The Tragic in Translation: Spivakian Planetarity and a New Ethics of Reading

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Abstract: In the wake of postmodern critiques of the totalizing project of Western philosophy, cultural theorists have had to reconsider the ethical dimensions of their engagement with the other's singular alterity without subsuming it within the epistemic coordinates of the Western subject. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* (2003) is an important intervention in reformulating this question within the institutional politics of Comparative Literature in the American academia. In imagining a "new comparative literature," based not on globalization but on "planetarity," Spivak highlights the ethico-political stakes of translation and the risks that must be taken in reaching out to the subaltern other.

This essay locates Spivak's text in the larger 'politics of love' that philosophers like Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida have tried to limn through their work on the other's irreducible figure. In her writings, Spivak posits the intuitive openness of love as an alternative to hyper-rational, Enlightenment modes of dealing with nature and the environment. It is only by supplementing political activism with the patient, attentive, often painful, act of love that it is possible to establish ethical singularity with the other, even if it is equally possible that this love will not be returned, even if the consummation of this love remains an impossibility. In this essay, I read Amit V. Masurkar's Hindi film *Newton* (2017) in the light of Sean D. Kirkland's distinction between *dromoscopic* and *aporetic* temporalities and argue that this act of love is infused with intimations of the tragic, a 'double bind' that leads to an acknowledgement of the aporetic dimension of the endeavor, at the end of which there are no ways (Gk. *poros*) left, and yet an impossible translation remains the only ethical imperative.

Keywords: Spivak, planetarity, translation, tragedy, Bollywood

With the expansion of globalization in recent decades, the discipline of Comparative Litera ture, as understood and practiced in the American academia, has had to address the geopolitical complexities and cultural differences in an increasingly decentered world. In doing so, the comparative enterprise has sought to overcome its Eurocentric bias by responding to the politics of global literary production and the rise of postcolonial literatures. This territorial refashioning of the discipline, both in spatial and temporal terms, has given rise to a renewed investment in the question of ethical sensitivity towards cultures that are radically different from the West. Postcolonial and postmodern critiques of the patronizing gaze of the Western subject has injected new anxieties in the task of the translator and the comparatist. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* (2003) is an important intervention in reformulating these questions within the wider debates in the field. In imagining a "new comparative literature," based not on globalization but on "planetarity," Spivak highlights the ethico-political stakes of inter-cultural translation and the risks that must be taken in reaching out to the subaltern other. This act of reaching out, for Spivak, is an act of love—a surrender, a 'giving in' that is nonetheless violent and often catastrophic. In this paper, borrow Sean

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D. Kirkland's distinction between *dromoscopic* and *aporetic* temporalities to argue that this act of love is infused with intimations of a tragic 'double bind' that leads to an acknowledgement of the aporetic dimensions in translation.

Spivak prefaces her book with a statement that suggests her suspicion of a strategic complicity between neoliberalism and the practice of comparative literature in the United States. She reminds us that the rise of disciplines like postcolonial studies and comparative literature have been co-extensive with US foreign policy and intellectual/economic investment in the 'Third World.' In the name of making their field more democratic, these disciplines have often ended up collaborating with global economic expansion by "producing knowledge" about the 'Third World.' She writes:

> Publishing conglomerates have recognized a market for anthologies of world literature in translation. Academics with large advances are busy putting these together. Typically, the entire literature of China, say, is represented by a couple of chapters of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* and a few pages of poetry. Notes and introduction are provided by a scholar from the area commissioned for the purpose by the general editor, located in the United States. The market is international. Students in Taiwan or Nigeria will learn about the literatures about the world through English translations organized by the United States. Thus institutionalized, this global education market will need teachers. Presumably, the graduate discipline of comparative literature will train those teachers. (xii)

In this book, Spivak seeks to interrogate this narcissistic, patronizing attitude of the "world literature" gaze. While her work has consistently focused on the gendered experiences of the subaltern woman, Spivak has always been deliberately self-conscious in pointing out how she is *not* to be taken as a 'native' informant, making 'authentic' and 'transparent' claims about her subjects. Spivak's project in this essay is to introduce this moment of critical self-reflexivity in the field of comparative literature and to propose "planetarity" as a way of 'doing' comparison.

In establishing ethics as "first philosophy," Emmanuel Levinas had already problematized the possibility of engagement with the other's singular alterity without subsuming it within the epistemic coordinates of the Western subject. For Levinas, it is the face-to-face encounter with the other that inaugurates the ethical moment, as the other's face exceeds all categories, refusing epistemic foreclosures. Spivak receives Levinas inflected by Derrida, especially through the notion of the *tout autre*, the 'wholly other,' as a possibility that is always yet "to come." This messianic waiting for the other is characterized by a perennial openness towards an unknown, unpredicted future that may never actually arrive. Derrida writes, "I am careful to say 'let it come' because if the other is precisely what is not invented, the initiative or deconstructive inventiveness can consist only in opening, in uncloseting, in destabilising foreclusionary structures, so as to allow for the passage toward the other" ("Reading" 60). It is this gesture of unending openness to the other that Spivak invokes in *Death of a Discipline* when she borrows the concept of *teleopoiesis* from Derrida, which she defines as "an imaginative making—without guarantees … [that] makes the task of reading imperative yet indecisive" ("Death" 31). The social space between the self and the other is marked by an "irreducible curvature" (29), which instead of deterring politics actually calls for a "more risky political activity" (30). The 'planet' of the other consists of figures that cannot be pinned down by traditional Western hermeneutics; these figures are marked by an excess that unsettle the position of the reader and problematize the practice of reading. Throughout this book, Spivak emphasizes the need for "affirmative undecidability"—a reading in the mode of "to come," "if," and "perhaps" (48), a reading that is always provisional, ambivalent, incomplete, self-reflexive. She argues that this "new comparative literature" must be based on planetarity, a system of differences that exceeds and spills over the totalizing fantasy of globalization. Seen in this light, Spivak's notion of a "new comparative literature" is not so much a foundational project as it is a call for a critical understanding of the limits of comparison. She writes:

> I propose the planet to overwrite the globe. Globalization is the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere. … The globe is on our computers. No one lives there. It allows us to think that we can aim to control it. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet

> we inhabit it, on loan. It is not really amenable to a neat contrast with the globe. I cannot say "the planet, on the other hand." When I invoke the planet, I think of the effort required to figure the (im)possibility of this underived intuition ("Death" 72).

It needs to be clarified that the model of planetarity is not the same as that of absolute relativism. The gift of planetarity lies in the way it allows us to approach other cultures while never arriving "at" them. Refusing the identity politics of Area Studies, Spivak notes that "Comparative Literature laced with Area Studies goes rather toward the other" (92). It is this "going toward" that is crucial in this impossible journey. This planetarity does not deny globalization (93), but supplements it (96).

There is a sense, I suggest, in which Spivak's formulation of planetarity relates to the idea of the tragic. In his essay 'Tragic Time,' Sean D. Kirkland identifies two kinds of temporalities at work in Greek tragedy—*dromoscopic time* and *aporetic time*. The first is the temporality of the race (from Gk. *dromos*, race) where the origin and end of one's actions are neatly visible, as in a race, where one is aware of the starting point and the finishing line. Such an action consists in "racing from a past to a future, such that in one's speed one treats these as fixed, simple, manifest, and perfectly grasped" (Kirkland 56). Aporetic time, on the other hand, is an experience of temporality where one realizes that "one's past and future, and thus one's very own motivations and aims, are not fixed and clear at all, but complex, obscure, and inscrutable" (56). The tragic lies precisely in the transition from the first temporality to the second, in our confrontation with the limits of human knowledge. At the tragic moment, we are robbed of our path (Gk. *poros*), and are left in a "waylessness" or *aporia*. Tragedy, Kirkland argues, forces us into a recognition of "the object of our own desire as yet undesirable, because by definition it has not emerged into the present from the inscrutability of the future" (59). In other words, after one thinks one has reached the *telos* of one's journey, one realizes that the relation between origins and ends is never pure, simple, or linear; it is always already contaminated by a temporal excess that lies beyond human grasp.

Kirkland identifies a telling moment in Sophocles' *Antigone* when on the point of facing inevitable death, Antigone is seized by doubt over her tragic action: "At this moment, for the first time in the play, she suffers the 'if,' the 'perhaps,' in Greek the *ei*. She says, 'If then this [my being punished] is what is pleasing to the gods, I would acknowledge my error, having suffered [*Ant.* 925–26]. … She moves along now with hesitation, pausing beneath the weight of her 'perhaps,' and the attending soldiers are loathe to rush her" (59–60). Antigone's hesitation in her final moments is, according to Kirkland, the result of her jarring encounter with the *aporia* that lies in the beyond. Spivak's emphasis on the 'if' and 'perhaps' of the planetary approach demonstrates, I suggest, intimations of this tragic element. Reaching out to the other always involves an acknowledgement of the aporetic dimension of the endeavor, at the end of which there are no ways left, where no finishing line is ever final. In Spivak, the tragic also lies in the realization that every other is singular, and hence any responsible dialogue with one other could involve one's failure to other others—a tragic double bind that Derrida astutely identifies in *The Gift of Death*, where he says, "I am responsible to anyone (that is to say, to any other) only by failing in my responsibility to all the others, to the ethical or political generality. And I can never justify this sacrifice; I must always hold my peace about it ... What binds me to this one or that one, remains finally unjustifiable" (70).

Spivak, however, cautions us against confusing this ethical moment of incommunicable experience with the skepticism of science. If the humanities tend to join in a competition with the sciences, we have already lost: "In the arena of the humanities as the uncoercive rearrangement of desire, he who wins loses. If this sounds vague, what we learn (to imagine what we know) rather than know in the humanities remains vague, unverifiable, iterable. You don't put it aside in order to be literary critical" (101). While the 'scientific spirit' lies in the pursuit of a specified *telos*, the humanities must always negotiate the limits, the liminal space, always already contaminated, between the self and the other. It is a project always in the 'becoming.' As Rabindranath Tagore had noted more than a century ago in his essay titled 'World Literature,' written in 1907:

> We have to regard literature as a temple being built by the master mason, universal man; writers from various countries and periods are working under him as laborers. None of us has the *plan* of the entire building; but the defective parts are dismantled again and again, and every worker has to conform to that invisible *plan* by exercising his natural talent and blending his composition with the total design. … Its creation is a continuous process like the material world's; and yet in the heart of this unfinished creation, an ideal conclusion dwells immovably. (55-56)

What is striking about this passage is that at the heart of this deeply humanist conception of literature as a universal totality, there is a recognition that such a totality is only "ideal," while the literary "world" itself in its materiality is always an "unfinished creation," whose parts are to be "dismantled again and again." The realization of the project, therefore, lies in its repeated failures. Spivak, writing almost a century later in a world shaped by postmodern fragmentations, cannot believe in an overarching humanist "plan." Though indebted to Marx and Foucault in her understanding of the dynamics of power relations, Spivak has engaged in a sustained interrogation of utopian political programs inspired by Marxism and national independence movements. In contrast to such movements which claim to faithfully represent the voices of the oppressed but end up replicating the discourse of the oppressor, it is in Derrida's deconstruction of Western philosophy that Spivak finds the possibility of establishing an ethical relationship with the other. She, therefore, emphasizes the iterability of these attempts at "building the temple," and their inevitable, even necessary, failures. Planetarity, she writes, is "the experience of the impossible" ("Death" 102). It results not only in a recognition of the unfamiliarity of the other but also in a defamiliarization of the self. Drawing on psychoanalytic terminology, Spivak contends that planetarity must render the home "*unheimlich*"—unhomely or uncanny: "What is home—to be human in the world—becomes inhospitable, provoking anxiety or *Angst*" (57-58, 73-74).

In the second part of the book, Spivak reads Mahasweta Devi's Bengali story 'Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha' as a "transgressive reading" of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. She identifies in it moments that are germane to an ethically responsible reflection on Conrad's novel. There is a striking narrative parallel between these two literary works and the Hindi film *Newton*, Amit V. Masurkar, that released in 2017. Here I try to tease out the tragic undercurrents in planetary love through a brief reading of the film.

The film is about Nutan Kumar, aka Newton, a rookie government staff who is appointed as the presiding officer for the elections being held in the jungles of Maoist-controlled Chattisgarh—India's 'heart of darkness.' In the midst of administrative callousness and total apathy of the police officers towards the tribal voters, Newton comes across as an idealistic and upright character bent on carrying out his duties to the letter. Fighting many odd obstacles even at the risk of his own life, he is determined to get the votes which he sincerely believes would usher in better times for the tribal population. This, however, is a land where the pretense of democracy breaks down. The tribal voters have never seen any of the politicians they are supposed to vote for, nor do they have an inkling about how to use the voting machine. They fall outside the logic of democracy in that even if they can vote, they have no access to the structures of citizenship. They are thus least interested in participating in a game that has no meaning for them. Newton, however, in the blindness of his righteous intentions, fails to see the gulf that separates his knowledge of the world from the 'planet' of these people. Newton does not understand their language; he has to rely on a local interpreter to translate their words. In a brilliantly crafted scene, while Newton is explaining to them the benefits of voting, one of them inquires, "*Kitna paisa milega?*" ("How much money shall we get?" and another one asks, "Which candidate will give us a fair price for Tendu leaves [used for smoking – for wrapping the tobacco in *beedis* or Indian cigar]?" Newton's response is characteristic in his use of clichés: he tries explaining how voting is one's birthright, how it forms the pillar of democracy, how the winning candidate would ensure that they get social justice, and so on, while the voters blankly stare at him. This is a moment of total linguistic collapse. Newton does not know how to interpret

their response; their expressions speak a language that is alien to him. Despite his best intentions, his words repeatedly fail to arrive at their destination; translation becomes impossible.

In some of her other works, Spivak seems to suggest that the only way out of this *aporia* is through a politics of love that, in its singularity, also marks the end of all politics. She posits the intuitive openness of love as an alternative to hyper-rational, Enlightenment modes of dealing with the alterity of the other. It is only by supplementing political activism with the patient, attentive, often painful, act of love that it is possible to establish ethical singularity with the other, even if it is equally possible that this love will not be returned, even if the consummation of this love remains an impossible possibility. Spivak writes:

> For a collective struggle *supplemented* by the impossibility of full ethical engagement – not in the rationalist sense of "doing the right thing," but in this more familiar sense of the impossibility of "love" in the one-on-one way for each human being – the future is always around the corner; there is no victory, but only victories that are also warnings. ("Reader" 270)

It is important, however, to distinguish Spivak's concept of love from that of Emmanuel Levinas, particularly because they might seem to hew too closely to one another. For Levinas, love for the other entails some kind of wisdom that makes the other visible; it obligates the self to the imperative of the other. There seems to be no such assurances in Spivak. Instead, it is hard to dissociate this love from the violence inherent in the very structure of desire. Spivak once quoted her teacher Paul de Man saying to Fredric Jameson, "Fred, you can only deconstruct what you love" (Paulson). Planetary love, therefore, always comes with the possibility of violence and failure. If love takes me inside the other and binds me in "critical intimacy," it also gives me the tool to unpack and dismantle the other. This love, I suggest, is tragic, in that it is conditioned by the betrayal that it necessarily demands—a theme astutely illustrated in *Newton.* The tribal subaltern in the film fails to speak because language has already been co-opted by those who claim to speak on their behalf. In his attempt to save the other, Newton becomes complicit in an epistemic violence against the very people he seeks to 'rescue' or speak for. At the seeming end of his race, Newton's *dromoscopic* sense of time encounters a radical *aporia* where the very possibility of an ethics seems to flounder. Newton is not a tragic character; he never reaches an awareness of his failing. But this is precisely what makes this satirical film also a tragic text—a tragedy without a tragic hero—in that it makes us confront the impossible possibility of a planetary ethics.

It might be useful here to remember that this emphasis on the catastrophic intimations of planetary theory is not intended towards a foundational politics, and Spivak is well aware of the problems involved in adapting a deconstructionist mode of reading. As she says in an interview in *The Post-Colonial Critic*, "Deconstruction cannot found a political program of any kind. … Deconstruction teaches us to look at these limits and questions. It is a corrective and a critical movement. … Yet in its suggestion that masterwords like 'the worker' or 'the woman' have no literal referents deconstruction is again a political safeguard" (104). It is thus important to see the *aporia* of planetarity not as denying globalization ("Death" 93), but as supplementing it (96). It is as a supplement to the Hegelian-Marxian grand-narrative and the Nietzschean-Schmittian relentlessness that planetarity becomes a potent reminder of the dangers of translation. While acknowledging that the space between the particular and the universal, between domestication and foreignization, is always fraught with tension and the possibility of failure, planetary love nevertheless allows for a mode of reading characterized by "affirmative undecidability."

In the US academia in particular, the last few decades have seen a crucial and necessary movement towards a deprovincialization of the canon through a huge spike in translations of texts from vast and previously unmined geo-literary landscapes. As Emily Apter has shown, however, this extensive drive to anthologize reading lists and resources for a World Literature curriculum has often been guilty of presuming a false equivalence between languages and cultures, and of "zoom[ing] over the speed bumps of untranslatability in the rush to cover ground" (7). As a counter to the "translatability

assumption" of World Literature, Apter outlines a horizon for a new Comparative Literature that neither revives the hegemony of the Western canon, nor fetishizes the absolute alterity of the other, but instead walks a thin line between translation and nonntranslatability—in other words, a translational praxis that acknowledges both the impossibility of translation and the necessity to translate *quand m^me* (drawing on the Beckettian formula, 'I can't go on, I will go on'). Translation, to return to Spivak, is primarily an act of love; but as love, it is also a risk, a transgression. Yet this risk is not paralyzing; the painstaking labor involved in the process entails a recognition of the other's singularity while positing a planetary translation as the first ethical imperative in the task of reading.

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