

An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization

By Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

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During the past twenty years, the world’s most renowned critical theorist?the scholar who defined the field of postcolonial studies?has experienced a radical reorientation in her thinking. Finding the neat polarities of tradition and modernity, colonial and postcolonial, no longer sufficient for interpreting the globalized present, she turns elsewhere to make her central argument: that aesthetic education is the last available instrument for implementing global justice and democracy.

Spivak’s unwillingness to sacrifice the ethical in the name of the aesthetic, or to sacrifice the aesthetic in grappling with the political, makes her task formidable. As she wrestles with these fraught relationships, she rewrites Friedrich Schiller’s concept of play as double bind, reading Gregory Bateson with Gramsci as she negotiates Immanuel Kant, while in dialogue with her teacher Paul de Man. Among the concerns Spivak addresses is this: Are we ready to forfeit the wealth of the world’s languages in the name of global communication? “Even a good globalization (the failed dream of socialism) requires the uniformity which the diversity of mother-tongues must challenge,” Spivak writes. “The tower of Babel is our refuge.”

In essays on theory, translation, Marxism, gender, and world literature, and on writers such as Assia Djebar, J. M. Coetzee, and Rabindranath Tagore, Spivak argues for the social urgency of the humanities and renews the case for literary studies, imprisoned in the corporate university. “Perhaps,” she writes, “the literary can still do something.”

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Editorial Review

Review
Spivak remains an indispensable leader and guide in the exhilarating conceptual adventure?the trip?which, since the late sixties, we've called theory. *Aesthetic Education* presents us with lessons that she has learnt on the way?difficult, defiant, sober lessons for these unpromising times. They demand our attention. (Simon During, University of Queensland)

This captivating collection of lectures delivered over the course of a quarter century asks us to attend to the profoundly democratic possibilities of the imagination. Aesthetic education empowers us to apprehend and negotiate what Spivak calls the "double bind at the heart of democracy." At a time when the humanities are expected to genuflect before the sciences and privatization and professionalization displace knowledge, Spivak urges us not only to stand tall but to insist that ethical solidarities are only possible through the rigorous training of the imagination. (Angela Y. Davis, University of California, Santa Cruz)

[A] rewarding series of meditations on the possibility of reading, learning, and teaching that would encourage the full flowering of cultural, sexual, and linguistic diversity and resist the homogenizing force of globalization...The gathered texts are a testament to a fundamental faith in the power of literature that is never less than inspiring. (*Publishers Weekly* 2011-11-11)

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's latest collection of essays offers a timely reminder of what the real and powerful ends of education might be...[The essays] cover the breadth of an extraordinary intellectual career...The essays, for all their diversity, have the quality of a cumulative, long retrospection, a slow-burning consideration of what it means to teach, how faultily we do it and how we might do better by those who most want to learn and have least opportunity...It is, though, Spivak's assertion, after Schiller, that an aesthetic education remains the strongest resource available for the cause of global justice and democracy. The homogenizing and pacifying effects of globalization, which Spivak so routinely lambasts, here, she argues, can never extend "to the sensory equipment of the experiencing being." And here she has never sounded more persuasive, identifying in arts education the evocation of a phenomenology at feeling and the engendering of critical thinking that are posited beyond the logic of capital. (Shahidha Bari *Times Higher Education* 2012-04-06)

About the Author
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is University Professor at Columbia University and a trainer of elementary school teachers in West Bengal.

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