On Subaltermity and Representation:

Female and Post Colonial Subjects Claiming Universal Human Rights in 1948

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Abstract

Recent research has questioned the dominant narrative of human rights as a Western project, by re-reading the drafting of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, as rooted in conflicting cultural narratives, rather than stemming from a Western hegemonic consensus. Yet, such readings may consolidate static notions of particularity in which narratives on religion and culture are given greater importance than that of gender. Hence the need to look specifically at the unique non-Western and female subjects who represented their countries in the drafting process, such as Begum Shaista Ikramullah (Pakistan), Mehta Hansa (India) and Minerva Bernardino (Dominican Republic). This paper draws on Spivak’s work on subaltermity by exploring the possibilities and constrains of female representation in relation to change. How did the concept of human rights change due to the participation of these United Nations women delegates? Additionally, how can subaltermity be understood in relation to women’s history in the aftermath of the social crisis that led to the drafting of the UDHR? The study emphasizes the participation of these women as having been crucial for the political articulation of human rights as an inclusive concept.