

first publication

1 Landry, Donna/ Maclean, Gerald (Ed.): *The Spivak Reader*. New York, London: Routledge 1996; Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty: *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason. Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge/Mass., London: Harvard UP 1999.

2 De Lauretis, Teresa: *Upping the Anti [sic] in Feminist Theory*. In: *During*, Simon (Ed.): *The Cultural Studies Reader*. London, New York: Routledge 1999, pp.307-319, quot. p. 319.

3 Moi, Toril: *Appropriating Bourdieu: Feminist Theory and Pierre Bourdieu's Sociology of Culture*. In: *New Literary History* 22 (1991), pp. 1017-1049, quot. p. 1028.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*, p. 1035.

This paper is concerned with the question in how far various feminist and feminist cultural studies theories can be applied to Austro-Hungarian literature and culture around 1900. First of all, it is necessary to explain the context of this paper. It is part of a research project, headed by Wolfgang Müller-Funk, that deals with the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, i.e. with the period of dualism from 1867 to 1918. This project is especially concerned with questions of ethnical differentiation, hegemony and literature of that time and place, its theoretical focus is on Cultural Studies and German and Hungarian Studies.

My personal (but not exceptional) focus within this project is on Gender Studies and the literary life in Vienna. For me, the main sources of research are therefore literary and arts magazines and supplements as well as women's magazines of that period. One of my fields of analysis is the feminist debate on prostitution in Vienna around 1900. Theorizing a historical stage of the feminist movement implies difficulties that do not exist to this extent when dealing with contemporary phenomena. This is where cultural studies get involved.

As I want to point out in this paper, it is more important to eclectically combine various approaches – even if they seem to be incompatible – than being an adherent of one particular »school« and thus lacking certain analytical instruments to get hold of phenomena of some complexity. Sometimes even the most contradictory approaches turn out to aim at the same target, though they start out from opposite directions. The first part of the paper is concerned with the specific task when dealing with a historical stage of the feminist movement. It is an attempt to bring/think together various theoretical approaches. The second part focuses on the theories of Gayatri Spivak.¹

In Austro-Hungarian female writing around 1900, we confront many literary texts and essays with a definitely feminist impact: Privileged women campaign for »equal rights« for those women they regard as oppressed (e.g. prostitutes).

It is only at first glance, however, that they all seem to fight for the same thing. Upon close examination, the differences become apparent: There are already several factions within the first feminist movement and they differ in their attitudes towards problems under discussion. This becomes evident even on a purely textual basis.

Many women engaged in the early feminist movement seem to refer to »women as such«, a category that is based on the simple binary opposition of male and female. They generalize the problems of female individuals and often attribute them to this opposition. They aim at female solidarity and do not take into account the »specific, emergent, and conflictual history«² of a female embodied social subject. However, they do initiate some social change. Speaking in Pierre Bourdieu's terms and referring to Toril Moi's appropriation of his *Sociology of Culture* (1991), the first feminists do so by deriving a certain amount of power »from their capacity to *objectify* unformulated experiences, to make them public«.³ In this context, Moi regards »the way in which previously dominated experience is legitimated and constituted qua experience in the very act of being given public utterance [...] as a particularly useful theorization of feminist practice with its emphasis on constructing a language expressing women's experience.«⁴ As a matter of fact, since gender belongs to the »whole social field« as does class, it is a social factor of immense variability, but does not constitute »a pure field in its own right«.⁵ It is to be seen as a fundamental social category that structures all other fields. Therefore we have to take into consideration that especially at that time women who are able to articulate belong to different fields than women who are generally referred to, since many of the female writers and feminist activists around 1900 are characterized by a certain financial and social status: they either have a wealthy or socially highly respected background or they manage to amass symbolic capital by overcoming the educational hurdle.

It is therefore necessary to undertake a field-related reading of their texts, to relate the feminist discourse to the (power) structures of the field in which it arises and to reflect the conditions which produce the feminist critic as a speaker. However, sometimes one loses the tracks of historical persons and has to content oneself with written utterances: This is when discourse becomes significant because it shows that she has internalized and identifies with dominant social structures prevailing within her field. In order to gain the power to speak she



6 Ibid., p. 1022f.

7 Cf. Butler, Judith: *Subjects of Sex/ Gender/Desire*. In: *During* 1999, pp.340-353, quot. p.342.

8 Ibid., p. 344.

9 Spivak 1999, p. x.

10 Ibid. p. 50.

has – to a certain degree – to be an accomplice in the power structures she tries to unmask.⁶ Thus the hegemonial attitude of socially distinguished women towards their gender mates of humble origin.

If we fail to have any information on the biography of a writer – which is not unusual when dealing with literature that was produced a century ago – we can only fall back on the method of close reading of literary and theoretical texts, and contextualize it with the text of culture in order to reconstruct the identity of an individual. This construction comprises among many other things the categories of gender, class, race, ethnicity etc.

Only by taking into account as many as possible constituents of an individual identity-construction the actual complexity of early feminist debates will become apparent. And only then it will be possible to distinguish between the different approaches towards the same problem and find explanations of these differences in attitude.

We try to make up for this kind of »mistake« made by many early feminists, who mistook femaleness for a singular constituent of a pure field of its own, by taking into account all the criteria mentioned above. Doing so, we get a revealing impression of the heterogeneity of the feminist movement already at that early stage. It is like colouring a black-and-white photo.

However, more important than that is the distinction between the woman who appears as a subject in the texts she produces and the woman discussed in the very text, i.e. the object of the debate. With regard to the debate on prostitution, it becomes especially evident that the feminist politics (at least at that time) produce the subject they claim to represent.⁷ As will be demonstrated below, prostitutes are only one example of marginalized individuals who do not possess any power, whether to speak or to gain access to information or education etc. Judith Butler has put it as follows: »[...] the fragmentation within feminism and the paradoxical opposition to feminism from ›women‹ whom feminism claims to represent suggest the necessary limits of identity politics.«⁸ The very fact that it is absolutely difficult to gain any authentic knowledge of the attitude of the women represented in the debate leads us to Gayatri Spivak's concept of the »native informant«:

Gayatri Spivak combines deconstruction with theories of feminism, marxism, and cultural studies. In her critique of postcolonial studies, she asks a question that has often been criticized: *Can the subaltern speak?* In one of her more recent publications, called *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), she tracks the figure of the ›native informant‹. The term was originally used in ethnography for a figure that yields data to be interpreted by the knowing subject for reading. Spivak goes beyond this definition when referring to the perspective adopted by the theorists who try to deal with the situation of the native informant. She calls this perspective scientifically incorrect and (im)possible, and she calls the whole undertaking both necessary and impossible. Right from the beginning of her essay, she thus addresses »the ›sanctioned ignorance‹ of the theoretical elite«: »The reader's place is as unsecured as the writer's.«⁹

The ›native informant‹ may be an implied reader contemporary with the text, the recipient to whom a text is addressed (*Bhagavadgītā*): But how can we produce this reader if we are convinced that we cannot gain any knowledge about different times and places? Spivak gives some useful advice how to produce such a contemporary reader in the interest of active interpretation and reconstellation.¹⁰

In »ancient« literature, this contemporary reader mostly has neither a voice, nor a perspective nor the knowledge to read or write. The texts are written records of an oral tradition. That is the reason why he or she cannot be the primarily implied reader, still he or she is present in the text.

Dealing with one particular aspect of subalternity within the Viennese society around 1900, therefore dealing with texts clearly originating from the centre and aiming at the margin of a densely interwoven multiethnic metropolitan culture, the term ›native informant‹ is not appropriate for my research topic. I would therefore rather concentrate on one particular aspect of the ›native informant‹ and use the term ›subaltern‹ instead.

The chapters of the book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* are »loosely strung on a chain that may be described this way: the philosophical presuppositions, historical excavations, and literary representations of the dominant – insofar as they are shared by the emergent postcolonial – also trace a subliminal and discontinuous emergence of the »native informant«: »autochthone and/or subaltern.«¹¹

11 Ibid. p. xi.

12 Azim, Firdous: *The Colonial Rise of the Novel*. London: Routledge 1993.
Mills, Sara: *Post-colonial Feminist Theory*. In: Jackson, Sten/ Jones, Jackie (Ed.): *Contemporary Feminist Theory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP 1998, pp. 98-112, quot. p. 107.

13 The lecture from 1983 was first published in 1985.

14 Landry/ Maclean 1996, p. 203.

15 Ibid. p. 288.

16 Ibid. p. 204.

17 Mills 1998, p.106.

18 Landry/ Maclean 1996, p. 289.

19 Ibid. pp. 212ff.

20 Butler 1999, p. 344.

Of course, what will now be said about the subaltern, in most cases will equally apply to the native informant, however, it is a more restricted approach more appropriate to my field of research.

The following sentences really seem to be a translation of what has been mentioned at the beginning of this paper into a different terminology, they show how much these theories are interrelated.

In literature and theoretical texts drafted in order to speak *for* the subaltern, we only confront utterances of non-subaltern subjects that try to, but ultimately are not able to put themselves into the positions of subalterns. As Spivak has often and convincingly pointed out, they rather use them as a vehicle for their own ends. This is the predicament of any theorists. Of course Spivak is very self-critical in this respect. The object of investigation, the subaltern, is a blank. Only by a responsible reading we are able to perceive this blank and try to read it as a space of difference that constitutes the subaltern.

Spivak suggests many ingredients for such a responsible reading, to give an example, one important aspect is always to reflect on the form of the text: Once you regard novels of a certain period and context as a typical colonial text form written from the perspective of the coloniser, focussing on extreme forms of subjectivity in contrast to undifferentiated native subjects,¹² you will be able to perceive the characters marginal to the text more easily.

In spite of all the responses her essay *Can the Subaltern speak?*¹³ has provoked, Spivak is still convinced of the non-speakingness in the very notion of subalternity, but in an interview in 1993 she emphasizes that the term ›speak‹ must not be taken literally as ›talk‹, that it is not the actual utterance. Referring to Gramsci's definition of the subaltern as »nonelite and subordinated social groups»¹⁴ and Ranajit Guha's definition as »the space cut off from the lines of mobility in a colonized country«,¹⁵ she describes subalternity as the space outside the lines of mobility in all directions existing below any form of elite (both the foreign and the indigenous elite). *In Bourdieuan terms, this would mean that there is no chance for these disadvantaged social groups to obtain the symbolic educational capital necessary to advance in society.* Spivak regards the subaltern as the »product of a network of differential, potentially contradictory strands«. ¹⁶ In other words: the constituents making up the construction of their identity function as negative symbolic capital for many possible fields. This and the fact that the concept cannot appear without the thought of elite are the reasons why the subaltern is always »irretrievably heterogenous«¹⁷ and we never confront the pure subaltern: »[E]very moment that is noticed as a case of subalternity is undermined«¹⁸ – since every moment of insurgency focussed by Subalternists has been a moment when subalternity has been brought to a crisis and the cultural constructions allowed to exist within subalternity are changed into militancy. *Or: In times of social crisis symbolic violence ceases to function and turns into physical violence.*

There are no positive documents on subaltern insurgency. The only sources of information are texts of counterinsurgency or elite documentation. Subaltern consciousness is thus situated in the place of a difference rather than in an identity and is not accessible.¹⁹

In these cases it is evident that the objects are presented from the other side. If we want to use them as sources of information, it is clear that we have to be very careful and mistrust the texts, to think the social, cultural, historical and textual context together in order to approach the subaltern. *Or as Judith Butler puts it: »the critical point of departure is the historical present (Marx) [...]. And the task is to formulate within this constituted frame a critique of the categories of identity that contemporary [juridical] structures engender, naturalize and immobilize.«* – *There is no subject before the law.*²⁰

It is more complicated when dealing with texts drafted in favour of the subaltern. By close reading, we have to watch out for keywords that can be used as deconstructive levers for a new politics of reading to uncover how the subaltern perspective is foreclosed.²¹ What seems to be part of a politically committed discourse or political debate out of solidarity, then often turns out to be characterized by an inherent, mostly unconscious hegemonial attitude on second sight.

Especially in postcolonial discourse, the position of Western theorists – feminists included – is both – *part of* and *distant from* the power structures they criticize. *Again in Bourdieuan terms, the intellectual woman is caught up in the field she is in.*



21 Spivak 1999, p. 110.

22 Ibid. p. x.

23 Ibid. p. 130.

24 Thürmer-Rohr, Christina:
Vagabundinnen. Feministische
Essays. Berlin: Orlanda 1987.

In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak charts the progress from colonial discourse studies²¹ to transnational cultural studies.²² I will now give a survey of the most important conclusions she draws in this book:

1. She contextualizes the term ›native informant‹ within postcolonial studies.
2. She tries to dissolve the opposition of colonizer and colonized that is inherent to all colonial discourse and shows the complicity of native hegemony and the axioms of imperialism. – This phenomenon does indeed resemble the complicity of ›women‹ in ›patriarchal‹ systems. *In other terms: She pleads for diversity instead of simplified binary oppositions.* She warns against dealing with the colonized subaltern subject in an undifferentiated way, against ignoring the heterogeneity of what we tend to describe as »the other«.
3. She warns against »epistemic violence« by which the colonial subject is constructed as »the other«, even if this is done as an attempt to put oneself in the position of a subject that cannot speak, in order to speak *for* the subaltern: »No perspective *critical* of imperialism can turn the other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been an incommensurable and discontinuous other into a domesticated other that consolidates the imperialistic self.«²³

Many aspects mentioned so far might be useful for the analysis of the feminist debate on prostitution in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy at the end of the 19th century. Dealing with literary and political texts by politically committed female writers, Spivak's ingredients for a new policy of reading might help to disclose the foreclosure of the subaltern perspective, symbolised by prostitutes in Vienna around 1900. It can be described as follows: female, poor, of low social class, no education, naïve, often migrated from a province to the metropolis Vienna, from marginal parts of the monarchy to the centre, and thus part of an ethnic minority and exposed to the process of internal colonisation, i.e. economic exploitation, political dependence and cultural dominance exerted by a powerful minority. The authors of the texts arguing against prostitution are mostly socially privileged women, talking from the central perspective about the margins of society, they are feminists who cannot really put themselves in the position of the prostitutes.

On second sight and by deconstructing their contributions to the public debate by speeches, newspaper articles, and works of literature their own complicity with hegemonial thinking and patriarchal structure becomes visible.²⁴ By thinking the literary and social context together, by trying to understand the social aspects of cultural production, by comparing the Austro-Hungarian feminist activities to those of British feminist activists, both differences and similarities become visible.

The value of this kind of politically committed literature gains new dimensions: Firstly, we are able to analyse the state of knowledge about a phenomenon from various perspectives. Several factions have already developed at that early phase of the women's movement. The attitude of the authors towards the theories of Freud, Weininger, and others, the kinds of suggestions they make to solve the problem of prostitution, the characters they create to describe this phenomenon in literary texts, their own biographical background, etc. – all these facts have to be considered and thought together in order to disclose that many early feminists are acting out of solidarity, and at the same time are complicit with patriarchal structures, and that they use campaigning to constitute themselves as subjects at the expense of the female subaltern.

Obviously, some texts did not become popular due to their elaborated literary quality, but because of the topic so popular with an increasing female audience. Some female writers seemed to have monopolized certain topics that naturally excluded male writers. Sometimes content seemed to be more important than form. This phenomenon is interesting because it shows the urgent demand for a public debate on feminist topics at that time. The methods described above are also a way to reproduce the class stratification so typical of metropolitan information about the cultural »other«.



Secondly, we read the text to find out what is not there. Since the only available source of research are texts written by non-subaltern women, we have to look for the blanks, to collect and compare documents with documentations characterized by solidarity, but written from a privileged perspective with those texts written from the other side – if there are any. We have to check the subaltern's appearance in history and documents. Again we have to think any possible contexts together to approach a position that is not there. We have to track different strands to define a space of difference that is a blank.

Spivak's suggestions for a responsible reading may help to gain additional and complex information on both the subject actively involved in the debate and the object of the debate.

The relation between the two positions and their transformation in the course of the debate would then be the last step to undertake towards a comprehensive analysis of a historical debate. The main thing is to go beyond the consideration of a social construction like gender by additionally taking into account other fundamental social categories like race, ethnicity, class, etc.



Dr. Alexandra Millner, geb. 1968, Studium der Germanistik u. Anglistik an der Univ. Wien; 1990/91 Studium an der Univ. of Aberdeen; 1994 Organisation der *Österreichischen Gesellschaft für Germanistik*, Redaktion u. Lektorat des *stimulus*; 1994-1997 Österreich. Auslandslektorin für deutschspr. Literatur an der Univ. di Roma Tre; 1999 Diss. über das Spiegelmotiv in der deutschspr. Gegenwartsliteratur; seit 1999 Kuratorin u. Organisatorin von *Literatur im März* u. Literaturkritikerin; seit 2001 Seminare für ausländische Studierende über europ. Kulturgeschichte. Mitarbeiterin des Forschungsprojekts *Herrschaft, ethnische Differenzierung und Literarizität in Österreich-Ungarn 1867-1918* (FWF_P 14727). Forschungsschwerpunkte: Literatur des 19. u. 20. Jahrhunderts, Ästhetik, Identität, Gender Studies, kulturwissenschaftl. Fragestellungen, Dramenrezeption, Spiegelmotiv, Kasperfigur, Vampirismus. Zahlr. Publikationen.
Kontakt: alexandra.millner@chello.at.