

REVIEWS

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Postcolonial Reason and Its Critique

Eds Purushottama Bilimoria
and Dina Al-Kassim

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Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asked a question in 1988: ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ That question was the expression of a lifetime of observation of the marginalized and witnessing of attempts to civilize the ‘aborigine’. Eventually, this question led to *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (CPR) in 1999. A seminal work, this book unsettled and reoriented the thoughts of scholars, brought up new questions and insights, and the very construct of civilization and culture was challenged. In 2000 a group of scholars, of whom many were Gayatri’s students—the first name of the celebrated thinker is being used in this review in keeping with her radical spirit—came together as a panel in the annual meeting of the International Association for Philosophy and Literature at Stony Brook University in Long Island, New York, to deliberate on CPR. The panel discussions were engaging and elicited extraordinary response. This encouraged the publication of the proceedings as a special symposium in 2002 in the journal *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*. The present book is a result of further working on these proceedings for more than a decade.

This book has become a reality due to the untiring efforts of Purushottama Bilimoria, ably assisted by Dina Al-Kassim, who has also written a wonderful introduction. Bilimoria vividly recounts the unfolding of this book in his preface. Al-Kassim points to the possibility of deliberations

on a specific thinker going on a tangent and immediately assures us that this volume is free from such a defect. The first essay is by Bilimoria who situates Gayatri in relation to Kant and Bimal K Matilal, thinkers whose thoughts she juxtaposes in CPR. Bilimoria stresses that Gayatri’s gift is ‘a genuine critique of the rational’ (1) missed by both Kant and Matilal. Al-Kassim focuses on the transnational scenario, where the ‘Native Informant’ undermines the very cause the ‘civilizing mission’ vowed to advocate. The Subaltern is not correctly represented because the ‘representative intellectual, in wanting to/attempts to speak for the other, inevitably rebounds into a descriptive representational depiction of that other’s speech’ (15).

The historiography of a critique is examined by Ritu Birla, who connects the female subjectivity and subalternity to the ‘inside and outside’ (24) limits of history. She critiques the historical burying of the Rani of Sirmur—who resisted colonial authority—as a mere widow who wanted to become a *sati*. Patriarchal patterns are questioned when Bhubaneshwari Bhaduri, upon failing to do a political assassination, ‘hangs herself while menstruating to prevent her political act from being read as the pathology of an unmarried pregnant woman’ (35). Derrida’s ‘lever’ and Kantian ‘subreption’ are read in Gayatri’s work by Forest Pyle (39), who tells us of her ‘*passion* of a teaching and a reading of rigour and of rule-breaking that demands of all who encounter it the most rigorous forms of rule-breaking’ (40). Of all the hats that Gayatri dons and of all her faces that emerge from this volume that of a teacher is the strongest in character. Thomas Keenan analyses this statement of Gayatri: ‘The push and pull of rights and responsibilities unevenly agonize the field of *différance* between capitalism and socialism’ (51). Mark Sanders postulates the ‘reading-otherwise as response to the call of the wholly other’ (63) as another formulation of ‘the permanent parabasis of *darstellen* and *vertreten*’ (ibid.).

Drucilla Cornell talks about the ‘art of witnessing’ and that women’s ‘journey can be understood as an allegory for how difficult it is not only for historical voices that have been suppressed but also for new voices to find the means of representation to be seen and heard’ (90). Mieke Bal delineates the necessity of reading CSR though it is difficult to read, thus compelling reading other-wise. Multiple levels of reading, academic or otherwise, prompts Bal to posit a ‘Three-way Misreading’ of CSR, where she refuses to ‘follow the author’s “intention”’ (105). She presents ‘readings in ... archival-ardor mode ... as evidence of the referential will of deconstructionist reading’ (119). However, it is the ‘teacher-image’ that lingers “‘imaged” in much the same way that’ Gayatri ‘unpacks other-determination’ (128) because the ‘classroom is’ her ‘site of passion’ (120).

Stephen Morton tries to position CSR from the perspective of the Kantian critique and attempts to find reason in ‘postcolonial reason’. He discovers the ‘clandestine inclusion of woman as a masculine figure in the dominant political philosophy of democracy’ (158). Maria Koundoura revisits rights and ‘Kantian vision’s contemporary life’ (170) in the process of becoming a citizen as opposed to the othering of the Aborigines of Australia. Chetan Bhatt interprets Gayatri’s ethics as ‘the interpretation of narrative as ethical instantiation’ (199) and is critical that ‘in allowing Kant’s privileging of *philosophical* time’ Gayatri’s ‘critique can be seen to do the same’ (195). Adrian Parr insists that we ‘consider the success or failure of politics in terms of affectivity’ as Gayatri and Deleuze ‘invite us to do’ (203). He reminds us that ‘as we encounter expressions of freedom we are all presented with the terrifying prospect that subjectivity, including our own, can be disposed of once *potestas* is strengthened through the exploitation of our *potentia*’ (219).

The best part of this book is the section with Gayatri’s responses to the panel, which include the replies she gave during the conference, and the additions she wrote leisurely, eight years later. She begins with an expression of being overwhelmed at the series of papers and a fond remembrance of tutoring her student Forest Pyle or Tres. This is followed by a clarification: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Dina Al-Kassim ‘are not *for* women’s faces

being burnt up by acid’ but ‘are with the movements that have been in place for decades now’ (225). Neither does Gayatri consider ‘*sati* empowering’ but holds only that ‘the criminalization of *sati* was an unquestioned good’ (ibid.). She has complaint only against the ‘impatience of human rights’ (226) and remembers her roots when she remarks that ‘Bimal was perhaps the only person in the world who could work with the established tradition of rational critique within Indian philosophy’ (ibid.).

Responding to the papers individually, Gayatri finds that ‘Kant needed to foreclose the tribal to philosophize, that Hegel had a foregone conclusion’ (233). Gently chiding Bilimoria that ‘he might have ventured forth into the wide outside’ (234), Gayatri concurs with Dina Al-Kassim for sensing that ‘there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism’ (234). Gayatri then confesses that she ‘will have to think ... for a long time’ about ‘history or historiography as the secret encounter’ (235) as posited by Ritu Birla. Gayatri’s comments are not without candour. She is incisive and finds the review of Chetan Bhatt with ‘problems’. Apart from many misleading statements Bhatt’s paper has totally missed possibilities such as that of reterritorializing ‘the project of a just and secular world’ (243). His paper also suffers from contradictions like though he says that Gayatri reads Kant wrongly, in a footnote he affirms that she is interesting, leading her to wonder whether at all he is serious. Gayatri is convinced that ‘any readerly connection between the raw man ... and the inadvertent example of the West Australian and Fuegan is not thereby annulled’ (245) and is left with ‘embarrassment’ after reading Bhatt.

Diligently edited, elegantly printed, this handy volume is an interesting and thought-provoking read for anyone even remotely interested in the humanities. On the cover is the painting ‘Spivak with Bear’, which is part of a series named ‘Exit, Pursued by a Bear’—featuring leading thinkers—by Gordon Lester. As Bilimoria points out in the preface, this ‘volume is also an offering to celebrate her being made a laureate of the Kyoto Prize in Art and Philosophy in late 2012’ (x). In sum, this work is a fitting tribute to one of the most brilliant minds of our time.

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