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Sarajevo: A Spivak Interpretation

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The Bosnian War from 1992-1995 was a haunting experience. The genocide in Srebrenica stands as one of the worst episodes of ethnic cleansing in modern history. The Serb military forces massacred thousands of Bosnian Muslims, while thousands of women were raped, and children killed. While there were losses on all fronts during the war, the Bosnian Muslim community paid the highest, most painful price to this conflict.

The documentary, *Miss Sarajevo*, filmed during the siege of Sarajevo, shows how despite the ongoing war, Bosnian life continued, and the citizens kept their culture and spirits alive with music, school, socializing, and even beauty pageants. However, at the end of the war Bosnian Muslims were no longer the same, now holding the chilling memories of blood and mourning that they will carry on for years ahead. Their identities have changed due to the traumatic experience, which left Bosnians victimized, oppressed, and fueling a sense of “subaltern” identity.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2017) proposes a theory of subalternity in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. By “subaltern,” Spivak means the oppressed subjects, or more specifically those who are in a position of other to a dominant group. Spivak answers the question of ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ by characterizing this feature of the subaltern this way: No speech is possible from that position and speech never gets accepted as meaningful. This was represented at the end of *Miss Sarajevo* by an articulate, enlightened, and tragic young girl when she says, “There is nothing good to say.” A few years earlier the same girl in the same documentary was confidently claiming her Muslim identity and noting that she goes to the cathedral on Christmas Eve to show how she is open, tolerant, and more human than the snipers in the hills. At the end, the young girl sadly but silently tells the narrators she has lost her friends and her home. She is not living, only surviving. Spivak (2017) states, “Part of our ‘unlearning’ project is to articulate that ideological formation—by measuring silences, if necessary—into the object of investigation” (pp. 411).

The filmmaker and narrator of *Miss Sarajevo* shows how hopeful Bosnians remained despite their misfortune. The orchestra would play in the TV building because they had no other place to play music. Women insisted ‘looking beautiful.’ According to the people interviewed in *Miss Sarajevo*, they each have their way of fighting, not just men with guns, but women with their beauty. They held beauty pageants.

Spivak (2017) argues that the subaltern tries to speak but the message they are trying to convey becomes completely ignored as people observe in silence and do not respond to the words being said. To really understand the war, one must 'be there,' as one Bosnian man said to the narrator of the documentary. Moreover, it is difficult to understand and grasp from the subalterns own understanding of the social violence. In *Miss Sarajevo*, men and women explain how they had to run across streets to escape snipers. One girl mentions that Serbian military use joy sticks, to point and shoot at potential victims. However, the observer, as Spivak (2017) states, sees only a mere tolerance for the criminal. At one point, Spivak quotes Foucault's theory of "episteme- which makes possible the separation not of the true from the false, but of what may not be characterized as scientific" (pp.413). The objective frame of the scientific observer masks the truth of what is told.

As seen in *Miss Sarajevo*, it could be said that the Bosnian identity transformed into one of a subaltern as witnessed in the obvious differences in speech and expressions from the start of the war to the end of the war. While Bosnians were telling their story and sharing narratives through their voices, the message Bosnians were trying to communicate to the Western world was forgotten and distorted. *Miss Sarajevo's* portrayal of Bosnians exemplifies this loss. The subaltern, who is caught between victimization and the position the scientific observer gives to them, cannot speak.

References

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty.2017. "Can the Subaltern Speak". Pp 409- 413 in *Social Theory: The Multicultural, Global, and Classic Readings*, edited by Lemert, Charles., New York, NY: Routledge Press.

[Link to "Miss Sarajevo" Ending](#)

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