

## Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak Living Translation

APTER, EMILY; ABHISHEK GANGULY, MAURO PALA & SURYA PAREKH (eds.). 2022. *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak Living Translation*. London, New York & Calcutta: Seagull Books.

Reviewed by CHANDRANI CHATTERJEE

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's writing career spans several decades of the twentieth and twenty first centuries cutting across varied fields of scholarly enquiry, like comparative literature, post-colonial studies, feminism to name just a few. Spivak's writings on translation have, however, not received the critical attention that it deserves. A translator of Jacques Derrida and Mahasweta Devi, Spivak has written widely on translation as a critical and theoretical practice. For the first time, *Living Translation* brings together Spivak's published writings on translation in a book form. It is an important addition for researchers in the field of Translation Studies.

*Living Translation* is wonderfully edited and the editorial interventions play a vital role in the arrangement and presentation of the book. The reader is guided through the different transitions in Spivak's writings on translation. After a detailed critical Foreword by Emily Apter and a Preface by Aron Aji and Maureen Robertson, Spivak's writings on translation are arranged into five sections: Politics of Translation; Cultures of Translation; The Most Intimate Act of Reading; Necessary, Yet Impossible; Teaching, Learning, Unlearning Translation. This is followed by an Afterword 'Translating the Planet' by Avishek Ganguly and Mauro Pala's essay on Gramsci and Spivak: Politics of Translation.

Spivak's writings not only touch upon the practice of translation, but also on its pedagogies. How does one teach translation? What are the methodologies therein and how does it vary in different situations and locations? These are pertinent

questions that are often raised in Spivak's writings particularly on translation and even otherwise in her larger philosophy of 'transnational literacies'. *Living Translation* has a section that addresses the pedagogies of translation. In the section 'Teaching, Learning, Unlearning Translation', five essays by Spivak are collected. It is through these essays that one can gauge the dialogic space that Spivak's writings on translation aim at. Repeatedly in her writings on translation, Spivak has emphasized the need for an acknowledgment of the plurality of linguistic communities and their situatedness in different cultural locations. This acknowledgement is the key to the learning and unlearning processes that play a vital role in any act of translation.

Spivak's thoughts on translation cut across conventional disciplinary frameworks and borders. She asks us to question translations in the globalized spaces that we inhabit. In this regard her 2009 essay on 'Translation in the Undergraduate Curriculum' is an eye opener to the largely monolingual syllabi and pedagogies that we tend to endorse and validate. She suggests translation and the teaching of translation as a practice and a way to interrupt the very idea of monolingual spaces. In discussing her course, she writes and it will be necessary to quote Spivak at some length,

"The course is devised specifically for the possibility that students, especially undergraduate students will be interested in learning languages if the teacher teaches through "problems in translation." The method is to introduce a language-conscious comparativist element into undergraduate teaching, using the strengths of traditional comparative literature. [...] Typically, students read the texts in English. The instructor, who knows the original language, teaches through attending to the problems of translation, on a level accessible to the young student who does not know the language. Given the global constituency of the New York classroom, there is usually a

single student or group of students who can navigate the original better than the rest of the class. This difference creates patterns of sharing that are pedagogically useful. [...] I invoked that extraordinary page in Antonio Gramsci's Prison Notebook number 29, where Gramsci talks about all historical grammar as comparative and indeed an account of struggle. We should welcome our students into the struggle if they are going to become citizens of the world. Otherwise any notion of globalizing the curriculum becomes too-speedy Americanizing of every bit of the global that is useful to us" (186-193).

In theorizing the enabling spaces that translations can create, Spivak, however, indicates the need for producing translators rather than translations. In a 2012 essay titled 'Scattered Speculations on Translation Studies', she talks of the 'double-bind' of translation,

"There are two theories of literary translation: you add yourself to the original, or you efface yourself and let the text shine. I subscribe to the second. But I have said again and again that translation is also the most intimate act of reading. And to read is to pray to be haunted. A translator may be a ventriloquist, performing the contradiction, the counter-resistance, which is at the heart of love. Does this promote cultural exchange? This for me is the site of a double bind, contradictory instructions coming at the same time: love the original/share the original; culture cannot/ must be exchanged. [...] Following these thinkers, then, I come to the conclusion that the double bind of translation can best be welcomed in a world by teaching translation as an activism rather than merely a convenience. In other words, while the translated work will of course make material somewhat imperfectly accessible to the general reading public, we in the academy, should primarily produce translators rather than translations" (208-209).

Spivak's urgent need to address the conventional understanding of translation's very epistemological premise, is the ability to unlearn certain premises on which translation and Translation Studies both seem to be based.

"We need a deep change of mind in order to thrust the contextualization of the global into its own repeated displacement. Otherwise the equation of globalization and Americanization continues as the task or burden of translation. We forget then that the phonetic elements of languages do not translate – that is also an abstraction. I am often told that when I speak my mother tongue, it sounds beautiful – it is a legitimation by reversal of the argument behind the word barbarous. Meaningless sounds, whether ugly or beautiful. In place of such culturalist exoticization of the MLA, the task of the translator as member might be to rethink the current workaday definition of translation and try to make translation the beginning, on the way to language learning, rather than the end" (222-223).

This epistemological shift can possibly be the only way ahead in reimagining the role of translation in our lives. Spivak's writings on translation, otherwise scattered across journals and edited volumes, when compiled in *Living Translation*, provides a new perspective to the crucial presence of translation in her writing career, even when most unrelated to translation, her writings on post-colonial identities, subalternity, gender or transnational literacies all are connected to some of the basic epistemic shifts that one finds in the writings on translation. In a 2015 essay titled 'Global?' Spivak critically engages with the concept that has perhaps been at the core of Translation Studies ever since its inception – that of cultural exchange.

"[...] There is no cultural exchange through translation. I do not think cultures can be named. I think culture is a word that

one should take a moratorium on. Translations of convenience are a way coping with the fact that there can be no global community except at the very top. And even then, even with just a handful of well-known languages, the convenience of translation must constantly be used and the double bind between the necessity and impossibility of translation denied” (234).

Spivak repeatedly emphasizes the importance of language learning as the only way of doing translation. Comparative literature makes possible such encounters.

Comparative literature at its best tries to learn language the child’s way, the impossible way, entering the lingual memory, the memory of the language in the language (p 235).

In *Death of a Discipline*, Spivak had, over a decade back, called for a reassessment of Comparative Literature, “As far as I am concerned, then, there is nothing necessarily new about the new Comparative Literature. Nonetheless, I must acknowledge that the times determine how the necessary vision of “comparativity” will play out. Comparative Literature must always cross borders. And crossing borders, as Derrida never ceases reminding us via Kant, is a problematic affair” (16).

The coming together of Comparative Literature and Translation Studies and a call for collectivities and planetarity is Spivak’s suggestion for the way ahead. As Avishek Ganguly points out in the Afterword ‘Translating the Planet?’ – “How might the ethics and politics of translation in Spivak resonate with her imperatives for the necessary impossibility of imagining the subject as planetary, put forward in another set of equally compelling speculations? One place to look for an answer to this question would be the notion of “the untranslatable”, which I would argue functions for Spivak as

not only a limit of translation but also as a point of departure for thinking planetarity” (257).

*Living Translation* brings together, for the first time, a collection of Spivak’s writings on translation. By doing so, the book also unsettles the available disciplinary field of Translation Studies by contesting and pushing its limits beyond the framework of what is expected of a discipline. Spivak’s critical and theoretical oeuvre has repeatedly contested singularity and homogeneity of any kind, making space for a plurality and heterogeneity to be the corner stay of humanities research. *Living Translation* is perhaps one of the best examples of this practice. The diverse essays in this book emerge from different contexts, address very specific audiences and are situated in a specific time-space. By bringing these essays together, there is perhaps an attempt at universalizing, a generalizing of Spivak’s idea of translation. However, the book best illustrates the futility of even attempting to contain the essays within any strict framework. This in turn is indicative of the connectedness and yet plurality of the ideas and the dynamicity of the trajectory of thoughts on translation that Spivak developed over a writing career spanning two centuries. This further points to the ways in which the meaning and idea of translation keeps changing depending on the contexts in which translation is used. The editorial commentaries and essays provide fresh look at Spivak’s writings. These interventions in turn become ‘intimate acts of reading’ in engaging with and interpreting Spivak’s ideas on translation for readers yet to be born.

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