Voicing the Subaltern by Narrating the Communist Past through the Focalization of a Child in Gábor Németh’s ‘Are You a Jew?’ and Endre Kukorelly’s ‘The Fairy Valley’

Abstract: This chapter demonstrates how the notion of the postcolonial subaltern created by Gayatri Spivak can be redeployed into the study of (post)communist Hungarian culture. Spivak convincingly claims that the subaltern cannot speak the language of the dominant discourse; therefore, mainstream representation cannot guarantee that the voices of subordinate groups will be recognized. In my analysis of two post-communist Hungarian novels, Endre Kukorelly’s ‘The Fairy Valley, or About the Mysteries of the Heart’ and Gábor Németh’s ‘Are You a Jew?’, I take the figure of the child living in a fictional totalitarian period as a special case of the subaltern. I claim that these novels express the complexity of the problem in a similar way as it was formulated by Spivak, and that they offer a narrative-rhetorical solution for giving voice to the subaltern.

Contemporary Hungarian literature plays an important role in helping the country work through its communist past. An interesting recent literary trend in Hungarian prose fiction utilizes a child’s point of view to narrate the communist period. Some examples of this include: György Dragomán’s Fehér király [The White King] (2005), Ferenc Barnás’s Kilencedik [The Ninth] (2006), Zsuzsa Rákószky’s Hullócsillag éve [The Year of the Falling Star] (2005), Gábor Németh’s Zsidó vagy? [Are You a Jew?] (2004), Attila Bartis’s Nyugalom [Tranquility] (2001), Endre Kukorelly’s Tündérvölgy, avagy az emberi szív rejtelmeiről [The Fairy Valley, or About the Mysteries of the Heart] (2003), László Garaczi’s Pompásan buszozunk [The Splendid Bus Ride] (1998), and Szilárd Borbély’s Nincstelenek [The Dispossessed] (2013). In this study I claim that the combination of the fictional dictatorship and the focalization through a child’s eyes makes possible a postcolonial reading that helps us face our communist past. However, it is important to mention that when employing postcolonial theories to better understand post-communist regions, we cannot avoid facing the problem that Eastern Europe culturally shares in the Western and European heritage, ‘European thought’, and historicism that recent postcolonial thinkers, particularly Dipesh Chakrabarty, have manifestly challenged.1 Accepting his reasoning, I support

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1 Dipesh Chakrabarty roundly criticizes the history writing tradition in which non-European history is marginalized and the central position of Europe is taken for granted. He uses the term ‘Europe’ as a certain value system which originated in the Enlightenment and understood history as a developmental process. According to this Eurocentric view, non-European societies were undeveloped and inferior in comparison with the West, and remained stuck in an era that preceded that which
the use of the concept of *translation*, which involves the reinterpretation and extension of certain categories, rather than ‘application’ of a postcolonial approach to reading Eastern-European literature.

I believe Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s argument on the representation of the subaltern can be interpreted in a more general way than was originally explored by Spivak, who discussed the custom known as *sati*, or the self-immolation of Hindu widows. According to Spivak’s provocative and inspiring argument, the Hindu widow, the female subaltern who faced death by fire, could not articulate her own views, and thus remained silent. In her research on *sati*, Spivak could not find the signs of the voice of these women in the legal documents made by the English colonizers who intended to change the custom of *sati* in order to save Indian women.\(^2\)

Spivak vigorously argues that compassionate Western intellectuals and politicians can ironically objectify, assimilate, and appropriate, thus silencing the disempowered by speaking on their behalf. Neither recognition by assimilation, nor political representation with its often simplifying categorizations can ensure that subordinate groups will be acknowledged or that their voices will be heard.\(^3\) After two decades of discussion in various fields in the humanities, the question of representing the subaltern remains open and there is still a huge distance between the theoretical discourses on the subaltern and practical programs of solidarity to help them.\(^4\)

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\(^3\) Ibid, p. 308.


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