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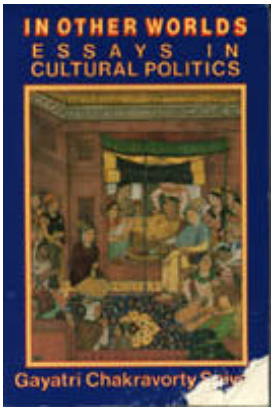
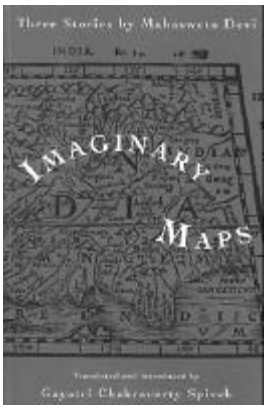
Profile of a Translator: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak





INTRODUCTION

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak may consider herself to be an intellectually insecure person, and yet she has been hailed by scholars all over the world as a writer, professor, feminist, postcolonial and culture-studies theorist, and translator. In 1976, Spivak published one of her most influential work, *Of Grammatology*, an English translation of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida's *De la grammatologie* (1967). In her translator's preface not only did she introduced Derrida and the deconstruction theory to the English-speaking readers, but she also set a whole new level of self-reflexivity never seen in any book's introduction or preface before. She approaches the 'question of the preface' from every possible perspective and explains what translation is all about. In her Introduction to *Changing the Terms* Sherry Simon tries to show how Spivak's translations are mobilized by a sense of sensitivity, not only at the linguistic level but more importantly sensitivity to the questions of power in cultural translation, which (according to Simon) is a must in translation studies. While very "few culture-studies theorists investigate the specifically linguistic question of postcolonial cultural transactions, preferring to treat 'translation' as a metaphor," Spivak claims that the translator must surrender to the text in order to show the limits of the source language, and thus the "translator exposes the complexities of cultural exchange within a disposition where 'metropolitans', 'colonials' and 'migrants' compete for subject positions. [Spivak's] work troubles the easy identifications of 'foreign' and 'home' culture, introducing the figure of the translator whose identity is subsumed neither by the host nor the receiving culture, who has no single 'home' to offer to the translated work. Translations, like the original works of diasporic writers, become caught up in networks of readership which involve audiences which are not defined by one national frame." (Simon 2000: 9).

Biography

Born in the middle of the Second World War, on February 24, 1942 in Calcutta, West Bengal, to "solidly metropolitan middle class" parents, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak belonged to the first generation of Indian intellectuals after independence. Her earliest memories of Calcutta are of the famine created by the British army:

> I was growing up as a middle-class child in the shadow of famine… One of my big memories is of negotiated political independence, very early on. My generation was on a cusp of decolonization. Our childhood and adolescent sensibilities were played out of the meaning of a negotiated political independence… I come from the lower bottom layer of the upper middle class… I went to a missionary school, which is different from a convent. A convent is upper class and fashionable stuff. Mine was a cheap school, very good academic quality. (Interview with Alfred Arteaga, 1993-94, in Landry 1996: 16-17)

Spivak did her undergraduate studies in English at Presidency College of the University of Calcutta, graduating with first class honors in 1959, while at the same time winning gold medals for both English and Bengali literature. She was 18 when she went to the US to do her Master's degree. She could have gone to Harvard or Yale, but instead opted for Cornell because she thought those universities were too good for her. She had no choice but study Comparative Literature, as it was the only Department that offered her financial assistance. She completed her MA in 1962 and after a year's fellowship at Girton College, Cambridge, Spivak taught at the University of Iowa while working on her PhD at Cornell. Her doctoral thesis (1967) directed by Paul de Man was on Yeats, which she published as *Myself Must I remake: the Life and Poetry of W.B. Yeats*. During this time she married and

divorced an American, but she kept her married name under which her work was first published.

Spivak has lectured extensively throughout Britain, United States, Australia, Canada, South Africa and India among many others, at some world-renowned universities like University of California, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Stanford, Université Paul Valery, Goethe Universitat in Frankfurt and University of British Columbia. In pursuing this outstanding teaching journey, she came to New York in 1991 and since then she has been the Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University, where she teaches English and Comparative Literature. Spivak is one of the most influential cultural and literary theorists in the United States and has no doubt paved her way in the history of translation through postcolonialism as outlined by Irena Makaryk (Makaryk 1993: 155). Her interventions in fields such as Marxism, Feminism and most recently Postcolonialism, including deconstructive, psychoanalytical and historiographic problematic are well known. Spivak's career has also been punctuated by many honours, like being the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh. She has been a Fellow of the National Humanities Institute, the Center for the Humanities at Wesleyan, the Davis Center for Historical Studies in Princeton, the Rockefeller Foundation in Bellagio and the Center for the Study of Social Sciences in Calcutta. Among her Distinguished Faculty Fellowships is the Tagore Fellowship at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, India. She is also on the editorial boards of many journals namely *Cultural Critique*, *Diaspora*, *ARIEL*, Re-*thinking Marxism*, *Public Culture* and *Parallax Interventions*. Moreover, Spivak is the 1997 recipient of the Translation Prize from the National Academy of Literature in India.

Her regular interventions in the field of Art include yearly seminars with the Independent Study program at the downtown Whitney (New York). Being a very powerful and charismatic speaker, Spivak has been invited to

deliver some key presentations across the planet, namely at the Linguidticulture Conference at the University of Osaka; at the steirische Herbst in Graz, Austria; at the Lancaster University (UK); Conference on *Transformation through Feminism*, at documenta X in Germany, and at the Johannesburg (South Africa) and Kwangju (Korea) biennales. Spivak is also involved in promoting rural literacy teaching training on the grassroots level in India and Bangladesh, working with non-governmental organizations. She is very passionate about many issues concerning India, especially access to telecommunications and its importance as compared to electricity, food, roads or primary health.

During her 1984 visit to Australia, as one of the guest speakers of the Futurfall Conference on Postmodernism in Sydney, Spivak conducted a series of interviews with a number of scholars. In fact, it is these various interviews and discussions that led Spivak to the writing of one of her major publications, *The Post-Colonial Critic*. It is a collection of twelve of her interviews, especially discussions of some of the most compelling politico-theoretical issues that constantly surface in her works, namely the politicization of deconstruction, postcolonialism and the politics of multiculturalism. Among her other major publications are *Of Grammatology* (the groundbreaking translation of Derrida's *De la grammatologie*, which includes a critical introduction of more than 80 pages), *Imaginary Maps* and *Breast Stories* (translations of a collection of stories by Mahasweta Devi, a Bengali author), *In Other Worlds*, *The Post-Colonial Critic*, and *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. She also publishes in her mother tongue, Bengali, and one of her numerous current projects includes the translation for the definitive edition of the *Selected Works of Mahasweta Devi*. (A list of her major publications is included at the end of this paper)

Spivak the Translator and her thoughts on Translation

Although she is known as a postcolonial theorist, Gayatri Spivak describes herself as a "para-disciplinary, ethical author". She first became

known by her translation and preface to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. She ordered *De la grammatologie* out of a catalogue in 1967 and began translating it shortly after. Here is an example how Spivak translates Derrida:

Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in certain way falls prey to its own work. (Derrida 1976: 24)	Opérant nécessairement de l'intérieur, empruntant à la structure ancienne toutes les ressources stratégiques et économiques de la subversion, les lui empruntant structurel-lement, c'est-à-dire sans pouvoir en isoler des éléments et des atomes, l'entreprise de déconstruction est toujours d'une certaine manière emportée par son propre travail. (Derrida 1967: 39)

According to Spivak, it is this deconstructive liability and this self-confessed fallibility of deconstruction that constitute its greatest gift. Her work itself is as subjective to its exigency as any other. She has since then applied deconstructive strategies to various theoretical engagements and textual analyses, from Feminism, Marxism, and Literary Criticism to, most recently, Postcolonialism. If we were to take a look at the original Derrida's text, we notice that Spivak's translation is very faithful to the source text. There are no syntactic changes, not even in the punctuations. What strategies Spivak adopt in her translation? Like most young translators it appears that she has opted for the 'safety' mode – being somewhat reluctant not to divert from text or syntax as in the case above. For Spivak, translation can either be 'safe', in which case the logical is emphasized at the expense of rhetorical interferences or we would be "talking of risks, of violence to the translating medium." (Barrett, 1992, 178)

Writing and translation is more than a passion to her, she describes the imagination as "the possibility of real virtuality," that is "the possibility of being somewhere that is not the Self" (Spivak, 1990, 11). She sees language as being "one of many elements that allow us to make sense of things, of the sub-individual force-fields of being which click into place in different situations, swerve from the straight or true line of language-in-thought" (Spivak, 1988, 102). For her, the task of a feminist writer is not very simple, as the latter should consider language as a clue to the workings of gendered agency. While, translation for her is "the most intimate act of reading," which she wrote in her *Translator's Preface* of the translation of some late eighteenth-century Bengali poetry:

> Translation is the most intimate act of reading. I surrender to the text when I translate… Reading and surrendering take on new meanings in such a case. The translator earns permission to transgress from the trace of the other – before memory – in the closest places of the self. (Spivak quoted by Barrett 1992: 178).

For Spivak, there should be some kind of a relationship between the author of the original text and the translator, because it is the only way the translator can become an intimate reader (like the relationship between Devi and herself), and hence "surrender to the text." She demonstrates this by referring to the two different translations of Mahasweti Devi's *Stanadayini*. The first one *Breast-giver*, translated by Spivak and approved by the author and the second one as *The Wet-nurse*, which was translated by someone in the West. According to Spivak, the second text completely neutralizes the author's irony in constructing an unfamiliar word, something that only a person who is 'intimate' with text would be able to translate properly. Moreover, translation is not about fraying, suppressing or censoring, these things have to be kept to a minimum. "The task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow, a love that … holds

the agency of the translator and the demands of her imagined or actual audience at bay." (Spivak, quoted by Barrett 1992: 178).

Spivak is such a strong believer of this concept of intimacy with the medium that she even talks about other translators' works, which according to her, have failed to give a glimpse of the real story. For example, the translations of the song by Ram Proshad:

Why have you, my, left Ma's feet?
O mind, meditate upon Shokti, you will obtain delivrance.
Bind those holy feet with the rope of devotion.
In good time you saw nothing, that is indeed your sorrow.
Pourquoi as-tu, mon âme, délaissé les pieds de Mâ?
O esprit, médite Shokti, tu obtiendras la délivrance.
Attache-les ces pieds saints avec la corde de la dévotion.
Au bon moment tu n'as rien vu, c'est bien là ton malheur.
To play with her faithful one, She appeared to me
In the form of my daughter and helped me repair my enclosure.
It is at death that you will understand Ma's love.
Here, they will shed a few tears, then purify the place.

Pour se jouer de son fidèle, Elle m'est apparue
Sous la forme de ma fille et m'a aidé à réparer ma clôture.
C'est à la mort que tu comprendras l'amour de Mâ.
Ici, on versera quelques larmes, puis on purifiera le lieu.
(Spivak quoted by Barrett 1992: 184)

Both the French and English versions are by Spivak, and they are both more or less similar and rather faithful to the Bengali song. If we were to compare them to a different translation of the same Bengali song done by the French wife of a Bengali artist:

Mind, why footloose from Mother?

Mind mine, think power, for freedom's dower, bind bower with love-rope

In time, mind, you minded not blasted lot.

> And Mother, daughter-like, bound up house-fence to dupe her dense and devoted fellow.
> Oh you'll see at death how much Mum loves you
> A couple minutes' tears, and lashings of water, cowdung-pure.
> (Spivak quoted by Barrett 1992: 183)

According to Spivak, the latter translation has failed to capture the spirit of the song, and is marred "by the pervasive orientalism ready at hand as a discursive system." (Spivak quoted by Barrett 1992: 183) She is fully convinced that the depth of commitment to correct cultural politics is sometimes not enough, and that the history of the language, the history of the author's moment must figure in the weaving as well. Spivak is apparently very upfront about identity problems that she faces as a translator and by foregrounding them as pointed out by Simon, she "draws attention to the kinds of forces at play in today's global literary commerce. Providing a preface and a postface to her translations of Devi, she ensures that the reader has a contextualized and informed understanding of the difficult text she is reading. In insisting on her own pivotal role as a critic and translator, Spivak replaces the 'inter-national' itineraries of translation with more specific and devious cultural routes." (Simon 2000: 9)

As a feminist, Spivak focuses a lot of attention to women authors of Third world. She has come to know through experience that the genuinely bilingual post-colonial has more of an edge nowadays, as opposed to what it was in old days, when it was most important for a colonial or post-colonial student of English to be as 'indistinguishable' as possible from the native speaker of English. But for that to be really true she insists that "the translator from a Third World language should be sufficiently in touch with what is going on in the literary production in that language to be capable of distinguishing between good and bad writing by women, resistant and conformist writing by women." (Spivak quoted by Barrett 1992: 186) Spivak is fond of psychobiographies of women who have been shafted by

post-modern capitalism. Furthermore, she is concerned about non-literary problems that are affecting women's everyday life, like the effacement of the clitoris, and hence of sexual pleasure. Surprisingly enough, and despites her feminist nature, she agrees that all Third World women's writing are not as 'good', and feels almost revolted when sometimes Devi is associated with other Indian writers. Her respect and admiration for the latter is obvious through her numerous comments on the Bengali author. What differentiates Devi from the rest, according to Spivak, is that "she is unlike her scene… I remain interested in writers who are against the current, against mainstream." (Spivak quoted by Barrett 1992: 187) Both Devi and Spivak share an easy-going relationship with each other and she feels that she can tell her anything. This is one of the reasons why she feels confident when translating her work, because friendship is another form of surrender. We do not see that kind of intimacy in Derrida's translation of *De la grammatologie*, and this absence of intimacy in her very first translation led to a work that is very faithful to the source text.

Conclusion

Over the years Spivak's translations have evolved, she is no longer afraid to venture in a medium that might trigger violence to translating language. Her translating techniques consist of translating the text rapidly at first, without assuming any audience or what is happening to her English, because that is the only way that she can surrender to the text. It is only after having produced a version in this way that she revises her work carefully and makes the necessary changes. Spivak prefers translation over writing books: "I'm afraid of writing books, because I've found myself changing my mind so much, I don't particularly like what I write." (Spivak 1990: 48) There is no doubt that Spivak made the right choice, as it is through her translations that she made a breakthrough in Postcolonialism. Today her name is primarily associated with concepts like postcolonial studies (along with names like

Edward Said and Homi Bhabba), feminism and Marxism among others, although her views on her position is somewhat different:

> My position is generally a reactive one. I am viewed by Marxists as too codic, by Feminists as too male-identified, by indigenous as too committed to western Theory. I am uneasily pleased about this. (Spivak 1990: 45)

Despite her outsider status – or partly, because of it – Spivak is widely cited in a range of disciplines and it would be wrong to assume that her work is esoteric and has no audience outside the academy. Moreover, her work has been translated into a number of European and non-European languages.

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