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“Miss Sarajevo” and Spivak

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Miss Sarajevo is a short film about the siege in Sarajevo from 1992-1995. The siege lasted for one thousand, four hundred and twenty-five days, which is the longest siege of a capital city to ever happen in modern times. Almost fourteen thousand people were killed during the siege and nearly five thousand of those were civilians. This film shows the everyday life for these people. This includes what they deal with daily, where it looks like where they lived, how they survive, and what they do for fun. However, will we ever truly understand what they went through, even when we have the video evidence? Do we have the right to? And if we cannot understand, how can we best make sure that nothing like this ever happens again?

The people of Bosnia try to put on a brave face while the foreign filmmaker was making the video. They had no qualms about describing how horrid it was to live there and some of the atrocities that they experienced. However, are the primary accounts even enough to properly describe the horrors that have taken place? In “Can the Subaltern Speak,” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes one of the problems surrounding the subaltern is “the permission to narrate.” Even though the cameraman is recording their own accounts of what is happening, we do not know what it is that he may have chosen to cut out. Does he have the right or the ability to tell their story since he does not live there and go through the same things that they do? The problem that takes place is that the documentary filmmaker is assuming that he can put together their story better than they can. Do we let this sort of thing occur because the people aren’t able to speak for themselves at that moment of time? How do we tell their story without painting them as someone to be pitied? All of these tie back to the “permission to narrate” problem.

When they were talking about how the people protested, there was a vast difference between the way that the women and the men were seen to protest. The men fought at the front. There was a time in the movie where a man talked about being sent to the front lines and having to deal with the horrors that were there. He talked about his friends dying around him and being able to smell their brains as they were blown out of their skulls. His entire account was very serious. However, when it came to the women in Sarajevo interviewed, they showed how they put together a beauty pageant in protest of the war. One woman said, “The men have their guns, while the women have their beauty.” This seemed to purposefully paint a specific sort of picture of the women in the war, where they could have shown more about what it was like for the women that had lost their husbands, brothers, and other male family members and now had to figure out how they had to navigate the snipers with children in tow. Spivak talks about something similar when describing the customs of widows as described by the members of the British East India Company. She described how the policemen made assumptions, saying things like the women wanted to die. In

stating why the women could not put together a voice, she says: “As one goes down the grotesquely mis-transcribed names of these women, the sacrificed widows, in the police reports included in the records of the East India company, one cannot put together a voice.” I think that during this time the same goes for the women in Bosnia when people try to speak for them and everything gets blurry.

Another thing I noticed is how the people in Sarajevo try very hard to show how they are still doing things typical of western culture, such as dancing or singing popular songs of the day. This relates back to what Spivak says about people being exposed to Western culture. She states, “Groups rendered psychologically marginal by their exposure to western impact had come under pressure to demonstrate to others as well as to themselves, their ritual purity and allegiance to traditional high culture.” This is shown also when they are talking about their humor. Even though we would expect most of them to be sad and upset, but instead we see them laughing and using their own brand of dark humor. It is kind of a big middle finger to all of the people trying to oppress them saying that even constant fire and fear cannot hold us down.

So, to conclude, we must again ask ourselves in reference to the people in Bosnia, “Can the subaltern speak?” I believe that the answer is still no. Although the person making the video did his best to show their perspective and their lifeworld from their point of view, he was not part of the groups and so fell short. We saw the ways that the men and women both protest. We saw what they did to keep their culture alive despite the horrid position that they were in on a daily basis. We can try to speak and advocate for them, for them as subjects, but this does not mean the subaltern speaks.

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](#)

This short essay was a writing assignment in Professor Keith Doubt’s class, “Social Theory,” in the Sociology Department at Wittenberg University, Springfield, Ohio, Fall 2019.

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