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Introduction to the concept ‘Subaltern’:

The word ‘Subaltern’ stands for ‘of inferior rank’ or status. Subordinate, hence, of rank, power, authority and action. In other words, it refers to the subordination of class, caste, gender, race, language and culture. It also indicates to those groups in society who are subject to the domination of the ruling classes. In general, subaltern classes include peasants, workers and other groups who have been denied access to ‘hegemonic’ power. The idea of the subaltern was primarily referred to by the Italian Marxist political protester Antonio Gramsci¹ in his article “Notes on Italian History” which published later on as part of his most extensively acknowledged book Prison Notebooks written between 1929 and 1935. He affirmed that the subaltern was the term subjected to the people of underclass in a society on whom the dominant power puts forth its hegemonic power and impact.

The term ‘subaltern,’ in general, indicates a kind of deprived person which ensemble within the representation of the Oppressor/Oppressed. A subaltern is certain kind of a person with a low ranking in a social, political, economical or other chain of command. It also denotes to the individuals who have been marginalized or oppressed. Gayatri Spivak’s outstanding article “Can the Subaltern Speak?”(1988) scrutinizes the subaltern concept from the most theoretical perspective. According to Spivak, the subaltern cannot speak. She opines that the subaltern does not have a voice. Spivak in her essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak’ writes,

The Subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with woman a pious. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual has a circumscribe task which she must not disown with a flourish. (p. 308)

Of late, Post-Colonial Theory as a new field of study has become one of the most prominent academic disciplines in the world of literature. Post Colonial literature persistently generated an enormous literature, especially by literary critics, feminists, art of critics, social reformists, political scientists and political economists. The incessant expansion of post-colonialism in its new account made its own domains of attention extended beyond the other fields of global academics like African American Literature, Literary Theory and Criticism, Anthropology and Cultural Studies. Consequently, Subaltern Studies has become one of the latest subdivisions of post-colonial theory.

Readings of Subaltern Studies began in India when writings initiated about Subaltern Studies began in book reviews. Primarily, every volume in the series was reviewed independently as a collection of essays, but by 1986 an increase of writing inside and outside the project had launched a unique school of research whose supporters came to be called 'subalternists' or 'subalterns.' Their influential essays published in 1988 as Selected Subaltern Studies-WAS published by Oxford University Press in New York and Oxford, edited by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, with a foreword by Edward Said. By 1990s the famous contemporary American historian Burton Stein (1990) cited the Subaltern Studies as a growing interest and declares it as 'a decade of historical efflorescence' in South Asian studies. During 1990s, Subaltern Studies turned as a hot topic in academic circles ranging from History to Political Science, Anthropology, Sociology, Literary Criticism, and Cultural Studies across the globe. Subaltern Studies extended in the literary arena as Subaltern Studies Group or the Subaltern Studies Collective which was launched in the 1980s by a group of eminent Indian scholars. The Subaltern Studies Group, in its earnest attempt to restudy the Indian history and society as a description with, forced a large number of contentious topics; among them is the
problematic issue of the subaltern subject and its constitution in the Indian historiography. Therefore, this module explains the concept (the subaltern) from the three predominant thinkers with whom it is essentially associated, particularly in the context of Indian Literature: Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Dipesh Chakrabarty.

**Subaltern Studies - Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Dipesh Chakrabarty:**

Subaltern Studies initiated its remarkable work in England from the end of 1970s, during discussions on subaltern themes among a small group of English and Indian historians led to a plan to launch a new journal in India. Oxford University Press in New Delhi agreed to publish three volumes of essays titled ‘Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society.’ From 1982. These essays appeared annually and succeeded with three more volumes, all edited by Ranajit Guha. The central objective was to retake history for the under classes, whose voices had not been heard earlier. Scholars of the subaltern group anticipated to get rid of the histories of elites and the Eurocentric bias of existing imperial history. They also protested against the "Cambridge School" which gave the impression to support the colonial legacy of elitism. They were highlighting on subaltern in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language and culture. The first and foremost leader of this literary movement was Ranajit Guha who had written on peasant uprisings in India. This group also comprises many South Asian historians, social critics and scholars like Touraj Atabaki, Shahid Amin, Dipesh Chakrabarty, David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee, David Hardiman and Sumit Sarkar who opposed the group due to its substandard turn to post-modernism. Their detailed and methodical approaches in reading of the Indian and south Asian histories are chiefly motivated by Gramsci’s outlook expressed in “the Prison Notebooks.”
However, the writers of subaltern were also further motivated by their eminent predecessor, Ranajit Guha, initially in his “Subaltern Studies I” and later on in his well-known classical discourse named ‘The Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India’(1983). Ranajit Guha is undeniably the most renowned name among all Subaltern Historians. His ‘Elementary Aspects of Peasants Insurgency in Colonial India’ is considered to be the most influential model of Subaltern historical study. By going back to the 19th Century peasants’ insurrection in Colonial India, Guha proposed an interesting description of the peasants’ rebellious consciousness, gossips, spiritual ideas, religiosity and relationships of caste and community. Guha attempted to reveal the factual condition of peasants’ survival in colonial India. He claimed that the peasants were unrecognized as a topic of history in his own right yet a subject that was all his own. According to Guha, the elitist historiographies were failed to put the peasants’ conditions and their insurgency in correct perception. Guha endeavored to illustrate that the Indian peasants were conscious of the consequence that their uprising would have on the colonial administration, both socially and politically, which hardly ever sees uprising as a struggle for social justice. Guha looks for the justice to the Indian peasants by investigating the relationship between domination and subjugation in Indian context from 1783 to 1900.

In the preface and introduction to Subaltern Studies I (1982), Ranajit Guha tries for the need to uphold a systematic dialogue of subordination and domination in South Asian history and society. Particularly, the spotlight of this project was an exposition of elitism in the understanding and outlook that informed much of the study of South Asia, predominantly Indian nationalism. Guha in his argument tries to probe what the Indians did on their own, beyond the effort and authority of the leaders and institutions of the colonial regime and nationalist elite politics.
The three essays in the *Subaltern Studies* series, summarizes the essential elements of the Subaltern Studies Group. The first essay titled *Colonialism in South Asia: A Dominance without Hegemony* (1989), Guha states the ongoing authority and impact of British colonial historiography in the work of Indian scholars and the need for self-criticism. Although Guha recognizes 'Cambridge School' historians, who refocused their attention on local and regional action, he opined that it is an elitist and neo-colonialist and was British, not Indian. In the second essay, *Discipline and Mobilize: Hegemony and Elite Control in Nationalist Campaigns* (1992), Guha depicts M. K. Gandhi's use of a idiosyncratic range of secular and spiritual powers which move caste sanctions that controlled the former Swadeshi Movement. Guha observed it as a reflection of the expanding disagreement between the elite and subaltern domains of politics. Guha’s third essay, *An Indian Historiography of India: Hegemonic Implications of a Nineteenth-Century Agenda* (1988), concerns elite uses of the past.

According to Ranajit Guha, Subaltern Studies is ‘a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way’ (Guha, 1982). The subaltern according to him represents “the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the elite” (Guha, 1982). Directed by the foundational observations of Guha, the group members targeted to study the subaltern groups as an “objective assessment of the role of the elite and as a critique of elitist interpretations of that role (Guha, 1982).” This worry derived from the supposition that the writing of Indian national history has been restricted by colonial elitism and nationalist-bourgeois elitism which were created by the British colonialism. As a result, Guha confirmed that this kind of historiography cannot perhaps convey, examine or
recognize the kind of transformations or inputs carried by common people themselves. This dissimilar variation between the elite and the subaltern is noticeable when we imagined it through the idea of political mobilization. On one hand, the elite political mobilization is satisfied through appropriation of or correction to the British parliamentary institutions and laws. On the other hand, the subaltern political mobilization is established on classical forms of social group like: blood relationships and kinship, territoriality, traditional and tribal relationships where popular mobilization take the form of peasant uprisings. Regardless of how varied the subaltern groups may be, there is a continuously static character which defines them: that is, the idea of struggle to the forced power and dominance of the elite class. The final outcome of this interplay was concluded with the fact that the Indian bourgeoisie were unsuccessful by the end to address for the nation, a situation which proved the malfunction of Indian nation to dispassionately exist without any representations formed and appreciated by the colonial regime. According to Guha, this failure consists of critical quandary of the historiography of colonial India. To defend his concept of subalternity from critics, Guha asserts the fact that there is an idiosyncratic divergence between the subaltern groups and dominant indigenous groups at the local levels.

**Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak:**

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (B.1942) is an Indian scholar, literary theorist, and feminist critic. She is a University Professor at Columbia University. She is the co founder of Institute for Comparative Literature and Society. She is considered as one of the most influential postcolonial intellectuals. She translated Jacques Derrida's *De la grammatologie*. (On Grammatology). Her introduction to this translation has become the most influential piece of literary criticism. She has been awarded the Kyoto Prize in Arts and Philosophy in 2012 for being ‘a critical theorist and
educator speaking for the humanities against intellectual colonialism in relation to the globalized world’. She is regarded as a spokesperson for the underprivileged and for the women globally. She translated Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Stanadayini’ into English as ‘The Breast Giver (2006)’ which shows her passion for the women in subjugation. According to Spivak, subaltern means

It refers to those who don’t give orders; they only receive orders. That comes from Antonio Gramsci, who made the word current. He was looking at people who were not in fact working-class folks or victims of capitalism. He was looking at people who were outside of that logic because he was himself from Sardinia, which was outside of the High Italy of the north. But “subaltern” also means those who do not have access to the structures of citizenship. I’m now talking about India today, where the largest sector of the electorate is the rural landless illiterate. They may vote but they have no access to the structures of citizenship. So that’s a subaltern².

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is well-known for her openly political use of contemporary cultural and critical theories to confront the inheritance of colonialism on the way we read and reflect about literature and culture. Spivak’s critical interventions include a range of theoretical interests such as Marxism, feminism, deconstruction, postcolonial theory and subaltern studies. She has challenged the disciplinary conventions of literary criticism and academic philosophy by centering on the cultural texts of those people who are often marginalized by overriding western culture: the new immigrant, the working class, women and the postcolonial subject. The concept of the subaltern stimulated to a further more intricate theoretical discussion with the involvement

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² Spivak explains this view in her interview with Steve Paulson of Los Angeles Review of Books on 29 July, 2016 under the title ‘Critical Intimacy: An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’
of well-known Indian-American post-colonial feminist critic, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who examined the concept ‘Subaltern’ critically in her pioneering essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988). Spivak’s essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ challenges the idea of colonial (and Western) “subject” and offers an example of the boundaries of the capability of Western discourse, even postcolonial discourse, to interrelate with incongruent cultures. Spivak’s groundbreaking essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?,’ marked a paradigm shift in post-colonial studies.

Spivak in her essay argues that it is not an easy task to make subalterns visible. She also says that there's no quick fix for inequality. Many of European theorists such as Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze thought that they could access the subaltern's voice directly. Spivak’s essay tries to explain why this project is doomed to fail. It may not be for the reason that the subaltern cannot speak words or produce sentences. The subaltern "cannot speak," instead, because her speech falls short of fully authorized, political speech and her message is being heard, socially and politically.

Spivak expresses her disapproval of ‘Subalternity’ analyzed by Subaltern Studies Group. In her beginning, Spivak tries to circumvent this problem by arguing that the subaltern historians do not just offer counter narratives, but also deconstruct the concept of history. Her allegations seem negated by the very claims that most of the articles make to revisionism. Edward Said in his preface identifies these claims-and admits these historians as authentic, indigenous voices against colonialist and nationalist history. The subaltern historians speak for an indigenous, genuine history, but they cannot survive independent of the historians they de-authorize as bourgeois nationalists. She utters against an exceedingly wide application of the term in 1992:
Subaltern is not just a classy word for "oppressed", for [the] Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie.... In post-colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference. Now, who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern.... Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus; they don't need the word 'subaltern'.... They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They're within the hegemonic discourse, wanting a piece of the pie, and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern. (de Kock 1992³)

The convolution of Spivak’s stand might be accredited to her intellectual and dexterous, but sometimes, indistinct execution of structuralist and post-structuralist theories, particularly deconstructionist strategies of reading, in colonial and post-colonial spaces of divergence and inversion. In her influential essay, Spivak reconsidered the problems of subalternity within new historical developments as brought by capitalistic politics of undermining rebellious voice and divisions of labor in a globalized world. She criticizes the first place of Gramsci’s affirmation of the independence of the subaltern groups. Her validation of this denial of Gramscian outlook is based on her observation that this autonomy results in homogeneity of the subaltern group and subaltern subjective distinctiveness. Spivak’s further disapproval of Subaltern Studies Group lies

in her belief that no methodology, even the most ambitious Marxist one, can avoid a sort of essentialism in its attempt to define who or what may form the subaltern group.

Therefore, Spivak prefers to take up the idea of the subaltern fundamentally because,

“It is truly situational. ‘Subaltern’ began as a description of a certain rank in the military. The word was used under censorship by Gramsci: he called Marxism ‘monism,’ and was obliged to call the proletarian ‘subaltern’. That word, used under duress, has been transformed into the description of everything that does not fall under strict class analysis. This is so, because it has no theoretical rigor (Spivak, 1991).”

Spivak, faced with this complexity of identifying the area of subalternity, alters to re-evaluate the issues of the subaltern groups by dealing with the tribulations of gender and above all Indian women during colonial times. She revealed on the standing of Indian women relying on her analysis of a case of Sati women practices under the British colonial rule. She considered ‘Sati women’ as a subaltern group. At this juncture, it can be noticed clearly that the Hindu woman loses their voice in such a conflicting situation between two opposed ways that continuously taunts her to make a choice. The ‘voice’ of the Hindu woman vanished while these two discursive groups tried to give her a voice. Finally, the Hindu woman “disappeared, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling, which is the displaced figuration of the „third-world woman” caught between tradition and modernization (Spivak, 1991). Spivak concludes at the end that ‘the subaltern cannot speak’. This last pronouncement that she made in her essay was controversially interpreted.

It was assumed as a statement of the impossibility of voicing the oppressed groups’ confrontation because of their demonstrations by other overriding forces as the same as a declaration which
confirmed the fact that the subaltern as a definitely conscious prejudice only obsessed with a leading language or a dominant voice to be heard. According to this stand, one may go further to presume that the entire dialogue of post-colonial theory itself is to be considered as a voice for the voiceless and politically marginalized groups by their scholarly representatives. Therefore, by exploring the conditions of oppressed women, particularly in India, Spivak managed to explain on the original differentiation of the idea of the subaltern as it was first developed by Ranajit Guha and the others through her basic investigation of the happenings and problems of women in general, either from the lower class and peasantry class or from the upper middle class and elite class. She stands for women as a distinguished gender because of the disgraceful exclusion of their contribution in anti-colonial history.

Spivak challenges,

“The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is ‘evidence’; rather, both were used as object of colonialist historiography and as a subject of insurgency, though the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (Spivak, 1988).

Thus, Spivak has been sustaining in drawing and redrawing the boundaries of post-colonial studies and subaltern studies.

Dipesh Chakrabarthy:

Dipesh Chakrabarty (b.1948) is a historian, and subaltern studies critic who made contributions to postcolonial theory and subaltern studies. He is the Lawrence A. Kimpton Distinguished
Service Professor in history at the University of Chicago. He was an active member of the Subaltern Studies Group or Collective. His contribution towards post colonial and subaltern studies can be seen from his pioneering works such as ‘Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference’ (2000) explores the relation between history and post colonial theory. He has also contributed the area of subaltern studies with his book titled ‘Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies’ (2002). He is a founding member of the editorial collective of Subaltern Studies, and was the editor for ‘Subaltern Studies Vol. 9’ (1997) along with Shahid Amin. He is also a founding editor of Postcolonial Studies.

His ‘Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference’ first published in 2000. It deals with the mythical stature of Europe that is frequently taken to be the original site of modernity in various histories of capitalist evolution in non-Western nations. According to Dipesh Chakrabarty, the imaginary Europe is built into the social sciences. The notion of historicizing carries with it some strangely European postulations about disillusioned scope, secular time, and sovereignty. Considered against such mythical standards, capitalist shift in the third world has repeatedly seemed either unfinished or deficient. This book addresses that each case of transition to capitalism is a case of translation as well- a translation of existing worlds and their thought-categories into the categories and self-understandings of capitalist modernity.

Chakrabarthy’s ‘Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography’ reveals the historiography of the Subaltern Studies starting from the initiative of Ranajit Guha and his Group way back in 1982. He explored to answer his own question i.e. ‘How did a project which began as a specific and focused intervention in the academic discipline of (Indian) history come to be associated with postcolonialism, an area of studies whose principal home has been in literature departments?’ and attempted to answer this question by discussing how, and in what way
*Subaltern Studies* could be seen as a postcolonial project of writing history. It should be elucidated that the relationship between postcolonialism and historiography fails to see the contributions that other disciplines such as political science, legal studies, anthropology, literature, cultural studies, and economics have made to the field of subaltern studies. Dipesh’s treatise on ‘Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography’, is motivated by a question that has the discipline of history in focus: In what ways can one read the original historiographic agenda of *Subaltern Studies* as not simply yet another version of Marxist/radical history but as possessing a necessarily postcolonial outlook? He concentrated on the discipline of history for two motives: (a) the association between the new field of postcolonial writing and historiography has not yet gained the notice it justifies, and (b) to reply critics who say that *Subaltern Studies* was once “good” Marxist history in the same way that the English tradition of “history from below” was, but that it lost its way when it came into contact with Said’s orientalism, Spivak’s deconstructionism, or Bhabha’s analysis of colonial discourse.

Without aspiring to increase the claims of *Subaltern Studies* scholars or to refute what they may have really learned from the British Marxist historians, Dipesh tries to illustrate that this reading of *Subaltern Studies*—as an example of Indian or Third World historians simply catching up with or only relating appropriate methodological insights of Anglo social history—gravely misjudges what the series has been all about. From its very beginning, Dipesh argues that *Subaltern Studies* raised questions about history writing that made a fundamental exit from English Marxist historiographical traditions unavoidable. Dipesh tried to develop his argument by concentrating primarily on the work of the historian Ranajit Guha in the period when he acted as the founding editor of *Subaltern Studies*. The specific writings of Guha which Dipesh selected
to discuss are those which could be considered the founding texts of the project Subaltern Studies.

Dipesh Chakrabarty’s essay in *Subaltern Studies IV* points out that the nature of this declaration by asserting their basic concern with ‘the thorny question of ‘consciousness’ and by identifying subalternity as ‘the composite culture of resistance to and acceptance of domination and hierarchy.’ This approximates an official definition, but Chakrabarty also says that members of the Editorial Collective “are perhaps far more united in their rejection of certain academic positions and tendencies than in their acceptance of alternatives”. Chakrabarty therefore has remained the subalternist most concerned with Marxism. His “Invitation to a Dialogue,” the first extended response to critics in the pages of *Subaltern Studies*.

**Conclusion:**

Subalternity as a form turns into an umbrella concept which increases the scope of research from various subaltern perspectives. People existing at present would readily like to inhabit the situation of a subaltern whose silence is perhaps voiced through the advocating demonstration of an intellectual. However, Spivak warns in advance from such a situation of accommodating the condition of a enduring subordination. She stated that the undertaking of an intellectual is to pave way for the subaltern groups and let them freely speak for themselves. It turned out to be quite complicated for all the changes happening in a globalized post-modern world to define the subaltern as a separate class. The Subaltern theory proposes that ‘the subalterns cannot speak’ by providing special prominence on the aspect of noise. Subaltern Studies became a unique place for a new kind of history from below, a people’s history free of national constrictions, a post-nationalist re-imagining of the Indian nation on the underside, at the margins, outside
nationalism. Vinay Bhal observes in his essay 'Relevance (or Irrelevance) of Subaltern Studies in Reading Subaltern Studies' edited by David Ludden as:

Members of Subaltern Studies group felt that although Marxist historians produced impressive and pioneering studies, their claim to represent the history of the masses remained debatable. Their main thesis is that colonialist, nationalist and Marxist interpretations of Indian History had robbed the common people of their agency. The Subaltern Studies collectively thus announced a new approach to restore history to the subordinated in order to rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much academic work in South Asian Studies. The subaltern’s agency was restored by theorising that the elite in India played a dominant role and not simply a hegemonic one. Thus, with the logic of this theory the subaltern were made into autonomous historical actors who then seemingly acted on their own since they were not to be led by the elites. (p. 361)

Subaltern Studies also became entangled with efforts to re-imagine history itself. It re-invented subalternity. After introducing the cultural perspectives of two outstanding scholars, Bernard S. Cohn and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who explored the language and textuality of discursive power, which primarily influenced to study the added perspectives by Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee, along with other scholars like Dipesh Chakrabarty, the area of Subaltern studies gained more prominence across the Third World Nations in its scope of research. The Subaltern school has no doubt made an enormous contribution in the realm of Indian historiography.

The Subaltern School has contributed a lot in the study of history, economics and social sciences in Third World countries during end of the twentieth century. It shapes a part of postcolonial theory in literature and its application is certainly functional in the study of certain texts (for example – Dalit Literature).
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