Narrating the Margins: Subaltern Voices in Beloved and The Color Purple

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***Abstract*—This paper examines how African American women's literature negotiates the question of subaltern voice through a comparative study of Beloved by Toni Morrison and The Color Purple by Alice Walker. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, particularly her seminal essay Can the Subaltern Speak?, the study explores the tensions between silence, representation, and agency in narratives centered on Black women's experiences. Spivak argues that the subaltern is structurally excluded from meaningful speech due to epistemic violence embedded in dominant discourses. While both Morrison and Walker depict the historical silencing of African American women through slavery, patriarchy, and systemic racism, their works also challenge the totalizing nature of Spivak's claim. Through innovative narrative techniques, including fragmented memory, epistolary form, and communal storytelling, these authors create spaces where marginalized voices emerge, resist, and reconfigure identity.**

The paper argues that Beloved and The Color Purple simultaneously confirm and revise Spivak's theory. On one hand, they illustrate the limitations imposed on subaltern speech; on the other, they demonstrate the potential of literature to function as a site of resistance and reclamation. By situating these texts within both postcolonial and Black feminist frameworks, the study ultimately contends that while subaltern voices remain mediated, they are not entirely silenced. Instead, they persist in complex, negotiated forms that challenge dominant structures of knowledge and representation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The question of whether the marginalized can truly speak within dominant systems of power remains central to postcolonial and feminist literary studies. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her influential essay Can the Subaltern Speak?, argues that the subaltern—those positioned at the lowest strata of society, excluded from hegemonic power structures—is fundamentally constrained from articulating their voice in a way that can be authentically recognized. According to Spivak, even when the subaltern appears to speak, their voice is inevitably mediated, appropriated, or distorted by dominant discourses, resulting in what she terms epistemic violence. This provocative

claim has sparked extensive debate, particularly when applied to literary texts that attempt to represent marginalized experiences.

African American women's literature provides a rich and complex site for examining and challenging Spivak's argument. Historically subjected to the intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class, African American women have often been denied access to institutional forms of representation and authorship. Yet, through literary production, they have carved out spaces for articulating their histories, identities, and resistances. Writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker have been instrumental in bringing Black women's voices to the forefront of contemporary literature, addressing both the legacy of slavery and the ongoing realities of marginalization.

This paper focuses on two seminal works: Beloved and The Color Purple. Both novels center on Black female protagonists who navigate profound trauma and systemic silencing, yet they also foreground processes of self-expression and communal healing. In Beloved, Morrison reconstructs the fragmented memories of slavery through a nonlinear narrative that resists conventional historical representation. In The Color Purple, Walker employs an epistolary form to trace the protagonist Celie's journey from voicelessness to self-assertion. These texts not only depict the conditions of subalternity but also experiment with narrative forms that challenge dominant modes of storytelling.

The central argument of this paper is that African American women's literature, as exemplified by these two novels, both confirms and revises Spivak's theory of the subaltern. On one hand, the experiences of characters like Sethe and Celie illustrate the structural barriers to speech and recognition that Spivak identifies. Their voices are shaped by trauma, oppression, and the limitations of available language. On the other hand, Morrison and Walker demonstrate that literature can function as a space for rearticulating marginalized identities, enabling forms of expression that resist and reconfigure dominant narratives.

Furthermore, this study situates Spivak's framework in dialogue with Black feminist thought, particularly the works of bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, who emphasize the importance of intersectionality and collective voice. While Spivak's analysis highlights the constraints on subaltern speech, Black feminist scholars foreground the ways in which marginalized communities generate their own epistemologies and modes of resistance. This intersection of perspectives allows for a more nuanced understanding of voice and agency in African American women's literature.

By examining Beloved and The Color Purple through these theoretical lenses, this paper seeks to explore the following questions: To what extent do these texts reproduce the silencing of the subaltern? How do their narrative strategies challenge or complicate Spivak's claims? And can literature serve as a viable space for subaltern voices to emerge, even within the constraints of dominant discourse?

Ultimately, this study argues that while Spivak's theory remains crucial for understanding the structural limitations of representation, it must be re-evaluated in light of literary practices that foreground marginalized voices. African American women's literature does not simply illustrate

the impossibility of subaltern speech; it actively engages in the work of making that speech heard, albeit in complex and mediated ways.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The exploration of subaltern voice in African American women's literature necessitates a strong theoretical grounding in postcolonial and feminist discourse. This study primarily draws upon the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose influential essay Can the Subaltern Speak? interrogates the conditions under which marginalized subjects are denied the capacity for authentic self-representation. However, to fully understand the complexities of African American women's writing, it is equally important to place Spivak's framework in dialogue with Black feminist thought, particularly the contributions of bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins. Together, these perspectives offer a nuanced approach to questions of voice, agency, and representation.

At the core of Spivak's argument is the concept of the subaltern, a term she adapts from Antonio Gramsci to describe populations that exist outside hegemonic power structures and are systematically excluded from institutional modes of expression. For Spivak, the subaltern is not merely oppressed but is positioned in such a way that their voice cannot be adequately recognized or validated within dominant epistemological frameworks. This leads to what she terms epistemic violence—the process by which knowledge systems of the West erase, distort, or overwrite the perspectives of marginalized groups.

A crucial distinction in Spivak's work is between two forms of representation: Vertretung (political representation or speaking for) and Darstellung (re-presentation or portrayal). She critiques Western intellectuals for conflating these modes, often assuming that they can "give voice" to the oppressed without acknowledging the inherent power dynamics involved. In doing so, they risk reinforcing the very structures of domination they seek to critique. This insight is particularly relevant to literary studies, where authors and critics must grapple with the ethics of representing marginalized experiences.

Spivak's well-known conclusion—that "the subaltern cannot speak"—should not be interpreted as a literal claim that marginalized individuals are incapable of speech. Rather, it highlights the structural conditions that prevent their voices from being heard or understood on their own terms. Even when the subaltern appears to speak, their voice is mediated through dominant languages, institutions, and discourses, which reshape and often dilute its meaning. This perspective provides a critical lens for analyzing texts like Beloved and The Color Purple, where issues of voice, silence, and narrative authority are central.

However, Spivak's framework has been critiqued for its perceived pessimism and its limited engagement with the specific historical and cultural contexts of African American experience. This is where Black feminist thought becomes essential. Scholars such as bell hooks argue that marginality should not be viewed solely as a site of deprivation but also as a space of resistance and possibility. In her work, hooks conceptualizes the margin as a "radical space of openness" where new identities and discourses can emerge, challenging dominant power structures.

Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins introduces the concept of Black feminist epistemology, which emphasizes the importance of lived experience, dialogue, and community in the production of knowledge. Collins argues that African American women have historically developed alternative ways of knowing that resist and subvert dominant narratives. This perspective complicates Spivak's assertion by suggesting that marginalized groups are not entirely silenced but instead produce their own forms of discourse that may exist outside traditional academic or institutional frameworks.

Another key concept relevant to this study is intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Intersectionality highlights how systems of oppression—such as racism, sexism, and classism—interact to shape the experiences of marginalized individuals. African American women occupy a unique position at the intersection of these forces, making their voices particularly complex and multifaceted. This framework is crucial for understanding the characters in Beloved and The Color Purple, whose struggles cannot be reduced to a single axis of oppression.

When these theoretical perspectives are brought together, a more dynamic understanding of subaltern voice emerges. Spivak's emphasis on structural constraint and epistemic violence provides a necessary critique of simplistic notions of representation. At the same time, Black feminist thought and intersectionality highlight the ways in which marginalized subjects actively negotiate, resist, and reinterpret these constraints.

In the context of African American women's literature, this combined framework allows us to see how texts can simultaneously depict silencing and enable expression. Beloved and The Color Purple do not simply illustrate the impossibility of subaltern speech; they engage in a complex process of narrative experimentation that both acknowledges and challenges the limits identified by Spivak. Through their innovative forms and focus on lived experience, these works create spaces where marginalized voices can be heard, even if only partially and conditionally.

Thus, the theoretical framework guiding this study is not confined to a single perspective but is instead an intersection of postcolonial critique and Black feminist theory. This approach makes it possible to critically assess Spivak's claim while also recognizing the transformative potential of African American women's literary practices.

Subalternity, Memory, and Voice in Beloved

Beloved by Toni Morrison stands as one of the most powerful literary explorations of slavery's enduring psychological and cultural impact. Through its fragmented narrative, haunting imagery, and complex characterization, the novel foregrounds the silencing of Black women under slavery while simultaneously attempting to recover their suppressed voices. When read through the theoretical lens of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Beloved both affirms the structural constraints on subaltern speech and challenges the notion of its absolute impossibility.

At the center of the novel is Sethe, an escaped enslaved woman whose life is shaped by extreme trauma and loss. Sethe's experiences exemplify what Spivak terms epistemic violence, as her history is not only marked by physical brutality but also by the systematic erasure of her identity and voice. Under slavery, Sethe is denied the basic conditions necessary for selfhood: control over her body, her family, and her narrative. Her memories of Sweet Home plantation are fragmented

and often unspeakable, illustrating the limits of language in articulating traumatic experience. In this sense, Sethe embodies the subaltern subject whose voice is constrained by structures that preclude full expression.

Morrison's narrative technique reinforces this silencing. The story of Sethe's past is not presented in a linear or coherent manner but emerges through disjointed recollections, shifting perspectives, and moments of intense emotional rupture. This fragmentation reflects the psychological effects of trauma while also suggesting that conventional narrative forms are inadequate for representing the history of slavery. The inability to tell a complete, unified story aligns with Spivak's assertion that the subaltern cannot easily translate their experiences into dominant discursive frameworks.

The character of Beloved herself serves as a powerful symbol of repressed history and unspeakable memory. Often interpreted as the ghost of Sethe's deceased daughter, Beloved represents the return of what has been silenced or forgotten. Her presence forces Sethe and the surrounding community to confront the past that they have attempted to suppress. In this way, Beloved embodies the voices of countless enslaved individuals whose stories were never recorded or acknowledged. Yet, even as these voices resurface, they do so in a form that is fragmented, ambiguous, and difficult to interpret—again reinforcing the challenges of subaltern expression.

Despite this pervasive silencing, Beloved also demonstrates how alternative narrative strategies can create space for marginalized voices. Morrison employs a polyphonic structure, incorporating multiple perspectives and interior monologues that allow characters to articulate their experiences in their own terms. At key moments in the novel, characters such as Sethe, Denver, and Beloved engage in a form of stream-of-consciousness narration that blurs the boundaries between individual and collective voice. These passages resist the authority of a single, dominant perspective, instead presenting a multiplicity of voices that challenge traditional hierarchies of representation.

This emphasis on collective voice is particularly significant in relation to Spivak's theory. While Spivak highlights the difficulty of individual subaltern speech, Morrison suggests that communal forms of expression may offer a partial solution. The Black community in the novel plays a crucial role in both the repression and eventual articulation of traumatic memory. Initially, the community's withdrawal from Sethe contributes to her isolation and silence. However, in the novel's climactic scene, a group of women comes together to confront and exorcise Beloved, using collective prayer and song. This moment signifies the power of shared experience and communal voice in addressing the legacy of oppression.

Furthermore, Morrison's act of writing itself can be seen as a form of resistance to epistemic violence. By centering the experiences of enslaved Black women and experimenting with narrative form, she challenges dominant historical narratives that have marginalized or erased these voices. While acknowledging the limitations of representation, Beloved insists on the necessity of attempting to tell these stories, even if they cannot be fully captured.

In this sense, the novel both confirms and revises Spivak's argument. It confirms her claim by illustrating the profound difficulties involved in articulating subaltern experience, particularly in the context of extreme trauma and historical erasure. At the same time, it revises her theory by

demonstrating that literature can serve as a space where these silenced voices are not only acknowledged but also partially recovered. The voices in Beloved may be fragmented and mediated, but they are not entirely absent.

Ultimately, Beloved presents subaltern speech as a complex and ongoing process rather than an absolute impossibility. Through its innovative narrative techniques and focus on memory, trauma, and community, the novel reveals both the limits and the possibilities of representing marginalized voices. In doing so, it offers a powerful rethinking of Spivak's claim, suggesting that while the subaltern may not speak in a fully autonomous or unmediated way, their voices can still emerge in forms that challenge and transform dominant discourses.

Voice, Agency, and Transformation in The Color Purple

The Color Purple by Alice Walker offers a profound exploration of the journey from silence to self-expression, making it a crucial text for examining subaltern voice through the lens of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. While the novel initially appears to confirm Spivak's assertion that marginalized subjects are structurally silenced, it ultimately revises her theory by demonstrating how voice can be gradually constructed through alternative forms of expression, interpersonal relationships, and self-realization.

The protagonist, Celie, embodies the condition of the subaltern at the beginning of the novel. As a poor, Black woman in the early twentieth-century American South, she is subjected to multiple layers of oppression, including racial discrimination, patriarchal violence, and economic marginalization. Her early life is marked by abuse at the hands of her stepfather and later her husband, leaving her with little sense of self-worth or agency. In this context, Celie's voice is not only suppressed but also internalized as silence, reflecting Spivak's notion that the subaltern is positioned in such a way that meaningful speech becomes nearly impossible.

The epistolary form of the novel is central to understanding Celie's evolving voice. Initially, Celie writes letters addressed to God, which function as a private and constrained form of communication. These letters reveal her inner thoughts and suffering, yet they also underscore her isolation, as she lacks a tangible audience who can respond or validate her experiences. This mode of expression aligns with Spivak's argument that subaltern speech, even when it occurs, is often confined within structures that limit its impact and recognition.

However, as the narrative progresses, the nature of Celie's writing undergoes a significant transformation. Her letters shift from being addressed to God to being directed toward her sister Nettie. This change represents a crucial turning point, as it introduces the possibility of reciprocal communication and shared understanding. Through this epistolary exchange, Celie begins to articulate her experiences more confidently, gradually developing a sense of identity and agency. The act of writing becomes not merely a record of suffering but a means of self-definition and resistance.

Walker further complicates Spivak's framework by emphasizing the role of relationships in enabling subaltern expression. Characters such as Shug Avery and Sofia play pivotal roles in Celie's transformation. Shug, in particular, challenges Celie's internalized beliefs about herself and encourages her to assert her own desires and opinions. Through her relationship with Shug, Celie

learns to reinterpret her experiences and to question the authority of patriarchal structures that have silenced her. Similarly, Sofia's defiance against male domination offers an alternative model of resistance, demonstrating that silence is not the only possible response to oppression.

These interpersonal dynamics highlight an important departure from Spivak's emphasis on structural constraint. While Spivak underscores the systemic barriers to subaltern speech, The Color Purple illustrates how community and solidarity can create conditions for voice to emerge. This perspective aligns with the ideas of bell hooks, who conceptualizes marginality as a site of resistance, and Patricia Hill Collins, who emphasizes the importance of collective experience in the formation of Black feminist consciousness.

Another significant aspect of the novel is its use of language. Celie's early letters are written in a vernacular style that reflects her limited formal education. While this has sometimes been interpreted as a sign of marginalization, it can also be seen as a form of resistance to dominant linguistic norms. By privileging Celie's voice in its authentic form, Walker challenges the idea that valid expression must conform to standardized or "proper" language. This choice disrupts traditional hierarchies of knowledge and representation, allowing a marginalized voice to be heard on its own terms.

By the end of the novel, Celie achieves a level of self-awareness and independence that stands in stark contrast to her initial condition. She establishes economic autonomy through her sewing business, asserts herself in her relationships, and redefines her understanding of spirituality and self-worth. Importantly, her voice is no longer confined to private letters but becomes part of a broader network of communication and community.

In this way, The Color Purple revises Spivak's claim by demonstrating that the subaltern is not permanently silenced. While Celie's voice is initially constrained by oppressive structures, it evolves through a process of self-discovery, relational support, and creative expression. The novel suggests that although subaltern speech may be mediated and shaped by existing power dynamics, it can still emerge in meaningful and transformative ways.

At the same time, the text does not entirely reject Spivak's insights. Celie's journey is long, difficult, and contingent upon specific relationships and circumstances, indicating that access to voice is neither universal nor easily achieved. Thus, the novel maintains a tension between constraint and possibility, reflecting the complex realities of subaltern experience.

Ultimately, The Color Purple presents voice not as an inherent or immediate attribute but as something that must be cultivated and negotiated. Through its innovative use of the epistolary form, its emphasis on community, and its commitment to representing marginalized experience, the novel offers a powerful reimagining of subaltern speech—one that both acknowledges its limitations and affirms its potential.

Comparative Discussion: Subaltern Voices in Beloved and The Color Purple

A comparative analysis of Beloved and The Color Purple highlights both convergences and divergences in the ways African American women's literature negotiates subaltern voice. While both texts grapple with the silencing effects of oppression, they deploy different narrative strategies to recover and rearticulate marginalized experiences. Together, they offer a nuanced framework

for understanding how literature can both confirm and revise Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of the subaltern.

1. Silence, Trauma, and the Limits of Speech

Both Morrison and Walker depict the structural constraints that render Black women voiceless, thus affirming Spivak's argument. In Beloved, Sethe's traumatic memories are fragmented and often unspeakable, reflecting the deep epistemic violence of slavery. Her inability to fully narrate her experiences illustrates the structural limitations on subaltern speech identified by Spivak. Similarly, Celie in The Color Purple begins in silence, constrained by patriarchal and racial oppression, echoing the subaltern's exclusion from hegemonic modes of representation. Both novels underscore that trauma, systemic oppression, and historical erasure profoundly shape the capacity for voice.

Yet the texts differ in emphasis. Beloved situates silence within historical trauma, emphasizing memory, loss, and haunting as the primary barriers to speech. The Color Purple, by contrast, focuses more on social and interpersonal constraints, showing how Celie's silence is produced and maintained through gendered violence and isolation. This distinction illustrates that subalternity is contextually mediated and must be understood in relation to both historical and social structures.

2. Narrative Strategies and Modes of Voice

While both novels depict silencing, they also experiment with narrative forms to enable subaltern expression. Morrison employs a polyphonic and nonlinear structure, incorporating multiple perspectives and fragmented recollections. This narrative strategy mirrors the complexity of subaltern experience: voices are mediated, incomplete, and contingent, yet they are present and resistant. Walker uses an epistolary form, allowing Celie's voice to emerge gradually from private letters to letters exchanged with Nettie. The epistolary format creates a mediated but intimate space for subaltern speech, emphasizing its development over time.

In both cases, the novels illustrate that subaltern voices are not simply absent but are negotiated and mediated. While they cannot speak in ways fully recognized by dominant structures, these texts show that literary experimentation allows marginalized voices to articulate themselves within their own terms.

3. Individual vs. Collective Voice

Another key difference lies in the role of community. In Beloved, communal voice is crucial for the exorcism of trauma. The collective intervention of the Black community helps to confront Beloved and address past silences, highlighting that subaltern recovery often occurs within relational or collective frameworks. In The Color Purple, female relationships—particularly Celie's bonds with Shug Avery and Sofia—provide the necessary support for voice to emerge. Here, collective solidarity functions as a site of empowerment, enabling individual self-expression. Both novels suggest that subaltern speech is strengthened by community, thereby revising Spivak's emphasis on structural silencing. While she focuses on the impossibility of authentic subaltern articulation in hegemonic discourse, Morrison and Walker demonstrate that subaltern voices can emerge through alternative, localized networks of communication—whether communal, relational, or literary.

4. Revising Spivak: Voice as Process

Together, these texts illustrate that subaltern speech is not static but processual. It is contingent, mediated, and sometimes fragmented, but it exists and evolves. In Beloved, the haunting of Beloved embodies the return of suppressed voices, while the community's intervention enables articulation. In The Color Purple, Celie's journey from silence to empowerment demonstrates that voice develops gradually through interpersonal and self-reflective processes.

Thus, both novels confirm Spivak's insight into the structural constraints on marginalized voices while simultaneously revising it by demonstrating that literature provides a medium for subaltern expression. African American women's narratives do not fully escape hegemonic mediation, but they assert that silenced voices can resist, recover, and transform dominant discourses.

5. Intersection with Black Feminist Thought

This comparative discussion also highlights the significance of Black feminist epistemology. As bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins argue, marginalized women produce knowledge and voice through lived experience and communal networks. Both Morrison and Walker exemplify this approach: their works prioritize lived experience, relationality, and authentic vernacular expression. In doing so, they demonstrate that the subaltern is not merely silenced; she negotiates, asserts, and articulates her subjectivity in ways that challenge dominant narratives.

III. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the representation of subaltern voice in African American women's literature through a comparative study of Beloved and The Color Purple. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal insights in Can the Subaltern Speak?, the analysis demonstrates that both novels confirm the structural limitations imposed on marginalized voices while simultaneously revising Spivak's more pessimistic conclusions.

In Beloved, Sethe's fragmented memories and haunting experiences reflect the epistemic violence inherent in slavery, illustrating the profound difficulties of articulating subaltern experience. Yet Morrison's innovative narrative techniques—fragmentation, polyphony, and communal storytelling—offer a way for silenced voices to emerge, even if mediated and incomplete. In The Color Purple, Celie's epistolary journey from silence to self-expression exemplifies the gradual and relational nature of subaltern voice. The support of female mentors and peers, combined with the act of writing, enables her to develop agency and assert her subjectivity.

The comparative analysis highlights several key insights. First, African American women's literature situates the subaltern within specific historical, social, and cultural contexts, showing how intersecting oppressions shape voice. Second, these texts demonstrate that narrative form and community are central to the articulation of marginalized experience. Third, both novels suggest that voice is processual, negotiated, and mediated rather than immediately accessible. In doing so, they extend Spivak's theory by showing that while subalterns may face structural constraints, they are not entirely silenced. Literature provides a space where their experiences can be communicated, reclaimed, and transformed.

Finally, situating these works within Black feminist thought emphasizes the importance of lived experience, collective support, and alternative epistemologies in the production of subaltern voice. African American women's literature, therefore, functions both as a witness to historical and social silencing and as a medium through which marginalized voices are reclaimed and amplified. By confirming Spivak's critique of structural barriers and revising her conclusions about the impossibility of speech, Beloved and The Color Purple illuminate the dynamic interplay between oppression, resistance, and literary representation.

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