**Approaches to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak “Can the Subaltern Speak?”**

**Key terms to enable understanding of the essay:**

1. **Hegemony:** hegemonic power or dominant discourse is predominantly that of a white male.
2. **Equivocation:** Spivak is suggesting that we have to be sure in the theoretical rigour of our use of terms. We need to avoid using terms that have multiple meanings. She wants us to avoid equivocation.
3. **Subaltern:** The individual that is oppressed has limited hegemonic power or accessibility to the notion of hegemony/power. Through historical narrative the oppressed do not have access to orthodoxy (those in control of hegemony). The oppressed can consolidate power to force orthodoxy to ensure the revision of history. Revisionist history is when an oppressed person is given the opportunity to be rewritten into history. The subaltern lack recognition and cannot contribute to revisionist history. **The subaltern and oppressed are not interchangeable terms. All subaltern are oppressed but not all oppressed are subaltern.**
4. **Subjectivity:** Foucault and Deleuze ascribe to the poststructuralist traditional model that believe desire, interest, and intent are all united and all the same in the formation of the subject. They conflate the terms. However, Spivak argues for Akrasia and Marxist subjectivity, which is the antithesis of Foucault and Deleuze. She believes that desires and interests are not the same. She suggests subjectivity doesn’t come from unity but dislocation.

**Spivak argues:**

1. The subaltern is oppressed.
2. The subject is divided. Subjectivity arises as a consequence of dislocation. Any attempt to make sense of contradiction and dislocation homogenises the subject.
3. There are two forms of representation.
   1. Representation (Vertretung) - political representation from within the hegemonic power.
   2. Representation (Darstellung) - re-presentation - something that has been presented will be re-presented. Transforming the nature of representation.
4. We need try to clarify our use of terms to avoid equivocation and re-present concepts.

**What is guiding Spivak in her attempt to shed light on the subaltern?**

1. The implementation of the law as a means of “epistemic violence” (control).
2. The creation of a class of “interpreters” between the colonised and coloniser. “Interpreters” are employed to infuse and indoctrinate the colonised with Western ideologies. They serve as “sub oppressors”, who pacify the colonised by educational indoctrination of the oppressed.
3. For Foucault and Deleuze the sub-proletariat can speak for themselves, and the subaltern do have a voice and access to hegemonic voices of power. Spivak disagrees with this.
4. Spivak rejects the possibility of this and provides an example of a subaltern that does not have a voice. She is not suggesting we should abstain from representing the subaltern. She wants to show us that there can be a complete loss of voice. The example she gives examines the practice of “Sati” (when a woman sacrifices herself after her husband’s death by throwing herself on his funeral pyre).

**Questions to consider when reading:**

1. Spivak argues “white men are saving brown women from brown men” (92). Why might it be problematic for a woman to be “an object of protection from her own kind” (94)?
2. What is the significance of Spivak’s closing assertion: “The subaltern cannot speak” and what does she suggest we should do?
3. Examine Spivak’s analysis of the British codification of Hindu Law focusing on her investigation of “Sati”.
4. What is Spivak’s opinion of the creation of a class of “interpreters”?
5. Explain why for Spivak to be a “‘woman’ seems most problematic” (90)?