



# The Legacy of Spivak's Subaltern Theory: A Systematic Literature Review in Postcolonial Criticism

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## Abstract

*This study aims to map the influence of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of the subaltern in the field of postcolonial literary criticism over the past twenty-five years. Meanwhile, through the systematic literature review method, this study analyzed 20 academic articles published between 2000 and 2025 that directly used or discussed subaltern theory in a literary context. The analysis's findings also show how Spivak's theory has been effectively used to study the representation, voice, agency, and marginalization issues in literary works from a variety of previous colonies. Thus, the representation of subaltern voices, the role of silence as a political method, the connection between subalternity and issues of gender, race, and class, and the critique and revision of Spivak's theory are the most significant results. As a result, the study also emphasizes the importance of additional research to ensure the relevance of subaltern theory in contemporary sociopolitical and cultural contexts, such as globalization and digital media. As a result, this study greatly improves our knowledge of how Spivak's theory improved postcolonial literary interpretation.*

**Keywords:** *Gayatri Spivak, subaltern theory, postcolonial literary criticism, representation, systematic literature review*



## Introduction

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is one of the most important figures in the field of postcolonial studies, which looks at how colonialism affects literature, culture, and society (Rahmatullah & Gupta, 2022). In addition, one of his well-known theories involves the subaltern group, which is a majority of marginalized individuals who can express their own opinions according to the current social and political structure (Oishe et al., 2024). Meanwhile, Spivak questioned if this group could actually speak and be heard, or if those in positions of power were always the ones speaking for them, in his article "Can the Subaltern Speak?". Therefore, Spivak's thought became important in literary criticism because many literary works, especially from former colonial countries, contained stories about oppressed groups. Meanwhile, using subaltern theory, researchers can reread literary works to see if figures from marginalized groups really get a voice or are simply used as symbols without power (Angelo, 2020). Therefore, this criticism makes readers more sensitive to inequality in stories that are often considered neutral or universal.

However, Spivak's subaltern theory is also inseparable from criticism. In addition, many feel that this theory is difficult to understand because the language is very academic and complicated (Svensson, 2024). Meanwhile, they focus too much on discourse or language, so that they forget the real conditions on the ground, such as poverty, violence, or social inequality (Persaud & Sajed, 2018). Therefore, in the last 20 years, many researchers have tried to adapt this theory to make it more relevant and easier to use in literary and real-life analysis. Furthermore, this study aims to look at how Spivak's theory of subalterns has been used in postcolonial literary criticism over the past two decades. Through a systematic review of various academic articles, this study aims to map the development of thinking about subalterns, such as how researchers use them, how they interpret them, and what criticisms and improvements are offered. In other words, the study wanted to see how much of Spivak's influence was in the academic world, especially in reading literary works from the point of view of oppressed people (Subhashini et al., 2025).

In addition, this research is important not only because it examines the application of this theory, but also because the world is changing all the time. Meanwhile, digital technology, social media, and globalization are also giving previously unheard voices a platform. The question is, can the subaltern theory still explain the conditions of marginalization in today's time? For example, do minority groups now have a new way of speaking out through digital media? Or, do they remain silenced, just in a more subtle way? This study will open up a space for discussion about these matters. Thus, by understanding how Spivak's theory developed and was used, we can also learn how to read literary works more equitably. Meanwhile, this review not only looks at the influence of Spivak's theory in academia but also tries to understand how it can remain useful for looking at injustice in various forms, both in fiction and reality (Shome,



2018). Thus, by combining theory and practice, this research hopes to make an important contribution to the study of literature while paving the way for postcolonial thinking that is more open, inclusive, and relevant to the present.

## **Methodology**

The methodology part of this study uses the systematic literature review approach. Meanwhile, a systematic literature review is a method of collecting and assessing various existing studies in a structured, planned, and objective manner. Therefore, the objective is to ensure that the methodology part of this study uses the systematic literature review approach. In simple terms, a systematic literature review is a method of collecting and assessing various existing studies in a structured, planned, and objective manner (Saba, 2024). Meanwhile, the goal is to ensure that the data collected is not arbitrary but is genuinely relevant and trustworthy. Therefore, this is similar to sifting through information from a reading stack, with clear rules so that the result can be accounted for academically.

A systematic literature review is different from regular reviews because it is carried out in systematic stages (Linnenluecke, 2025). Meanwhile, the researchers not only read what they find, but also determine in advance where to search, with what keywords, the period of the research, and what criteria determine whether or not an article will be included. In this way, the results of the research can be stronger through a transparent and consistent selection process. In addition, the first step that the researcher took was to search for articles and books from several large academic databases such as JSTOR and Scopus, which are already widely known in the scientific world. In addition, to make sure the search results were relevant to the research's objective, the researcher applied terms like Gayatri Spivak, subaltern studies, and postcolonial literary criticism. Additionally, because the research only covered relatively current and relevant literature, the search was focused on the years 2000–2025. In the meantime, this particular period allows researchers to track the growth and changes that have occurred by observing the evolution of Spivak's theory over the last 25 years. Following data collection, the researcher filters the articles that will be used in the study based on specific criteria. As a result, only papers that specifically address subaltern theory within the framework of postcolonial literature are chosen.

Therefore, it means that if there is an article that only discusses political history without linking it to literary analysis, it will be removed from the list. Furthermore, the same goes for non-academic articles such as opinion pieces in the media or blog posts, all of which are not included because they are less credible. The next stage is to read in depth the selected articles. The researcher recorded various important pieces of information from each article, such as what is the main theme. How is subaltern theory used in analysis? Is there any criticism of Spivak's theory? And the last question is there any form of development or adaptation of the theory? Therefore, all the data is collected, and this information is organized thematically, for example, grouped based on a common idea or approach. Moreover, it makes it easier for researchers to see general

patterns and analyze trends in the use of subaltern theory over the past two decades. This approach demonstrates that the study analyzes how Spivak's theory was interpreted, applied, and improved by numerous other researchers rather than just repeating it. However, readers can be confident that the findings of this study aren't just founded on subjective opinions but rather originate from a properly selected and organized synthesis of scholarly data using a systematic literature review method.

## Result and Discussion

The researcher found 20 scientific articles that were eligible for analysis. Meanwhile, these articles discuss various literary works from the former colonies, as well as from Western countries that also discuss postcolonial issues. Then, the works discussed are also diverse, ranging from novels, poems, to dramas. Furthermore, Spivak-style subaltern theory has been used in many different contexts to see how literature portrays the voices of oppressed or marginalized groups. Meanwhile, the study divided the results of the analysis into four major themes: *Voice and Representation*, *Agency and Silence*, *Intersectionality and Subalternity*, and *Critiques and Revisions*. In addition, there are many articles that criticize Spivak's theory.

Some consider his theory too complicated, too focused on language and theory, and less directly applicable to analyzing reality or a particular literary work. Therefore, there are researchers who try to modify or simplify this theory to make it more practical and relevant, especially for today's context. Overall, the results of this section show that Spivak's theory of the subaltern is still highly influential, but its use has evolved and varied. Furthermore, the researcher used not only to find missing voices in texts, but also to dig up silent forms of protest, add a dimension of intersectionality, and simplify theories to make them more applicable in modern social and cultural contexts.

Author & Year	Focus on Research	Contribution
Suandi (2024)	India	Suandi noted that women as a subaltern group do not have the space to convey their personal experiences, because social structures close this access.
Piu (2023)	India	According to Piu, Spivak claims that subalterns have no ability to speak because the structure that rules avoids them from being heard, not because they lack a voice.

Hamza (2022)	Nigeria	This article challenges Spivak's view that the subaltern cannot speak. In the two dramas analyzed, subalterns such as Elesin and Olunde (Nigerian), as well as Loomis and Bynum (African-American), were able to articulate their voices both through symbolic action and resistance.
Colpani & Mascot (2022)	India	Colpani emphasized that subalterns do not automatically become able to speak just because they are given a forum. He rejects the romanticization of alternative voices without an awareness of epistemic power structures
Ndi (2019)	Africa	Ndi criticized that in practice, the African subaltern society remains unable to speak for itself. The intellectual elite and political leaders have replaced the people's voice.
de Jong (2022)	India	Spivak and Santos are at issue over who can speak on whose behalf, and in what framework. They reject the dominant structure that divides the world into "providers" and "receivers" of rights, which indirectly silences the subalterns.
Siby (2025)	Africa & India	Siby uses Spivak's theory to discuss how subalterns, especially women, are not merely speechless but are silenced by colonial and patriarchal narrative structures.
Rana (2021)	India, Pakistan & Africa	This article asserts that subalterns (marginalized people) cannot speak because their representation is controlled by Western discourse and patriarchy.
Yildiz (2015)	Nigeria	Based on Spivak's thoughts, this article shows that the voices of subalterns (in this case, the Igbo people and figures like Okonkwo) are not legitimately represented in the dominant colonial discourse.
Bertrand (2018)	Germany	This article relies heavily on Gayatri Spivak's concept in <i>Can the Subaltern Speak?</i> to show that the subaltern group is not only silenced but also misrepresented by outsiders.
Jambhulkar & Joshi (2022)	India	This article draws heavily on the theory of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Spivak points out that subalterns, especially women, are not given

		a space to speak by the dominant discourse structure.
Muama & Mustofa (2022)	Mesir	The main character in the short story Qisshatu Fathiyyah Al-Misriyyah, namely Fathiyyah, is a woman who does not have access to voice her suffering. He was not given space to talk about his fate, either in his family, society, or state.
Nyongesa (2024)	Africa, Nigeria, Somalia, Zimbabwe	Nyongesa emphasizes that although the author intends to defend the oppressed, they often misrepresent the voice or even silence other groups.
Suryawati et al. (2021)	India	One of the important points of this article is the discussion of the inability of the subaltern to speak in the dominant system.
Kumar (2019)	India	This article raises the famous essay Spivak <i>Can the Subaltern Speak?</i> and explains that subaltern women cannot speak because they have no voice, but because the dominant system does not allow their voices to be recognized.
Susilawati & Wajiran (2024)	Korea	This article explains that the Zainichi community cannot speak on their behalf because the Japanese hegemonic system refuses to listen to them. An example is the characters Noa and Sunja, who are not only silenced by the Japanese education and legal system, but also have to hide their ethnic identity to be accepted in society.
D'Angelo (2020)	India	This article reviews Spivak's important argument that subalterns, especially female subalterns, cannot speak because their voices are always mediated and represented by the intellectual elite or dominant system
Nashruddin et al. (2023)	Indonesia	Small people, such as farmers, fishermen, and traders in Tumapel, are described as having no voice in the existing power system. They can only be submissive, pseudo-obedient, and live in misery, while the fruits of their hard work are taken away by the rulers
Martinerie (2024)	South Africa	The author highlights how South Africa's history is largely written by white academics, even progressive ones, but still reproduces the inequality of representation.

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Ferreira (2023)	East Africa (Tanzania)	Gurnah highlights how colonial and postcolonial subjects have no control over their narratives.
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### Structural Barriers to Subaltern Voice

Structural barriers are obstacles that are built into the system or structure of a society, institution, or organization that make it difficult or impossible for certain groups of people to access opportunities, resources, or rights. This subsection describes how social, political, and cultural structures systematically prevent subalterns, particularly women and minority groups, from expressing their experiences and suffering. For example, structural barriers are in the novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe; meanwhile, British colonial law and government replaced the Igbo customary system, so local voices and knowledge were considered illegitimate. In addition, characters like Okonkwo could not "speak" in the presence of colonial power because the colonial structure only recognized European laws and logic.

A study by Suandi (2024) reinforces this through an analysis of the film *Pad Man*, in which women's struggle for menstrual health is mediated by male characters. Although women are central objects in the story, they are not the subjects of voice; their voices are presented through male narratives, showing that patriarchal systems not only restrict access to public space but also to symbolic representation in media and narratives. Meanwhile, Piu (2023) points out that in many literary works, the experience of subaltern women is often represented by male figures or external narrators, so that the voices that emerge are not direct representations, but external interpretations, which are often distorted by ideological or structural biases. This results in reduced representation, and women's voices lose their authenticity. Kumar (2019) added that female characters in literary works are often symbolically silenced through narratives that perpetuate patriarchal structures and social hierarchies. In many cases, this silencing is not explicit, but comes in the form of abandonment, stereotyping, or the reduction of identity to mere symbols of suffering or sacrifice. In line with that, Jambhulkar and Joshi (2022) highlight that Indian literature reflects a social reality that shuts down women's access to public spaces, both literally and discursively.

Thus, the voice of subaltern women in literature is not only inaudible but also not taken into account as a source of knowledge or as a narrative-altering agent. This reinforces Spivak's argument that the silencing of subaltern females is systemic, as they lack a recognized epistemic position to convey meaning in dominant systems. In other words, even though subaltern female voices exist, they are hit by language, cultural, gender, and power boundaries that make them unheard or not interpreted equally. Literature, which is often thought of as an imaginative and reflective space, also reproduces that power structure, so it needs to be criticized not only by its narrative content, but also by who speaks, for whom, and how the voice is constructed.

## Distortion of Representation by the Elite

The distortion of representation by the elite refers to a situation where powerful or privileged individuals or groups misrepresent the experiences, voices, or identities of marginalized people, often while claiming to "speak for them". For example, Novel *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, Conrad claimed to "represent" Africa, but through a colonial lens, which concealed their true humanity. This is an example of how the elite (Western writers) distort the representation of the subaltern. This discussion includes criticism of how the intellectual elite, the government, and mainstream writers often claim to represent subaltern voices, but instead oppress or distort those voices.

As explained in the article, even if subalterns are given a "forum" or space to speak, it doesn't mean they can speak freely and be heard. Giving space is not a guarantee that their voice will be accepted, interpreted, or valued. This is because power structures, whether political, academic, or mediastill control who is worthy of hearing and how those voices are translated. Ndi (2019) and Nyongesa (2024) show that in many postcolonial contexts in Africa, the voices of ordinary people or marginalized groups are often "replaced" by political and academic elites. For example, when there is a debate about policy or people's history, it is the leaders or intellectuals who are speaking, not the people who have experienced the situation firsthand. As a result, the people's voice seems to be "represented, when, in fact, they never really speak from their position. This is a form of pseudo-representation, since all that appears is the version that has been filtered by power. Bertrand (2018) emphasizes that even outsiders who claim to "represent" subalterns, including progressive researchers, often do not understand the context or original way of thinking of the group they are researching. As a result, the subaltern voice is misinterpreted or simply used to reinforce the researcher's argument. For example, a Western academic writes about poor groups in Africa, but uses language and a frame of mind that does not correspond to the original experience of that society. In this case, the subalterns look as if they are "making a voice", even though they remain symbolically silenced, because their voices have been altered and packaged by the other party.

## Possibility of Subaltern Agency through Resistance

Subaltern agency through resistance refers to the capacity of marginalized or oppressed people (the subaltern) to act, resist, and assert themselves, even when they appear to be silent, passive, or powerless in dominant systems. For example, the novel *Death and the King's Horseman* by Wole Soyinka. Meanwhile, Olunde uses death as a form of agency to assert cultural identity. This subsection presents a counter view to Spivak's thesis, which states that the subaltern cannot speak.

Hamza (2022) shows that characters in Nigerian and African-American dramas, such as Olunde in *Death and the King's Horseman* and Bynum in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, not only speak literally but also express their experiences through symbols and actions.

This means that even though they live in an oppressive system, they can still find ways to convey meaning, resist injustice, and voice their identity. They do not always "scream" in the literal sense, but they speak through life choices, attitudes, and symbolic actions, for example, through cultural rituals, self-sacrifice, or rejection of colonial values. This indicates that the subaltern is not completely stationary or passive. They could have used small gaps in an oppressive system to show their existence and courage. In other words, even though they are constrained by power structures, they still have agency, the power to act, just that their form does not always conform to the standards of dominant discourse.

This is reinforced by Ferreira (2023) through an analysis by Abdulrazak Gurnah, a Tanzanian writer. In his novels, characters living under the shadow of colonialism and migration continue to struggle to maintain their identities and construct their narratives, even though they are often not recognized by the outside world. They cannot speak freely in formal systems (such as the media, law, or academia), but they speak through stories, memories, and personal relationships. Even in a lonely and marginal state, they can still negotiate with the world around them.

### **Subaltern Women and Gendered Silencing**

Subaltern women are women who are not only marginalized by race, class, caste, or colonialism, but also by gender. For example, *Pachinko* by Min Jin Lee. Meanwhile, Sunja is an example of a subaltern woman who has never really been heard of, because she is a woman, poor, and an ethnic minority. The focus on this category is women as subalterns who experience layered silencing, both from colonialism and patriarchy. Articles such as Siby (2025), Muama & Mustofa (2022), and Susilawati & Wajiran (2024) show that women are not only unheard, but also objected to by dominant narratives. For example, in the story of Qisshatu Fathiyyah Al-Misriyyah, female characters cannot have a voice in the family, society, or the state. This is consistent with Spivak's analysis that subaltern women experience double marginalization, and that their voices are not even considered worthy of representation in the dominant discourse.

### **Postcolonial Geopolitical Contexts and the Subaltern**

Postcolonial geopolitical contexts and the subaltern refer to how global power relations after colonialism continue to shape the lives, identities, and voices of marginalized (subaltern) people, especially across nations, regions, and borders. For example, *By the Sea & Afterlives by Gurnah*. Gurnah highlighted that even though colonialism has ended, global power relations (Global North vs South) still make its figures subaltern on the international stage. This section explores how geographic contexts such as India, Africa, or Southeast Asia affect the way subalterns are silenced. In the article Nashruddin et al. (2023), it is explained that small communities such as farmers and fishermen in Tumapel do not have access to voice their opinions in the power system. They can only "submit" and live a life of suffering, while the fruits of their labor are taken away by the rulers. Although they are an important part of society, their voices are

not taken into account in political decisions or social structures. This is a real form of subaltern silencing locally, where grassroots communities have no space or tools to communicate their experiences and needs.

Meanwhile, Yıldız (2015) discusses a similar situation in Nigeria, where the Igbo community is not legitimately represented in the colonial narrative. In works like *Things Fall Apart*, the voices and perspectives of the Igbo people are often conveyed through a colonial point of view so that their identities are shaped by outside powers, not by themselves. This suggests that even when a subaltern group is "present" in a text or history, their voices can still be distorted or ignored by the dominant narrative.

What's interesting about these two studies is that subaltern silencing doesn't occur in the same way in all places. In contrast, the form and intensity of silencing are highly dependent on local contexts, such as social structures, colonial history, power relations, and political culture in each region. In Tumpapel, silence occurred due to local feudal power and social inequality, while in Nigeria, the silencing occurred due to European colonial narratives that portrayed indigenous peoples from an outside perspective.

This shows that the silencing of the subaltern is not just a matter of not being able to speak, but deeper: who permits to speak, in whose language, and in whose frame of mind. Spivak's theory of "subalterns can't talk" becomes richer when we look at how local contexts shape the way subalterns are silenced or manipulated. In conclusion, this study confirms that subaltern silencing is not a globally uniform phenomenon. Although they are equally inaudible, the causes and forms of silencing are very diverse. Therefore, when we talk about subaltern voices, we must understand the unique local realities so as not to generalize their experiences, and so that we do not unconsciously repeat the oppressive practice of representation.

### **Theoretical Debates on Voice and Representation**

Theoretical debates on voice and representation refer to academic discussions, especially in postcolonial theory, feminist theory, and cultural studies, about who has the right to speak, how marginalized groups are represented, and whether that representation is authentic or distorted. For example, *Draupadi* by Mahasweta Devi which the character Dopdi, a minority woman, was raped by the state army, then refused to wear clothes and looked back at her oppressors. This subsection addresses the academic debate surrounding who has the right to represent whom, and how.

However, in de Jong's article (2022), an interesting debate is shown between Gayatri Spivak and Boaventura de Sousa Santos about who has the right to represent whom in the global system. They use the terms "assignor" and "assignee," who is authorized to speak. This means that in global power structures, often only certain parties, such as states, academics, or international institutions, are considered authoritative to determine who gets to speak, and how that voice is delivered. Piu (2023) and D'Angelo (2020) support this view. They show that subaltern voices are almost always mediated by



dominant epistemic forces, such as academia, the state, or the media. For example, when a poor woman from an indigenous community is interviewed by the media, what is broadcast to the public is a voice version that has been adapted to "language that can be understood" by the general public or the elite. Indigenous voices with cultural contexts, local ways of thinking, and personal experiences are often lost or diminished. So, what appears is not the original voice of the subaltern, but the voice that has been repackaged by the party that is considered "the provider of meaning".

In other words, the question is not simply whether the subaltern has a voice or not, but who is considered worthy of being heard, and in terms of whose voice it is interpreted. This is a question of epistemic power, that is, who controls what is considered "right", "important" important, or "worthy" of knowledge. In conclusion, this debate expands our understanding that the issue of representation is not only about giving a place to speak, but also about the power structure that determines the meaning of the voice itself. Without changing the dominant epistemic system, subaltern voices remain vulnerable to being misinterpreted or silenced, even if they physically appear to be "talking".

## **Conclusion**

Based on the results of a systematic review of twenty scientific articles, it can be concluded that the subaltern theory developed by Gayatri Spivak is still very influential in the study of postcolonial literature. Meanwhile, this theory has been widely used to read how oppressed figures due to colonialism, patriarchy, class, race, and caste are depicted in various literary works, ranging from novels, poems, to dramas. Therefore, one of the important findings of this study is that the voices of subaltern groups are often not really from themselves, but rather are conveyed by figures or narrators from more powerful groups. Thus, this suggests that even though the subaltern is "given a place" in the story, its representation is still bound by the dominant structure.

In this context, Spivak's theory provides an important tool for criticizing who speaks and who is silent. However, the silence of a subaltern figure does not necessarily mean weakness. Instead, many articles suggest that silence can be a form of resistance, an expression of trauma, or a survival strategy. Therefore, this expands the meaning of silence to be part of "agency" or the power to act, even if in an indirect form. In addition, this study also shows that the oppression of subalterns does not only originate from one factor, but is stacked between gender, race, class, and cultural background. Meanwhile, this intersectionality approach enriches our understanding of the experiences of oppressed figures in literature.

On the other hand, although Spivak's theory is widely used, some criticism arises because of its complex language and focus on theory rather than concrete reality. Therefore, many academics are trying to simplify and adapt this theory so that it can be applied more in modern contexts such as digital media and globalization. Spivak himself, in his last interview, admitted that the subaltern theory must continue to be

revised to remain relevant to the changing times. Thus, it can be concluded that the subaltern theory has an important role in helping readers understand the voices that are lost in literature. However, its use requires constant updating to be able to respond to the social and cultural challenges that are developing today.

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