



NEW MEDIA STUDIES

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YEAR: Year 4

MODULE: Final Year Project

ASSIGNMENT: Final Year Project: Critical Essay Word count 2,750

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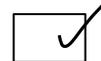
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**‘Representation or Re-presentation?’: The *Filipinx* Discourse and the Ventriloquism of
the Speaking Subaltern in Western Media**

The chosen topic for this final year project explores the intersectionality within representations of people of colour (POC) in the media and how people working behind the scenes in the entertainment industry often do not reflect the diversity and inclusivity they represent on screen. The first part of the video edit focuses on the *Filipinx* discourse in which Filipinos living in the Philippines and the Filipino diaspora debate about whether the term is a 'more inclusive' representation of people with origins in the Philippines. Those who want to impose the term *Filipinx* tend to belong to the Filipino diaspora and are predominantly Filipino-Americans. Their argument is that the term *Filipinx* is more inclusive than the commonly used term 'Filipino' especially for those who don't identify with the traditional gender binary. On the other hand, those who do not identify with *Filipinx* argue that the term 'Filipino' is already a gender-neutral term since a direct translation for 'he' or 'she' does not exist in the Filipino language. In pre-colonial Philippines, men and women were of equal status and non-binary individuals were highly respected as they held important roles in pre-colonial society. *Babaylans* were 'powerful figures who foretold the future, cured the sick, solemnized rituals, and communicated with spirits.'¹ They were mostly women, but some *babaylans* were also non-binary figures. When Spain conquered the Philippines in 1521, they brought Christianity with them and the Spaniards used their religion as a way to 'civilise' the native inhabitants of the land which then resulted to the abandonment of pagan rituals and other traditional practices. Contemporary Filipino discussions about LGBTQ+ issues often refer to the once existence of the indigenous *babaylan* to argue about the prominence of gender equality in the land before it was colonised. Pre-colonial Philippines is also used to point out the extent of how colonialism is responsible for the subjugation of women by introducing patriarchy. For some, the push for replacing 'Filipino' with *Filipinx* as a 'progressive' alternative, erases the progressiveness that

¹ Angeles, Leonora, 'Only in the Philippines? Postcolonial exceptionalisms and Filipina feminisms', *Critical Asian Studies*, 52.2 (2020), 226-247 (p.235).

was always there to begin with. Moreover, some argue that the term further imposes Western norms and highlights how America continues to have a heavy influence on Filipino culture. The westernisation of Filipino identity parallels with the ways colonisation was presented as a ‘civilising mission’.² It can be argued that it also further exposes how Western culture continues to insist itself as a signifier ‘for the establishment of a good society.’³ Disregarding the fact that it was westerners who first introduced patriarchal values and heteronormativity unto indigenous lands. Moreover, the argument that the term *Filipinx* would be an empowering statement of reclaiming the word ‘Filipino’ from its colonial ties to Spain would undermine the historical efforts of those who fought during the Philippine Revolution. Originally, the term ‘Filipino’ was used to identify Spaniards born in the Philippines while the native inhabitants of the land were called ‘Indios’. During that time, there was no unity among the indigenous tribes as they were not governed under the same national identity. Colonisers took advantage of this division among the indigenous people and enabled tribes to fight other tribes who heavily disapproved of the Spaniards and challenged their authority. In Frantz Fanon’s writings on French colonialism, he discusses the inferiority complex that the colonised experience as a result of years of dehumanisation due to colonial powers. ‘As a result of colonization, the white man becomes the epitome of perfection and the black man seeks to emulate him.’⁴ This sense of inadequacy that the native feels result in violence as a form of self-assertion. When the native realises that they ‘cannot hope to become truly ‘white’, or even expel the whites, his violence turns against his own kind.’⁵ Fanon argues that tribal wars exemplify such violence where tribes turn on each other because of their defeat against the unmatched colonial master. Eventually, in the late 1800s, the people of the Philippines

² Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in *Reflections on the History of an Idea: ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’*, ed. by Rosalind C. Morris, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 21-78 (p. 52).

³ Spivak, p. 50.

⁴ Nayar, Pramod K., ‘Introduction: Postcolonial Thought’, in *Postcolonialism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2010), pp. 1-34 (p. 9).

⁵ Nayar, p. 9.

reclaimed the term ‘Filipino’ from the Spaniards to unite the country under a new national identity. This was made possible with the help of the Philippine national hero José Rizal who used his writings to empower and unify the country.⁶ The unification among Filipinos resulted in the Philippine Revolution which brought the end to the Spanish rule. However, their triumph was short-lived because immediately after Philippines gained their independence, Spain ceded its longstanding colony of the Philippines to the United States in the Treaty of Paris.⁷ Despite gaining their independence in 1946, the effects of the Spanish and American colonisation are still evident to this day in many aspects of the Filipino culture such as their language, values, tradition, and religion. Due to the longstanding colonial ties between the U.S. and the Philippines, migration to the U.S. was encouraged. Today, the U.S. is home to by far the largest number of Filipinos abroad. The assimilation of the Filipino diaspora to western culture and norms leads to discussions of intersectionality within representations of the Filipino identity. Colourism comes in to play when discussing Filipino representations in western media as the majority of celebrities who are referred to as the face of Filipino representation often come from a biracial background. Often times these Filipino celebrities have never been to the Philippines or even embrace their culture yet, they have more visibility in the media due to the fact that they are a part of the western media which dominates the digital public sphere. Discussions about social class also comes into play when discussing who gets to be the face of Filipino representation in western media. This can be seen in the film *Crazy Rich Asians* with the cameo of a famous Filipino actress named Kris Aquino. The majority of the characters in the film are East Asians, specifically from Singapore and the film arguably does not overall reflect Asian culture and all its complexities. The single Filipino representation in the film is played by an actress who comes from a political dynasty and whose late father and mother was

⁶ One Down, *Filipino vs Filipinx: Breaking the Tabo: Episode 2* (2020), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-W42FEbezK&t=1s>> [accessed 23 April 2021].

⁷ One Down.

Senator Benigno Aquino Jr. and President Corazon Aquino. Aquino not only comes from a family of politicians but also has extreme wealth on her own from being a major figure in the Philippine entertainment industry. Aquino being chosen to represent Philippines in the film exemplifies the point made in the video edit of how the continued spotlighting of the *Crazy Rich Asian* narrative in the media only undermines other representations of the Asian community. In understanding the intersectionality of Filipino identity, it is then possible to recognise the privileges of Filipinos who conform to Eurocentric standards of beauty and also those who are of certain social class. Arguably, they do not represent the majority of Filipinos despite speaking on behalf of them. The same could be said about the Filipino diaspora with the term *Filipinx* since Filipinos in general are not familiar with the term and those who do not relate to it only associate the term with the Filipino-American experience. Although the Filipino diaspora are part of the marginalised group in western society, it can be argued that they have gained a certain level of privilege assimilating to western culture. In other words, the same group who could be dominated in one area, could be among the dominant in another.⁸ This could create many ambiguities and contradictions among those of different social classes or ethnic background who all belong in the same category of national identity. It is evident that there must be a common ground in which both terms can exist simultaneously without invalidating the other. The problem is that those who argue on imposing the term *Filipinx* are at an advantage and have the platform to voice out their opinion. As a result, those who do not identify with the term are being spoken for by those who have more visibility. Often times, class, colour, and gender dictates most of who is chosen to be the spokesperson for representation. But as the postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak said, ‘if that representing subject is in the entitled position that this other is denied, then the representation will always be

⁸ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, ‘Appendix: Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in *Reflections on the History of an Idea: ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’*, ed. by Rosalind C. Morris, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 237-291 (p. 254).

contaminated by that very entitlement.’⁹ Spivak advocates the practice of an ethics that begins with those in a position of privilege to unlearn their privilege and their entitlement to speak.¹⁰ In understanding that there is a subaltern to the subaltern, we then become more aware of the harmful ways those in a position of privilege become complicit in silencing the people they claim to be representing, as we see with the *Filipinx* discourse.

In Spivak’s essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* she talks about the concept of representation and re-presentation when explaining the difference between the subaltern who are representing, and the subaltern being represented. The subaltern can be defined as one who has no position or power outside the discourse that constructs him or her as subject. She puts forward the question of whether those who ‘act and *struggle*’ should be considered mute, ‘as opposed to those who act and *speak*.’¹¹ Spivak applies this concept in the context of the Karl Marx essay, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in which Marx argues that we only know the world through re-presentations. In his essay, Marx speaks of representation as *vertretung* in relation to political representation and re-presentation as *darstellung* ‘as in art, as in the portrait, as in staging.’¹² This concept of re-presentation is something that the postcolonial theorist Edward W. Said also talked about in his book, *Orientalism* which is believed to have influenced postcolonial studies and what officially launched postcolonial theory as a critical method. In his writings, Said showed how literary texts were encoded with ‘formulaic representations, stereotypes, and clichés about Oriental religions, cultures and peoples.’¹³ He wrote about the clear power relations between the West and the East, and how literary and narrative projects

⁹ Cornell, Drucilla, ‘The Ethical Affirmation of Human Rights’, in *Reflections on the History of an Idea: ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’*, ed. by Rosalind C. Morris, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 100-114 (p. 104).

¹⁰ Cornell, p. 102.

¹¹ Spivak, p. 28.

¹² Birla, Ritu, ‘Postcolonial Studies: Now That’s History’, in *Reflections on the History of an Idea: ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’*, ed. by Rosalind C. Morris, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 87-99 (p. 91).

¹³ Nayar, p. 14.

ultimately affected how Westerners perceived the East and its cultures. Said explained that orientalism allowed the Orient to be subjects that needed to be represented and spoken for by the colonial who felt entitled to speak for them, as they viewed the subaltern incapable of representing themselves. This concept of the subaltern being spoken for and being represented by the superior West is further explored by Spivak in her own writings on postcolonialism. In her essay, Spivak uses the example of the Hindu practice of *sati* which is an act of self-immolation¹⁴ performed by widows to exemplify the double subjugation that a subaltern woman faces. The double subjugation being the case of the native woman being silenced by patriarchy and colonialism.¹⁵ Spivak famously coined the phrase, ‘white men are saving brown women from brown men’¹⁶ when explaining how colonial officials seek to abolish the practice of *sati* in the name of civilising the subaltern. On the other hand, the Indian nativist argue that ‘the women wanted to die’.¹⁷ Thus, the subaltern woman is caught between the western perception of a good society and the ‘regressive “envy” of the colonised male.’¹⁸ The subaltern woman, in Spivak’s argument develops an identity of which she is the subject of a discourse in which she has little to no control over. This narrative of ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ can be seen in some representations of Muslim women in the media, more specifically in western media. The video edit uses the Spanish series *Elite* on Netflix as an example of how the media continues to enable the common Islamophobic trope of the female Muslim character needing a saviour to free her from the oppressiveness of her religion and the wearing of the hijab. This trope further legitimises Spivak’s argument about the west being entitled of establishing what it is to be a good society when they portray the female Muslim character as being more empowered and liberated when she becomes more westernised. It is

¹⁴ Hiddleston, Jane, ‘Ethics with politics? Spivak, Mudimbe, Mbembe’, in *Understanding Postcolonialism*, (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), pp. 151-177 (p. 156).

¹⁵ Nayar, p. 26.

¹⁶ Spivak, p. 48

¹⁷ Spivak, p. 50.

¹⁸ Spivak, p. 52.

important to note that some Muslim women do face oppression by being forced to wear the hijab and it is important that their realities are not disregarded or silenced. But when it is the narrative that is constantly being used to represent Muslim women in the media, then it is playing into an already dangerous misconception about Islam and Muslim women in which they need be saved from their own kind. This also correlates with the ‘white saviour complex’ in which the narrative of the white spokesperson speaking out for the voiceless subaltern is presented as ‘heroism’, just as colonisation was presented as a ‘civilising mission’.¹⁹ The video edit also elaborates on Spivak’s point about the ‘ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern’²⁰ by applying it to the representations of people of colour in the three Netflix shows *Orange is the New Black (OITNB)*, *Grand Army*, and *Elite*. The points made in the video edit is in line with Spivak’s argument that an authentic representation of the subaltern is not possible especially when the system that stages these representations gloss over its own flaws by creating the illusion of inclusivity and progressiveness. In other words, representation in the media does not always mean liberation. Well intentioned texts claiming to speak for or give voice to the subaltern cannot ultimately escape the problem that arises when their progressiveness seem artificial or surface level. The ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern can be seen when looking at certain shows that promote diversity yet have a predominantly white writer’s room or production team. Minority groups are represented on screen, yet they are not being represented behind the scenes. This raises ethical concerns about the authenticity of the stories and voices they claim to be amplifying especially when race, class, and sexuality are the main themes of the show. A show that pays great attention to detail in an effort to portray a character that accurately reflects its audience makes such a significant impact on how the show will be received by the audience. Whether that is hiring a hair stylist who knows how to work with

¹⁹ Spivak, p. 52.

²⁰ Spivak, p. 27.

afro-textured hair or hiring a more diverse group of writers and directors that would be more equipped in creating storylines that challenge the common narratives and tropes used on POC characters or LGBTQ+ characters. The importance of hiring diverse writers is even more vital in a postcolonial society and a globalised media industry where there is more diversity on screen. The reason being that there are ethical concerns about the commodification of minority struggles for the consumption of a global audience.²¹ As it was pointed out in the video edit, this is deeply concerning especially when shows like *OITNB* and *Grand Army* that represent stories about black pain, immigrant struggles, and the oppression of women of colour are being written and directed by predominantly white men and women who may not experience oppression on the same level as the POC characters they are depicting due to differences in racial, ethnic, and social background.

It is safe to say that representation in the media has come a long way but that does not mean it has reached its final stage. As it was explained in the video edit, representation in the media still has a long way to go in terms of finding an ethical solution in which diverse stories of ethnic minorities are given the spotlight without being exploited. This project intends to emphasise how representation does not always mean liberation and to challenge what the media considers to be progressive. Spivak's writings on postcolonialism is the foundation of this project to encapsulate discussions about intersectionality within ethnic groups as well as to 'acknowledge out complicity in the muting'²² of the subaltern and recognise our entitlement to speak for them. To conclude with a final point from Spivak, we must ask ourselves 'what is at stake when we insist that the subaltern speaks?'. When the media continues to insist on its progressiveness, it silences the voices of those who are yet to be represented in the media. Thus,

²¹ Nayar, Pramod K., 'New Concerns for the Postcolonial', in *Postcolonialism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2010), pp. 191-211 (p. 206).

²² Spivak, p. 64.

an ethical representation of the subaltern can only be achieved through the deliberate creation of a space for them to represent themselves and be heard, instead of spoken for.

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