



28th January, 2025

The Holberg Committee Citation: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Born in Kolkata in 1942, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is a graduate of the University of Calcutta and of Cornell University. Holding the post of University Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University, she is one of the most influential global intellectuals today. Spivak continues to shape several fields in an interdisciplinary manner. These include comparative literature, translation, postcolonial studies, political philosophy, and feminist theory. Her scholarship has been translated into well over twenty languages. She has taught and lectured in more than fifty countries and has received nearly fifty honorary doctorates and prizes from across the globe.

Spivak's essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) has become a formative text within postcolonial studies and beyond. Its global impact exemplifies her challenge to Western scholarship that occludes the perspectives of minoritized groups and their struggles. It was groundbreaking in starting from the experience of women in colonial India to examine questions of voice and power. Her concept of "planetary" in her book *Death of a Discipline* (2003) further developed this critical approach, offering an ethical alternative to "globalization". Among her many influential books are *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012), and *Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee and Certain Scenes of Teaching* (2018).

Spivak is committed to an interdisciplinary critique of structures of power and knowledge in an unequal world. In this sense, the labour of translation becomes an act of thinking through the limits of dominant modes of knowledge production. She defines translation as a profoundly philosophical and political act. Her highly influential English translations demonstrate her deep attention to multivocal and diverse epistemes. This is evident in her celebrated translations of Mahasweta Devi's literary works from Bengali, as well as Derrida's philosophical works and Aimé Césaire's political writings from French.

As a public intellectual and activist, Spivak combats illiteracy in marginalized rural communities across several countries, including in West Bengal, India where she has founded, funded and participated in educational initiatives. For Spivak, rigorous creativity must intersect with local initiatives to provide alternatives to intellectual colonialism.

Her concepts, such as "strategic essentialism" and "global criticality," are now widely used and debated. Spivak's work challenges readers, students, and researchers to "train the imagination" through a sustained study of literature and culture. Taking the core of Western thought as an object

of critical analysis, she has inspired, enabled, and supported otherwise inconceivable lines of critical interrogations—both at the centres and margins of global modernity.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is a highly worthy recipient of the 2025 Holberg Prize.

On behalf of the Holberg Committee,

Heike Krieger, Committee Chair