



Christina Dalcher's *Vox*: An Inquiry into the Epistemic Erasure of Feminine Articulation

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Abstract

Vox, a spine thrilling novel by Christina Dalcher talks about the power structure that enforces a draconian regime of silence that targets women. Women in that speculative fiction are restricted to speak only hundred words per day highlighting Dalcher's statement of "one hundred years in reverse is actually possible." Dalcher's novel acts as a speculative narrative of epistemic violence in which the entanglement of language, ideology and technology is sensed. By foregrounding language as a central axis of power, the novel unravels the entanglement of disciplinary regimes such as bodily, spatial and epistemological resulting in the systemic erasure of women's social participation. Accordingly, this paper underscores the dramatization of marginalized people whose voices are dismissed in hegemonic discourse. At its core, the novel offers a speculative framework of marginalization where women in the novel are not just silenced but are crafted as epistemically disqualified.

Keywords: epistemic erasure, epistemic violence, hegemonic discourse

In 2018, Christina Dalcher published *Vox*, a dystopian novel set in a totalitarian version of America. Dalcher's narrative speculates a terrible future where women are reduced to regulating bodies and are allowed to speak only 100 words per day. Even though this novel seems to be a traditional feminist dystopia, it underscores the dramatization of marginalized people whose voices are dismissed in hegemonic discourse. Consequently, this novel acts as a speculative narrative of epistemic violence in which the entanglement of language, ideology and technology could be traced. The epistemic erasure of female articulation resonates the epistemic violence, a term coined by Gayatri Spivak where she emphasizes how marginalized voices are denied within hegemonic discourse. Subsequently, Dalcher

presents a hegemonic structure where The Pure Government, a fundamentalist regime that took over America denies any rights to women and reduce them to the daily quota of one hundred words in order to make America pure again.

In Spivak's seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" She claims that the subaltern woman cannot speak as their voice is not valued in a dominant and patriarchal framework. Even if she speaks asserts Spivak, that her voice may enter discourse but it's frequently co-opted or reframed by others. She says, "For the 'true' subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation." (Spivak 80). She questions this



voicelessness of women and critiques the hegemonic structure that silence women by denying them linguistic agency. This denial of epistemic agency parallels the narration of *Vox* where women are denied even their basic right to speak. This patriarchal regime not only undermines their speech but prevents them from speaking at all resulting in the erasure of their articulation.

In Dalcher's fictional America, women's rights are stripped away almost overnight where they are denied to speak, work and read. Moreover, they are forced to wear electronic word counters that gives painful shocks if they exceed their daily quota of words. "I knew something else about the counters. The pain increases with each infraction" (Dalcher 63). Women are simply dismissed within a day where the government reverts to Victorian cult of domesticity paving way for The Pure Government to thrive. As a result, women are excluded from the dominant epistemic order such as knowledge, power and meaning. This exclusion is further justified by their revival of Victorian cult of domesticity which idealizes women to be silent and submissive and their value is considered only in terms of domestic sphere. "We are called as women to keep silence and to be under obedience. If we must learn, let us ask our husbands in the closeness of the home, for it is shameful that a woman question God-ordained male leadership" (Dalcher 83). While Spivak argues about woman voices that are structurally erased, Dalcher emphasizes on the systemic suppression of it.

Language is used as a weapon to suppress people as it is primarily significant for the production of knowledge. By denying women to speak, the fundamentalist government cuts them from intellectual arena such as education, discourse and debate. This replicates the epistemic injustice where women are prohibited to express and cultivate knowledge. Furthermore, as women are restricted only to domestic sphere, they are also banned to read and write which bars them from accessing and transmitting knowledge. Fortunately, there are schools for Girl children. Despite they are provided education, their schooling is limited to learn only domestic tasks and religious studies which

suppresses their voice on other affairs. It ends up in making girl children mere passive recipients of fundamentalist ideology. "This is what he wanted: docile women and girls. The older generations need to be controlled, but eventually, by the time Sonia has children of her own, Reverend Carl Corbin's dream of Pure Women and Pure Men will be the way of the world" (Dalcher 81).

Delving deep into their forcing of Victorian cult of domesticity, women are expected to be only the caregivers and moral guardian of the family. As the Pure Government finds feminism as a sin, their ethics strongly align with the conservative worldviews. The Pure Government argues, "We don't know who men are or who women are anymore. Our children are growing up confused. The culture of family has broken down" (V, 39-40). Accordingly, the Government imposes strict rule over women as feminism has brought drastic change in the society which results in impure America. To put things right on track, conservative regime reverts to traditional values enforcing moral purity in women's lives. As Victorian values such as piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity are expected from women, they are forced to find purpose only in domestic spheres and not in intellectual or public life. Consequently, women's bodies are regulated in favour of state sanctioned prohibition of their voice.

The Government takes absolute control over women bodies by monopolizing language, knowledge and labour. This epistemic erasure is to ensure the power of patriarchal society. In an interview, Spivak draws the meaning of the word *subaltern*. In the interview conducted by De Kock, Spivak shares her insights on the distinction between *subaltern* identity and mere oppression. "*Subaltern* is not just a classy word for "oppressed", for [the] Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie..." (Spivak 13)

Spivak illustrates the word *subaltern* is not a fancy word which denotes oppressed people or marginalized. Though they are a part of discriminated group, they are not *subaltern* says Spivak. She points to Antonio Gramsci's original use of term that refers to certain group of people who are



excluded in terms of social, political and cultural aspect and cannot represent themselves within the hierarchical power structure. The subaltern exists beyond the reach of dominant discourse and are not allowed to speak in their own terms. Subsequently, the working-class people, poor people, minorities are not subalterns as they can write, protest and publish. Only those who have no voice, no access and no representation are termed as subaltern in Spivakian sense.

She also critiques the hegemonic discourse that claims to know everything and makes choice for the others. The dominant system of knowledge asserts moral authority over people completely ignoring their voices and choices. The Patriarchal system which dictates domestic values for women asserting it's only appropriate for them, speak about women but are never with them. As a result, these women are suppressed and denied subjectivity where their bodies are regulated in terms of male-centered ideological conflicts. This is what she calls epistemic violence which leads to structural erasure and woman's own subjectivity is not valued. The Pure Government, a patriarchal regime makes use of this hegemonic discourse that frames women's domestic roles to be ideal, moral and divinely ordained and hence making them voiceless. This domination is masked as moral authority where women are prohibited to define themselves.

Considering the plight of women under the Pure Government, they are regarded as subaltern subjects as they are structurally silenced by the power structure and not just oppressed. "I've become a woman of few words" (Dalcher 1). They are systematically denied and erased to enter into discourse, power and representation. Subsequently, they are not allowed to speak for themselves both literally and epistemically. This resonates Spivak's statement of "the subaltern cannot speak" as the women in *Vox* cannot just be termed as the victims of Patriarchal structure rather, they are linguistically and symbolically removed from the process of meaning making as there is no space for their voice to be heard or interpreted.

The epistemic violence according to Spivak is the denial of marginalized group's right to know and be known in the power structure. This concept is institutionalized by Dalcher where women are denied to education, science and politics and even restricted to speak more than hundred words. Ironically the protagonist of this novel is a neuro-linguist who is silenced by the patriarchal system. As they want to make America pure again, they decided that women's voices are unnecessary as well as dangerous to attain that. This act is considered to be a violent structural exclusion that marks the key condition of subalternity. Half of the population in America is silenced and has no access to hegemonic discursive structures and their voices are not valued. Their speech is limited to 100 words and their ability to write and use sign language is criminalized which makes the power structure to heavily manipulate their thought process according to their convenience. According to Spivak, the subaltern cannot speak not due to the fact that they lack thought or language but system prevents them from doing so.

Dr. Jean McClellan as a linguist could not tolerate the epistemic violence done to her six-year-old girl Sonia. She starts her resistance in order to reclaim voice for her child. Though her epistemic agency is forcibly erased by the religious regime, as a neurolinguist, her knowledge becomes a key factor to undermine the power system. Jean gets an unexpected chance to work in favour of the government. She is recruited by the government to find a cure for aphasia as president's brother lost his ability to speak in an accident. After many confusions, she agreed to find the antidote thinking that it might help her daughter Sonia as she hopes the government could relax daily quota of words for her. Over the course of time though, she comes to know the true intention of the regime that they want to reverse the serum she creates. They do not want the real cure rather they decided to weaponize her cure by reversing it as they can suppress the voice of the dissenters permanently. "Whether Reverend Carl is behind it, or Morgan or the president or the Pure Movement, doesn't matter. It could be all of them, all



working to create a serum that doesn't cure aphasia, but causes it" (Dalcher 212).

This realization of government's cruel plan marks the critical moment in Dalcher's narrative, when Jean understands how language can become biopolitical. Language is manipulated to the core of neurological level to cultivate obedience portrays the intensification of epistemic violence. After everything she has been through, her resistance lies merely on her realization and refusal than in direct action. She postpones and slightly refuses to complete her project but could not directly attack the government. It is only through her husband, Patrick's radical act, the regime is collapsed and everything falls back in place. This further aligns with Spivak's claim that the subaltern subjects can only speak or act only through compromised means.

Spivak throws light on the idea called benevolent Western intellectual who becomes the voice of subaltern. By doing so, she argues they only repeat the erasure by not letting the subaltern speak. This can be paralleled with *Vox*, where the resistance and realization happen solely when men in the hegemonical sphere allow Jean back to work. Here, Jean does not protest and revolt to get back into her work. Her value as a linguist to the state is utilized for weaponizing it and is never a part of liberation. In her essay, "Can the Subaltern speak?" She underscores the relationship between the agent of empire and victim of imperial rule as ambiguous. She further elaborates that relationship to be a domination masked as benevolence and silencing disguised as salvation. This imbalanced relationship resonates the idea of 'hieroglyphist prejudice' defined by Derrida. This term is used in his seminal work, *Of Grammatology* (1967). He analyses the Western ideology of privileging speech over writing and refusing to accept pictographic systems of writing.

Hieroglyphist prejudice, expounds Derrida is a devaluation of non-Western forms of writing. Though Westerners have exotic admiration over Egyptian hieroglyphs they regarded it to be primitive and illogical. This biased way of devaluing writing system reinforces Eurocentric ideas about language

and reason to be superior. Spivak uses the same term to illustrate how dominant culture exoticize subaltern voices only to exclude them from discourse. In *Vox*, this aligns with the fundamentalist government that praises conventional feminine traits such as silence, obedience and purity but dismisses their actual speech, knowledge and will power. Similar to hieroglyphs, women's voices are symbolically valued but functionally erased from hegemonic discourse.

This conceptual framework mirrors the state of women in *Vox* where patriarchy mandates the silencing of women under the pretense of moral restoration. Men in that fictitious America believe that they know what serves the best for women and take a paternalistic stance regarding women's interests. Women being deprived of even the basic rights stems out of such paternalistic stance who induce Victorian cult of domesticity assuming it to be in favor of women population. When Jean out of all silenced women is given a chance to work for the government and included in systems of power, not as an independent agent but to be used as tool for upholding male dominance. The ideology followed by the Pure Government emphasizing the moral values and restoring religious purity resonates the hyperbolic admiration to justify the domination. When Spivak argues women can be included in hegemonic discourse without ever being heard, she says, "The emergent dissenting possibilities of that hegemonic account of the fighting mother are well documented and popularly well remembered through the discourse of the male leaders and participants in the independence movement. The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" (Spivak 104).

She critiques the voices of brave and fighting woman narrated through the voices of male leaders and not by them. Though their sacrifice is recorded, they are filtered through the male discourse which never allows woman to speak as a primary subject. Though that woman's act is portrayed to be heroic, she is not epistemically heard. In *Vox*, the Protagonist Jean is included in part of the government's agenda not as an empowered agent but as a weapon in order to induce aphasia for the



dissenters. In relation to the fighting mother of Spivak's argument, Jean is not let inside to hear her truth but only to serve the objectives of the patriarchal system. Her knowledge is instrumentalized rather than idealized. Here, Jean's voice is used not heard. Her resistance is compromised driven by male agency, not by her own empowerment and fails to dismantle the power structure. Inclusivity of Jean in public sphere to comply with Government's agenda is mediated by imperialistic logic to preserve patriarchy. This ambiguous form of inclusion underscores how women are invoked in discourse without ever being heard.

Finally, when Spivak expounds the definition of epistemic violence as "The clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other (Spivak 76), *Vox* serves as a modern allegory of epistemic violence. When imperialist constructs the colonized people as different, barbaric and irrational which is termed as a process of Othering. Epistemic violence according to Spivak is the destruction of native knowledge structure and identity by colonial people. The colonial regime inculcates this process of epistemic violence not by force but by an intellectual and symbolic operation. Subsequently, the colonizers decide and define who are humans, what marks knowledge and who can speak. This process is orchestrated through laws, discourse and educational institutions. So, in the process of Othering, they define the victims of imperialism, impose their outward identity on them and end up in erasing their own subjectivity.

Accordingly, the colonizers have the absolute epistemic control. The structural erasure of knowledge of certain groups through the system of knowledge and representation is termed as epistemic violence. This system of knowledge is never neutral as they are significantly entangled in power structure which silences the very people they claim to help and civilize. Dalcher's narrative portrays a conservative American government that crafts an epistemic regime that parallels the colonial epistemic violence. This Pure Government redefines and reshapes truth, morality and knowledge where they decide women's

place in the society. Language is strictly monitored and communication is politicized. This epistemic shift is regulated by patriarchal ideology that defines the role of women in the society. All of the sudden, women are devised as passive subjects in which their duties are restricted to caretaking and moral anchoring. Though, Jean has accomplished herself as neurolinguist, her life is reduced to silence where she is not even given a chance to resist which is a literal rendering of epistemic erasure.

Dr. Jean McClellan's subjectivity as a scientist, thinker and a linguist are dismissed. She is brought back to the regime as a passive tool where her knowledge is instrumentalized. Jean's epistemic agency is denied and used as a mere tool within the hegemonic discourse. This novel dramatizes not just political suppression but a systemic denial of epistemic subjecthood. As women are barred from education and discourse, their ability to pass on knowledge to next generation is halted. "I haven't had a real conversation with my kids for more than a year" (Dalcher 61). Jean's daughter Sonia is a victim to that marginalization where she grows up with a mother who is a renowned scientist and linguist but cannot acquire anything from her. This also applies to every woman in the state whose children are deprived of the knowledge the mother possesses. As a result, it creates intergenerational epistemic erasure.

Spivak's critique of colonial epistemic violence reverberates in Christina Dalcher's *Vox*. The novel depicts vividly how a Patriarchal regime under the guise of moral authority redefines language, speech and knowledge to establish new roles of women who can no longer know, speak or act under the hegemonic discourse. The protagonist Jean McClellan and other women in the novel are not just silenced but are crafted as epistemically disqualified. Accordingly, *Vox* renders epistemic violence in its purest dystopian form.

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