

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Death of a Discipline*. The Wellek Library Lectures Series. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. xii + 128 pp. \$22.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-12944-2.

Reviewed by Ferial J. Ghazoul (Department of English and Comparative Literature, The American University in Cairo)

Published on H-Gender-MidEast (June, 2003)



## Comparative Literature as a Phoenix

### Comparative Literature as a Phoenix

This thought-provoking slim book is written in an eclectic style, jumpy and elusive, self-indulgent and self-questioning simultaneously, making reading a hard intellectual labor, yet it is worth the effort. Spivak is aware of her unfinished text; it is “no more than scattered speculations” (p. 84). This draft-like quality of the book is the hallmark of Spivak’s critical prose, which often harbors the most brilliant of ideas. Convinced of the non-definitive, open nature of her project, I presume she writes intentionally in this provisional, somewhat sloppy, mode. The book is meant, as she says, “for a future reader” (p. 93), but it is more correct to say she writes for the reader who cares about the future.

In one of her rare straightforward sentences, Spivak reveals where she stands: “To be human is to be intended toward the other” (p. 73). Her book searches for ways of intending toward the other. Her project is aimed at the university, not as a technical institution, exhibiting “apathetic professionalization,” but as a higher-education site working for a just world. One is tempted to say “dream on,” but in an affirmative, not a sarcastic, tone. We need to dream and to experiment with our ideas, and the university is an appropriate laboratory for it. Spivak’s curriculum reform, then, is intended for the world as a “classroom without walls.”

Spivak senses the wind of change in the fields of humanities and social sciences triggered by the overwhelming presence of the “Other” in the classroom. She is

equally aware of the pitfalls of each discipline when its subject matter moves away from familiar grounds. She proposes a project that will catch two birds with one net, that will yoke Comparative Literature with Area Studies. This will allow the traditionally Euro-centric Comparative Literature to step out of its confinement and permit Area Studies to be humanized by learning to interpret the language and idiom of the Other through the literary method instead of learning the language of the Other as simply a fieldwork tool.

The first chapter of the book, which is entitled “Crossing Borders,” is not simply about crossing national borders but also about traversing disciplinary boundaries as well as the divides of the international society (South and North). In plain English, Spivak feels that Area Studies, “with its roots in the Cold War,” concentrates on the rigorous knowledge of the Other in the service of power. Comparative Literature, on the other hand, studies other literary traditions to appreciate them and to show the kinship of literatures; however it generally takes seriously only the literatures of Euro-U.S. By intending to be both inclusive and appreciative of the other, Spivak finds the solution in a marriage of these two fields. Thus she insists on the necessity to pay serious attention to the language and idiom of the global South. The new trends in literary studies—Ethnic Studies/Cultural Studies and postcolonial mapping of world literature in translated anthologies—have not contributed to a rigorous knowledge of the Other, though the Other is constantly invoked. These trends have been based on the “author-

ity of experience” and “the sanctioned ignorance” of migrants to the metropolitan cities. In other words, Spivak senses the haste with which Third World literature has been packaged for Euro-U.S. cultural consumption. She is equally critical of reducing the Other into a single category using identitarian politics, i.e. based on the sameness of a collectivity. Thus she is as critical of Fredric Jameson for reducing Third World literature, with all its heterogeneity, to national allegory as she is of Aijaz Ahmad for finding class as the major issue (p. 66). Spivak herself dwells on gender but this—she presumes—is a different matter and in no way reductive because women are present in all of humanity.

How do we cross borders? This is the question. The first lesson in Spivak is to be armed with linguistic skills and literary competence, supplemented by Area Studies. “Collectivities,” which is the title of her second chapter, is the second lesson. Collectivities are not given; they are indeterminate and “to come,” which I understand to be pre-emergent. So far, crossing borders in Comparative Literature has been essentially based on the border crossing of (colonial) languages and people (in the diaspora). Francophony is an example where literature written in French by an African or a French Canadian is studied under one umbrella. But Spivak is looking for a different kind of collectivity that goes beyond the limited examples of colonial hybridization or waves of migrations. The key word for Spivak is inclusiveness; she wants to embrace the world, and thus she looks for a comprehensive collectivity. It would be a mistake to assume she is arguing for universality where people are variations on a common denominator. Her quest has to do with the general, with all its diversity, and yet with its siblinghood (I use a gender-neutral term rather than brotherhood or sisterhood). In her third chapter, Spivak finds a term for this dreamt up collectivity, namely “planetarity.” But she does not get there before reading texts that prefigure what she is advocating and foretelling.

How can anyone have the audacity to speak about the future? Well, Spivak is trying to imagine what lies separated by distances, namely the human collectivity as it will emerge. She knows very well the difficulty of trying to think comprehensively about such a huge unit, but she also recognizes the importance of “imaginative making” (what Aristotle called *poiesis* and preferred to *istoria*; the first, poetry/literature, deals with the general and the latter, history, deals with the singular). But since what she wants to imagine lies far off (in place and in time), she borrows a term from Derrida, *telepoiesis*, which combines the Greek prefix “tele” (=far

off) with “*poiesis*” (=imaginative making). Hers is not a blueprint but an effort to conceive, to imagine a better world where we all come together as a collectivity without reducing one to the other. This non-reductive collectivity is to be contrasted to the streamlined, hegemonic collectivity of globalization, which she defines as “the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere” (p. 72). Spivak is also critical of international feminism that tries to turn other women into Westernized “sisters”; thus Afghan women are seen as liberated because now they shop and date (p. 50)! Spivak sees the importance of learning from “below” and explores respectfully pre-capitalist formations. She insists that we can have a collectivity, or rather camaraderie—friendship, to use the term of Derrida—without changing our culture or mode of being. We need not give up our rural mode of life to be liberated, just as women do not need to give up their womanhood in order to be equal to men.

Spivak picks up a question Derrida poses in his *Politics of Friendship*, which I presume is rhetorical. He asks if we can have democracy, which corresponds to the politics of friendship, “without a logofratrocentric notion of collectivity? With the sister allowed, rarely, and only as an honorary brother?” (qtd. p. 32). Spivak takes the question seriously and tries to answer it by a new reading of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. Hers is a brilliant close reading: Spivak at her best. She manages to turn us around without any use of interpretive violence. Spivak convinces us that Woolf is not an author calling for a “room of one’s own and five hundred pounds a year.” She is calling for feminist activism in obscure places so as to make the invisible woman appear: “I maintain that she would come if we worked for her and that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worthwhile” (qtd. p. 35). This, I suspect, is more like Woolf prefiguring Spivak than responding to Derrida. Spivak has been working in barefoot girl schools in West Bengal for the last ten years. In fact this whole book seems to me like a valiant attempt to bring the two souls of Spivak (and of us who are divided between academia and activism) together.

Spivak demonstrates what she proposes through the prefigurations of literature. In her analysis of three works, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*, and Mahasweta Devi’s *Pterodactyl*, she shows how the Arabic and Bengali narratives displace Conrad’s binary collectivities (European/North vs. African/South) based on male bonding. Salih casts doubt on such dichotomies through gender positioning—the role women play in breaking the

polarization—and thus *Season* points obliquely to a collectivity that goes beyond North and South. Finally, the Bengali work points to planetarity. I shall concentrate on *Season*. Essentially Spivak is right: Salih is not trying to pit the Sudanese against Britishers, the colonized against the colonizer, in a Manichaean way. He is critical of post-independence Sudan with its corruption and its consumer-oriented elite as much as he is critical of the violation of Sudan by British colonialism. The statement by the narrator, which he withholds for fear he might not be understood, in the opening of the novel, clearly points to the truth that, apart from colonization, the others (British) are like us (Sudanese). But the way Spivak thinks Salih is disrupting the binarism of modernity and tradition is unconvincing. There is definitely a critique of both traditional and modern ways of life in the novel, but the women and the naming or withholding the name of sexual parts have very little to do with it.

Derrida distinguishes between two similar words in Greek which pit one collectivity against the other: *ethnos*, meaning “one’s own kind of people” or nation, and *ethnikos*, meaning “the pejoratively defined other” (qtd. p. 83). The first is pitted against the other. For Spivak any kind of disruption of this opposition is significant as it points to underlying commonality. For the narrator in *Season*, the Colonizers are “familiar” (home-like) through their human characteristics, and are “unfamiliar” (unlike home) in their colonizational act. Thus there is something familiar/unfamiliar about them in the unfolding of Spivak’s argument. This is quite different from the Conradian split between familiar (civility) and unfamiliar (savagery) in *Heart of Darkness*. What is disturbing in Conrad’s novella is finding the kinship between those

two poles, as Chinua Achebe has pointed out. In *Season*, there is overlapping between the Self and the Other, between the familiar and unfamiliar; thus Spivak calls on Freud’s concept of the uncanny which combines the sense of “the foreign” with that of “at home,” the *Unheimlich/Heimlich*. But while using this notion of Freud’s “uncanny,” Spivak empties it of its gender bias. Freud associates the feeling of the uncanny—using as his spokesman a neurotic—with the female genital organ where it is unfamiliar, yet it is everyone’s home as it is our birth place. Spivak retains the importance of the (Un)heimlich when dealing not only with the culture of the Other but also with the culture of the Self (which invariably includes the Other). Perhaps we can call this strange and ambivalent sense of affinity with the distant, the “Self-in-the-Other,” just as we can call Ethnic Studies, concentrating on minority or marginalized discourse, the “Other-in-the-Self.” For Spivak this double-edged feeling, this interpenetration of Self and Other, can best be located in the planet; it is neither continental nor global. The planet is our home yet remains so foreign—thus the crucial notion of planetarity in her work, which she detects in an embryonic form in Devi’s novel.

At one point in her book, after having undertaken a laborious analysis of a literary text, Spivak remarks in a self-doubting mood: “How much of this is my transactionality as reader?” (p. 78). Whether or not it is all in Spivak’s mind, and thus in the eye of the other from the standpoint of the readers of her book, it is really immaterial. We have been on a planetary tour, which makes us rethink human collectivity across borders—thanks to Spivak.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-gender-mideast>

**Citation:** Ferial J. Ghazoul. Review of Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *Death of a Discipline*. H-Gender-MidEast, H-Net Reviews. June, 2003.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7729>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).