

Coevalness and the Self-Immolating Woman: Anthropology's Objects

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Abstract: Divergent but complementary approaches emerge out of the 80s to circumscribe anthropologists' relation to object of study with respect to translation. Concerned with intersubjective treatment of anthropology's object, Fabian critiques the denial of coevalness as the central problematic of interdisciplinary studies in the epistemic construction of knowledge. The author's subversion overthrows the pinnacle of human progress embodied by the West. By deploying distancing devices to demonstrate how the Other had been coined in the Western imaginary - notably, as a temporal marker of the past - Fabian emphasizes that ethnocentric visualism is pre-existing in language. At the intersection with subjective knowing in anthropology, this article provides a theoretical framework for considering Johannes Fabian's and Gayatri Spivak's chronopolitics. Through an analysis of synchronicity, simultaneity and contemporaneity, it especially gives attention to three issues: visualism, language and distancing device. Applied to the Hindi or Sikh tradition of suttee, the question of time is regarded as a necessary object for analysis in order to bring the Other into an equivalent plane of reference. Mired is the day when one would exist beyond the exclusionary divider between Self and Other.

Keywords: Self-immolation, Time-and-the-other, Chronopolitics, Orientalism, Gendered subject.

1. INTRODUCTION

Links are made in this essay from Johannes Fabian's position concerning time to the stronghold of Gayatri Spivak's epistemic writing in a recognized study on the rights of persons, *Can the subaltern speak?* The subsequent comparison shows a misunderstanding resulting from divergent cultural expectations. The relativism in question sketches the double-bind of a disadvantaged woman, incarnating a pre-eminent portrait of alterity, so as to emphasize her misrecognized lack of subjective sovereignty due to the "anthropologist's alliance with forces of oppression" [1]. Discussed is, more precisely, the process of suttee (also spelled sati) that represents an obsolete Hindu funeral custom where a widow immolates herself on her husband's pyre, or commits suicide in another fashion shortly after her husband's death. With documented practice dating back to the 4th century BC, this custom has its origins within the warrior aristocracy on the Indian subcontinent, gradually gaining in popularity from the 10th century AD and spreading to other groups from the 12th through 18th century AD.

As an illustration of a process of manufacturing consent [2], the distinguished tradition of "widow-sacrifice" depicts the "savage woman" as living in an antecedent epoch, for which her will must be

disciplined from choice options/subsequently freedoms. Through the fusion of the philosophical/literary classics and, in the absence of methodical, socio-historical approach of the cultural practice in question, my intention is to fill a gap in current scholarship in order to demonstrate how Fabian's terminology unravels the unspoken premises of Spivak's cultural configuration of anthropology's female destitute Others. The hidden agenda of this piece consists in the debunking of a literary vignette within time-based theories of Otherness.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Juxtaposing Fabian and Spivak serves essentially the purpose of undoing logocentric dominions of oppressive centrism built on the confrontation with the unknown. The authors seek to understand the way in which Other ought to be addressed: *face-à-face* through intersubjectivity; and accounted for through ethics. Both approaches lay out the way in which Other is conflated with non-status - a diachronic analysis which discredits the anthropologist's credibility. Capturing the Other reflects more on the anthropologist than on his object. The forced subordination of Other - in Spivak's case amounting to silencing the object with absences of mindfulness for her sovereignty - manifests a discrepancy between the intersubjectivity of fieldwork and the diachronic relegation of the Other [3]. According to Fabian, the lack of premeditation is linked to the "temporal structures which place anthropologist and readers in a privileged time frame, while banishing Other to a stage of lesser

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development" [4]. The resultant downgrading leaves the Bengali woman with diminished coping strategies delegated for manifest destiny - her will being considered of lesser worth, her agency eclipsed with distancing devices of *esotropia*. [Esotropia is a form of *strabismus* in which one or both eyes turns inward. The condition can be constantly present, or occur intermittently, and can give the affected individual a "cross-eyed" appearance. The wording is used here as metaphor for skewed processes of vision: ones engrained with missing the object seen and gazing with fault].

Fabian anticipates the brutality of Western discourse through his thorough deconstruction regarding the attribution of epithets such as "savage" extended to the referential Other through interpretation. Other biased genitive descriptives - of the politics of privilege, reminding the reader all too well of Bronislaw Malinowski's field diary, follow suit: backwards, neolithic, primitive, etc. The anthropologist makes it appear that this Western attribution represents the general rule of anthropologist-cohort behaviour; that if not direct, is latent in the subconscious of Westerners in contact with alterity. Many anthropologists have historically proven to be distinguished *salauds*. Temporal distance interpreted as objectivity is reflected with great accuracy and exasperating predictability in the popular image of the discipline [5]. Philosophers such as Derrida affirm that ethnocentrism is embedded in our relation to each other in and of itself.

Yet, determined by temporal distance, objectivity does contrarily produce open-minded anthropologists who become immersed in fieldworks guided by the spirit of ethics, values, an ineffable *sens de l'écoute*. To posit that anthropology is a one-sided enterprise guided by the intentionality of exploration short-changes the attentionate care of practitioners who are complicit in human rights underpinnings of cultural discourse. Nevertheless, to say that honesty is relevant betrays those researchers who persist to be condescending of the native Other. One is immersed in the juxtaposition of inherent bias, generalization and simplified hearsay in the circles of common opinion.

Fabian's implicit support of such generalizations, which cut corners to vulgarize ideas, becomes detrimental to the self-dignity of well-intentioned, "honest" or "naive" anthropological projects. He achieves the latter through postulates confirming the skewed nature of anthropology due to its link to faunal history: "when popular opinion identifies all

anthropologists are handlers of bones and stones, it is not in error; it grasps the essential role of anthropology as provider of temporal distance" [6]. The systematic discrimination of Other actually starts with work on bones, which integrate temporal bias by supporting the hypothesis that man is more advanced than pre-modernity. This *dasein* unravels qualities of oppressive, even self-hating nature. By making anthropology's nature synonymous with physical anthropology, this thinking links contemporaneity to a natural-habitat-archeological-past, underscored with chronotypes of classified physical proofs of anteriority understood as backwardness. This idea suggests that, for some, anthropology regards the reconstitution of material culture and the struggle-for-survival biologism. Temporal distancing holds, subsequently, value for widow-sacrifice description, and has general value. To argue that popular opinion believes for anthropology to be all that, however- is hardly a reliable measure of its temporality, since the image of popular knowing suffers deficiencies from the uncouth character of distortion, consolidated by reckless anthro dissemination on the part of researchers themselves.

So Fabian singles out time. He places the Other on an antecedent mobile structure in relation to it, at exactly that location, where this foreign presence is deemed antecedent to the arrival of the Anthropologist himself. This strategy erases the possibility of the anthropologist and the Other being plausible partners in a cultural exchange. The author intends to focus on the extraction of data, for which Western man must, economically, make Other necessarily instrumental. The impossibility of partnership is driven home by the dire procedures of social science. Like a doctor or a policeman, the anthropologist represents, in this scheme, an authority figure, who "writes up" the Other, culminating in stigmatization, editorial caricature and disfiguration. On one hand, writing is the essence of anthropology. It is used in the crafting of precious field notes. The anthropologist is, however, writing up difference, deviation, norm, ritual and is - in spite of himself - expressing judgment on Other to paradoxically vehicle ideas of progress. This, the Gayatri Spivak example of suttee illustrates finely. When white men prevent brown women from sacrificing themselves at the death bed of their husbands, they strip the latter of their emancipated desire and agency. Postcolonial thinkers point out nativist arguments, positing that some women simply wish to die. A synthesis of Fabian and Spivak upholds heuristic value because Spivak's essay honours Fabian's theory with a field based illustration. Making recourse to the

argument that Western intellectual production is, in many ways, complicit with Western international economic interests [7], Spivak's vignette establishes the premisses of the relativism behind the anthropologist's treatment of the Other. Fabian's time argument underscores, on the other hand, the theory of pluralized subject effects which give the illusion of undermining subjective sovereignty while often providing a cover for the subject of knowledge [8]. Acted out as a function of leniency of time in favour of knowing subjects, Other and his or her rights are abandoned.

In attempting to show the way in which the Western Eye singles out Other, I will attempt to trace, against the backdrop of Spivak's argument of self-immolation, coherent patterns between both authors by examining: distancing devices such as historicity of anthropology, visualism as ethnocentrism as well as the role of language in intersubjective dialogism.

3. DISCUSSION

Distancing Devices

Contained in German by *Gleichzeitigkeit*, time driving the wedge between Self and Other, is made explicit through synchronicity, simultaneity and contemporaneity. Coeval designates that which is of the same age, date, duration; that which is coincident and contemporary. This ascription applies very well to the Indian practice of suttee. Judging it backward, colonial British officers have denied indigenous women freedom of choice by discrediting their ability to be accountable individuals. "Double displacement" is expressed as "the problem of finding a psychoanalytic allegory that can accommodate the third woman with the first" [10]. The crux of the issue is driven by spatial distance of exclusion from the margins of the "true and differential" [11]. As a wedge between Self and Other, time acquires, in this sense, the vested powers of attachment to heterogeneous locations of culture. According to Fabian, time determines geopolitics; thus, the movements on political chessboards - of power, of consciousness, of subjectivity.

Subaltern woman's subjectivity has no semantic expression in imaginary configurations of time-privilege. The "historically muted subject of the subaltern woman" [12] exists indifferent to the bourgeois democratic revolutions, which have led to the individualism of women in Western societies. It exists as if it were placed in a plane of non-being [13]. Just as the human rights project exists as a parallel,

unattainable sphere to that of the subaltern, Spivak's suttee widow cannot reach beyond exclusion from discourse. As a factor of division, time structures the grammar of in-and-out group divisions. With *in-* and *out-*groups, shared time is a fiction.

Fabian argues that for human communication to occur, coevalness must be created [14]. Time is not the imperative of divisions between White Man and Other. Time is the yard-stick and the reflexive mirror at the intersection between identity groups for whom solely interest, conflict resolution and reconciliation — offer binding solution on fair terms. To administer the abolition of time, man needs concessions. If there is no sticks or carrots, paradoxically imbued in listening to the unspoken needs, dialogue is parsimonious. Disciplinary action aspiring to halt suttee appears to an essentialist-ecologist like a ruthless intervention. Itself driven by misunderstanding of the symbolic signification of ritual to an indigenous community, it picks on the vulnerability of individuals and their human rights. As a power undertaking, it claims that Western communities know better and are, thus, authorized to take responsibility for their brother, without much sensitivity towards their needs or sensibilities. The British government's action to eradicate a cultural ritual indicates an encroachment on the collective memory of a nation: the premeditated extinction of its sense of Self. It fails to take into account rights and freedoms, cohesive social psychology and self-righteousness of a people, and, furthermore, of women.

Insofar as imperialist political moves appropriated Indian choice on their own terms, deluding decision-makers into temporal distance, the object of their search is missed. The enigmatic Indian ritual embodies a threat to Western chronology due to its unexpected, chaotic coup on rationality. Motivated by the objective of saving lives, the British government's so-called humanitarian action punishes Indian-women and strips them of their rightful intentionality. Revealing fear of being invaded by Otherness and of having their values contaminated, British officials have manipulated this historical example as a tool of repression and violent terror while trying to pass it off as a queer masquerade for progress. The blatant result construes the misunderstanding of Other. Time establishes the conditions of a denial of coevalness: spot-on structural violence.

Subjugated under the headings of a unique system of beliefs and womanhood, the inscription of time as disseminating the configuration of action in the field

portrays the setting of an unjust war on people whose crime is their identity. Absence of conciliatory means leads to crackdowns and defiance. The resolve behind the violence is driven in function of the "imagination and courage to picture what would happen to the West if anthropology, if its temporal fortress, were suddenly invaded by the Time and the Other" [15]. The alterity of suttee challenges the British imagination to protect itself against assault on values, without considering human communication with Other. Implicitly offering guiding suggestibility to the Western mind, distancing devices lead to the de-Othering of indigenous subjects.

Anthropologists who are justice-seekers or human rights activists pierce through the logocentric assumptions of the direction of such de-grading experience, persisting to imagine what lies on the other side of the temporal spectrum - aspects which can be bridged only by the engagement of the fictive and the imaginary. They express sensibility to Other when they attest: "Clearly, if you are poor, black or female, you get it in three ways" [16].

Manifesting concern for Other, rhetorical approaches emphasize that temporal distancing has the possibility of being bridged through compassion and communication, inviting an intellectual combat. Fabian suggests, matter of factedly, that anthropology has to transcend its historicity [17] - including the overcoming of positive illusions of Time being embedded in discourse [18]. Justice can be obtained only if the ideological machine of temporal uncoupling or referential illusions is deconstructed [19].

Ethnocentric Visualism

The second point of intersection between Fabian and Spivak is addressed by the optics of apprehending Other. Time, according to Fabian, is inscribed into the rhetorics of vision. The perspective singles out the subaltern woman in terms of an empirical, scientific tradition, which conflates her essence through a deforming lense. According to the author of *Time and the Other*, visualism is bolstered by the recommendation to use maps, charts and tables [20]. Such devices rest, according to Fabian, on a corpuscular, atomic theory of knowledge and information, encouraging quantification and diagrammatic representation so that that the ability to visualize a culture becomes synonymous with understanding.

Visualism is a filter on Other. Omitting dimensions of life experience [21], it applies an interest-driven grid, premised on Western priorities, on fragiles references.

According to Freud's principle of desire and forms of representation such as Auerbachian mimesis, visualism reconfigures Other in the image of colonizers resulting in distortions of reality. In an argument for the denial of coevalness, the unbridgeable distance between field fact and representation introduces visualism into philosophy and history.

Based on the position that the subject of knowledge is absolute master over truth, not only a relocation of blind rationality, visualism become the resting place of the ultimate logic of social science. Confering power onto men and positing the single-minded view of the "I", visualism predicts a political contingency. The all-mighty Geertzian "I-witnessing" bases his or her ontology on the denial of Other, on the *effacement* of Other, on the absence of acknowledgement of the Other's point of view, inclination or basic need.

In the case of the suttee, the drama consists similiary of British officials pursuing the extermination of a ritual, knowing no other reality than their own. Being predicated on self-interest and self-righteousness, visualism is naturally deemed more important than paradoxical suicidal drives of a *foule de femmes*, enmeshed in a tribal performance.

Fabian's visualism feeds into Spivak's rendition of Derrida's radical critique with the threat of appropriating Other by assimilation, culminating in *catachresis*. The latter term of dissonance is used by Spivak to show the temporal distance between actors and the value-attachments given to them. In Spivak's view, a woman or the proletariat represent terms which mistakenly do not relay the denotation of the territory, cancelling out subtle and concealed aspects of human experience. Insofar as it egoistically privileges the "I" over the Other, visualism enforces catachresis, enforces partiality. Notions of truth-value, identity, representation are drawn away through a kind of cognitive inversion from the territory towards misconceived fabrications of the imaginary along a continuum ranging from indifference, well-wishing to polarization, refined by the predication of Self over Other.

Visualism presents a departure from naive observation, undermines the idea of neutrality in research. While it is true that participant observation helps to bridge the temporal gap - immersion implies closeness to field subjects, implication of the narrowing of intimate rapports - this presumably lays the ground to authorize anthropologists to speak about subjects

and to feel for their specific cultural condition. Originating in the works of Malinowski, participant observation had been, in fact, a first step towards the demise of visualism. Writing off all anthropology as insensitive and dispassionate is honestly erroneous on such grounds. Conceived as a block to visualism at its foundation, participant observation implies immediately anthropology's paradoxical inner sense of reflexivity: persistent attempts to render possible the conditions of co-existence between the Knower and the Known. Irrespective of the rule of objectivity, there has been an initial attempt to bring the Other into the circle of love.

In the context of Spivak's subaltern woman self-immolating on her husband's pyre, visualism analyzes the double position of self-sacrifice as threat to one's security (from which Other needs to be "saved" through a civilising mission) on one hand; and the threat of its unique expression of self-determination, on Other. Field evidence furthermore complicates analysis. Subaltern women act under pressure to act in the name of supra-individual reasons [22]: "Kill yourself on your husband's pyre now and you may kill your female body in the entire cycle of birth". Self-immolation is furthermore linked with self-preservation against the threat of sexual violence from other men: "The task of recovering a sexually subaltern subject is lost in an institutional textuality at the archaic origin" [23].

Instead of treating it as a peculiar superstition, misinformation about the ritual leads through visualism to criminalize the subject [24]. Through further application of temporal devices, visualism fails to recognize that subaltern women expect "liberation" and a "reward" through suttee. According to Spivak, visualism goes both ways. The first view would have it the subaltern woman is seen as primitive and has to be criminalized. The second view assumes that punishing suttee is not collective violence, but a release-centred cultural mission. In either case, the subaltern woman does not speak but has a visualism of her own.

Language

The last point brings me to consider the problem of coevalness in terms of epistemology. According to Fabian, the crux of the issue rests on the negation of the temporal materiality of communication through language as the temporality of speaking implies contemporality of producer and product, speaker and listener, Self and Other [25]. This section examines the relation of temporal distancing with language aspects

such as communication, dialogue, dialectical contradiction, deconstruction and fiction.

Fabian's vocabulary provides a framework, which elucidates Spivak's position. Both authors have parallel intentions, the playing field of anthropological discourse ultimately rests with language, which offers the space for the negotiation of interpretation. This is where suttee is elaborated as a value system, where the subaltern woman receives her post-humous justice, where simulacra from the field are well intentionally but misguidedly constructed. At the end of the day, his or her truth being buried in conjectures, the Subject of knowing knows less than expected. In order to build his fortress on inclusion or dialogue, in his or her quest for coevalness, the practitioner has to give in to the innocence of "not knowing" (challenge to conceit) and, even, to vulnerability. The language of this process is communication.

Rather than confronting Other, language benefits the researcher in confronting his presuppositions and himself, opening the doors for mindfulness and inclusion. Requiring the undoing the Gordian knot concerning the combat of family members for dowry and general scriptural doctrines concerning the reprehensible nature of ideological battlegrounds, suttee is made meaningful when it is explained that groups rendered psychologically marginal by their exposure to Western impact and had come under pressure to demonstrate to others as well as to themselves, their ritual parity and allegiance to traditional high culture: "To many of them, suttee, becomes an important proof of their conformity to older norms at a time when these norms had become shaky from within" [27].

As write-ups disfigure subjectivities, the delicate nature of cultural dogma calls for vigilance. Fabian calls for the need to confront dialectical contradictions, of which practices such as self-immolation in India are one example. Attached to the shock content in the restitution of mental configurations of social phenomena, the web of contrasting presuppositions calls for assiduous investigation, tact and listening. Language's temporary ability to deconstruct visualism puts into place renewed forms of its imperfection to offer a novel philosophical fieldwork [28]. Part of our unlearning project rests on the prerogative to articulate the idea that ideological formation by measuring silences, if necessary, into the object of inquiry [29].

Dialectical contradiction presupposes disagreement, conflict, negotiation. Language is the agora where such transformations take place. If we follow the metaphor, truth is about gaging war. Based on temporal distance - an incomprehensible vortex, which transforms the subject of knowledge indefinitely, reaching out for Other - presupposes entering a violent language labyrinth. Thanks to discursive practice and rewriting, the anthropologist transforms the Other and - self-transforms. The thrust against dialectical contradiction involves reflexivity concerning one's method, decentering of one's cardinal points to control temporal distancing. Coevalness may be impossible to attain, but intellectual honesty presupposes the intended deconstruction of prejudice and self-enforced stereotypes, which correlate the territory with false maps on a time scale.

While the gradients of racism are ever-present due to the collision of *-in* and *-out* groups, some anthropologists ambition to find the grounds of equivalence in mismatched foreign contexts, with greater refrain from placating an ethnocentric point of view on anthropology's object of study, based on nuanced understanding of strife and oppression. The Western point of view renders such a task untenable as many scientists cannot concede, against their strongest impulse, to place themselves into the Other's shoes by making recourse to Dilthey's method of *Verstehen*. But help comes in unexpected ways.

The emergence of radical thinkers from subaltern contexts, such as those like Camus, Derrida, Spivak, Tajfel, Bhabba fill the blanks of the discourse: having experienced, in however small fraction, "being Other", these intellectuals have a greater predisposition for deconstruction. Their susceptibility to experience the dire pains and suffering of Othering marks their voice in the matter. By mastering language, these *enfants terribles* negotiate the Other's point of view before the Babel, driving home the position of subalterns to profess the ills of visualism in meta-narratives of counter-hegemonic discourse. Having been the Other, those authors translate the Other's position for the public at large.

The game is not at the level of articulating silence: the stakes are being fought through language by these Others, who appropriate scriptural strategies from the Western model, about the other Others. Inspired from below, such fictions fully stigmatize the indigenous, a position taking which they acquired through immersion in Western contexts. Nevertheless, they act out based

on the intuition to perform reflexivity on culture, enabling a self-economy of survival.

CONCLUSION

By securing the antagonisms of the self-other dichotomy and reliant on its framework to extend one-sided rhetoric of vision, time cross-breeds the suttee ritual. Establishing tangible structures based on opposition, self-enforced on the social psychology side by stereotype: simplification and prejudice, temporal distinctions embody the concealed faces of misinformed superstition in apprehending Other. They are the vectors, which situate interests and stakes.

As the British government actions towards subaltern women manifest through informal oppression, anthropology is a function of the polarization of Self and Other. The Indian woman, in this historical illustration, lives in seclusion, due to binary oppositions implicit in its distancing schemes. It is then not time, as much as the "belief in time splitting human beings", which generates opinion and point of view. In the absence of face saving measures from *ad hominem* attacks, the potential of time-severance relegates the brown woman into non-speech. Vested with ethnocentric values, visual perception projects the lack of consideration and empathy towards Other. An embedded cleavage, time marks the bifurcation between recognition of status and reductionism of Other, culminating in misunderstanding, neglect, indifference. Where time structures infinite interactions through cooperation, it is pigeonholed with political philosophy of associational networks. Such initiatives are known to grant increased privilege to contemporaneity. To erase the one-sidedness of time, anthropology benefits from the epistemic structures of history seeking the eternal return of the centre [30] to excavate the social dimension of life by entitling Other to existence: "Renewed interest in the history of our discipline and disciplined inquiry into the history of the confrontation between the anthropology and its Other are therefore not escapes from empire; they are practical and realistic. They are way to meet the Other on the same ground, in the same Time" [31].

Integration, yes - assimilation, no. Genuine inquiry, circumventing bias through reflexivity is the only viable procedure.

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