as 'speaking for' (like in politics) and 2) 're-presentation' (art or philosophy). First, think through the differences (and maybe similarities) between the two notions of representation. Return to *Buddha* and find examples (give me quotes) of both kinds of representation.

4. How does Spivak define "tokenism"? Do any of the characters in *Buddha* serve as tokens in this way? (See, 595-597)

5. What does Spivak mean by "an historical critique of your position? (597)" Can you consider this in relation to your position as a first-year undergraduate at The University of Warwick? (Go read the quote on 597, it will help as will the exchange on 600-601)