

## Can the Subaltern Communicate?

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### **Abstract:**

Following Gayatri Spivak's Controversial essay, "can the subaltern Speak?" a host of debates have come to the fore as regards whether or not the subaltern voice can speak at all, especially after the era of independence. Of course, Spivak has her reasons to answer the question she raises in the negative, but other writers (I take the example of Moroccans) have proven that they can speak and they actually have spoken in their writings though the means whereby the speech is conducted is Western. In this sense, my contribution addresses the question of the subaltern voice in some post-colonial literary works, especially of the Moroccans, and the extent to which this voice is able or abled to speak. This is seen into especially through the content of what the subaltern voice says and the literary techniques employed in speaking its mind.

**Key Words:** Abrogation, appropriation, discourse, the subaltern

### Can the Subaltern Communicate?

Now and then, literature has been concerned with the themes and factual aspects that demonstrate the extent to which we still live in a world intensified by the growing discrepancy between the haves and have-nots. That is the reason why many authors, scholars and even critics have embarked on a literary journey to which they have chosen the oppressed voices of the subaltern to be their main preoccupation. Therefore, the notion of the subaltern has become an issue in the post-colonial theory when Gayatri C. Spivak (1988) critiqued the assumption of the subaltern studies group in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Her criticism has rendered the issue of the subaltern voice one of the concerns of the post-colonial theoreticians and writers, thereby culminating in having a huge debate between the post-colonial theoreticians over whether or not the subaltern voices can speak. (Spivak, 1988)

As an answer to her question, Spivak (1988) asserts that the subaltern cannot speak because of different reasons. Along with her contention goes many writers as well as those opposing her. Spivak herself is one of the voices that we can place under analysis here. When she has problematized the Gramscian notion of the subaltern, many writers and critics, among whom we can cite Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, and others, considered her as an inquisitive voice that has sought to solve an issue that has come on stage because of the Indian repressing regime and its patriarchal system of ruling. Spivak (1988) confirms that the subaltern groups cannot speak in the sense they have hybrid identities and are governed or manipulated by the dominant discourse that provided them with the language and conceptual categories with which they speak. (Spivak, 1988: 273) Therefore, “the subaltern cannot speak, means that even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard, and speaking and hearing complete the speech act. That’s what it had meant.” (Donna, Landry et al, 1996: 292)

The subaltern, for Spivak, cannot speak because they do not have the means that can allow them to. They are, in a way or another, constructed by some discourse that they unintentionally work to promote. Spivak argues that the language utilised by the subaltern to voice himself/herself is appropriated, and any attempt to speak or write by means of this language will be a furtherance of the hegemonic power of the discourse by which the subaltern voice was constructed. In this connection Bill Ashcroft (1999) explains that,

Theorists such as Gayatri Spivak drew attention to the dangers of assuming that it was a simple matter of allowing the subaltern (oppressed) forces to speak, without recognizing that their essential subjectivity had been and still constrained by the discourses within which they were constructed as subaltern. (Ashcroft, et al, 1999: 79).

The construction of the subaltern voice within the parameters of some certain discourses, such as the acquisition of the colonial language, is what prevents the voice from deploying all of their concerns and worries, thereby speaking, to use Edward Said’s wordings, the truth to power. (Said, W. Edward, 1996: 85). Spivak is not the only one who has spoken of the subjectivity of the subaltern voice. Along with her line of reasoning go Louis Althusser, Lacan and Michael Foucault, among others. It seems that Spivak concurs with the post-structuralist position on

subjectivity. For instance, Louis Althusser stresses the importance of ideology in the formation of a subject or a subaltern voice. For him, the ruling classes in a society do not only rule, but they try to manipulate their thinkers and producers of ideas. Hence, the subaltern voice is constructed by the ideology of the ruling classes, and every action the voice can perform is the corollary of the ideological formation of this subaltern subject. As for Lacan, language constructs the subaltern's subjectivity. Post-colonial writers have been exposed to the colonial languages, and any attempt from their part to write or speak using this language is what makes them subject to it and only perpetrators of the hegemonic force of that language.

Furthermore, Michel Foucault is much known for his writings and interviews on discourse. For him, discourse produces a subject dependent upon the rules of the system of knowledge that produces it. For instance, the subaltern voice cannot escape the shackles of the discourse by which he or his people were first entrapped. Generally, any action or voice emitted by the subaltern is out of the three elements that have been examined by Louis Althusser, Lacan and Michel Foucault. (Ashcroft, et al, 1999: 224-225 ). Spivak also goes in the same direction by confirming that the subaltern cannot speak because it is constructed within some discourses that do without the emancipation of that voice. She even goes further as to explain the situation of the Indian women who constitute double oppressed voices, for they are voices oppressed by both the patriarchal society in which they have grown up and the colonial discourses that have constructed the whole Indian society. In her words, Spivak avers that, "in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow." (Qtd. in Ashcroft, et al, 1999: 219).

This is the situation of women as doubly marginalised by both the patriarchal Indian society and the ideological construction of their knowledge. Indian women are even in shadow and very few have been said on their behalf. If we can really speak of the subaltern as unable to speak, then the Indian women would provide the solid arguments underpinning such claim. Still, there is a growing tendency towards affirming the capability of the subaltern to speak, especially with the advent of the postcolonial theory. The subaltern voice, in this sense, has gained the confidence of some post-colonial critics and writers who asserted that this voice can speak and has already spoken. Therefore, the postcolonial literary products prove an indispensable haven where the subaltern voices effectively function as a counter-discourse to the ex-colonial dominant discourse.

In their book, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, the authors have quoted George Lamming contending that it is time for this subaltern voice to speak and rebel against the ex-colonial norms and chains by which this voice used to be repelled. For Lamming, some post-colonial writers (such as Raja Rao, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe and Tom King, to mention but a few) have managed to establish their own rules and regulations meant to make of them voices against the neo-colonial dominance in the newly independent African countries. These voices, in turn, can console and represent the other oppressed and unknown people of the world. (Ashcroft, et al, 2001: 45). In support of this, Bill Ashcroft (2003) explains that the subaltern voice was suppressed and disabled to emerge during the colonial era, but more recently this voice has started to be heard, read and even incorporated into the Western canonical realm of the colonial literature. To clarify this idea more, Ashcroft (2003) puts forward the contention that,

The English cultural hegemony has been maintained through canonical assumptions about literary activity, and through attitudes to post-colonial literatures which identify them as isolated national off-shoots of English literature, and which therefore relegate them to marginal and subordinate positions. More recently, as the range and strength of this literature has become undeniable, a process of incorporation has begun in which, employing Eurocentric standards of judgement, the works and writers of which it approves as British. (Ashcroft, et al, 2003: 7).

English writers have realised that the emergence of the subaltern voice has to be incorporated or contained within the English canonical literary world. This attests to the power of this voice as a precious source of knowledge about the world that the Westerners are trying to incorporate. Similarly, Elleke Boehmer (1995) invokes the same idea of the voices that are being claimed or incorporated by the British lest they would cause a change that may affect the English literary canon. Boehmer goes further as to say that foreign writers themselves acknowledge the fact that the subaltern can speak, since “there is an intriguing coincidence in the fact that metropolitan writers began to acknowledge in their work the presence of others around the same time as colonized writers were appropriating European genres and symbolic conventions to express their own identity.” (Boehmer, 1995: 99)

The subaltern has been all the time presented as either a representative or a represented power in different literary works. This power has culminated in its recognition by both the place from where the power of the voice is released and the potential destination to where it is heading. Furthermore, many other postcolonial writers, among whom we find Moroccans, have corroborated the ability of the subaltern to speak. For instance, those writers tend to confirm that they are voices reading their cultures to others, and, in the meanwhile, they themselves employ some voices within their novels, autobiographies or short stories that they enable to speak.

In his *Heart of Embers*, Abdellatif Akbib has freed the voice of Said, the major character. Said throughout the novel tries to make up for all mistakes he committed in the past by voicing them through Akbib’s lenses. In this regard, Said confirms that,

I am saying this because, in the darkness of the room where I lie, in the grip of a deep sense of solitude, and prompted by a keen sensory perception, I have often caught myself communing with the past-journeying back through its nooks and recesses, puzzling my way along its tortuous labyrinth- now that I have practically no foreseeable future to plan for. (Akbib, 2004: 11).

Journeying back through the doors of the past, Said is meant to get his voice freed and feel at ease by doing good to those whom he mistreated in the past even by remembering their names and good deeds. In light of this and other literary works written by Moroccans and sub-Saharan, the question of the ability of the subaltern to speak has been fully tackled. More interestingly, it is amazing how a voice can manage to emerge from within some harsh circumstances used to have been stumble-blocking it throughout its successive attempts to tell or make the others hear its echoes and flashes. The subaltern voice has managed to speak when it played the role of the representative of, more or less, the other more oppressed voices still have

not emerged or spoken yet. What the voice utters or articulates is a transmission to endless problems and worries of either the subaltern voice or his/her people. For instance, Frederick Douglass is a black spokesperson for the black people. He is against slavery and the dehumanizing exploitation of the black by the white by choosing to represent the black race just as Martin Luther King did. King also did not hesitate to defend the black cause and fight against slavery, injustice and inequality. These are the underlying principles that made him organize non-violent campaigns with his fellow-country men. In his words, Martin Luther says,

I am cognized of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I can not sit idly by in Atlanta and not to be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice every where. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. (King, M. Luther, 1971: 23)

Amazing is the metaphorical image Martin Luther King draws as to demonstrate the extent to which the black person is very important and is the focal point of most black writers. When some people are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality and tied in a single garment of destiny, they become one single body defending, speaking and caring for each other. In support of such ideals, Brick Oussaid (1989) has written an autobiographical story entitled, *Mountains Forgotten by God*, where he assumed the responsibility of speaking and representing his people about whom nothing has been heard or known. His story of a Moroccan Berber family is a representative of a larger social network of people still living under dire poverty and still enduring the caprices of life. These people are the forgotten, thereby needing to be voiced to the outer world via Oussaid's tongue. In this connection, he confirms that, "the people of whom [he] speak[s] have no voice, they can neither speak out nor demonstrate. The echo of their sighs does not carry far." (Oussaid, 1989: 4).

Furthermore, the subaltern voice has been a counter-discourse to the European dominant discourse. If the West depicts its "Others" as savages, uncivilized or immature, now the East will write and react back against the misconceptions that have been held against it for decades. For instance, Kamal Abdel-Malek (2000) summarises the scope of his anthology, *America in an Arab Mirror*, in saying that,

This anthology illustrates the ways in which America has been portrayed in the one hundred years spanning 1895-1995. These travel accounts reveal the difference, background, and gender of the travellers images of America in these accounts range from America the unchanging other, the very antithesis of the Arab self, to America as the other that has praise worthy and reprehensible elements; some to reject, others to appropriate. (Kamal, 2000: 2)

Leafing through the anthology's pages, one can sense that Arabs are now in a position to act as Occidentalists. They have reached the moment to have their own ideas, thoughts and judgements about their "Others" heard and regarded with full attention. America now is the mirror through which the Arabs can see their real "Self." In so doing, throughout their literary

products, the subaltern voices endeavour to report their messages with the implication of different literary techniques to serve the unity or efficacy of the voiced concerns, especially with characterisation, language or temporal and spatial elements. In so doing, the use of a character or different characters in the post-colonial novel has been characterised by distinctive features. In the British or American traditional novels, the authors usually employ a protagonist versus an antagonist technique as both subjects and dominators of the events occurring throughout the whole novel. By contrast, when leafing all through a post-colonial novel of an African or Asian writer, we notice that the characters involved in the events of the story stand for a collectivity rather than an individual. Even when there is one character or more in such novels, they most of the time defend the cause of a group of people.

This explains that in the post-colonial era, we have ended up having objects rather than subjects: Subaltern voices defending and standing for the cause of a collectivity. This is perceived in Brick Oussaid's (1989) *Mountains Forgotten by God*, where one can feel Oussaid's ability to be the representative of his people; a voice that has shouldered the responsibility to carry the echoes of some other minor voices far than they themselves can. Abdellatif Akbib (2004) also in his novel *Hearts of Embers* puts into service a voice that was freed all the way through the novel in order to express the different concerns, mistakes or problems the voice of Said, the Major character, has encountered and led during his life. These and other examples are there to typify the ways in which the implementation of characterisation in the post-colonial novel has threaded a different path from that of the eighteenth and nineteenth century novel.

Besides, language is a key marker and an effective communicational device via which the subaltern is able or abled to speak. It is the most suitable arm a writer can make use of with the purpose of externalising what he/she thinks and feels. Similarly, in order for a voice to be heard, there needs to be a powerful language whereby the subaltern can effectively speak. The ability to speak by means of language can be marked in the different post-colonial literary products whose organic or thematic unity necessitates a language that can kill two birds with one stone. That is to say, language can do the job of a cohesive organizer of ideas, themes and evidence. It can also be a messenger despatching ideas to its readership. More importantly, a language does not only enable some voices to speak, but it also help these same voices enable other minor ones within their novels to speak their minds as well. In so doing, some characters are being voiced in some post-colonial literary products via other major voices that happened to possess the means or the language that can successfully deliver their messages. For example, in his *Abdullah's feet*, Hafid Bouazza (2005) has enabled other voices within his novel to speak by using a language over which only Bouazza has control. In this account, Bouazza relates,

What is it, Baba?' Fatima asked:

What is all the commotion? My father, sheik Abdullah, juted his chin toward the kitchen. It's mother,' replied Fatima, 'she dreamed of Abdullah last night.' (Bouazza, 2005: 20).

Bouazza (2005) has given a voice to the characters he has employed in his work. Abdullah, the father, is able to ask his sister, Fatima, in a language that they, as illiterate voices, could not have spoken if it had not been for Bouazza. Likewise, Hamid Qabbal (2008) is another major subaltern voice who has enabled in his novel, *The Spirit of a City*, most of the characters to

speak through the language they may not have had access to without his help. The novel relates the life of Mouh who has gone through bitter and unsatisfactory experiences. Mouh has managed to speak along with the shoe-shiner boy using a different language. In this regard, Qabbal says,

Mouh sighing with relief gently put him down, and eagerly asked:” how much have you got? ”The boy looked down, topped the ground with the front of his right shoe and resignedly answered: “two hundred.” Mouh giggled out:” that’s too much for a boy!” the boy sadly contradicted:” too little for an orphan without a home an heir that money is now my father, mother, friends and family! (Qabbal, 2008: 66).

Had it not been the English language used in voicing both Mouh and the shoe-shiner, the like voices would have never been heard. Hamid Qabbal (2008) has done them favour when he has given them the language via which they, from time to time, are enabled to tell us something they want using their voice.

Time and space in the novels where the subaltern voice is set free are very important in showing the extent to which the subaltern voice can be traced through the temporal and spatial elements of a novel. When speaking about the significance of time to the subaltern voices, we then refer to the era or period where the literary works voicing them have been first produced. It is quite indispensable to make reference to the fact that most of the novels produced in the period of post-colonialism have given raise to the subaltern voices to speak and call for the recovering of identities, cultures or indigenous languages. In this respect, the minor voices have sensed the need to be independent and free to make their voices heard, especially as part of the independence that their countries have been granted.

Furthermore, space is another element constituting the novels of the subaltern. The significance of space in the post-colonial or minority writings lies in its ability to cause a change, which in turn would culminate in voicing the subaltern. Considering Brick Oussaid’s (1989) *Mountains Forgotten by God*, we notice that the author has managed to speak through this literary work just after he left for France. This movement from his place of birth to the outer Nirvana of France has helped him a great deal with establishing the basics and foundations on which his voice as well as that of his people would stand and be secured. Oussaid’s avers that, “the support of [his] friends and the social services of the host country saved [him].” (Oussaid, 1989: 125). France, for Oussaid, is the place where he has changed and transformed the life of misery and oppression he used to have in Morocco. From there also he has learned the basics to use in his writing and speaking about his people secluded in the middle of nowhere. In fact, the journey that Oussaid has undergone has helped him a great deal to discover who he really is: a representative of the forgotten.

More importantly, another main component making of the subaltern voices stronger to reach many an audience is the choice of language, especially a global one. In this regard, Chinua Achebe (1981) gave his support to the English language for two main reasons. The first one is that English, as a lingua franca, has helped with maintaining the national unity of a country, like Nigeria, where more than two hundred languages are at clash as to which language to use in daily life situations. The second reason is that English has become part of the Nigerian life and

should be seen as a Nigerian language, since it is spoken and used in the writings of the Nigerians to voice all what they have. (Achebe, 1981: 48). Besides, speaking of the good qualities of the English language, one may refer to its position among the other spoken languages all over the world. For the subaltern voice, the English language serves as a powerful medium of communication that has the capability to carry the voice to the remotest corners of the world. In so doing, “post-colonial writers in English are able to express their view of a world fissured, distorted, and made incredible by cultural displacement.” (Achebe, 1981: 235).

English is a globally dominant language serving to voice every single issue on a global scale. This can offer us an answer to why some Moroccan voices speak in the English language though French is the language of the ex-colonizers. Of course, we can cite as many writers as the English language can testify of those Moroccans who write and speak through the open shatters of its windows. For instance, Abdellatif Akbib, Anour Majid, Jilali El Koudia, and Mohamed Benouarrek, to mention but a few, have all chosen to interpret their cultures in a language about which many scholars and African writers, such as Chinua Achebe said to have the ability to bear the burden of one’s experiences and despatch them to faraway places. In the same connection, Chinua Achebe (1981) reckoned with the necessity to specify the readers intended to hear the subaltern voice. As an African voice, Achebe is very concerned with his potential audience and, in this regard, he argues that:

I realise that a lot has been made of the allegation that African writers have to write for European and American readers because African readers where they exist at all are only interested in reading text books. I don’t know if African writers always have a foreign audience in mind. What I do know is that they do not have to. At least I know that I don’t have to. (Achebe, 1981: 42).

Though Achebe (1981) acknowledges that the English language can carry the weight of the African experience, he has in mind the African readership. Of course, English is the language that can read Achebe’s thoughts to every Nigerian. That is why he testifies that,

Last year the pattern of sales of things fall apart in the cheap paper-back edition was as follows: about 800copies in Britain, 20,000 in Nigeria; and about 2,500 in all other places. The same pattern was true also of no longer at ease. (Achebe, 1981: 42).

The Nigerian readership is outnumbering other foreign readers of Chinua Achebe. This can be attributed either to the topic that the voice is raising within his/her work, or to the efficiency of the English language and its aptitude to reach many readers all over the world. Chinua Achebe, like many other African writers, has opted for the English language as a trustworthy messenger to carry the cultural weight of his country and its subaltern voices. Surely, many disputes have resulted over whether or not the subaltern voice has any practical effects on real life situations though using the English language. Many views have expressed their doubt to that effect. Historically, by the time the ex-colonized countries got their independence, there began a move towards voicing the scandals and barbarity of the ex-colonizers by many post-

colonial writers. The subaltern voice has had an effective role to play on practical life. Bill Ashcroft (1999) supports this idea in saying that,

The existence of post-colonial discourse itself is an example of such speaking, and in most cases the dominant language or mode of representation is appropriated so that the marginal voice can be heard. (Ashcroft, et al, 1999: 219)

The subaltern has managed to cause a change in its contemporary life and come up with a counter discourse to question, contest and even belie the modes of representation by which the ex-colonizers used to manipulate and picture their subjects. In this post-colonial discourse, the voice has utilised all the clues enabling it to speak out against the oppression of its ex-colonizer. Simply, by appropriating the ex-colonizer's discourse and then subverting it from within, the post-colonial writers have managed to shaken the giant edifice behind which the ex-colonizer used to take hold of its subject through discourse. That is to say, the appropriation of the colonial language was in fact an emulation that has sought to abrogate this language to become a tool running the counter-attacks against the European dominant discourse. Hence, the subaltern voice can dismantle the master's house just by using the tools of the master.<sup>1</sup> In support of this, Elleke Boehmer (1995) explicates that,

Drawing on the special effects of magic realism, post-colonial writers combine the supernatural with local legend and imagery derived from colonialist cultures to represent [...] and indict the follies of both empire and its aftermaths. (Boehmer, 1995: 235)

Speaking about the term abrogation, which was applied by most post-colonial writers as a subversive literary technique in the post-colonial discourse, the modern African stories offer us an insight into some African writers' literary works. These writers have appropriated the English language, but this English is a new one to effectively depict the African experiences. For instance, Nkem Nwankwo (1977) in his short story, "the gambler" writes,

"My frend bay we de work with me last month no de work with again he throw in one hundred pounds, yes one hundred and he win thousands. Now I see am ride fine fine cars and carry fine fine women. You no see am." (Nwankwo, 1977: 172).

This is an example of the many texts in which the abrogation or rejection of the Standard English is manifest. Such African writers use this subversive strategy as a means of saying to their ex-colonizers that they have appropriated and mastered their language, and now it is their turn to write back in a distorted language standing as a mirror for colonial corrupt acts. Gabriel Okara (2001) offers us an explanation as to why many post-colonial writers write English in an abrogated way. In this regard, he explains that,

Some may regard this way of writing English as a desecration of the language. This is of course not true. Living languages grow like living things, and English is far from a dead language. There are American, West Indian, Australian, Canadian and New Zealand versions of English. All of them add life and vigour to the language while reflecting their own respective cultures. Why shouldn't there be a Nigerian or West African English which we can use to express our own ideas, thinking and philosophy in our own way? (Qtd. in Ashcroft, et al, 2001: 286-287)

As far as Gabriel Okara (2001) is concerned, there should be versions of English, each of which would be used to explain and read some peoples cultures, philosophy or thinking. This way of writing English could be conceived of as a revolt of the post-colonial voices against Standard English. However, Edward W. Said (1996) invites a kind of carefulness when dealing with language in the sense that the voices should use a language to necessarily bring about a change rather than seek revenge. Said, in this sense, affirms that, "in writing and speaking, one's aim is not to show everyone how right one is, but rather in trying to induce a change in the moral climate whereby aggression is seen as such." (Said, W. Edward, 1996: 74). In this sense, the role of the post-colonial voice is to speak the truth to power and attempt to, at least, generate a positive change. Therefore,

The intellectual does not climb a mountain or pulpit and declaim from the heights. Obviously you want to speak your piece where it can be heard best; and also you want it represented in such way as to influence with an ongoing and actual process, for instance, the cause of peace and justice. Yes, the intellectual's voice is lonely, but it has resonance only because it associates itself freely with the reality of a movement, the aspirations of a people, [and] the common pursuit of a shared ideal. (Said, W. Edward, 1996: 75).

The subaltern can be effective and produce fruitful effects only if it associates itself with the worries, concerns and aspirations of its people. The voice, as mentioned earlier, has managed to produce some literary works where it has been expressed and further empowered. It is not that very essential to put in mind one's audience before starting to write or speak, but rather what counts is what to say and the concrete effects it could generate on practical life. These effects have to be positive and cause a change; a moral one in the unjust communities where injustice and oppression are still rampant even after the colonizer's departure.

To bring this discussion home, the subaltern voice has indeed generated disputed debates that have been seeking to unravel all the uncertainties of whether the subaltern can speak or not. Spivak has argued that the voice cannot speak, whereas many other writers have stressed that this voice can speak and, more than that, it has already spoken. This is argued for when we read some literary works of some post-colonial writers whose main preoccupations are to read their cultures to others, tell about the hardship of some people, celebrate the aspirations of their people or denounce the injustice found in their societies. In this respect, what is more important when speaking or writing is to make considerable efforts to cause a moral change in one's society. The subaltern voices have to associate themselves with the improvement of their social surroundings

and the aspirations of the people with whom they share cultural, social, linguistic and local belongings.

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