

REVIEWS

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***Ethics and Politics in
Tagore, Coetzee and
Certain Scenes of Teaching***
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Oxford University Press, Ground
Floor, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, Delhi
110002. Website: <https://global.oup.com>. 2019. 88 pp. ₹250. HB. ISBN
9780199486694.

When literature students have forgotten what Derek Attridge called ‘the singularity of literature’, we have Swami Pavitrnananda’s initiated disciple, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s 2003 lecture titled *Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee and Certain Scenes of Teaching* delivered at the Centre for Studies in the Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSSC) reprinted by Oxford University Press in 2019. This is a necessary intervention at a time when those who publicly profess literature have effected the erasure of literature as a knowledge-domain distinct from the social sciences. Spivak emphasises in this lecture, the singular nature of literature: ‘I believe ... Aristotle said *poiesis* or making-in-fiction was *philosophoteron*—a better instrument of knowledge—than *historia*—because it allowed us to produce the probable rather than account for that which has been possible’ (21).

Spivak believes in ‘fiction as [not only an] event but also [in] fiction as task’ and then warns discerning readers of Tagore and Coetzee from harbouring covert ‘postcolonial political ambitions’ (6), thus ruining their reception of either Tagore or Coetzee. Spivak’s groundedness in literature then (2003), and now (2019-) is what all literary scholars need to integrate into their readings of ‘the singular and the unverifiable’ (20). Spivak sees literature correctly as both ‘singular’ and ‘unverifiable’. This is the beauty of the literary object. It is

opaque to philosophical and other non-literary reductionist pressures.

Spivak cannot understand why others call her a philosopher or literary theorist since she says: ‘I [due to “disciplinary formation”] cannot philosophise, I cannot write like a historian and I have no anthropological curiosity. Others call me interdisciplinary and I always wonder why’ since there are ‘generic differences’ between philosophy and literature (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Readings*, ed. Lara Choksey (Kolkata: Seagull, 2014), 162). It is precisely her ‘training in literary reading’ that had prepared her to heed ‘the language of the other’ (*Readings*, 6) and to see the literary texts as ‘coming from Latin *texere*—“to weave”’ (6).

There can be no doubt that Spivak is a votary of the text; of the written word which weaves meaning into this chaotic world. This preoccupation of Spivak’s with words and their inherent meaning and her understanding of texts as weaving-machines have ramifications, which have hitherto gone unnoticed.

Partha Chatterjee and Rosinka Chaudhuri, who have written the ‘General Introduction to the Series’, are not Spivak; both not being of her calibre. Their writings are not germane to this review since their main mode of *écriture*, as Spivak would have us say, is bereft of aporias. That is, they are merely journalistic and eschew what Anirban Das, a medical doctor, a telling profession if one were to focus on professions as Michel Foucault would want us to do, in his ‘Introduction’ (xxi-xxxiii) to the book under review speaks of ‘an ethical move’, which ‘unlike the epistemic drive [used] to calculate and contain the other’, while to be found in Spivak’s ‘relationship to the incalculable’ (xxv) cannot simply be found in anyone else including, in the series’ editors’ works and their ‘General Introduction’.

Let us note that Spivak according to Das,

tries to 'contain the other' and has a relationship with 'the incalculable'. Previously, this reviewer has pointed out that Spivak is grounded in the unverifiable *texere*, which leads her, like it led many before her, to engage with the (hospitable) other. Spivak's appreciation for the Torah commentator, Emmanuel Levinas is well known and needs no further comment here.

Returning to the book under review, Das's 'Introduction' reminds this reviewer of Somerset Maugham's remarks about Sigmund Freud's bad writing style in Maugham's short story *The Kite* (1946). Similarly, Das's 'Introduction' is illustrative of bad writing style. Das mouths a lot of senseless platitudes: 'The concept-metaphors ... the power axis ... [playing] in the spaces of marriage and family ... the subaltern cannot yet speak to the political ... this erstwhile subject ... the institutional calculus ... an epistemically obvious agency' (xxix).

From medical doctors Freud to Jacques Lacan to Das, we have verbal outpourings that scarcely make any sense to the uninitiated in their scientific field. But note that this verbose medical practitioner has omitted to even once point out the nosology of Spivak as an Indian subject by herself in *Prabuddha Bharata* and of her formation as a devotee of the Shakta Sri Ramakrishna (See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Many Voices', *Prabuddha Bharata*, 119/12 (December 2014), 655–63). Spivak, as the Kyoto Prize laureate of 2012, declared her absolute loyalty to the Ramakrishna Order headquartered at Belur Math, West Bengal, India. Because of Spivak's grounding in Shakta tantra we have Das unknowingly, but correctly, identifying in Spivak's writings an ethical preoccupation with 'the incalculable'. Das again unbeknownst to himself, rightly maps Spivak's engagement with various axes of power or Shakti in this book under review.

Now, Spivak's seeing the text as weaving, *texere*, makes sense. Another meaning of 'tantra' is like *texere*; it is weaving the cosmos into an expansive Logos comparable to the *spandana* or *sphota* theory of Indian philosophy. It is good to bear in mind that neither Derrida nor Spivak deconstructed the Logos since the Logos

is. They only tried to create a hermeneutics of deconstruction as a technique of ethicality. Martin Heidegger in his corpus has shown the immutability of the Logos within Continental philosophy.

Spivak, as it were, is a votary of power. She writes in the book under review and elsewhere of the differences between *avidya* and *vidya*; power that is destructive being informed by ignorance and power that springs from an ethical engagement with right knowledge. Spivak, unlike numerous commentators on her, never gives into atheism or nihilism since she is a disciple in the tradition of Sri Ramakrishna. She overcomes 'the structuralist hermeneutics of suspicion' (3) in spite of being schooled in Immanuel Kant's Enlightenment diatribe which fashioned Spivak through her doctoral supervisor Paul de Man and then, her friend, Jacques Derrida. It is necessary to mention in the passing that Derrida too, like Spivak, was no atheist or nihilist. But Derrida, like Levinas mentioned earlier, is not the subject of this review.

Adapting the possible anecdotal dictum of Sri Abhinavagupta (950–1016 CE), Spivak leads a public life as 'a Europeanist' (See Steve Paulson and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Critical Intimacy: An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak', *Los Angeles Review of Books* (LARB), 29 July 2016 <lareviewofbooks.org/article/critical-intimacy-interview-gayatri-chakravorty-spivak/#!> accessed 29 April 2019), a private life as a Totapuri-lineage philosopher, and in private she has no problems in exquisitely constructing the life of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi and she writes: 'I ... write this for the record. ... I give witness to the great goddesses, Durga and Kali. You will work out my negotiations. "I" is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being. Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them; it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping. If not, you will of course throw the whole of it into the wastepaper basket and forget all about it'" (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Moving Devi', *Cultural Critique*, 47 (Winter 2001), 120–63; 129).

Chatterjee, Chaudhuri, and Das have all failed

to understand the Shakta roots of Spivak, who like a true Kaula, guards this alterity within her at all times. She is herself, as Gavin Flood would write of tantra in his corpus, various texts inscribed. This silent interiorisation of the incalculable is what makes Spivak a true witness to the subaltern status of Shakta tantra in the here and the now, in 2019. Spivak understands that: ‘The only way a reading establishes itself—without guarantees—is by sharing the steps of the reading. That is the experience of the impossible, ethical discontinuity shaken up in a simulacrum. Unless you take a step with me, there will be no interdisciplinarity, only the tedium of turf battles’ (22).

To read Spivak is to heed her call, to share her steps in reading texts qua life alongside her and that is to take a step into an ‘ethical discontinuity’ otherwise called Shakta tantra embodied in the siddha, the epochal avatara Sri Ramakrishna and his holy tradition that till date is simultaneously Vedantic and tantric. Spivak, if scrutinised as she deserves to be, in all her writings including the book under review, is not a Kashmiri Shaivite, nor is she a practitioner of Sri Vidya. She is a Shakta, plain and simple. For instance, in her 1987 essay, ‘A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman’s Text from the Third World’, Spivak insists on knowing Sanskrit. Sanskrit is a language which she is aware is indispensable if we are to recover the true meaning of being a woman then and, by implication, now. Sanskrit, according to Spivak, ‘consolidates’ her entire corpus. Sanskrit, as it were, is the bija (seed) of Spivak’s mentors and herself. When she writes, ‘I will suggest that the discontinuities between the ethical and the epistemological and political fields can be staged by means of the play of logic and rhetoric in fiction’ (5), she explicitly enters into the Shakta Sanskrit domains in which she, her father, and her great-grandfather were schooled in a plan inscrutable to any human gaze. More on this inscrutability from Spivak herself later.

The Sanskrit alphabet inheres Shakta tantra. This form of tantra insists on the divine feminine. Thus we have Spivak emerging as a feminist qua a *spandana* of that Shakti which she received

while being spiritually initiated by her guru, Swami Pavitrananda.

Spivak may hate it that her Enlightenment credentials are being questioned as an endgame. Yet the truth remains that she bears witness to the ancient tradition of *svadhyaya* or *lectio divina* and has become a living body where she has taken great autochthonous pains to inscribe texts only to reject them for the ‘interruptive emergence of the ethical’ (38) that ‘is neither a beginning nor an end, only an irreducible grounding condition’ (39). If this is not living within the Shakta tantra tradition, then what is? This book, a reprint by the Oxford University Press, nowhere mentions this theological orientation of Spivak, whose love for Mother Kali is well known and is no secret (See her translation, Ramaprasada Sen and Nirode Mazumdar, *Song for Kali: A Cycle of Images and Songs*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Calcutta: Seagull, 2000) for a more nuanced journeying with Spivak).

We must bear in mind that Spivak advocates authorial death and her writings are for us to deconstruct. In a moment we shall be firmly convinced from her interviews about her being a Kaula.

We have to contextualise her within what she is most reluctant to speak of her aporias: ‘As I think I [Spivak] write this for the first time in my life of 70 years, I realise that I have no interest at all in bringing this into the ambit of understanding or analysis. This dwelling in an unbroken intuition of the transcendental was part of something into which we were inserted as infants. ... This is the closest formulation I can make of a wordless precomprehension that I have never attempted to describe’ (Spivak’s 2012 lecture, ‘Sri Ramakrishna: A Sacred Life’. See ‘Damning Evidence of Books’, *The Telegraph* <<https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/west-bengal/damning-evidence-of-books/cid/1282390>> accessed 29 April 2019).

This ‘precomprehension’, uttered as a classical psychoanalytic slip, is the text under review. None has bothered to make explicit this ‘precomprehension’, the *mysterium tremendum* of Rudolf Otto to be found everywhere in Spivak.

This needs to be analysed if one is to begin understanding her.

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**The Advaita Vedanta of
Siva Samhita**
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Motilal Banarsidass, 41 U A Bungalow
Road, Jawahar Nagar, Delhi 110007.
Website: www.mlb.com. 2018. 211 pp.
₹350. HB. ISBN 9788120841727.

Shiva Samhita, written in the form of a dialogue between Shiva and Parvati, is one of the foundational texts of hatha yoga, the other two being *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* and *Gheranda Samhita*. But what would be a revelation to many is that this text also presents the teachings of Advaita Vedanta in a systematic manner in its first chapter, the other four chapters dedicated to the comprehensive presentation of hatha yoga asanas, mudras, chakras, meditations, and energies in the human body.

The book under review is the commentary on the first chapter of the *Shiva Samhita* according to Advaita Vedanta traditions by K Kathirasan, a management expert and a teacher of shastras based in Singapore. The contents of his class teachings were transcribed and ably edited by his students S Anuradha and K Kannan. The author studied the scriptures in traditional manner under Swami Satprakashananda Saraswathi of Atma Vidya Vanam which is reflected in his commentary on the text.

The first chapter of the *Shiva Samhita* containing ninety-six verses presents in a simple and direct language the conclusions of Advaita Vedanta without unnecessary polemics. It deals with the qualifications of a seeker, obstacles, false doctrines, true nature of the Self, fruits of Self-knowledge, discussions on maya, creation, samadhi, and the like.

The author explains each verse in a lucid language closely following the traditional Advaitic interpretation. On the way, he clears

several misunderstandings on the nature of moksha, samadhi, liberated souls, and the true nature of *ananda* or bliss. He takes care to explain several concepts like *adhyaropa-apavada*, *drishti-shrishti vada*, and *shrishti-drishti vada* that would later help the reader to tackle serious Advaitic texts. Each verse is given in the Devanagari original, followed by the English transliteration, meaning, and detailed explanation.

Certain aspects of the text are both intriguing and illuminating. For instance, ignorance is held to be imaginary. This is a surprisingly different interpretation of the primal ignorance that causes the ultimate reality to be mistaken as this universe. By discounting ignorance itself to be imaginary, the text accords greater emphasis on the reality of the ultimate truth.

As a corollary to the standpoint that ignorance, and by its consequence the universe, is imaginary, time is also held to be imaginary. Thus, two main causes of suffering, our dabbings with the past, present, and future in the realm of ignorance, and ignorance itself, are completely discounted as not just unreal but imaginary.

This text is by its very nature introductory and defines various important Vedantic concepts in a lucid and accessible language. The translation and commentary refer to various Vedantic texts in the original, thereby introducing the reader to related literature. The text leans towards a stricter standpoint of Advaita Vedanta much like that of Gaudapada as reflected in his *Mandukya Karika*. That is why the text negates everything other than the Atman, by implication even moksha, to be false and unreal. This is arguably the most uncompromising strain of Advaita Vedanta.

This book is well produced with a beautiful cover, index, glossary, and bibliography. The author and the publisher must be commended for digging out this gem of a text from the forest of Sanskrit literature and placing it before the general public. The book is recommended for the beginners in Advaita Vedanta, who wish to know the essence of Advaita philosophy in all its subtlety and depth.

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