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Defining Representation of the Subaltern

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ABSTRACT

Spivak in her ground-breaking essay asks, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" The clear answer to this query is 'NO'. (Spivak, 1988:1) They are the subalterns, voiceless! Someone else must speak for them. Someone should re-present them. Etymologically, re-presentation is nothing but a presentation created not by describing the object as it is but by representing it in a best-understood form. The term representation embodies a wide range of connotations and readings. It can also be considered as an active process. Representation is related to power. Often we find some visible components involved in the term representation. A representation can be in the form of material reproductions, clear images, reproductions or even a performance. Factually speaking re-presenting of anything must involve some "real" factor but for over a century, the historians, artists, philosophers, and linguists are betrothed in defining the relationship between the real thing and its representation. Specifically speaking, a politician represents his constituency in the parliament; an individual represents a group of people; this is the basic principle of the fundamental democratic ruling. For the sake of this particular study, we focus on the artistic, visual and political factors of the concept of 'Representation'. From a political point of view, according to Shohat "one representation often influences all the spheres of society". (Woolfgang, Iser, 1987)

Keywords: Subaltern, Representation, Post colonialism, Voice, Agency

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Introduction

"Representation is first and foremost an act of performance, bringing forth in the mode of staging something which in itself is not a given." (Wolfgang Iser, 1987:232)

Representation characterised so far is always relational and will not necessarily be real. They are facts or images which need a severe interrogation to their conceptual reality. Representation is not necessarily a truth; one can say it's a similar truth; it can take any form: photograph, advertisement, films, television, paintings, and many more cultural kinds. In literary terms, novels, academic texts, journalistic pieces, and other literature are also indispensable forms of representation. Edward Said's *Orientalism*, emphasises the fact that representation can never be exactly realistic.

He mostly felt so while analysing the textual representation of the Orient in *Orientalism*. This brings forth the uncertain nature of representation. How to interpret it? Alternatively, how to explain the truth content of the representation? Two aspects of the matter arising from, the discussion so far. Firstly, representation comes in several forms. The literary structure of

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representation has three necessary conditions of representation; one is representation itself; the second is the object, which is to be represented; the third is the author who represents the object. The second fundamental point for discussion here is the strength, value, efficacy and the effective accuracy of the representation of the object. The literary representation of the object cannot instrumentally depend on the object itself, rather it is the presence of the representor, via virtue of it having displaced, excluded and made supererogatory of the object as a real thing.

Defining Representation of the Subaltern:

Representation occupies an equally critical place in the socio-cultural environment as that of the postcolonial studies and academia. The postcolonial theorists have studied the role of power in the act of representation and exposed the concept of 'othering' exemplified in the modern colonial Western literature and culture. (Woolfgang, Iser. 1987) Similarly, Gayatri Spivak differentiates between Vertretung und Darstellung. She defines the first one as "stepping in someone's region … to tread in someone's shoes." Here the term representation takes the meaning of "political representation" or speaking on behalf of someone. However, Darstellung means re-presentation, "placing there". Thus according to Spivak, representation is "proxy and portrait". One must understand the consent in "speaking for" and "portraying". She discourses the problem of "speaking in the name of": "It is no longer a solution, the notion of the disenfranchised speaking for them, or the radical critics speaking for them; this query of representation, self-representation, representing others, is a problem." Spivak advised 'persistent critique' to protect in contrast to "constructing the Other simply as an object of knowledge, leaving out the real Others because of the ones who are getting entry into the public sector due to these waves of benevolence and so on" (Spivak,1988:63).

The process of representation needs a constant check. It always has some element of interpretation involved. One must identify the interpreter to get a clear understanding of the represented body.

According to Ella Shohat, one must continuously question representations: A literary work or cultural piece like a play offers significant insight into the notion of representation in both society and literature. Every such expression needs to be analysed from both perspectives of the term, which is being represented and who is representing it. The perseverance, historic moment, location, strategy and the tone of the representation; everything must be analysed.
All this questioning becomes essential, primarily when a subaltern is represented. For academics, subalterns are the people who are socially and politically outside of the hegemonic power structure. They are not positioned to represent themselves. Very few representations exist for these groups, and most of them are unsuitable. Shohat brings our attention to the fact that the higher strata of the society can live with distinctive representations; Even if a negative image happens to be portrayed it will be treated as a "natural diversity" of people. (C. Belair: 2010) However, the representation of an under represented group is necessarily within the hermeneutics of domination, overcharged with symbolic significance. (Shahot, Ella. "The Struggle over Representation, 1995)

In the current literary sphere, very little subaltern representations are comprehended and going ahead, only a few of them are believed to be genuinely representative. That is why the mass

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media apprehends subaltern studies as symbolic (See Postcolonial Novel). Only a few images are quite typical, not only for individuals but also for the minority group as a whole. A common assumption is made that a subaltern can represent a subaltern.

Some prominent examples are Carmen Miranda in *The Gang's All Here* (1943), Ricardo Montalban in *Sayonara* (1957), and Rudolph Valentino in *The Son of the Sheik and Sarah Shahi in the L-Word*. Actors with the certain ethnic background are cast to represent the ethnic "other" in these movies. This limitation reflects the obliviousness and the lack of diversity within the subaltern groups.

The role of subalterns in their representational forms has always been that of the object rather than a subject of narration. They are never offered a chance to tell their story and are always treated as inferior other whose story should be told by some superior entity. This denial of artistic representation consequently resulted in a literal rejection of legal, economic and political representation. Most importantly, they need to be heard, rather than to be spoken for. A common misunderstanding about representation is that it is just literary and does not affect the actual world scenarios whereas the fact is that they certainly affect, how an individual is professed in the society based on their communal representations. A conceptual analysis of these representations must be done in terms of their accomplishments. Available subaltern representations are already very few in numbers looking at their consequent impact on the real lives of the marginalised groups; the negative representation may create a devastating situation. The available quantity of representation is already an issue of concern, as they are extremely less. If this is true, then who will write more representation for them? Even the symbolic characters, subaltern actors, writers, and also the scholars face a dilemma, who will speak for subalterns? As soon as some representative or a specific image is recited as metonymic, that representation becomes problematic.

It is difficult to theorise any solution to this challenging situation. Only some increase in the self-representation or addition of more individuals from the marginalised groups to represent themselves can contribute to improvisation. It is easier said than done! Actually if one genuinely wants to picturise the subaltern setup, people from all strata of society must come forward to add to this.

Conclusion

Summing up the discussion, come across Spivak's question again *Can the Subaltern Speak?* In her influential essay, she highlights the fact that the process of representation involves two people: one is the listener, and one is the speaker. (Laura, R. Brueck. 2014) Subaltern, as the name suggests, is voiceless and even if they try to represent themselves, they are less likely to be heard. Often this act of self-representation falls out of them, "lines laid down by the official institutional structures of representation" (306). Thus self-representation of subalterns is almost impossible. At the same time, the master signifiers like artists or activists continue to work and challenge the status quo representation despite the continued resistance.

In the above discussion, it is clear that no representation is possible of, ‘the thing in itself'. The factual representation can only be represented, ‘transcendentally', with the understanding of

the individual accompanied by his practical insights. In short, image or speech illustrates something. The representation carries an equal possibility of distortion. Consistent and substantial work in the field of representing subalterns is also needed. Furthermore, efforts must be taken to disengage dominant modes and challenge hegemonic ideologies. More self-representation efforts must be encouraged through, or it will take a long time to come into existent properly.

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