

# **The Speech of Generals: Some Meditations on Pakistan by way of Subaltern Studies**

**Naveeda Khan, Department of Anthropology, Johns Hopkins University**

**For presentation at the Annual Meetings of the Anthropological Association  
November 30, 2007**

In her introduction to *Selected Subaltern Studies* Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak applauded the Subalternists, the well known group of historians headed by Ranajit Guha, for shaking of the cobwebs off of Indian historiography and offering a meaningful theory of change. At the same time she cautioned the group of what she called “positivistic essentialism.” She saw this tendency particularly in Guha’s writings, in his efforts to establish the stealthy presence and intellectual substance of subaltern consciousness long dismissed by colonial authorities for whom subaltern insurrections were much like natural disasters, taking as much thought as a cyclone to break out. In her efforts to both deconstruct the Subalternist project and sing their praises, she suggested that perhaps Guha was not so much salvaging a subaltern consciousness as positing such a consciousness, a subaltern subject, as an impossible possible from which vantage point to offer a critique of neo-colonialist historiography: “I would read it, than as a *strategic* use of positivistic essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (1988, 13, emphasis in original). In Derridean terms this was an example of an affirmative deconstruction. In her words, one could do little else: “The radical intellectual in the West is either caught in a deliberate choice of subalternity, granting to the oppressed either that very expressive subjectivity which s/he criticizes or, instead a total unrepresentability” (17).

Or could one? In the spirit of revisiting area studies, in particular South Asia studies, and its contribution to critical thinking, as is the call of this AAA panel, this short paper returns to Spivak's famous criticism of the Subaltern historians more fully fleshed out in her later essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" to suggest that while Spivak nicely makes visible the abovementioned trait in the writings of the Subaltern historians, she perhaps overly determines the choices available to radical intellectuals when she casts them as having to choose between representing or not representing a heterogeneous milieu. In other words she does not account for the possibility of a milieu bleeding through the driest of texts such that one has to by necessity imagine a field of competing possibilities cutting through the actualized and enframed event. This field is not comprised of that which is lost and has to be recovered but that which is there as what could have been (and, dare one say, what might still be). I see the Subalternists themselves struck by this presence as noted in Guha's oft quoted words from his introduction to *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*: "It should be possible therefore to read the presence of a rebel consciousness as a necessary and pervasive element within that body of evidence" (1986: 15). Moreover, their language of the subaltern as a sovereign subject with a mappable consciousness perhaps escapes Spivak's charge of metaphysicality if one grants heterogeneity to the subject. I am not saying that the subaltern subject is an empty signifier to be filled in with a description of whoever serves as the subaltern within a particular set of relations in a given situation. Rather, the subaltern subject subsumes within itself tremendous heterogeneity. Cast in another way, it is the nature of every subject to be subaltern in that its heterogeneity is always springing forth/bleeding through/expressing itself

simultaneously as the actualized sovereign subject. Subalternity *is* heterogeneity.

Moreover, this heterogeneity does not operate as supplement within the picture of the subject by which to deconstruct its sovereignty. The heterogeneity is simply there. It is our choice as intellectuals, radical or otherwise, whether we take note of it or not.

Therefore the task is much more that of affirmation than deconstruction.

The Subalternists, in my rendering of them, chose to affirm and the specific task they set to themselves was to systematically map this potentiality as an empirical reality. Moreover, they developed considerable intellectual tools to do so, one of them being the means of studying rumors. Unfortunately they often operated so as to suggest that the subaltern subject could only be congruent with an actual afflicted group in the world, that is, the subaltern had also to be a victim of an established order. I would suggest that the subaltern in an aspect of every subject. In another moment of reflection on a certain past of South Asia studies let me just say that this is a somewhat different point from that made by Ashish Nandy in *Intimate Enemy* when he wrote that colonialism did not only adversely affect the psyche of colonial subjects but also that of their masters. He went on to suggest how colonialism robbed each in specific ways so as to produce unhealthiness in both. In other words he pointed to how colonialism subtracted from the unitary subject whereas I seek to point to the multiplicities that colonize it.

In what follows I illustrate my point through studying the speech of Pakistan's generals, notably Ayub Khan, Zia-ul Haq, and Pervaiz Musharaff to show how each illuminates becoming subaltern as a persistent aspect of self-making. Due to constraints of time and space I am unable to do a more thorough study but rather limit my attention to fragments of speeches that were delivered by the generals as they tried

to transition out of an extrajudicial position of military leadership into that of civilian leadership. This was not only a tricky legal maneuver entailing tortuous moves to make oneself legitimate within a system of law which one has abrogated and whose reinstatement immediately renders one illegitimate. It also entailed a certain staking of oneself against other versions of oneself, previous selves, the self in relation to a people under construction, the self as viewed by posterity, and so on and so forth. Entire series of selves spring up through their words. The struggle was to keep the speaking self as sovereign over these series. The outcome in each case has yet to be determined.

Field Marshall Muhammad Ayub Khan, the most secular and modernist of Pakistan's military leaders, came to power through a coup in 1958 and stayed on as the President of Pakistan until 1969. In 1967 he wrote a book, as he says in the introduction to his *Friends not Masters*, in which he tried to give a correct account of his legacy for Pakistan, which is as he says, "a story of struggle—struggle to get new ideas accepted" (1967: viii). Calling his coup a "revolution," he writes: "revolutions take long and painstaking preparation, detailed planning, clandestine meetings, and country-wide movement of troops. In our case there was little preparation. It was handled as a military operation" (71). Further on he writes about the swiftness with which he moved from imposing martial law to drafting and implementing a constitution (the 1961 Constitution of the three that Pakistan has had so far). It is worth quoting him extensively on the reception of his plans as here we find the self as staked to a "people" that fragments:

Many people thought at the time that I was moving too fast and that I should allow sufficient time for the reforms to take root...An English friend asked me, "Why are you in such a hurry to bring in a Constitution? I said, 'I thought you were a democratic people.'...At home, too, there were certain people, including some members of my Cabinet, who were convinced that the vested interests who had been badly hit by our reforms, such as landowners, politicians, and similar groups, would combine in an all-out attempt to unseat me and to destroy whatever had been achieved in the past few years. I knew the feelings of the people at large also. Many thought I was throwing them back to the wolves and that, once again, there would be no respect for law, that corruption and jockeying for power would return, with all the other ugly features of our political life in the past....Nevertheless, I came to the conclusion that it was better to take the risk, even if all our reforms had not yet taken root, and to let the people carry on from that point..." (211).

There are no less than four types of people who are mentioned in this telling paragraph, a democratic people abroad who nonetheless desire the order of martial law in Pakistan, the people at home who warn him against his excesses, those at large who expect the worst of him and his leadership, and then there are the people with a capital P who will sally forth once he has put in place the conditions for their emergence. In each instance, a different self springs forth over which he has no control, the social engineering dictator, the one who is part of a vast rumor mill, the one who is intuitively in touch with the people at large, and then the one who will hopefully serve as the subject of future testimonials. And the fear the general has as he sees versions of himself

proliferate is that of chaos and schism: “As a Muslim my sole anxiety has been to unite the people of Pakistan in the light of their faith and ideology” (ix). After the bitterly fought and narrowly won elections of 1965: “The interest and response of the people was most gratifying. The country has chosen stability against chaos, security against disintegration, progress against stagnation” (240). And finally, “I thanked the people who had supported me and also those who had differed with me...I wanted the moment of vindication to become a symbol of lasting unity” (241). Yet his own multiplicities militate against such unity.

Let us now turn to General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq who was the president and military ruler of Pakistan from 1977 till his death in 1988. He came to power through a coup against Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, becoming the third to impose martial law in Pakistan. He ruled as a military law dictator for a year before assuming the post of president of Pakistan in 1978. He fashioned himself as an Islamic leader and gave considerable place of importance to religious scholars in the administration of the country. And it was in his time that the perception that the mullahs bore the burden of responsibility for Pakistan’s dire state emerged very strongly. I quote from one of Zia’s speeches to the nation that attempted to address growing hostility towards the figure of the mullah:

People think that that they have cracked a big joke by branding Radio Pakistan or Pakistan Television as a religious school which will be greeted by peels of laughter by others. But alas, these people are a joke themselves. The people of Pakistan can discriminate between good and bad; they don’t laugh at them but they only feel sorry for them. They say what kind of people are they who have a

grouse against the ban imposed in Pakistan on the performance of vulgar dances, on night clubs and dancing houses? Lashes are administered for drinking. Films are properly pruned and edited before they are shown on television. The call for prayer reverberates from radio all the time. *The Maulvi has got stuck on the T.V. screen; and let me tell you he will remain stuck there.* (My emphasis, Inaugural address, Islamabad, 09 October, 1982: p. 25)

Although translated, these words provide us our first hint of the complex coordinates of the people. In speaking of those who joke about the maulvi, Zia referred to them as “people.” Yet further down he said that the “people of Pakistan” felt sorry for the “people” and wondered what kind of “people” were they who complained about the maulvi in the media. There are two sets of confusions here. First, it was unclear who the “people” were in each instance. Were the people of the first kind not people of Pakistan? Or was Zia hailing one and the same people, albeit as a split self, a private self that laughed and a public that shook its head at the private self? Secondly, what could have Zia meant when he said “the Maulvi has got stuck on the T.V. screen?” In one sense he may be quoting words attributable to those people who crack jokes. In another sense he may be saying that the joke was on the people for the maulvi was nothing but simulacrum. The onus lay on them to tell the good from the bad, that is, the real from the simulacrum.

Thus we see how Zia hailed Pakistanis as Muslims and implicated them in his worldview. Turned in upon themselves for daring to laugh or joke, they were culled into an uncertainty as to whether they were able to decipher real from simulacrum, to tell if the maulvi was actually stuck in the television or in their heads. The maulvi stuck in the television was of course none other than himself. As different versions of him

proliferated, Zia was able to turn each of these versions to his advantage. Yet his speech is saturated with his fear of ridicule. And so he should be, jokes of him are still in circulation.

Now we come to the third of our generals, the Chief of Army Staff and current President of Pakistan, Pervaiz Musharaff who came to power in 1999 and was in the process of leading the government to parliamentary elections set for early 2008 after winning the presidential elections earlier this year when he imposed emergency rule in his capacity as Chief of Army Staff in early November 2007 indefinitely suspending the Constitution. Many suspect the reasons for his doing so was because the Supreme Court was moving to nullify the approval of his candidacy by the Election Commission, which would render his premiership illegal. In his speech to the nation in which he declared emergency he said, “The people are worried. The extremists are trying to take the authority and power of the government into their own hands. They want to impose their outdated religious views upon the people ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2007 Pakistani state of emergency#Speech to the nation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2007_Pakistani_state_of_emergency#Speech_to_the_nation)).

He followed up his speech to the nation with a speech to the international community in which he said the following:

Pakistan is on the verge of destabilization if not arrested in time and now without any further time or delaying the issue. The saddest part of everything which saddens me the most that after all we have achieved in the past even years I see in front of my eyes Pakistan’s upsurge taking a downwards trend. I personally with all my conviction and with all the facts available to me

consider that inaction at this moment is suicide for Pakistan.

<http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/11/03/pakistan.emergency/>

Finally, speaking to the New York Times correspondents in Islamabad on Nov 13, 2007 he complained that the domestic media did not know how to behave and has to abide by a code of conduct as befitting a civilized nation. Furthermore he complained about the western media saying: “In your media and your press the Pakistan Army and intelligence set up are being criticized, maligned to be may be going around with Taliban, and Al-Qaeda, hiding Osama bin Laden. This is not the reality.” After stating that the U.S. government knows the truth, he said, “Unfortunately it is the media casting wrong aspersions which is not the truth.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/14/world/asia/14pakistan.html?ex=1352696400&en=b85f2d5c5a05c030&ei=50>).

While these are early days yet for Musharaff as president and his speeches will no doubt grow savvier if he stays in power, even a quick look at what he says suggests a self not yet fully staked upon the people. He rarely mentions the people of Pakistan as if to speak for them and never claims to be intuitively in touch with their desires and opinions. If as he says that people are worried (as quoted earlier), he does so only in the manner of reporting what is openly voiced. Rather his concern is much more with Pakistan as a geo-political territory. If his self is staked upon anything, it is upon his version of reality, which is that of the military establishment. This is underlined by his repeated use of the trope of “seeing with my own eyes” or “in front of my eyes.” The fear of multiplicities is not over chaos and schism as in the case of Ayub Khan, or over ridicule as in the case of Zia-ul

Haq, but over the split between reality and false reportage for Musharaff. Hence we see his widespread and hitherto successful efforts to clamp down on the domestic media and to present himself to the international media as much as possible so as to saturate their airwaves. I will hold back from prophesizing on the lives of the multiplicities that may come to haunt Musharaff.

In this short and, I fear, inadequate paper I have tried to suggest how subaltern becoming assails all subjects, even generals, through the multiplicities that constitute each and proliferate further in the world. I have not developed the intellectual tools to systematically map subaltern becoming within military consciousness in Pakistan but I urge that such work be attempted and that it take encouragement and guidance from the work of the Subaltern historians looked at from this somewhat different perspective that I have tried to lay out here. Finally, I want to end by saying that I speak on the generals not to be timely. So the untimely reason for my seemingly timely commentary on Pakistan's generals is to warn against thinking that Pakistan is in grips of the same, that political dysfunction is repeating itself again and again. Attention, scholarly, literary, ordinary, needs to be paid to the smallest differences between each historical moment so that we can not only understand and theorize the nature of repetition specific to Pakistan but also learn to amplify other possibilities in the realm of the potential.