

Gayatri Spivak

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*Deconstruction and the Ethics
of Postcolonial Literary
Interpretation*

By

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INTRODUCTION

The post-colonial critic and theorist, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, is a well-known scholar in diverse fields of academic research. She was born in 1942 in Calcutta, India. Her education started at a missionary school that was not an upper-class one. Before leaving for Cornell, the United States, she continued her education and got her B.A. at Presidency College which according to her was left-influenced and politically active.¹ In 1961, she went to the United States at a time when there “was nothing – no multiculturalism, no academic feminism.”² Yet, she admits that she was fortunate enough to be taken seriously, especially by the literary critic Paul De Man (1919-1983), who was her PhD supervisor. After obtaining her PhD at Cornell in 1967, Spivak joined the department of Comparative Literature at the University of Iowa as an Assistant Professor, beginning an intellectual career which has already lasted more than four decades.

Mark Sanders, author of one of the four book-length studies of Spivak, notes that: “[b]y the late 1980s Spivak had become not only an academic ‘star’ in the United States, garnering a series of prestigious university appointments, but also a major international intellectual, highly sought after as a speaker at conferences and other gatherings in culture and the arts all over the world.”³ Spivak’s work is rich in topics that can be the focus of many books. It has covered historiography, literature, cultural politics, and translation. She is renowned for her engagement with post-structuralism, deconstruction, feminism, Marxism, psychoanalysis and subaltern studies. Moreover, much of what is now known as postcolonial literary criticism is indebted to her analysis of both western and non-western literary texts. Although reading and interpreting literary texts has been one of Spivak’s central and significant contributions to postcolonial theory, there has as yet been no concerted effort to understand how she

¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, ed. Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean (London: Routledge, 1996), 16-17.

² Swapan Chakravorty et al, *Conversations with Spivak* (London: Seagull, 2006), 13.

³ Mark Sanders, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Live Theory* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 6.

approaches the task of literary criticism and how that approach has developed over the course of her career.

This book, *Gayatri Spivak: Deconstruction and the Ethics of Postcolonial Literary Interpretation*, is concerned with Spivak's approach to literary analysis illustrated in her readings of: Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) and Mahasweta Devi's "Pirtha, Puran Sahay and Pterodactyl" (translated by Spivak in 1993). These readings were compiled in the chapter entitled: "Literature" which appears in Spivak's book: *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999). Although Spivak has written about many literary texts, these five texts are particularly important because the essays discussing them are reproduced in the major work, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, where Spivak strives to offer her critique of postcolonial reason after more than three decades as a teacher of literature and as a critic. Spivak wrote this book with the aim of providing postcolonial readers with an approach to the reading of great western texts. When Spivak reproduced her analyses of these five texts in "Literature," many changes occurred in the reproduction at different levels. However, for the purposes of this book, the focus will be on two major and significant changes. First, when Spivak compiled all these studies together, she juxtaposed western texts with non-western ones for the aim of contrasting them rather than discussing each group of texts separately. In this manner, she paved the way for detecting possible connections or disconnections between the two sides. Second, she places these readings in the second chapter of her book, immediately after the chapter "Philosophy" where she reads the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx and Friedrich Hegel. Ordering "Philosophy" and "Literature" in this way may allow readers to establish connections between western philosophy and Spivak's literary analysis. In other words, the way Spivak orders the two chapters sheds new light on what Spivak does when she analyses a literary text. This book will focus both on "Literature" as a whole and on the separate articles combined in it.

Most of the previous brief studies of and commentaries on Spivak's chapter "Literature" or the articles it includes agree that deconstruction is a constant reference point for Spivak. Stephen Morton, for instance, argues that "Spivak's ongoing engagement with deconstruction has not only enabled her to produce a theoretical vocabulary with which to criticize the cultural, political and economic legacy of colonialism, but it has also allowed her to develop an ethic that is sensitive to the singular position of

the subaltern.”⁴ Indeed, deconstruction has influenced Spivak’s writings since her translation of Derrida’s *de la grammatologie – Of Grammatology* – in 1976. Spivak herself admits her being indebted to deconstruction on many occasions. For example, in 1988, Spivak says: “[t]here would have been no ‘other worlds for me’ if something now called deconstruction had not come to disrupt the diasporic space of a postcolonial academic.”⁵ The existing studies that discuss deconstruction in Spivak’s thought deal with deconstruction as a general approach that is clear in Spivak’s writing in the various disciplines she has been involved in. However, there is no study that tries to show how exactly Spivak uses deconstruction in approaching “Literature.” Again, most of these studies do not explore whether Spivak has used deconstruction consistently and whether it has referred to the same thing in all the times it is deployed in Spivak’s criticism. Therefore, focusing on “Literature” which contains Spivak’s articles starting from 1985 to 1999, the questions that this book aims to address are: How did Spivak as a literary critic approach literature? Is deconstruction the main approach she used during that period? Does ‘deconstruction’ always mean the same thing, or are different forms of deconstruction prominent at different stages of her career? What theory of literary interpretation can be adduced from this set of readings?

To address these questions, this book will dedicate one chapter to each of the five texts which Spivak discusses, attempting in each case to understand how she uses deconstruction. The aim is to disentangle the knots within Spivak’s literary analysis, showing the tools and concepts she finds useful for each move she makes. The book is divided into eight chapters. Chapter One provides the relevant background, first by examining Spivak’s deconstruction of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, an exercise which provides the essential terms and techniques which Spivak uses in analysing *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Frankenstein*; and second by examining the feminist debates to which Spivak contributed before writing about the those three literary texts. Chapters Two, Three, and Four explain Spivak’s deconstruction of the three texts in light of the background provided in the first chapter. Chapter Five provides the theoretical background explaining how Derrida’s deconstruction contributes to understanding Spivak’s readings of *Foe* and “Pterodactyl.” The chapter will attempt at revealing the connections between Derrida’s deconstruction and Spivak’s discussion of the two final texts. Chapters Six

⁴ Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Spivak: Ethics, Subalternity and the Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 69.

⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 1988), xxi.

and Seven examine her analyses of *Foe* and “Pterodactyl” respectively, investigating whether Spivak’s approach to these two texts is the same one she used in reading the first three texts. Chapter 8 concludes the book by clarifying whether an approach can be extracted from the scrupulous analysis of how Spivak approaches the literary texts included in “Literature.” This chapter will also refer to Spivak’s *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalisation* (2012) to find out whether or not Spivak has changed her approach.

Apart from chapters Two and Five which provide the theoretical backgrounds of Spivak’s criticism of the texts under discussion, this book will present the discussion of Spivak’s readings of the literary texts according to the dates of their publication. The order of the chapters is also thematic: the first three texts are western ones through which Spivak critiques the marginalisation of the ‘native subaltern female.’ What is different in her analysis of *Foe* is that the text was written by a South African writer where Spivak detects a perspective of subaltern representation that differs from the one demonstrated in the first three. *Foe* was written as a rewriting of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, a canonical English text which is often read as containing colonial themes. Therefore, *Foe*, in a way, is still connected to the western canon. However, Spivak’s analysis of “Pterodactyl” seems to be the radical shift in her literary criticism because the novella was written by Devi who, both as a writer and activist, has been deeply involved in issues related to the poorest people in India. Through analysing Devi’s “Pterodactyl,” Spivak demonstrates the literary representation of the subaltern which is in contrast with the eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century western texts which depended on the exclusion of the Other.’

Previous book-length studies of Spivak’s thought have examined her literary criticism only as one aspect of her work. So, for example, in his book: *Gayatri Spivak: Ethics, Subalternity and the Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (2007), Morton discusses in a very important chapter of twenty-six pages Spivak’s reading of some literary texts showing the importance of Spivak’s approach in terms of pedagogy. Again in twenty-seven pages, Mark Sanders’ *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Live Theory* (2006) attempts to examine whether Spivak’s approach to reading literature can lead to a responsible global literacy. Sangeeta Ray, for her part, presents a chapter in her book, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: In Other Words* (2009), where she concentrates on the pedagogical significance of “Three Women’s Texts” if read alongside Spivak’s well-known essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice.” As these and other critics agree, Spivak’s literary theory has implications for

pedagogy, which she herself goes on to draw out in her book *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012). However, the value of Spivak's literary criticism cannot be fully appreciated and apprehended only by predicting its consequences and prospects. There is no work or study that presents an in-depth analysis of the steps which Spivak follows when analysing these texts, an analysis that is necessary for figuring out whether there was a consistent theoretical practice which underlay Spivak's literary criticism during that period (1985-1999) and to identify the terms and characteristics of such a practice.

The background of “Literature” (1999)

“Literature” is the second chapter of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, and it is a combination of Spivak's “Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” (1985) and “Theory in the Margin: Coetzee's *Foe* Reading Defoe's *Crusoe/ Roxana*” (1988) in addition to her analysis of “Pterodactyl” (1999). Spivak's declared aim when she first wrote “Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” was to offer a critique of the influence of imperialism on the representation of the ‘native subaltern female’ as an object of knowledge in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British fiction, as well as, in twentieth-century feminist criticism. Critique here is used according to Spivak's definition of it as “a careful description of the structures that produce an object of knowledge.”⁶ With this aim, Spivak discusses *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and *Frankenstein*. “Three Women's Texts” was written at a time when a new wave of feminism started to appear and was called third-wave feminism. Whereas first-wave feminism was seen as essentialising the woman to fight for political rights such as suffrage, and second-wave feminism as giving the woman an essence depending on the social construction of the woman, third-wave feminism rebuffed essentialism and underscored the heterogeneity of women's experiences.

The second article included in “Literature” is “Theory in the Margin: Coetzee's *Foe* Reading Defoe's *Crusoe/Roxana*” where Spivak examines *Foe* (1986) by the South African novelist J. M. Coetzee. This article was written in 1988 as a paper for the English Institute 1987-1988, and was published in *Consequences of Theory* in 1991. The title of the book was derived from “Some Consequences of Theory,” the title of the first English Institute panel designed by Jonathan Arac. Arac suggested that “since theory has taught us the groundlessness of truth, what we must have

⁶ Spivak, *Conversations*, 60.

instead are consequences.”⁷ In other words, theorists have lost the fixed ground that they can start from since their intellectual effort is always guarded by the margins as Spivak herself wanted to prove in her study of *Foe*. Barbara Johnson, one of the book’s editors, comments on Spivak’s study of *Foe* saying: “Spivak notes the current centrality of philosophical and political margins in literary theory and criticism.”⁸ Therefore, one can argue that Spivak reads Coetzee’s text as an example of the shift from the centre to the margins of literary theory. Spivak also added her 1999 reading of Devi’s “Pterodactyl” to “Literature.” She had expressed some of her ideas about “Pterodactyl” in the preface and appendix of her 1993 translation of *Imaginary Maps*, a collection of three stories by Devi. However, in 1999, she elaborates on the novella and contrasts it with the texts studied in “Three Women’s Texts.” On the one hand, *Foe*, as Spivak’s reading shows, presents a different way of representing the subaltern through its insistence on the un-representability of the subaltern’s story. Spivak’s translation of and commentary on Devi’s “Pterodactyl,” on the other hand, is the shift to reading a text written by “the descendent of the colonial female subject that history did in fact produce.”⁹

To clarify the significance of Spivak’s chapter “Literature” and to justify selecting it as the focus of this book, it must be located within the wider trajectory of Spivak’s literary criticism. The significance of “Literature” lies in the importance of the period ranging from 1985 to 1999 during which Spivak’s criticism changed its focus from colonial to postcolonial texts. A quick skim of the texts studied by Spivak before this period helps us realise how “Literature” can be distinguished from what preceded it. Starting from 1967, Spivak’s PhD thesis tackled the Irish poet W. B. Yeats. Her writings were mainly concerned with Yeats until 1975, and a year later Spivak’s translation of *de la grammatologie* was published. After this year, deconstruction started to show its influence on Spivak’s literary analysis. Between 1977 and 1980, Spivak concentrated on analysing romantic English poets like Samuel Coleridge and William Wordsworth. Apart from Spivak’s translation of Devi’s story “Draupadi,” which was published in 1981, Spivak’s writing between 1981 and 1985

⁷ Barbara Johnson, “Introduction: Truth or Consequences” in *Consequences of Theory*, edited by Jonathan Arac and Barbara Johnson (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1991), viii.

⁸ Johnson, “Introduction,” xii.

⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 140.

focused on theoretical topics such as ‘the subaltern’ and ‘representation’, resorting to the work of philosophers like Michel Foucault, Karl Marx and Jacques Derrida. Another important theoretical field that Spivak approached during the period between 1981 and 1985 was French feminism. In 1981, Spivak wrote “French Feminism in an International Frame” where she criticises high French feminism for excluding what at that time was known as the ‘Third-World woman.’

In 1983, Spivak presented “Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice,” a paper which marked the shift of Spivak’s attention to issues of subaltern women, the disenfranchised women who cannot speak for themselves. During that time, Spivak was involved in the work of the Subaltern Studies Group, a group of South Asian scholars interested in reviving the voice of the subaltern from official records documenting insurgency during the British rule of India. This group was founded by Ranajit Guha, the Indian historian who migrated to the UK in the 1960s. They have published many volumes on subaltern issues since 1983. Spivak herself co-edited the fourth volume and had an introductory chapter in it in 1985: “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography.” The year 1985 witnessed the publication of “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” in which Spivak’s attention was directed to nineteenth- and twentieth-century English fiction. Since that year, Spivak started analysing texts coming from other parts of the world, juxtaposing them to canonical English texts as was the case in her reading of *Foe* in “Theory in the Margin.” Meanwhile, Spivak continued her translation of and commentary on Devi’s works like “Stanadayini,” “Douloti the Bountiful” and “The Hunt.” Her translation efforts culminated in *Imaginary Maps* (1993).

While Spivak’s analyses of other literary texts are rarely evoked or discussed by critics, “Literature” remains the chapter to which most references to Spivak are made. “Three Women’s Texts” and “Theory in the Margin” have often been reprinted. The texts that these two articles tackle open the way for a critique of imperialism since they contain slippages which evoke, for a critic like Spivak, colonial spaces like the Caribbean and India. In addition these texts contain figures of Otherness: Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, Christophine in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the monster in *Frankenstein*, Friday in *Foe* and Bikhia and the pterodactyl in “Pterodactyl”. In brief, “Literature” is significant because, as Spivak herself says in the preface of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, it is a chapter which “reads a cluster of literary texts to show how colonialism and postcoloniality are figured.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Spivak, *Critique*, x.

As Morton argues, Spivak has “made an important contribution to the development of a critical vocabulary and theoretical framework through which to read postcolonial texts.”¹¹ Whereas most of the Spivakian vocabulary will be explained in detail in the coming chapters, it is essential here to introduce ‘the native subaltern female,’ the key concept which Spivak introduced to the field of postcolonial criticism and which will be recurrently used in this book. Introducing this concept and explaining some of its particularities may answer the question of why Spivak uses ‘the native subaltern female’ to the exclusion of ‘the Third-World woman.’ Spivak declares that her literary analysis in “Literature” is concerned with the ‘native subaltern female.’ She used ‘the Third-World woman’ until the year 1981 and, in 1985 she used the ‘native female’ without ‘subaltern.’ It is in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* where she used both the ‘native subaltern female’ and “the-native-informant-as-woman-of-the-South.”¹² The following paragraphs will start by giving an example of the female about whom Spivak writes. Then the theoretical nuances of this example will be explained.

The example is taken from Spivak's participation in the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, 1994. In the paper which Spivak presented in this conference, the ‘native subaltern female’ is the poorest woman of the South. Spivak criticises the issue of reducing reproductive rights to abortion which was under discussion in this conference. She argues that abortion is immaterial in the South where poor women consider children a source of social security. She accuses the proponents of reducing the reproductive rights to abortion of not taking into account the heterogeneity of poor women in the South. The proponents of such a solution view the poor woman of the South as a copy of themselves: “[f]ocusing reproductive rights so intensely on abortion assumes that the able woman of the North is a person endowed with subjectivity and that the poor woman of the South should of course want what she herself wants.”¹³ The female about whom Spivak was speaking is a good example of the ‘native subaltern female’ because she cannot represent herself in such international conferences. The poorest women of the South do not have access to the dominant discourses of the globalising system. Many world organisations and local non-governmental organisations speak in these women's names. Organisations suggest solutions for what

¹¹ Morton, *Gayatri Spivak*, 15.

¹² Spivak, *Critique*, 13, n. 20. I will use the ‘native subaltern female’ throughout the book because this is the term Spivak uses in the text of the book.

¹³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Public Hearing on Crimes Against Women,” *WAF* 7 (1995): 3-4.

they evaluate as these poor women's problems without listening to them. In brief, the voice of the poorest women of the South is lost and this loss is filled by western women and organisations. Of course, the poorest woman of the South is only one example of the 'native subaltern female' and it cannot be generalised as the norm. Now that the example has been presented, an explanation of why Spivak uses 'the native subaltern female' instead of 'the Third-World woman' will be offered by clarifying how she uses the terms 'native informant,' 'subaltern,' and 'South.'

Spivak borrows the term 'native informant' from ethnography. Morton contends that "the label 'native informant' is conventionally used in ethnography to describe indigenous people who provide information about non-western societies to western ethnographers."¹⁴ In Spivak's opinion, ethnography takes the 'native informant' seriously, considering that the latter has a cultural identity, an identity that can be inscribed only by the West. However, she thinks that in other disciplines – philosophy for instance – the 'native informant' was exploited merely to consolidate western theories and then s/he was excluded from the species of mankind. Hence, when Spivak wrote "Three Women's Texts," she used the 'native female' implying the female whose voice cannot be retrieved since this voice was manipulated by western imperialism. Later, in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, specifically in her chapter on literature, Spivak describes the woman she wants to track in her study as the 'native subaltern female.' Sanders argues that adding the term 'subaltern' is significant here because Spivak seems to have become aware that not all native women are unrepresentable due to class and caste distinctions.¹⁵

'Subaltern' refers to social groups like peasants, workers and tribals who are subject to the power of the ruling classes.¹⁶ It is the term which was associated with the prominent Marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). Gramsci was one of the leaders of the Communist Party of Italy and was imprisoned by Mussolini's fascist regime. Gramsci developed the concept of cultural hegemony which is a means used by capitalist systems to present bourgeois values as common sense in society. By this, the capitalist system achieves the coercion of the subaltern classes. Gramsci describes the subaltern classes saying: "[t]he subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a 'State': their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of

¹⁴ Morton, *Gayatri Spivak*, 142.

¹⁵ Sanders, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, 84.

¹⁶ The following three paragraphs draw on my MA dissertation, "Representing the Subaltern: Spivak's Reading of Foucault and Marx in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (University of Essex, 2008).

civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States.”¹⁷ Gramsci’s analysis of the subaltern makes them appear only as allies to be won by other social groups striving for domination. Spivak used this term after her involvement with the Subaltern Studies Group whose effort since the 1980s has been directed to the retrieval of the voices of the subaltern in India during the British rule in India. Spivak’s contribution to the work of this group is her endeavour to avoid the essentialism of defining the subaltern merely by its difference from the élite. To her, the subaltern is a heterogeneous term which may include women, tribals, and the unemployed who, she concludes, cannot represent themselves. She maintains that there is always a group in formation at the margin contending that: “the name subaltern for everything that is different from organised resistance is a warning that tells us that as we organize, as we *must* organize, there is something beyond the margin of organizability that begins to construct itself.”¹⁸

Moreover, the ‘native subaltern female’ cannot be referred to as ‘the Third-World woman’ because Spivak replaces ‘the Third World’ by ‘the South.’ Spivak’s reservation concerning the term ‘Third World’ is associated with her ideas about imperialism which, she claims, inscribed the earth dividing it into three worlds. Postcolonial critics offer different definitions and perspectives of imperialism. However, the common point is that the hegemony that imperialism imposed on the so-called ‘Third World’ was not confined to economics, but its effects can be detected in other cultural fields, including literature. They claim that imperialism was motivated by “the desire for, and belief in, European cultural dominance – a belief in a superior right to exploit the world’s resources.”¹⁹ The imperial discourse, they think, was powerful and could monopolise the means of representation.²⁰ Spivak, as argued by Laura Chrisman, discusses imperialism as “a territorial and subject-constituting project.”²¹ Spivak does not spend much ink defining imperialism, preferring instead to work out the effects

¹⁷ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 52.

¹⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Gayatri Spivak on the Politics of the Subaltern,” edited by Howard Winant, *Socialist Review* 20:3 (1990): 90.

¹⁹ Bill Ashcroft et al, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (London: Routledge, 1998), 126.

²⁰ Ashcroft et al, *Key Concepts*, 126.

²¹ Laura Chrisman, *Postcolonial Contraventions Cultural Readings of Race, Imperialism and Transnationalism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 52.

of imperialism as they appear in different cultural fields. In literature, for instance, she illustrates how imperialism influences fictional structures like moving a white female character from the margin to the centre at the expense of another racially marginalised character.

Spivak perceives the 'Third World' which we speak of, or may imagine that we know, as only fiction, something which is constructed and which does not copy any real essence since imperialism monopolised both philosophical and political representation of the so-called 'Third World.'²² Two concepts that belong to Spivak's critique of imperialism are 'worlding' and 'epistemic violence.' She believes that it is European imperialism that produced the division of worlds which were not present before colonisation. This worlding was followed by epistemic violence which can be defined as "an interested construction, rather than 'the disinterested production of facts.'"²³ In other words, the West started to create and sustain certain images of the colonised peoples. These images gave European societies the stereotypes of the uncivilised Other and led them to justify and support the civilising mission which was the pretext of colonisation. Epistemic violence was enabled by the subject/object binary in which one side is collapsed into the other, leading imperialism to apply the same technique to the binary opposition self/Other. In claiming that the Other can be collapsed into the self, imperialism was underlain by a claim of knowing Europe's Others and a right to represent them, since it is a technique of power to "know and represent the Other."²⁴ By this process, imperialism domesticated the Other; hence Spivak's perseverance that this Other cannot be retrieved in its pure identity or consciousness:

No perspective *critical* of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self.²⁵

In her literary readings, Spivak repeatedly evokes the idea of domesticating the Other to argue against the possibility of making the Other as a copy of

²² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Crossberg (London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1988), 271-313.

²³ Peter Childs and Patrick R.J. Williams, *An Introduction to Post-colonial Theory* (Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 1997), 165.

²⁴ Chrisman, *Postcolonial Contraventions*, 57.

²⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 253.

the self and she calls this ‘selfing the Other.’²⁶ For her, it is only possible to turn the Other into a domesticated version of the western self. Spivak refuses the label ‘Third World’ – and consequently avoids ‘Third-World woman’ – as a fictional construction, occasionally replacing it with ‘the South’, a term resulting from the new economic division of the world into the North and the South.²⁷ Thus, Spivak tries to avoid the theory of the ‘three worlds’ in dealing with the ‘native-informant-as-woman-of-the-South’ keeping, with vigilance, the South:

It is beyond the scope of this book [*A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*] to demonstrate how the new North-South divide in the post-Soviet world imposes new limitations, although my argument will constantly seek to escape that caution. We may, however, suggest that our grasp on that process is made more secure if we in the humanities [...] see the “third world” as a displacement of the old colonies as colonialism proper displaces itself into neocolonialism.²⁸

Hence, there are three reasons for Spivak’s exclusion of the term ‘Third-World woman.’ First, the ‘Third World’ is an imperialist construction. Second, the modern economic division of the world leaves us with only the North and the South. Third, not all ‘Third-World women’ are subaltern figures and not all of them are unrepresentable. Spivak jettisons this kind of homogeneity.

Spivak uses a variety of terms when to refer to the Other. These terms will be used throughout this book and therefore there is a need to briefly clarify the differences among them before moving to the main argument. First, ‘the native informant’ is the Other when s/he is viewed and tackled as a source of information. Spivak uses this term when she deals with a text that marginalises the Other and renders her/him as a passive object of knowledge. Second, the Other is divided into two types in Spivak’s thought: the Other who can be domesticated and made a copy of the self and the ‘wholly,’ ‘absolutely’ or ‘quite’ Other who cannot be domesticated. Spivak stresses that “[b]y definition, we cannot – no self can – reach the quite-other.”²⁹ The subaltern and the ‘native subaltern female’ belong to

²⁶ Spivak also uses the word ‘self’ as a verb in expressions like ‘to self the Other’ to indicate that someone is trying to make the Other as a copy of the self.

²⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Appendix” in Mahasweta Devi, *Imaginary Maps*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Calcutta: Thema, 2001), 200.

²⁸ Spivak, *Critique*, 3.

²⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “A Moral Dilemma” in *What Happens to History: The Renewal of Ethics in Contemporary Thought*, edited by Howard Marchitello (London: Routledge, 2001), 215.

this 'wholly' Other. The last three terms are used interchangeably in this book due to the fact that Spivak uses all of them to refer to characters that cannot be represented or contained by the literary text since their consciousness or voice cannot be revived.

Aware of these ideas about the terms used by Spivak and about the 'native subaltern female' who was at the forefront of Spivak's mind while she was approaching the five literary texts and even when she was compiling the essays into "Literature," we can move to Chapter One: "Spivak's Engagement with Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and Western Feminist Discourses." The discussion of how Spivak approached the literary texts in the period between 1985 and 1999 can be better understood by highlighting the relationships which Spivak establishes between the philosophy of Enlightenment and literature and by applying de Man's version of deconstruction both to philosophy and canonical literary texts. This can be discussed through Spivak's reading of some of Kant's ideas since she repeatedly evokes Kant in her analysis of the texts under discussion. Furthermore, Spivak's attention to the exclusion of the 'native subaltern female' was triggered during her involvement in western feminism. This makes it also essential to understand how the feminist background during that time influenced Spivak's literary criticism, Chapter One will also attempt to provide this feminist background with special attention to the period between 1981 and 1985 when Spivak realised that western feminism excluded the female who was known at that time as the 'Third-World woman' from feminist freedom.

CHAPTER ONE

SPIVAK'S ENGAGEMENT WITH KANT'S *CRITIQUE OF JUDGMENT* AND WESTERN FEMINIST DISCOURSES

Spivak's understanding of the foreclosure of the 'native informant' in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* greatly influences her criticism of the representation of the 'native subaltern female' in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British literature and twentieth-century western feminist criticism. This chapter first explains Spivak's deconstruction of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. It is important to explain this deconstruction because Spivak makes several references to Kant's critique in "Three Women's Texts" and this draws our attention to the fact that there must be thematic and methodological connections between Spivak's reading of Kant and her criticism of the literary texts. Then, the chapter will demonstrate that what Spivak does to Kant's text is de Man's topological deconstruction. This point is also important because though in the 1985 version of "Three Women's Texts" Spivak does not mention Paul de Man's topological deconstruction, a careful reading of the article illustrates her resort to topological deconstruction in approaching the three texts. In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak mentions topological deconstruction in her reading of Kant which comes first in the book and then in the chapter on literature. Spivak also makes connections between Kant's critique and twentieth-century Anglo-American feminism in which she herself was involved. Therefore, another aim of this chapter is establishing the relationship between Spivak's reading of Kant's text and the way in which she changed her position within the feminist discourses up to the moment of writing "Three Women's Texts." By establishing these connections, this chapter will provide a comprehensive background that will pave the way for a better understanding of Spivak's argument in "Three Women's Texts."

Spivak's engagement with Kant's *Critique of Judgment*

Spivak repeatedly evokes Kant in her readings of *Jane Eyre* and *Frankenstein*. Her reading of some ideas of Kant's philosophy is essential to understand her literary interpretation since she assumes that the imperialist project of soul-making, the civilising mission, started in the eighteenth century and the source is the construction of the Other as savage by the philosophy of Enlightenment. When Spivak speaks about the imperialist project of soul-making, she means that imperialism constituted the European subject as civilised and free at the expense of the 'native informant' who was constituted as uncivilised and bound. This project supported the imperialist civilising mission which was the pretext for colonial expansion. The first time Spivak evoked Kant in her reading of literature associating him with imperialism was in 1985 in her discussion of *Jane Eyre*. However, Spivak's most detailed explanation of what she sees as Kant's foreclosure of the 'native informant' comes in her chapter on philosophy in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. This book was written fourteen years after "Three Women's Texts." Nonetheless, it provides a background that clarifies the relationship between Spivak's understanding of Kant and what she wrote on *Jane Eyre*, especially that she includes "Three Women's Texts" in a later chapter of the same book.

The key text for Spivak's literary analysis is Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790), which is the third of his critiques, following *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788). In Spivak's opinion, the three critiques form a cultural self-representation of western man's capacity for aesthetic judgment. However, it is in the third critique that she detects the slippage which demonstrates Kant's need for the foreclosure of the 'native informant' in the interest of consolidating this western self. Spivak describes this slippage as "an unacknowledgeable moment that [she] will call 'the native informant' [which] is crucially needed by the great texts; and it is foreclosed."¹ To better understand this last statement, one needs to know how Spivak uses the term 'foreclosed.' She borrows the term 'foreclosure' from psychoanalysis, namely in the Lacanian sense as explained in *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* (1974). Lacan introduced this term, *forclusion* in French, as an equivalent to Freud's *verwerfung* or repudiation, which refers to a psychic defence, meaning that the ego rejects an idea with its affect and pretends that the idea never occurred to it. It is a two-step process which includes the idea's introduction to and then its expulsion from the subject. Lacan, for his part,

¹ Spivak, *Critique*, 4.

defines foreclosure as the rejection of a fundamental signifier resulting in the expulsion of this signifier from the subject's symbolic order. However, this foreclosed signifier remains in the real.² The real is an important term in relation to Spivak's approach to the 'native subaltern female' because according to Lacan, the real is "that which resists symbolization absolutely."³ Because the world of words is what creates things, the real remains outside language. The real cannot be considered a meaning and this means that it cannot be subject to representation or symbolisation. The real belongs to the impossible. Accordingly, the 'native informant' and consequently the 'native subaltern female' are foreclosed symbolically from the Name of Man by a philosopher, like Kant. However, the native figure returns in the real, haunting the philosopher's text without surrendering to any kind of representation. Therefore, the 'native informant' belongs to the impossible in as much as s/he cannot be represented any more.⁴

To prove that Kant forecloses the 'native informant,' Spivak follows two steps. First, she chooses two instances from his *Critique of Judgment* and deliberately wrenches them out of their philosophical context. The first instance is the appearance of "*der rohe Mensch*," which she translates as "man in the raw," in the "Analytic of the Sublime."⁵ The second is naming 'man in the raw' as the New Hollander, the Australian aboriginal, and the Fuegian, the indigenous inhabitant of Tierra de Fuego in South America, in the "Analytic of Teleological Judgment." She takes 'man in the raw,' the New Hollander and the Fuegian as variables for the 'native informant.' Second, Spivak introduces the discourse of anthropology to conclude that these two instances demonstrate the foreclosure of the 'native informant.' In the following paragraphs, the philosophical context of each of the two examples chosen by Spivak will be briefly explained according to Kant's text, and then Spivak's intervention will be discussed.

The sublime and 'man in the raw' in Kant's text

'Man in the raw' is presented in Kant's explanation of the sublime, which hinges on the relationship between two faculties of the mind: imagination

² Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* translated by Donald Nickleson Smith (New York: Norton, 1974), 166-169.

³ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: W.W. Norton), 66.

⁴ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II*.

⁵ Spivak, *Critique*, 13.

and reason. The explanation is divided into the mathematically sublime and the dynamically sublime. In the mathematically sublime, Kant defines the sublime as the absolutely large or the magnitude that is beyond all comparison and “equal only to itself. It follows that the sublime must not be sought outside itself.”⁶ Thinking of the sublime cannot be achieved by imagination, which depends on appearances. Therefore, Kant insists that the sublime is to be sought in crude nature not in works of art because in art both the form and magnitude are determined by human purposes. For example, thinking of the infinite, which is absolutely large, needs the human mind to be super-sensible; that is, it has to surpass all sensibility on which imagination depends. Because the sublime is large beyond any standard of sense, and because imagination fails to judge it, what we judge as sublime is not the object but “the mental attunement in which we find ourselves when we estimate the object.”⁷ The natural object is only what prompts this attunement of the mind and it is only reason that can receive the idea of the sublime as in the case of the infinite. That is why the respect for the object is replaced with the respect for the human mind. Thus, judging the sublime results in displeasure because of the inadequacy of imagination but it also gives pleasure because it elevates reason as Kant explains: “[w]hat makes this possible is that the subject’s own inability uncovers in him the consciousness of an unlimited ability which is also his, and that the mind can judge this ability aesthetically only by that inability.”⁸

In the part dealing with the dynamically sublime, Kant contests that nature can be considered dynamically sublime because it can be seen as an object of fear threatening our life and health and calling forth our strength to resist it. However, this fear caused by nature’s might does not dominate the human mind; we feel superior to nature by thinking we are able to overcome the natural obstacles and this is the basis for self-preservation. The ability to feel superior to nature is part of human nature but it must be developed. Therefore, Kant proposes: “the predisposition to this ability [to feel the sublime] is part of our nature, whereas it remains up to us, as our obligation, to develop and exercise this ability.”⁹ It is man’s capacity for overcoming the fear of the abyss of nature and for judging the sublime that leads to man’s freedom. Kant adds that in order to be attuned to feel the sublime, the mind must be receptive to ideas and this requires culture:

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, translated by Werner S. Pluhar (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 105.

⁷ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 112.

⁸ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 116.

⁹ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 121.

It is a fact that what is called sublime by us, having been prepared through culture, comes across as merely repellent to a person who is uncultured and lacking in the development of moral ideas [...] But the fact that a judgment about the sublime in nature requires culture [...] still in no way implies that it was initially produced by culture and then introduced to society by way of (say) mere convention. Rather, it has its foundation in human nature: in something that, along with common sense, we may require and demand of everyone, namely, the predisposition to the feeling for (practical) ideas, i.e. to moral feeling.¹⁰

What is translated as 'the uncultured' in the above quotation appears in Kant's text as '*der rohe Mensch*.' Spivak insists that this term – "generally translated 'uneducated,'" – should be translated as "man in the raw," a term which, in her opinion, includes the savage or the primitive.¹¹ Building on her translation of *der rohe Mensch* and maintaining that it includes the 'native informant,' Spivak further argues that the 'native informant' is excluded from this 'programmed' passage to freedom since Kant claims that a person who is not prepared through culture will view the sublime as repellent. Because Spivak is convinced that culture in Kant's text refers only to western culture excluding other cultures, she concludes: "[i]t is not possible to *become* cultured in this culture [which, for Spivak, refers to western culture], if you are *naturally* alien to it."¹²

However, Kant's example of the uncultured man or *der rohe Mensch* is the Savoyard peasant from a part of France located in the western Alps. Kant had read about the Savoyard peasant in *Voyages dans les Alpes* by the Swiss geologist Horace Bénédict de Saussure. Since he is not prepared by culture to judge the sublime, this peasant describes any person enjoying the view of the snowy mountains as a fool.¹³ Apart from Spivak's translation, this peasant would be described as 'uneducated' rather than 'not prepared by culture' in the meaning Spivak intends, western culture. In fact, Spivak does not offer any kind of evidence about what Kant refers to by his use of the term 'culture.' Besides, her conclusion is based on the assumption that man in the raw "can, in its signifying reach, accommodate the savage and the primitive."¹⁴ Kant's text does not discuss cultural difference overtly and Spivak admits this, stressing that there is an implicit rather than explicit presupposition of cultural difference. She says: "Kant's philosophical project, whether sublime or bourgeois, operates in terms of

¹⁰ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 124-5.

¹¹ Spivak, *Critique*, 13.

¹² Spivak, *Critique*, 12.

¹³ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 124.

¹⁴ Spivak, *Critique*, 13.

an implicit cultural difference.”¹⁵ Actually, what she presents is not evidence but an assumption which she justifies by explaining that she sees an implicit racial difference underlying the manner in which manhood is defined in the third critique. Spivak imagines the ‘native informant,’ the retrieval of whose voice is impossible, arguing that Kant’s text “uses a peculiar thinking of what man is to put him [the ‘native informant’] out of it.”¹⁶ Spivak imagines the ‘native informant’ emphasising that Kant’s text defines the introduction into humanity as the passage from fearing the abyss of nature to appreciating the sublime followed by realising the presence of God. This is a passage from savagery to Christian faith, a passage enabled by western culture. Thus, Spivak imposes the figure of the ‘native informant’ on Kant’s text despite him not mentioning such a figure at all. In this way, Spivak gives a geo-political dimension to Kant’s philosophical text.

She also argues that Kant’s text deconstructs itself by showing that freedom happens through obligation. Spivak tries to prove this by making some modifications to the usual translation of Kant’s terms. For example, she states that a programme or blueprint is implied in the word *anlage* in Kant’s text. Whereas *anlage* is usually translated as ‘tendency’ or ‘predisposition’ in a clause like “the predisposition to feel the sublime,” Spivak finds in it an indication of obligation in the following manner: when encountering a natural sublime, a lack in imagination is revealed due to imagination’s failure to feel the sublime. Reason is compelled, rather than inclined, to supplement this lack. Then, the respect for the object of nature is replaced with a respect for the human mind for its ability to supplement this lack. This in Kant’s opinion happens by a certain subreption which Spivak defines, depending on the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as the suppression of truth. Thus, since the whole process of judging the sublime, in Spivak’s estimation, is based on the suppression of truth, and since it excludes the primitive informant who is not prepared by western culture, this means that the freedom offered by Kant’s text is merely a truth-claim. Spivak defines the truth-claim as “a trope that passes itself off as truth.”¹⁷ She thinks that supplementing the gap in this manner is what philosophy is based on. Further, in *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012), Spivak argues that this way in which reason supplements the gaps is the kind of an intended ‘mistake’ on which the philosopher depends for his theories to be consolidated. She quotes Kant’s

¹⁵ Spivak, *Critique*, 32.

¹⁶ Spivak, *Critique*, 26.

¹⁷ Spivak, *Critique*, 147.

definition of the word 'maxim' – which is a truth-claim – in the following manner:

I call all subjective grounding propositions [*Grundsätze*] that are found [*hergenommen*] not from the nature [*Beschaffenheit*] of the object [Latin spelling] but from the interest of reason in regard to a specific [*gewiss*] possible perfection of the cognition of the object [Latin spelling], maxims of reason. Thus there are maxims of speculative reason's speculative reason, which rest unsupported [*lediglich*] on reason's speculative interest, even though it may seem as if they were objective principles [*Principien*].¹⁸

Of course, Spivak here concentrates on the fact that most English translations of this passage hide the strong wording of Kant because, unlike *Principien* which are objective principles, *Grundsätze* refers to subjective principles. The fact that, according to Spivak's translation of *Grundsätze*, maxims are subjective principles which are used by the philosopher as if they were objective leads Spivak to conclude that a "‘maxim’ is something that the philosopher devises in order to come to terms with the transcendental gap at the origin of philosophy."¹⁹ Then, she argues that "Kant's own text can also be described as an intended mistake."²⁰

The philosopher is aware of the maxim, or the mistake, used by him to supplement the gap in his theory but the danger lies in such maxims being exploited by politicians because politicians are not aware of why such maxims are existent.²¹ For example, in her reading of the third critique, Spivak explains that since freedom is achieved through man's ability to judge the sublime without fearing it and since this happens via culture, Kant's text provides an alibi for correcting the mistake of 'man in the raw' who views the sublime as fearful, in order to civilise and enable him to pass to freedom. In other words, the relationship between the western subject and the 'native informant,' "the not-yet-subject," is established on the former's conviction that the latter's mistake must be corrected by culture through the civilising mission.²² Spivak contends:

¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, "Toward a Perpetual Peace," in *Political Writings*, translated by H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 130, quoted in Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (London: Harvard University Press, 2012), 14.

¹⁹ Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education*, 16.

²⁰ Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education*, 20.

²¹ Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education*, 16.

²² Spivak, *Critique*, 14.

[T]he mistake made by the *raw* man, for whom the abyss of the infinite is fearful rather than sublime, must be corrected through culture itself, although on the threshold of such a project [the project of correcting the mistake committed by the 'native informant'] stands the peculiar relationship between productive and natural culture cited earlier. (One of the ideological consequences of this relationship might be the conviction that the cultural mission of imperialism can never really succeed, but it must nonetheless be undertaken.²³

Therefore, Spivak believes that the seeds for the civilising mission were sown by the philosophy of Enlightenment and she traces the influence of this idea on the literary texts discussed in her chapter on literature.

The New Hollander and the Fuegian

Spivak draws her second example of Kant's foreclosure of the 'native informant' from "Analytic of Teleological Judgment," the part in which Kant proposes that we must assume an intelligent Being who is the author of the world, and who is beyond the sensible. Kant reaches this conclusion through viewing nature as governed by a final intentional end. He argues that although we can discover the mechanical laws which control the material objects of nature, we cannot depend on such laws for all objects to explain organisms. For example, we can know by mechanical laws that a tree sheds its leaves to store water, but these laws cannot be used to understand how the tree has been organised in a way that makes this process possible. Therefore, Kant resorts to the theory of purposes which govern nature, suggesting that an object is a natural purpose if it produces and is produced by itself. The tree, for example, produces another tree and can grow by its ability to separate and recombine the materials it takes from nature. The tree then is an organised and self-organising being in which every part is there for the sake of other parts and for the sake of the whole. Knowing this internal purposiveness of the tree is called by Kant the intrinsic purposiveness and if it is present, the object is called a natural purpose. A natural purpose is different from an object or being that is a purpose of nature. A purpose of nature can be judged according to extrinsic purposiveness which refers to the external purposive relations between things. In order to be able to describe an object or a being as a purpose of nature, we need to know the final purpose of nature itself. But

²³ Spivak, *Critique*, 14.