

**Sangeeta Ray. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: In Other Words. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. 150 pp. [Book review]**

By: Cybelle H. McFadden

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: In Other Words. Sangeeta Ray, Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature 35.2 (2011): 365–367.

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### **Abstract:**

Through her essays, books, interviews, and lectures, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has established herself as one of the most influential contemporary critical and literary theorists whose work engages with the interstices of postcolonialism, feminism, Marxism, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis. Spivak’s body of work in different iterations concerns itself with representation, self-representation, the Other, subject positionality, and the politics of the postcolonial and multicultural. In *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: In Other Words*, Sangeeta Ray skillfully takes on the task of articulating and unpacking the theoretical and political stakes of Spivak—a daunting proposition indeed. Ray’s initial trepidation with which she opens the book proves to be unnecessarily self-conscious as she astutely synthesizes Spivak’s literary and theoretical contributions. Ray effectively imitates Spivak’s methodology to illustrate both Spivak’s influence on her thinking and the manner in which Spivak’s critical intervention necessitates active engagement by all participants, the critic and reader alike.

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### **Article:**

\*\*\*Note: Full text of article below

finally conquered the interior by 1815. This chapter offers the view of some British writers of the island, from Harriet Martineau to Arthur C. Clarke. The sixth chapter focuses on Romesh Gunsekera's informal trilogy of novels: *Reef* (1994), *The Sandglass* (1998) and *Heaven's Edge* (2002). This final section has a heavier concentration in ecological criticism and literature, especially when analyzing *Reef* and *Heaven's Edge*, since this novel is populated by multiple "ecotopian images" (177) of endangered gardens, asking whether Eden could be recreated after an apocalypse on Earth.

This is an outstanding book that deserves attention, especially from scholars interested in ecoliterature, postcolonial issues, and comparative literature. Deckard's conclusion with the relevance today of utopian/dystopian literature and the current capital role of paradise in fiction as a locus of reconciliation and acceptance of the Other is important and much needed. However, the book presents some minor issues in terms of balance: the first section, unlike the other two, chooses a completely foreign author as representative of the anti-imperialist discourse, whereas the other two areas choose a native expatriate. Although the point is to bring Latin America into the postcolonial discourse, this selection proves once again the difficulty and issues involved in such a thing, since most Latin American writers (even political exiles) keep writing in Spanish and not English. Another option would have been to choose a Cuban-American or Dominican-American writer (e.g. Cristina García or Junot Díaz), but that would defeat the purpose of exploring the traditionally forgotten paradises, since it would be the Caribbean again. There are some citation issues (citing Spanish language authors with the second last name as opposed to the first, i.e. Vargas Llosa is also cited as Llosa [19]), consistency issues (the novel *Desertion* appears as from 2005 and 2006 in the same chapter), and typographical errors on a couple of occasions (48, 53) but that might be editorial grounds. Overall, it is a work well done which deserves attention.

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Through her essays, books, interviews, and lectures, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has established herself as one of the most influential contemporary critical and literary theorists whose work engages with the interstices of postcolonialism, feminism, Marxism, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis. Spivak's body of work in different iterations concerns itself with representation, self-representation, the Other, subject positionality, and the politics of the postcolonial and

multicultural. In *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: In Other Words*, Sangeeta Ray skillfully takes on the task of articulating and unpacking the theoretical and political stakes of Spivak—a daunting proposition indeed. Ray’s initial trepidation with which she opens the book proves to be unnecessarily self-conscious as she astutely synthesizes Spivak’s literary and theoretical contributions. Ray effectively imitates Spivak’s methodology to illustrate both Spivak’s influence on her thinking and the manner in which Spivak’s critical intervention necessitates active engagement by all participants, the critic and reader alike.

What struck me most about Ray’s account of Spivak’s work is the author’s acute awareness of both her own subject positionality and her own intellectual indebtedness to Spivak as a postcolonial theorist who articulates well the very contradictions of this positionality and existence. By carefully employing well-chosen anecdotes and analyses of Spivak’s body of work, Ray traces the trajectory of Spivak both as an intellectual figure in the academy and as a model of critique. Ray enacts Spivak’s critical maneuvers to make them intelligible both to a reader who may have only read “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and to those who know Spivak’s work well.

Ray lays out Spivak’s intellectual contributions in the following chapters: Chapter 1 “Writing Autobiography, Writing Spivak: In Lieu of an Introduction,” Chapter 2 “Reading Literature, Teaching Literature: Whither Soul Making?,” Chapter 3 “Reading Singularity, Reading Difference: An Ethics of the Impossible,” and Chapter 4 “Reading Women, Reading Essence: Whither Gender?” The first chapter does an excellent job of explaining Spivak’s critical stance and the intellectual tensions at the heart of her work through Ray’s very own encounters with Spivak both as a reader and as a Bengali woman herself. She enacts Spivak’s critical practices, outlines Spivak’s “movement from a middle-class family in Calcutta to the upper echelons of academia in the United States” (3), and describes the shifts in her critical engagement with Spivak over time. Reading Spivak’s “Translator’s Preface” to Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* taught Ray “the significance of responsibility of one’s writing and reading” (2). Through Spivak’s work, we understand “unlearning one’s privilege and power as loss” (3), the difficulty to do so, and the shifting terrain of subject positions. Ray skillfully illustrates Spivak’s various injunctions from “A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman’s Text From the Third World” to *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, and Dialogues*. She also points out the paucity of sustained engagement with Spivak’s *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* in spite of several reviews. Ray wants her own book to be “a thinking through with Spivak the important questions about reading, pedagogy, ethics, and feminism” (23).

The second chapter delves into a detailed account of Spivak’s close readings of literature in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. Ray analyzes Spivak’s shift from reading Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to Mahashweta Devi's novella *Pterodactyl, Pirtha and Puran Sahay* as an important intervention about representation, the Third World, the native informant, and soul making. Spivak's reading of J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* and *Disgrace* illuminates the importance of teaching; the example of Spivak's encounter with the girl in rural India seems to hold the key to an ethical political stance, but also to her intellectual investments. The third chapter outlines Spivak's ethical call to reading, especially when knowledge seems to be in particular crisis. The Spivakian methodology of persistent critique is especially important in the coupling of ethics and alterity and for her recent work on planetary ethics. "Since globalization is tied to the march of capital and development, the other is either erased as other, consolidated as the almost same, reproduced as subjects of tradition, or negated as not quite subject yet of Reason" according to Ray (84). Ray thus explains Spivak's impetus to "imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents" (84). The concluding chapter illustrates Spivak's contributions to transnational feminism while being informed by French feminists, including Simone de Beauvoir, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva. Ray turns to Spivak's essays "If Only" and "Can the Subaltern Speak?" to probe the problem of representation in gendered terms, specifically the gendered subaltern. She investigates "what happens when the postcolonial feminist moves from the colonial and national to the transnational with Spivak" (132).

Through the looking glass of Spivak, Rays reminds readers of why literature, ways of knowing, and the political are not only still relevant and key questions for critical thought, but why the need for their convergence is even stronger than ever. Ray's book will be useful for scholars who want an in-depth analysis of the trajectory of Spivak's work, as well as for students who are being introduced to Spivak's work, especially in a postcolonial and feminist context. Ray, as a leading postcolonial feminist critic herself, enacts Spivak's methodology well. Reading Ray to read Spivak will be pedagogically beneficial for graduate students who are learning reading and textual practices that are at the very heart of both Spivak's work and this text about her body of work.

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