Interview With Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa

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It is seldom that a conference achieves a singular symbolic significance in its own right, but this was true of the New Nation Writers Conference held in Johannesburg, December 1991. In itself it represented so much that its staging alone requires cultural and political decoding. The conference sought to enact, both symbolically and materially, a dialectical alternative to the supposedly vanishing world of apartheid. Indeed, its theme was proclaimed as “Making Literature: Reconstruction in South Africa” (New Nation 5), and the conference organizers saw themselves as encouraging a “re-making of the world” (New Nation 6). The presupposition was that apartheid had been vanquished, and that the market of symbolic goods needed reorganization. But the ironies were there for those who cared to look: formerly exiled writers were back home because the in-place neo-apartheid government had dropped the bans and relaxed restrictions as part of its own strategy to appropriate the rhetoric of liberal democracy. The cultural reconstruction and the “process towards a genuine people’s culture” (New Nation 3) was, on the evidence of the conference alone, a fairly middle-class affair, while black South Africans continued to die in large numbers in political violence all around us. And the deep currents of apocalyptic feeling evident at the conference were not matched by anything in the political world except promises and dubious good intentions on all sides. It was like a post-revolution conference before the revolution that would now never really occur.

Nevertheless, it was something of a victory conference for those who had been banned, proscribed, suppressed, and maimed by apartheid, and who were now back home without
ever having repented. The State President had unbanned the African National Congress, the Pan African Congress, and the South African Communist Party, and committed himself to a new government elected by universal suffrage. Senior Nationalist politicians were apologizing for apartheid. But the turnaround also threatened to pull the mat from under oppositional feet. The governing party (and its slavish State television service) had begun freely to appropriate liberal language—“freedom,” “justice,” “democracy,” “human rights,” and so on—so that even the discourse of liberal humanism, which for so long was the front line of cultural resistance and the preserve of the arts, looked to be in danger of being swallowed up by the former demons of apartheid. Not for nothing did President F. W. de Klerk congratulate Nadine Gordimer on winning the Nobel prize for literature.

Still, the many victims of apartheid were not to be outdone. The conference organizers would insist on their own victory and their own oppositional language. They were an amalgam of progressive organizations representing apartheid’s Others: the New Nation newspaper, an independent weekly supported by the Catholic Bishops Conference of South Africa; the Congress of South African Writers and the African Writers Association; and other cultural activists. They would not allow the notorious amnesia which afflicts South Africa’s frontier consciousness to efface the truth: apartheid had killed, tortured, maimed, divided, and wasted people, and still was doing these things by the implicit power of its surviving hegemonic forms. Moreover, more than three centuries of discursive violence by colonialism, consolidated by four decades of explicit cultural and physical repression, had left deep imprints on the cultural identity of South African people.

So, many of the conference themes were perforce conceived in opposition to the perceived dominant cultural tropes of the old apartheid which everyone knew and could recognize and which, indeed, still survived in the lives and experience of those who came to the gathering to testify to it and to sweep it away. The first day was devoted to discussing alternatives to race-talk. The sessions were entitled: “Race & Ethnicity: Towards Cultural Diversity & Unity”; “Race & Ethnicity: Images & Stereotypes in Literature”;
"Race and Ethnicity: The Problems & Challenges of Racism in Writing"; and "Race & Ethnicity: Beyond the Legacy of Victims; South African Writers Speak." The speakers included some of South Africa's most celebrated writer-exiles and former exiles: Dennis Brutus, Lewis Nkosi, Breyten Breytenbach, Es'kia Mphahlele, Albie Sachs, and Mbulelo Mzamane, as well as non-South Africans such as Kole Omotoso, Claribel Algeria, George Lamming, Sterling Plumpp, Chenjerai Hove, and Archie Weller. The next day saw a frank discussion of sexism, racism's sibling in the apartheid world, while another trusted pair of interdependent opposites—freedom and responsibility, including "universality and diversity"—was discussed on the third day. The last two days were devoted to "Literature, Language and Democracy" and "Orality and the Dissemination of Literature." The conference organizers also sought to break out of the limitations of highbrow talk by running a week of regional writing workshops for less advantaged South Africans.

The conference served as a healing ground. All of South Africa was symbolically reconstituted under the single nationhood formerly denied them: the exiles and refugees were welcomed home by the internal activists, writers, and scholars; foreign writers shared their experiences and helped to break down the cultural xenophobia of the old order; the marginalized groups (black, female, banned, maimed) were joyously embraced; and the stranglehold of what I described elsewhere as "pompous, Wasp, middle-class control of scholarly discourse" and "whiteism, pinko-liberalism and snuffling, self-congratulatory academic formalism" (De Kock 23) was decisively broken. But for all this, there were some misgivings. Breyten Breytenbach clearly felt disturbed by the dangers of a new "alternative" consensus for culture and remarked that "the fringes must be kept alive." He would oppose the replacement of Afrikaaner power structures by "repressive pressure groups using mechanisms of control through censorship, selection, distribution, prescription, manipulation or fashions imposed by literati, structured or unstructured, operating in the name of 'culture'" (Breytenbach 3). Further, Gayatri Spivak identified the problem of recursive debate when she remarked that "the old aesthetics-
politics debate is so European. . . . The form-content debate is so European.” To some extent, she was right: the conference was at times occupied with recirculating the clutter of old arguments about literature and politics, universality and diversity, and race and gender stereotypes. There was a fair amount of hostility to “theory,” and little evidence of acquaintance with, and advances upon, theories of postcoloniality and discourse analysis, which are, after all, germane to a country as deeply postcolonial and as discursively-stratified as South Africa. It was as if apartheid still had a good many scholars and writers doing a lot of knee-jerking, despite the conference’s ostensible emphasis on the “new.”

Gayatri Spivak was invited to grace the gathering as yet another very bright star in the international firmament, although she was the only international delegate invited as a scholar and not a writer. She herself saw her visit in humble terms: she came to listen and to learn, and she gave a talk entirely in the subjunctive mood, explaining the paper she would have presented if she had given a paper and not a ten-minute talk. She wrote down the sub-headings of the putative paper on a blackboard and succeeded in perplexing most of the audience. The session in which she participated was called “Women’s Exile: Addressing the Marginalisation of Women in Culture.” In an attempt to get her to say a little more, this interview was conducted on the day following her talk.

I’d like to ask you, to start with, whether, possibly as an analogue of decolonization, you could provide a brief autobiography?

Well, I was born in British India. When I was going to school, the system of education had not yet started its process of systematic decolonization. My generation at college was among the first generations to really kind of feel that they were in independent India. I entered college in 1955. Looking back now, one of the first things that strike me is that we thought of studying English not as the great literature, but a great literature. I don’t know that we knew that’s what we were doing. Looking back, that’s what really stands out. We had the idea that we were going to do Bengali, which is the first language of the people in the area where I was, as well as we did English. This was by no means a new
idea within nationalism, but it seemed new to us. I think that idea of a great literature rather than *the* great literature was something that coloured all kinds of things later on.

Then, in 1961 I came to the United States. This was perhaps a little more self-conscious. I had no particular desire to go to Britain. I didn’t want to remain only in India. I had no particular plan of doing one thing or another, but I knew I didn’t want to go to Britain, so I came to the United States.

*How were you enabled to do this?*

You really want to hear that story? I don’t know if I really want to talk about it. Well, let’s put it this way: I borrowed the money. The story of borrowing the money is in fact quite interesting in that I was a very young middle-class girl who had started earning money two years before her departure by coaching English. My father was dead. (My father died when I was thirteen.) So in fact it was really something that I completely kind of did, and I was not in a situation where I really knew anything about American universities. I knew the names of Harvard, Yale, and Cornell, and I thought half of them were too good for me. So I sent a telegram to Cornell saying I was a very good student and I didn’t need financial aid because they wouldn’t have given it to me because I wasn’t a native speaker of English—I mean, those days were different from now—and because multiculturalism was certainly not on the agenda. You had to be as good as a native speaker. And so in fact that story, the story of how I managed to borrow the money, is extremely entertaining and also interesting, but I really don’t think it’s part of an interview, okay?

Anyway, so that’s how I went, with no money because the guy who had lent me the money also had said he would only give me the money monthly, so I went. I had very little money and I knew nobody. . .

*And you felt the cringe? You didn’t feel you were good enough for places like Harvard and Yale?*

I have never. I’m intellectually a very insecure person. I must also say that this had come about because of sexism in my surroundings, which continued right from the start, the moment I entered
college, and even today. And that’s the worst thing about sexism, that it makes you believe what is being told. My general reputation is that I’m flashy rather than substantive, rather than generally thoughtful, rather than generally brilliant. This was helped by the fact that I enjoyed being a young woman, and I still very much think I’m a playful person, and this is not supposed to be. If a woman is really serious, she has to deny all her so-called feminine qualities and become like a man. And so in fact that led, especially without any help from feminism on the ground, that helped me, or hindered me really, to form a self-concept which I have not been able to shake off, even today. I know I’m now veering from the autobiographical slightly because it’s not a narrative anymore. One of the things, for example, that I encounter paradoxically all the time is public talk from women I respect about women grabbing power. And then when I use what little power I have been able to grab in public to cope with masculine intervention, then among the women I quite often receive a reputation for arrogance. You see, so that to an extent this had led to great intellectual insecurity. Yes, I was quite prepared to believe that I was not good enough for the best institutions. And, to an extent, I still feel that way, that I do not have the right to intervene. In fact, we’ve come from a session [“Redefining Aesthetics: Universality and Diversity”] where I very much wanted to intervene, but I kept myself quiet because I thought no one wants to hear me, or they’d think I’m arrogant. See what I mean?

So, I went to the United States. Once I went there, I was not particularly vetted for anything. You know, I was only a bright young foreign woman student, and the fact that I knew how to take exams—because that’s what the education system was in India—stood in my way because Cornell then had a system where if a student got an A-plus average, she was allowed to devise her own programme. And it was totally parochial, geared to the American system. I came from a different kind of a system, you know, dying under its own weight, built on the London University system. Therefore, the fact of my doing photo-finish exams had nothing to do with the fact that I really needed some kind of experience of what is best in American education, and some-
times *that* is abused when students start to judge without any knowledge. But for me it would have been wonderful to have tasted some of the invitation to judge rather than to reproduce. But because I did my exams so well, I was allowed to devise my own programme, so in fact my entire education-formation remains Indian, because in those last three years of Ph.D. work I didn’t really learn much. I was just kind of taking courses that I felt would be nice, and so on. I fell into comparative literature because Comp. Lit. was the only thing that offered me money, and therefore I had to learn French and German in classes where instruction was often given in French and German, and we were given Baudelaire and Goethe, because a Ph.D. student in Comp. Lit. was not allowed to take language courses. So that’s why my spoken French is fluent but often not grammatical, and therefore this again is held as proof that I couldn’t possibly know anything about deconstruction. You know what I mean. So there are all of these problems that I carried on my shoulders without giving myself the right to think that these were problems. A heavy weight of sexism kept me thinking that these were my faults. The blaming the victim syndrome turned inside, especially since I was a good student. Therefore I couldn’t say, listen, be kind to me.

I must say at this point that the one strongest influence in my life—that one has to remain resilient, that one should not get exercised on one’s own behalf (I’m doing it now because you kindly asked me this question why I thought I was not good enough), to remember that politics is other people, rather than always to exercise oneself on one’s own behalf—is my mother. My mother is one of the most unusual women I have ever had the good fortune to have met. My relationship with her is not just confined to the mother-daughter relationship. There is intellectual respect on both sides. We give each other advice, and she understands things about my life and my problems, both intellectual and personal, that I cannot expect other female relatives to understand.

So I would say that with this I came to the United States. I believe I was Paul de Man’s first Ph.D. He was chairing Comp. Lit. But as I say I wasn’t groomed for anything. I learnt from him. I took good notes and slowly sort of understood.
So, I then married, and at that point I really remained in the United States because I was coming from a cultural production where women stayed where their husbands were. I had no particular plans about staying or not staying, and I didn’t look for a job, for example. I got a job because it was the Vietnam years, and it was possible to get jobs without a Ph.D.

So I never really got a chance of knowing what it was like to live as an adult. I stayed. I was a good wife. I was in a bit of a shock, because—although people find this hard to credit because I’m so international in many ways—I didn’t really know white people. The only persons that I’d come into contact with were the regional representatives of the British Council, and they were just incredibly kind of stiff. And so it seemed very strange to be among whites. I mean those were the sixties. It was the beginning of the civil rights struggle. I couldn’t understand this, in terms of these people, white people, talking civil rights. And at the same time there were these incredibly artificial constructs of the Allen Ginsberg-/Timothy Leary-style India, which bore no relationship, I mean my strongest influence in Calcutta was second international communism, that’s what you were . . .

[Interview was interrupted, and interlocutors agreed not to proceed with the autobiographical because of its boundless narrative potential.]

I know you have come here to learn, and you criticize people who talk about and for other people, but how do you read this conference? How do you read the way they are dealing with issues here? First I must say that I don’t. I respect the fact that conferences should not be judged in terms of dealing with issues. Conferences are a sort of staging, where conditions of possibility for dealing with issues are laid down, at what seems to be a great waste of time and talk and energy. But that is the nature of conferences. It’s almost like an exercise which has its end almost totally separated from it. And so I see it as that kind of staging. I go to many conferences, and in certain international contexts, I can tell what stops are being pulled out. Within South Africa, since I don’t know what stops are being pulled out, for me it is a learning experience. It’s because I respect what conferences are
supposed to be, and I don’t expect them to be a substitute for either activism or policy-making, or, in fact, sheer intellectual instruction. As long as you hang out—hang in with the nature of conferences—it seems to me that you can learn if you are in my position.

Should conferences lead to activism or intervention?

No. This is why I said that the relationship between what the end, the goal, the hoped-for results would be, and the conference, are oblique. If they did lead to things, and in some cases in the past they have, you know, especially those conferences which divide parts of the globe after a war or something (but those are extreme cases), it’s not always good. It seems to me that a conference has a kind of trickle-down effect, and can affect all kinds of things, but in itself it can only enervate. A conference is not a restful thing, and must involve wastage.

You said earlier that you were tempted to intervene in the aesthetics debate on “Universality and Diversity.” Would you care to state what you wanted to say?

Well, I can’t say everything I want to say because I haven’t thought it through properly, but I think my basic impulse was to look at a completely different sense of aesthetic, rather than relate it to the beautiful, and oppose it to politics. I always believe in looking at things as doings and I was thinking of another old definition, that through the aesthetic you can get pleasure out of things that are representations, things for which you cannot immediately find the actual object, so that it seemed to me that if one looked at it that way, then what we have to deal with is to allow different kinds of pleasure to be known as pleasure, because aesthetics for me is also a transactional thing. We can only feel pleasure at something if the cultural system acknowledges that it is pleasure. So, there was one participant who spoke of his taste, and yet he said that there was nothing universalist in it, and it seems to me that the idea of taste, in fact, is simply what is allowed to be pleasurable. I know that I am not supposed to give long answers but can I give you an example?

Please.
I feel that in the oral-epic impulse, participants who listened to the singer were able—it’s a very sophisticated reaction—were able to think of the epic as true even as they knew that it was not factually true. This is a very sophisticated phenomenon, but participants in all countries do this. I’m not a golden-ageist or a reverse-history person, but I do look at these things because separated from that golden age ethos, they really can offer us lessons. Now this is the thing for which Coleridge in the nineteenth century had to devise a description, willing suspension of disbelief, and if people actually bothered, without any golden age impulse, to see that this aesthetic influence—taking pleasure in something for which no actual object can be offered—is alive and well in situations where one does not expect words like “taste” to be used, I think that would be a way in which one would look for enlarging the concept of what pleasure can be, and it would not involve museumizing or endorsing diversity. I’ve not said everything, and it sounds more crude in my telling of it. The old aesthetics-politics debate is so European, as if there is a separation. The form-content debate is so European. Let’s look at it as a social act, aesthetics as the possibility of a social act. That’s quite different from universalism talk. There can be no human act without some modicum of universalizing. Humanity would be completely autistic if it were not always, however incompletely, universalizing: thinking of oneself as an example of being human.

Here they seem to be grappling with the issue of that universalizing notion being appropriated by powerful formations, bourgeois culture perhaps.

Yes, but the thing is that if you put diversity against universality you still acknowledge the problem of the one and the many. English, or all the African languages? See what I mean? This is pulling out a stop because this has been debated endlessly in this country, but I’m just proposing that one look at the aesthetic not as a thing about which answers will be given in alternatives for universality terms. The power will be engaged in expanding the possibility of pleasures.

I also made some notes about certification, validation, book market et cetera, et cetera, because these things now exist and we
must make use of them. One of the participants talked about how he does not think these questions are settled at conferences with theories, and then proceeded to give us definitions. It seems to me that therefore we have to acknowledge that however obliquely, mechanisms of certification, validation, and marketing will be there to organize the expansion of the possibility of pleasures, and I think that’s where activism should be devoted rather than seeing what the policy-makers decide, so that action will always be resistant to the policies because neither universality, nor diversity, when endorsed by policy, will be uncriticizable. So I remain in the arena of the persistent critic.

You hinted yesterday during your talk that you felt theory was being pushed away a little, and that you would desist from talking theory. Did you feel that, and do you feel that this might be a danger in this kind of discussion?

Well, I don’t think theory is actually being pushed away. I think theory is being made in the name of no-theory. There is by now a kind of international institutional culture, and in the international institutional culture both the universalist reactionaries who don’t have to let “theory” come in, because they have the most powerful unacknowledged theory, and the activists on the other side, join by being against so-called theory, which in itself is justified because theory is perceived only as a baggage of abstract learning, out of touch with real life (whatever that might be), talking about real life at a level of abstraction, by people who are incomprehensible, endorsed by institutions, and winning away young minds from the task of either activism, or, unthinkingly applauding the cultural good of the white dominant, white supremacist history. So it is paradoxical for us that we are caught in between these two ends, and I for one cannot completely reject the critique of institutional elitism. You must recognize by now that this is a classic deconstructive position, in the middle, but not on either side, and unable to solve a problem by taking either side, but on the other hand solving it situationally, and not for ever. So what you saw happening yesterday was one of those solutions. Deconstructive imperatives always come out of situations; it’s not situationally relative, but they always come out of
situations. So what I felt there was, although I didn’t succeed, but nonetheless what I was trying to do, was, keep the worst of the theoreticist impulses [inaudible], recognize what brand of theory by naming a vocabulary. I tried to keep the track of that impulse outside of what I was saying. I think the demand that one be comprehensible is a good demand. On the other hand, I also know that plain prose cheats, and I also know that clear thought hides. So, I was trying to do a balancing act. I was using those theoretical discourses which are recognized by many more, like Marx for example. I was using that. But on the other hand, I don’t think that I quite succeeded because it seemed to many that it was even yet too theoretical. The trouble with theory is that to theorize is to make visible a great deal.

*How do you answer to the charge that your own writing is so difficult, at such an advanced level of abstraction (as you say, you are describing so much) that you are recolonizing the margin from the centre of continental thought, and that you are somewhat inaccessible to a lot of people?*

Well, I tell you many, many of these objections are interesting objections. The centre of European thought. One would like to know what the sources of our thoughts are if we do not name them. I’m not interested in finding nativist alibis for where my thoughts come from. I would say that I have a problem, which is that I cannot write clearly. Let us not give that some kind of a party-politics name. I’m trying to work with it. I believe that my writing now is clearer than it was before. I think that what one saw before was a result of some intellectual insecurity, wanting to write about fields where I didn’t know enough. On the other hand I felt what I said needed to be said. I think those things are changing, and I would advise the people who make this objection to think again about where the objection is coming from. I think that it is also that one doesn’t speak in the international scholarly situation with the endorsed voice of a female marginal. That is for me to embrace an extremely dubious political position. Unfortunately, that is the only voice that is heard by the readers who complain. I do a lot of other writing and speaking and teaching, where I never see these critics. I invite them, before
they make these criticisms, to come and hear me. Well, people like them don’t generally bother to come.

Do you find that your register is moderated quite significantly when you teach your students?

I think it’s moderated by the timing, by the tempo. In the teaching, in the United States, not when I’m teaching in non-formal situations and my students do not have the same sort of academic preparation, but teaching in the United States in fact I use the same kind of terminology, but I unpack more. I think I am in fact best at classroom teaching. I’m best as a classroom teacher. In fact what happens to many of my students is that they take one course from me, and then they take all of my courses because I’m even better if my time span is not just 14 weeks, but let’s say two years. That’s my problem, because I don’t know things very profoundly. People who know things profoundly can simplify them without cheating. But I’m learning as I’m teaching, so I can’t always speak in that kind of achieved simplicity.

Well, could you unpack for me something in your talk—I did not fully understand what you meant by multiculturalism as crisis management. I wonder in what sense it might be interesting for us here. . .

Now, the last bit I can’t say because one of the principles that I dearly hold by is that imperatives are situational, so I don’t know if this applies in South Africa at all, and please remember I said it. Whatever you cut off don’t cut off this one, but I’m speaking out of the United States context. I’m looking at the United States as in a bit of a crisis right now. All of the apparent signs that have to be used to the hilt to prove that there is no crisis, are “good.” The U.S. is the “only superpower.” They’ve got the media. They’ve got the President. The U.S. has won the Cold War, and so on. The Communists have been defeated—good signs. But in fact what is happening is that unless the situation is managed it is just possible that the European Economic Community, plus Japan (so that it’s not a national, or even international concept really) is going to consolidate the United States of Europe, so what has to be managed is the entire area released by the implosion of the Bolshevik experiment. Now that area can be ideologically
managed—and here only ideology will work because the crisis-situation is political and economic. Ideologically it can be managed by that extremely loose term, ethnicity, and an even looser term, culture, often identified by the liberal multiculturalists. On top of that there is what I was saying yesterday, the concrete figures that in fact the migrancy is going to be used immensely in order to support a post-Fordist economy, in Europe and in the north in general. In a situation whereas the migrants are taking over with the postcolonial African American, as I was saying, in the United States this is a danger point. The best thing that can be done is to make them compete—the old divide and rule thing. So with this multiculturalism, the coding of capitalism as democracy can be helped by the in-place immigrant, old immigrant communities. With this multiculturalism, with the new immigrants, it becomes nothing but national-origin validation, and they have nothing in common except wanting to be in the United States, so that’s divisive. What can be done is that a real wedge can be driven between the African American struggle, between the Latino-Chicano struggle, and what looks like, and I quote a young professor from the University of Minnesota, “Disneyland courses.” See what I mean? So this whole thing, it’s a huge crisis, but it’s being managed in this easy, repressively tolerant way.

And “transnational literacy”—what does that remedy?

It doesn’t remedy anything, but what it allows is, it allows us, all of these groups that I’ve just mentioned, to invent a unity out of what on a level of abstraction we really share, that is to say, our stake in wanting to turn capitalism into a juster model for our communities.

I want to ask you about what you have called your “disciplinary predicament”—what to do with English studies.

This will depend on when I said it because I’m constantly on the move, and my disciplinary predicament has probably changed from the time when I said it. Well, my disciplinary predicament is to be teaching, tokenized. When I speak within my disciplinary position, what I say can be used because I’m among the few
senior women of colour in the United States, and I teach now at a very prestigious university, so one cannot in fact speak against multiculturalism without immediately being used by the reactionary lobby against political correctness. One cannot in fact suggest that these things should not be the hegemony of the English departments without giving support, without providing an alibi for the people who say "only teach the texts of English literature in the English departments." This predicament was not what I was talking about, I'm sure, when you read me saying that...

In The Post-Colonial Critic...

Oh, my God, what does that say? I mean I don't like that book. But anyway, you don't want me to tell you anything more do you, because there are many things one could say.

What kind of curricular choices or changes would you like to see... given the decolonizing imperative, or whatever you would like to call that?

Within what situation? Remember I never say anything...

Well certainly. I would have liked you to comment on the situation here, but you can't...

Look, I won't. The thing is I could. It's only too easy, only too easy, but I won't.

But in your situation?

My situation? Well, what I'm suggesting is that on the undergraduate level there should be national-origin validation courses. They should not be seen as multicultural because then the person who is the centre is the white person who is allowing diversity. If you see them as national-origin validation, then it's the young people who are coming as new immigrants who are obliged, you know, as they come through the immigration, naturalization services, they take a very symbolically important Americanization "course." Okay. So in that context, you have on the undergraduate curriculum national-origin validation courses, all kinds of cultures, et cetera, and I see the the main pedagogic imperative there to change the established so-called opposition
groups in the direction of understanding that the national-origin validation course is not against their interests and to change the old immigrants from white identification into immigrant identification, since I see everything as an act.

At the level of postgraduate studies, where I'm most involved, educating the educators, it seems to me that you have to there begin transnational literacy, so the question of a national identity is seen as no more than a kind of affective alibi against the fact that one wants to be within the changed United States, so that the nature of origin is seen within the transnational alphabet, and in general I think we will get more help from the person who's not from that nation in locating this, rather than the person who is from that other nation state. And then, among the teachers of these courses, and I speak as someone who is doing this for herself, there has to be also educating the educators by supplementing the humanities with the social sciences and social sciences with the humanities, so we should realize that interdisciplinary teaching is something we have to learn rather than take for granted.

_I'd like to change track a little now. How do you respond to criticism against your position that “the subaltern cannot speak”?_

"Can the Subaltern Speak?" comes out of the recounting of an incident. Now the incident is a situation where a subaltern person had tried extremely hard to speak, to the extent of making her damned suicide into a message. I cannot think of a situation where somebody really tries to communicate that is more urgent than this. What happened? In one generation, one of the women in her own family said exactly the opposite and condemned her, so in that situation of extreme poignancy I say "a subaltern cannot speak." But every person has decided not to. . . . This is a proof that the subaltern cannot speak: nobody relates it to the damned suicide, not a person. In fact, every accusation that G. C. Spivak is not letting the bloody subaltern speak is a proof that the subaltern cannot speak, because that's spoken in rage and disappointment by one woman hearing through the most non-masculine network—mother to daughter, see that's my grandmother's sister. My mother said to me that my grandmother's
sister had done this and left a message and waited until menstruation and all that stuff, and in my generation the women have forgotten it. It's the least phallocentric way of networking and it has failed, so not only has she not been able to speak, her grandniece trying to make her speak has also failed because not one critic has related it to the example which proves for me that the subaltern cannot speak. I'm supposed to take that seriously? I cannot take that seriously, to tell you the truth. Now let's move that one out. This you should publish because I've never said this.

Then, the next point: everybody thinks the subaltern is just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie. The definition of the word "subaltern" that I use is given in the essay. We are scholars after all. If they are networking in the most non-phallocentric way, and it has failed, the subaltern cannot speak. Let us at least use the hegemonic discourse as well, scholarly discourse. I give the definition, I quote the definition, the definition has a scholarly history, and that is forgotten, so that at both ends my critics are just kind of going to town, failing at both ends. Now, the word "subaltern" as one knows is the description of a military thing. One knows that Gramsci used it because Gramsci was obliged to censor himself in prison. One also knows that the word changed in its use when Gramsci presciently began to be able to see what we today call north-south problems, sitting in prison in Italy, because he was talking about the southern question, and he realized that if one was talking on southern Italy, just class-formation questions were not going to solve anything. And so then the word "subaltern" became packed with meaning. How extraordinary "subaltern's" provenance—a word that comes out of censorship and therefore is a classic catachresis, because of this incredible political situation, and we run with it.

The subalternist historians take it from Gramsci and change it. They define it as the people, the foreign elite, the indigenous elite, the upwardly mobile indigenes, in various kinds of situations: everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference. Now, who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's
not subaltern. It’s in capital logic, you know what I mean? So, to that extent, you can only... then I’m talking Gramsci. I mean, do we understand metaphoric use of words that are like minimally metaphoric. When you say cannot speak, it means that if speaking involves speaking and listening, this possibility of response, responsibility, does not exist in the subaltern’s sphere. You bring out these so-called subalterns from the woodwork; the only way that that speech is produced is by inserting the subaltern into the circuit of hegemony, which is what should happen, as subaltern. Who the hell wants to museumize or protect subalternity? Only extremely reactionary, dubious anthropologic museumizers. No activist wants to keep the subaltern in the space of difference. To do a thing, to work for the subaltern, means to bring it into speech.

The third thing, which is the worst, that is, you don’t give the subaltern voice. You work for the bloody subaltern, you work against subalternity. The penultimate thing is (I want to say something about the work of the subalternist historians), many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being in a discriminated-against minority on the university campus, they don’t need the word subaltern, and they don’t need Spivak as a whipping girl because she said out of that position that the subaltern cannot speak. They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are, and since they can speak, as they tell me—yes they can speak—I quite agree, they’re within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of the pie and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They shouldn’t call themselves subaltern and their main purpose should not be to bloody Spivak.

But the final one is, you see the work of the subalternist historians... their work has in fact, whether they do it themselves or not... it’s having an impact on decolonized India, because what they have proved with meticulous care is that the nationalist narrative of decolonization is like a vaccine that did not take with the subaltern, precisely because the subaltern had no access to the culture of imperialism. And therefore today in decolonized areas, the fact is that all of those alibis for decolonization are
INTERVIEW WITH GAYATRI SPIVAK

absolutely useless. The people have no particular vested interest or feeling of identification with those great alibis, used just less than fifty years ago. Now in this interventionist, subalternist work, they are not speaking for the subaltern, but they’re working for the subaltern in that way. One doesn’t do everything directly. So, those are the things that I would say about the whole spurious “the subaltern can speak” debate.

NOTES

1 According to research statistics compiled by the Human Rights Commission and the Community Agency for Social Enquiry, December 1991 (when the conference was held) was a relatively ‘quiet’ month with approximately 50 political killings (Everatt and Sadek 13). In March 1992, when the white referendum was held, more than 200 people died in political violence (13). The dead in December included three people who were thrown off trains in the greater Johannesburg area, according to the Independent Board of Inquiry into Informal Repression (Independent Board of Inquiry 12-13).

2 A book containing conference contributions is being prepared by the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) under the editorship of Andries W. Oliphant.


WORKS CITED


Postcolonialism
From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Postcolonialism or postcolonial studies is an academic discipline featuring methods of intellectual discourse that analyze, explain, and respond to the cultural legacies of colonialism and imperialism, to the human consequences of controlling a country and establishing settlers for the economic exploitation of the native people and their land. Drawing from postmodern schools of thought, postcolonial studies analyse the politics of knowledge (creation, control, and distribution) by analyzing the functional relations of social and political power that sustain colonialism and neocolonialism—the how and the why of an imperial regime's representations (social, political, cultural) of the imperial colonizer and of the colonized people.

As a genre of contemporary history, postcolonialism questions and reinvents the modes of cultural perception—the ways of viewing and of being viewed. As anthropology, postcolonialism records human relations among the colonial nations and the subaltern peoples exploited by colonial rule.[1] As critical theory, postcolonialism presents, explains, and illustrates the ideology and the praxis of neocolonialism, with examples drawn from the humanities—history and political science, philosophy and Marxist theory, sociology, anthropology, and human geography; the cinema, religion, and theology; feminism, linguistics, and postcolonial literature, of which the anti-conquest narrative genre presents the stories of colonial subjugation of the subaltern man and woman.

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Colonialism

Colonialism was presented as "the extension of Civilization", which ideologically justified the self-ascribed superiority (racial and cultural) of the European Western World over the non-Western world. This concept was espoused by Joseph-Ernest Renan in *La Réforme intellectuelle et morale* (1871), whereby imperial stewardship was thought to effect the intellectual and moral reformation of the coloured peoples of the lesser cultures of the world. That such a divinely established, natural harmony among the human races of the world would be possible, because everyone—colonizer and colonized—has an assigned cultural identity, a social place, and an economic role within an imperial colony; thus:

The regeneration of the inferior or degenerate races, by the superior races is part of the providential order of things for humanity. . . . *Regere imperio populos* is our vocation. Pour forth this all-consuming activity onto countries, which, like China, are crying aloud for foreign conquest. Turn the adventurers who disturb European society into a *ver sacrum*, a horde like those of the Franks, the Lombards, or the Normans, and every man will be in his right role. Nature has made a race of workers, the Chinese race, who have wonderful manual dexterity, and almost no sense of honour; govern them with justice, levying from them, in return for the blessing of such a government, an ample allowance for the conquering race, and they will be satisfied; a race of tillers of the soil, the Negro; treat him with kindness and humanity, and all will be as it should; a race of masters and soldiers, the European race. . . . Let each do what he is made for, and all will be well.

— *La Réforme intellectuelle et morale* (1871), by Joseph-Ernest Renan [2]

From the mid- to the late-nineteenth century, such racialist group-identity language was the cultural common-currency justifying geopolitical competition, among the European and American empires, meant to protect their over-extended economies. Especially in the colonisation of the Far East and in the Scramble for Africa (1870–1914), the representation of a homogeneous European identity justified colonisation. Hence, Belgium
and Britain, and France and Germany proffered theories of national superiority that justified colonialism as delivering the light of civilisation to benighted peoples. Notably, *La mission civilisatrice*, the self-ascribed 'civilising mission' of the French Empire, proposed that some races and cultures have a higher purpose in life, whereby the more powerful, more developed, and more civilised races have the right to colonise other peoples, in service to the noble idea of "civilisation" and its economic benefits.[3][4][5]

**Definition**

As an epistemology (the study of knowledge, its nature and verifiability), as an ethics (moral philosophy), and as a politics (affairs of the citizenry), the field of postcolonialism address the politics of knowledge—the matters that constitute the postcolonial identity of a decolonised people, which derives from: (i) the coloniser's generation of cultural knowledge about the colonised people; and (ii) how that Western cultural knowledge was applied to subjugate a non–European people into a colony of the European Mother Country, which, after initial invasion, was effected by means of the cultural identities of "coloniser" and "colonised".

**Postcolonial identity**

A decolonised people develop a postcolonial identity from the cultural interactions among the types of identity (cultural, national, ethnic) and the social relations of sex, class, and caste; determined by the gender and the race of the colonised person; and the racism inherent to the structures of a colonial society. In postcolonial literature, the anti-conquest narrative analyses the identity politics that are the social and cultural perspectives of the subaltern colonial subjects—their creative resistance to the culture of the coloniser; how such cultural resistance complicated the establishment of a colonial society; how the colonisers developed their postcolonial identity; and how neocolonialism actively employs the Us-and-Them binary social relation to view the non-Western world as inhabited by The Other.

The neocolonial discourse of geopolitical homogeneity conflates the decolonised peoples, their cultures, and their countries, into an imaginary place, such as "the Third World", an over-inclusive term that usually comprises continents and seas, i.e. Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania. The postcolonial critique analyses the self-justifying discourse of neocolonialism and the functions (philosophic and political) of its over-inclusive terms, to establish the factual and cultural inaccuracy of homogeneous concepts, such as "the Arabs" and "the First World", "Christendom" and "the Islamic World", actually comprise heterogeneous peoples, cultures, and geography, and that realistic descriptions of the world's peoples, places, and things require nuanced and accurate terms.[6]

**Characteristics**

Postcolonialism is the critical destabilization of the theories (intellectual and linguistic, social and economic) that support the ways of Western thought—deductive reasoning, rule of law and monotheism—by means of which colonialists "perceive", "understand", and "know" the world. Postcolonial theory thus establishes intellectual spaces for the subaltern peoples to speak for themselves, in their own voices, and so produce cultural discourses, of philosophy and language, of society and economy, which balance the imbalanced us-and-them binary power-relationship between the colonist and the colonial subject.

As a contemporary-history term, *postcolonialism* occasionally is applied temporally, to denote the immediate time after colonialism, which is a problematic application of the term, because the immediate, historical, political time is not included to the categories of critical identity-discourse, which deals with over-inclusive terms of cultural representation, which are abrogated and replaced by postcolonial criticism. As such, the terms
postcolonial and postcolonialism denote aspects of the subject matter, which indicate that the decolonised world is an intellectual space "of contradictions, of half-finished processes, of confusions, of hybridity, and of liminalities".[7]

In Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics (1996), Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins clarified the denotational functions, among which:

The term post-colonialism—according to a too-rigid etymology—is frequently misunderstood as a temporal concept, meaning the time after colonialism has ceased, or the time following the politically determined Independence Day on which a country breaks away from its governance by another state. Not a naïve teleological sequence, which supersedes colonialism, post-colonialism is, rather, an engagement with, and contestation of, colonialism's discourses, power structures, and social hierarchies. . . . A theory of post-colonialism must, then, respond to more than the merely chronological construction of post-independence, and to more than just the discursive experience of imperialism.

— Post-Colonial Drama (1996).[8]

The term postcolonialism also is applied to denote the Mother Country's neocolonial control of the decolonised country, effected by the legalistic continuation of the economic, cultural, and linguistic power relationships that controlled the colonial politics of knowledge (the generation, production, and distribution of knowledge) about the colonised peoples of the non-Western world.[7][9]

The cultural and religious assumptions of colonialist logic remain active practices in contemporary society, and are the bases of the Mother Country's neocolonial attitude towards her former colonial subjects—an economical source of labour and raw materials.[10] Hence, in The Location of Culture (1994), the theoretician Homi K. Bhabha argued that so long as the way of viewing the human world, as composed of separate and unequal cultures, rather than as an integral human world, perpetuates the belief in the existence of imaginary peoples and places—"Christendom" and "The Islamic World", "The First World", "The Second World", and "The Third World". To counter such linguistic and sociologic reductionism, postcolonial praxis establishes the philosophic value of hybrid intellectual-spaces, wherein ambiguity abrogates truth and authenticity; thereby, hybridity is the philosophic condition that most substantively challenges the ideological validity of colonialism.[11]

Critical purpose

The critical purpose of postcolonial studies is to account for, and to combat, the residual effects (social, political, and cultural) of colonialism upon the peoples once ruled by the Mother Country.[10] To that end, postcolonial theoreticians establish social and cultural spaces for the non-Western peoples—especially the subaltern peoples—whose native cultures were often suppressed by the Western value systems promoted and established as the dominant ideology of the colonial enterprise, said cultural suppression was meant to civilise the natives in the European image, as proposed and justified by the French philosopher Joseph-Ernest Renan in the book La Réforme intellectuel et morale (1871),[2] and by the German philosopher G. F. W. Hegel, in the essay "The African Character" (1830).[12]

The critical perspectives and analyses presented in the book Orientalism (1978), by Edward Saïd, argued that, in dealing with non-Western peoples, European scholars applied the high-abstraction idealism inherent to the concept of "The Orient", in order to disregard the existing native societies, and their social, intellectual, and
In the essay "The African Character" (1830), Hegel says that some cultures lagged in their development, and needed Christian–European stewardship to mature towards civilisation.

In the novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), the writer Chinua Achebe described native life in the British colony of Nigeria.

To that end, postcolonialism critically destabilizes the dominant ideologies of the West, by challenging the "inherent assumptions . . . [and the] material and discursive legacies of colonialism", by working with tangible social factors such as:

- **Anthropology**, by means of which Western intellectuals generated knowledge about non-Western peoples, which colonial institutions then used to subjugate them into a colony to serve the economic, social, and cultural interests of the imperial power.

- **Colonialist literature**, wherein the writers ideologically justified imperialism and colonialism with cultural representations (literary and pictorial) of the colonised country and its people, as perpetually inferior, which the imperial steward must organise into a colonial society to be guided towards European modernity.

- **Postcolonial literature**, wherein writers articulate and celebrate the postcolonial identity of the decolonised, native society (an identity often reclaimed from the coloniser) whilst maintaining the independent nation's pragmatic connections (economic and social, linguistic and cultural) with the Mother Country.

- **Native cultural-identity in a colonised society**, and the dilemmas inherent to developing a postcolonial national identity after the de-colonisation of the country, whilst avoiding the counter-productive extremes of nationalism.[7]

In the definition and establishment of a postcolonial identity, the literature of the anti-conquest narrative genre is the praxis of "indigenous decolonisation", whereby writers explain, analyse, and transcend the personal and societal experiences of imperial subjugation, of having endured the imposed identity of "a colonial subject". By means of their postcolonial literature, the subaltern peoples reply to the Mother Country's perceived misrepresentation of their humanity; an African example is the novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), by Chinua Achebe, about the Nigerian experience of being part of the British Empire. Using the native varieties of the colonial languages, the Anti-conquest narrative addresses the Mother Country's cultural hegemony; by "writing back to the centre" of the empire, the natives create their own national histories in service to forming and establishing a national identity after decolonisation.[13] [14]

**Notable theoreticians**
Frantz Fanon

In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), the psychiatrist Frantz Fanon analysed and medically described the nature of colonialism as essentially destructive. Its societal effects—the imposition of a subjugating colonial identity—are harmful to the mental health of the native peoples who were subjugated into colonies. Fanon wrote the ideological essence of colonialism is the systematic denial of "all attributes of humanity" of the colonised people. Such dehumanization is achieved with physical and mental violence, by which the colonist means to inculcate a servile mentality upon the natives. For Fanon the natives must violently resist colonial subjugation. Hence, Fanon describes violent resistance to colonialism as a mentally cathartic practice, which purges colonial servility from the native psyche, and restores self-respect to the subjugated. Thus he supported the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) in the Algerian War (1954–62) for independence from France.

As postcolonial praxis, Fanon's mental-health analyses of colonialism and imperialism, and the supporting economic theories, were partly derived from the essay *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916), wherein Vladimir Lenin described colonial imperialism as a degenerate form of capitalism, which requires greater degrees of human exploitation to ensure continually consistent profit for investment.

Edward Said

To describe the us-and-them "binary social relation" with which Western Europe intellectually divided the world—into the "Occident" and the "Orient"—the cultural critic Edward Said developed the denotations and connotations of the term *Orientalism* (an art-history term for Western depictions and the study of the Orient). This is the concept that the cultural representations generated with the us-and-them binary relation are social constructs, which are mutually constitutive and cannot exist independent of each other, because each exists on account of and for the other.

Notably, "the West" created the cultural concept of "the East", which according to Said allowed the Europeans to suppress the peoples of the Middle East, of the Indian Subcontinent, and of Asia, from expressing and representing themselves as discrete peoples and cultures. Orientalism thus conflated and reduced the non-Western world into the homogeneous cultural entity known as "the East". Therefore, in service to the colonial type of imperialism, the us-and-them Orientalist paradigm allowed European scholars to represent the Oriental World as inferior and backward, irrational and wild, as opposed to a Western Europe that was superior and progressive, rational and civil—the opposite of the Oriental Other. In "Edward Said: The Exile as Interpreter" (1993), about Said's *Orientalism* (1978), A. Madhavan said that "Said's passionate thesis in that book, now an 'almost canonical study', represented Orientalism as a 'style of thought' based on the antimony of East and West in their world-views, and also as a 'corporate institution' for dealing with the Orient."

In concordance with the philosopher Michel Foucault, Said established that power and knowledge are the inseparable components of the intellectual binary relationship with which Occidentals claim "knowledge of the Orient". That the applied power of such cultural knowledge allowed Europeans to rename, re-define, and thereby control Oriental peoples, places, and things, into imperial colonies. The power–knowledge binary relation is conceptually essential to identify and understand colonialism in general, and European colonialism in particular. Hence,

To the extent that Western scholars were aware of contemporary Orientals or Oriental movements of thought and culture, these were perceived either as silent shadows to be animated by the Orientalist, brought into reality by them, or as a kind of cultural and international proletariat useful for the Orientalist's grander interpretive activity.
Nonetheless, critics of the homogeneous "Occident–Orient" binary social relation, said that Orientalism is of limited descriptive capability and practical application, and proposed that there are variants of Orientalism that apply to Africa and to Latin America. To which Said replied that the European West applied Orientalism as a *homogeneous* form of The Other, in order to facilitate the formation of the cohesive, collective European cultural identity denoted by the term "The West". \[20]\]

**Gayatri Spivak**

In establishing the Postcolonial definition of the term *Subaltern*, the philosopher and theoretician Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak cautioned against assigning an over-broad connotation; that:

>... *subaltern* is not just a classy word for "oppressed", for The Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie. ... In postcolonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference. Now, who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not *subaltern*.... Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus; they don't need the word 'subaltern'. ... They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They're within the hegemonic discourse, wanting a piece of the pie, and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern.

— *Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa* (1992) \[21]\]

Spivak also introduced the terms *essentialism* and *strategic essentialism* to describe the social functions of postcolonialism. The term *essentialism* denotes the perceptual dangers inherent to reviving subaltern voices in ways that might (over) simplify the cultural identity of heterogeneous social groups, and, thereby, create stereotyped representations of the different identities of the people who compose a given social group. The term *strategic essentialism* denotes a temporary, essential group-identity used in the praxis of discourse among peoples. Furthermore, essentialism can occasionally be applied—by the so-described people—to facilitate the subaltern's communication in being heeded, heard, and understood, because a strategic essentialism (a fixed and established subaltern identity) is more readily grasped, and accepted, by the popular majority, in the course of inter-group discourse. The important distinction, between the terms, is that strategic essentialism does not ignore the diversity of identities (cultural and ethnic) in a social group, but that, in its practical function, strategic essentialism temporarily minimizes inter-group diversity to pragmatically support the essential group-identity. \[6]\]

Spivak developed and applied Foucault's term *epistemic violence* to describe the destruction of non–Western ways of perceiving the world, and the resultant dominance of the Western ways of perceiving the world. Conceptually, epistemic violence specifically relates to women, whereby the "Subaltern [woman] must always be caught in translation, never [allowed to be] truly expressing herself", because the colonial power's destruction of her culture pushed to the social margins her non–Western ways of perceiving, understanding, and knowing the world. \[6]\]
In June of the year 1600, the Afro–Iberian woman Francisca de Figueroa requested from the King of Spain his permission for her to emigrate from Europe to New Spain, and reunite with her daughter, Juana de Figueroa. As a subaltern woman, Francisca repressed her native African language, and spoke her request in Peninsular Spanish, the official language of Colonial Latin America. As a subaltern woman, she applied to her voice the Spanish cultural filters of sexism, Christian monotheism, and servile language, in addressing her colonial master:

I, Francisca de Figueroa, mulatta in colour, declare that I have, in the city of Cartagena, a daughter named Juana de Figueroa; and she has written, to call for me, in order to help me. I will take with me, in my company, a daughter of mine, her sister, named María, of the said colour; and for this, I must write to Our Lord the King to petition that he favour me with a licence, so that I, and my said daughter, can go and reside in the said city of Cartagena. For this, I will give an account of what is put down in this report; and of how I, Francisca de Figueroa, am a woman of sound body, and mulatta in colour . . . And my daughter María is twenty-years-old, and of the said colour, and of medium size. Once given, I attest to this. I beg your Lordship to approve, and order it done. I ask for justice in this.

[On the twenty-first day of the month of June 1600, Your Majesty's Lords Presidents and Official Judges of this House of Contract Employment order that the account she offers be received, and that testimony for the purpose she requests given.]


Moreover, Spivak further cautioned against ignoring subaltern peoples as "cultural Others", and said that the West could progress—beyond the colonial perspective—by means of introspective self-criticism of the basic ideals and investigative methods that establish a culturally superior West studying the culturally inferior non–Western peoples.[6][23] Hence, the integration of the subaltern voice to the intellectual spaces of social studies is problematic, because of the unrealistic opposition to the idea of studying "Others"; Spivak rejected such an anti-intellectual stance by social scientists, and about them said that "to refuse to represent a cultural Other is salving your conscience . . . allowing you not to do any homework."[24] Moreover, postcolonial studies also reject the colonial cultural depiction of subaltern peoples as hollow mimics of the European colonists and their Western ways; and rejects the depiction of subaltern peoples as the passive recipient-vessels of the imperial and colonial power of the Mother Country. Consequent to Foucault’s philosophic model of the binary relationship of power and knowledge, scholars from the Subaltern Studies Collective, proposed that anti-colonial resistance always counters every exercise of colonial power.
R. Siva Kumar

In 1997, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of India's Independence, Santiniketan: The Making of a Contextual Modernism was an important exhibition curated by R. Siva Kumar at the National Gallery of Modern Art.\[25\]

In his catalogue essay R. Siva Kumar introduced the term Contextual Modernism which later emerged as a postcolonial critical tool in the understanding of Indian art, specifically the works of Nandalal Bose, Rabindranath Tagore, Ram Kinker Baij and Benode Behari Mukherjee.\[26\]

Siva Kumar argues that the Santiniketan artists did not believe that to be indigenous one has to be historicist either in theme or in style, and similarly to be modern one has to adopt a particular trans-national formal language or technique. Modernism was to them neither a style nor a form of internationalism. It was critical re-engagement with the foundational aspects of art necessitated by changes in one’s unique historical position.\[27\]

In the postcolonial history of art, this marked the departure from Eurocentric unilateral idea of Modernism to alternative context sensitive Modernisms.

The brief survey of the individual works of the core Santiniketan artists and the thought perspectives they open up makes clear that though there were various contact points in the work they were not bound by a continuity of style but buy a community of ideas. Which they not only shared but also interpreted and carried forward. Thus they do not represent a school but a movement.


Several terms including Paul Gilroy’s counter culture of modernity and Tani Barlow's Colonial modernity have been used to describe the kind of alternative modernity that emerged in non-European contexts. Professor Gall argues that ‘Contextual Modernism’ is a more suited term because “the colonial in colonial modernity does not accommodate the refusal of many in colonized situations to internalize inferiority. Santiniketan’s artist teachers’ refusal of subordination incorporated a counter vision of modernity, which sought to correct the racial and cultural essentialism that drove and characterized imperial Western modernity and modernism. Those European modernities, projected through a triumphant British colonial power, provoked nationalist responses, equally problematic when they incorporated similar essentialisms.”\[28\]

Dipesh Chakrabarty

In Provincializing Europe (2000), Dipesh Chakrabarty charted the subaltern history of the Indian struggle for independence, and countered Eurocentric, Western scholarship about non-Western peoples and cultures, by proposing that Western Europe simply be considered as culturally equal to the other cultures of the world, that is, as "one region among many" in human geography.\[29\] \[30\]

Derek Gregory

Derek Gregory argues the long traces in history of British and American colonization is an ongoing process happening even today. In the Colonial Present, Gregory traces connections between the geopolitics of events
happening in modern day Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq and links it back to the us-and-them binary relation between the Western and Eastern world. Building upon the ideas of the other and Said's work on orientalism, Gregory critiques the economic policy, military apparatus, and transnational corporations as vehicles driving present day colonialism. Emphasizing ideas of discussing ideas around colonialism in the present tense, Gregory utilizes modern events such as the September 11 attacks to tell spatial stories around the colonial behavior happening due to the War on Terror.[31]

**Postcolonial nations**

As a literary theory, postcolonialism deals with the literatures produced by the peoples who once were colonies of the European imperial powers (e.g. Britain, France, and Spain); and the literatures of the decolonised countries engaged in contemporary, postcolonial arrangements (e.g. Francophonie and the British Commonwealth) with their former mother countries.[32][33] Postcolonial literary criticism comprehends the literatures written by the coloniser and the colonised, wherein the subject matter includes portraits of the colonised peoples and their lives as imperial subjects. In Dutch literature, the Indies Literature includes the colonial and postcolonial genres, which examine and analyse the formation of a postcolonial identity, and the postcolonial culture produced by the diaspora of the Indo-European peoples, the Eurasian folk who originated from Indonesia; the peoples who were the colony of the Dutch East Indies; in the literature, the notable author is Tjalie Robinson.[34]

To perpetuate and facilitate control of the colonial enterprise, some colonised people, especially from among the subaltern peoples of the British Empire, were sent to attend university in the Imperial Motherland; they were to become the native-born, but Europeanised, ruling class of colonial satraps. Yet, after decolonisation, their bicultural educations originated postcolonial criticism of empire and colonialism, and of the representations of the colonist and the colonised. In the late twentieth century, after the dissolution of the USSR (1991), the constituent soviet socialist republics became the literary subjects of postcolonial criticism, wherein the writers dealt with the legacies (cultural, social, economic) of the Russification of their peoples, countries, and cultures in service to Greater Russia.[35]

Postcolonial literary study is in two categories: (i) that of the postcolonial nations, and (ii) that of the nations who continue forging a postcolonial national identity. The first category of literature presents and analyses the internal challenges inherent to determining an ethnic identity in a decolonised nation. The second category of literature presents and analyses the degeneration of civic and nationalist unities consequent to ethnic parochialism, usually manifested as the demagoguery of "protecting the nation", a variant of the Us-and-Them binary social relation. Civic and national unity degenerate when a patriarchal régime unilaterally defines what is and what is not "the national culture" of the decolonised country; the nation-state collapses, either into communal movements, espousing grand political goals for the postcolonial nation; or into ethnically mixed communal movements, espousing political separatism, as occurred in decolonised Rwanda, the Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo; thus the postcolonial extremes against which Frantz Fanon warned in 1961.

**The Middle East**

In the essays "Overstating the Arab State" (2001), by Nazih Ayubi, and "Is Jordan Palestine?" (2003), by Raphael Israel, the authors deal with the psychologically fragmented postcolonial identity, as determined by the effects (political and social, cultural and economic) of Western colonialism in the Middle East. As such, the fragmented national identity remains a characteristic of such societies, consequence of the imperially convenient, but arbitrary, colonial boundaries (geographic and cultural) demarcated by the Europeans, with which they ignored the tribal and clan relations that determined the geographic borders of the Middle East.
countries, before the arrival of European imperialists. Hence, the postcolonial literature about the Middle East examines and analyses the Western discourses about identity formation, the existence and inconsistent nature of a postcolonial national-identity among the peoples of the contemporary Middle East.

In the essay “Who Am I?: The Identity Crisis in the Middle East” (2006), P.R. Kumaraswamy said:

Most countries of the Middle East, suffered from the fundamental problems over their national identities. More than three-quarters of a century after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, from which most of them emerged, these states have been unable to define, project, and maintain a national identity that is both inclusive and representative.

Independence and the end of colonialism did not end social fragmentation and war (civil and international) in the Middle East. In The Search for Arab Democracy: Discourses and Counter-Discourses (2004), Larbi Sadiki said that the problems of national identity in the Middle East are consequence of the Orientalist indifference of the European empires when they demarcated the political borders of their colonies, which ignored the local history and the geographic and tribal boundaries observed by the natives, in the course of establishing the Western version of the Middle East.

In the event, "in places like Iraq and Jordan, leaders of the new sovereign states were brought in from the outside, [and] tailored to suit colonial interests and commitments. Likewise, most states in the Persian Gulf were handed over to those [Europeanised colonial subjects] who could protect and safeguard imperial interests in the post-withdrawal phase." Moreover, "with notable exceptions like Egypt, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, most [countries] . . . [have] had to [re]invent, their historical roots" after decolonisation, and, "like its colonial predecessor, postcolonial identity owes its existence to force."

Africa

In the late 19th century, the Scramble for Africa (1874–1914) proved to be the tail end of mercantilist colonialism of the European imperial powers, yet, for the Africans, the consequences were greater than elsewhere in the colonised non–Western world. To facilitate the colonisation—the European empires laid railroads where the rivers and the land proved impassable. To wit, the Imperial British railroad effort proved overambitious in the effort of traversing continental Africa, yet succeeded only in connecting colonial North Africa (Cairo) with the colonial south of Africa (Cape Town).

Upon arriving to Africa, the Europeans encountered the native African civilisations of the Ashanti Empire, the Benin Empire, the Kingdom of Dahomey, the Buganda Kingdom (Uganda), and the Kingdom of Kongo, all of which annexed by imperial powers under the belief that they required European stewardship, as proposed and justified in the essay "The African Character" (1830), by G. W. F. Hegel, in keeping with his philosophic opinion that cultures were stages in the course of the historical unfolding of The Absolute. Nigeria was the homeland of the Hausa people, the Yoruba people and the Igbo people; which last were among the first people to develop their history in constructing a postcolonial identity. (See: Things Fall Apart, 1958).

About East Africa, the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o wrote Weep Not, Child (1964), the first postcolonial
Colonialism in 1913: the African colonies of the European empires; and the postcolonial, contemporary political boundaries of the decolonized countries. (Click image for key)

In postcolonial countries of Africa, the Africans and the non–Africans live in a world of genders, ethnicities, classes and languages, of ages, families, professions, religions and nations. There is a suggestion that individualism and postcolonialism are essentially discontinuous and divergent cultural phenomena.[41]

Criticism

National identity

The concentration of postcolonial studies upon the subject of national identity has determined it is essential to the creation and establishment of a stable nation and country in the aftermath of decolonisation; yet indicates that either an indeterminate or an ambiguous national identity has tended to limit the social, cultural, and economic progress of a decolonised people. In Overstating the Arab State (2001), by Nazih Ayubi, the Moroccan scholar Bin 'Abd al-'Ali proposed that the existence of "a pathological obsession with . . . identity" is a cultural theme common to the contemporary academic field Middle Eastern Studies.[42]

Nevertheless, Kumaraswamy and Sadiki said that such a common sociologic problem—that of an indeterminate national identity—among the countries of the Middle East is an important aspect that must be accounted in order to have an understanding the politics of the contemporary Middle East.[38] In the event, Ayubi asks if what 'Bin Abd al–'Ali sociologically described as an obsession with national identity might be explained by "the absence of a championing social class?"[43]

Literature of postcolonialism

Foundation works

- Discourse on Colonialism (1950), by Aimé Césaire
- Black Skin, White Masks (1952), by Frantz Fanon
- The Wretched of the Earth (1961), by Frantz Fanon
- The Colonizer and the Colonized (1965), by Albert Memmi
- Consciencism (1970), by Kwame Nkrumah
- Orientalism (1978), by Edward Saïd

Important works

The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature (1990), by B. Ashcroft.
L'Européocentrisme (Eurocentrism, 1988), by Samir Amin.
The Location of Culture (1994), H.K. Bhabha.
"Cahiers du CEDREF” on “Decolonial Feminist and Queer Theories” (2012), by Paola Bachetta.
Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories, P. Chatterjee, Princeton University Press.
Iran: A People Interrupted (2007), by Hamid Dabashi.
Colonialism is Doomed, by Ernesto Guevara.
Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism” (1916), by Lenin.
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The Idea of Latin América” (2005), by Walter Mignolo.
Local Histories/Global designs: Coloniality (1999), by Walter Mignolo.
** "New Orientations:Post Colonial Literature in English” by Jaydeep Sarangi, Authorspress,New Delhi
Under Western Eyes (1986), by Chandra Talpade Mohanty.
The Invention of Africa (1988), by V. Y. Mudimbe.
Dislocating Cultures (1997), by Uma Narayan.
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Delusions and Discoveries (1983), B. Parry.
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- "Calibán: Apuntes sobre la cultura de Nuestra América" (Caliban: Notes About the Culture of Our America, 1971), in Calibán and Other Essays (1989), by Roberto Fernández Retamar
- Culture and Imperialism (1993), by Edward W. Saïd [44]
- Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World (1986), by Kumari Jayawardena.
- The Postcolonial Critic (1990), by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.
- White Mythologies: Writing History and the West (1990), by Robert J.C. Young. [45]
- Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction (2001), by Robert J.C. Young.

See also

- Burn! (1969), directed by Gillo Pontecorvo
- Cultural cringe
- Critical theory
- Cross-culturalism
- The Dogs of War (1980), directed by John Irvin
- Ethnology
- An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" (1975), by Chinua Achebe
- Inversion in postcolonial theory
- Linguistic imperialism
- Nation-building
- Postcolonial anarchism
- Postcolonial feminism
- Postcolonial literature
- Post-Communism
- Ranajit Guha
- Ranjit Hoskote
- Robert J.C. Young
- Subaltern
Notes

1. Fischer-Tiné 2011, § Lead; Quayson 2000, p. 2–
12. Bhabha, 1994: 113
17. The Globalization of World Politics (2005), by John Baylis and Steve Smith, pp. 231–35
44. Quayson 2000, p. 4.
45. Quayson 2000, p. 3.

References

- Kumaraswamy, P. R. (March 2006). "Who am I?: The Identity Crisis in the Middle East". The Middle East Review of International Affairs 10 (1, Article 5)

External links

- Contemporary Postcolonial and Postimperial Literature (http://www.postcolonialweb.org/)
- Paper about Post-Colonialism: Definition, Development and Examples from India (http://www.nilsole.net/referate/post-colonialism-definition-development-and-examples-from-india/)
- The Postcolonial Space (http://postcolonial.net/)
- Postcolonialities (http://postcoloniality.org/)
- Postcolonial Studies Association (http://www.postcolonialstudiesassociation.co.uk/)


Categories: Postcolonialism | Critical theory | Neocolonialism | Africana philosophy | Postmodern theory | Post-structuralism

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Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (born February 24, 1942) is a University Professor at Columbia University, where she is a founding member of the school's Institute for Comparative Literature and Society.[1] She is best known for the essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?," considered a founding text of postcolonialism, and for her translation of and introduction to Jacques Derrida's De la grammatologie. In 2012, Spivak was awarded the Kyoto Prize in Arts and Philosophy for being "a critical theorist and educator speaking for the humanities against intellectual colonialism in relation to the globalized world."[2] In 2013, she received the Padma Bhushan, the third highest civilian award given by the Republic of India.[3]

Spivak is known for her cultural and critical theories that challenge the "legacy of colonialism" in the way readers engage with literature and culture. She often focuses on the texts of peoples who are typically marginalized by dominant western culture, including immigrant, working class, women and other subaltern populations.[4][5]

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Life

Spivak was born Gayatri Chakravorty in Calcutta, India, to Pares Chandra and Sivani Chakravorty.[6] After completing her secondary education at St. John's Diocesan Girls' Higher Secondary School, Spivak attended Presidency College, Kolkata under the University of Calcutta, from which she graduated with honors, a degree in English, and gold medals for English and Bengali literature, in 1959.[6] Spivak attended Cornell University, where she completed her MA in English and continued to pursue her PhD in comparative literature while also teaching at the University of Iowa.[6]
Her dissertation, advised by Paul de Man, was on W.B. Yeats and titled *Myself Must I Remake: The Life and Poetry of W.B. Yeats*. At Cornell, she was the second woman elected to membership in the Telluride Association. She was briefly married to Talbot Spivak in the 1960s, who wrote the autobiographical novel *The Bride Wore the Traditional Gold* which deals with the early years of this marriage.

In March 2007, Spivak became a University Professor at Columbia University, making her the first woman of color to achieve the highest faculty rank in the University's 264-year history.

In June 2012, she was awarded the Kyoto Prize in Arts and Philosophy.

On December 21, 2014, Spivak was conferred a honorary D.Litt. by Presidency University, Kolkata.

**Work**

In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak discusses the lack of an account of the Sati practice, leading her to reflect on whether the subaltern can even speak. Spivak recounts how Sati appears in colonial archives. Spivak demonstrates that the Western academy has obscured subaltern experiences by assuming the transparency of its scholarship. Spivak writes about the process, the focus on the Eurocentric Subject as they disavow the problem of representation; and by invoking the Subject of Europe, these intellectuals constitute the subaltern Other of Europe as anonymous and mute.

Spivak rose to prominence with her translation of Derrida's *De la grammatologie*, which included a translator's introduction that has been described as "setting a new standard for self-reflexivity in prefaces." After this, as a member of the "Subaltern Studies Collective," she carried out a series of historical studies and literary critiques of imperialism and international feminism. She has often referred to herself as a "practical Marxist-feminist-deconstructionist." Her predominant ethico-political concern has been for the space occupied by the subaltern, especially subaltern women, both in discursive practices and in institutions of Western cultures. Edward Said wrote of Spivak's work, "She pioneered the study in literary theory of non-Western women and produced one of the earliest and most coherent accounts of that role available to us." In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak highlights how Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault confine the subject to the West, which problematizes the non-Western other as real and knowable. In concluding her essay, she rebuffs Deleuze and Foucault for making it impossible to confer with the subaltern in a discursive practice, and suggests the possibilities Jacques Derrida offers for thinking about the subaltern insomuch as he appertains to a classically philosophical interpretation of the subject, rather than a socio-political, cultural or historical interpretation, which might assume that the subject is always already the subject of the West.

Her *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, published in 1999, explores how major works of European metaphysics (e.g., Kant, Hegel) not only tend to exclude the subaltern from their discussions, but actively prevent non-Europeans from occupying positions as fully human subjects.

Spivak coined the term "strategic essentialism," which refers to a sort of temporary solidarity for the purpose of social action. For example, women's groups have many different agendas that potentially make it difficult for feminists to work together for common causes; "Strategic essentialism" allows for disparate groups to accept temporarily an "essentialist" position that enables them to act cohesively. However, while others have built upon this idea of "strategic essentialism," Spivak has since retracted use of this term.

Spivak taught at several universities before arriving at Columbia in 1991. She has been a Guggenheim fellow, has received numerous academic honours including an honorary doctorate from Oberlin College, and has
been on the editorial board of academic journals such as boundary 2. In March 2007, Columbia University President Lee Bollinger appointed Spivak University Professor, the institution's highest faculty rank. In a letter to the faculty, he wrote,

“Not only does her world-renowned scholarship—grounded in deconstructivist literary theory—range widely from critiques of post-colonial discourse to feminism, Marxism, and globalization; her lifelong search for fresh insights and understanding has transcended the traditional boundaries of discipline while retaining the fire for new knowledge that is the hallmark of a great intellect.

Spivak's writing has received some criticism,[15] including the suggestion that her work puts style ahead of substance.[16] It has been argued in her defense, however, that this sort of criticism reveals an unwillingness to substantively engage with her texts.[17] Judith Butler has noted that Spivak's supposedly complex language has, in fact, resonated with and profoundly changed the thinking of "tens of thousands of activists and scholars."[18] Marxist literary theorist Terry Eagleton noted that "there can thus be few more important critics of our age than the likes of Spivak. [...] She has probably done more long-term political good, in pioneering feminist and post-colonial studies within global academia than almost any of her theoretical colleagues."[19]

In speeches given and published since 2002, Spivak has addressed the issue of terrorism and suicide bombings. With the aim of bringing an end to suicide bombings, she has explored and "tried to imagine what message [such acts] might contain,"[20] ruminating that "suicidal resistance is a message inscribed in the body when no other means will get through."[20] One critic has suggested that this sort of stylised language may serve to blur important moral issues relating to terrorism.[21] However, Spivak stated in the same speech that "single coerced yet willed suicidal 'terror' is in excess of the destruction of dynastic temples and the violation of women, tenacious and powerfully residual. It has not the banality of evil. It is informed by the stupidity of belief taken to extreme."[20]

**Philanthropy**

In 1997, Spivak founded The Pares Chandra Chakravorty Memorial Literacy Project Inc., a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organisation, to provide quality primary education for children in some of the poorest regions of the globe, a continuing work that Spivak had started in 1986. The Project currently operates schools in rural areas of West Bengal, India. By setting up schools and giving sustained training to local teachers who operate them with the help of local supervisors, the Project seeks to offer children in these areas the resources to enter the mainstream education system for secondary school and beyond.

The Project is committed to using the existing state curriculum and textbooks to train teachers, in the belief that by using these materials they can better enable their students to enter the national education system on equal terms with others. "Since India constantly brags about being the world's largest democracy, and this is a large sector of the electorate, what I'm trying to do is develop rituals of democratic habits," she said of the Project.[22]

**Books**

**Academic**

Selected Subaltern Studies (edited with Ranajit Guha) (1988)
The Post-Colonial Critic – Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues (1990)
Death of a Discipline (2003).
Other Asias (2005).

Literary

- Imaginary Maps (translation with critical introduction of three stories by Mahasweta Devi) (1994)
- Red Thread (forthcoming)

See also

- List of deconstructionists
- Postcolonialism
- Postcolonial feminism
- Subaltern Studies
- Chandra Talpade Mohanty
- Comparative literature

References

1. Columbia faculty profile (http://www.columbia.edu/cu/english/fac_profiles.htm#gcs4)
Further reading


External links

- Media related to Gayatri Spivak at Wikimedia Commons
- "Righting Wrongs" (read full article) (http://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File%3AGayatri_Chakravorty_Spivak%2C_RIGHTING_WRONGS.pdf&page=2)
- "'Woman' as Theatre" (http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/default.asp?channel_id=2187&editorial_id=10716) in *Radical Philosophy*
- Full article: "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (http://www.mcgill.ca/files/crclaw-discourse/Can_the_subaltern Speak.pdf)
- "Exacting Solidarities" (http://www.lrb.co.uk/v21/n13/letters.html) – Letters responding to Eagleton's review of Spivak by Judith Butler and others
- Glossary of Key Terms in the Work of Spivak (http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Glossary.html)
"An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBzCwzvudv0) on YouTube; Gayatri Spivak describes her 2012 collection from Harvard University Press


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