Counterhegemonic cultural practices: the example of postcolonial women writers

Silvia Caporale Bizzini
Universidad de Alicante

1. Introduction. Subjectivity and cultural hegemony

The critical work that intellectuals belonging to socially and culturally subordinate groups have carried out in the last two decades has given to cultural and/or social minorities the theoretical tools to question some basic issues regarding the production of knowledge and its relation to the politics and definition of subjectivity. Writing can be understood as a potentially effective weapon to carry out not only a politics of resistance, but to help develop an active politics of social change (even though such change is being slow and difficult to achieve fully). As critics have extensively demonstrated, hegemonic discursive practices play a basic role in the definition and representation of the colonized subject. When it comes to representing the colonized feminine identity, the issue becomes troublesome, penetrates the discourse of feminism (which is in itself a counterhegemonic discourse), provokes a fissure and complicates the representation of postcolonial feminine subjectivity. The analysis of the discursive practices that have shaped

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1 This paper is the result of research conducted at Pittsburgh University. The project was funded by a grant from the Spanish Ministry of Education (M.E. y C.).
our world view cannot leave aside the role that intellectuals play in the construction of hegemonic or counterhegemonic discourses.\textsuperscript{2} It is in this sense that I will use a Gramscian approach to demonstrate how the woman writer, and in our case the postcolonial woman writer, can question the hegemonic vision of reality; how her writing can participate in the definition of a counterhegemonic discourse and, at the same time, problematise and put forward the paradoxes which exist within the idea of `cultural hegemony'.

As Marcia Landy points out: “It is not accidental that these challenges to received knowledge arise out of the oppositional contexts of feminist and postcolonial theories, and that they are dependent on work that has arisen from work in structuralism and poststructuralism” (Landy, 1994: 1). The poststructuralist project of questioning the dominant ontology and outgoing a discourse based on the idea of a totality that erases the categories of race, class and gender could be greatly enriched by adding to its theorization a more open emphasis on production. If poststructuralist theories of the subject (and I am mainly thinking of the work that Michel Foucault did on the power/knowledge relation and the normativization of identity), have given us a provocative way to look at the strategies that help to define subjectivity, this does not seem to be enough -or the only thing to consider- if we want to go a step further and carry out a feasible and realistic politics of social change. In spite of finding the Foucauldian archaeological and genealogical analysis of the “games of truth” inspiring, we must not forget that, as Spivak claims, “This S/subject, curiously sewn together into a transparency by denegations, belongs to the exploiters’ side of the international division of labor” (1995: 24).

The Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci focuses his work on a materialistic analysis of the role that the dominant, or hegemonic, discourse, the cultural apparatuses and power relations

\textsuperscript{2} Such analysis cannot be separated from the questioning of a social and economical order that developed and
play within the social and epistemological context and in the standardization of subjectivity. He also sees culture as the privileged site where the dominant discourse produces individuality. Antonio Gramsci’s work on cultural hegemony, his interest in the individual as we see in the *Notebooks*, and in the history of subaltern groups, make his work especially engaging in contemporary cultural theory. One of the reasons which makes his thought contemporary is Gramsci’s interest on subjects and histories which belong to the margins of the hegemonic discourse. As Dante Germino reminds us: «What had previously been described as "marginal" territory—the everyday life of the impoverished and illiterate majority of humankind—becomes for Gramsci the center around which the political world revolves». (1986: 20).

Gramsci focuses his analysis on the fundamental role that culture and traditional intellectuals play in the formation of cultural hegemony. In this context he develops his theory of the “organic intellectual” as an element of resistance to hegemony. Gramsci's interest for intellectuals and their history is strictly related to the role that he asserts they can play within the hegemonic structure of society in order to help to produce a counter-hegemonic discourse in which the interests of subaltern groups can be recognized and articulated. The cultural apparatus is seen as a powerful tool to create the consensus that the dominant class needs to carry out its politics from a position of power. Within this frame, intellectuals can organically act in order to transform and rearticulate the existing structures. It is in this sense that subjectivity becomes one of the central themes in Gramsci’s *Notebooks*.

The enormous role that culture and hegemonic structures play in Gramscian thought lead the Italian thinker to feel a special interest for the human being understood as a feasible vehicle of change when it comes to question cultural hegemony. Gramsci does not understand the
carried out a colonial policy—and is still doing so through its economic power.
formation of the subject only in economical terms, but relates his analysis to other intellectual and cultural factors and allows the individual - within the collectivity, but without forgetting the personal dimension and historical development of individuals - to understand their situation and ontological position in order to become subjects conscious of the possibilities to carry out a change. If we consider his analysis of the construction of subjectivity, we immediately notice that Gramsci firmly believes that there is not a preconstructed, straightforward and unalterable definition of identity. This is what he writes: “If we think of it, we see that asking ourselves what is man [sic] we mean what he can become. In other words, if man can control his own destiny, he can construct himself and his own life. We then say that man [sic] is a process and he is precisely the process of his own acts” (1975: 1343-1344. My translation; my emphasis).

Now there are two main ideas that immediately strikes the reader when he or she goes through the above lines. In the first place, the formation of the individual is considered as a process influenced by historical factors and events; in the second place, the stress on the agency of subjects allows them a certain degree of control over their life, choices and actions. Gramsci’s analysis is then related to social, historical and personal condition, which shape individuals’ lives and subjectivities. So, we clearly infer that not only was Gramsci interested in individuality, but also committed to examine the discourses that convince individuals of the existence of an essentialist, immutable and ahistorical subjectivity which mark their line of conduct and their actions. Gramsci urges to regard the individual as a reality which is composed of several

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4 Obviously, this is not the only or the first time Gramsci refers to an ideological apparatus which determines individuality and the possibility that the subject and the collectivity, if willing or if gone through the cathartic process or both, has to transform him/herself and the situation created by the dominant discourse and the dominant class. See for example Notebook 3, See also Notebook 7 where he criticizes the structures that constuct what he calls l’uomo di massa.
elements that interact in a historical moment in turn determined by previous historical conditions. The first element are individuals themselves, the second is other individuals, the third is nature. Subjects are the result of their interaction.

In order to take a critical stance and be able to question existing structures and cultural hegemony, subjects have to be conscious of their position within these very structures. The individual has first to understand the mechanisms that have historically determined her way of being, thinking, and acting before she or he is free to choose what to do. This process is what Gramsci calls 'know yourself'. It is through the capacity that the subject has to relate to other subjects and the environment (always bearing in mind the historical dimension of these two elements), that the individual gains the agency to change herself and find her position within collectivity. In short, what we can get from Gramsci is the agency that individuals, shaped through a series of relations and within an historical context, can undertake in a collectivity and carry out a politically viable, progressive project of change. A theoretical position that can fit within the feminist project.

The focal points of the philosopher’s analysis are two. The first refers to the process of understanding oneself and one's origins not within an essentialist discourse, but as the product of determined material discourses and of very clearly identified forces and relations of production. The second claims the necessity to study the discursive and dividing practices that have come to determine the ontology of the hegemonic discourse that focuses on the center and leaves aside the margins. Gramsci’s ‘know yourself’, however, should not be considered as a Platonic return to the origins, but as a way to understand how and which discourses have shaped one’s identity. It is in this sense that history becomes a strategy for change. In order to write the history of the
present (and change it) one has to understand how the history of the past has forged us into subjects. This central idea is illustrated at the end of the *Notebooks* when Gramsci, writing on the history of subaltern groups, criticizes the mechanisms of the construction of subjectivity that the dominant class used in order to transform a different subject into an excluded subject.\(^6\)

Once the importance of subjectivity within Gramscian thought has been stressed, it is necessary to relate it to his theorization on the system that shapes the subject and then transforms it into a part of a wider order of things.\(^7\) His work can be used to construct a counterhegemonic discourse that can help devise and develop different ontologies and distinct ways of thinking and understanding the centrality of such project in our society. It is through his analysis that we can understand the way culture is related -always- to politics and to the order of things that shape identity and deny the idea of difference.

2. Decolonizing writing

Though Gramsci’s study can be helpful in all cultural fields, it seems particularly appropriate to approach the post-colonial perspective and the role that writing plays within the social in relation to the political systems that have shaped Western culture and its gaze towards ‘other cultures’. As Radhica Mohanram and Gita Rajan underline: «... ‘writing’ is fundamentally a cultural boundary.\(^5\) See on this topic Dante Germino, «Antonio Gramsci: From the Margins to the Centre, the Journey of a Hunchback», *boundary2* XIV (3), Spring 1986, pp:19-30.

\(^6\) Laclau and Mouffe have made the Gramscian concept more extensive and claim that subordination is not only carried out in the economic field but it also takes place within the cultural sphere or the social, and the example are women, ethnic minorities or homosexual subjects, old people or sick people (all subjects that do not fit within the limits of the normative identity).

\(^7\) Gramsci’s concept of hegemony has got two basic definitions within his works. In the first part of his works, hegemony is considered as the overcoming of the ‘economic-corporative’ and, according to Adamson, this is Gramsci’s first attempt to theorize hegemony (see Walter Adamson, *Hegemony and Revolution*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980. See especially note, 6, p. 277). In the *Notebooks*, hegemony is understood as consensual basis of an existing political system within civil society. It has to be stressed that the main ideas that Gramsci develops in his *Notebooks* can already be found in the "Southern Question" and the first cultural orientation
activity: every kind of writing therefore bears the marks of a culture, and in this case, a colonial culture» (1996: 5). Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, stressed this point. I think that his words apply not only to the construction and definition of ‘Orientalism’ itself, but to all societies and cultures -and I cannot avoid thinking of the concepts of race or gender also- that have been affected by one form or another of colonization. He writes:

My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage-and even produce-the Orient politically, [...] logically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period (Said 1991: 3).

Elleke Bohemer points out how: «...cultural representations were central ... to the process of colonizing other lands...» (Boheker, 1995: 5) and Homi Bhabha, in his essay “Signs Taken for Wonder”, underlines the great importance that written words maintain in the construction of a colonial hegemony which has shaped our understanding of the colonized subject. He goes on to demonstrate how the dichotomy colonizer/colonized is not so sharp but how, if the center is defined clearly, its borders blur: “The contour of difference is agonistic, shifting, splitting, rather like Freud’s description of the system of consciousness which occupies a position in space lying on the borderline between outside and inside, a surface of protection, reception and projection” (1995: 32). If the text has apparently an author/itative means which defines subjectivities, in reality it opens to englobe into its culture the culture of the ‘other’. The final aim is to develop a

 implicit in hegemony is indebted to the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce as Gramsci himself writes in the
textual politics which transforms the colonized subject from a subject in her own right into a subject that like Barthes’ pictures in *Camara Lucida* is a negative copy of the colonizer subject. It is at this point that difference becomes equal to something negative that has to be erased.

Nonetheless, I think that Bhabha’s theory of hybridity studies part of the phenomenon: if the colonial masculine subject has gone through this cultural construction, the feminine subject has been doubly erased. She has either been silenced or transformed into a stereotype: the silenced victim, the woman behind the veil, etc.. In the case of Asian women living in Britain this kind of discursive representation has been questioned both from a sociological and cultural perspective. The writing of postcolonial women intellectuals is thus a form of becoming visible, to interact with a public cultural space and to re-present the image of the place that the postcolonial feminine subject is occupying in society. Stanley Aronowitz claims that the construction of critical public spaces is based on the work of writers and artists who are conscious of the ambivalences and contradictions which conform their subjectivity. Through their writing they construe an idea of culture which is at the same time transgressive and collective, they retain their personal history while belonging to a community.

Postcolonial texts written by women become a way to challenge hegemonic cultural practices, produce counterhegemonic discursive practices and, at the same time, maintain the power of re-writing one’s subjectivity. This kind of cultural discourse: “...opens up a third space to allow a dialogue with ourselves and the world, and central to that dialogue is a critical writing that refuses closure” (Giroux, 1995: 195). This rejection of closure is related to the necessity to

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**Notebooks.**

understand oneself as an historical subject, to understand one’s origins and to use this knowledge as a starting point to rewrite assigned identities. In the process of the narrativization of identity carried out as a questioning of the hegemonic discourse(s), history becomes a turning point to understand the complex relation that Empire and textuality maintain. As Roman de la Campa points out “... the requirements of specific periodization impose a more differentiated, nuanced, conceptualization of cultural production” (1995: 3).

In Gramsci’s philosophy, culture assumes a very important role when it comes to the point of the construction of the hegemonic discourse. But the Gramscian concept of hegemony is neither linear nor simple to understand due, among other things, to the fragmentary organization of his Notebooks. Following Mouffe⁹, we could then say that Gramsci's notion of hegemony is a starting point to face the problem of the dissemination of power within society from a perspective that considers various foci in which and through which the dominant, or hegemonic, discourse is constituted. This also implies the idea that the power relations between the state and civil society are and cannot be immutable but they shift and have to be renegotiated constantly.¹⁰

The consciousness of the existence of such mechanisms is the first step to understand that the individual has the possibility to act in order to examine and carry out a change within the hegemonic discourse. The second phase is the most stimulating because it concerns the subject agency: once one is conscious of her being historically determined and of belonging to a subaltern or marginalized group, she has to transform into an independent subject. In other

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¹⁰ As Joseph Buttigieg points out: «Even before he developed his concepts of civil society, hegemony, and so on, Gramsci could already perceive how a dominant class becomes securely entrenched not by forcefully repressing the antagonistic classes but rather by creating and disseminating what he calls a forma mentis, and by establishing a system of government that embodies this forma mentis and translates it into an order, or, better still, makes it appear to be orderliness itself» (1995: 12).
words, the individual has to acquire self-autonomy (described in a kantian way) and have the historical consciousness of having comprehended the rational self conceptions of other classes and other epochs.

The intellectual becomes an agent of basic importance and, at this point of the Gramscian thought, he or she is defined in his or her organic task to connect to the whole state apparatuses and to mediate between structure and superstructure through what Gramsci calls a "war of position" that, as Buttigieg points out,\textsuperscript{11} has to be, and is, fought within civil society where hegemony is constructed and located. The relationship that exists between structure, superstructure and the division of the hegemonic discourse in disciplines in order to define a set of discursive practices that help to forge and sustain hegemony and the consequent creation of "common sense" is apparent and bring us to think of some of the following developments of Gramsci's theories: Althusser's notion of the ideological state apparatuses and the move that in *The Order of Discourse* Michel Foucault did to transport these notions from the terrain of the political to the terrain of discursivity. It is then clear that the role that intellectuals play within these ‘games of truth’, to use a foucauldian concept, is of great importance when it comes to question the hegemonic construction of the notions of gender, race and class.

The use of history becomes then the key to locate the subject within hegemony. But history is not enough if we do not consider gender. As we have already seen, Homi Bhabha (rightly) stresses the importance to historicise the cultural enterprise of imperialism, but he forgets to give his analysis a gendered perspective. A perspective that, on the contrary, is the

\textsuperscript{11} “His [Gramsci] purpose is not to repress civil society or to restrict its space but rather to develop a revolutionary strategy (a "war of position") that would be employed precisely in the arena of civil society, with the aim of disabling the coercitive apparatus of the state, gaining access to political power, and creating the conditions that could give rise to a consensual society wherein no individual or group is reduced to a subaltern status” (Buttigieg 1995: 7).
obvious starting point in the works of colonial and/or postcolonial women writers. The invisibility to which women have been condemned seems to persist also in contemporary theory.

The examples I will very briefly refer to in order to support my point are Suleri’s *Meatless Days*, published in 1990, and two novels, *Kamala* and *Saguna*, written by Kuprabai Satthianadhan and published more than 100 years ago. Both writers, Suleri and Kuprabai, use writing to come to terms with their individuality which has been forged between two cultures and both of them choose autobiography to reinstate their identity within their own personal discourse. So, the choice has not been casual and, in a sense, has been motivated by a phrase written by Bhabha in ‘Signs Taken for Wonder’ where he claims that the arrival of Evangelism to India meant that: “…the word of God, truth, art, creates the conditions for a beginning, a practice of history” (31). This is undoubtedly true if a) we consider the affirmation from a postcolonial male centered perspective and b) do not analyze historically what christianism meant for many women in colonial India.

Bhabha’s theorization can apply to Suleri’s autobiographical *Meatless Days*. Sara Suleri is an academic in one of the most prestigious universities in the States; her parents were both intellectuals and belonged to different cultures. Her mother was British, a lecturer of English Literature at the University of Lahore, and her father was a Pakistani intellectual. Due to her social class and privileged personal circumstances Suleri is able to declare openly that: «But we were coming to a parting, Pakistan and I. I felt supped full of history, hungry for flavors less stringent on my palate, less demanding of my loyalty» (123) and recognize, following Bhabha, the discourses that have constructed her own subjectivity. Her split identity materializes in her writing the paradoxes and the process of cultural hybridity which has shaped her as an historical subject. She is free to choose where she belongs and she can consciously carry out the process of
the Gramscian ‘know yourself’. On the contrary, Bhabha’s theorization is quite difficult to apply to the discourse of another writer, Kuprabai Satthianadhan, a woman who grew up a Christian in a dominant Hindu community and that, contrary to Bahbha’s affirmation (and Gramsci’s), in her works she has related the new imported religion to the possibility of developing her own subjectivity.

Kuprabai was born in 1862, daughter of a Braham converted to christianity she was the first woman to attend Madras Medical College. Although she died young, at the age of 32, she devoted most of her life to her husband and to her writing. In her works, three novels and several articles, she declares in favour of the emancipation of women and relates the possibility of such emancipation to the new christian paradigm. These ideas are reflected in her novel Sagauna, a kind of autobiography in which the author projects a split personality and explain what christianity and the English novel (especially George Eliot’s A Mill on the Floss) meant for her and the development of her own individuality: «I would now throw aside the fetters that bound me and be independent. I had chafed under the restraints and the ties which formed the common lot of women, and I longed for an opportunity to show that a woman is in no way inferior to a man» (Sagauna, 178). This process of the conscious construction of one’s own subjectivity does not take place in her other novel: Kamala. The protagonist of Kamala is trapped within the limits imposed to women by Hindu religion and family structures, she is harrassed by her in-laws, against which, even when she has the opportunity, she is not able to fight: «Somehow Kamala became resigned to her lot, and it was her crude religious convictions that enabled her to do so» (Kamala, 57). If we compare Sagauna and Kamala we see how the element which differentiates their life is the acceptance of a new order of things represented by christianity. Kamala is tied to the old order that has decided her destiny, while Sagauna, accepting the ‘new order of things’
(even though critically) has the chance to free herself from a tradition that, even though she accepts and recognises as her own («...I sincerely hope that my countrywomen, and for the matter of that, my countrymen also, in their eagerness to adopt the new will not give up the good that is in the old», Saguna, 99), imposes a destiny to women just for being women.

So, if we examine Suleri’s and Kuprabai’s discourses from a perspective that considers the historical dimension of the Gramscian ‘know yourself’ and a gendered perspective we can understand why what Bhabha sees as the beginning of the Western cultural construction of India becomes a counter-hegemonic stance for a woman who lived, worked and wrote 100 years ago.

3. Conclusions

If we examine the whole question from a Gramscian perspective, we can understand postcolonial women writers as organic intellectuals that, through writing, try to recast their own realities, realities that have been either erased or misinterpreted. Through the Gramscian analysis of society and culture provides us with useful insights for a more complete understanding of the complexity, the differentiation, the organization and fragmentation of modern reality. Gramsci’s theory of hegemony suggests that we have to consider new and different cultural modes while positioning ourselves historically to understand the different position that, for example, colonial and/or postcolonial women writers have taken in a determined moment. This also means to accept and problematise the paradoxes of cultural hegemony. We also have to regard class alliances and the meeting between the progressive forces in the East and the West -the women’s movement, ecology, gay and lesbian associations, just to name but a few- whose work is framed within a discourse of change which englobes the concept of difference. A bloc in which the
Gramscian idea of ‘war of position’ can come true and transform into a viable project of cultural politics. It is within this context that Gramci’s intellectual projects can be used to carry out an interesting line of action when we come to consider the writer as intellectual, and her active role within society and in in favour of the formation of counterhegemonic discourses.

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