

Writing/Reading the Subaltern Woman: Narrative Voice and Subaltern Agency in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August*

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The subaltern cannot speak. The death of the subaltern as speaking subject announced at the end of Gayatri Spivak's seminal 1988 essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" has had implications for scholarship in fields as diverse as political science and literature.¹ Scholars in postcolonial studies, broadly defined, have attempted to resuscitate the subaltern, and imbue her with voice. Alternatively, they have constructed projects that follow from the philosophical arguments Spivak makes to forward her claim.² The vast range of scholarship that has emerged as a consequence of this essay indicates its centrality to the field of postcolonial studies.

Rosalind Morris' recent book *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea* revisits Spivak's essay through a series of eight scholarly essays that engage with some of the central questions her essay raises: namely, the quest for human rights, the politics of silence and most significantly for this essay, the possibilities of recovering the voice of the subaltern. Central to Spivak's argument is the primacy of narrative as a means of subsuming subaltern agency. More specifically, she argues:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, 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 "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 306)

The narrative of subalternity is always already subsumed by the discursive power of patriarchy, imperialism, and nationalism, which purport to both represent (in terms of politics) and re-present (in terms of artistic renditions) the subaltern subject.

This essay revisits this aspect of Spivak's argument to offer an alternative vision of subaltern agency through a close study of narrative voice. While the work of the Subaltern Studies collective has been very significant in (re)writing history from below, their analyses have focused primarily on the subaltern consciousness that is being re-presented. Although who is being re-presented (in terms of the subject as a narrative construction) is closely tied to who purports to represent her (in terms of the subject as a political being), the interconnection between the two is largely obscured in the work of the subaltern studies collective, which has

focused largely on the representation of the subaltern alone without taking into account the narrative voice that structures subalternity.

In “Chandra’s Death” for instance, subaltern historian Ranajit Guha focuses primarily on the ways in which legal discourse obscures the agency of the subaltern subject, Chandra. The elite consciousness that frames this representation, though acknowledged, has not been seen as equally important. In fact, the aim of the group has been to disavow elite consciousness, and hence the intimate interconnection between the two has been largely ignored. This is primarily because the Subaltern Studies collective has focused largely on historical records and ethnography, which do not lend themselves to an analysis of narrative voice.

Fiction, in contrast, is a fruitful site for engaging with the narrative voice, specifically the multiple ways in which narrative voice structures subalternity. Further, literature is self-avowedly invested in the process of narration. Since the “real” subaltern (if indeed we can create such a category) is unable to represent or re-present herself through writing, any attempt to write subaltern subjectivity is always an imagined projection. Literature allows us to read subaltern agency in the interstices of narrative voices that purport to re-present/represent her. In other words, it is in the gaps, silences and caesuras of the elite narration of subalternity that we may find subaltern agency.

I take as my case study Upamanyu Chatterjee’s *English, August* (1988), a postcolonial novel that centers on the trials and tribulations of Agastya, a middle-class officer of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) stuck in small-town India. Chatterjee tantalizingly subtitles his novel *English, August: An Indian Story*. From the outset, the dialectic between “English” and “Indian” dominates the narrative. In the opening pages of the novel, Chatterjee deliberately draws attention to the hybridity of his protagonist who desires to be English and hence earns the nickname August.

His entrapment between two worlds is most tellingly represented in the novel through his use of language (Bhabha 162). The novel opens with Agastya driving around Delhi with his friend and college classmate Dhrubo, who questions Agastya’s decision to join the IAS, leaving his life of comfort in the urban metropolis. The two friends laughingly agree that Agastya is “hazaar fucked” [fucked a thousand times over] (Chatterjee 2). This use of a neologism, a seamless blend of Hindi with English, gestures to their status as hybrid subjects, who can only exist in cosmopolitan, metropolitan India. Part of a new generation of urban, upper-class Indians, “with no special aptitude for anything, not even wondering how to manage, not even really thinking” (Chatterjee 3), Agastya joins the IAS not out of a desire to serve his country, or any exalted purpose as such, but rather to “manage” without really thinking.³

Displaced to Madna, a small town in the heartland of India eons away from Delhi, Agastya yearns for the male companionship of Dhrubo, whose life in Delhi becomes the counterpoint to his own alienated existence. While the fraught heterosexual relationships between characters separated

by national and cultural differences propels the narrative of other colonial and postcolonial novels such as E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, in *English, August*, the protagonist's frustrated desire for homosociality⁴ with other men produces the novel's lack of narrative momentum.⁵

In Madna, Agastya is compelled to engage with the problems of the tribal population⁶, which has been marginalized and forgotten by the state. For a hundred and fifty pages of the novel, nothing much happens as Agastya, unable to cope with the tedium of life in small-town India, retreats into an inner world of inebriation, masturbation and self-reflection. This narrative stasis is ultimately ruptured at the end of the novel when four tribal men from Pirtana chop off the arms of Gandhi, a Forest Officer, who has raped a tribal woman. This event, although never described in the novel, becomes the lens through which the fraught relationship between elite and subaltern is narrated.

Critics have read the elite protagonist's inability to deal with Madna as symptomatic of the English-speaking Indian novelist's own alienation from India. In a caustic essay on Indian novelists writing in English, Harish Trivedi reads Chatterjee's novel as a metonym for an entire generation of novelists who graduated from St. Stephen's College (India's premiere elite institution of higher learning):

If you know only English and have hit St Stephen's by age 17, where do you go next except West? Unless, of course, you are Agastya/August, IAS, in which case you meet a fate considerably worse and are exiled to that rather more foreign country—the God-forsaken (because English-forsaken) mofussil Indian town of Madna . . . and soon enough run whelping back with your limp tail between your metropolitan legs. The dismal disorientation, cynical apathy, and utter enervation which permeate Chatterjee's acutely rendered novel, and the regressive retreat to the anglophone womb at the end of it, present a bleak and arid prospect" (Trivedi 185).

For Trivedi the "anglophone womb" represents the protagonist's (and by extension the novelist's) refusal to engage with the "real India," a sentiment echoed in Meenakshi Mukherjee's assessment of the novel as well.⁷

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and Leela Gandhi offer a more sympathetic reading of the novel. Rajan suggests that the dissident bureaucrat protagonist is symptomatic of the anxieties that beset the Indian novel in English, which aspires to dissent "while at the same time occupying the political mainstream" (Sunder Rajan 210). She goes on to quote Leela Gandhi who voices a similar concern: "Where else [but in the new Indian novel in English] can we imagine the formation of the radically abusive artist as a young civil servant?" (Gandhi 2000: 156). Both Rajan and Gandhi concur that Agastya's condition represents that of the postcolonial novelist writing in English, who must struggle to find his voice in an Anglophone milieu even as he acknowledges his own privileged position within it. As we see, critical readings of the novel have focused largely on

understanding the elite male protagonist in the context of the Indian novel in English.

This paper breaks away from this trend to examine the elite protagonist in terms of his relation to the subaltern, paying specific attention to narrative voice—both the third-person omniscient narrator and Agastya’s interior monologues; that is, the elite representation of the tribal woman is always already imbricated in her subalternity. Since subaltern consciousness is always subject to the “cathexis of the elite,” a study of the self-avowedly elitist narrative voice mediated by the narrator’s class position, his cultural roots, and his location, allows for a more intentional analysis of the framing of subalternity. This makes the task of recovering subaltern agency a reading of narrative against the grain, so to speak.

In what follows, I argue first that Agastya is drawn into an involuntary kinship with other men because they use similar narrative strategies to “traffic” in representations of tribal women as subaltern, disempowered objects.⁸ Next, I argue that since the telling of the subaltern story is always already caught in the narrative of the elite, our work as literary critics and feminist scholars is to read the absences and gaps through which subaltern agency is rendered in these narratives. From these gaps and absences emerges a subaltern epistemic framework that privileges silence and the body over speech. In conclusion, I consider the ways in which Para’s agency complicates our understandings of the subaltern as an ontological category and alters our understanding of the subaltern’s relation to the political.

I. Narrative Representation and the Traffic in Women

Lying in bed, in the tepid heat of Madna, Agastya reflects, “God, he was fucked—weak, feverish, aching, in a claustrophobic room, being ravaged by mosquitoes, with no electricity, with no sleep, in a place he disliked, totally alone, with a job that didn’t interest him, in murderous weather, and now feeling madly sexually aroused” (Chatterjee 92). Agastya emerges as a character riddled with lethargy and inertia, coupled with a troubling inability to connect emotionally or intellectually with those around him. As Bede Scott cogently argues, the ennui of the protagonist is mirrored in the narrative stasis of the text, which in turn symbolizes the inefficacy of the Indian Administrative Service.⁹ Through the first part of the novel, the reader, as Scott suggests, is desperate to make meaning of the listless narrative and of the lethargic narrator. The banal narrative compels the reader to search for meaning in Agastya’s relation to other people, mostly the men who populate the novel. Although there are glimpses of Agastya’s homosocial bonds with other men in the first part of the novel, they are mostly unrealized.

The event of the rape brings into sharp focus the homosocial bonds between men and breaks the narrative stasis of the novel. Although this

event occurs towards the end of the novel, it marks an abrupt shift in narrative tempo, and in this draws attention to its significance within the narrative. Through the event of the rape, we discover the elite characters' (Agastya, Rao and Gandhi) shared notion that women are sexual objects for male consumption. As Eve Sedgwick reading Gayle Rubin argues, "patriarchal heterosexuality can best be discussed in terms of one or another form of the traffic in women: it is the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men" (Sedgwick 25-26). In this instance, the elite characters' traffic in re-presentations/representation of tribal women as subaltern subjects draws the men into an involuntary kinship with one another.¹⁰

Earlier on in the novel, we see Agastya's salacious appetite for women. Mandy, Agastya's friend remarks that women were often "provided" for officers on tour if they frequented brothels and it became known that they were hungry for sex. Agastya thinks: "That didn't sound bad at all" (Chatterjee 104). Agastya's complicity in this exploitation is evident even though he does not actively participate in it and prefigures Gandhi's rape of the unknown tribal woman.

Rao, a member of a Communist guerilla group, the Naxalites, narrates the rape to Agastya: "A man called Gandhi, he abused the honour of the tribal woman who cooked for him. The men of her village were very angry. They visited Gandhi three nights ago, and surprised them both. In revenge, and as punishment they cut off his arms" (Chatterjee 260). On the surface, it seems that Rao, who works for the upliftment of the tribals in rural Jompanna, would have nothing in common with the elite Agastya. Rao's alliance with the tribals goes unquestioned by the reader, who associates Naxalites with rural upliftment, and this view is consolidated by his concrete and detailed narration of the event. We presume that Rao has authoritative insider knowledge of subaltern agency. However, in his narration of the event, Rao justifies it as both "revenge" and "punishment," thus demarcating the event's liminal position between crime and insurgency.¹¹ His articulation of both interpretations suggests his own liminality: he is not of their class position, but at the same time his alliance with them is clear; he is simultaneously both participant and onlooker.

Although Rao's narrative of apparent subaltern agency implies class solidarity, his account, like Agastya's, is suspect because it is mired in his own particular hierarchical relation to them. It is clear that he does not think of himself as one of them. He tells Agastya: "These tribals needed help to think, they [the Naxalites] said, because they felt anchorless in the new world. 'Look at the way they struggle for water. You have seen how simple they are'" (Chatterjee 261). "Simple" is Rao's code word for suggesting that the tribals are unaware of their subject position, and need the Naxalites to "think" for them, because after all they struggle in a political vacuum without knowing they can take action. From Rao's perspective, the Naxalites enable the tribals to define their class position

and propel them to political action—even when this involves acts of gratuitous violence. These acts anchor the tribals in the nation and enable them to think of themselves as political subjects. As we see, this representation of the tribals as economic and political subalterns is also simultaneously an attempt to represent them politically.

Furthermore, Rao's relation to the tribal population is problematized by his exploitation of their "simplicity." In this case, the sexual labor of tribal women pays for the "education" of the tribals in insurgency, here suggested by his sexual relationship with the tribal woman Para. Thus, while Rao remains acutely aware of the tribals' economic and political disadvantages, he is willfully ignorant of gender as an equally debilitating source of subalternity. Significantly, Agastya wonders "why these guardians of honour did not cut off Rao's arms too" (Chatterjee 261). This musing suggests that Rao's cohabitation with Para is just as exploitative as Gandhi's rape of the unnamed tribal woman (who acts as Para's double here) and Agastya's salacious interest in being provided a woman for sex.¹²

Agastya, Gandhi and Rao are drawn into an involuntary homosociality over the body of the unnamed tribal woman as they each stake their political claim through this event. The act of rape not only signifies Gandhi's sexual dominance over the tribals but also his desire to represent them politically. It is no coincidence that the rapist is named Mohandas Gandhi, a pointed reference to the historical Gandhi who worked for the upliftment of tribals through his life.¹³ Gandhi's parallel with the historical figure is ironic in this instance because he represents the elite: the "*sarkar*, *sahukar* and *zamindar*," the traditional antagonist of the subaltern, rather than her or his chief spokesperson (Guha, *Elementary Aspects* 26). He is "*sarkar*" [government] as a government official, a "*sahukar*" [capitalist] in that the woman he rapes serves him, and a "*zamindar*" [landowner] in that as a Forest Officer he has usurped tribal ownership of the very forest from which the tribals eke their existence. Gandhi's character in the novel is an indictment of the state's claim to represent the subaltern.

Likewise, the Naxalites, as the alternative to the state, cannot adequately represent the subaltern either. Agastya's description of the Naxalites as clothed in "guiltless khadi" (Chatterjee 261), the hand-woven cloth associated with the historical Gandhi's non-cooperation movement, suggests that they have taken over the project of rural upliftment from him; however, they are in no way less exploitative than the state.¹⁴ We see that Rao uses the tribal woman's rape to further his argument that he is the political representative of the tribals. From this we see that all three men perceive tribal women's bodies, made "available" on account of their poverty, as property which can be owned, passed around, and exploited at will.

Moreover, the three men's objectification of the tribal woman both sexually and politically stems from their perception and consequent narration of her as an apolitical subject. As Kamala Visweswaran argues,

in the context of colonial India, “this idea of the ‘dependent subject’ was replicated in the way nationalist ideology rendered women as domestic(ated), and not political subjects” (86). Here the tribal woman is perceived as “dependent” on her elite male master for work as a cook (Gandhi), for sex work (Agastya), and for her “education” in politics (Rao). Consequently, she is perceived as “domesticated” (note that each instance of assistance falls within the realm of domesticity or is at the very least infantilizing) and as therefore apolitical and incapable of asserting agency.

We see here that representations of the subaltern are contingent on the narrative voice that re-presents them, specifically on the way in which each of these narrative voices is structured by the narrator’s own class and political position. The subaltern in these narrativizations, then, is not a fixed essence but a constantly shifting interpretation, which is located in the interactional context of its articulation.

II. Subaltern Agency: Silence and the Body

As seen in the instance above, the subaltern is rendered the victim twice over—first in the elite’s exploitation of her, and then in the elite’s rewriting of her subjectivity as a dependent object. Retrieving subaltern agency from elite narratives is indeed a perilous task, as the work of the subaltern studies collective amply demonstrates.¹⁵ Since subaltern agency is contingent on the narrative voice that re-presents it, I suggest that the shifting narrative voice of the novel, allows us to see subaltern agency through a range of narrative techniques.

Agastya’s first encounter with a tribal woman, Para, is narrated through a third-person omniscient narrator who narrates Agastya’s interiority such that there is a clear alignment between the elite narrator and the elite narratorial voice.

Some time in his third week in Jompanna. A tribal woman, thirty-fiveish, in front of him in his office, and he hardly listening to her, reveling in a rare uncontrollable erection. The woman was strong, veined forearms and lined tragic face, aquiline nose, eyes darkened by a contemptible life, she even smelt of the years of squalor, hard buttocks the size, he thought, laughing silently, of the fucking moon. She had to repeat herself several times before he understood her. (Chatterjee 254)

As we see, the narrative voice starts as third-person omniscient narration and weaves its way in and out of Agastya’s subjectivity. In doing so, it draws attention to the constructed nature of this narrative, enabling us to see Para as Agastya sees her—as an object of lust, mired in her subalternity. Agastya’s “rare” and “uncontrollable” erection is a reaction to his re-presentation of Para—he is able to see her only as an object of his desire. As Veena Das argues, the category of subaltern is created through the subaltern’s relation with the elite, or in Hegelian terms, the slave is a slave only when she has a master.¹⁶ Subaltern, in this instance, refers to

Para's class position (economically disempowered), her caste status (as a tribal woman) and to her gender (sexual object). Para is thus created as a subaltern through Agastya's re-presentation of her.

If we read the third-person omniscient narrator as a mouthpiece for the elite author (Chatterjee) and that of his elite protagonist, then Agastya's silence when faced with the conditions of subalternity is telling. In this instance, the third-person narrative voice renders silence as the elite protagonist's response to the subaltern, which suggests his (the third-person elite narrator and the elite protagonist's) inability to fully comprehend subaltern agency as it lies beyond his epistemic framework.

Agastya arrives in Chipanthi (Para's village) to look into the construction of a well for the village and is confronted by a deafening silence. He observes: "The silence was startling. Even the forest seemed deadened. An uneven clearing of red sand, scrub, then the scraggy trees, yet Bajaj had said that he must visit Chipanthi" (Chatterjee 255). The pared forest, "deadened" in silence, the "scraggy trees" and the "green [...] broken by scars" do not speak to Agastya. At best they cause him to question why anyone might recommend visiting Chipanthi, precisely because there is nothing here worth seeing: ecological devastation does not qualify as a tourist attraction.

Agastya's representation of Para's social environment is similarly structured by silence and invisibility: "[He] saw no one around the huts. No naked children, noisy and curious, advertisements for malnutrition. Just a noon silence..." (Chatterjee 255). The reason for this silence is because the people of the village are busy drawing water from a well by staking the lives of their children. As Agastya watches, mothers lower children into the well, who re-surface with a daub of muddy water in a broken pail and gaping gashes on their bodies. It is significant that Agastya is unable to see clearly into the well: "He looked into the well. He couldn't see any water, but the children were blurred wraiths forty feet below, scouring the mud of the well floor for water, like sinners serving some mythic punishment" (Chatterjee 256). Since he is unable to "know" them fully, his re-presentation of their plight is necessarily distorted: he can only see them as "blurred wraiths." To see them fully would entail recognizing them as subjects with interiority and agency.

We see here that both the forest and the human population are silenced by a corrupt polity that has choked off (metaphorically and literally) their speech. The desecration of the forest is simultaneous with the exploitation of the subaltern, an indication of their symbiotic relationship. Thus, the silence of Chipanthi's human population signifies the inability of the subaltern to make itself intelligible to the elite, a category that includes not only Agastya, but also the reader of the text. The silence frustrates both the reader and Agastya because it cannot be represented; hence, Agastya's rendering of it is as a presence that is visible only by the absence of speech. In other words, the narration of silence from Agastya's perspective is an acknowledgement of his incomprehension of subalternity.

A similar incomprehensibility structures his relationship with Para who is rendered in the text as a speech-less subject. In Agastya's first encounter with Para, she asks him to repair the well in her village, Chipanthi. We know that Para has spoken through Agastya's narration because her words propel Agastya to visit her village. This uneasy transmission of Para's speech through indirect speech once again points to Agastya and the third-person narrator's inability to have full cognizance of tribal consciousness. Although Para's speech initiates a chain of events, it is itself not rendered directly in the text. The absence of her speech compels us to rethink the equation between speech and agency.

In her examination of Ranajit Guha's essay "Chandra's Death," Rajeswari Sunder Rajan suggests that Guha's subaltern does not speak because while Guha spends inordinate space on the bare bones of Chandra's sister's testimony, he has nothing to say about Chandra's silence. She suggests that in Guha's essay, "Chandra's silence is naturalized: what could she have to say?" (Rajan 134). In order to de-naturalize the subaltern's silence, I argue that it is in fact in silences that we must look for the subaltern's speech. By this I mean that we need to unpack the assumptions that overlay the silences that structure the subaltern's text.

If we think of agency in terms of speech, silence connotes a lack of agency. As Visweswaran argues, "[t]he idea of a 'speaking subject' is of course central to the philosophies of humanism. Speech as agency, invokes the idea of self-originating presence, so that conversely, lack of speech is seen as absence" (91). Alternatively, we can read the equation of agency with voice as an elite epistemic framework. From this perspective, silence is the subaltern's mode of agency. Thus, Para's speech-less-ness is not an indication of her lack of agency but rather of the elite narrator's inability to comprehend her. It also suggests that Para's subjectivity is not merely constructed in opposition to the elite, what Ranajit Guha terms negative consciousness, but is independent of elite definitions, and thus can only be rendered in indirect speech.¹⁷

Further, the name "Para" is in itself significant. Apte's Sanskrit dictionary gives the following meanings: "Other different another; Distant removed remote; Beyond, further, on the other side of" (Apte 315). Monier-Williams Sanskrit dictionary corroborates Apte's list with the following definitions: "ulterior, earlier, previous former" (533). Para means variously border, edge and other. As a tribal woman with a Sanskrit name, her name suggests her own liminal position between class definitions: she is the subaltern who acts without speech.

Just as Para's speech-less-ness in this instance signifies her agency, in another instance of the narrative, so do her body movements and her eyes (as rendered through Agastya's narration)—but this is yet another form of agency that is un-recognizable as such from an elite perspective. As Rao tells Agastya about Gandhi's mutilation, Para sits on the floor and follows their conversation through the inflections of their voices, as she is unable

to understand their Hindi (the national language). At this point, Agastya, shaken by Gandhi's mutilation, glances at Para and says:

He disliked Para for the way she sat a little behind Rao, face relaxed and distant, but eyes flicking continually, trying to follow the conversation by the tone of the voices, and he wanted to make a token protest, against her conviction that what men like them said was always worth listening to, against a world of action through belief. (Chatterjee 262)

In Agastya's reading of Para, he assumes that her gaze could only signify her adulation of Rao; he assumes that she has internalized Rao's "beliefs" without really understanding them. Since neither Agastya nor the third-person omniscient narrator of text is able to elucidate Para's thoughts, we are granted access only to Agastya's perception of her thoughts. In this context, I suggest an alternative reading of Para's body language. Given her sexual relationship with Rao, it is possible that for Para, Rao represents the state (as much as she represents the "simple" tribal population to Rao) in that both Rao and the state give favors for a price; she listens to him attentively perhaps because she must understand the economy of her disempowerment.

Para's body, even when mis-read by Agastya, compels him to recognize her as a subject, independent of his desire for her and of her relationship with Rao. Subsequently, in a conversation with Mandy on the subject of sex, Agastya's tone is markedly different: "Don't be silly, Mandy, you and I have been lonely and horny too, here in Madna. But you wouldn't fuck your cook, not even if she looked like Khajuraho and sat down beside your plate while you had lunch and shaved her puss in front of you" (Chatterjee 267). "Fucking" his cook is no longer an antidote to being "lonely and horny," because even though she does look like the erotic temple sculptures of Khajuraho (note Agastya's earlier description of Para), her beauty is now bound with the tragedy of her humanity. If she were to shave her "puss" in front of him, it could only be encoded within a narrative of exploitation.

Para's body catalyzes a change in Agastya's conception of the tribal, as he recognizes his inability to re-present or represent Para. Her body emphasizes her alterity, her inability to fit within a narrative of sexual conquest or within a paradigm of national sovereignty. Agastya acknowledges that he is unable to re-present her in narrative just as he cannot represent her politically. In both instances, subaltern consciousness appears "fragmented" to Agastya and the third-person omniscient narrator because, as Partha Chatterjee cogently argues, it is forged in the encounter of the dominant class with the subaltern and does not exist outside this frame ("Caste and Subaltern Consciousness" 170).¹⁸

III. Thinking Subalternity

In conclusion, I return to the fraught relation between narrative strategy and subaltern agency in order to reconsider the centrality of narration to the production of voice/speech. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan makes a distinction between the literal and figural subaltern of Spivak's essay—while the literal subaltern, one who is systematically denied a voice because of her economic and political condition, cannot speak, the figural subaltern speaks but is not heard.¹⁹ I suggest that Para is both the literal and figural subaltern in that her speech is never rendered in the text (the literal subaltern) and that when she does speak, she cannot be heard by any of the male characters (the figural subaltern). While Agastya lusts after Para and thinks of her as a body to be consumed, a literal subaltern who does not have a voice, Rao treats Para as the figural subaltern, one who presumably speaks but whose voice he willfully does not hear, for after all he must impart his political knowledge to the “simple” tribals. Although they differ in the ways in which they conceptualize Para, they both narrativize her as a subaltern. In other words, it is the *telling* of the subaltern's story that determines her status as a subaltern.

In her reading of Spivak's essay, Ritu Birla points out that Spivak's emphasis on ideology highlights a key concern of the essay, namely a consideration of “the mechanics of agency in the production of subjects” (Birla 91). Building on this, I suggest that the “mechanics” of producing an agentive subject, can in this instance, be read to mean narrative voice. As we see, the elite male characters render Para as an apolitical and sexual object who exists only as a consumable body, through their narration of her. If we read the third-person narrative voice against the grain and focus on its representation of Para's body instead we see a different mechanics of agency, one that relies on the close relation between language and body.

As Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous have argued, for women, language arises from the body but also goes beyond the body: “l'écriture féminine.” Cixous argues that writing will “return [woman] to the body which has been more than confiscated from her” and will also enable her “entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression” (Cixous 880). In the epistemic framework of the subaltern, it is not writing but rather language itself, which determines her entry into history. Seen through a crack in the narrative, Para's body is the locus *of* narrative in that her body language irritates Agastya and prompts him to narrativize its meaning. Furthermore, it is also a locus *for* a narrative of the self—that is we see Para thinking, but neither the omniscient narrator, nor the elite protagonist nor the elite reader have access to her thoughts. Para's body is the site of language, her entry into history.

She reconfigures the relation between agency and voice that structures discussions of subaltern agency, as we understand her language (and concomitantly her agency) not through words, but from the chain of

events that emanate from it as a result. Para, from what we glean in the narrative, is able to get Agastya to repair the well in Jompanna and to keep Rao, a Naxalite with political cache, in Jompanna. This suggests that she is able to both think the state (understand the state as a political entity) and to understand her positionality within it. Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that “once the subaltern could imagine/think the state, he [sic] transcended, theoretically speaking, the condition of subalternity” (34).

The events of the novel indicate that Para is capable of thinking the state, though her notion of the political is necessarily different from Agastya and Rao’s notion of the same. Their sense of the political stems from their imbrication in the institutions of the state: while Agastya is a cog in the state’s structure, Rao defines himself in opposition to it. For Para, however, the state is conceptualized in terms of the men who represent it; she recognizes the inextricable intertwining of patriarchy and state power. This reading of Chatterjee’s novel thus suggests an alternative view of the subaltern: Para is a subaltern subject who reconfigures our understanding of the political because she stands outside of it.

Notes

1. Spivak herself has subsequently revised this essay in *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (specifically, the chapter “History”). Substantive engagements with the original and revised essay have been collected in *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*.

2. In his retrospective on the impact of Spivak’s essay in *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, Partha Chatterjee notes: “It is understandable, I suppose, that the question that dominates postcolonial studies is, as Spivak proposed in 1983, ‘how the third-world subject is represented in Western discourse.’ But there is a bewildering range of answers that have been offered as the solution—from nostalgic investments in postcolonial authenticity to affirmations of postcolonial hybridity, from postcolonial multiculturalism to a postcolonial moral imperialism and even [...] a postcolonial neo-Orientalism” (Chatterjee 85).

3. Agastya’s position in the novel mirrors the position of the erstwhile colonial officer. The novel hints at this mirroring through the dead Richard Avery, “Collector and District Magistrate of Madna” (211), slaughtered by a man-eating tiger in the Jompanna forest. When Agastya is promoted to Block Development Officer, he is transferred to Jompanna. This structural mirroring, then, further reinforces Agastya’s uncontested position as elite within the narrative.

4. Sedgwick defines homosociality as the “social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy

with 'homosexual,' and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from 'homosexual'" (1).

5. This insight into the text was produced in the course of a conversation with Durba Ghosh. I am indebted to her for her generous reading of multiple drafts of this paper, her invaluable criticism and her unfailing support.

6. I use the term "tribal" because this is the term used by Upamanyu Chatterjee to refer to the aboriginal population of the subcontinent, who have been largely absent from historical accounts of the Indian nation. Although the Indian Constitution makes special provisions for them, in practice they continue to be ignored and marginalized by social reform movements and economic policies.

7. "Part of the appeal of Upamanyu Chatterjee or Amit Chaudhuri for the younger generation may be located in their unapologetic acceptance of their exclusive upbringing, which some of these readers share and the others aspire to" (Mukherjee 2611).

8. The term "traffic" in women comes from Gayle Rubin's seminal essay of the same name (177).

9. Bede Scott writes: "In other words, by replicating the dilatory drag of bureaucratic procedure, the narrative itself internalizes many of the qualities we tend to associate with the IAS: inefficiency, repetition, redundancy, interminability, and above all, a uniquely bureaucratic combination of the "bewildering and [the] boring" (Chatterjee 35)" (Scott 2).

10. I use the term "tribal" because this is the term used by Upamanyu Chatterjee to refer to the aboriginal population of the subcontinent, who have been largely absent from historical accounts of the Indian nation. Although the Indian Constitution makes special provisions for them, in practice they continue to be ignored and marginalized by social reform movements and economic policies.

11. In *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, Guha describes the ambiguity between crime and insurgency as a matter of elite perspective: "In all feudal types of societies there have always been individuals and small groups who were driven by hunger and humiliation to commit acts of violence in such a way as to amount to turning things upside down. These acts are almost invariably designated as 'crime' by the rulers of such societies" (Guha 77).

12. In her study of the different modalities through which homosociality operates between men, Sedgwick, following René Girard,

suggests that the rivalry between two men over a woman draws the men together in “an erotic triangle” (21), a bond which is just as powerful as the heterosexual one.

13. This reference is reiterated by the ordinariness of Gandhi’s character in the novel. He is “reasonably at peace, satisfied with his lot” (105) and his position as Forest Officer, with all its connotations of protecting tribal rights to self-sufficiency through the forest.

14. More broadly, it implies that in the decade that succeeds the Emergency or Indira Gandhi’s violent regime of power, Gandhian methods of non-violent resistance are obsolete as a means of empowering the subaltern; in this instance, the violence of the state can only be matched by the violence of its people.

15. See especially Ranajit Guha’s “Chandra’s Death.”

16. “[I]t is not easy to characterize caste or ethnic consciousness as ‘negative,’ as it has an essence of its own, for it also depends on the interactional context within which this consciousness is being articulated...” (Das 320).

17. In *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, Guha defines negative consciousness as follows: “It was, however, a negative class consciousness in that the definition of class which was involved was that of their enemies rather than of themselves: in other words, the nobility” (Guha 20).

18. See Partha Chatterjee “Caste and Subaltern Consciousness,” p. 170.

19. “Bhubaneswari on the other hand serves as the *figural* example of the subaltern who cannot—but, in fact, does—speak. ‘Cannot’ in this instance signifies not speech’s absence but its failure.” (Sunder Rajan 121).

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