

# Gender in the global utopia

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*Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was made Professor Honoris Causa of the Rovira i Virgili University on May 10, 2011. The following is her acceptance speech made on that occasion.*

I am deeply honored that the trustees of the Rovira i Virgili University have decided to make me a member of their alumni. I am especially grateful to Elizabeth Russell and Anthony Pym for proposing me as a recipient of this honor.

Today is the 8<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of my mother, Sivani Chakravorty, who was an intellectual in her own right, receiving an M.A. in Bengali Literature from the University of Calcutta in 1937, at the age of twenty four. My father, Dr. Pares Chandra Chakravorty, a village boy, worked with Rutherford at Cambridge on Radiology in the late 1920s, was created a Civil Surgeon by the British, but destroyed his brilliant career with no hesitation at all when asked to give false evidence in a rape trial. I have no doubt at all that it is my parents who nurtured in me the qualities that you have decided to acknowledge today.

Unlike Professor Russell, I am not a specialist in contemporary Utopian Studies. My sense of utopia comes from the root meaning of the word— that it is a no-place, a good place that we try to approximate, not achieve. The utopia proposed by globalization is “a level playing field.” I think it is generally understood that this is a false promise, especially since the impossibility inherent in all utopian thought is ignored by it. The world is run on the aim to achieve it, more or less disingenuously. In order to make this false promise, the sponsors of globalization emphasize that access to capital brings in and creates social productivity. They do not emphasize the fact that such productivity must be humanely mediated by decision-makers who are deeply trained in unconditional ethics and, with the decline and fall in education in the humanities, this group is extinct. To the wise heads of this university I repeat what I said to the president of the university that was kind enough to offer me my first honorary doctorate: “Think of [education in

the humanities] as epistemological and ethical health care for the society at large.” In the absence of philosopher-kings directing the global utopia, what is also and necessarily ignored is that for capital to work in a capitalist way, there must be what used to be called “proletarianization” and today has been revised to “subalternization.” I will “define” the subaltern to close my remarks. To open my remarks I want to touch on two other issues close to our hearts and minds today: gender and translation, for they are routinely used to “achieve utopia,” and to close off access to subalternization.

In order to establish the same system of exchange all over the world—the bottom line of globalization—the barriers between individual national economies and international capital have to be removed. When this happens, states lose their individual and idiosyncratic constitutional particularities in history, and become recoded as agents for managing the interests of global capital. In such a situation, when demand and supply begin to become the organizing principles of running a state, we come to realize that items such as clean water, or HIV-AIDS research, let us say, do not necessarily come up in terms of the demands of the global economy. These kinds of needs then begin to be supervised by a global collection of agencies that are separate from nation states. This group is often called the international civil society, a more palliative description of what is also still called non-governmental organizations—supported by the United Nations. Thus we can say that the structuring of the utopianism of globalization brings forth restructured states aided by an international civil society and other instruments of world governance. In order to be realistic about this, we should also speak of geopolitical interests, geo-military interests, international criminal courts and so on, but that would take us away from gender and translation.

It is well known that the management of gender provides alibis for all kinds of activities—from military intervention to various kinds of platforms of action, where experience deeply embedded in cultural difference is translated into general equivalence. Often this happens because women are perceived to be a more malleable and fungible sector of society—especially women below a certain income line. If in a global utopia, it is also imagined that sexual preference would be translated into the language of general affective equivalence, this exists on a separate plane.

Already we can see that in order to establish the same system of exchange all over the globe, we are also obliged to establish the same system of gendering globally. How does translation enter here?

To gather singularities into a system of equivalence is also called “abstraction.” I have often argued that gender, or what many of us have been calling gender for the last 40 years or so, is humankind’s, or perhaps the most intelligent primates’ first instrument of abstraction: as follows.

Gender is our first instrument of abstraction.

Let us think of culture as a package of largely unacknowledged assumptions, loosely held by a loosely outlined group of people, mapping

negotiations between the sacred and the profane, and the relationship between the sexes. To theorize in the abstract, we need a difference. However we philosophize sensible and intelligible, abstract and concrete etc., the first difference we perceive materially is sexual difference. It becomes our tool for abstraction, in many forms and shapes. On the level of the loosely held assumptions and presuppositions that English-speaking peoples have been calling “culture” for two hundred years, change is incessant. But, as they change, these unwitting *pre*-suppositions become belief systems, organized suppositions. Rituals coalesce to match, support, and advance beliefs and suppositions. But these presuppositions also give us the wherewithal to change our world, to innovate and create. Most people believe, even (or perhaps particularly) when they are being cultural relativists, that creation and innovation is their own cultural secret, whereas “others” are only determined by their cultures. This habit is unavoidable and computed with the help of sexual difference sustained into something feminists who are speakers of English started calling “gender” in the last forty years. But if we aspire to a global utopia, we must not only fight the habit of thinking creation and innovation is our own cultural secret, we must also shake the habit of thinking that our version of computing gender is the world’s and in fact even ignore our own sense of gender unless we are specifically speaking of women and queers.

Thought as an instrument of abstraction, gender is in fact a position without identity—an insight coming to us via Queer Studies from David Halperin (1995: 62)—sexualized in cultural practice. We can therefore never think the abstracting instrumentality of gender fully.

This broad discussion of gender in the general sense invites us to realize that gender is not just another word for women and that the (non-)place of the queer in the social division of labor is also contained within it. And yet, because gender, through the apparent immediacy to sexuality, is also thought to be the concrete as such (with commonly shared problems by women), the international civil society finds it easiest to enter the supplementing of globalization through gender. This is where translating becomes a word that loses its sense of transferring meanings or significations. A certain human-to-human unmediated affect-transfer is assumed.

Yet it is possible that gender(ing)-in-the-concrete is inaccessible to agential probing, mediated or unmediated.

The human infant grabs on to some one thing and then things. This grabbing of an outside indistinguishable from an inside constitutes an inside, going back and forth and coding everything into a sign-system by the thing(s) grasped. One can certainly call this crude coding a “translation,” but it is taking place (if there is a place for such virtuality) in infancy, between world and self (those two great Kantian “as if”-s), as part of the formation of a “self.” In this never-ending weaving, violence translates into conscience and vice versa. From birth to death this “natural” machine, programming the

mind perhaps as genetic instructions program the body (where does body stop and mind begin?) is partly metapsychological and therefore outside the grasp of the mind. In other words, where parental sexual difference helps the infant constitute a world to self the self in, the work that we are calling “translating” is not even accessible to the infant’s mind. So it is not much use for the kind of cultural interference that NGO gender work engages in. For all of us, “nature” passes and repasses into “culture,” in this work or shuttling site of violence: the violent production of the precarious subject of reparation and responsibility. To plot this weave, the worker, translating the incessant translating shuttle into that which is read, must have the most intimate knowledge of the rules of representation and permissible narratives that make up the substance of a culture, and must also become responsible and accountable to the writing/translating presupposed original. That is the space of language-learning, not the space of speedy gender-training in the interest of achieving utopia in globalization. This is why books such as *Why Translation Studies Matters* (2010), published through the European Society for Translation Studies, are of interest to me, and I hope my words resonate with their sense of mission. In preparation for this occasion, I have also looked carefully at the activities of the Intercultural Studies Group at your university. I hope some members of those groups will attend to my remarks as describing what is necessarily excluded at the limits of the merely achievable.

I have given above an account of how the “self” is formed, through sexual difference. Let us move just a bit further in the infant’s chronology and look at the infant acquiring language.

There is a language we learn first, mixed with the pre-phenomenal, which stamps the metapsychological circuits of “lingual memory” (Becker 1995: 12). The child invents a language, beginning by bestowing signification upon gendered parts of the parental bodies. The parents “learn” this language. Because they speak a named language, the child’s language gets inserted into the named language with a history before the child’s birth, which will continue after its death. As the child begins to navigate this language it is beginning to access the entire interior network of the language, all its possibility of articulations, for which the best metaphor that can be found is—especially in the age of computers— “memory.” By comparison, “cultural memory” is a crude concept of narrative re-memorization that attempts to privatize the historical record.

Translation Studies must imagine that each language may be activated in this special way and make an effort to produce a simulacrum through the reflexivity of language as habit. Here we translate, not the content, but the very moves of languaging. We can provisionally locate this peculiar form of originary translation before translation on the way, finally, to institutionally recognizable translation, which often takes refuge in the reduction to equivalence of a quantifiable sort.

This is not to make an opposition between the natural spontaneity of the emergence of “my languaged place” and the artificial effortfulness of learning foreign languages. Rather is it to emphasize the metapsychological and telecommunicative nature of the subject’s being-encountered by the languaging of place. If we entertain the spontaneous/artificial opposition, we will possibly value our own place over all others and thus defeat the ethical impulse so often ignored in competitive translation studies. Embracing another place as my creolized space may be a legitimation by reversal. We know now that the hybrid is not an issue here. If, on the other hand, we recall the helplessness before history—our own and of the languaged place—in our acquisition of our first dwelling in language, we just may sense the challenge of producing a simulacrum, always recalling that this language too, depending on the subject’s history, can inscribe lingual memory. In other words, a sense of metapsychological equivalence among languages, at the other end from quantification, rather than a comparison of historico-civilizational content. Étienne Balibar has suggested that equivalence blurs differences, whereas equality requires them. Precisely because civil war may be the allegoric name for an extreme form of untranslatability, it is that “blurring” that we need.

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.

How intimate is this “intimate act of reading?” Long ago in Taiwan, my dear friend Ackbar Abbas had said that my take on reading was a “critical intimacy” rather than a “critical distance.” And now, another perceptive reader, Professor Deborah Madsen (2011), has found in my idea of “suture (as translation)” a way into Derrida’s sense that translation is an intimate embrace, an embrace that is also something like a physical combat.

We pray to be haunted because “I cannot be in the other’s place, in the head of the the other.” In all reading, but most so in translation, we are dealing with ghosts, because “to translate is to lose the body. The most faithful translation is violent: one loses the body of the poem, which exists only in [the ‘original’ language and once only]... translation is desired by the poet... but...,” and here we enter the place of violence in love “love and violence.” And the language of the “original,” is itself “a bloody struggle with [that very] language, which [it] it’s deforms, transforms, which [it]

assaults, and which [it] incises.” We have to inhabit the “original” language against its own grain in order to translate.<sup>1</sup>

Following these thinkers, then, I come to the conclusion that the double bind of translation can best be welcomed in the 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 ourselves, in the academy, primarily produce translators rather than translations. We can expand this analogy to the necessarily imperfect translations of the images of Utopia. The translations, in a classroom, at the Center—are lovely byproducts. We produce critically annotated and introduced translations, fighting the publishers some. In other words, we have to have the courage of our convictions as we enter and continue in the translation trade. I remember a time in Spain, when I first came in 1963, having read George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, and spent the summer as a penniless graduate student in a fishing village not far from here, when Catalan was forbidden. It is the energy of the struggle that is inherent in the history of Catalan that has permitted me to make this plea here, in this space, at this time.

At the end of Benjamin's famous essay on “The Task of the Translator,” there is the mention of a meaning-less speech, “pure speech,” which makes translation possible.<sup>2</sup> There is a famous scandal about the accepted English translation translating this as “makes translation impossible.” In closing, I would like to invoke this intuition, which in Benjamin, to me unfortunately, takes on the guise of the sacred. But this idea, that the possibility of the production of meaning is a system without meaning but with values that can be filled with meaning, is in today's informatics—which is rather far from the language of the Scripture.<sup>3</sup>

In this understanding, signification means to turn something into a sign—rather than to produce meaning—and make it possible for there to be meaning within established conventions. This originary condition of possibility is what makes translation possible—that there can be meaning and not necessarily tied to singular systems. About 60 years ago, Jacques Lacan suggested that the unconscious is constituted like a conveyor belt,

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<sup>1</sup> All Derrida quotes are taken from Jacques Derrida, “The Truth that Wounds: From An Interview” (2005: 164-169).

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” tr. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1996), p. 253–63.

<sup>3</sup> In this connection, Derrida also invokes the intuition of the transcendental but distances himself in the end: “every poem says, ‘this is my body,’... and you know what comes next: passions, crucifixions, executions. Others would also say” -- mark these words -- “resurrections...”

rolling out objects susceptible to meaningfulness—for use in building the history of a subject, with imperfect reference to whatever one could call the real world (Lacan 2007). In these mysterious thickets, the possibility of translation emerges, but only if, institutionally, the so-called foreign languages are taught with such care that, when the student is producing in it, s/he has forgotten the language that was rooted in the soul—roots which, Saussure, Lacan, information theory, and in his own way Benjamin, see as themselves produced, dare I say, as rhizomes without specific ground?<sup>4</sup> It gives me pleasure to recall that Saussure was a student of Sanskrit and something of this sort of intuition he might have come to from a reading of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Indian grammarian Bhartrihari's notion of *sphota*.<sup>5</sup>

I have often said that globalization is like an island of signs in a sea of traces. A trace is not . . . a sign. A sign-system promises meaning, a trace promises nothing, simply seems to suggest that there was something here. In this connection one inevitably thinks of the established patriarchal convention, still honored by most legal systems, that I, especially if I am recognizable as a man, am my father's sign and my mother's trace. What is important for us within my argument is that, rather than theorize globalization as a general field of translation which, in spite of all the empiricization of apparently impersonal mechanical translation, in fact privileges host or target, ceaselessly and indefinitely, we should learn to think that the human subject in globalization is an island of languaging—unevenly understanding some languages and idioms with the “first” language as monitor—within an entire field of traces, where “understanding” follows no guarantee, there is just a feeling that these words are meaningful, not just noise; an undoing of the *barbaros*. A new call for a different “non-expressional” art, a different “simultaneous translation.”

Global translating in the achievable Utopia, on the other hand, ceaselessly transforms trace to sign, sign to data, undoing the placelessness of utopias. This arrogance is checked and situated if we learn, with humility, to celebrate the possibility of meaning in a grounding medium that is meaning-less.

In the interview from which I have already quoted, given a few months before his death, Derrida puts it in a lovely empirical way: “there may be an allusion to a referent from [the author's] life that is hidden or encrypted through numerous layers of hidden literary references. [...] in a word, there will always be an excess that is not of the order of meaning, that is not just another meaning.”

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<sup>4</sup> The exhortation to learn the foreign language with such care as to forget the mother tongue comes from Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” (1852/1973: 147, translation modified).

<sup>5</sup> For a learned introduction to Bhartrihari, see Bimal Krishna Matilal (1990).

In that spirit, accepting the exhilarating limits of translation I accept also your honor, I thank you and I come back to where I started. If we claim a successful translation, a successful recoding into a general system of equivalence, we forget the ghostliness of utopias, we betray gendering, our first instrument of translation.

A postscript on proletarian and subaltern. The distinction was first made by Antonio Gramsci. As Frank Rosengarten, Gramsci's translator, pointed out in conversation, in the army, the definition of subaltern is "those who take orders." As soon as we look at this category, rather than those who are trashed within and by the logic of capital, we think gender, we think the paperless, we think of those outside the system of equivalences, we think of those with no social mobility who don't know that the welfare structures of the state are for the use of the citizen. I should tell you in closing that this final definition of the subaltern I wrote recently for a second cousin, deeply involved in global capitalism, who happened to see a video where women workers gently and with affection mocked me for my fixation on the subaltern. My cousin didn't know what the word meant. It gives me pleasure to bring the family into these ceremonies—since my sister, Professor Maitreyi Chandra, who, as an educator herself, certainly knows of the predicament of the subaltern, has traveled all the way from New Delhi to be present on this happy occasion, when you welcome me into the university family.

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