

# Hyper-self-reflexive development? Spivak on representing the Third World 'Other'

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**ABSTRACT** This article emphasises the relevance and importance of Gayatri Spivak's work for those of us involved in the field of development (as academics, researchers or development workers). Spivak underlines how our representations, especially of marginalised Third World groups, are intimately linked to our positioning (socioeconomic, gendered, cultural, geographic, historical, institutional). She therefore demands a heightened self-reflexivity that mainstream development analysts (eg Robert Chambers), and even 'critical' ones (eg Escobar, Shiva), have failed to live up to. The article examines Spivak's writings to illustrate the reasons, advantages and limits of this hyper-self-reflexivity.

'Can the subaltern speak?' (1988a), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential, albeit controversial,<sup>1</sup> article, underscores what has become her untiring concern—the proclivity of dominant discourses and institutions to marginalise and disempower the Third World 'subaltern'.<sup>2</sup> Her article examines the ethics and politics involved in this othering process, seizing on the question of representation of the Third World.

Spivak begins the piece by pointing out how 'progressive' Western intellectuals such as Foucault and Deleuze tend to engage in gross universalisations when they speak on behalf of the Third World 'masses', or refer to 'the workers' struggle' in a way that ignores the international division of labour (1988a: 272–274). She goes on to show how colonial and 'native' representations are similarly problematic. Focusing on widow-sacrifice (sati) in colonial India, she examines the British move to abolish the practice, which was justified on the basis of the British 'civilising mission' in India (a move which Spivak captures in the now famous phrase: 'White men saving brown women from brown men') (1988a: 297). She contrasts this position with the then dominant Hindu one, which excused the practice by arguing that the widows wanted to die. Spivak indicates how each representation legitimises the other: one purports to be a social mission, saving Hindu women from their own men, the other a reward, allowing the women to commit a 'pure' and 'courageous' act. But all the while, the widow's own voice is ignored. 'Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disap-

pears...There is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak' (1988a: 306–307). Spivak ends the article by pointing out that, even when the female subaltern does speak, she cannot be heard (1988a: 308). In this regard, she mentions the case of Bhuvanewari Bhaduri, whose suicide in 1926 is interpreted as sati resulting from illicit love, in spite of her deliberately leaving signs that she committed it for other (ie political) reasons.

The crux of Spivak's argument is that the above representations of the Third World conflate two related but discontinuous meanings of 'representation' (1988a: 275–276): 1) 'speaking for', in the sense of political representation; and 2) 'speaking about' or 're-presenting', in the sense of making a portrait. Thus, the British abolition of sati rests on a claim to represent the Hindu widow politically and to portray her 'as she really is or desires'. But not only does this claim end up silencing her, it also erases the role the British play when staging her representation. In conflating the two meanings, in speaking for her even as they re-present her, the British neglect their own complicity in the representational process. And Spivak holds not just imperial and dominant nativist discourses to account here; even Foucault and Deleuze, whom she calls 'two great practitioners' of the critique of the subject, and the 'best prophets of heterogeneity and the Other', are guilty: 'The banality of leftist intellectuals' lists of self-knowing, politically canny subalterns stands revealed; representing them, the intellectuals represent themselves as transparent' (1988a: 275).

Spivak writes from the point of view of a literary/postcolonial critic; but I would like, in this article, to argue for the pertinence and significance of her concerns for the field of development. Many of us who work in this field as researchers and/or development workers<sup>3</sup> struggle with the dilemmas that her writing raises. What are the ethico-political implications of our representations for the Third World, and especially for the subaltern groups that preoccupy a good part of our work? To what extent do our depictions and actions marginalise or silence these groups and mask our own complicities? What social and institutional power relationships do these representations, even those aimed at 'empowerment', set up or neglect? And to what extent can we attenuate these pitfalls? Spivak encourages us to ask such questions. She underlines how our discursive constructions are intimately linked to our positioning (socioeconomic, gendered, cultural, geographic, historical, institutional), and therefore demands a heightened self-reflexivity that sometimes even those 'critical' development analysts among us can fail to live up to. I shall attempt to examine Spivak's numerous writings to illustrate the reasons, advantages and limits of this hyper-self-reflexivity.<sup>4</sup>

### **Who represents?**

Spivak underlines how we cannot encounter the Third World today without carrying a lot of baggage. She joins her fellow postcolonial critic, Edward Said (1978), in maintaining that her own discipline of literary criticism is unavoidably invested in Orientalism, so that literary writing (especially on the Third World) always already means reproducing various forms of Western hegemonic power over the Third World.<sup>5</sup> The same may be said of the field of development. As

the 'postdevelopment' theorists (eg Escobar, 1984, 1995; Sachs, 1992) have reminded us, working in development inevitably positions us within a 'development discourse', where the North's superiority over the South is taken for granted, and Western-style development is the norm. Our encounters with, and representations of, our 'subjects' are therefore coded or framed in terms of an us/them dichotomy in which 'we' aid/develop/civilise/empower 'them'. Changing this relationship is not a question of mere good intentions or semantics: for instance, development organisations or researchers may now call their subjects 'beneficiaries', 'target groups', 'partners' or 'clients', instead of 'poor', 'underdeveloped' or 'disadvantaged', but this does not by itself change the discourse or dismantle the us/them power relationship. So caught up are we in this coding that it becomes important in our encounters with the Third World to ask who represents, and what baggage positions us in this us/them manner.

An inheritance that Spivak frequently emphasises is the history of imperialism. Showing her Marxist leanings,<sup>6</sup> she reminds us of the materialist dimensions of this history, especially the way in which colonialism incorporated the colonies into the international division of labour and thus initiated a process of global inequality and socioeconomic impoverishment, particularly in the Third World. For Spivak, this is a process that continues today under the rubric of 'globalisation', with women bearing the brunt of the costs: 'Marx's prescience is fulfilled in postfordism and the explosion of global homeworking. The subaltern woman is now to a rather large extent the support of production' (1999: 67). But Spivak supplements this political-economy argument with an important semiotic one: like Said, she recalls imperialism's cultural production and domination of colonial societies, a process she refers to as the "'worlding" of what is today called "the Third World" ' (1985: 247). 'Worlding' for her is akin to Marx's 'commodity fetishism', where commodities are so fetishised under capitalism that the (alienated) labour process involved in their production is obscured. For Spivak, the epistemic violence of imperialism has meant the transformation of the 'Third World' into a sign whose production has been obfuscated to the point that Western superiority and dominance are naturalized (1999: 114ff).

One does not have to look too far afield in international development to see this obfuscatory process at work. As several analysts have pointed out (eg Frank, 1967; Sylvester, 1999: 717; Escobar, 1991: 675-676), modernisation thinking (eg Rostow, 1960), which has so dominated the field, barely even mentions colonialism. For it, Third World history begins post-World War II, with First World growth patterns serving as history's guide and goal. The pervasiveness of such thinking is visible, for example, in the structural adjustment and 'free-trade' policies of the Bretton Woods institutions, under which countries must liberalise socioeconomic and trade regimes. The policies proceed by a disavowal of the history of imperialism and the unequal footing on which such a history has often placed Third World countries in the global capitalist system. They also proceed by buying 'a self-contained version of the West', which for Spivak amounts to ignoring both its complicity in, and production by, 'the imperialist project' (1988a: 291).

Thus, according to Spivak, the disavowal of the 'worlding' of the Third World, allows the Westerner to overlook the interrelationships between the West and imperialism or globalisation and the conditions of homeworkers. It places the Third World at bay from the West, and either ignores colonialism, or situates it securely enough in the past as to make one think it is now over and done with. Moreover, it reinforces Western ethnocentrism and triumphalism. Spivak writes, for example, that 'the student [where Spivak teaches, at Columbia University, New York] is encouraged to think that he or she lives in the capital of the world. The student is encouraged to think that he or she is there to help the rest of the world. And he or she is also encouraged to think that to be from other parts of the world is not to be fully global' (2003: 622).

But Spivak is careful not to conclude that such thinking happens only along a geographic, West/Third World axis. Increasingly, her work refers to a 'class apartheid', in which the cultures of class are often more important than national or spatial positioning:

There is an internal line of cultural difference within the 'same culture,' apart from the usual mechanisms of class formation. It is related to the formation of the new global culture of management and finance and the families attached to it. It marks access to the Internet. It also marks the new culture of international nongovernmental organizations, involved in development and human rights, as they work on the lowest strata in the developing world' (2003: 618; cf 2002: 7).

For Spivak, this elite global professional class, made up of both First and Third worlders, is so embedded in managerialist culture that it is easily blind to the Third World subaltern or is prone to projecting developmentalist/ethnocentric mythologies onto the subaltern.

Spivak never shies from implicating herself in her critique of the above-mentioned historical, geographic, cultural and class positionings, often confessing, for instance, to being a privileged Third World academic working in the West (eg 1990a: 57, 60, 75-94 ). It is perhaps for this reason that she also devotes quite a bit of space in her writings to what she calls the 'native informant', not hesitating once again to implicate herself. She borrows the admittedly problematic<sup>7</sup> term from ethnography to denote a person positioned to speak on behalf of his/her ethnic group or country, typically for the benefit of the Western investigator or audience (1999: 6, ix; cf. Khan, 2001). The term refers specifically to informants from the Third World or Third World diasporas living in the West<sup>8</sup> (like Spivak, I fit the latter category). Spivak is sceptical of the now fashionable celebration of 'marginality' and multiculturalism, and the increasingly important role that native informants play in/for the West. She is weary of these individuals' uncritical embrace of the West's validation of multiculturalism. The problem is that the native informant can too readily don ethnicity as a badge. S/he may indeed be a well informed and prepared investigator, but 'clinging to marginality' (1993: 9) also runs the risk of essentialising one's ethnic identity and romanticising national origins. It can lead, for example, to ahistorical or fundamentalist claims (eg 'feminism is un-Islamic') which, in turn, may be used by those in power to justify the repression of women or subalterns (eg censorship of progressive Muslim women's groups). It can also lead to shaky claims about the native informant as keeper of esoteric 'ethnic' or subaltern

knowledge. Being postcolonial or 'ethnic', according to Spivak, does not necessarily or naturally qualify one as Third World expert or indeed subaltern (1999: 310); in fact, valorising the 'ethnic' may end up rewarding those who are already privileged and upwardly mobile, at the expense of the subaltern.

While defending identity-based movements' attempts at recognition and protection of minority group rights, Spivak is critical of privileged diasporics capitalising on postcoloniality by claiming comparative advantage or disadvantage. She states that, in the academic or political sphere, the 'diasporic' or 'subaltern' has become a 'kind of buzzword for any group that wants something that it does not have' (1996: 290). Similarly, in the economic/business sphere, 'difference' is increasingly becoming commodified, with ethnic culture now being packaged and 'niche'-marketed. She sees upwardly mobile third-worlders and Western diasporics, spurred by the desire to assist their 'home' culture, playing a greater role in this commodification process: as 'well-placed Southern diasporic[s]' or natives, they help advance corporate multinational globalisation through the patenting of indigenous knowledge and agricultural inputs, microcredit programmes for women, or population control (1999: 310; 2003: 611). She therefore concludes that this new-found 'nativism' yields a reverse ethnocentrism: 'It is as if, in a certain way, we are becoming complicitous in the perpetration of a "new orientalism"' (1993: 56; cf 277).

But Spivak is quick to examine the other side of the equation. She reproaches Western researchers/academics for sometimes too easily distancing themselves from postcoloniality by uncritically situating the native informant as authentic and exotic 'insider': they say "'OK, sorry, we are just very good white people, therefore we do not speak for the blacks.'" That's the kind of breast-beating that is left behind at the threshold and then business goes on as usual' (1990a: 121). By placing themselves as 'outsiders', they duck their own complicity in North-South politics, often hiding behind naïveté or lack of expertise, all the while congratulating themselves as the 'saviors of marginality' (1993: 61). This inside/outside separation either helps contain and depoliticise ethnicity, or puts the onus for change and engagement exclusively on the Third World subaltern (or on the native informant as its representative).

Thus, for Spivak, it is dangerous to assume that one can encounter the Third World, and especially the Third World subaltern, on a level playing field. Our interaction with, and representations of, the subaltern are inevitably loaded. They are determined by our favourable historical and geographic position, our material and cultural advantages resulting from imperialism and capitalism, and our identity as privileged Westerner or native informant. When the investigating subject, naively or knowingly, disavows its complicity or pretends it has no 'geo-political determinations', it does the opposite of concealing itself: it privileges itself (1988a: 272, 292). It is liable (as discussed above and detailed further below) to speak for the subaltern, justifying power and domination, naturalising Western superiority, essentialising ethnicity, or asserting ethnocultural and class identity, all in the name of the subaltern. In so doing, it is liable to do harm to the subaltern. As Linda Alcoff writes, 'Though the speaker may be trying to materially improve the situation of some lesser-privileged group, the effects of her discourse is to reinforce racist, imperialist conceptions and perhaps

also to further silence the lesser-privileged group's own ability to speak and be heard' (1991: 26).

### Why represent?

Perhaps the most common answer in the field of development to the question about why we represent the Third World is that we want to better get to know it so as to be of help (to the 'less fortunate?'). Yet Spivak stands with Foucault (and Said and Escobar) in arguing that such noble and altruistic claims are never just that: knowledge is always imbricated with power, so that getting to know (or 'discursively framing') the Third World is also about getting to discipline and monitor it, to have a more manageable Other; and helping the subaltern is often a reaffirmation of the social Darwinism implicit in 'development', in which 'help' is framed as 'the burden of the fittest' (2002: 22). We have already examined how our framing is influenced by our geopolitical positioning; but Spivak adds and underlines that the 'why' of our representations cannot be divorced from our institutional positioning.<sup>9</sup> She insists, in fact, that there is no such thing as a 'non-institutional environment' (1990a: 5), and hence that our representations are constructed, at least in part, based on such an environment. I propose, in this section, to examine her argument in relation to some of the key organisations in which we researchers/professionals work—academic institutions and governmental and non-governmental development organisations.

Universities have tended to pride themselves as institutions where knowledge can be pursued for its own sake, and where education is delivered in a neutral and objective manner. But of late, these claims have fallen into disrepute. Far from being pure and unmotivated, knowledge and learning are shown to be subject to myriad institutional demands (Bérubé & Nelson, 1995; Kuhn, 1970; Miyoshi, 2000): pressures to 'publish or perish' (for faculty tenure and/or promotion); the imperative for prestige and 'originality'; competition (among students and faculty) for research funding and grants; jockeying between students for high grades; or 'turf wars' among researchers. These institutional demands are shaped, in turn, by external factors, such as government funding or cutbacks to education, corporatisation of the university, the relative availability of research funds for humanities/social sciences versus natural sciences, or state policies on immigration or multiculturalism (that may affect pedagogical content and style, for example). Spivak encapsulates this intersection of academic learning and will to power, this knowledge framing according to institutional demands and pressures, under the rubric of 'teaching machine' (1993; cf 1990a: 5). But she casts a particularly critical eye on how this knowledge framing intersects, in turn, with the Third World.

She is concerned primarily with the politics of knowledge production, specifically the way in which Western university researchers, armed with personal/institutional interests, go to the South to do fieldwork and collect data. She calls this a process of 'information retrieval' (1990a: 59), wherein the Third World becomes a 'repository of an ethnographic "cultural difference"' (1999: 388).<sup>10</sup> It is, for her, another form of imperialism, the Third World once again providing 'resources' for the First World; but unlike classical imperialism, it is

'extraction of surplus-value without extra-economic coercion' (Spivak 1988a: 290; cf Best, 1999: 486, 492). Seen in this light, Western intellectual production mirrors, and is in many ways complicit with, Western imperialism. Cultural imperialism supplements classical (socioeconomic) imperialism, with the Third World producing both 'the wealth and the possibility of the cultural self-representation of the "First World"' (1990a: 96; cf 1988a: 271).

Spivak picks up two specific dimensions of this cultural imperialism. The first is what she refers to as the 'benevolent first-world appropriation and reinscription of the Third World as an Other' (1988a: 289). She means by it the retrieval of information from the South, not to encounter the Third World on its own terms, but for other, usually First World, purposes. To illustrate, she takes Julia Kristeva, the noted French feminist scholar, to task over her book, *About Chinese Women* (1977). Ostensibly a feminist book about ancient Chinese matriarchical institutions, Spivak reproaches it for being ahistorical (for too easily extrapolating the category of 'woman' to ancient Chinese social institutions), romantic (for implying that contemporary China has 'declined' relative to the former idyllic age), and colonialist (for benevolently using the Chinese example, but to argue for the ultimate Western feminist political agenda—a non-patriarchal feminist utopia). For Spivak, Kristeva is not interested in Chinese women per se, but in appropriating them for her own purposes. This amounts to exoticising and orientalising the women, treating the 'margin' as tourist (1988b: 134–153).

A second dimension of academic cultural imperialism is the privileging of theory (1988a: 275). Spivak has in mind here researchers who see themselves as transforming 'raw facts' or 'information' gathered from the South into 'knowledge'. Thus, the 'field' becomes the repository of data, the academy the 'centre' for value-added theory; subalterns/women tell stories, (male) researchers theorise for them; workers have concrete experience and practice, intellectuals distil and systemise them; social movements do local politics, academics formulate 'new social movement theory'. The Third World is 'worlded' on the basis of this theory/practice binary, which perpetuates the pattern of placing the Western academy and intellectual at the centre. That the researcher does not see subaltern stories as sophisticated theory probably says more about her/him, and what s/he constructs and values as 'theory' and 'story', than about the subaltern. Moreover, what s/he disavows, according to Spivak, is that 'the production of theory is also a practice' (1988a: 275), and conversely, that practice and narrative are never free from theory or theoretical bias. But in this *mêlée*, once again, the subaltern is not heard.

Perhaps because she is herself an academic, Spivak has more to say on academic institutions than on development organisations; however, she does seize on the issue of gender and development. She describes gender programmes as the 'matronizing and sororizing of women in development' (1999: 386). The programmes often represent Third World women as oppressed by 'second-class cultures' (1999: 407), thus rationalising feminist intervention and reinventing, under guise of enlightened benevolence, the colonialist 'civilising mission'. For Spivak, gender specialists in development agencies 'must learn to stop feeling privileged as a woman' and refrain from assuming 'women's solidarity because

they are women' (1988b: 136; 1990a: 137, both italics in original; cf. Marchand & Parpart, 1995; Mohanty, 1991; Sylvester, 1995: 956). By generalising themselves, by speaking for all women's desires and interests, they disavow the many obstacles to gender liberation and equality in the West. They also neglect the historical, cultural and socioeconomic differences among and between First and Third World women's groups.

Although she does not specifically consider other institutional dimensions of development, several of Spivak's arguments are pertinent. Just as universities can lay claim to 'pure' knowledge (as mentioned above), development organisations can promote the image of benevolence and disinterestedness. However, the construction of development as 'aid' and 'assistance' to the Third World is belied by what can be called the 'business' and 'conditionality' of development. Thus, in a fashion not untypical of all aid organisations, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) justifies its aid budget to Canadian 'tax-payers' by boasting that 70 cents on every Canadian aid dollar returns to Canada through the creation of jobs and the purchase of goods and services (ie 70% of Canadian aid is tied), and that such aid sustains 30 000 Canadian jobs and provides contracts to 2000 Canadian businesses, 50 universities and 60 colleges (CIDA, 2003). The aid programme may (or may not) help or reach its Third World audiences, but in the meantime, it is an export subsidy to First World businesses and a job creation programme for NGOs. It is also laced with power by dint of its conditionality: in this case, it means tying the recipient to procurement of Canadian goods and services; but in other cases (eg an IMF structural adjustment programme), it could mean the recipient must buy into an ideological programme (neoliberalism) and carry out serious socioeconomic structural reform. Finally, an aid programme can be used as a pretext to open up developing-country markets for Western businesses. Here, Spivak cites the World Bank's recent promotion of itself as a 'knowledge organisation' and its consequent encouragement of developing-country and subaltern group access to new telecommunications technologies (computers, internet, cell phones). The by-product of 'selling access to telecommunications-as-empowerment' is capitalist penetration by global computing and telecommunications industries (1997: 3; 1999: 419; 2003: 613).

Like university programming, development programming is also subject to numerous procedural demands. Technical requirements, deadlines, budgetary time frames, funding priorities—all of these intervene in programme delivery, having little to do with on-the-ground needs. In a Foucauldian vein, many (postdevelopment analysts) in fact maintain that these bureaucratic procedures and interests are integral to the disciplinary and regulatory character of development institutions. James Ferguson's study (1990) of World Bank poverty reduction schemes in Lesotho, for example, shows how the representation of communities as 'underdeveloped' and 'poor' helps justify and reproduce bureaucratic red tape and power. He argues that, ultimately, it does not matter whether the schemes are a success or failure; the main outcome is the depoliticisation of poverty issues and the advancement of state authority (1990: 256). Thus, rather than working themselves out of a job by reducing poverty, development administrations (local and external) can often ensure, through the construction



and/or strengthening of a bureaucratic and technical apparatus, their own survival, if not expansion.

Not just the state or the large international or multilateral development organisation such as the World Bank is complicit here; NGOs are, too. Spivak is sceptical of them because they tend to be 'too involved in the New World Order—in terms of the big players like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation as the economic arm and, unfortunately, more and more, the United Nations as the political arm' (1997: 4). Yet, even those NGOs that stand at the margins of the New World Order are not necessarily immune. Sangeeta Kamat's recent analysis (2002) of grassroots organisations in India demonstrates how small, ostensibly 'progressive', organisations can succumb to a development straightjacket. Comparing the work of a more mainstream organisation (Seva Sansad, devoted to the health and literacy of bonded labourers) and a more radical one (Shramik Hakk Sanghatana, a workers' trade union), Kamat concludes that each in its own way ends up casting off its political militancy: each may well oppose the state through court cases or denunciation of corruption, but neither meaningfully questions 'development', by challenging, say, property laws or socioeconomic inequality (2002: 161). In spite of being financially autonomous and relatively independent of state/international development institutions, each is reluctant to contravene state authority. Both end up choosing band-aid, technical solutions over political ones, thus legitimising state hegemony and reproducing development discourse.

Of course, the above critique is not meant to pose as a comprehensive examination or indictment of academic and development institutions, or to argue that all such institutions are imperialistic all of the time. Rather, Spivak's point is to underline that our representations of the Third World/subaltern cannot escape our institutional positioning and are always mediated by a confluence of diverse institutional interests and pressures, such as those described above. If professional motives dictate, at least to a degree, what and how we do (in development), we cannot pretend to have pure, innocent or benevolent encounters with the subaltern. To do so, as argued earlier, is to perpetuate, directly or indirectly, forms of imperialism, ethnocentrism, appropriation.

At least two implications follow. The first is that, to the extent that our lenses are institutionally (or geopolitically) tinted, our representations of the Third World are likewise institutionally constricted (as some of the examples above illustrate). The construction of development institutions and discourses is simultaneously the circumscription of what and how we can and cannot do (ie development discourse defines our type and mode of encounter). Invoking Foucault, Spivak writes, 'if the lines of making sense of something are laid down in a certain way, then you are able to do only those things with that something which are possible within and by the arrangement of those lines. *Pouvoir-savoir*—being able to do something—only as you are able to make sense of it' (1993: 34). The second implication is that we produce the Third World or subaltern (Said, 1978: 3; Beverly, 1999: 2), and to a rather large extent we produce them to suit our own image and desire. When we act in accordance with personal, professional, organisational interests, our representations of the Other

say much more about us than about the Other, or at a minimum, they construct the Other only in as far as we want to know it and control it.

### **Represent whom?**

I would like, in this section, to examine the above Spivakian argument that our discourses circumscribe what/how we can and cannot represent, although more from the perspective of the subject of our representations—the subaltern. Specifically, I want to assess three attempts at ‘allowing’ the subaltern to speak. I shall argue, from a Spivakian viewpoint, that all three are problematic.

One such attempt is Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), an approach that has become enormously fashionable in both governmental and non-governmental development circles. Popularised and developed by Robert Chambers, PRA is ‘a family of approaches and methods to enable local (rural and urban) people to express, enhance, share and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act’ (1994b: 1253). It is critical of top-down approaches dominated by outsiders and ‘experts’, and instead aims at valorising local knowledge and ‘empowering’ the subaltern so that s/he can ‘determine much of the [development] agenda’ (1994b: 1255). Accordingly, outsiders become facilitators of a participatory process, in which the ‘poor, weak, vulnerable and exploited...come first’ (1997: 11, emphasis in the original). PRA evolves a number of techniques that ensure inclusion of marginalised groups, emphasise open and collective learning, and valorise oral, visual and written inputs. These techniques are meant to secure subaltern participation in a number of development programmes, ranging from environmental management to gender and social programming (Chambers, 1994a: 959–962; 1994b: 1254–1257).

But while outwardly benevolent in wanting to enable the subaltern to speak, PRA is naive in believing that it actually can. Chambers’ bottom-up approach rests crucially on the idea that PRA helps make the subaltern voice transparent so that development organisations can hear and represent subaltern desires and interests. The reason is that, for Chambers, PRA minimises, if not eliminates, power from the PRA space, thereby freeing the subaltern to participate. To him, power is negative and repressive: ‘For learning, power is a disability’, and moreover, ‘All power deceives, and exceptional power deceives exceptionally’ (1997: 76). But he appears to neglect the knowledge/power problem, wherein every knowledge framing (that of PRA included) produces power relationships (Kapoor, 2002c). For example, women, whom PRA purportedly takes great care to include in the public space, can feel intimidated (and be intimidated) when speaking in public, especially on such sensitive issues as sex, rape and violence. Often, if they do participate, they soften their words or ask men to speak for them (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Mosse, 1994; Parpart, 2000). The participatory space is thus a panoptic one: even if subalterns speak, they (like anyone) may perform the roles they think are expected of them (by their own communities, the facilitator, the funding agency). They may modify their speech when under pressure, or exaggerate their praise to please the funder. So much, then, for Chambers wanting to banish power to enable the subaltern ‘to speak’.

The problem is magnified when we consider the role played by socioeconomic inequality. Chambers appears confident that people can reach agreement through PRA, but he does so because his narrow and localised view of power ignores the macro social impacts of imperialism or such difficult issues as unequal land tenure (Mohan & Stokke, 2000; Kapoor, 2002c). The consensus-reaching process, for him, is a relatively tame and harmonious affair. It is as if people can leave important power imbalances outside the door of the PRA space. Thus, he achieves harmony and consensus through disavowal. But as Medevoi et al point out, denying subalterns' subordination, in effect, reinforces their subalternity: it 'reproduce[s] the subalternity of the people at the very moment that it seem[s] to let them speak' (1990: 134). And Spivak adds, "'being made to unspeak" is also a species of silencing' (1999: 408-409; cf 1990b).

Even when the subaltern does speak, Chambers takes no account of the numerous intervening institutional structures. As we have seen, far from being neutral relays, they filter, reinterpret, appropriate, hijack the subaltern's voice. PRA tries to get around the problem by advocating use of direct testimonials or multiple narratives (1994a: 959). However, here too, there is no avoiding the question of who edits the stories, how they are presented, for whom and what purposes they are framed, and so on. So much, then, for PRA's belief in development organisations hearing and representing the pure, unmediated subaltern voice. As Spivak observes, despite appearances, it is another case of the first-world analyst or development organisation 'masquerading as the absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves' (1988a: 292).

But it is not just this mainstream (liberal?) approach that is questionable in this context; I want to argue that even 'progressive' critics like Vandana Shiva and Arturo Escobar can be guilty (in the manner that Spivak thinks Foucault, Deleuze and Kristeva can be).

Shiva's *Staying Alive* (1989) is considered one of the first analyses to focus our attention on Southern ecofeminist issues and problems. In many ways, the book inaugurates a feminist critique of development and mainstream science, as well as the validation of Third World grassroots environmental movements. But the book also makes problematic claims. Shiva essentialises subaltern women by feminising 'nature' through the retrieval of what she calls a 'feminine principle' (1989: xviii, 38ff) and identifying subaltern women as the embodiment of the principle: she writes about 'Women's ecology movements, as the preservation and recovery of the feminine principle' and nature as 'the experiment and women, as sylviculturalists, agriculturalists and water resource managers, the traditional natural scientists' (1989: xviii). By depicting subaltern women as 'naturally' close to nature and giving them an epistemologically privileged position on (feminised) nature, Shiva creates too neat a divide between subaltern men and women, thus reinforcing gender roles and stereotypes.<sup>11</sup> In addition, to counter her critique of mainstream development and science, she champions Chipko, the now famous forestry movement in the North-Indian Himalayas, as an ecological and feminist alternative (1989: 55ff). She praises the movement's successes and women's active involvement in them. But she has been taken to task for painting too rosy a picture (Jackson, 1995; Rangan, 2000: 13ff; Seminar, 1987): critics reproach her for neglecting to appreciate Chipko's patriarchal political structures (significant male leadership, despite women's overwhelming