SPIVAK, Gayatri C.

Gayatri C. Spivak first came to international renown with her 1976 translation of Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* and, more specifically, with her Translator’s Preface to the volume. Her reputation was consolidated with the publication, a decade later, of her essay, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, and her work, more generally, has contributed to the increasing significance given to feminist and Derridean themes within Postcolonial Studies.

In ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, Spivak offers an analysis of the relationship between Western discourses and the possibility of speaking of (or for) the subaltern (woman). She assesses the intellectual and political contributions of French post-structuralist theory and finds it wanting in terms of its failures in addressing the implications of imperialism in discussions of power and epistemic violence more generally. To work with ‘a self-contained version of the West,’ she argues, ‘is to ignore its production by the imperialist project’ (1988: 289). This is not to suggest that the history of imperialism is the only history of the West, but to address more explicitly the question of how what is currently dominant and hegemonic came to be so.

The question of voice is also central to Spivak’s work. As she argues in her critique of the early project of Subaltern Studies, it is necessary to recognise the heterogeneity of the
colonised subaltern subject and, at the same time, guard against the privileging of subaltern consciousness; not to do so is to fall into a project of a reifying essentialism and taxonomy (1988: 284). The issue, for Spivak, is less the subjective experience of oppression, or the identity claims of the subject, and more understanding (and uncovering) the mechanisms and structures of domination.

**Essential Reading:**

**Further Readings:**

**Questions:**
To what extent do you think using the figure of woman /the subaltern as a position from which to rethink the academic disciplines within which scholars are engaged is a fruitful activity?

Spivak argues that subaltern consciousness, always being subject to the desire of the elite for its recovery, can never be fully recoverable. Do you agree?

Submitted by Gurminder K Bhambra