

WHY SPIVAK?

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is best known for her overtly political use of contemporary cultural and critical theories to challenge the legacy of colonialism on the way we read and think about literature and culture. What is more, Spivak's critical interventions encompass a range of theoretical interests, including Marxism, feminism, deconstruction, postcolonial theory and cutting-edge work on globalisation. Along with other leading contemporary intellectuals such as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, Spivak has challenged the disciplinary conventions of literary criticism and academic philosophy by focusing on the cultural texts of those people who are often marginalised by dominant western culture: the new immigrant, the working class, women and the postcolonial subject.

By championing the voices and texts of such minority groups, Spivak has also challenged some of the dominant ideas of the contemporary era. Such ideas include, for example, the notion that the western world is more civilised, democratic and developed than the non-western world, or that the present, postcolonial era is more modern and progressive than the earlier historical period of European colonialism in the nineteenth century.

Indeed, for Spivak the effects of European colonialism did not simply vanish as many former European colonies achieved national independence in the second half of the twentieth century. Rather, the social,

political and economic structures that were established during colonial rule continued to inflect the cultural, political and economic life of post-colonial nation states ranging from Ireland to Algeria; from India to Pakistan and Jamaica to Mexico. In common with many anti-colonial intellectuals, including Frantz Fanon (1925–61) and Partha Chatterjee (1947–), Spivak emphasises how anti-colonial nationalism assumed a distinctively bourgeois character, and was thus perceived by many to reproduce the social and political inequalities that were predominant under colonial rule. Spivak further suggests that the emergence of the United States of America as a global economic super-power in the latter half of the twentieth century has redrawn the old colonial maps in the interests of multinational corporate finance and on the backs of ‘Third World’ women.

Taken together, what these critical interventions collectively demonstrate is the importance of reading Gayatri Spivak. For there are few other contemporary intellectuals who have managed to sustain a sophisticated engagement with contemporary critical and cultural theory, while always grounding that intellectual engagement in urgent political considerations about colonialism, postcolonialism and the contemporary international division of labour between the ‘First World’ and the ‘Third World’.

GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK

Spivak’s intellectual work has been shaped by the experience of post-colonial migration from India to the USA, where she currently teaches. In *The Post-Colonial Critic* (1990), Spivak identifies herself as a postcolonial intellectual caught between the socialist ideals of the national independence movement in India and the legacy of a colonial education system. In a profound moment of self-parody, Spivak compares herself to the drunken father in Hanif Kureishi’s play about South Asian immigrants living in Britain, *My Beautiful Launderette*, because this character ‘uses an outdated “socialist” language in a colonial accent’ (Spivak 1990: 69).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was born in Calcutta on 24 February 1942, the year of the great artificial famine and five years before independence from British colonial rule. She graduated from Presidency College of the University of Calcutta in 1959 with a first-class honours degree in English, including gold medals for English and Bengali literature. In this respect, her education could be regarded as a legacy

of the colonial education policies that had been in place in India since the days of the British Empire in the nineteenth century.

The colonial administrator and English historian Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800–59) had written in the early nineteenth century of how the British Empire's policies on education in India encouraged educated, middle-class Indian subjects to internalise the cultural values of the British. For Macaulay and other British colonial bureaucrats of the time, the teaching of British cultural values to the upper middle class in India was intended to instruct and enlighten the Indian middle class in the morally and politically superior culture of the British Empire. By employing such policies and practices, the British tried to persuade the Indian middle class that colonial rule was in its best interests.

For Spivak, the teaching of English literature in colonial India provided an insidious, though effective way of executing the civilising mission of imperialism. Spivak's literary criticism has worked to criticise this ideological function of English literature in the colonial context. In 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism' (1985) for example, Spivak contends that 'It should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English' (Spivak 1985: 243).

Spivak left India for the USA in 1959 to take a Masters' degree at Cornell University, followed by a year's fellowship at Girton College, Cambridge, England. Nevertheless, the intellectual tradition of left-wing, anti-colonial thought that was prevalent in India since the early twentieth century continued to tacitly influence Spivak's work. As the influential postcolonial critic Robert Young emphasises, Spivak's thought is best understood if it is situated in terms of ongoing political debates within India about the employment of classic European Marxism in the context of anti-colonial struggles, and the failure of Indian socialism to recognise the histories and struggles of women, the underclass, the tribal communities and the rural peasantry in Indian society (Young 2001: 350–52).

After completing the fellowship in England, Spivak subsequently returned to the USA to take up an instructor's position at the University of Iowa, while completing a doctoral dissertation on the work of the Irish poet W.B. Yeats (1865–1939), which was being directed by the literary critic Paul de Man (1919–83) at Cornell University, New York state.

THE POLITICS OF DECONSTRUCTION

Along with the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–), Spivak's professor Paul de Man was one of the most prominent and rigorous advocates of deconstruction in North America during the 1960s and 1970s (see box on Derrida and deconstruction, pp. 26–7). De Man's approach to reading emphasised how the meaning of a literary text is not stable or transparent, but is radically indeterminate and therefore always open to further questioning. For de Man, the practice of literary criticism is not a matter of formulating a single, correct interpretation; instead, de Man argues that texts contain blind spots which always and necessarily lead to errors and misreadings.

De Man's deconstructive criticism has certainly influenced Spivak's early readings of British colonial archives and official Indian historiography; her readings of William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and the works of W.B. Yeats; as well as her groundbreaking translation and scholarly preface to Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. For some readers, Spivak's allegiance to deconstruction might at first seem surprising when one considers Spivak's overtly political commitment to champion the cause of minority groups. After all, the deconstructive assertion that the meaning of a text is radically unstable and indeterminate would also surely weaken the effectiveness of any political intervention?

For Spivak, however, the popular understanding of deconstruction as apolitical and relativist is both reductive and simplistic. From the outset, Spivak has persistently and persuasively demonstrated that deconstruction is a powerful political and theoretical tool. One of the ways in which Spivak has demonstrated the political value of deconstruction is by focusing on the rhetorical blind spots or grounding mistakes which stabilise conventional notions of truth and reality. Along with other key figures such as Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau, and Edward Said, Spivak has foregrounded the textual elements that shape our understanding of the social world, and thereby questioned the binary opposition between philosophical or literary texts and the so-called real world.

Like Said and Derrida, Spivak has examined the way in which the real world is constituted by a network of texts, from British colonial archives to US foreign policies, computerised stock exchange market reports and World Bank Reports on the 'Third World' debt. In doing

so, Spivak has increasingly sought to challenge some of the dominant ideas about contemporary globalisation. One such idea is that the new speed and flexibility of technology enables the effective transnational circulation of people, money and information. This dominant idea clearly ignores the fact that the circulation of money and information is profitably regulated by rich, industrial 'First World' nations, while the vast majority of the world's population are living in a state of poverty and oppression.

By highlighting the political and economic interests which are served by the economic text of globalisation, Spivak exposes how the world is represented from the dominant perspective and geopolitical location of the 'First World' to the exclusion of other disenfranchised groups. Such a radical challenge to the truth claims of western democracy and globalisation has expanded the focus of deconstruction from the textual analysis of literature or philosophy to include the contemporary economic and political text. As I will go on to argue, this change in focus also highlights the political consequences of all reading practices.

THE QUESTION OF STYLE

Spivak's attempt to map the effects of different colonial legacies to the way we think about contemporary cultural objects and everyday life is often presented in a complex language and style that may at first appear difficult, and can be off-putting to some readers approaching her work for the first time. What is more, this difficult prose style may seem to contradict the overt political aim of Spivak's work: to articulate the voice and political agency of oppressed subjects in the 'Third World'.

Like many other thinkers of the twentieth century, including the German philosopher Theodor Adorno (1903–69) in particular, Spivak crucially challenges the common-sense assumption that clear, transparent language is the best way to represent the oppressed. In fact, Spivak suggests that the opposite is actually true. For the transparent systems of representation through which things are known and understood are also the systems which control and dominate people. For this reason, Spivak's thought emphasises the limitations of linguistic and philosophical representation, and their potential to mask real social and political inequalities in the contemporary world. As Spivak states in an interview:

[W]hen I'm pushed these days with the old criticism – 'Oh! Spivak is too hard to understand!' – I laugh, and I say okay. I will give you, just for your sake, a monosyllabic sentence, and you'll see that you can't rest with it. My monosyllabic sentence is: *We know plain prose cheats.*

(Danius and Jonsson 1993: 33)

Spivak's statement that 'plain prose cheats' clearly illustrates how the basic syntactic structure of the 'monosyllabic sentence' is contradicted by the semantic content of the sentence. Yet the point that Spivak is trying to convey in this example is not simply a play with words. Far from simply presenting her arguments in inaccessible prose, Spivak's essays and books carefully link disparate histories, places and methodologies in ways that often refuse to adhere to the systematic conventions of western critical thought. Such a refusal to be systematic is not merely a symptom of current academic or theoretical fashion, but a conscious rhetorical strategy calculated to engage the implied reader in the critical interrogation of how we make sense of literary, social and economic texts in the aftermath of colonialism.

SUBALTERN STUDIES

Over fifty years after the declaration of India's national independence from British colonial rule, one of the most important political questions that Spivak's work asks is why nationalism has failed to represent the majority of India's population. During the struggle for national independence in India, the nationalist political figure Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948) had led a policy of passive resistance against the British. This policy mobilised the popular political support of subaltern groups (see box, p. 48), including the rural peasantry and women in a practice of *satyagraha*, or feminised non-violent struggle. There are numerous other examples of subaltern resistance to colonial rule and class oppression from the eighteenth century onwards, but these are largely unrecorded in the annals of official history.

As Spivak emphasises, the work of the Subaltern Studies historians has sought to correct the class and gender blindness of elite bourgeois national independence in India by re-writing history from below. For Subaltern Studies historians such as Ranajit Guha (1923–), the national independence movement ultimately conserved the existing class structure in India: leaving a small group of educated, middle-class men

holding political and economic power, and a large impoverished population of rural-based peasant labourers, with little or no access to the benefits of national independence. Spivak has developed the ideas of the Subaltern Studies historians further, emphasising that the western Marxist model of social change that these historians employ does not do justice to the complex histories of subaltern insurgency and resistance which they seek to recover.

This critique of the Subaltern Studies historians exemplifies how Spivak has relentlessly questioned the ability of western theoretical models of political resistance and social change to adequately represent the histories and lives of the disenfranchised in India. More specifically, Spivak has argued that the everyday lives of many 'Third World' women are so complex and unsystematic that they cannot be known or represented in any straightforward way by the vocabularies of western critical theory. In this respect, the lived experiences of such women can be seen to present a crisis in the knowledge and understanding of western critical theory (Hitchcock 1999: 65). For Spivak, this crisis in knowledge highlights the ethical risks at stake when privileged intellectuals make political claims on behalf of oppressed groups. These risks include the danger that the voices, lives and struggles of 'Third World' women will be silenced and contained within the technical vocabulary of western critical theory.

Such an awareness of the ethical risks involved in postcolonial theory is not merely self-defeating, however. In her writings on Mahasweta Devi's fiction, for example, Spivak frequently engages with the singular histories and lives of 'Third World', subaltern women in order to disrupt the codes and conventions of western knowledge and the maintenance of imperial power.

SPIVAK AND FEMINISM

As I suggested, Spivak has further expanded the historical research of the Subaltern Studies historians by focusing on the experiences of subaltern women, which have been effaced in official Indian history. In 'A Literary Representation of the Subaltern' (1988) Spivak argues that the Bengali language fiction writer Mahasweta Devi (1926–) powerfully articulates the history of subaltern women through her female protagonist, Jashoda, in the story 'Breast Giver'. The story depicts the decay of Jashoda's maternal body after she is employed as a professional

mother in a wealthy Brahmin household. For Spivak, Jashoda's brutalised maternal body powerfully highlights the failure of Indian nationalism to emancipate lower-class, subaltern women, and also challenges the assumption, predominant in western society and culture, that women's reproductive labour is unwaged, domestic work.

Another crucial contribution to feminist thought that Spivak has made is the critique of western feminism, especially its universalising claim to speak for all women, regardless of differences in class, religion, culture, language or nationality. As a young Indian woman starting a career in the US academy in the late 1960s, Spivak describes how feminism was 'the best of a collection of accessible scenarios' (Spivak 1987: 134). Yet despite this general leaning towards western feminism, Spivak has questioned the 'lie' of a global sisterhood between 'First World' and 'Third World' women, pointing instead to the complicity of western feminism and imperialism. By doing so, Spivak expands and complicates the critical terms and political objectives of feminism in a way that is more sensitive to questions of difference.

One of the major challenges facing Spivak is whether talking about these issues in an academic setting will make any difference to the lives and experiences of the disempowered, subaltern groups she describes. Throughout her work, Spivak is constantly critical of her own position as an educated, middle-class professor, who now holds a chair at Columbia University in New York City. What is more significant, however, is the way in which Spivak talks about her location as a middle-class Indian migrant intellectual in the US academy. As the contemporary cultural critics Aijaz Ahmad, Arif Dirlik and Rey Chow have emphasised, the rise of postcolonial studies in the US academy is co-extensive with US foreign policy and economic investment in the 'Third World'. This historical parallel might suggest that postcolonial studies indirectly serve the interests of US foreign policy and global economic expansion by producing knowledge about the 'Third World'. To counter this difficulty, Spivak persistently emphasises how in her own critical thought she resists the temptation to appear as a spokesperson or native informant for the 'Third World' in the 'First World' academy, even though she acknowledges that the position of a famous postcolonial intellectual who lives and works in the western metropolitan academy and champions the cause of minority groups is a position that is beset with contradiction and paradox.

SPIVAK'S KEY IDEAS

For Spivak, the traditional disciplines of rational academic inquiry have restricted the way we think about texts and ideas in relation to the social, political and economic world. Before we can learn anything about the economic text of globalisation or the patriarchal oppression of 'Third World' women, Spivak insists that we must first unlearn the privileged systems of western knowledge that have indirectly served the interests of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Spivak's thought traverses a range of critical theories, texts and contexts which overlap and intricate in illuminating and radical ways. It would thus be impossible to reduce Spivak's thinking to a single critical position. Instead, the Key Ideas section traces the evolution of Spivak's most important interventions in a way that is in keeping with the political spirit and theoretical complexity of her thought.

Chapter 1 starts off by looking at Spivak's aphoristic and provisional style of writing. Situating Spivak's style in relation to poststructuralist debates about the relationship between the text and the world, this chapter considers how Spivak's style of writing resists the temptation to represent oppressed minorities in a transparent discourse that has traditionally denied their voice and agency.

Chapter 2 examines the influence of deconstruction on Spivak's thought and traces Spivak's inventive use of deconstruction from the 'Translator's Preface' to Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1976) to 'The Setting to Work of Deconstruction' (1998). Against the charge that Spivak's work is opaque and inaccessible, this chapter considers how Spivak has changed the emphasis of deconstruction by focusing her critical attention on contemporary political concerns such as globalisation and the international division of labour.

Discussion then turns to the intellectual and theoretical sources that have influenced Spivak's writings about the subaltern. After a consideration of Spivak's reading of the Subaltern Studies historical research, Chapter 3 proceeds to examine Spivak's most famous and controversial essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988; first published in 1985). To set this essay in context, the chapter initially considers Spivak's critique of representation in the work of French intellectuals Michel Foucault (1926–84) and Gilles Deleuze (1925–95). Then, the chapter moves on to look at the representation of widow sacrifice in the nineteenth-century colonial archives and the Hindu texts of antiquity. Finally, the

chapter examines what is at stake in Spivak's provocative assertion that 'there is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak' (Spivak 1988: 308).

Chapter 4 continues the discussion of the subaltern woman by focusing on Spivak's contribution to feminism. 'French Feminism in an International Frame' (1981) is perhaps Spivak's clearest argument against the colonial benevolence of western feminism. In this essay, Spivak criticises Julia Kristeva's (1941–) arrogant focus on the European feminist self in the book *About Chinese Women* (1977). Kristeva's discussion of female sexuality in *About Chinese Women* is also the occasion for Spivak's rethinking of female clitoridectomy as the symbolic condition of all women's social and economic oppression. This thread is continued in 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism' (1985), where Spivak considers how Charlotte Brontë's narrative of female individualism, *Jane Eyre* (1847), is predicated on the erasure of the colonial woman, Bertha Mason. As Spivak suggests, there are important lessons that contemporary western feminist thought can learn and unlearn from the proto-feminist literary narratives of British colonialism.

Chapter 5 turns to Spivak's rethinking of Marx and value. This aspect of Spivak's work is often overlooked because it is based on Marx's later economic writings. Yet a basic understanding of Marx is absolutely crucial to an understanding of Spivak's ideas. The chapter begins by situating Spivak's engagement with Marx in relation to contemporary re-readings of Marx. Focusing on 'Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value' (1985) the chapter moves to consider how Spivak has reconsidered Marx's writings on value as deconstructive before their time. Such a re-thinking of Marx's writings on value, labour and capitalism has transformed the contemporary understanding of materialist thought. What is more, Spivak's re-reading of Marx demonstrates the continuing importance of Marx's critique of capitalism to the political and economic legacy of colonialism, globalisation and the international division of labour.

Chapter 6 considers Spivak's contribution to colonial discourse studies and postcolonial theory. Beginning with an examination of Spivak's argument that English literature aided and abetted the civilising mission of colonialism, the chapter proceeds to consider Spivak's readings of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790). The chapter then considers Spivak's critique of postcolonial texts. It is now commonplace in postcolonial literary

criticism to argue that postcolonial texts such as Jean Rhys's (1894–1979) *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and J.M. Coetzee's (1940–) *Foe* (1986) subvert the originary master narratives of colonialism by rewriting them. Spivak questions this common view, arguing that the exaggerated political claims made on behalf of postcolonial texts often ignore how postcolonial societies are still riven by the legacy of colonialism. As a counterpoint to these political claims, Spivak's commentaries and translations of the Bengali language writer Mahasweta Devi have forcefully articulated the material reality of postcolonial nationalism from the embodied standpoint of tribal, subaltern women.

The final chapter of this book, 'After Spivak', addresses Spivak's impact in the field of critical theory and the unparalleled influence that Spivak's work has had in the field of postcolonial theory. Over the past twenty years, Spivak's thought has had an increasing impact in discussions about feminism, the future of Marxism after the collapse of Soviet communism, and the impact of global capitalism. In this way, Spivak has expanded the horizons of an increasing intellectual effort to critically assess the cultural and political legacy of colonialism in the contemporary world.

In the final Further reading section of this book, I offer a guide and bibliography for those wondering where they might begin in the important task of reading Spivak's works and those of her critics.