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Critical Intimacy: An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*

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BY NOW THE HEADY DAYS of deconstruction feel like a curious remnant from another era, as passé as big hair and parachute pants. Yet its core impulse — to unpack the relationship between text and meaning, and critique the hidden biases of the Western intellectual tradition — is so deeply embedded in modern academic life that it's easy to forget how exciting the movement once was. This year, Johns Hopkins University Press reinvigorated a public debate about the merits of deconstruction with a newly revised, and controversial, 40th anniversary edition of Jacques Derrida's Of Grammatology — one of deconstruction's foundational texts. The book features an updated translation by its original English translator, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Today, Spivak is an academic superstar — a prolific scholar and co-founder of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society at Columbia University. When she first started working on a translation of Derrida's treatise, Spivak was an unknown academic in her mid-20s — "this young Asian girl," as she says, trying to navigate the strange world of American academe. Spivak was a most unlikely translator. She had no formal training in philosophy and was not a native English or French speaker, so it was an audacious — almost preposterous — project to translate such a complex work of high theory. She not only translated the book; she also wrote her own monograph-length preface that introduced Derrida to a new generation of literary scholars.

In subsequent decades, Spivak carved out what seems like several distinct careers. She became a pioneering feminist Marxist scholar and then helped launch postcolonial studies with her seminal essay "Can the Subal-

tern Speak." But Spivak's not just an ivory tower intellectual. She also set up elementary schools for illiterate students in her native India, where she's taught for decades. Somehow, she's managed to teach critical theory to grad students at one of the United States's elite universities while also teaching democratic empowerment to rural children in West Bengal. Rarely has the blending of theory and praxis been so integrated with a single person.

Now in her mid-70s, Spivak maintains the busy schedule of a globe-trotting intellectual. I spoke with her shortly after she traveled to Lagos and before speaking engagements in London and Paris. We ranged over a wide range of subjects, from her friendship with Derrida and the tragic family story that sparked her interest in the subaltern, to the responsibility of intellectuals and the crisis in the humanities.

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Paulson*: *You have just come out with the 40th anniversary edition of Derrida's Of Grammatology. Why do we need a revised translation of this book?

Spivak: When I translated it, I didn't know who Derrida was or anything about his thinking. So I did my best to introduce and translate it and the introduction really caught on, for which I'm very grateful. But now, after a lifetime of working with and through Derrida, I can say something more to my readers about this extraordinary thinker, so I added an afterword. This is a kind of tribute to a lived life rather than encountering a great new text.

Has your understanding of Derrida's book changed over the four decades since you first translated it?

So I found. When I began, I didn't notice how critical the book was of "Eurocentrism" because the word in 1967 was not so common. Derrida was an Algerian Jew,

born before World War II, who was actually encountering Western philosophy from the inside. A brilliant man, he was looking at its Eurocentrism. I don't think I had caught onto that aspect as much as I do now. I also understand the thread that runs through it in terms of not only how we should read but how we should live, which was not as clear to me then. And I also know a bit more about Hegel than I did at that time so I was able to make some connections.

So you see this book as basically a critique of Western philosophy?

That's what de-construction is about, right? It's not just destruction. It's also construction. It's critical intimacy, not critical distance. So you actually speak from inside. That's deconstruction. My teacher Paul de Man once said to another very great critic, Fredric Jameson, "Fred, you can only deconstruct what you love." Because you are doing it from the inside, with real intimacy. You're kind of turning it around. It's that kind of critique.

What was Derrida trying to deconstruct? How was he trying to interpret Western philosophy in a new light?

It had a focus on being dominant for centuries without change. Whole groups get excluded because a certain kind of dominant discourse is established. He also said a very powerful thing about African orality: they could remember seven generations back; we've lost that capacity. There, "writing" takes place on the psychic material called "memory." Derrida connects this to Freud. So he was saying, look at reality carefully. It's coded so that other people, even if they're not present, can understand what we are saying. He looked at how this was suppressed in philosophical traditions.

You first started working on the translation of Of Grammatology *in the late '60s. You were an unknown scholar at the time and Derrida was still largely unknown in the United States. This was a highly theoretical, very difficult book that's still challenging to read. Why did you want to take on such a daunting project?*

Well, I didn't know who Derrida was at all. I was 25 and an assistant professor at the University of Iowa in 1967, and I was trying to keep myself intellectually clued in. So I would order books from the catalog which looked unusual enough that I should read, so that's how I ordered the book.

So you read it in the original French and then thought maybe there should be an English translation?

No, no. I managed to read it and thought it was an extraordinary book. This was before the internet, so nobody was telling me anything about Derrida. My teacher had not met Derrida when I left Cornell, so I truly didn't know who he was. So I thought, "Well, I'm a smart young foreign woman, and here's an unknown author. Nobody's going to give me a contract for a book on him, so why don't I try to translate him?" And I had heard at a cocktail party that the University of Massachusetts Press was doing translations, so I wrote them a very innocent query letter in late 1967 or early 1968. They told me later that they found my query letter so brave and sweet that they thought they should give me a chance. [Laughs.] It's really ridiculous, but there it was.

Quite humble origins for a book that has become a classic.

You know, I was surprised. You must put yourself back into my shoes. Neither English nor French was my

first language and I had left India only in 1961. My introduction was a humble introduction because I had never even had a course in philosophy.

And it's a very long introduction. Your introduction to Derrida's book is almost a book in itself.

That's what I wrote in my contract because I wanted to write a book on him. So I wrote in my contract, I will not do the translation if I cannot write a monograph-length introduction. I was in my mid-20s when I wrote that letter. Now it just fills me with shame and embarrassment.

Did you have much contact with Derrida himself as you were working on the translation?

No. I didn't know him at all. I only met him in 1971. And I did not recognize him until he came up to me and said, in French, "Je m'appelle Jacques Derrida," and I almost died.

But I assume you got to know him quite well after that.

Yes, we became friends. We were allies. You see, one of the things he understood, perhaps more than I did at that point, was the meaning of this Asian girl who really didn't have much French, launching this book into the world in her own way, so far out of the European coterie of high philosophy. He and I would go out to eat — and he was a swarthy man, a Sephardic Jew from Algeria — and people would take him to be Indian, and I'm Indian and my cultural inscription is strong and sometimes I wear a sari, so it was a joke and he would say, "Yes, I'm Indian." He understood the beauty of the situation of this young person who was neither a French PhD nor a native French speaker or native English speaker for that matter, and she was offering his text, not because she was worshipful toward him, because she hadn't even known who he was. She was offering his text to the rest of the world

and they were picking it up. There was something very attractive for him about that situation.

You were born in Calcutta a few years before the Partition of India. Did you grow up in a family of intellectuals?

Yes. My mother was married at 14, and my brother was born when she was 15. My father was born in a village way up in the foothills of the Himalayas in what is now Bangladesh, in a community where they didn't even wear clothes until they were six or seven years old. They just wore a metal ring around their middle. When they went to school they put on dhotis. In the wintertime, they sat by the fire with a wrap around their shoulders. Yet these two people really were both intellectuals and later led lives of intellectuals and brought up their children for the life of the mind. Proto-feminist dad, feminist mother. It was an extraordinary upbringing. I owe almost everything to my parents.

Did the Partition that split the country into India and Pakistan have much impact on your family?

You know, we also thought of it as Independence. Independence was marked by the horror of Partition. So Partition was the price that we were obliged to pay. Well, it marked my relatives more than my immediate family because my father had in fact run away from East Bengal, which is now Bangladesh. When he did well in his high school graduating exam, his father said to him, "Ah, then you can be postmaster in the county town," and my father was much more ambitious, so ticketless, he ran off to Calcutta in 1917. I was born in Calcutta. But the way in which the Partition did affect our lives was of course the terrible riots that were brought on by the Calcutta Killings of 1946 and the artificially created famine of 1942 and after. Those things really affected us. And once

the refugees started coming in, my mother, who was by then a considerable social worker, would leave at five in the morning and go to the railway station to help with refugee rehabilitation. These were some of the things that marked my childhood.

You must also have seen how Muslims came to be branded as outsiders.

Of course that's now increasing in India. In 1947 I was too young — I was five years old — to sense the difference between Hindus and Muslims since I was in a very ecumenical household. But it was all around us. It was there in the Hindu-Muslim riots, which were very unusual because until then there had been a sort of conflictual coexistence for centuries. But when that started in our neighborhood, you would hear Allahu akbar and then Hara hara Mahadeoand you knew that someone was being killed. And you would see bloodshed. But I was so young and at home there was so little differentiation between caste or religion or anything. And my father's Muslim students were so supportive, even to come to him dressed as Hindus and tell him not to answer a phone call in the evening. My father himself was a nonviolent man. Opening the small house, he would stand with Muslim men on the terrace and women and children inside the house, saying, "As long as I'm alive, nobody is going to touch you." We didn't think of the difference so much. As children we thought we were the same people.

You got your undergraduate degree in India. How did you end up coming to the United States?

I got my degree at the University of Calcutta, and I was working on my MA. I was only 18 years old and didn't have a father — he died when I was 13 — and I realized I was not going to get a first class because I was

editor of a journal and I'd been very critical of the university. So I borrowed money and came with a one way ticket and $18 in my pocket. I did not want to go to Britain because I would have had to take a second BA and I was just immediately post-independence. So this is why I came to the United States. I went to Cornell because I only knew the names Harvard, Yale, and Cornell and I thought Harvard and Yale were too good for me.

Today you are best known as one of the founders of postcolonial studies. Is there a connection between this work and your earlier work on deconstruction and translating Derrida?

You know, I was not at all part of the French theory coterie. So as an outsider I had been the tiniest bit of a trendsetter with deconstruction. It had become so internalized that I certainly wasn't making connections. But the postcolonial business had come as a sort of autobiographical moment that comes to most middle-class metropolitan migrants — like Edward Said, thinking "I was Orientalized." In 1981 when I was asked by the Yale French Studies to write on French feminism and by Critical Inquiry to write on deconstruction, I asked myself, how is it that I have become an authority on French material? So I turned around to think differently. Therefore, it was an engagement with that part of deconstruction, which looked at what is excluded when we construct systems. That part of deconstruction which said the best way to proceed is a very robust self-critique. And that part of deconstruction which said that you do not accuse what you are deconstructing. You enter it. Remember that critical intimacy? And you locate a moment where the text teaches you how to turn it around and use it. So this had become part of my way of moving. So clearly, there was a connection. But one thing I've never done is

apply theory. Theorizing is a practice. It becomes internalized. You are changed in your thinking and that shows in your work. So that's what happened.

Your 1985 essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" has become a foundational text in postcolonial studies. Can you explain what the word "subaltern" means?

It refers to those who don't give orders; they only receive orders. That comes from Antonio Gramsci, who made the word current. He was looking at people who were not in fact working-class folks or victims of capitalism. He was looking at people who were outside of that logic because he was himself from Sardinia, which was outside of the High Italy of the north. But "subaltern" also means those who do not have access to the structures of citizenship. I'm now talking about India today, where the largest sector of the electorate is the rural landless illiterate. They may vote but they have no access to the structures of citizenship. So that's a subaltern.

I discovered that my mother's aunt hanged herself in 1926 when she was 17 because she was part of an anti-imperialist group. She was unable to kill, so therefore she killed herself. But she waited four days until she menstruated so that people would not think that she was killing herself because of an illicit pregnancy. In her action she wanted to say that women do not just belong to men. Can you imagine how hard it must have been to wait? So she spoke with her body.

So she killed herself as a political act?

Yes, as a political act, because that's what you do if you can't carry through an assassination. Then you kill yourself. I mean, I don't understand those things but we've read enough Dostoevsky and we've read enough about the struggle against imperialism in India to know that this kind of thing happened. And she was a teenager,

so she waited because the only reason why teenage women in middle-class families hanged themselves was because they were illicitly pregnant. She left a letter for my grandmother. I heard the story from my mom, but I did not reveal that the woman in the essay was my great aunt. As a subaltern completely outside of these structures, she had spoken with her body, but could not be heard. To say the subaltern cannot speak is like saying there's no justice.

So even if she does speak, no one will hear her.

This is in fact true of subaltern groups. I moved away from my own class and my own agenda when I began to learn what subaltern meant. And I went into subaltern groups in India, which is where my schools are. These are people who have been millennially denied the right to intellectual labor by my own ancestors — caste Hindus. And so daily I see how even if they do speak, they are not allowed to speak in ways that we can immediately understand. Some people are feudally benevolent toward them and very philanthropic, but this doesn't change anything. I've been teaching there for 30 years, but it began when I started asking myself, should I just be an expert in French theory?

One thing that's fascinating about your career is you've worn two hats. You are a celebrated professor at Columbia University, and you also have been going back to India for decades to work with illiterate students in rural schools. What do you do in those schools?

I train the teachers by teaching the kids. And I show them, as far as I can, how to teach the state curriculum. I also try to devise a way of teaching which really makes the intuitions of democracy into mental habits for very small kids because it's no use talking at them. That's not the way children should be taught; it's like writing on

wet cement. So this is a very difficult thing to do. It's a huge challenge because these are minds that have been destroyed by us. These people have nothing. So I try to train the teachers through teaching the children. I go there eight or nine times a year but I talk with them twice a month on the phone. Just yesterday some of the teachers were talking about some difficulties they are having with their supervisors. They're all from the community. And I was saying, "Be patient. Just look at how much trouble I've had over the years trying to speak in such a way that it will really get through to you." So this is a very important challenge.

Teaching literacy usually means teaching the fundamentals of reading and writing, but you're talking about something much deeper. You're talking about democracy and teaching these young kids to question power.

My teachers are themselves also from this community. Largely landless folks. I mean, literacy and numeracy by themselves are not much, especially when the education that's available is a very bad education. Of course I greatly value literacy and numeracy. Nonetheless, I have known two or three illiterate people from this community over the last 30 years with whom I have been able to speak as intellectual equals because they have not been ruined by bad education.

It sounds like you're saying that real education is by definition an ethical practice.

Ethics are to an extent something that cannot be taught because ethics are not just doing the right thing. Remember, democracy is a political system, not necessarily an ethical system as such. A basic democratic approach toward those at the bottom is to remember that we don't just send our child to school for literacy. And

that teaches me a lot about what I do at the top. At Columbia I don't teach South Asia. I am not there to bring authentic news from my birthplace. I'm a Europeanist, so I teach English, French, and German material to these PhD students in New York City. That's about as close to the top as you can get! About as far from "just literacy" as possible. And then I have the landless illiterate in supposedly the world's largest democracy. It's a good experience to see how one can serve democratically at both ends.

Yet when I look at your career, there seems to be a deep paradox. You are teaching PhD students at Columbia, where you're regarded as the high priestess of literary theory, teaching very theoretical books, like Derrida's Of Grammatology. *Yet you're also an activist involved in these schools for illiterate students, which would seem to have nothing to do with the world of high theory. Is there really a connection between these two worlds?*

There is, yes, if you're talking about that era in France when people were thinking about theory or Gramsci in his jail cell. I'm also very influenced by Rosa Luxemburg, who believed in the state. But I don't apply theory when I'm actually teaching in these schools or teaching at Columbia. It's like I've been thrown into water and I'm learning to swim. Every time I'm still terrified before I go to class. But the thing is that afterward, when I think of the experience, I can see how theory is nuanced by what I have learned from the teaching and what part of the theory survives because theorizing is also a practice. This is something that we have not been able to teach our students at the top.

Do you think theory has actual political impact on real world problems?

Well, I was teaching Mao yesterday in my graduate seminar. I was not teaching *The Little Red Book*. I was teaching his intellectual stuff — the Hunan peasant stuff and then "On Contradiction" and also "On Practice." It's very difficult to get a good take on Mao in the United States. As an Indian it's also sometimes hard because we are competitors. But that's fine. An intellectual is there to question these kinds of received ideas. But we were looking at what he's doing with Hegel and of course we were looking at the Chinese text. I've been learning Chinese now for six or seven years but my Chinese is certainly not good. But the graduate student who was giving his paper is in fact an Englishman who grew up in Hong Kong and then began to do modern Chinese studies very critical of his own situation in Hong Kong. So together we were looking at this extraordinary essay, "On Contradiction." Mao had only read Hegel through Lenin and so on. And Gramsci himself talked about a new intellectual as a permanent persuader. So even if one doesn't know that one is theorizing, one is doing so. If you generalize and you speak to groups, you are theorizing. In fact, it's impossible to think without theorizing one way or the other. I don't think one should become so convinced of the excellence of theory by itself that one polices theory, but I think that's what's happened. Theory has become a kind of thing that's completely cut off from everything but it is not in fact cut off. It is in the world.

What do you make of the common criticism that we have all these university intellectuals doing very theoretical work who think they're radicals but they're just in their ivory towers, having no impact on real world issues? Does that critique carry any weight for you?

I'm just as critical of them as the picket line type of activist. I really do think they need a reality check. In fact, that's not just ivory tower. I'm also on the global

agenda committee on values at the World Economic Forum. I go there because it's my fieldwork. I'm not listened to, but I'm extremely careful in always intervening. And certainly my colleagues there are friendly. Below a certain radar, the world is unknown to these well-meaning people. So yes, I'm very critical of people who come forward to help without any idea of what it requires to be able to understand. At the bottom, the first right is the right to refuse. This is something I say to my students in the villages. I say, "I'm your enemy. I'm good and my parents were good but two generations do not undo thousands of years."

Why do you say you are their enemy?

Because I'm a caste Hindu. I'm the top caste. We are the ones who have made these people untouchable. We're the ones who have refused them rights to intellectual labor so they could serve us, so they could be trained for manual labor. This thing is not something where you just say, "Look, good parents, I'm good." I also asked them these kinds of questions because I do some ecological agriculture with them, so I'm sitting under this banyan tree with lots and lots of poor landless farmers. So I say to them, "How many castes are there?" And they know I don't believe in castes, so they don't know what to say. I never tell them answers and I don't give answers in my Columbia classes either. And a small voice pipes up and says, "Two." So I say, "Well, what are they?" So this person says the rich and the poor. And I say, "Good, come forward here. Now look at me." Of course compared to them I'm unbelievably rich, right? So I said, "Just don't forget I'm rich and you're poor. So we are not in the same group at all." So this is the reality check that one must have, rather than this kind of silly philanthropy where one gives a lot of money, but one never teaches how to use money. Money for you and me is very different than for someone who's never seen money. So

the reality check is not just needed for leftists teaching at universities. The reality check is needed much more broadly.

I have one final question. There is a lot of hand-wringing about the state of the humanities these days. We often hear that the humanities are in crisis. Do you think that's true?

Yes. The humanities have been trivialized. They are not a cash cow. As I wrote to the vice chancellor at the University of Toronto, when they were closing the Comparative Literature department, I said, "Look, we are the health care system of cultures. You cannot do moral metrics by knowledge management techniques. You have to cook the soul slow." That's the humanities. We are the personal trainers in the gym of the mind. You know, you can't exercise your body by going somewhere fast — speed of learning, easy learning. In the same way, you can't really make good minds by only doing speed of learning. And so we ourselves have actually allowed ourselves to be trivialized. I spend my life trying to make people understand that we should claim how useful we are and not just give in to the definitions of how to make ourselves useful by complete digitizing and all that stuff. We should not allow the humanities to be trivialized. If you don't train the soul, the global/digital cannot be used right. I can't really say much more in this brief conversation but I hope that one of these days we will have a much longer conversation about this.

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