

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942-)

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Description Literary critic and theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is one of the founders and foremost scholars of post-colonial theory. Her views are loosely associated with those of the Subaltern Studies Collective, a group of Marxist intellectuals based in India, Britain, and the United States — against which Spivak has also mounted criticism — who are interested in the histories of the unrepresented masses. Born in Calcutta, India in 1942, Spivak received her undergraduate education at the University of Calcutta before moving to the United States where she completed graduate work in English. Often given the label "marxist, feminist, deconstructionist," Spivak is anything but single-minded; her continually evolving work spans multiple disciplines and bridges the gap between academia and activism. Indeed, her status as an important and well-regarded academic (an insider) and an Indian woman living in the United States (an outsider) allows her to occupy a unique, if at times, somewhat precarious position.

Spivak is perhaps best known for her landmark essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985) in which she comes to the controversial and often misunderstood conclusion that "the subaltern cannot speak." By this phrase, Spivak means that those individuals in the most extreme positions of marginalization have no way of having their voices heard, and of becoming visible through any process of self-representation. Such circumstances arguably arise out of a powerful capitalist narrative which writes into the margins all those who do not fit its story. This is problematic because if the subaltern cannot be heard, read, or seen, then she also cannot claim personal or political autonomy; she is effectively barred from realizing any kind of meaningful selfhood or agency. Some of Spivak's other well-known ideas include "transnational literacy" and "strategic essentialism," the latter being when oppressed groups may temporarily assume an identity based on a single dimension (i.e., being a woman, being a Pakistani, being a lesbian) in order to achieve certain political goals. Also notable is Spivak's work as a translator, which includes a translation of French philosopher Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1976) as well as three short stories by the Indian writer Mahasweta Devi, published in the book *Imaginary Maps* (1994).

Despite the fact that Spivak is sometimes criticized for her obscure, inaccessible writing style, her work still manages to reach a diverse global activist audience. Although she currently holds a teaching position at Columbia University, Spivak spends a good deal of her time travelling, engaging in what she calls "fieldwork." This fieldwork includes training teachers in different parts of rural India and Bangladesh as part of a larger

campaign for rural literacy. She also speaks to farmers in these areas about issues of ecological injustice and about the "sacredness" of Nature. Spivak identifies the rural (as opposed to the urban) as the real front of globalization. In particular, she argues that through such mechanisms as seed and fertilizer control, genetic engineering, and the patenting of indigenous knowledge, the rural landscape of the Global South has become a site of intensified globalization — much to the detriment of the local peoples and land. As a way of addressing what she sees as the destructive realities of globalization, Spivak offers the counter concept "planetarity," to which she devotes a chapter of her book *Death of a Discipline* (2003). Spivak argues that the popular conception of globalization as the financialization and computerization of the globe leads to a vicious system of exploitation, whereby it is assumed that the globe (as a kind of imaginary terrain that exists only on our computers) can and should be controlled to produce capitalist gains. Planetarity, on the other hand, is a more sensitive and attuned way of understanding the materiality of the world and our collective place and responsibility as humans within it. Spivak suggests that rather than being global agents we should instead imagine ourselves as planetary subjects, inhabiting a planet that is merely "on loan" to us.

Suggested
Reading:

Harasym, Sarah. ed. 1990. *The post-colonial critic: Interviews, strategies, dialogues: Gayatri Spivak*. New York: Routledge.

Sharpe, Jenny. 2002. A conversation with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Politics and the imagination. *Signs* 28 (2): 609-24.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1985. Can the subaltern speak?. *Wedge* 7/8 (Winter/Spring): 120-30.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1999. *A critique of postcolonial reason: Toward a history of the vanishing present*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 2003. Planetarity. In *Death of a discipline*. 71-102. New York: Columbia University Press.