

## Double Colonialization: Spivak's Insights in Audre Lorde's "A Woman Speaks" and "Who Said It Was Simple"

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### Abstract

Audre Geraldine Lorde (1934-1992), an African-American writer, published "A Woman Speaks" and "Who Said It Was Simple" to show her outrage towards issues of racism, sexism and their undeniable influences upon Black female identity. The poems not only reflect the unjustified treatment of Afro-American women, but also encompass critical themes related to multiple forms of oppression like racism and sexism. The image of the woman in both poems is applicable to the concept of female subaltern and double displacement frequently criticized by postcolonial feminist theorists. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an Indian- American feminist critic and literary theorist, used Antonio Gramsci's idea of subalternity to criticize the way non-elite individuals, Third World women in particular, have been denied access to power or express their voice. Re-examining feminist readings, Spivak attacks Julia Kristeva for writing a book entitled *About Chinese Women* (1977) and argues that she has no true understanding about Chinese women so sides with those women whose voices are hardly heard. This essay aims to explore Gayatri Spivak's subaltern theory in Audre Lorde's "A Woman Speaks" and "Who Said It Was Simple".

**Keywords:** Subaltern theory, Audre Lorde, Spivak, Race, Gender

### Introduction

Audre Geraldine Lorde, as an African-American poet and intersectional feminist, was a critic of second-wave feminists like Mary Daly who used to neglect the experiences of colored women. According to Lorde, different identities such as class, sex, gender, race and religion overlap one another and cause different types of inequalities. As documents suggest, "[she] puts her emphasis on the authenticity of experience. She wants her difference acknowledged but not judged; she does not want to be subsumed into the one general category of 'woman'" (Birkle 1996: 202). Being rejected as a result of her multiple identities, she emphasized the significance of embracing diversity and believed that such identities belong to the very nature of the female experience so such categorization would result in suppression in the final run. Her collections of poetry entitled *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (1997)

contains "A Woman Speaks"; a poem that reflects the lives of Black women whose voices have often been ignored. The speaker, as an Afro-American, or any Black woman in particular, is trying to unite Black women together because such voicelessness was common and there was no place for colored women in American society of 1900's. In the poem "Who Said It Was Simple" from her third volume of poetry, the speaker stands up for her color and sex at the same time. Evidently, Lorde questions the way movements are separating people based on their identities.

This imposition of alien values and cultural inferiority is reminiscent of Marxist ideology which was used by the Marxist feminist deconstructionist, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, to attack Western intellectuals who do not allow *the Subalterns* to speak for themselves. As a postcolonial feminist, Spivak is best-known for composing "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) in which she criticizes Westernized knowledge. Having been exported from West to the Third World as a commodity, Western thinking aims to construct the Subaltern identity; therefore, the Subaltern do not construct their identities. Spivak uses Antonio Gramsci's idea of subalternity to explain that *the Subaltern*, as Third World people, cannot speak due to divisions in sex, race, religion, class and etc. This criticism of Eurocentric knowledge is applicable to the image of colored women in "A Woman Speaks" and "Who Said It Was Simple" depicted by Audre Lorde as one of the early intersectional feminists.

### Theoretical Framework

Aiming to point upon those who had been excluded from the socio-economic institutions of society, Antonio Gramsci, the Marxist critic, coined the term *subaltern*. In Gramsci's words, subalternity refers to those classes and social groups who are not in control of a culture's ideology or hegemony and suffer under the hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class. However, "Subaltern," as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak puts forward, is not "just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie" (Cited in de Kock 1992: 45). She stresses that in Gramsci's works the word *subaltern* signifies 'proletarian', whose voice could not be heard, being written out of the capitalist bourgeois narrative. In postcolonial terms, "[...] everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern — a space of difference. Now who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern" (ibid:45-46). Taking this into account, as a prominent postcolonial feminist, in her influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Spivak raises the notion of double colonialization which has been a critical point in postcolonial feminism and declares that,

[t]he question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is 'evidence'. It is, rather, that both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the

consent of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow (Spivak 2013 [1988]: 82-83).

Reconsidering the problems of the subaltern groups through dealing with the issues of Indian women during colonial times, Spivak claims that *sati* women, as a subaltern group, were lost between two antagonistic poles. One voice maintains that “[w]hite men are saving brown women from brown men” (ibid: 92), the other postulates “[t]he women actually wanted to die” (ibid: 93). So, the Hindu 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” (ibid: 102). To make it clearer, she refers to *sati-suicide* among the Hindus and brings forth the fact that women of India, as the women of Third World, are being oppressed by imperialism of white men and the patriarchy at the same time in a way that they have been radically silenced. She then came to the conclusion that as a Third World Woman, not simply a woman, “the subaltern as female cannot be heard or read” (ibid: 104).

In her groundbreaking essay “French Feminism in an International Frame” (1981), Spivak challenged the universal claims of French feminists to speak for all women during the time the theories of well-known feminist thinkers like Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous were becoming available. Examining the blind spots of Western feminist thought, she emphasized that there exist huge differences in culture, race, class and even religion between women all over the world. According to the anti-essentialist feminist thinker, Simone de Beauvoir, “one is not born a woman, one becomes a woman” (cited in Morton 2003: 73) which means that gender, being a social construct, is not determined by one’s biological sex. However, instead of focusing on the sexual differences between men and women, Spivak considered the cultural differences between women in the Third World and those in developed countries. As it is evident, in reaction to the Western feminists’ focus on the experiences and lives of the White, postcolonial feminism, trying to give voice to the women of the Third World and other minorities, seeks to decolonize Western feminism. On the one hand, women of the Third World or Black women were governed in an unfair and cruel way and prevented from having opportunities and freedom as their opposite sex. On the other hand, they had been oppressed as a result of being a Third World woman or a woman of color. Therefore, having been subjected to imperialism and patriarchy at the same time, they were colonized in a twofold way.

Spivak criticizes Anglo-American feminists for privileging their heroines’ achievements of independent subjectivity as ‘strong women’ unlimited by imperialism and colonialism. Bourgeois feminists are slaves to colonialism whether they know it or not, and this should not be celebrated. There is a false freedom and false economy, exploiting the lives and

labors of Third World women, who pay for their privilege (Guerin et al 2011: 364-365). Examining the nineteenth-century controversy between the colonized Indians and their British colonizers over the burning of widows on the funeral of their deceased husbands, it is not surprising that “[...] neither party allowed women [...] to speak. The British texts construct a position for the women in which she is made to represent Western individualism and, by implication, a superior Western civilization that emphasizes modern freedom, while the Indian ones present her as choosing for duty and tradition. Although both parties claim that they have them on their side, the woman themselves remain unheard” (Bertens 2001: 213). As mentioned earlier, Spivak stresses upon the fact that Third World women in ex-colonized countries have been doubly marginalized. In other words, in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, she puts forward the idea that the colonized is marginalized so the woman in a colonized society is double marginalized. Postcolonial feminists believe that not only women are oppressed by patriarchal beliefs but they are also dominated by the colonial power.

Strikingly, having been considered as ‘Others’ by the dominant culture, they are supposed to deny themselves, be quiet and just conform. As articulated by Charles E. Bressler, “[f]or people of color living in Africa or in the Americas, for Native Americans, for females, and for gays and lesbians, and a host of others, the traditional answer already has been articulated by the dominant class and its accompanying hegemony: silence. Live quietly, work quietly, think quietly” (Bressler 2012: 198). However, refusing to be in control of their culture’s ideology or hegemony, some have dared to express themselves and challenge the dictates imposed on them since when one culture is dominated by another, the struggle is irresistible. Accordingly, “[i]n its interaction with the conquering culture, the colonized or indigenous culture is forced to go underground or to be obliterated” (ibid: 202). Undeniably, all races other than White were considered to be different, savages, inferior or subhuman; therefore, as the *Other*, ‘the not me’, they had been eliminated from positions of power. That is exactly what may happen when one culture considers itself superior to the other and dominates not only the land but also the ideology of the colonized people; as a consequence, the colonized/marginalized people’s dreams about the future, hopes and even their identities are forced to go underground.

### Discussion

The poem “A Woman Speaks” (1984), having been selected from *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (1997), draws our attention to the unfair way women of color are seen and the speaker’s unrelenting struggles to define her identity despite the existing biases and obstacles. As it appears, this three-stanza poetic piece aims to contemplate the experiences of Black women in an American society during the late 70’s to the early 90’s and wonders if the feminist movement could do more to bring the lives of women

of color, as a minority group or an underrepresented community, into consideration. In the very beginning

Moon marked and touched by sun  
 my magic is unwritten  
 but when the sea turns back  
 it will leave my shape behind. (1-4)

Saying her 'magic is unwritten', she argues that her strengths haven't been fully appreciated and puts an emphasis upon how Black women, as *Others*, have been pushed to the margins both in terms of gender and race. Evidently, the speaker is trying to represent the discrimination Black women face and indicates that their abilities, qualities and achievements are not respected as they deserve. As far as racism of White feminists are concerned, it is worth to mention that Black women's power has often gone unrecognized

I do not dwell  
 within my birth nor my divinities  
 who am ageless and half-grown  
 and still seeking  
 my sisters  
 witches in Dahomey  
 wear me inside their coiled cloths  
 as our mother did  
 mourning. (16-24)

The above written lines indicate that she connects herself to the women warriors or 'witches in Dahomy', an African kingdom in West Africa, who, as outsiders, 'wear [her] inside their coiled cloths'. Indeed, she places herself in the world of these 'sisters' but soon after she says she does 'not dwell' with them as if she has been cut off from her 'sisters' due to slavery. Lorde suggests the destructive forces of racism, the separation between women and the differences between a Black and a White woman when she says, "[a]s an African-american woman in white patriarchy, I am used to having my archetypal experience distorted and trivialized" (ibid: 67-68). Therefore, tired of waiting for others to include Black women, the speaker recommends that the only way through which women of color can resist such underestimation is to speak out and work for it. In "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" (1980), Lorde reflects on her personal experiences and states that "[t]he women who sustained [her] through [the three-week period of her breast surgery] were black and white, old and young, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual, and we all shared a war against the tyrannies of silence" (Lorde 2001[1980]: 82);

I have been woman  
 for a long time  
 beware my smile  
 I am treacherous with old magic  
 and the noon's new fury  
 with all your wide futures  
 promised  
 I am  
 woman  
 and not white. (25-34)

of the poem, the poet, through the voice of a Black woman, says:

since white people have not recognized Black women's contribution to society. According to Lorde, "[w]ithin the community of women, racism is a reality force" in a Black woman's life which does not exist in a white woman's life (Lorde 1984 [1979]: 70).

In lines ten to eleven she says 'I do not mix/ love with pity' which means that she does not ask for sympathy; she, instead, describes the prejudice, hatred and distrust towards women of color and summons her 'sisters' in the following lines to form a united group:

therefore, like the speaker of the poem who is trying to point upon the underestimated position of black women, Lorde prefers to react to what she views as a missing piece of the feminist movement. According to her,

I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences (ibid: 81-82).

Historically speaking, a great number of African-American females were treated as breeders and objects of sexual exploitation for white men during and after the period of slavery; therefore, as a Black woman serving on the front-line in the fight for equality as far as intersecting identities are concerned, Audre Lorde asks women to unite in order to change the unjustified treatment of minorities.

As shown, the speaker argues that her struggles for equality have been ignored. In other words, having been marginalized due to their gender and race, women of color have been eliminated from the 'futures/ promised' by white women. To Lorde, "[...] for nonwhite woman in this country, there is 80 percent fatality rate from breast cancer, three times the number of unnecessary eventrations, hysterectomies and sterilizations as for white women: three times as many chances of being raped, murdered, or assaulted as exist for white women" (Lorde 1984: 70). Thus, as a *subaltern* group in Spivakian terms, their voices were radically silenced. The speaker warns 'beware [her] smile' to indicate her rage towards the empty 'promise[s]' of those feminists who have risen for the rights of white women only. As already stated, Spivak believes that white women did not experience the same kind of oppression as Black women since they just suffer from sexism while women of color suffer from both sexism and racial discrimination.

In the poem "Who Said It Was Simple", first published in Lorde's third volume of poetry *From a Land Where Other People Live* in 1973, she again

There are so many roots to the tree of anger  
that sometimes the branches shatter  
before they bear. (1-3)

The speaker compares life predicaments to 'roots to the tree of anger' to suggest there are many reasons that may lead to 'anger'. Born female at birth and identified as a lesbian and Black, the 'anger' Lorde mentions here connotes the alienation she feels due to homophobia, sexism and racism at the same time.

Sitting in Nedicks  
the women rally before they march  
discussing the problematic girls  
they hire to make them free.  
An almost white counterman passes  
a waiting brother to serve them first  
and the ladies neither notice nor reject  
the slighter pleasures of their slavery. (4-11)

In the above written lines Lorde depicts an image of a restaurant named 'Nedicks' and refers to the restrictions of Whites-only feminism. Indeed, through the lines 'discussing the problematic girls/ they hire to make them free' and 'the ladies neither notice nor reject/ the slighter pleasures of their slavery', she attacks feminists and gives special importance to racial oppression. As it happens, not everyone is rich enough to 'hire' a person to have her household chores done; therefore, Lorde alludes to white women who 'march' for women's rights but employ non-white 'girls' to 'make [themselves] free'. The speaker then explains how '[a]n almost white counterman/ passes a waiting brother' or a Black man to serve white women first; thus, the poet, identifying with the 'waiting brother',

But I who am bound by my mirror  
as well as my bed  
see causes in colour  
as well as sex (12-15)

disapproves of  
those feminists who pretend to  
speak for all women but take advantage of the  
oppressed. To explain it more, in an open letter  
addressed to the lesbian feminist, Mary Daly, Lorde  
criticized what she assumed was a kind of racism  
within feminism and stressed that "[t]he history of  
white women who are unable to hear Black women's  
words, or to maintain dialogue with us, is long and  
discouraging" (ibid: 66). In fact, Lorde argued that  
race, as a feminist issue, has been neglected as far as  
white male slave-masters are concerned. She overtly  
reacted to the denial of noneuropean female strength  
and the real connections that exist between all women  
since "[...] all women suffer the same oppression  
simply because [they] are women is to lose sight of the  
many varied tools of patriarchy" (ibid: 67) so "[a]s  
outsiders, [they] need each other for support and  
connection and all the other necessities of living on the  
borders. But in order to come together [they] must  
recognize each other" (ibid: 69-70). As a matter of  
point, in the very beginning of the poem, the speaker  
tries to address Whites-only feminists who define  
themselves feminists but continue to disregard *Others*:

Undeniably, like a tree, a human being may not be able to 'bear' the pressures of such inequalities so 'the branches shatter/ before they bear'. Furthermore, the 'roots' symbolize the denial of basic human rights because of gender identity, race and even sexual orientation.

hints at the problematic treatment of Black men and especially Black women in the US. Strikingly, the poet who is very likely the speaker in the above written lines, says the white women do not 'notice' or 'reject' the man serving them first and artistically calls our attention to feminists who just advocate white women's rights and eliminate women of color. Even though they 'march' for their own rights, they fail to 'notice' the rights of the 'waiting brother'. Feeling excluded by all the 'march[es]' happening around, the speaker, as a Black woman experiencing the oppressive intersection of race and gender, knows that no feminist movement is fighting for her since the stories of women of color often goes unnoticed as it is seen in the poem.



The phrase being “bound by my mirror/ as well as my bed’ suggests that being Black, woman and lesbian at

and sit here wondering  
 which me will survive  
 all these liberations. (16-18)

Surprisingly, the line ‘which me will survive/ all these liberations’ indicates that she has been frequently asked by feminists to deny her blackness and the civil rights’ movement wants her to deny her woman-ness and just focus on her blackness; however, she is not

### Conclusion

To sum up, in the essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Gayatri Spivak, inspired by Gramsci, disclosed the way Third World women or colored women are represented in Western discourse. She put forward the notion that Western thinking, especially Western feminism, always expresses the interests of its producers as mentioned in lines regarding Julia Kristeva’s *About Chinese Woman*. Moving to the example of the Indian *Sati* suicide, she questions the validity of the Western representation of the *others* or women of color. According to her, the British, as colonizers, introduce themselves as a civilized nation whereas the colonized Indians were always depicted as barbarians. Therefore, Spivak believes that the *Subaltern* cannot speak due to the fact that Western thinking construct the truth for them and such divisions or binaries like civilized/ barbarian or Occident/ Orient do not allow them to express themselves at all.

In “A Woman Speaks”, Audre Lorde argues that Black women, as a doubly marginalized group, are excluded from the ‘futures’ and are not given a chance to shine in society because not only they are not treated fairly for being a woman, but they are also of another race. In fact, being a Black woman is more challenging than being a white woman. Moreover, being a victim of racial and sexist prejudices, the African-American speaker in the poem “Who Said It Was Simple” demands equality on all terms since no one has control over these two items. As shown, the speaker seems to have multiple identities which dictate the types of oppression she is doomed to experience.

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the same time,  
 or a subaltern in Spivak’s words,  
 she cannot get the luxury of ‘slighter pleasures’ as white women do.

able to deny the different parts that coexist within her. She seems to avoid such unfair categorization and at the end says that such denial of any kind would result in the loss or suppression of one of her identities.

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