



Death of a Discipline

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

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For almost three decades, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has been ignoring the standardized "rules" of the academy and trespassing across disciplinary boundaries. Today she remains one of the foremost figures in the study of world literature and its cultural consequences. In this new book she declares the death of comparative literature as we know it and sounds an urgent call for a "new comparative literature," in which the discipline is given new life--one that is not appropriated and determined by the market.

In the era of globalization, when mammoth projects of world literature in translation are being undertaken in the United States, how can we protect the multiplicity of languages and literatures at the university? Spivak demonstrates how critics interested in social justice should pay close attention to literary form and offers new interpretations of classics such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Through close readings of texts not only in English, French, and German but also in Arabic and Bengali, Spivak practices what she preaches.

Acclaim for Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and her work:

"[Spivak] pioneered the study in literary theory of non-Western women."--Edward W. Said

"She has probably done more long-term political good, in pioneering feminist and post-colonial studies within global academia, than almost any of her theoretical colleagues." --Terry Eagleton

"A celebrity in academia... create[s] a stir wherever she goes." --*The New York Times*

Death of a Discipline Details

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From Reader Review Death of a Discipline for online ebook

Ayeshah says

Oh Dear! I still believe now what I did over a year ago "life is too short for this"! Unless you're a humanities major, I don't see why bother with Spivak at all! In this particular book she makes some interesting points: identity politics is neither smart nor good (that sentence was why I gave the second star, btw!); the concept of planetarity is a nice spin on Edward Said's Humanism or what he calls Hospitality; she points out the potential lack of rigour in cultural studies; and stress the necessity of direct knowledge of languages in an authentic comparative literature.. All great stuff & that's why I'm disappointed in her writing style & just can't bring myself to get over it :(these are serious issues that deserve an articulate expression..

"All around us is the clamour for the rational destruction of the figure, the demand for not clarity but immediate comprehensibility by the ideological average."

Guess I'm an ideological average, then! I have no plans to become anything else & Ms Spivak may enjoy the view from her high horse!

I highly recommend "Reading the Referent: Post-colonialism and the Writing of Modernity" by Simon Gikandi..

Nathaniel says

3.5 an da-rìribh, saoiléam, ach bidh agam ri smaoinéachadh barrachd mu dheidhinn an leabhair seo nuair a thar-sgrìobhas mi na h-às-earrannan a chomharraich mi fhad 's a bha mi a' leughadh.

Jeremy says

This is a manifesto of sorts suggesting a way forward for the humanities. Spivak argues these disciplines are becoming increasingly removed from the subjects/text they purport to study. She suggests a revolutionary hybridization, which really felt to me more like pointing the way backwards rather than forwards. As a political statement I found it somewhat lacking, but the problems that Spivak identifies are real enough. If academic disciplines are to remain relevant they must engage with reality, in all its complexity, and not merely toy with rhetoric.

JT says

Spivak argues that a new comparative literature, her 'Area Studies,' would insist on the radical incommensurability of different cultures' received ideas and concepts and stare directly into the observer-expectancy effect. In the age of a 'planetary' culture that has long been defined more by the continuous movement of global economic history than by the old fantasy of discrete nation-states and national literatures, Spivak argues that the most appropriate tack for comparative literature would be a kind of comparative inadequacy.

Death of a Discipline is just as dense and scattered in its style as in its sense, which is meant to be instructive I suppose. The book enlists Woolf, Coetzee, Conrad and several novels from outside the Western canon/market to demonstrate the persistent cognitive biases of colonialist thought. Her occasional jabs at the established tropes of American cultural studies are especially damning when they crop up - e.g. "[...] tied to plot summary masquerading as analysis of representation, and character analysis by a precritical model of motivation or an unearned psychoanalytic vocabulary[.]"

Definitely worth the time and effort.

Jaredjosephjaredjoseph harveyharvey says

The globe is on our computers. No one lives there.

Wm says

I knew what to expect going in, but I still had hope for some passages that would provide some insight or stick with me. Sadly, there were very few of these. So I can't honestly say that I liked this book even though I get that Spivak is not really writing for me (even though I have a comp lit degree) and even though the overarching concepts (esp. engagement with area studies) are interesting.

Rochelle says

i'm not going to pretend that i understood this text but what i could glean from it was fascinating.

Jafreen Alamgir says

Loved to see a different perspective of an intellectual's struggle. ♥ Words alone cannot describe its excellency.

Neocortext says

Read a couple chapters that blew my mind--then school started and the library recalled it. Must to reorder. Her reading of *Waiting for The Barbarians* was inspired.

Alex says

Cogent clarion call for reconceptualizing comparative literature as field/discipline. Had the feeling this edition not well-edited. Does chapter 2 intentionally trail off mid-thought, mid-paragraph, mid-sentence?

Mike Mcglaven says

This was mostly unreadable. I am perpetually disappointed that someone with such radical politics writes in the most inaccessible way possible, using dense and prolix jargon, incomprehensibly long sentence structure, and a roundabout sentence construction that is usually impossible to parse. I got the impression that there was some kind of colonial connotation to the idea of area studies but that's about it. Does that constitute a spoiler? I wish someone would spoil it for me so I could understand what I just read.

Eeke Van Der Wal says

For me this work was quite hard to read and understand. There are many references to other authors, which, for me, sometimes makes her point harder to grasp. Yet I do find the content of what she writes tremendously interesting and valuable!

Meredith says

A must for the complitters and theoryheads, lays out some of the major problems with literary study in the West as it relates to incorporating literatures from non-Western countries.

Talrubei says

A few points covered in a pile of jargon.

Joanna Lee says

As expected from Spivak, a radical reimagining of what Comparative Literature might be, utilizing the language of spirituality and revolutionary idealism; as always, the non-pedantic and sometimes roundabout language also serves as a teaching point. If you are looking for "points" and "arguments", you are already starting off from a different perspective, one entrenched in a specific approach to academic thinking. Instead, think of this as creative writing and a manifesto that reimagines a discipline.

Sara Baalbaki says

I'm not sure what to think after reading this book. It's confusing, but Spivak usually writes in a more abstruse manner, so this book was okay. The main thing I take away from this book is that she wants Ethic and Area Studies to be more inclusive of other literatures, and think of them in less binary (East vs West) terms.

Hossein says

I've never been a fan of postcolonial theory and comparative literature and I'm still not, although I admit the need for such theories. The mistake that many make about *Death of a Discipline*, is to reduce it to study of comparative literature, but look at what is behind the call for the new postcolonialist and new comparative literature. Spivak says a no to the nationalism, considers the planetarity of the identity and attacks harshly to the fixed definition of women advocated by institutions. So you will find more than comparative literature alone. However, sometimes the book gets clear to understand and sometimes very hard to follow, especially in chapter 2 when she talks about collectivity. Her thoughts about crossing borders seem to be impossible but while admitting that she explains how imagining the possibility of an impossible is important. Spivak, as you know, is a diehard fan of Derrida, so get ready for lots of Derridean challenging style of writing. deep in meaning, but hard to follow by the first reading.

Susanna says

I love Spivak. But she's impossible (for me) to understand the first time through. I only read her last chapter in this book, "Planetarity," but it has been very helpful for my work this semester. Here's how I approach reading Spivak: read it once, underlining what seems important but not backtracking if I don't understand. Then I go through it again and take notes in a word document. And then it all comes together.

Really Spivak is making the most interesting ethical arguments out there right now in globalization theory and postcolonial studies.

Ann says

Highly theoretical collection on the state of comparative literature -- which needs, in Spivak's view, a revival. Spivak does not call for the destruction of the field of comp lit, but a remodeling, as many comparatists have done before and since. She wants an intersection of disciplines, particularly that of comparative literature and area studies, a field dedicated to the total study (cultural, linguistic, economic, etc) of locations. In order to do this, Spivak wants the depoliticization of comparative literature from its intrinsic cold war politics and the dominant Euro-US cultural figure it centers around and calls for an acknowledgment that "whatever our view of what we [comparatists] do, we are moved by the forces of the people moving around the world." With this acknowledgement comes the demand for a reworking of the way comparatists even study language -- that is, as a part of cultural study rather than active cultural media, the latter being more conducive to the "collectiveness" of the new field of comparative literature Spivak calls for. She takes literature itself as a form of pedagogy, and her essays are replete with examples of how to read under this new paradigm of comparative literature, as the dominant subject as the other; the reader as other; the reader as being read. Her final essays calls for a planetary perspective on literature.

I really enjoyed Spivak's essays on comparative literature, but do acknowledge that at times things could get a little murky, particularly with her second essay on theopoiesis and Derrida. But while she raises questions about the state of the discipline, she also offers answers, and I appreciated her call to destabilize the very notion of the "nation" within comparative and world literature, for "comparative literature remains imprisoned within the borders it will not cross." I liked her call for academic rigor to not only the notion of

"nation" but the in-between processes as well -- that of diaspora and labor movements.

Finally, I liked her quote within a quote in her first essay -- "One thinks with horror of how small the number is of those who are ready even to misunderstand something like this."

Miss says

I must admit that I didn't understand much of what Spivak is saying until it finally came to me: she isn't saying much at all. Her stream-of-consciousness-style isn't doing her any favours, the real important points disappear in a pile of opaque explanations whose content is close to nothingness. The most important point she makes, and this why I like parts of this book, is that literature needs to be seen from a planetary perspective. Forget about the old imperialist world literature, forget about the capitalist global literature. We need an idea that includes everyone and deconstructs the old concept. I hope that someone will somehow build a whole theory on this idea because it could solve one of the biggest issues around the concept of world literature: its Western perspective.
