

## BETWEEN VOICE AND ERASURE: A SPIVAKIAN STUDY OF SUBALTERNITY IN THE IMMORTAL LIFE OF HENRIETTA LACKS

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### Abstract

*This study examines *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot through the theoretical framework of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of subalternity. Focusing on issues of voice, representation, and epistemic violence, the research analyzes how Henrietta Lacks is positioned within dominant medical and scientific discourses that denied her agency, consent, and recognition. Although Henrietta's biological contribution transformed modern medicine, her identity and subjectivity were excluded from institutional narratives, revealing deep-rooted power imbalances shaped by race, class, and gender. Using qualitative and interpretive textual analysis, this study explores the extent to which Skloot's narrative challenges historical silencing while also remaining constrained by the structures of representation Spivak critiques. The analysis demonstrates that scientific institutions transformed Henrietta's body into valuable knowledge while simultaneously erasing her voice, a process that aligns with Spivak's notion of epistemic violence. Furthermore, the study highlights how Henrietta's position as a Black woman intensified her marginalization, situating her at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression. By directly connecting Spivak's postcolonial theory to Skloot's narrative strategies, this research contributes to postcolonial literary studies, medical humanities, and bioethical discourse. It reveals the limitations of narrative recovery and underscores the ethical challenges involved in representing marginalized subjects whose voices have been historically excluded. Ultimately, the study argues that while *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* raises critical awareness of injustice, it also demonstrates the difficulty, if not impossibility, of fully restoring the subaltern voice within dominant systems of knowledge.*

**Keywords:** Bioethics, Epistemic Violence, Medical Humanities, Postcolonial Theory, Race, Gender, and Power, Representation, Subalternity

### Introduction

#### 1.1 Introduction

Henrietta Lacks, whose cancer cells became the famous HeLa cell line, is often discussed as a figure who had no voice in the decisions made about her body. Gayatri Spivak's ideas about the subaltern, people who are pushed to the margins and cannot speak for themselves, help us understand why Henrietta's story represents silence, exploitation, and unequal power. Rebecca Skloot's book *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* attempts to "give voice" to Henrietta, but it also raises important questions about who gets to represent whom. By using concepts such as subalternity, epistemic violence, and power/knowledge, this study explores how Henrietta's identity was shaped by scientific institutions and how her story is retold through a researcher's perspective.

Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* tells the story of a Black woman whose cancer cells, taken without her knowledge in 1951 became the first immortal human cell line, known as HeLa. These cells revolutionized modern medicine, leading to breakthroughs in vaccines, cancer treatments, and genetics, yet Henrietta herself remained

unknown and unheard for decades. Her story reflects the long history of racial injustice and medical exploitation faced by African Americans, especially Black women, within scientific institutions.

To understand the deeper meaning of Henrietta's silence and the unequal power dynamics surrounding her body, this study uses Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial concept of the subaltern, a term for individuals pushed so far to the margins that their voices cannot be heard within dominant systems. Spivak argues that when powerful institutions speak for marginalized people, they often repeat the very structures that silenced them in the first place. Applying this idea to Henrietta Lacks reveals that her silence was not accidental but produced by systems of race, class, medicine, and scientific authority.

Skloot's narrative attempts to bring Henrietta's voice back into history, yet it also raises important questions about representation. Who has the right to tell her story? Can the subaltern truly "speak" when their story is always retold through someone else's lens? These questions are central to postcolonial studies, which examine how knowledge, power, and storytelling are shaped by colonial and institutional structures.

By connecting Skloot's text with Spivak's theory, this research explores how Henrietta Lacks is positioned as a subaltern figure and how her story reflects larger patterns of epistemic violence, exploitation, and the unequal relationship between scientific knowledge and marginalized bodies.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

Henrietta Lacks's story shows how marginalized individuals, especially Black women, are often denied agency in medical and historical narratives. Although Skloot's book aims to recover Henrietta's voice, it may also repeat the same power structures it tries to expose. The problem lies in understanding whether the subaltern can truly "speak" when their voice is mediated, rewritten, or controlled by others, especially within powerful scientific institutions.

## **1.3 Research Question**

How does *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* represent Henrietta as a subaltern figure, and to what extent does the narrative challenge or reproduce epistemic violence and power imbalances found in medical and scientific institutions?

## **1.4 Research Objectives**

To analyze how Henrietta Lacks is portrayed as a subaltern figure in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* and how the narrative either challenges or reinforces her silencing.

## **1.5 Rationale of the Research**

This research is important because Henrietta Lacks's story is not only about medical discovery but also about race, power, and silence. Studying her case through Spivak's theory helps us question how many marginalized voices are still unheard in science, history, and society. By understanding these issues, we can promote ethical research practices and more respectful representation of marginalized people.

## 1.6 Delimitation

The study focuses only on the representation of Henrietta Lacks in Skloot's book. It does not analyze other media portrayals or the entire history of Black medical exploitation. The study uses Spivak's concepts as the main theoretical framework, not other postcolonial theories.

## 2.1 Literature Review

Bhaskaran's study of *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* examines how Rebecca Skloot's narrative moves beyond scientific history to expose deep ethical and power imbalances embedded in medical institutions (Bhaskaran, 2023). Bhaskaran argues that Skloot foregrounds issues of informed consent, patient autonomy, and racialized medical exploitation, showing how Henrietta Lacks became scientifically invaluable while remaining personally invisible within the scientific community. The narrative juxtaposes the emotional suffering of Henrietta's family with the language of medical progress, thereby critiquing the medical system's historical disregard for marginalized bodies. This analysis positions Skloot's text within medical humanities as a critique of systemic power relations in healthcare, closely aligning with Spivak's idea of epistemic violence, where marginalized subjects are absorbed into dominant knowledge systems without agency (Bhaskaran, 2023).

A study published in *BMC Medical Ethics* analyzes the influence of *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* on public discussions of bioethics, particularly regarding informed consent and vulnerable populations (Korf et al., 2013). Through content analysis of media coverage, the researchers found that informed consent was the most frequently discussed theme, dominating both major and minor references to the book. The study notes that Skloot's narrative drew attention to ethical concerns such as donor control, privacy, compensation, and exploitation, especially among marginalized communities. Although the public discourse often simplified these issues, the study concludes that Skloot's work played a significant role in shaping ethical awareness and debate surrounding biomedical research (Korf et al., 2013).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" provides a critical framework for understanding why voices like Henrietta Lacks's are historically silenced or mediated through dominant discourses (Spivak, 1988).

Spivak argues that the subaltern is often spoken about rather than allowed to speak, and when dominant institutions attempt to represent marginalized individuals, they may unintentionally reproduce the very power structures that silence them. Gayatri Spivak introduces the concept of epistemic violence, which refers to the systematic erasure or distortion of marginalized knowledge. When it is applied to Skloot's narrative, Spivak's theory raises important questions about whether Henrietta's voice can truly be recovered when her story is filtered through a researcher's perspective (Spivak, 1988).

Bioethical and historical scholarships, collectively, situate Henrietta Lacks's story within a broader legacy of racialized medical exploitation in the United States (Washington, 2022). Different studies document how African Americans were frequently subjected to unethical medical practices, including experimentation without consent and exclusion from the benefits of scientific advancement. This research emphasizes that Henrietta Lacks's experience was not an isolated incident but part of a structural pattern of inequality in medical research. Such scholarship supports postcolonial critiques that examine how dominant institutions

control knowledge production and representation, reinforcing unequal power relations between science and marginalized communities (Washington, 2022).

## **2.2 Research Gap**

While many studies talk about racism, bioethics, and HeLa cells, fewer examine Henrietta's story specifically through Spivak's idea of subalternity and epistemic violence. Even fewer analyze whether Skloot's narrative truly restores Henrietta's voice or repeats historical power dynamics. This study fills that gap by connecting Spivak's theory directly to the narrative choices in the book.

## **2.3 Theoretical Framework**

### **2.3.1 The subaltern cannot speak within dominant systems of knowledge.**

Spivak postulates that the subaltern is structurally prevented from speaking because dominant political, cultural, and institutional frameworks do not recognize subaltern speech as legitimate or meaningful (Spivak, 1988).

### **2.3.2 Representation by intellectuals and institutions often reproduces subaltern silence.**

Spivak argues that when elites or intellectuals attempt to represent the subaltern, they frequently reinforce existing power relations rather than dismantle them, thereby continuing the subaltern's silencing (Spivak, 1988).

### **2.3.3 Epistemic violence erases subaltern knowledge and subjectivity.**

Spivak introduces the concept of epistemic violence to describe how dominant knowledge systems overwrite, marginalize, or erase subaltern ways of knowing, making the subaltern invisible within official histories and discourses (Spivak, 1988).

### **2.3.4 The subaltern woman is doubly marginalized.**

Spivak postulates that subaltern women are positioned at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression, including patriarchy, colonialism, and class hierarchy, which intensifies their silencing (Spivak, 1988).

### **2.3.5 The recovery of the subaltern voice is limited by dominant discourse.**

Spivak asserts that attempts to recover or give voice to the subaltern are constrained by the very discursive structures that produced the subaltern's silence in the first place (Spivak, 1988).

## **Research Methodology**

### **4.1 Research Paradigm**

This study follows a qualitative, interpretive, and postcolonial research paradigm. It focuses on understanding meanings, power relations, and textual representation rather than quantifiable measures. The research interprets how Henrietta Lacks is represented in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* through the lens of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial concepts of subalternity, epistemic violence, and representation, emphasizing the social, historical, and ethical contexts that shape her marginalization.

#### 4.2 Data Collection Technique

The primary data for this study consists of Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010). The research employs documentary and textual data collection, focusing on passages, chapters, and narrative segments that describe Henrietta Lacks, her family, and the scientific and medical institutions involved. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles and credible historical texts, provide additional context. A purposive sampling strategy is used to select sections where issues of agency, consent, marginalization, and representation are most evident.

#### 4.3 Data Analysis Technique

The study uses qualitative content analysis combined with interpretive textual analysis to examine how Skloot represents Henrietta Lacks within medical and historical discourses. The analysis follows Coding relevant text, Thematic categorization, Interpretive analysis, Critical evaluation. This approach ensures that the analysis is systematic, theory-driven, and grounded in textual evidence, revealing the intersection of race, gender, and institutional power in Henrietta Lacks's story.

#### Data Analysis

Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010) documents the life, death, and posthumous exploitation of Henrietta Lacks, a poor African American woman whose cervical cancer cells were taken without consent in 1951 and later became the first immortal human cell line, known as HeLa. While these cells transformed modern medicine, Henrietta herself remained erased from scientific recognition, and her family continued to experience economic, epistemic, and social marginalization. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) offers a powerful theoretical lens through which this erasure can be understood. Spivak defines the subaltern as those rendered voiceless by dominant structures of power legal, scientific, political within which their speech is neither recognized nor authorized. Through this framework, Henrietta Lacks emerges not merely as an exploited subject but as a structurally silenced subaltern woman.

Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot speak because institutional systems do not provide a space in which their speech can be received as meaningful (Spivak, 1988). Henrietta's interactions with the medical establishment exemplify this condition with striking clarity. When she enters Johns Hopkins Hospital for treatment, she does so as a poor Black woman in a segregated healthcare system. Although Hopkins treated Black patients, it operated within a rigid racial and class hierarchy that denied them agency. It is also found that doctors repeatedly took samples of Henrietta's cells without informing her or seeking consent: "No one had told Henrietta that doctors were taking samples of her cells or that they would be used for research" (Skloot, 2010, P. 33). This lack of consent was not an anomaly but an institutional

norm, as “it was standard practice to take tissue samples without consent, and no one saw anything wrong with it” (Skloot, 2010, P. 131).

Henrietta’s “speech” is thus confined to patient compliance. She is diagnosed, examined, and used, but never consulted or acknowledged as an epistemic subject. As Spivak asserts, the subaltern is not simply unheard but “spoken for” within dominant discourse (Spivak, 1988, P. 287).

Henrietta’s body becomes a site of medical extraction, while her voice, understanding, and consent are rendered irrelevant. In this sense, her silence is not personal but structural.

This silencing intensifies after Henrietta’s death. Her cells achieve immortality, while her identity disappears. Scientists name the cell line “HeLa,” derived from the first letters of her name, yet “no one knew who she was” (Skloot, 2010, P. 2). As Skloot observes, “the cells were immortal, but the woman from whom they came was all but forgotten” (Skloot, 2010, P. 25). This abstraction exemplifies Spivak’s claim that the subaltern body may be appropriated while the subaltern voice remains inaudible (Spivak, 1988). Henrietta’s biological material “speaks” through data, experiments, and medical breakthroughs, but Henrietta herself does not.

Spivak sharply critiques representation, arguing that it often reproduces silence rather than dismantling it: “Representation has not withered away” (Spivak, 1988, P. 275). In Skloot’s narrative, scientific and journalistic representations repeatedly erase Henrietta’s subjectivity. Scientists reduce her to laboratory material, “Doctors saw cells. They didn’t see Henrietta” (Skloot, 2010, P. 238). Medical charts record her tumor but exclude her suffering: “The charts recorded her tumor, not her pain” (Skloot, 2010, P. 18). Such representations prioritize biomedical knowledge while excluding lived experience, reinforcing Spivak’s concept of epistemic violence.

This epistemic violence extends beyond Henrietta to her family. Despite the global profitability of HeLa cells, “Henrietta’s cells became one of the most important tools in medicine,” yet “her family couldn’t afford health insurance” (Skloot, 2010, P. 9). Companies sold her cells for profit “hundreds of dollars a vial” while her children lived in poverty (Skloot, 2010, P. 93). For decades, “nobody ever explained to Henrietta’s children what HeLa cells really were” (Skloot, 2010, P. 163). When researchers finally contacted them, the lack of transparent communication led that the family members to believe that “scientists were experimenting on them” (Skloot, 2010, P. 168).

Spivak defines epistemic violence as the process through which dominant knowledge systems overwrite subaltern ways of knowing (Spivak, 1988, P. 280). The Lacks family’s confusion, fear, and mistrust are not signs of ignorance but rational responses to historical exploitation. However, because their understanding does not align with scientific discourse, it is dismissed. Their lived knowledge is rendered illegitimate, reinforcing subaltern invisibility.

Spivak further emphasizes that the subaltern woman occupies the most silenced position within global power structures: “The subaltern woman will be as mute as ever” (Spivak, 1988, P. 297). Henrietta Lacks embodies this double and triple marginalization. As mentioned in the Skloot’s work that “a black woman in a white, male medical system” (Skloot, 2010, P. 31), her body becomes available for extraction and experimentation. Her reproductive

organs are the site of scientific intervention, reflecting the historical exploitation of Black female bodies. As Skloot notes, “her body became a resource, not a person” (2010, P. 220).

This erasure is tragically mirrored in the fate of Henrietta’s daughter Elsie, who was institutionalized due to intellectual disability. Elsie was “locked in a ward, neglected, and left to die” (Skloot, 2010, P. 266), and “no one kept records of what happened to her” (Skloot, 2010, P. 270). Elsie’s story intensifies Spivak’s argument by demonstrating how race, gender, disability, and class intersect to produce extreme subaltern silence.

Although Skloot attempts to recover Henrietta’s humanity, Spivak cautions that recovery itself is mediated by power (Spivak, 1988). Henrietta never speaks directly; her voice is reconstructed through medical records, secondhand memories, and institutional archives. Even recognition, public acknowledgment of Henrietta’s contribution or ethical debates about consent remains symbolic. Structural inequality persists as pharmaceutical industries continue to profit while the Lacks family struggles for healthcare access (Skloot, 2010).

Thus, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* does not resolve the problem of subaltern silence; it exposes it. The text confirms Spivak’s central claim that “the subaltern cannot speak” (Spivak, 1988, P. 308). Henrietta Lacks is prevented from speaking by dominant systems of knowledge, misrepresented through abstraction, subjected to epistemic violence, and doubly marginalized as a Black woman. While she may be narrated, celebrated, or mourned, she cannot fully speak within the structures that produced her erasure.

Through Spivak’s theoretical framework, Henrietta Lacks emerges as a powerful case study of subaltern silencing in modern biomedical history. Skloot’s narrative makes this silence visible, compelling readers to confront the ethical cost of scientific progress built upon erased lives.

## Conclusion

This study explored the representation of Henrietta Lacks as a subaltern figure in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* through the theoretical lens of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s concept of subalternity. The analysis demonstrates that Henrietta’s silencing was not accidental but systematically produced by intersecting structures of race, class, gender, and scientific authority. Her body was transformed into a valuable site of biomedical knowledge, while her agency, consent, and subjectivity were excluded from institutional narratives, exemplifying Spivak’s notion of epistemic violence. Although Rebecca Skloot’s narrative plays an important role in exposing historical injustice and ethical exploitation, it remains constrained by dominant modes of representation. Henrietta’s voice is reconstructed through archives, scientific discourse, and authorial mediation rather than direct self-representation, reinforcing Spivak’s argument that the subaltern cannot fully “speak” within hegemonic systems of knowledge. The study further highlights how Henrietta’s position as a Black woman intensified her marginalization, situating her at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression. Ultimately, this research reveals that while the text challenges historical erasure and raises ethical awareness, it also exposes the limitations of narrative recovery, underscoring the persistent structural silencing of marginalized lives within scientific and institutional frameworks.

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