

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

In Other Words

Sangeeta Ray

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

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Writing Autobiography, Writing Spivak: In Lieu of an Introduction

Partial Beginnings

This book has taken a while to take the shape it has. When Andrew McNeillie asked me if I would consider writing a book on Spivak, my immediate answer was a categorical no. I felt the task to be impossible. How would I tackle the vast subject that is Spivak, the collection of works that arrive in every page in a dense prose that seems often impossible to parse? And then how would I write her without diminishing her presence – always excessively present – in that prose. If, as Landry and Maclean say in their introduction to *The Spivak Reader*, echoing Spivak writing about Derrida, that “Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is also this collection of texts” (2), wouldn’t the reader of my text feel frustrated at not finding a Spivak, or the Spivak they were looking for? Perhaps the fear was even more personal. Would I vanish in trying to write Spivak, reduced to an emulating disciple, whose role would be to enable an “accurate” reading of Spivak? In the end, of course, I did write the book, this book, a version of the many possible books that were discarded and rewritten. Andrew did give me a lot of leeway. Looking back at my correspondence with him, I realize how we negotiated the terrain in which Spivak could be discovered. Should we think of the various terms that one associates with Spivak and examine her development of said terms in a principled manner? I suggested that we think of Spivak in terms of questions posed: a “what is?” model that then would produce, hopefully, complicated answers. Or we could think of the various contributions that Spivak has made to different fields. I could imagine a book (which I did for a while) where I read Spivak’s engagements with Derrida and Marx on the one hand, and postcoloniality, ethics, and feminism on the other. Perhaps this book is closest to that book.

2 *Writing Autobiography, Writing Spivak: In Lieu of an Introduction*

My own encounter with Spivak is, in a way, exemplary.¹ As a graduate student, I discovered Spivak in the covers of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. It was the requisite graduate introduction to theory; it was the mid-eighties and I had just arrived via a Pan Am flight to the Midwest. I did not know much theory, but I did know, like most good postcolonial subjects, a lot of British literature. In college in Calcutta, I thoroughly traversed the discipline from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf. Repeating a Master's degree in the US seemed trivial at best. So to theory I gravitated, attempting to master dense literary criticism as philosophy and vice versa. In that class, taught by a medievalist, who mainly talked with his back to the students while scribbling intensely on the blackboard, I discovered, unlike most in the class, that I liked theory. We read books or a set of articles under several rubrics: terms and definitions came flying at us without much preparation; I spent days and nights in the library trying to marshal my thoughts and keep at least half a step ahead. As a foreign student living on a pittance, I tried to check books out of the library rather than buying them at the bookstore. Looking at the syllabus, I saw that we were supposed to read a major chunk of *Of Grammatology* in a couple of weeks. I raced to check out the book. I remember sitting down and opening the book and coming across this name that seemed Indian; not just Indian but Bengali. I was hooked and I did then what I ask my students not to do – that is, do not read an introduction or an essay by someone else on a theorist.² Read the “original” text. Reading Spivak's “Translator's Preface” to *Of Grammatology* remains for me, even today, one of the greatest reading experiences, and not least because it is anything but an introduction, complicating profoundly the distinction between original and originary texts. Now, writing this book 22 years after reading that preface, I remind myself that at the beginning, almost, Spivak had underlined the significance of responsibility for one's writing and reading:

[If] the assumption of responsibility for one's discourse leads to the conclusion that all conclusions are genuinely provisional and therefore inconclusive, that all origins are similarly unoriginal, that responsibility itself must cohabit with frivolity, this need not be cause for gloom. (xiii)

Perhaps it is this cautionary promise of promise that allowed me to write this book, and, while the book that follows is not a preface, maybe I can still use Spivak's description of the preface as an opening into my

book on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: “[T]here, is then, always already a preface between two hands holding open a book. And the ‘prefacer,’ of the same or another proper name as the ‘author,’ need not apologize for ‘repeating’ the text” (xiii).

I could now move to the required biography of Spivak and list her various accomplishments, publications, and contributions to the making of a field such as postcolonial studies, and/or postcolonial transnational feminist studies. I could use another critic’s quite gauche sculpting of Spivak as “the model product of an Indian undergraduate and an American graduate education – probably the most scholarly combination in the planet” (*IOW*, ix), as a way to underline her movement from a middle-class family in Calcutta to the upper echelons of academia in the United States via an initial stay in Iowa and a few visits elsewhere. But trying to capture the life and times of Spivak, and reducing her contributions to a pithy defining sentence, is impossible. Spivak is a literary theorist, a postcolonial critic, translator, feminist, Marxist, and deconstructionist. She has published on every significant social, political, and cultural topic that has engaged our times, while never losing sight of the role of the teacher in the university and beyond, to rural enclaves in Bangladesh and China. She remains an exemplary literary critic of English texts, demanding, at the same time, an investment in the languages of the South for a productive comparative literature in the twenty-first century.³ Her subtle criticism of the long reach of the native informant has allowed her to think through the role and function of the informant, not just in colonial discourse, but in transnational feminism that repeatedly bypasses women who remain on the fringes of a present condition marked by nationalism, postcoloniality, and migration. Her commitment to a planetary ethics has produced trenchant criticisms of the racialization of capital in the hands of a “managerial class all across the globe today in globalization who are many colors, again racialized” (“What is Enlightenment?” 199) and the manner in which the “transformation of indigenous knowledges into intellectual property deliberately bypasses the question of the subject” (“Claiming Transformations,” 123).

But above all, and in everything she writes, Spivak continues to take to task modes of critical self-representation, whether it be as an embattled Third World scholar in the First, a feminist who is both a Marxist and a deconstructionist, or a teacher who remains ethically responsible to pedagogy. My own engagements with Spivak’s work have

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changed and developed over time, especially in relation to her own self-representation in her work and her encounters with those who seek to represent her through her work. Such moments are particularly marked in Spivak's numerous interviews, beginning with her first in 1963, at the age of 18, in *Newsweek*, in an article entitled "Foreign Students: Diplomas and Diplomacy." The interview was intended to capture the flow of foreign students to the US as a way of registering intercultural exchange between the US and the rest of the world. It seeks to register the culture shock that many students must have felt, or so the thinking goes, appropriately captured by a photo of Gayatri Spivak appearing on the cover in a sari. She refers to this interview in another one recorded by Angela Ingram in 1987 and notes:

[When I was being interviewed] by these blokes, I absolutely had no compunction in producing this deathless line. I only know because I got hate mail you would not believe. I said – and I was being honest because I felt that I should say what I thought – "I don't understand why Americans who don't know you smile at you on the street. I've been traumatized." Can you imagine? Really. This was a very genuine kind of a thing. I was a luscious nineteen-year-old, and they smiled at me because, to an extent, they didn't really think. It's like women in *National Geographic*, where they are allowed to have bare breasts. I was not someone with whom they had the same rules, the same sexual code of behavior. So it was okay. But you know, that comes from two things. One is the fact that I was a "communist" so early, right? So I kind of felt politics in other people. But also a communist out of moral outrage. But it also comes from a very bad thing, which is my caste-fix. Brahmin women have always been unspoken. (PC, 84-5)

Reading this passage always makes me giddy. There is so much to unpack here. Spivak's recollection of a traumatic event; her dismissal of the, obviously, more empowered interviewers as "blokes," who had no idea what they were up against; her conviction that she could and must speak her mind and politicize an everyday, seemingly benign, practice as a trauma for the other. Trauma in benevolence. Benevolence as trauma. One can already see in the re-presented 18-year old the Spivak to come. But then she also represents herself, from the present vantage point, as a luscious 19-year old whose clothed image in a sari conjures up images of bare breasted "other women" in *National Geographic*. A representation that is further compounded by her investment in

being a communist and an outspoken Brahmin woman. Race, class, caste, gender, and politics are evoked to challenge the notion of an essential foreigner captured in a seemingly unproblematic rendition of the Indian female student. But the slippages between women ranging from middle-class Indian Brahmin, to impoverished foreign student in Cornell, to subaltern bare-breasted women leaves me gasping for air. Does being a communist somehow help suture, however sloppily, these categories? Does Spivak rest uneasily on the Brahmin note? When she remarks that it is a bad thing to be an outspoken Brahmin woman, is she actually being good because it gives her strength to confront being othered? Does being Brahmin also allow her to be luscious?

A page earlier in the Ingram interview, entitled, "Postmarked Calcutta, India," Spivak challenges the interviewer's assumption that she can pass without being noticed in an airport in India. The idea of being different and thus marked carries over everywhere, including home. In India, given Spivak's height, spiky hair, and "hopeless sense of dress," she is considered as "some kind of foreign person who is *so* eccentric that she can dress [and look] like this" (PC, 82). However, the spiky hair produces another possible identity, that of the widow. Hair is an important signifier of femininity. Spivak's spiky hair was not seen in India, especially in Bengal, as a westernized stylish cut. Being 45, childless, and not married in the traditional sense of staying with one husband for the duration, people read her cut as a signifier of asexuality, a widow's cut. I wonder if the widow's cut was perceived as a Brahmin's widow cut. Spivak does not say so, but given all her work on the regulative psychobiography of women as sati, or rather sati as good wife and good woman,⁴ one could be forced to read this image as such. In the interview, Spivak leaves both accounts intact, begging the reader to make the connections between a hyper-sexualized figure as imagined by a 45-year-old looking back at a possible casting of a 19-year-old by the dominant western gaze, and a 45-year-old imagining her production as an hypo-aexualized widow by the dominant Indian. Both are moments of acute discomfort, but only one produces trauma. Why? The question is never answered except through Spivak's attempt to substitute her being read as a widow by her own reading of her self as an eccentric, a role further accentuated by her recourse to the accents of a British English. Interestingly, it is accent, an English accent, which is used to displace anxiety and lack of control over being read by others. In India, despite her tremendous fluency in Bengali, she can use her

accent to help produce herself as an eccentric if she so desires. In the US, enraged by a screaming white guy who did not realize that she lived and owned a home in the same street, she can roll down her car window and scold him in a very English accent, “*Stop muttering.*” “And he was so amazed, that someone dressed like me had said [that] to him” (PC, 90).

This interview is particularly significant because it is conducted upon her return from having taught, as an academic, for the first time in India. Perhaps this garnering of an academic status at “home” allows her to open up to the many ways one can be and choose to be represented. It is also an interview where Spivak admits to having not just privilege, but also power: “You see, [she says to Ingram] I use positions of power” (PC, 89). She admits this parenthetically, and it is this recognition of the power move that mitigates, for me, some of her more drastic deployments of shifting categories to describe herself. I used this interview to open up the space for my engagement with the collection of interviews gathered together in *The Post-Colonial Critic*. I revisit them here, and have thoroughly revised and self-consciously reworked my earlier review of the collection as a way to mark my own transformative experience in reading Spivak. My essay was written for a special issue of *Hypatia* in 1992, and then it was republished in a collection entitled *Language and Liberation: Feminism, Philosophy, and Language* in 1999. In its second incarnation, I added an autobiographical anecdote and a postscript to situate my own reading of Spivak, underlining my critical stance on the “original” essay. In a fashion, I practice here self-citatoriality as a mode of reading and writing Spivak. I use the essay as a point of departure for my introduction to this book on Spivak to mark the (im)possibility of ever resting easily with the collection of texts that is Spivak.

The Postcolonial Critic: Shifting Subjects

Many feminist and postcolonial critics continue to use a self-defining, clarifying sentence to produce a subject position vis-à-vis a text that they are attempting to read and critique. Here is one that I could use: I am a postcolonial feminist critic educated in a former British colony who now teaches in an American academic institution, and I am therefore intimately implicated in my reading of this text. One could imagine