



In 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Spivak offers the sentence 'White men are saving the brown women from brown men' as one interpretation of the relationship between colonizer and colonized. How far does this sentence reflect the representations of British dealings with India in the texts you have studied?

Eleanor Ross

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her influential essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' argues that the abolition of the Hindu rite of *sati* in India by the British 'has been generally understood as a case of 'White men saving brown women from brown men''.¹ Her use of the term 'generally understood' certainly warrants emphasis since, as will be discussed, the discourses on *sati* are rife with controversy. Katherine Mayo, after a three-month tour of the country in 1926, concludes that, 'The British administration of India, be it good, bad, or indifferent, has nothing whatever to do with the conditions [of India]'.² She goes on to suggest that the ills of Indian society stem from the very essence of Hinduism and its traditions: principally the deplorable treatment of women and of 'untouchables'.³ By examining a selection of *sati* texts, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and R. K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs*, Spivak's sentence appears increasingly blinkered. However, she admits that the sentence she has constructed is 'one among many displacements describing the relationship between brown and white *men*' (emphasis mine).⁴ As will be argued, Spivak's emphasis on 'brown women' marks femininity as a metaphor for colonisation. Despite ranging from 1825 to 1976, from Imperial to Independent India, the texts have some resounding similarities. 'British dealings with India' may have stopped officially, but the effects of Imperialism are felt even after Independence from the colonizer.

Although the term 'subaltern' conventionally denotes an inferior military rank, it is more generally used as 'a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society', often expressed in terms of gender and caste.⁵ In this way, both 'brown women' and low castes are subaltern, social subordinates. *Sati*, meaning 'good wife', signals a duty: the duty of a wife to her husband and religion. Indian women, with some exceptions such as Daisy in *The Painter of Signs*, seem unavoidably housebound. In his opening pages, Narayan describes the women at the lawyer's house as hidden away: 'several women emerged from various corners of the house'.⁶ Similarly, Sohini in *Untouchable*, although not housebound, makes the fire, collects water and cooks. Just as the woman is unable to escape the expectations of her gender, so too is the untouchable unable to escape his caste, it being acquired at birth and non changeable. Apparently unable, then, to save themselves, it seems at first glance that the white man can rescue the subaltern.

¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p.93

² Katherine Mayo, *Mother India*, ed. Mrinalini Sinha, (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), p.78

³ Mrinalini Sinha, 'Introduction' in *Mother India*, p.4

⁴ Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', p.93

⁵ Peter Childs and Patrick Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory*, (Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall, 1997), p.161

⁶ R. K. Narayan, *The Painter of Signs*, (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p.8

The Hindu tradition of *sati*, or widow-burning, to which Spivak refers began to represent a fault line in British presence in India. The *sati* woman therefore represents an ideological battleground for the dispute between Eastern and Western colonial discourse. As Lata Mani states, '[British] fear of the consequences of prohibiting *sati* was tied to their analysis of *sati* as a religious practice and to their view of religion as a fundamental and structuring principle of Indian society.'⁷ By prohibiting the 'religious practice' of *sati* in 1829, the British were thus rendering illegal what seemed to them an integral part of Hindu society and identity, redefining ritual not merely as superstition, but as *crime*. It is chiefly for this reason that the widows in the *sati* texts, all of which are written from a Western perspective, are portrayed as victims of an inhumane, religious, offence, as will be discussed. Mani goes on to suggest that there is a discrepancy in the very representations of *sati*: 'within the discourse on *sati*, women are represented in two mutually exclusive ways: as heroines able to withstand the raging blaze of the funeral pyre or else as pathetic victims coerced against their will into the flames'.⁸ Emma Roberts presents her *sati* widows as the latter of these categories in her poem, 'The Rajah's Obsequies'. She labels the widow, 'A helpless slave to lordly man's controul [...] compelled by brutal force' to perform the rite of *sati*.⁹

Stephen Morton furthers Spivak's sentence by equating it directly to the justification of colonialism: 'By representing *sati* as a barbaric practice, the British were thus able to justify imperialism as a civilising mission in which [...] they were rescuing Indian women from the reprehensible practices of a traditional Hindu patriarchal society.'¹⁰ The very 'representations' of *sati* can thus be seen as 'British dealings' since they were used to justify British presence in India. Daisy's attempt to educate the poor about birth control can also be seen as a 'civilising mission', but of a disparate variety. She attempts to 'rescue Indian women' from overpopulation and subsequent poverty through birth control, but without a personal political agenda. Although, as Robert J. C. Young observes, through the rite of *sati*, 'Women and modernity came to be regarded as antithetical entities', Daisy is driven by 'modern' thought processes equated with the West.¹¹ Thus she symbolises the antithesis of Spivak's sentence: Brown women are in fact saving other brown women from brown men. However, just as the foreign presence in India required justification, ultimately Daisy's 'civilising mission' is seen as alien, a desire to interfere in the natural order and to 'tamper with God's designs'.¹² Her potential to modernise aspects of Indian society is therefore marred by the indomitable existence of Hindu tradition.

Mani's aforementioned suggestion of the Indian women 'coerced against their will' is echoed by Emma Roberts who depicts the *sati* as appealing for a rescuer, someone to 'avenge the wrong [and] Crush at a blow foul superstition's laws'.¹³ The white men conveniently fill this void, becoming the Indian woman's 'rescuer' from the 'reprehensible practices' of a patriarchal Hindu society. However, William Sleeman, a British Indian Official, in his memoirs, writes of a woman who had 'determined to mix her ashes with those of her

⁷ Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*, (London: University of California Press, 1998), p.20

⁸ Mani, *Contentious Traditions*, p.162

⁹ Emma Roberts, 'The Rajah's Obsequies' in *Oriental Scenes, Dramatic Sketches And Tales, With Other Poems*, Calcutta: 1830

¹⁰ Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, (London: Routledge, 2003), p.63

¹¹ Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.97

¹² Narayan, *The Painter of Signs*, p.60

¹³ Roberts, 'The Rajah's Obsequies'

departed husband'.¹⁴ The word 'determined' implies that the woman's decision to become a *sati* is voluntary. She is a woman who, to use Spivak's terms, 'actually wanted to die'.¹⁵

In *The Painter of Signs*, Narayan depicts the Aunt as committed to her religious faith; she is metaphorically 'married' to Hinduism. Clinging to intangible horoscopes and the 'stars', the Aunt conforms to precisely the 'foul superstition's laws' to which Roberts refers.¹⁶ Her decision to go on a pilgrimage to Benares to end her days parallels the sacrifice of the *sati* widows; both are 'Hindu' self-sacrifices. Yet the Aunt's is unquestionably voluntary, as she sees it as, 'the most auspicious end to one's life'.¹⁷ Mayo suggests that the *sati* widow believes she will have an equally auspicious end: 'she escapes a present hell and may hope for happier birth in her next incarnation'.¹⁸ Thus it seems that by prohibiting *sati*, white men are *not* 'saving brown women from brown men', but in fact depriving the women of freedom of choice. Spivak's sentence can be reworded thus: 'brown women need saving from brown and white men alike'.

As Spivak warns, in the discourse on *sati*, 'One never encounters the testimony of the women's voice-consciousness'.¹⁹ It must be remembered that however realistic the widows' 'voices' may seem, they are merely *representations*, created and framed by a Western perspective. Despite Sleeman's assurance that, 'the reader may rely upon the truth of the whole tale', the quintessential 'truth' of the widow's words may be lost in his translation, or even politically slanted; as a figure who represents British authority in India, Sleeman debatably has a political agenda to protect the image of British presence in India.²⁰ Thus a fissure emerges, creating a chasm between the 'true' history of the colonized and the myriad of 'invented' discourses by the colonizer. This is exemplified in the *sati* poems in which there is a discrepancy between the poets' depictions of the *sati*'s attire. Whilst Landon and Jewsbury clad their widows in 'the white veil' and 'the bridal veil' respectively, Roberts' widow has an 'unveiled face'.

The Western perspective, then, is crucially superior to that of the subaltern: those with the power to speak speak *for* those who cannot. Yet Mukherjee identifies this as a problem in *Untouchable*: 'This caste and class distance between the writer and the people he represents results in the erasure in the novel of the voice of the untouchable community'.²¹ The *sati* writers' 'imperial eyes' and Anand's Western education supersede and quash the perspective of the subaltern for whom they ironically attempt to create a voice. Emma Roberts employs direct quotations to give a 'voice' to the two widows in 'The Rajah's Obsequies'. However, Stephen Morton alerts us to the adverse effect of this: 'the benevolent impulse to represent subaltern groups effectively appropriates the voice of the subaltern and thereby silences them'.²² In the same way that the 'benevolent' colonizer, by prohibiting *sati*, 'silenced' the voice of the widow who 'chooses' to die on her husband's funeral pyre, the examined *sati* writers 'silence' the subaltern woman by claiming to represent and to speak for her experience. In terms of colonial discourse, then, white men are not 'saving brown women from brown men'; rather, they are hampering their freedom to speak.

The ritual of *sati* is represented as removing the widow's identity: she exists *in relation* to her deceased husband, who retains his 'power beyond the grave'.²³ Just as the

¹⁴ William Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*, rev. and ann. Vincent A. Smith, (Karachi: OUP, 1915), p.20

¹⁵ Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', p.93

¹⁶ Narayan, *The Painter of Signs*, p.5

¹⁷ Narayan, *The Painter of Signs*, p.126

¹⁸ Mayo, *Mother India*, p.131

¹⁹ Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', p.93

²⁰ Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections*, p.19

²¹ Mukherjee, Arun P. 'The Exclusions of Postcolonial Theory and Mulk Raj Anand's "Untouchable"', in *Ariel*: 22:3, July 1991, p.36

²² Morton, *Spivak*, p.56

²³ Roberts, 'The Rajah's Obsequies'

Western woman who adopts the name of her husband metaphorically loses her previous 'identity' in marriage, Daisy recalls feeling a similar loss of her very innateness during her foiled pre-marriage ceremony: 'They decked me in [...] diamonds and gold all over my ears, neck, nose, and wrist [...] I felt suffocated [...] and felt that I was losing my identity.'²⁴ Yet earlier women did not have the power to escape that she does. Landon and Jewsbury both similarly redefine bridal jewellery as signs of enslavement: '*Chains* and bright *stones* are on her arms and neck', 'We have wreathed thy arms with bracelets bright, / And with *chains* of gold thy ankles light' (emphases mine).²⁵ Ironically, the removal of these feminine fetters before ascending the pyre does not emancipate the woman; rather, it results in a further loss of identity. As Sleeman notes, the widow, 'broke her bracelets in pieces by which she became dead in law, and forever excluded from caste'.²⁶

Narayan heightens the symbol of the bracelet as a female shackle in the depiction of the bangle-seller and his shop. The female customers, wearing and trying on bangles, are termed, 'Enslaved ones', harking back to the abovementioned *sati* 'chains'.²⁷ This image is furthered by the addition of a sexual dimension; the scene played out parallels a sex scene. Raman labels the bangle-seller a 'lecher', and the passage is peppered with words denoting sexual excitement: 'flirtation', 'coily', 'attractive', 'seductive'.²⁸ Suspicions of sexual connotations emerge from the image of the bangle-seller, 'squeezing wrists while slipping on the bangles' and 'massaging it down'; finally these suspicions are confirmed with the climaxing phrase, 'The woman enjoyed it and moaned with delicious pain'.²⁹ Although we once again see the 'enslaving' element of the bracelet, the women are in the shop out of free choice and the air is ringing with 'laughter', a marked contrast to the representations of *sati*.³⁰ Moreover, this sexual depiction reveals the sexually charged state of Raman's mind, a trait that Mayo condones as partly responsible for the conditions of India.

Mayo points to a fundamental weakness in the Indian male: his sexuality. She argues that the sexual excess of Indian men leaves them with 'hands [that] are too weak, too fluttering, to seize or to hold the reins of Government'.³¹ Although at first glance this statement implies merely that the colonizer is the political superior in the colonial relationship, on closer inspection we glean intricacies of inter-gender relations. Sexuality, as will be argued, is a trait that is simultaneously empowering and disempowering for man and woman alike. Raman conforms to Mayo's 'weak' and 'fluttering' depiction of the Indian male when in close proximity to Daisy: 'He felt confused and [...] unable to assess her personality [...] Never had he been in such a predicament'.³² Thus the quintessence of Spivak's argument that white men are 'saving' brown *women* from brown *men* is increasingly undermined; on occasions, it seems as though 'brown women' do not *require* 'saving'.

Thus beneath the veneer of feminine weakness lies a potential power: sexuality. The Pundit is attracted to Bakha's sister, Sohini in spite of her low caste. He 'recognised' her by her sexuality: 'the fresh young form whose full breasts with their dark beads of nipples stood out conspicuously under her muslin shirt [...] And he was inclined to be kind to her'.³³ The fact that he was 'inclined to be kind to her' comes as an afterthought, and *as a result of*,

²⁴ Narayan, *The Painter of Signs*, p.108

²⁵ Letitia Elizabeth Landon, 'A Sutte', *The Zenana and minor poems*, ed. Emma Roberts, London, 1839; Maria Jane Jewsbury, 'Song of the Hindoo Women', *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets*, eds. Isobel Armstrong and Joseph Bristow with Cath Sharrock, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), p.218-220

²⁶ Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections*, p.20

²⁷ Narayan, *The Painter of Signs*, p.112

²⁸ Narayan, *The Painter of Signs*, p.18-19

²⁹ Narayan, *The Painter of Signs*, p.19

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Mayo, *Mother India*, p.92

³² Narayan, *The Painter of Signs*, p.29

³³ Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable*, (London: Penguin Books, 1940), p.29

Sohini's sexuality, is not only a damning portrayal of the religious figure, but also marks the benefits of her femininity: he selects her out from the crowd of untouchables at the well and fills her water pitcher, an act that an untouchable is unable to do for fear of 'polluting' the well. Yet her attractiveness paradoxically becomes her folly, as the Pundit attempts to rape her. Raman, who also attempts to rape Daisy, observes that it is the 'tragedy of womanhood' that 'you never view them normally until they are past sixty and look shrunken-skinned'.³⁴ Yet over-sexed males create this 'tragedy'. Mayo's emphasis on the sexual excess of the Indian male as a fetter to the freedom of women thus rings true.

As aforementioned, Daisy has an enchanting effect on Raman, sparking his 'predicament'. Early in the text, there is a plethora of terms affiliating her with the supernatural or a temptress: 'she stood like a vision', 'she is a siren, planning to eat me up', 'these are the well-known tricks of wily women'³⁵. It is precisely because Raman is still 'unable to assess her personality', that Daisy enchants him.³⁶ Just as the British do not 'understand' the Hindu rite of *sati*, Raman and the Pundit do not 'understand' Daisy and Sohini. Their femininity renders them opposite, or 'other' to the men, in the same way that Eastern Hinduism is 'other' to Western Christianity. Thus, just as the British attempt to supersede *sati* by prohibition, Raman and the Pundit attempt to supersede Daisy and Sohini by violation. Hence we return to Spivak's sentence that brown women need 'saving' from brown men.

However, interestingly, Raman's attempt to rape Daisy is driven by a fantasy that is specifically Western: 'He debated within himself whether to dash up, seize her, and behave like Rudolph Valentino [...] Women liked an aggressive lover – so said the novelists'.³⁷ His notions of what 'women liked' is naively based on Western fiction. Thus it seems that the sexual ideologies of white men in fact preserve, or even create, the sexual predicament of Indian women. It is, then, indirectly the *white* men from whom the brown women need 'saving'. Moreover, by secretly fleeing Raman and the cart under which they were sleeping, Daisy renders her rape impossible. She has thus salvaged not only herself from violation, but also Raman from his sexual desires and subsequent guilt. He tells her, "'Thanks for saving me [...] From myself'".³⁸ In an inversion of Spivak's statement, then, we witness the brown *women* 'saving' the brown *men* from not only white men, but also from themselves.

Furthermore, the system of caste questions previous notions about power within gender relations. Bakha is male, yet as a *dalit* he ranks lower than women of a higher caste. The housewife, 'at whose doorstep Bakha was at rest', cries, "'May you perish and die! You have defiled my house!'"³⁹ It is now the woman who metaphorically commands the death of the opposite sex, whereas previously the *sati* was led to the funeral pyre by the death of the husband. Caste, then, is a more potent hierarchical social divider than is gender. Yet even when the question of caste is absent, there may be a gender role-reverberation. Daisy leads, and Raman follows, on her mission to spread the awareness of birth control. His subordination is solidified in the closing pages: 'He was quite prepared to surrender himself completely to her way of thinking'.⁴⁰

As India moves towards Independence, the presence of the colonizer becomes increasingly alien. Bakha, seeing the English Superintendent of Police 'in the midst of this enormous crowd of Indians', realises that 'the foreigner seemed out of place, insignificant,

³⁴ Narayan, *The Painter of Signs*, p.39

³⁵ Narayan, *The Painter of Signs*, p.29; p.40

³⁶ Narayan, *The Painter of Signs*, p.29

³⁷ Narayan, *The Painter of Signs*, p.77

³⁸ Narayan, *The Painter of Signs*, p.80

³⁹ Anand, *Untouchable*, p.71

⁴⁰ Narayan, *The Painter of Signs*, p.140

the representative of an order which seemed to have nothing to do with the natives'.⁴¹ The British dealings with India, it seems, are over. We thus recall Mayo's argument that the British administration had 'nothing whatever to do' with the conditions of India. Despite prohibiting *sati* in order to 'rescue' brown women from brown men, the British had 'nothing to do' with the eventual outcome of women since they continued, and continue, to need 'saving' in other ways. Ultimately, then, white men do *not*, as Spivak asserts, save brown women from brown men. It is the Indian woman, or indeed the Indian man, who alone can 'save' themselves.

⁴¹ Anand, *Untouchable*, p.144

Bibliography

- Anand, Mulk Raj. *Untouchable*. (London: Penguin Books, 1940)
- Childs, Peter and Williams, Patrick. *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory*. (Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall, 1997)
- Landon, Letitia Elizabeth. 'A Suttee', *The Zenana and minor poems*, ed. Emma Roberts, (London, 1839)
- Jewsbury, Maria Jane. 'Song of the Hindoo Women', *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets*, eds. Armstrong Isobel and Joseph Bristow with Cath Sharrock. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998)
- Knott, Kim. *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: OUP, 2000)
- Landon, Letitia Elizabeth. 'A Suttee', in *The Zenana and minor poems*. Ed. Emma Roberts, (London: 1839)
- Mani, Lata. *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*. (London: University of California Press, 1998)
- Mayo, Katherine. *Mother India*, ed. Sinha, Mrinalini. (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2000)
- Morton, Stephen. *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. (London: Routledge, 2003)
- Mukherjee, Arun P. 'The Exclusions of Postcolonial Theory and Mulk Raj Anand's "Untouchable": A Case Study', *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 22:3, July 1991.
- Narayan, R. K. *The Painter of Signs*. (London: Penguin Books, 2006)
- Roberts, Emma. 'The Rajah's Obsequies' in *Oriental Scenes, Dramatic Sketches And Tales, With Other Poems*. (Calcutta: 1830)
- Sleeman, William. *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*. Rev. and ann. Vincent A. Smith, (Karachi: OUP, 1915)
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Ed. Williams, Patrick and Laura Chrisman. *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994)
- Young, Robert J. C. *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003)