Definition: **Spivak, Gayatri** from *Key Terms in Literary Theory*


Summary Article: **Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty**

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Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is one of the most influential literary and cultural theorists of the late twentieth century. She is widely regarded as one of the founding figures of postcolonial theory, along with Edward W. Said and Homi K. Bhabha, but she is also a leading translator and commentator on the thought of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida and the Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi, and has made important contributions to debates about the future of comparative literature and the structural inequalities of neoliberal globalization.

Born and educated in Kolkata, India, Spivak moved to the United States in the 1960s to study under the American literary critic Paul de Man at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Her dissertation was on the poetry of W. B. Yeats. But it was Spivak's English translation of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida's *De la Grammatologie* in 1976 that established her reputation as a deconstructive critic. Spivak went on to write articles on Marxism and deconstruction and French feminist thought in the 1980s for journals such as *diacritics* and *Critical Inquiry*; she subsequently became involved in a critical dialogue with the Subaltern Studies historians, a group of historians who sought to challenge the elitism of South Asian historiography by examining historical events from the standpoint of the subaltern or the socially excluded in South Asian society. One of Spivak's most well known essays is “Can the subaltern speak?” (1995a [1988]), an essay which offers a deconstructive reading of the term “representation” in Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, and applies this reading to Hindu scriptures and colonial archives on the practice of sati-suicide in colonial India. It is perhaps this essay and Spivak's collection of interviews *The Postcolonial Critic* which have established her as a prominent postcolonial critic. Spivak is, however, uneasy with this label, and this uneasiness is signaled in the title of her magnum opus, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999), a book that interrogates the emancipatory claims of postcolonial studies in the context of the depredations of global capitalism. More recently in *Death of a Discipline* (2003a), a book of essays based on a lecture series delivered at the University California at Irvine, Spivak has sought to define a political vocation for comparative literature by focusing on subaltern languages as active cultural media for interrupting the corporate agenda of global development.

The literary critic Edward W. Said has argued in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* that “all texts are worldly, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted” (1983: 4). Like Said,
Spivak has also stressed that the activity of reading literary texts is intimately bound up with the social, political, and economic world. In an essay titled “Reading the world” Spivak has argued that the speculative reason associated with the practice of literary interpretation is crucial to reading the world: “Without the reading of the world as a book, there is no prediction, no planning, no taxes, no laws, no welfare, no war”. And yet, as Spivak goes on to explain, the world's politicians and businessmen “read the world in terms of rationality and averages, as if it were a textbook” (1987: 95). For Spivak, what is particularly useful about the act of literary interpretation is its potential to imagine an alternative to the economic rationalization of the world and its resources: “If, through our study of literature, we can ourselves learn and teach others to read the world in the ‘proper’ risky way, and to act upon that lesson, perhaps we literary people would not forever be such helpless victims” (95). If there appears to be a conceptual resemblance between Said's account of the worldliness of texts and Spivak's political injunction to read the world, it is also important to stress that Spivak takes issue with Said's criticism of Derrida's distinction between textuality and the world. In Said's account, “Derrida's criticism moves us into the text, Foucault's in and out” (1983: 183). For Spivak, however, this “plangent aphorism … betrays a profound misapprehension of the notion of ‘textuality’” (1995a: 87). Like Derrida, Spivak views a text as anything that is based on a system of a signs and codes. In this definition, a text could be a system of government such as democracy or apartheid, an economic division of labor, as well as a work of visual art or a literary text.

Spivak's rereading of value as a deconstructive sign in Marx's economic writings is an interesting example of this.

In “Scattered speculations on the question of value” Spivak traces the ways in which value is an ambivalent sign in Marx’s work which always contains a trace of the worker's physical labor power. In the face of arguments that Marx’s labor theory of value is no longer relevant to describe contemporary neoliberal economics, Spivak insists that “any critique of the labor theory of value, pointing at the unfeasibility of the theory under post-industrialism, or as a calculus of economic indicators, ignores the dark presence of the Third World” (1987: 167). In so doing, Spivak demonstrates the political significance of deconstruction as a strategy for reading the world. Just as Marx emphasized that the masculine, industrial working-class subject of nineteenth-century Europe is “the source of value” for industrial capitalism, so Spivak argues that the “so-called ‘Third World’ … produces the wealth and possibility of the ‘First World’” (1990: 96). In saying this, Spivak also challenges the view of the Third World as a primitive, premodern, or underdeveloped space outside of the circuits of capitalism.

Spivak's invocation of the gendered international division of labor here certainly demonstrates the continuing relevance of Marx's labor theory of value to the gendered and geographical dynamics of contemporary global capitalism. However, the casual and nonunionized conditions of labor for many women (and children) employed in sweatshops and free trade zones, and other forms of subcontracted labor in the global South would seem to make it difficult for such workers to organize and protest against their exploitation, let alone to promote the social redistribution of capital. While Spivak is critical of the international division of labor, she is also skeptical of the transparent claims made by benevolent First World intellectuals to “speak for” subaltern workers in the global South. In A Critique of Postcolonial Reason, for example, Spivak criticizes the “moral imperialism” of “boycott politics” (1999: 415). Focusing on the emergence of a public discourse in the US media during the 1990s around the exploitation of child labor in the Bangladeshi garment manufacturing industry, Spivak criticizes the racism of benevolent liberal reformers, who supported “sanctions against Southern garment factories that use
child labor” (416). In common with the liberal reformers, she condemns the exploitation of child labor. However she also questions the efficacy of sanctions against Bangladeshi garment factories that use child labor on the grounds that such sanctions do nothing to redress the broader absence of unionized labor laws or infrastructural reforms in countries such as Bangladesh.

Spivak’s critique of the “moral imperialism” associated with “First World” anti-sweatshop campaigns for consumer boycotts of certain commodities that are produced by “Third World” workers under conditions of sweated labor has been taken up in recent critiques of the contemporary anticapitalist movement. The American cultural critic Bruce Robbins, for example, characterizes the “First World” consumer’s contemplation of the magnitude of the world economic system and the international division of labor as a contemporary example of Immanuel Kant’s theory of the sublime. Robbins acknowledges that there is no guarantee that a “First World” consumer’s contemplation of what he aptly calls the “sweatshop sublime” will necessarily lead to their political mobilization; indeed, in many cases, a consumer’s experience of the “sweatshop sublime” may lead to political paralysis and inaction. Yet for Robbins, it is precisely the experience of hesitancy, self-questioning, and doubt associated with the sublime which complicates the “tempting simplicity of action.”

Significantly, Robbins cites Spivak’s *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* to support his argument. By juxtaposing Spivak’s critique of Kant’s foreclosure of the native informant in his analytic of the sublime with her critique of the “boycott politics” associated with the North American anti-sweatshop movement and Western human rights discourse, Robbins concludes that in Spivak’s *Critique*, “Kant’s analytic of the sublime does the same thing that western human rights discourse does when addressed to Bangladeshi sweatshops: it flattens out the complexity and difference of Third World society to suit a First World standard of ethical rationality” (Robbins 2002: 95).

Spivak’s criticism of Western human rights discourse is developed further in her writings on human rights and transnational literacy. She first defined what she means by transnational literacy in an essay titled “Teaching for the times.” In this essay, Spivak argues that literacy is not simply expertise in another language, but rather “the skill to differentiate between letters, so that an articulated script can be read, reread, written, rewritten” (1995b: 193). More importantly, “literacy allows us to sense that the other is not just a ‘voice,’ but that others produce articulated texts, even as they, like us, are written in and by a text not of our own making” (193). To clarify this claim, Spivak turns to *Fantasia (L’Amour, la fantasia)*, a novel by the Algerian feminist writer Assia Djebar, in which the narrator stages the trauma of being denied access to classical Arabic in French-occupied Algeria. In a passage from the third section of the novel entitled “Embraces,” the French-educated protagonist attempts to translate *Un Été au Sahara*, a story by the nineteenth-century French orientalist writer Eugène Fromentin, into Arabic for “Zohra, an eighty-year old rural mujahida (female freedom fighter)” (197). By translating Fromentin’s written text into an Arabic story, the narrator also retells the story of two Algerian prostitutes, murdered by the French army during a battle. In doing so, Spivak suggests that Djebar’s protagonist privileges the perspective of the two Algerian prostitutes in Fromentin’s text, and that in the act of translation the protagonist undoes her amnesia of the Arabic language. Such an example is significant because it stages the delegitimization of a non-European language by a dominant European language. In doing so, the protagonist also works to legitimize the Arabic language, which she has forgotten as a consequence of French colonial policies. For Spivak, this passage from Djebar’s *Fantasia* allows non-Arabic readers to grasp that “the other is not just a ‘voice,’ but that others produce articulated texts” (193).
Spivak has proceeded to refine what she means by transnational literacy in her claim that subaltern languages, or the subordinate languages of the global South, have restricted permeability, by which she means that subaltern languages are not widely spoken, read, or understood. Spivak develops this point in “Righting wrongs” (2003b), an article that was originally presented at the Oxford Amnesty lectures in 2001. In this article, Spivak argues that “the rural poor and... all species of the sub-proletariat” will remain an “object of benevolence in human rights discourse” without the recovering and training of the ethical imagination of such subaltern groups (206-7). To facilitate such training, Spivak proposes a rethinking of the subject of human rights from the standpoint of the rural poor and the subproletariat in South Asia. Such a rethinking demands a new pedagogy that is capable of suturing the damage wrought on subaltern groups in South Asia by centuries of class and caste oppression, as well as the transition from colonial modernity to globalization. What is crucial here for Spivak is that such a pedagogy should strive to “learn well one of the languages of the rural poor of the South” (208). In this sense, transnational literacy signals a shift in Spivak’s work from the politics of reading the world to an ethical commitment to learn from the subaltern.

SEE ALSO: Bhabha, Homi; Derrida, Jacques; Foucault, Michel; Postcolonial Studies; Said, Edward

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS


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