OBJECT(ING) TO SUBJECT(S): READING RE-PRESENTATIONS OF THE SUBALTERNITY OF WOMEN THROUGH 'THING THEORY'

Abstract

In her seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Gayatri Spivak deconstructs the very Eurocentric figure of the human as depicted in the discourses of postcolonial historiography and subaltern studies. By re-presenting the figure of the subaltern as a woman, she argues "[I]f 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). A close reading of her text through the critical framework of 'thing theory' could offer us new directions in employing the subaltern as a "cartographic tool" involved in processes of "undoing the human" and the figure of the "Man/Anthropos" in postcolonial scholarships and narratives often dominated by men (Braidotti, 2018). The 'shadow' here – where Spivak argues the "subaltern as female" is further pushed into – can refer to "the balmy elsewhere beyond theory" where lurks the metaphorical figure of the woman as the thing-in-itself problematizing the binary between subject and object (Brown, 2001). Focusing on the works of Romila Thapar, in the context of ancient Indian history, and Brij V. Lal, regarding the history of indentured labour in Indo-Fijian Diaspora, this paper presents an analysis of some of the documented narratives of female self-immolation (sati) and suicide (both committed and attempted) and how the same constructed the subject position of women as objects of colonialist historiography. My paper will also offer a comparative reading of the biographical account of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri's suicide, that Spivak refers to, in 'Can the

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Subaltern Speak?’, for deconstructing the question of agency of women, against the fictional depiction of Mangala Bibi in Amitav Ghosh’s Calcutta Chromosome who subverts the colonial systems of knowledge by transitioning from being an object of investigation to becoming the one who studies the erstwhile investigating (colonialist) subject. I argue here that Bill Brown’s ‘thing theory’ is useful in interrogating established modes of reading informed by Eurocentric/anthropocentric discourses to subvert the position of the woman as the subaltern in colonialist historiography.

Keywords: postcolonial, subaltern, thing theory, women studies

I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I primarily argue that the subalternity of women can be illustrated through the lens of the subject-object dialectical relation which entraps the woman while offering her, in specific processes of discourse-formation, the illusion of being empowered. Building upon Bill Brown's 'thing theory' (2001) as a critical framework employed in reading re-presentations of the subalternity of women in documented narratives, I propose that the subaltern as woman, in the discursive production of knowledge, mutates into a thing-in-herself when her position as the "object of investigation" (Spivak, 1988, p. 92) is interrogated and the notion of s/Subject is deconstructed. In her seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Gayatri Spivak poses the titular question as an "object of simple semiosis" that allows her to ask what it means to say that "[w]hite men are saving brown women from brown men" (1988, p. 92). As a postcolonial intellectual, she assumes the role of the "investigating subject" to interrogate the modes of discourse-production and subject-constitution that enable the continued ideological formation of subalterns by rendering the women mute in the structural hegemony of the erstwhile colonial state (Spivak, 1988). What this means – to participate in the act of semiosis that Spivak proposes – is precisely that mainstream history, as incorporated in the academic curriculum of the educational institutions in most of the Third World nations, systematically pushed the woman into the shadows of obscurity. The woman, even in discourses like the one on 'sati' that concerns her positionality in the question of determining social agency, never becomes the agential/empowered subject. I conclude, as I shall elaborate in this paper, that the woman (as subaltern) is the perpetual Other, treated as an object of study, in colonialist historiography.

Spivak makes a useful etymological distinction between representation and re-presentation by referring to the German counterparts of the word as used by Karl Marx in the context of the international division of labour– 'vertreten' and 'darstellen' (1988). On the one hand, 'vertreten' means to represent as in politics, or to speak for and thereby, in the process of "speaking for" and "listening to" the subalterns, substitute them (Spivak, 1988, pp.70-71). On the other hand, then, 'darstellen' means to re-present as in theory, philosophy or arts (Spivak, 1988, pp.70-71). In other words, therefore, 'vetreten' is the political act of representing a community or individual by speaking for them or on their behalf, and 'darstellen' signifies the act of reproducing a social reality based on one's interpretation of the same which could be further influenced or conditioned by various socio-political as well as economic and cultural institutions. My attempt, here, is to read re-presentations ('darstellen') of the subalternity of women in historically documented narratives produced by two major historians – Romila Thapar (2014) working on ancient Indian history and its contemporary impacts especially in the context of the once widely-prevalent practice of 'sati' (self-immolation of women) and Brij V. Lal (2012) studying, albeit against the grain, documented evidences of what is now known as neo-slavery perpetrated by the colonial state on the 'girmitiyas' of the indentured diaspora.

I propose to employ the critical framework of 'thing theory' in my reading of the aforementioned texts and narratives. According to Brown, when the role of being subservient to the subject in question becomes invalid, the 'thingness' of the object attracts critical attention (2001). This thing, in most cases, unless the literary critic purposely intervenes, lurks "in the balmy elsewhere beyond theory" (Brown, 2001, pp.1-7). To compare this with Spivak's trajectory of the subaltern: the theory the subaltern takes the figure of the male as

the assumed subject; the woman as subaltern, therefore, is not just doubly oppressed but more pushed into the shadow beyond the scope of discovery. By re-presenting the figure of the subaltern as a woman, she famously argues "[I]f 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, 2003). The female subaltern is a figure often treated as an object of investigative study in colonialist historiography and never a subject in herself. I will return to this later following a theoretical discussion on discourse with the history of the practice and prevention of 'sati' as our case in context.

II. DISMISSIVE DISCOURSES OR DISCURSIVE DISMISSALS? TRACING THE POSITIONALITY OF WOMEN (AS SUBALTERNS) IN COLONIALIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

Lata Mani's pathbreaking work on a nuanced analysis of the official discourse on 'sati' as produced by the State of the erstwhile British colonized India offers an insightful commentary on the positionality of the woman in colonial historiography (1986). In the state-sanctioned formation of scriptural knowledge as discourse/power, the woman – the very subject of this official discourse on 'sati' in relation to institutions affiliated to the Hindu religion and the colonial government of the British Imperial Empire – has always been the "object of investigation" (Spivak, 1988). Mani argues that a careful examination of the production of a discourse is important in uncovering the 'privileged' and the 'marginalised' (Mani, 1986, p. 32). This brings us back to Spivak's proposition regarding "systematic unlearning" which is a project that the postcolonial intellectual as the "investigating subject" must undertake in her endeavour of "measuring silences" of the subaltern who has been muted in various models of discourse formation (1988, p. 92). It is to be noted that both Spivak (1988) and Mani (1986) refer to Foucault's conceptualisation of 'discourse' in the production of knowledge as power and Edward Said's theory of 'Orientalism' that marks the onset of the postcolonial critique of Eurocentric knowledge production as racial discourses.

As an ideological tool in the Marxist notion, a discourse is produced through dialogic interactions between institutions of the State apparatus (Mani, 1986). In the case of the production of an official discourse on 'sati', as Mani points out in her essay, the interaction was initiated by the colonial government with the pundits who were the patriarchal representatives of the Hindu religion (1986). In observing their commitment of not hurting religious sentiments of the indigenous communities and people, the colonial British government invited the pundits to study the religious scriptures of Hinduism to find out if the practice of 'sati' was endorsed by the religion. The outcome of this interaction produced, first, a debate that later assumed the form of a discourse regarding the central problematic of the practice of self-immolation of women on the pyre of their dead husbands (Mani, 1986). A few questions, therefore, arise in this context. Why was it that the dialogic interaction so necessary for the production of an official discourse regarding the question of a woman's life/death only involved male participation in both the parties (the white male-dominated colonial administration, on the one hand, and the pundits who were the brown men representing the institutions of Hinduism, on the other)? Did the very process of the official discourse-production regarding the question of legitimately banning the practice of 'sati' not end up dismissing the agency of the very women that it was supposed to be concerned about? Is what we observe here not a silently effective process of formation of subalterns who were

rendered voiceless in the discourse(s) concerning, of all things, their agency to being saved from getting killed in the name of religion?

In all of this prolonged history regarding the debate on 'sati' which existed since its very inception in the scriptures (including the Dharmashastra and the Rig Veda), as realised by those pundits in their colonial state-sanctioned research and also by postcolonial scholars studying the theological texts associated with Hinduism in their pursuit of uncovering the past of ancient India, there is something that should catch the literary critic's attention. At a superficial level, it might appear that the discourse on the ban on 'sati' as legislatively ordered by the colonial government of the British Empire revolved around the subject of reducing moral crime against women (Mani, 1986; Thapar, 2014, pp. 278-292). It is true that arguments were raised in the colonial administration, and rightfully so, in favour of abolishing a ritual that literally allowed the killing of widowed women in the name of religion (Mani, 1986). However, after a close reading of these narratives as discussed above, it cannot be ignored that the British government's first instinct was to engage in a dialogue with the Hindu pundits urging them to study the religious scriptures to make sure that the practice of 'sati' was not unambiguously endorsed by the religion before the administration intervened to incriminate the practice. Why is it that in his 'noble' pursuit of saving the helpless brown widow from the misogynistic tyranny of the brown men, the white male saviour on his colonising mission would prioritise the concern of (not) hurting the religious sentiments of a community under his rule? If this is the question that the postcolonial intellectual asks after a discourse analysis, she must ask a seemingly simpler question of "semiotic analysis" which unironically yields a result of greater significance (Mani, 1986; Mani, 1988). As the "investigating subject" in her project of "systematic unlearning", Spivak asks: what does it mean when we say that the white man (seen as the benevolent coloniser) was saving the brown woman (here, the 'helpless' and also voiceless widow) from the brown man who is seen as the 'savage' native in the Eurocentric discourse-production that preserves the episteme of the "subject of the West" as well as "the West as Subject" (1988, p. 66).

I conclude that in the production of knowledge as discourse surrounding the debates on 'sati', the officials of the colonial administration, on the one hand, through their interaction with the representatives of the indigenous Brahmanical elite of the state, on the other, perceives of the brown woman, whose life is at stake in the processes involved, as a mere object of study. To understand this, it is imperative that we look into some of the detailed case studies produced as postcolonial re-presentations of the central problematic in an attempt to 'systematically unlearn', to borrow Spivak's words, the discursive knowledge we received from the colonial narratives of mainstream history.

III. POSTCOLONIAL RE-PRESENTATIONS AS PROJECT(S) OF "SYSTEMATIC UNLEARNING"

In the chapter entitled 'Becoming Sati: The Problematic Widow', of her book *The Past as Present*, Romila Thapar observes that the concept of self-immolation of a widow on the same funeral pyre of her deceased husband – or the practice of 'sati' as it was famously known across India and to the British government as "suttee" – is not an act that one can commit, as in suicide (2014). The widow, through her voluntarily exercised act of self-immolation on the same pyre as her deceased husband, becomes a 'sati' which in Sanskrit (if the definition as provided in texts like Dharmashatra and RgVeda are considered), roughly

means "pure woman" (Thapar, 2014, pp. 278-292). The self-sacrificing widow, therefore, performs this act to re-unite with her husband ("sat") in afterlife thereby proving her unwavering loyalty to him even after death. In September of 1987, an eighteen-year-old Roop Kanwar, in the Deorala district of Rajasthan, reportedly decided to become 'sati' by sitting on the same pyre as her recently deceased husband. According to her in-laws and the villagers, Kanwar's decision to commit this act of suicide was completely voluntary and not forced upon her by anybody (Bhadwar, 1987). This incident, one of the last reported cases of 'sati' in independent India of the twentieth century, led to a huge outcry not just all across the nation but also in the international forum so much so that the State Government of Rajasthan was forced to act appropriately in the situation despite exhibiting some initial hesitation in the process for which it came under the attack of the media and various activists and organizations. The Prevention of the Sati Act was introduced and passed in the Parliament that year with hardly any opposition (Bhadwar, 1987).

In Brij V Lal's "Kunti's Cry", the eponymous protagonist of this real-life historical account was a young unmarried woman (working as an indentured labourer in the plantations of Fiji) who was punished to work in a patch of land segregated from the rest of the workers (2012, pp. 195-214). It may be worth mentioning here that punishment through segregation was a common disciplinary tactic used by the colonial overseers on the indentured labourers. Now, one colonial overseer took advantage of this opportunity to make inappropriate advances, of sexual nature, towards Kunti who then in a fit of rage and indignation jumped into the nearby water body to, as the account goes, protect her 'purity' from being corrupted by the said officer. Since she was actually saved from drowning by a fellow labourer, it interestingly became a case of brown men saving brown women from white men. But the colonial investigator published a report in the gazette claiming that the white man did nothing wrong and that Kunti was only being used by the community of indentured labourers to slander the colonizers (Lal, 2012, pp. 195-214). This, paradoxically, creates a counternarrative which is that of the trope of 'white men trying to save brown women from brown men'.

Here lies the problem: the act of self-immolation – or in Kunti's case, an attempted but failed case of suicide – was often hailed as a 'pious act' committed by the widow on her own free will to re-unite with her deceased husband in afterlife as we saw in the reports of the witness for the Roop Kanwar incident. There are various debates on this, in RgVeda and later in the works of Manu, with some even condoning the practice. When the British government banned this practice, their justification was that there is no uniform evidence among the various scriptures of Hinduism that unanimously supports the practice of 'sati' or 'suttee' (Thapar, 2014). It was, therefore, seen as a criminal act perpetrated by the brown man upon the brown woman often with the motive of taking over the property of the deceased man which could have otherwise been passed on to the widowed wife, as it was mostly the case in Bengal where women were entitled to property rights of their husbands unlike the traditional Hindu convention in other states of the erstwhile India during and before the British Raj (Spivak, 1988). As Spivak mentions, this is a clear case of 'white man saving brown woman from brown man' by liberating the brown woman from an oppressive social/religious custom – the saviour act of the colonizing mission. However, according to Thapar (2014), since a lot of brown men justified the practice of 'becoming Sati' on the grounds of it being a pious act of women, it is paradoxically also the case of the brown man saving the brown woman from the white man by trying to protect or preserve her purity and bestowing upon her a certain

kind of moral superiority which, of course, is rooted in a grossly patriarchal mindset not uncommon in the social structure of mostly rural, but also urban, colonial as well as postcolonial India. The woman, in either instance, becomes, as Spivak notes, "the object of protection" (1988, p. 94). By protecting the brown woman "from her own kind", the coloniser marks the "good image" of the Imperialist project (Spivak, 1988, p. 94). In both cases, the woman is being falsely portrayed as the empowered subject who has agency to make a choice. However, it is clear that the woman *becoming* 'sati' only has the illusion of agency and is ultimately entrapped and not empowered since the choice of life/death is not hers to make. The critical question to be asked here should be this: whose perceived subaltern she is to be saved by or from?

Rosi Braidotti's neo-Spinozist distinction between power as empowerment ('potentia') and power as entrapment ('potestas') might be useful here (2018, p. 3). The woman feels entrapped as an 'object of protection' when the white colonizer, as part of his colonising mission, attempts to save her from the brown man or when the brown man tries to preserve her sanctity from being corrupted by justifying the act of becoming 'sati' as an act of virtue and courage. To clarify my point, in both cases, the white man or the brown man constructs a narrative to convince the woman that she is empowered to exercise her agency thereby intentionally obscuring the fact that the social conditioning does not allow her to make a choice on her own accord about her own life. This is how the woman becomes a subaltern who does not have the agency to be 'heard' even if she raises her voice. Lata Mani's discourse analysis revealed that the woman was never the subject in the production of an official discourse on 'sati' (1986). The woman stays as the "object of investigation" even when the postcolonial intellectual becomes the "investigating subject" (Spivak, 1988). Therefore, I argue that the "systematic unlearning" project should adopt the critical framework of 'thing theory' in an attempt to subvert the subalternity of women by choosing to read, in a certain way, the re-presentations of women's history in colonial narratives. Let me provide an example of reading two contrasting re-presentations of the positionality of the woman as subaltern in one case (non-fictional account) and subversive in another (fictional account). I choose to read a fictional account here parallelly with a non-fictional account because I believe that a postcolonial novel is as much a legitimate re-presentation ('darstellen') as is a work of Critical Theory.

IV. SUBVERTING THE SUBALTERNITY OF WOMEN

In Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (2004), we come across the fictional character of Mangala Bibi engaged in her ambitiously scientific pursuit of inventing a genetically engineered technology of transmigrating the selfhood of an individual through chromosomal transference to another body for achieving immortality. In this process, she ends up directing the famous scientist Ronald Ross in discovering the cure for malaria – the syphilitic parasite in the contaminated blood (Ghosh, 2004). Ghosh, exhibiting his finest craftsmanship as an author but also as a postcolonial intellectual engaged in the "systematic unlearning" project, presents the character of Mangala Bibi as the figure of a woman who subverts the subalternity that the West imposes upon the brown woman through Eurocentric discourses of which the colonial history of medical sciences plays a major part.

To contrast this fictional account of Mangala Bibi with the real-life account as presented in Spivak's essay, Bhubaneshwari Bhaduri's suicide can be read in the same light

of the central problematic surrounding the question of 'sati'. Bhaduri's contribution to the freedom movement had been washed down the annals of mainstream history; but worse still, predicting the possible rumours regarding her moral purity, Bhaduri had waited for the onset of her menstrual cycle so that her suicide could not be mistakenly linked with a case of illicit pregnancy by the patriarchal society (Spivak, 1988, pp. 103-104). So, in other words, what should be known here about her could not be known. Despite her strongest contributions in the armed struggle against the British Empire, Bhadhuri became a subaltern muted in history. On the other hand, Mangala Bibi's very deliberate absence from historical records and her refusal to be an "object of investigation", as according to the novel, consolidated her position and identity that subverted the patriarchal-colonial discursive complex of Western science that often ignored the contribution of the brown women.

Mangala Bibi, in her act of refusing to become the "object of investigation/protection" in the discursive process of Eurocentric knowledge-production, becomes a thing-in-herself. If one must know something about Mangala Bibi, one must reject the modes of reading that is prevalent in colonialist historiography. She does not subjugate herself as the mute subaltern whose voice must be measured by the "investigating subject" that the postcolonial scholar attempts to be while being trained in Western modes of reading. She must be studied, as the subject of the discourse being constructed about her, by systematically unlearning the colonial biases inherent in our existing modes of reading. Bill Brown's theory, that focuses on the 'thingness' of the object by freeing the latter from the oppressive subject-object dialectic, becomes useful here (2001).

The woman as subaltern cannot speak as long as she is an object of colonialist historiography that preserves the episteme of the "West as Subject" privileging a patriarchal narrative (Spivak, 1988). To read the subaltern within the framework of 'thing theory' is to acknowledge the mutation of the object of knowledge to the thing-in-itself thereby deconstructing the very process of subject-constitution in the discourse-formation

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