

*Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: In Other Words*

Sangeeta Ray

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“There 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” (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Translator’s Preface,” *Of Grammatology* xiii)

It is with the above quotation from Spivak’s “Translator’s Preface” to *Of Grammatology* that Sangeeta Ray, in the opening pages of her own book, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: In Other Words*, begins her task of “thinking through with Spivak the important questions about reading, pedagogy, ethics, and feminism” (23). Spivak’s scholarship is notorious for what is seen as its difficult and sometimes cryptic prose; it has also been criticized for enveloping the gendered subaltern in a language inaccessible to the subaltern herself and thereby blunting its implications for activism. By now, however, I hope these kinds of casual readings of Spivak’s work have been set aside, in favour of a more serious consideration of, on the one hand, the extensive impact her research has had in the humanities and, on the other, the ongoing importance of grappling with the significance of her work in the field of literary and cultural studies as a whole. Let’s face it, reading Spivak’s scholarship is a challenge, but its enabling, often counterintuitive, insights have been pivotal in transforming postcolonial studies into a field relevant to the humanities in general. “Looking back at my own relationship with Spivak,” admits Ray, “I have moved from a place of some trepidation and resistance to one of deep, critical immersion” (22). Not a “Beginner’s Guide” to Spivak’s work, *In Other Words* tackles her critical essays in the specialized language of high theory, with Ray adopting the Spivakian practice of “persistent critique” by revisiting some of her own previously published work inspired by the theorist’s reflections on the relationship between ethics and reading. While Ray’s study imagines its primary audience as those already familiar with the theorist’s many interviews, essays and books, this monograph is largely successful in its stated goal of engaging central theoretical questions with a clarity that is impressive as well as helpful for teasing out the significance of almost forty years of Spivak’s contributions to critical theory.

The unfolding of this critical oeuvre in this way is no simple task; Ray’s book leads the reader through the gradual evolution of Spivak’s engagement with reading, ethics, feminism, and pedagogy, scattered

throughout the theorist's long list of published essays, tied together by multiple footnotes and often reworked in subsequent articles and monographs. One of the strongest contributions made by Ray's volume may be precisely this performance of collecting, sifting and rethinking the trajectory of Spivak's scrutiny of issues such as subaltern speech throughout this interdisciplinary and wide-ranging constellation of published work. Ray emphasizes throughout her analysis "the need to read Spivak's works in dialogue—the incessant repetition, self citations provide the route for such reading and re-readings" (37). For instance in the second chapter of *In Other Words*, Ray skilfully tracks pedagogy, or "the art of teaching; the implications of teaching; the negotiations between subjects during teaching[;] [and] [t]eaching as a form of learning," as an "overriding concern" in Spivak's scholarly output (29). She makes a good case for seeing Spivak's essay "Three Women's Texts" as transforming Victorian literary studies by making visible how "colonialism and imperialism saturate many canonical nineteenth-century novels" (29) and inflect the unwitting process of "soul making" (35) that has informed Anglo-American feminist pedagogy of the 1980s. "In other words," writes Ray, "the savage, the heathen, or the 'raw man' (in Kant) acts as a limit case for the civilizing mission that seeks to make the other into a human" (31). However, as Ray makes clear, it is this essay's critique of the "violence of subject constitution" (32) in Eurocentric feminist approaches to nineteenth-century British literature that links it to Spivak's other signature article, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", both of which are revised in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. Ray's book unfolds the connections the theorist makes between a seemingly disparate group of writers, and texts (from Brontë, to Rhys, to Devi, and Coetzee), to make visible how Spivak's multiple publications train us to be wary of attempts in postcolonial studies to register "the native subaltern female (within discourse, as a signifier)" of the margins (37). Ironically, as Ray points out, "[t]he most difficult lesson for those of us working in fields that lend themselves to an examination of the margins is that it is precisely our centred examination of the margins that ends up reproducing them as fixed verifiabiles" (48-49).

This risk, of course, underpins most scholarship published in the field of postcolonial studies in general and Ray's engagement with Spivak's work throughout *In Other Words* is particularly instructive for weighing various pedagogical strategies that seek to defer this outcome. The book's examination of these different reading practices also makes clear how a Spivakian ethics (one of the other major subthemes in Ray's engagement with the critic's work as a whole) "underscore[s] the discontinuity between the ethical and the political and the ethical and the epistemological" (50). Ray highlights that Spivak has often drawn attention to the practice of deconstruction as "a radical acceptance of vulnerability," something Ray sees as a prerequisite for the theorist's later engagement with "ethics and the call to the ethical" (68). In this appropriation of deconstruction, Ray suggests that Spivak "insists on

revealing that the ‘(thinking of) responsibility is also the (thinking of) contamination’” (71), a statement that implies that ethical “responsibility to the other is [also] necessarily caught up with responsibility for the other” (72 original emphasis).

Not only does this book represent something of a herculean effort to weave together the vast number of threads that comprise the fabric of Spivak’s oeuvre, it is also attentive to its frayed edges, gaps and critical snags. These inconsistencies are discussed in the final chapter of Ray’s book where she unfurls the critic’s “contentious evocations of strategic essentialism,” a concept that Ray first identifies in a 1984 interview with Elizabeth Grosz, reprinted in *The Postcolonial Critic*. Tracing Spivak’s acknowledgement that one “cannot not be an essentialist” through subsequent interviews and essays, Ray finds, however, that even Spivak “fails to sufficiently acknowledge the dangers of doing politics anchored, however strategically, in essentialist identity bits” (110). For example, in a reading of a 1987 interview Spivak gave at Jawaharlal Nehru University during a visiting professorship, Ray finds that the theorist elides “the differences of a gendered postcoloniality within the Indian nation-state and in the diaspora” (111) by claiming a shared and stable ‘Indian’ identity with her interviewers in order to deflect their attempt to cast her as a non-resident Indian who “privileges exile as a vantage point for a clearer perspective” (67). Ray refracts Spivak’s criticism back on her statements to disclose some contradictions in her use of this term, demonstrating how strategic essentialism can easily become an “indexical reference” instead of “a mode of transactional reading” that historicizes “the inevitable production of names” (110).

Overall, *In Other Words* represents an impressive effort by Ray to link, compress but also carefully reread a wide swath of Spivak’s work. At times disorienting in its scope like the theorist’s own work, Ray’s book offers a sustained engagement with some of Spivak’s most valuable insights and has me returning to her oeuvre with fresh eyes.

#### Works Cited

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