

إعادة قراءة الطبقة المظلومة: الصمت، التمثيل، والمسؤولية الأخلاقية في النقد ما بعد الاستعماري

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المستخلص

إعادة التفكير في السؤال الأساسي الذي طرحته غاياتري شاكراפורتي سبياك في مقالها "هل يمكن للطبقة المظلومة أن تتكلم؟" من خلال منظور يعتبر القراءة بدلاً من الكلام. يقترح البحث أن صمت الطبقات المظلومة لا يحدث فقط من خلال غيابها في النص، بل أيضاً من خلال ممارسات القراءة التي قد تفرض عنفاً إبستيمياً. بينما تم التحقيق بشكل واسع في سؤال الطبقة المظلومة في نظرية الأدب ما بعد الاستعماري من حيث الهامشية، الصمت، والتشريد، لم يتم التركيز كثيراً على الموقف الأخلاقي للقارئ، المفسر، والعالم الأدبي. يقترح هذا المقال أن الخطاب النقدي، والتجريد النظري، والتمثيل قد يعيدون صياغة نفس الظروف التي يهدفون إلى تفكيكها. من خلال أفكار سبياك الأحدث، والأخلاقيات في ما بعد الاستعمار، ونظريات الخطاب، يقترح هذا المقال أخلاقيات القراءة التي تركز على القراءة من خلال، القراءة بدون، والقراءة مع، مع الوعي بموقع الفرد. ما يعنيه ذلك هو أن أخلاقيات القراءة، بدلاً من السعي لاستعادة أو التحدث نيابة عن الطبقة المظلومة، تخضع خطاب الفرد نفسه للفحص من حيث إنتاجه للمعنى والسلطة. علاوة على ذلك، يسعى هذا المقال إلى تداول أخلاقيات القراءة، من خلال فهم الطبقة المظلومة كقضية أخلاقية، وليس في الواقع مشكلة استعادة السرد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الطبقة المظلومة؛ القراءة الأخلاقية؛ التمثيل؛ العنف الإبستيمي؛ النقد ما بعد الاستعماري.

Re-reading the Subaltern: Silence, Representation, and Ethical Responsibility in Postcolonial Criticism

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Abstract

This study rethinks the seminal question raised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” through an optic that considers reading rather than speech. It suggests that silencing subalterns occurs not only through absence in text, but also through reading practices that may impose epistemic violence. While the subaltern question in postcolonial literary theory has been widely interrogated as to its marginality, silence, and displacement, relatively little scrutiny has been focused on the ethical position of the reader, the interpreter, and the literary scholar. This essay suggests that critical discourse, theoretical abstraction, and representation may well reinscribe the very conditions they aim to dismantle. Through Spivak's more recent ideas, ethics in postcolonialism, and discourse theories, this essay proposes an ethics of reading that centers on reading through, reading without, and reading with, an awareness of one's own positioning. What this means, rather, is that an ethics of reading, rather than seeking to recuperate or speak on behalf of the subaltern, subjects one's own discourse to scrutiny in terms of its own production of meaning and power. Moreover, this essay seeks to circulate an ethics of reading, in turn, through an understanding of subalternity as an ethics problem, and not, in fact, an issue of narrative recuperation.

Keywords: Subalternity; Ethical Reading; Representation; Epistemic Violence; Postcolonial Criticism.

1. Introduction

Since the release of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's canonical text "Can the Subaltern Speak?" the subaltern subject has appeared both as the ideal of postcolonial critique and its impossible object. The text's relevance lies not only within its deconstruction of colonial ideologies and patriarchal mediation but also within its disturbing argument that the very terms of subaltern recovery may themselves constitute a new form of epistemic subjugation. Thus, Spivak herself insists, "the subaltern cannot speak" not because it is impossible for the subaltern to speak, but because its discourse is constantly overdetermined by representational regimes which predefine intelligibility.¹ Although subaltern scholarship has called into question the relevance and optimism of this particular argument, its more specific aim might be said to be the question of whether the subaltern can be accessed at all without being further objectified within the terms of critical discourse.

Typically, the focus of postcolonial interpretation has been on the subaltern in terms of notions of absence, recovery, or counter-discourse, in which the critical gesture is that of magnifying the silenced voices or decoding the erased discourses. But such critical interventions are easily compromised on what Spivak elsewhere describes as "the desire to speak for the Other in the guise of beneficence"², an impulse that enhances the critical subject's authority and positional power, and adjudges the subaltern primarily in terms of the very dominant discourses. This paper will argue, on the contrary, that the silence of the subaltern can and should be regarded not simply as a failure of representation but as a symptomatic practice of interpretation itself that prefers coherence, agency, and narrativity.

As the central concern shifts from speaking to reading, this intervention engages postcolonial studies at the level of methodology rather than that of interpretation itself. The principle at work is that subalternity is not merely the result of the silencing of certain subjects within discourse but also that the very acts of reading imply the privilege of making sense of the text without considering the epistemology of the reader's positionality. As Spivak points out, "to read is to risk complicity".³ The warning that this statement carries about the ethical implications entailed in the very act of reading itself underscores the very fact that the

¹ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1988, p.308.

² Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. Routledge, 1987, p.310.

³ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, p.63.

activity of reading is not merely a passive reception but a space where power relations are implicated, where authority is constituted, or where silence is produced or ruptured.

In this context, this intervention becomes especially pressing in literary studies, where gaps in narrative, ambiguities, or presences that are fragmentarily realized are all too often conceived not as boundaries to be respected but as puzzles to be solved. The dominant ideology in critical theory has tended to view silence as a lack that awaits completion, in this way reinscribing what Michel Foucault has termed “the will to truth” that underlies modern discourse.⁴ By contrast, this article will argue that there are silences that function not as lacks but as resistant zones that require humble interpretation. This position is consonant with Spivak’s argument that “learning to learn from below” is necessary to an ethical critical practice.⁵

Moreover, the article asserts that the role of the critic is still under-theorized as an ethical subject with the ability to make interpretative judgments that yield material and discursive effects. Though postcolonial theory has shown its capability in identifying inequalities in structures, often this theory has overlooked micro-politics in reading through which inequalities are reinscribed in disciplining discourses in academia. As Edward Said asserts, criticism is never a process which can be isolated from material power because “texts are always embedded in circumstance, time, place, and society”.⁶ Reading the subaltern is not merely an act of textual analysis but is an act of being implicated in a web of meanings which either undermines or reinforces the structures of knowledge.

This paper does not seek to recover an authentic subaltern voice, nor does it promote silence as an aesthetic. It rather interprets subalternity as an ethical issue that happens at a crossing of interpretation, authority, and responsibility. Through interrogating assumptions that support interpretive practice, this paper contests the idea that representation is in itself liberating and proposes instead an ethics of interpretive discretion. Discretion does not mean absence in critical practice but entails instead continuous reflexiveness about the boundaries of knowledge and about violence embedded in premature interpretation.

In formulating this approach, the paper engages with the work of Spivak on ethics, discourse theory, and the postcolonial literature on representation, but with a deliberate avoidance of

⁴ Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith, Routledge, 2002, p.131.

⁵ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, p.9.

⁶ Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Knopf, 1993, p.35.

the tendency to subsume all of this work under a unified approach. The strategic refusal to totalize is a methodological move that emerges as a correlate of this approach's view that an ethics of reading involves a certain tolerance of ambiguity and contradiction. As Judith Butler puts it, "Ethical responsibility begins at the site of the failure of understanding, and this is because in many ways, we are undone by each other" (Butler 23). Thus, to read the subaltern, in an ethics of reading, is to maintain responsibility to that which resists understanding.

By thinking of silence not as a failure of theory but as a key moment in critical thinking, this article presents a much-needed shift in perspective in postcolonial literary criticism. It is claimed that while the answer to Spivak's question may be negative, the subaltern may very well be unable to speak, the question's relevance now has nothing to do with whether the subaltern is able to speak but whether critical thinkers are able to cede the privilege of interpretation to make that possible.

2. Spivak and the Limits of Speech and Representation

Spivak's contribution to postcolonial theory is more about undermining the very notion of intelligibility that makes speech possible than simply showing how the voice of the margins is absent from the dominant discourse; in fact, in her landmark text "Can the Subaltern Speak?," the so-called momentous declaration of the impossibility of the voice of the subaltern to speak has been largely misconstrued as an ontological prohibition and negativity in itself. On the contrary, the status of her argument is more about voice as a pragmatically second-order process of mediation in which the act of speaking is deferred and made intelligible only through the a priori reception structures of epistemic regimes. As she carefully articulates: "Representation has not withered away but now operates through both *Vertretung* and *Darstellung*, that is to say, through political proxy and aesthetic representation, that is conflated to produce epistemic violence".⁷

The relevance of this difference consists in showing that representation should be understood not merely as a transparency but rather as a constitutive agency that determines what can be known and who gets to be heard. The relevance of Spivak's criticism lies specifically within Western intellectual culture, which assumes the transparency of intention, words, and meaning, rendering possible a vision of the intellectuals themselves as moral brokers who do not claim any specific hermeneutical agency. In this way, the subaltern's exclusion is no longer merely a question of political subjugation but takes place at the junction of words

⁷ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, 279.

systemically integrated within meanings that erase the particularities of the subaltern's words themselves. In this regard, silence is no longer the negation of expression but rather its result within the capture of meanings.

This logic is best illustrated in Spivak's reading of the sati controversy. The colonial archive preserves the voices of the British administrators and the native elites, whereas the female subject caught up in the ritual remains silenced, not because she failed to act and signified nothing, but because "there is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak".⁸

The common misreading of the illustrative example in discussions of Spivak's paragraph concerns her emphasis that the issue with the female subject's silence is not the silence itself but the frameworks that constitute her act as either tradition or coercion. Speech in this case is disciplined by its own saturation with meaning.

In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak continues this line of thought and turns her critique from colonial archives back towards contemporary scholarly practice, warning that postcolonial studies may encode a reproduction of these epistemic hierarchies. She suggests that the subject of subalternity becomes instead "a figure for intellectual nostalgia" rather than a site of ethical problematization.⁹ This is what happens when critics value theoretical consistency and moral clarity above all, so that subalternity becomes an object of knowledge, rather than a problematization of knowing. In this way, representation becomes an appropriation masquerading as critique.

However, it is essential to note that Spivak by no means denies representation in general or celebrates the silence of critical discourse as an ideal. Instead, Spivak encourages a radical interrogation of the circumstances in which representation exercises its power over others. In her book *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, Spivak writes, "Responsibility is not a choice" but an ineluctable outcome of being in the position of having the power of interpretation.¹⁰

This statement identifies the critic's role not in terms of being the voice of the subaltern but in terms of being the reader who exercises her will in shaping the domain of intelligibility. Reading thus emerges as an ethics very much because it involves the risk of misrecognition.

Spivak's methodology is differentiated from celebratory narratives of voice recovery in its deliberate non-identification of political commitment with interpretive certainty. Spivak

⁸ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, p.307.

⁹ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, p.310.

¹⁰ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, p.64.

consistently warns against the “benevolent imperialism” in which the critical aspiration for voice recovery unwittingly consolidates the discourses of Western epistemologies.¹¹ This critique discloses a paradox inherent in postcolonial studies, in which those critics who increasingly seek to make the subaltern speaking heard also increasingly seek to erase the conditions of subalternity. Speaking itself becomes a means of erasure when it is forced into discursivity.

This paradox reveals the imperative to conceptualize silence not as a void to be fulfilled but as an immanent limit against interpretation. The imperative to “unlearn one's privilege as one's loss”¹², to invoke Spivak on the issue, points to the imperative to involve oneself in ways that give priority to ethical hesitations over masterful interpretations. On this plane, unlearning signifies not ignorance but an active choice against the naturalization of the authority of one's own methodologies of interpretation. It becomes imperative, then, to not find meaning in silence but to be responsible to its opacity.

In emphasizing the boundaries of speech and representation, Spivak opens up a new arena for thinking subalternity as a matter of interpretation rather than as a presence that can be restored as narrative. It seems that the greatest challenge of criticism lies in occupying silence rather than translating silence into proof of successful theory. As Spivak puts it, “the task is to make visible the complicity of our own intellectual production”.¹³ This requires prolonged self-reflection rather than self-assurance.

This section has argued that the representation critique in Spivak's practice provides the conceptual groundwork to re-articulate the subaltern question in reading rather than in speaking. The limits Spivak points out are not gaps to be bridged but ethical boundaries that lay bare the violence inherent in the authority of interpretation. The acknowledgment of these limits does not exempt the critique from responsibility but rather increases it, because the refusal to speak on behalf of the subaltern needs to be paired with attentiveness to one's reading.

3. Epistemic Violence and Critical Authority

However, the ethical dimensions of engagement with subaltern subjects are inextricably bound with the idea of epistemic violence, as conceived by Spivak as the silencing and subalternization of subaltern subjects via dominant modes of knowledge production.

¹¹ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, p.8.

¹² Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, p.370.

¹³ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, p.66.

Epistemic violence subsumes more than the figurative silencing of subaltern subjects since it conceives a material-discursive effect whereby certain knowledge counts as unrecognizable, subordinate, or invisible in hegemonic modes of intellectual production. As Spivak affirms, “the subaltern cannot speak” because the very structures that regulate knowledge make her speech intelligible in the dominant discourses.¹⁴ This point illuminates an ethical commitment on the parts of critics whose own modes of interpretation risk reinstating the very same exclusions that critique takes as its object.

Critical authority, or the ability of scholars, theorists, and literary critics to produce meaning and to represent marginalized voices, is a necessarily contradictory thing. On the one hand, authority enables a disruption within textual or cultural hierarchies, offering a means through which marginalized subjects might gain recognition. On the other hand, however, authority also poses the risk of reinscribing epistemic hierarchies, since acts of interpretation all too often occur within a framework defined by colonialist, patriarchal, or class-based ideals. As Mignolo writes, “the very act of knowing is often a form of violence when knowledge is imposed rather than relationally negotiated”¹⁵; indeed, the relationship between the responsible scholar and the violences of knowing is a fraught one. In literary studies, for instance, the relationship is particularly complex inasmuch as the scholar's reading is, necessarily, non-neutral, since acts of critical authority map silence into representation in a fashion which typically reinforces a kind of domination over the subaltern subject rather than listening to it.¹⁶

In addition, by attempting to make subaltern subjectivities visible, theory and intent can sometimes conflate in ways that make epistemic violence more likely. Critics and theorists may rely on universalist thought, regardless of whether that theory is derived from a Marxist, psychoanalytic, or poststructuralist paradigm, in ways that erase the specificity of subaltern experience in favor of theoretical clarity. This process also has the potential to transform the subaltern subject into a symbolic representative of theoretical ideas, rather than an actual subject, in a way that reinforces unequal power dynamics. As Spivak writes, “Good

¹⁴ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, p.27.

¹⁵ Mignolo, Walter. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Duke UP, 2011, p.68.

¹⁶ Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton UP, 2000, p.48.

intentions are not sufficient; representation can only compound subaltern erasure if it does not practice critical self-reflexivity”.¹⁷

A habitual engagement with Subaltern texts must both heed the text itself and pay heed to its deliberate erasures and silences. The critic’s privileged position must shift from one of imposition to one of mediating attention to the ethical implications of their own textual practice. It is crucial to be mindful of the limits of one’s own critical attempts to fill in the narratives of Subaltern historiographies with hypothetical reinterpretations and to be ardently sensitive to the specific socio-historical determinations that triggers the Subaltern’s silence. Epistemic violence is no remote concern but the critical mandate for every act of literary textual practice.¹⁸

Cumulatively, the intersection of epistemic violence and critical authority emphasized the ethical component of scholarly endeavor in that representation is never an innocent or neutral practice, as the practice of ethical reading is always embroiled in a certain tension or negotiation between the illumination of interpretation and the virtue of humility. Through the positioning of critical authority in this nexus of interpretation, the work inscribes a turn away from the utilitarian retrieval of subaltern discursivity and toward a reflective practice of interpretation.

4. Methodology: Ethical and Discourse-Oriented Reading

The current research utilizes a methodology that gives priority to ethical readings as a critical process that is aware of the implications and responsibilities underlying acts of interpretation. Moving beyond conventional approaches used in literary analysis and critique, which tend to give primacy to issues concerning the intentionality of an author or a complete text, an ethical framework for readings positions a critic within a framework of power and gives precedence to implications of interpreter actions concerning subaltern representations. The proposed methodology is underpinned by two interrelated approaches: readings that are discourse-oriented, as well as reflexive ethical engagements.

Discourse-oriented reading, informed by Foucault’s idea of knowledge/power, recognizes that literary texts are not standalone entities but are part of larger discourses.¹⁹ Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith, Routledge, 2002 In this respect, the subaltern is no longer simply “lost” or repressed, but rather is created

¹⁷ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, p.48.

¹⁸ Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994, p.112.

¹⁹ Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith, Routledge, 2002, p.88.

through epistemic regimes that make experiences invisible. As such, this analysis examines narrative gaps, absences, or silences, not simply as representational failures, but rather as sites that indexically reveal power. This includes investigating dominant discourses, whether it is colonial, patriarchal, or class-based, that frame narrative in ways that impact narrative decisions, as well as how such discourses condition or filter research access to subaltern knowledge.

This ethics of engagement must involve the critic in taking up a reflexive position in her practice, one that takes account of her own positionalities, her understanding of interpretation, and her role in the epistemic violence that might be done. In this practice, it would be necessary for the critic to step back and listen instead, since the very critique concerns the need to critique her own presumptions.²⁰ In that regard, this study submits itself to the need to engage in its own critique, one that questions its presumptions instead of resting its practice on its presumptions.²¹

In practice, the modalities associated with the methodological concern are facilitated through close reading as well as comparative readings in relation to texts that include subaltern characters/topics, marginal storylines/silos, as well as silenced discourse. Additionally, the readings are concerned with linguistic discourse as well as narrative form in relation to the facilitation of inequalities in texts as well as associated dilemmas. More importantly, the concern with ethics in readings involves secondary discourse in relation to postcolonial discourse in addition to subaltern discourse in order to facilitate a critical dialogue rather than a prescriptive discourse.

By combining discourse analysis and reflective ethical consciousness, the approach locates the act of reading as being both analytically and ethically based. Here, the act of reading is aware that the silences of the subaltern are not empty spaces to be filled but are in fact spaces that must be negotiated for. It is an act of literary praxis that is both rigorous and responsible in its critical method and as such provides a groundwork for the assessment of the critic as an ethical being.

5. The Critic as an Ethical Agent

In being based on an ethical critique methodological paradigm and discourse reading, the role of the critic appears more than that of an interpreter of the text because it involves an ethical

²⁰ Gandhi, Leela. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Columbia UP, 1998, p.52.

²¹ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, p.203.

agent with morally significant implications in its intervention. The ethical critic realizes that reading involves more than a disinterested activity since it happens in an ideological frame with power relations in terms of knowledge accessibility and meaning construction. As Spivak points out: "interpretation is a site of ethical responsibility, where the act of reading can either reproduce subaltern erasures or contribute to the recognition of their limits".²²

Reflexivity on positionality is one of the key practices involved in the ethical work of a critic. This involves an acknowledgment of how one's social, cultural, and intellectual positioning shapes one's interpretive perspective, sometimes bringing along elements of bias or inappropriate assumption/implications. This involves constant self-interrogation and an openness concerning methodological decisions and a sensitivity towards the power relations involved in reading itself. By positioning oneself within these relations, a critic can move away from appropriation/ventriloquizing tendencies and resist any impulse towards making subaltern narrative readable on one's terms, thus reinscribing relations of dominance.²³

Thus, ethical agency is also Dobson's understanding of interpretive restraint: Instead of seeking to "recover" the subaltern's discourse or supplement its narrative gaps by speculatively reconstructing its meanings, ethical practice must be characterized by an attention to gaps, ambiguities, and absence as signifying elements of that text: What is missing is not just a lack or an absence but marks a particular form of discourse restriction. As Bhabha aptly says, "The gaps and exclusions are signs of signification that force a rethink of understanding and representation".²⁴

Furthermore, the ethical critic is also a facilitator, not an authoritative voice. This approach makes dialogue rather than domination central. The critical endeavor is that of illuminating the possible meanings within which the subaltern subject positions itself by not submitting to the temptation to bring closure to this complex situation. Walter Mignolo focuses on this aspect by saying that "delinking from dominant epistemologies and being sensitive to knowledge that is relationally and contextually defined" is what ethical critique of subaltern subjects is all about.²⁵

In literary criticism, ethical practice means taking seriously the wider implications of the activity of interpretation. Criticism goes beyond the purely textually based moment of

²² Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, p. 214.

²³ Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, p.92.

²⁴ Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*, p.114.

²⁵ Mignolo, Walter. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Duke UP, 2011, p.77.

understanding insofar as interpretation connects with the social and political implications of knowledge-making. The practice of reading carries within it the potential to disrupt or to maintain epistemic violence, so that the critic's conception of responsibility becomes imperative. To adopt this ethic is to locate literary criticism as a practice that intervenes in its own assumptions and premises.

In conclusion, the role of the critic as the ethical actor represents a reading practice which is at once reflective, disciplined, and social, focusing on the responsibilities associated with the subaltern representation. Such a reading practice transcends the conventional role of literary authority associated with criticism and creates space for a more ethical relationship between the text and its silences.

6. Limits of Interpretation and Productive Silence

Ethics in literary critique revolve around the recognition of the boundaries of interpretation, above all in reference to subaltern discourses. Subaltern marginality is not simply what is to be supplemented or what is to be recovered, but rather it is itself symptomatic of exclusions that elude full knowledge or full representation. As Spivak suggests, "the subaltern cannot speak insofar as it is not available to the dominant epistemologies without mediation, or rather, there can never be such a thing as subaltern 'speaking' from which dominant discourses can adequately represent it, without reproducing what it critiques".²⁶ Thus, it becomes necessary to recognize not merely that there is no full knowledge or representation possible, but that there is productive value in subaltern silence.

In this reading, silence must be understood as more than its meanings of absence, lack, or failure. Silence can be imagined as a space where subaltern knowledge can be subjected to critical reflection that problematizes the way in which representation and meaning have conventionally been understood. Gandhi insists that "subaltern silences are a reminder that knowledge is always partial and situated, and that interpretation itself can be an act of domination if it ignores this condition".²⁷ Silence can be understood as productive so that the interpretation of critique moves beyond the representation and interpretation of subaltern voices towards investigating the meanings that subaltern silences articulate.

In addition, the limits of interpretation subvert the hegemonic discourses of literary criticism in that the latter presumes that there are no limits to the appropriation of meaning. Ethical

²⁶ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, p.28.

²⁷ Gandhi, Leela. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, p.61.

interpretation involves a certain subtlety on the part of the literary critic who seeks to appropriate meaning in a manner that maintains certain limits of interpretation. This involves avoiding the temptation of imposing meaning on certain texts in a manner that effaces the complexity of the subaltern and reinforces hegemonic discourses.²⁸ Silences in interpretation are thus both methodological and ethical instruments in the sense that they signal the limits of interpretation to the literary critic.

Responding to silence productively can open up a more complex understanding of representation, responsibility, and power. By placing a spotlight on the unrepresentable, ethical criticism reveals the enabling conditions for marginalization, where the moral implications of reading gain critical prominence. As Bhabha suggests, silences inherent in cultural texts offer a zone where cultural meanings are negotiated, contested, and reinscribed in a manner in which critical intervention is enabled without facing the dangers of appropriation or overreach.²⁹ Here, silence is not a passive but active agency in textual or cultural discourse, working towards influencing how the reader responds critically to Subalternity.

Ultimately, the understanding of the limitations of interpretation and the role of silence serves to reposition the role of the critic from that of a master interpreter to one who takes part in a dialogical relationship. Such a reading praxis is modest, listening, and respectful of the unrepresentable, turning silence into a resource for criticism. Such an understanding of postcolonial criticism, examining its own power and avoiding any master narratives on the subaltern, informs a model of literary study that is ethically aware, analytically precise, and nuanced about the subtleties of subalternity.

7. Conclusion

The problem of subalternity is restated through a shift from speech to reading, a move that privileges the ethical practice of postcolonial criticism as one of interpretation as opposed to ventriloquism. As postcolonial practice engages with representation, violence, and ethical considerations about critical agency, it becomes apparent that the problem of subalternity cannot be fully known through dominant discourse. Alternatively, the problem of subalternity becomes an occasion for postcolonial critical thought as a site that is signified through silences, absences, and gaps that indicate the structural terms under which subaltern positions are produced.

²⁸ Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. P.110.

²⁹ Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*, p.116.

The analysis underlines that all reading practice should be accompanied by the recalibration of the critical prerogative, which requires the adoption of a reflexive posture on the part of the critic, a position that acknowledges its positionality, its limitations of interpretation, and its ability to perform the reproduction of the knowledge's hierarchical structure. The operation of subaltern voice recovery or reconstruction might well be reproductive of epistemic violence should it be carried out without this awareness on the part of the critical subject or this sensitivity to the ethics of reading.

In addition, the idea of "productive silence" also appears as a key concept in grasping subalternity. Silence, in this respect, is not merely about absence but also a resource in critical encounters in which the boundaries of power are unfolded, and common assumptions about representation are also problematized. The ethical approach to silence helps critics traverse and negotiate between comprehension and appropriation.

In conclusion, ethical reading posits the subaltern question as a moral and epistemological problem rather than as a recoverable story. Through its engagement with interpretive responsibility, reflexivity, and the productivity of silence, this critical work seeks to make a critical intervention in postcolonial literary studies by sketching out a critical approach to interpretation that emphasizes responsibility, moderation, and a responsiveness to the power relation underlying representation as such. Ultimately, it is not the ethical critic who seeks to empower subaltern voices but rather one who seeks to read with a sense of recognition and respect for the complexity, absence, and unrepresentability of subalternity towards a more ethical end for postcolonial discourse.

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