

Postcolonial Literature
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Lecture No. #18
Mahasweta Devi's Pterodactyl (I)

Welcome back, again to the series of lectures, on Postcolonial Studies. During the course of this lecture, as well as the next lecture, we will try to understand, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Theorisation of the Subaltern position, through Mahasweta Devi's short story titled, Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha. But, before we start exploring the story itself, I would like to revisit, Spivak's Can the Subaltern Speak, an essay, that we have been referring to, from our previous lecture.

And, I would like to revisit it, to highlight the connecting threads, that link Spivak's Theoretical position, as far as Subaltern is concerned, and the story of Devi, that we are going to study. Now, as you will remember, from our previous discussion, we had defined Subaltern, as a position of Disempowerment and Marginalisation.

And, we had also talked about Spivak's argument, that for someone within the position of Subalternity, it is impossible to generate Discourse, about one's own desires, about one's own interests, and indeed about one's own self-identity. And, according to Spivak, this is the characterising feature, of the Subaltern position. And, this basic argument, is found coded, in the form of the cryptic, but very powerful statement, that the Subaltern cannot speak.

And, I will not elaborate on this cryptic statement, in this lecture. Because, we have already discussed this, quite a bit, in our previous lecture. But, what I would like you to note here is that, Spivak's essay, Can the Subaltern Speak, is not merely limited, to showing that the Subaltern cannot speak. That is one of the things, that Spivak does in her essay, but that is not the only thing.

Indeed, this observation, that the Subaltern is unable to generate Discourse about herself, or her own interests, her desires, this theorisation acts in Spivak, as a trigger for ethical intervention. In other words, the realisation of the fact, that the Subaltern is disempowered,

and cannot speak for herself, her own desires, they Act for Spivak, in her essay, as a kind of a trigger, for ethical intervention.

So, in other words, this observation, that the Subaltern cannot speak, leads Spivak, to another very critical and very crucial question. And, what is that question. The question is, if the Subaltern cannot speak, then what should be our critical response to it, our ethical response to it, our response to it as intellectuals, as academicians, as responsible members of a society. And here, when I say our response, I mean, the response of those, who have agency, and whose speech is recognised within the society, as meaningful Discourse.

Now, a simplistic answer to this particular question, would be to state that, since the Subaltern cannot speak for herself, we, who are the Elites, and here I use the term Elite, following Ranajit Guha's categorisation of a society, into Elites and Subaltern. So, I mean clearly, if we have agency, and if our Discourse within the society is regarded to be valid Discourse, then we are clearly not Subalterns. And, therefore, we belong to the group of Elites, according to Ranajit Guha's categorisation, at least.

So, a simplistic answer to that ethical question, that I had raised just now, is that, since the Subalterns cannot speak, we, who are the Elites, should speak for the Subaltern. Now, on the surface speaking for, or representing the oppressed and the disempowered, sounds like a very valid ethical gesture. But, as Spivak points out, in her essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak*, this desire to speak for someone else, is fraught with its own dangers.

Because, what might happen, and indeed what often does happen, is that, when the Elite tries to represent the Subaltern, he ends up not actually representing the Subaltern, but he ends up speaking for his own self. In other words, what gets represented as the voice of the Subaltern, is not her voice at all. But, the voice of an Elite, trying to pass off his own desires, his own interests, as the interest and desires of the Subaltern.

And, according to Spivak, any such attempt to speak for the Subaltern, leaves the Subaltern ultimately, in that zone of speechlessness, and in that zone, which is bereft of agency. Now, this argument of Spivak, that we cannot speak for the Subaltern, we cannot really represent the Subaltern, as Elites, is slightly confusing. But, I hope, it will become clear, if we dwell

into the section of the essay, Can the Subaltern Speak, where Spivak writes about the position of Sati.

So, to exemplify the dangers, of the attempt of the Elites to represent the Subaltern, Spivak refers to the debate surrounding the rituals Sati, in which an upper caste Hindu Widow, mounts the funeral pyre of her Husband, and ends her own life. Now, I think, the context will make it very clear, as to when I am referring to, Sati as a ritual, and when I am referring to, Sati as the figure of the Hindu Widow.

But, we should bear in mind, that Sati refers to both. In, contemporary Discourse, it refers both to the ritual of self-immolation by the Widow, and also it refers to the figure of the Widow herself. Now, Spivak in her essay, argues that, though a lot of Discourse is available on Sati, the figure of the Sati herself, the figure of the Hindu Widow, who burns herself in the funeral pyre of her Husband, represents a typical example of a Subaltern, who cannot speak.

And, this is because, the different Elite groups, Discoursing on Sati, though they claim to represent or speak for the woman, who emulates herself with her dead Husband, ultimately, they end up speaking for their own self-interest. As, I was just saying, a few minutes before, that it is difficult to speak, for the Subaltern. Because, when we try to speak for the Subaltern as Elites, we often end up, speaking about our own self-interest, and about our own self goals, about our desires.

And, we tend to impose those desires, on to the Subaltern. We tend to present them, as the genuine desire of the Subaltern, herself. And, according to Spivak, this is what has happened, with regards to Sati. Because, a huge amount of Discourse, is available on Sati. And, all this Discourse, claims to be the voice of the Sati herself, the Widow, who burns herself, on the funeral pyre of her Husband. But, Spivak's argument is that, in spite of this claim, none of the Elite Discourses about the Sati, actually brings out the voice of the Widow.

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Sati as the 'subaltern'

- In 1829, the then Governor General of British India, Lord William Bentinck, passed a legal act banning the practice of sati in the Indian territories under British jurisdiction
- This act formed the part of 19th century colonial discourse which characterised sati as a brutal and barbaric custom, and was nothing less than murder sanctioned by the Hindu patriarchy
- The law thus becomes an attempt by the British coloniser to speak on behalf of the subaltern Hindu widow who otherwise cannot express her desire or assert her authority against the aggression of the Hindu male
- According to Spivak, the colonial discourse made it out to be a case of "white men saving brown women from brown men"

Now, to understand this better, let us start our enquiry, from the year 1829. Because, this was the year, when the then Governor General of British India, Lord William Bentinck, he passed a Legal Act. And, what was the Act about. Well, the Act Sati, in the Indian territory, under British jurisdiction. And, of course later, this Act was also extended and implemented, to the Princely states.

Now, this Act, or the Legislative Document, which form this Act, can be read as part of the 19th century Colonial Discourse, which characterised the Right of Sati, as a brutal and barbaric custom, in which the Hindu Men, "Punished the Hindu Widow, by forcing her to mount the funeral pyre of her Husband." In this Colonial Discourse, the Right of Sati, was nothing less than the murder, sanctioned by the Hindu Patriarchy.

So, the Colonisers, who banned the Right of Sati, this sort of ritual of Sati, they regarded Sati as nothing less than a murder, a murder that was sanctioned by the Hindu Patriarchal society. And, the Hindu Widow, who mounts the fire, is presented in this Colonial Discourse, as the helpless victim of Hindu Males sadistic desire, to punish and torture the weaker sex.

The Law, passed by the Colonial government, banning this ritual of Widow sacrifice, therefore becomes an attempt by the British Coloniser, to speak on behalf of the Subaltern Hindu Widow, who otherwise cannot express her desire, or assert her authority, against the aggression of the Hindu Male. Now, according to Spivak, the Colonial Discourse, made this entire ritual of Sati, they made it out, to be a case of White Man, saving Brown Women, from Brown Men.

And here, I mean, this is again an cryptic statement, typical of Spivak, White Man, saving Brown Women, from Brown Men. Of course, it refers to the apparent attempt, by the White Coloniser, to save the Brown Women, which means, the woman, who were “Punished, and forced by Hindu Males, to burn themselves, on the funeral pyre of their Husbands”, from Brown Men, which means, the Hindu Men, who sanctioned Sati.

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- Spivak argues that though the colonial discourse tried to argue that the banning of sati was an attempt by the colonial government to provide agency to the otherwise powerless Hindu widow, the ulterior motive behind this legislative act was different
- By portraying the rite of sati as a barbaric practice, the colonisers could justify the colonial rule as a civilizing mission. The very fact that brown women needed protection from brown men cast the white coloniser into the role of a benevolent protector whose civilizing efforts were needed to root out the cruel and savage practices that plagued the Hindu society in particular and the Indian society at large
- Contrary to the colonial view, the Hindu nativists like Rabindranath Tagore and Ananda Coomaraswamy, constructed the image of the Hindu sati not as a victim of male sadism but rather as someone who mounts the pyre of her husband out of her own desire

However, Spivak argues, that though the Colonial Discourse tried to argue, that the banning of Sati, was an attempt by the Colonial government, to provide agency, to the otherwise powerless Hindu Widow. The ulterior motive, behind this Legislative Act, was different. What was the ulterior motive? Well, according to Spivak, by portraying the Right of Sati, as a barbaric practice, the Colonisers could justify the Colonial rule, as a civilising mission.

Because, the very fact, that Brown Women, needed protection from Brown Men, cast the White Coloniser, into the role of a benevolent protector, whose civilising efforts were needed, to root out the cruel and savage practices, that plagued the Hindu society in particular, and Indian society at large. So, the argument here, is that though the Coloniser, by banning Sati, claimed to give agency to the Hindu woman, this was not the ulterior motive, behind the banning of Sati.

The ulterior motive, was to portray the ritual of Sati, as a barbaric practice, as a practice, which needs to be condemned, which does not have a place, within the modern society. The

Coloniser then, presented Colonialism as a civilising mission, which was needed in such a society, to root out the barbaric practice Sati, or similar barbaric practices like Sati.

So, the Colonial Discourse, though it claimed to be the voice of the Sati, is revealed by Spivak, to be simply the voice of the Coloniser, which is informed, not by the desires and interests of the Hindu Widow, but by the desires and interests of the British overlord, justifying Colonialism, justifying the Colonial subjugation of India, as a civilising mission. So, because there is Sati, you need to be under, Colonial rule. Because, the argument is, that you are not civilised yourself, because you burn your Women.

So, your Women needs protection, from you. You are not civilised enough, you are not mature enough, to take care of your woman. Which is why, you need the protection of the British overlord, the civilising influence of the British overlord. Now, if you read Spivak's essay, Can the Subaltern Speak, you will note that, Spivak also makes a similar argument, about the Male Hindu Nativists, who opposed the Colonial intervention, in banning the ritual of Sati. And, who too claimed to speak, on the behalf of the Hindu Widow.

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So, contrary to the Colonial view, these Hindu Nativists, and they included people like Rabindranath Tagore for instance, or Ananda Coomaraswamy for instance, they constructed the image of the Hindu Sati, not as a victim of Male sadism, but rather as someone, who mounts the pyre of her Husband, out of her own volition, out of her own desire.

Now, Spivak argues, that in spite of being a contrary Discourse, this Discourse is of course contrary to the Colonial Discourse, which presents Sati as a kind of sadistic practice, in which, Hindu Widows were bullied, to burn themselves, by Hindu Male. This is a counterpoint.

But, according to Spivak, in spite of being a contrary Discourse, in spite of being a counter Discourse, this Hindu Nativists argument too, just like the Colonial Discourse, does not help us, listen to the voice of the Widow. Spivak points out, a number of ways, in which the Widows voice, gets suppressed, within this Hindu Nativists Discourse. But, we lack the time, to go into further details, now. What we need to remember here, however is that, is the larger point, that Spivak is making.

And, the larger point is that, any attempt to speak for the voiceless Subaltern, often ends up in creation of Discourses, which are underlined by the desires and interests of the Elites, rather than the Subaltern. Just like, the Colonial and the Nativist Discourse about Sati, ends up reflecting the desires and interests of the Colonisers, and the Hindu Males, and not that of the Widow.

But, now we come to the question then, that what is the way forward, if we cannot really speak for the Subaltern, if we cannot really represent the Subaltern. Because, speaking for the Subaltern, often ends up in creation of Discourses, where we speak actually for ourselves, and not for the Subaltern. If, that is the case, then what is the way forward. What should we, as ethical individuals do, to address the situation of the disempowered and the voiceless Subaltern.

According to Spivak, since we cannot really speak for the Subaltern, the more ethical move would be, to create enabling conditions, for the Subaltern to speak for herself, and thereby come out of the disempowered position of Subalternity. And, let me repeat this. According to Spivak, since we cannot really speak for the Subaltern, since we cannot really represent the Subaltern, our ethical move should be, to create enabling conditions for the Subaltern, so that, she can herself, be empowered to speak.

And, by doing that, she can come out of the disempowered position of Subalternity. And, it is really, in the light of creating enabling circumstances for the Subaltern, that we should read Spivak's work, as a Teacher, among the landless illiterate population, in the villages of West Bengal. Spivak's role there, as a Teacher, as she conceives it, is primarily the role of a Facilitator, someone who creates the situation, in which the Subaltern can then find her voice.

But, for Spivak, even this act of creating enabling circumstances, for the Subaltern to speak, comes later. According to Spivak, this step should be preceded, by another step. And, the first step should be, to try and learn from the Subaltern, and sensitise ourselves to her needs and her desires. The process of learning from the Subaltern, that will enable us to create the enabling circumstances, for her to come out and speak for herself, is a difficult process.

Because, if you remember, we are starting from a position, where the Subaltern cannot speak. So, trying to learn from someone, who cannot speak, is a difficult task. And, here again, we come across one of Spivak's cryptic, but powerful statements, that we should learn, to learn from the Subaltern. Now, the meaning of this phrase, learn, to learn from the Subaltern, is that, the desire to learn from the Subaltern, does not mean that, we can automatically and easily, start learning from the Subaltern.

We need to learn, how to learn from the Subaltern. Because, it is as I said, it is not an easy task, to learn from the individuals, who have been denied for very long, the right to speak for themselves. So, the first step, is not even learning from the Subaltern. The first step, is to think through the difficulties, that are there, if you want to learn from the Subaltern. So, the first step is really to know, how to learn, to learn from the Subaltern.

Now, it is only when you face the Subaltern, as a learner, as a listener, that we can perhaps empowered, and enjoying the Subaltern to speak. And, according to Spivak, this is our only ethical move, that is possible. Now, to explore Spivak's Theorisation of the Subaltern, through a literary texts, let me now turn, to Mahasweta Devi's short story. The story, that we are going to read, is one of the three tales by Mahasweta Devi, that is contained in the book titled, *Imaginary Maps*.

And, this book contains, three translated stories. And, all of these three stories, are translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, herself. And, the story, which we will be focusing on today, and in the next lecture, bears the title, *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha*. But, before we go on to the story, let me introduce, Mahasweta Devi to you.

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Mahasweta Devi, well respected author and social activist, was born in 1926, in Dhaka,



which is now the capital of our neighbouring state, Bangladesh. After, the partition of the subcontinent, during the independence, Devi moved from Dhaka to West Bengal, where she completed her Tertiary Education in English, first in Tagore's Viswa Bharati University, and then, in the University of Calcutta.

She started her career, as a Teacher in a College, in Kolkata. But then, navigated towards journalism, and creative writing. Her career, was also marked, by social activism, and a strong commitment, towards the Tribal population of India. As Devi, has in fact, pointed out in several occasions, this Tribal population, which forms about 1/6th of the total population of India, has long suffered unimaginable oppressions from the people, who belong to the mainstream.

With every wave of migration, that has arrived in the subcontinent, the position of the indigenous Tribal population has been made, more and more precarious. The forest, which is their habitation, has been gradually taken away from them, and their ways of life, have been brutally crushed. Devi, traces back this oppression, of the Tribal population, back to the days of Hindu Epic Ramayan, and argues that the oppression that started so long back, has not ended yet.

Under the British rule, many of the Tribals were branded, as criminals, and their rights to the forest were curtailed. And, such curtailment of Tribal rights, has continued even in post-independence India. Thus, here we are confronted with a form of oppression, that is as

gruesome as the Colonial oppression, that we have discussed in this course. And, the Tribal, in the story of oppression, the Tribal emerges as a archivable Subaltern, whose voice has been systematically gagged, and marginalised for centuries.

Both, as a social activist, and as an author, Devi has stood up, for the rights of the disempowered Tribals. And, her work, both as an author, and as a social activist, has been widely acknowledged, both in India and abroad. And, she has been the recipient of numerous awards, including the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Ramon Magsaysay Award, Padma Shri, and Padma Vibhushan.

Now, one of the reasons, I chose the story *Pterodactyl*, for our reading in this course, is because, Devi herself in an interview with Spivak, identifies it, as the summation of the entire experience she obtained, while working with the Tribals. She also identifies the story, as the distillation of the agony of the Tribals, that she had learn to perceive, through her sustained engagement with them.

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- “*Pterodactyl*, Puran Sahay and Pirtha” (*Imaginary Maps*, 1995)
- Written by Mahasweta Devi and translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak
- “If read carefully, *Pterodactyl* will communicate the agony of the tribals, of marginalized people all over the world. [...] *Pterodactyl* wants to show what has been done to the entire tribal world of India. [...] Each tribe is like a continent. But we never tried to know. Never tried to respect them. That is true of every tribal. And we destroy them.” - Mahasweta Devi in an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

In Devi’s own words, and I quote, “If read carefully, *Pterodactyl* the story, will communicate the agony of the Tribals, of marginalised people all over the world. *Pterodactyl*, wants to show, what has been done, to the entire Tribal world of India.” Devi, then goes on to add that, and I quote again, “Each Tribe is like a continent. But, we never tried to know them, never tried to respect them. That is true of every Tribal. And we destroy them.”

So, Pterodactyl, really is a story, which confronts this narrative of destruction, which is continuing even today, in modern day India, in the name of development. It speaks of our ethical obligation, to stop this wanton destruction, and to reach out to the Tribals, not in the role of subjugators, or even in the role of patronising superiors, but as empathetic listeners and learners. To quote Devi again, “Our double task is to resist development actively, and to learn to love.”

We will elaborate on this double task, in our next lecture. But, I would like to end today’s discussion, by briefly commenting on, how Pterodactyl the story, and Devi’s engagement with the Tribals, that it narrates, how do they connect to the concerns of Postcolonial studies. Well, this story contributes, to our understanding of the Postcolonial situation, in at least two distinct ways.

Firstly, by speaking about the Subalternization of the Tribals in India, that has continued from the period of the British raj, to the present day, it points out the fact that, even as an independent nation, we are still burdened, with a huge amount of Colonial baggage. And, we have not really, been able to dismantle, the Colonial structures of coercion, subjugation, and oppression.

Secondly, this narrative about the Tribals, whose world we have destroyed, and whose world we continue destroying even today, questions the narrative of nationalism, it questions the narrative of Postcolonial freedom. Because, it forces us, to reconsider the kind of freedom, that we have earned. Because, this freedom, that we talk about so much, that we celebrate every independence day, and the sense of agency that this freedom has given us, has definitely not reached, the hundred million strong Tribal population in India.

Pterodactyl asks us, the question, that what kind of nation, have we really built for ourselves. What is this nation, in which the Tribals, who are as the Indian word Adivasi suggests, the original or the primitive inhabitants of this land, they do not have a place. What is this nation, that we have created for ourselves. It is definitely not a very inclusive nation, if it leaves out, the hundred million Tribal population.

We will take up, this powerful story of Mahasweta Devi, as well as the difficult question, it raises for us, in our next lecture. Thank you, for listening.