

Trading French and Postcolonial Feminisms: Spivak's Ethics of Exchange

ZUBEDA JALALZAI

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in articulating feminist and postcolonial politics, raises issues of importance for both first world and third world feminists as well as enacting some of the very dangers which accompany those tenuous relationships. Spivak's essays, "French Feminism in an International Frame" (1981) and "French Feminism Revisited: Ethics and Politics" (1992), provide a rich arena in which she presents powerful cautions regarding international solidarities and explores the complicated dynamics of ethical relationships on multiple levels, including that between mother and daughter, bourgeois postcolonial feminist and the woman of the "ground," as well as between metropolitan and postcolonial feminists. I look at moments of exchange in these essays and the central contradiction in Spivak's work which is in her call not to assume the other woman as oneself but also her claim that before any kind of communication can occur, one must assume the other woman without alterity. Though Spivak rightly points to the complications in intimacy, solidarity, and speech, the "gift" of French feminism is, rather, an "exchange" and, it seems, one whose end points will forever maintain it as an asymmetrical relationship that replays older, colonial dynamics.

Throughout feminist history, the charge of universalizing Woman's experience has been leveled at various groups of femi-

nists by others, who, in turn, are accused of projecting their own subjectivities. Such political pit falls are prevalent in building international, feminist solidarities. Spivak problematizes assumed familiarities in her analysis of the connections and the distinctions between first world and third world feminisms by appealing to French feminist theory, in particular through Cixous's "Laugh of the Medusa" which detaches the connection of mother/daughter as a relationship of the body to "a relationship with the other woman who is precisely not a child of [one's] body." In this way, the mother is not equivalent with the daughter; by extension, the western feminist is not equivalent with the postcolonial feminist, though both are connected through discrete intimacies like imperial and patriarchal history.

Spivak supports such ethical alterity and hopes to release the third world feminist and western feminists from assumed equivalencies through their common female bodies, but Spivak's use of Marie-Aimee Helie-Lucas, an Algerian scholar and author of "Bound and Gagged by the Family Code" (1987), works precisely to keep the "postcolonial feminist of a recently decolonized state" (to use a phrase of Helie-Lucas) in debt to the metropolitan feminist. I will focus on Spivak's use of, in the first essay (1981), a Sudanese scholar's statement, "I have written a structural functionalist dissertation on female circumcision in the Sudan" and, in the second (1992), Helie-Lucas's essay on the family code for Spivak's assumptions of Helie-Lucas's deconstructive subversion, and "strategic essentialism." The ironies of being "bound and gagged" by a familial code abound here even in the relationship of mother and daughter not born of actual bodies.

Spivak engages the concept of exchange on multiple levels including that which she sees occurring between her first and second essays and the greater exchanges between women (herself, metropolitan feminists, postcolonial feminists, women of the ground). In "French Feminism Revisited: Ethics and Politics" Spivak states that her original position that "the face of 'global' feminism is turned outward and must be welcomed and respected as such, rather than fetishized as the figure of the Other" (1992, 54) was supported by her research trip to Algeria. Spivak's hope, when speaking of her academic debt, however, is that "this postcolonial feminist will no longer need to revisit French Feminism as a way in . . . [t]hat . . . defines the Third World as Other"

(1992, 54). She claims to revise her earlier position in "French Feminism in an International Frame" by honing the question of how various feminists could confer. Within these questions and sharpened positions, Spivak locates the changes in her situation.

I remain, of course, a Europeanist by training. My belief remains the same: no Europeanist should ignore the once and future global production of "Europe." My question has sharpened: How does the postcolonial feminist negotiate with the metropolitan feminist? I have placed three classic texts of French feminism before an activist text of Algerian feminism that speaks of negotiation. I imagine a sympathy with Marie-Aimee Helie-Lucas's subject position because hers too is perhaps fractured and I help to crack it further, for use. She too is revising an earlier position. As she does so, she speaks of solidarity with Islamic Women around the world. She speaks to a British interviewer. And I, a non-Islamic Indian postcolonial, use her to revise my reading of French feminism. (1992, 58)

The links Spivak makes necessarily assume familiarity in order to license communication and theoretical exchange. These affiliations justify the center's relationship with the postcolony and likewise justifies the use of Helie-Lucas's activist text. Negotiation, therefore, also justifies a common fracturing of identity which Spivak "cracks" for further use, thereby allowing solidarities between Muslim women and a "non-Islamic Indian postcolonial." The identity of Helie-Lucas's interviewer as British also warrants Helie-Lucas's relocation to the west. Spivak rightly works here against the notion that histories of unequal power relationships bar any kind of beneficial and non-Imperialist possibilities. Spivak solidifies the differences, however, in ways that she elsewhere warns against, as when she speaks about an inability to see communication ("learning") as anything but a task born of "patriarchal humanism." Rather than revising the basis or integrity of these distinct positions, Spivak reinscribes and "thickens" the differences in a movement similar to her revisions

in her second essay.

Spivak elaborates her subject position in "French Feminism in an International Frame" as an "ethnic minority who had broken into the university in the US." She sees the work of this first essay as revisionary; she "thickens" her location in the next essay, however, by adding to "ethnic minority": "ethnic in the US, racial in Britain, negotiating for decolonized space" (1992, 57). Spivak uses gender struggles in decolonization to revise her reading of French feminism (another way in to western academia) while pointing to its use for women like Helie-Lucas, which she justifies in their already "contaminated" state and fundamental indebtedness. Central in Spivak's understanding of conventional communication is the assumption of the Other as an othered self. In speaking as well as teaching she says that "assuming that classes and audiences are collections of selves ignores the details of their intimate and inaccessible alterity" (1992, 55); an uncertainty accompanies this "violating yet enabling convention" (1992, 56). This dynamic also operates in conventional mothering. From Beauvoir, Spivak designates the conventional mother as: "justified by the presence in her womb of another, she rejoices finally and fully in being herself" (Beauvoir qtd. in Spivak 1992, 62). Motherhood, however, disrupts intersubjectivity because neither the mother's nor the child's identities are discrete. The ethical potential in this relationship lies in the "responsibility, " and "the risk of a relationship in view of the impossibility of relating" (1992, 61). Spivak advocates this dynamic of transfer among women in international networks. Such relationships require risky connections with those who are neither wholly self nor wholly other.

At the conclusion of "French Feminism Revisited," Spivak's response to the general reader or student confirms some of the movements she enacts within the text.

One cannot be sure that, in a specific cluster of others (such as the readership of this book), with all its attendant insecurities, there will be someone who is in that peculiar subject position 3/4 a feminist citizen of a recently decolonized nation concerned with its domestic/international political claims, not merely its ethno-cultural

agenda. To such a person I would say—whenever the teleological talk turns into acknowledged, often travestied, articulations of the Plato of *The Republic* or *Laws*; or, indeed to the rights of the self-consolidating other, Irigaray's readings must be recalled in detail. If such a person—I must assume her without alterity—holds a reproduction of this page, she will know, alas, that such occasions will not be infrequent. But how can I be certain? And what is it to know, or be sure that a knowing has been learned? To theorize the political, to politicize the theoretical, are such vast aggregative asymmetrical undertakings; the hardest lesson is the impossible intimacy of the ethical. (1992, 81)

She identifies the other woman, acknowledging the uncertainty of that designation, warns her to recall Irigaray's readings in detail, raises questions about teaching/learning, and ends by drawing a line between the theoretical and the political. In her placement of herself as teacher Spivak's directs her examination not so much at the basis of the teachers' authority as to whether the student has properly learned her lesson. Spivak links speech and teaching directly to patriarchal humanism in her discussion of Beauvoir's critique (perhaps unintentional) of philosophical anthropology. Spivak adds, "but then, what is it to teach?" (1992, 59). Spivak challenges the teacher's authority and power not as source of information (she maintains this) but in terms of reception, the effects of the transfer.

Spivak follows her discussion of Beauvoir with a consideration of Cixous's mother as that which gives "the woman to the other woman." The mother is "able to love herself and return in love the body that was 'born' to her" (1992, 66). This "selfless love" defines "woman in the narrow sense." Cixous redefines the daughter as "precisely not a child of [the mother's] body" (1992, 67). With Cixous Spivak establishes the ethical in terms of necessity and responsibility. The inclusion of necessity undercuts the status of French feminism's lessons as gifts which the postcolonial feminist may or may not utilize in particular ways (crack open for use).

In his discussion of the gift vs. exchange in "Women in the Beehive," Jacques Derrida indicates that in so far as the "gift has an assignable destination, it is an exchange . . . passing from subject to subject . . . if there is a possible determination of subject at that moment, there is no longer a gift" (Derrida 1984, 14). Exchange, according to Derrida, is characterized by destination, while the gift moves at random (by chance). The gift "produces the identity of the giver and the receiver" and produces the destination, rather than being an exchange between subjects with determined locations.

It is the receiver who is the determining factor of the gift. It is not really a "message" structure, for a message presupposes the "X" sends "Y" for "Z", and in the situation of the gift, there is no message. It is only the other, at the moment when it receives it, who decides the destination, and who says "it is me who answers" or, "it is mine." (Derrida 1987, 15)

In "French Feminism in an International Frame" the gift of French feminism is the deconstruction of the split between politics and theory. The terms of this giving, however, contradicts French feminism's construction of mother and child, as identities determined through a gift-like circulation, rather than exchanges of a determined message, between discrete subjects.

Spivak's conclusion specifies the connections she makes between women: I emphasize discontinuity, heterogeneity, and typology as I speak of such a sex-analysis, because this work cannot by itself obliterate the problems of race and class. . . . It might, one hopes, promote a sense of our common yet history-specific lot. It ties together the terrified child held down by her grandmother as the blood runs down her groin and the "liberated" heterosexual woman who . . . confronts, at worst, the "shame" of admitting to the "abnormality" of her orgasm: at best, the acceptance of such a "special" need; and the

radical feminist who, setting herself apart from the circle of reproduction, systematically discloses the beauty of the lesbian body; the dowried bride—a body or burning—and the female wage-slave—a body for maximum exploitation. There can be other lists; and each one will straddle and undo the ideological-material opposition. For me it is the best gift of French feminism, that it cannot itself fully acknowledge, and that we must work at; here is a theme that can liberate my colleague from Sudan, and a theme the old washerwomen by the river would understand. (1981, 153)

The relations of women here cross racial and class lines and indicate that culture affects but does not fix “woman” as a term. The common lot of the child undergoing clitoridectomy, the liberated heterosexual woman, the radical feminist, the bodies of the lesbian, the dowried bride, the wage slave is shared because of their status as women, the relation of their female bodies to specific patriarchies. By illustrating expressions of sexism within various kinds of privilege, Spivak hopes to challenge the assumption of privilege that western feminists express toward other women which produces the sentiment: “what can I do for them?” (1981, 135).

French feminism’s instruction in ethics is to politicize the theoretical and theorize the political. The Sudanese scholar who writes, “I have written a structuralist functionalist dissertation on female circumcision in the Sudan,” does not heed French feminism’s direction. Spivak treats her statement as an error. “I was ready to forgive the sexist term ‘female circumcision.’ We have learned to say ‘clitoridectomy’ because others more acute than we have pointed out our mistake . . . But Structuralist Functionalism? . . . a ‘disinterested’ stance on society as functioning structure. Its implicit interest is to applaud a system—in this case sexual fl because it functions” (1981, 134). Spivak then traces her own biographical position because she reads the Sudanese scholar’s research as “an allegory of [her] own ideological victimage” (1981, 134). Spivak’s earlier investment in “International Feminism” likewise pulled her into the trap of using western femi-

nism as a "web of information retrieval" resting on an assumption of privilege. In this mapping, Spivak relates a childhood incident in which:

Two ancient washerwomen are washing clothes on the stones. One accuses the other of poaching on her part of the river. I can still hear the cracked derisive voice of the one accused: "You fool! Is this your river? The river belongs to the Company!"—the East India Company, from whom India passed to England by the Act for the Better Government of India (1858). . . . I was precocious enough to know that the remark was incorrect. It has taken me thirty-one years and the experience of confronting a nearly inarticulate question to apprehend that their facts were wrong but the fact was right. The Company does still own the land. (1981, 135)

While Spivak warns herself not to "patronize and romanticize" these women, she says "that the academic feminist must learn to learn from them, to speak to them, to suspect that their access to the political and sexual scene is not merely to be corrected by our superior theory and enlightened compassion" (1981, 135). But, in the return of these washerwomen at the text's conclusion, Spivak does place them in a romanticized position, surpassing the knowledge of the postcolonial feminist (the Sudanese scholar) and closer to the French feminists.

For me it is the best gift of French feminism, that it cannot itself fully acknowledge, and that we must work at; here is a theme that can liberate my colleague from Sudan, and a theme the old washerwomen by the river would understand. (1981, 153)

The women by the river understand the connection between material reality and ideological power structures, while the Sudanese scholar maintains their distinction. Spivak tries to disrupt this opposition between the learned feminist scholar and the

woman of the "ground," but she maintains a hierarchy of knowledge in which the woman in-between, the woman neither wholly of the west nor of the ground, does not have the authority of either position. She has neither learned the lessons of French feminism nor can she claim the authentic position of the washer-women. Spivak's injunction, then, is that the Sudanese scholar take notes from both poles.

Spivak desires the relationship between French and post-colonial feminists in terms of the gift (in so far as the gift is determined by the recipient and not the source). Referring now to the Algerian, not the Sudanese, scholar, Spivak says, "my agenda is not to recommend Helene Cixous for Marie-Aimee Helie-Lucas, but in a sense to judge Helene Cixous's text to see if it can live in Helie-Lucas's world, which is not the grass-roots world of Algeria" (1992, 69). While the focus of the gift is, at first, on Helie-Lucas's reception of Cixous, the gift later serves as another way into western feminism (through a re-reading). When Spivak asks whether Cixous is of any use to Helie-Lucas, she answers, "yes, because she lives in a classed space of power as well" (1992, 68). Again the sharing of class makes the information relevant and capable of travel. Furthermore, like the French feminists, Helie-Lucas's insistence on international networks and on women's struggles within national movements indicates to Spivak a "postponement of the production of individualities" (1992, 72).

But if Cixous's individuality is short of the "real individual" because it is posited in the possibility of fiction, Helie-Lucas's is beyond the "real individual" because posited as the possibility of collectivity. Each should presuppose the other. When Cixous imagines collectivity, Helie-Lucas must thicken it. When Helie-Lucas naturalizes individuality, Cixous can stand as a warning. The enabling violation of imperialism laid the line for a woman's alliance in decolonization. Helie-Lucas can only ever animate that line with the implicit metaphor of sisterhood. Cixous's impossible dimension of giving woman to the other woman can split up and fill that thought of

sisterhood so that it does not become the repressive hegemony of the old colonial subject. (1992, 72)

Helie-Lucas functions as "thickener," who adds to definitions of individuality. The other woman must be included to insure a better representation. Spivak sees Cixous denaturalizing Helie-Lucas's call to sisterhood and casts her as a teacher, who stands as warning against such unproblematized relations. Helie-Lucas may have things to teach Cixous but Helie-Lucas has more to learn.

Spivak depicts this gift in "giving woman to the other woman" as a historical responsibility.

However unwilling she may be to acknowledge this, part of her historical burden is to be in a situation of *tu-toi-ing* with the radical feminist in the metropolis. If she wants to turn away from this, to learn to "give woman to the other woman" in her own nation-state is certainly a way, for it is by no means certain that, by virtue of organizational and social work alone, she is in touch with the Algerian gendered subaltern in the inaccessible I-thou. (1992, 69)

By insisting on this dynamic in both directions, Spivak desires that feminism not remain narrowly inscribed. But, this burden keeps the postcolonial feminist who may or may not have made use of western universities and western feminisms indebted to those sources. The question Spivak does not ask is whether communication may occur without the element of necessity and without stabilizing particular terms of identity, however thickened. Spivak clearly delineates the cultural, historical, and political constructedness of identity, but she assumes a naturalized womanhood and postcoloniality because these allow her to view international feminism as outside the imperial hierarchies of knowledge and power.

Spivak puts Helie-Lucas's text in play with the French feminists, but she also writes Helie-Lucas into a deconstructive theoretical position which further justifies Spivak's call for her to take

lessons from French theory. For example, Spivak reads Helie-Lucas's statement: "We should link our struggles from one country to the other for reasons of *ethics*. . . . We have everything to gain in being truly internationalist" (Helie-Lucas qtd. in Spivak 1992, 72). Spivak responds:

The word "true" in truly internationalist can be read as an affirmative "misuse," a wrenching away from its proper meaning. The Oxford Dictionary provides this among the important meanings of "catachresis." One of the offshoots of the deconstructive view of language is the acknowledgment that the political use of words, like the use of words, is irreducibly catachrestic. . . . The task of a feminist political philosophy is neither to establish the proper meaning of "true," nor to get caught up in a regressive pattern to show how the proper meaning always eludes our grasp, nor yet "ignore" it, as would Rorty, but to accept the risk of catachresis. (1992, 72)

In light of this revision of Helie-Lucas's term, "true," Spivak also redefines Helie-Lucas's use of internationalism as, in fact, *post-nationalism*. "It is only when we see that ['true internationalism' indicates a 'strained' post-national internationalism] that we can begin further to see that the word being really put into question here is 'nation'" (1992, 72-3). Spivak rescues Helie-Lucas from an essentialist position by claiming that her use of "truly" is, as in any use of language, a misuse. The authentic challenge of Helie-Lucas's text remains, therefore, in the ("really put") question of nationalism. "This is an internationalism that takes a distance from the project of national identity when it interferes with the production of female individualities. And the critique of individualities, not merely individualism, will bring us back to Cixous" (1992, 7). "Strategic essentialism" along with a "critical voice" constitutes the double movement which Spivak advocates through Helie-Lucas and which re-connects Helie-Lucas to Cixous. Spivak's understanding of internationalism and use of the mother/child metaphor in formulating feminist networks is

actually less tactical than Helie-Lucas's international solidarity. Spivak familializes while Helie-Lucas builds coalitions that do not forever bind international feminists or "sisters." While simplistic notions of sororal equality may obfuscate asymmetric power relationships in the international frame, the mother/child model may reinforce those unequal power relationship because of the insistence on that intimacy.

For Helie-Lucas internationalism provides an arena for women to realize that religious justifications given to gendered practices are culturally (not divinely) designated:

Let women from Muslim countries out of their national ghettos, let them see that infibulation practiced in Africa is unthinkable in Asia, that the veil worn in Arab countries is not there in Africa, that none of these practices rely on religious principles, but that religion everywhere backs such practices whenever they allow more control over women. (Helie-Lucas 1987, 14)

Though Helie-Lucas mentions her "debt to the early Western internationalist feminists who, 20 years ago, started inviting women from the so-called Third World to international feminist gatherings," she stresses that "it becomes increasingly difficult to limit our action to an imitation of the West; the support of women from the West is less vital" (1987, 14-15). Instead:

Women and women's groups from 17 countries now write to each other, ask for documentation, compare so-called Muslim Laws in different countries, send appeals for solidarity, inform others of their strategies in very practical terms, such as writing marriage contracts which give the maximum space to women, building documentation for local groups and so on. (1987, 14)

Helie-Lucas stabilizes the category of woman in international networks as a focal point, but she stresses the cultural specificity of religion and, therefore, the definition of womanhood in those contexts. She de-essentializes not gender and nation but reli-

gious authority. In so far as Helie-Lucas maintains that culture affects rather than creates gender, she supports a common womanhood. The east-west direction of Helie-Lucas's work, however, seems distinct from Spivak's in that although she claims connection with western women (especially feminists of the past), she focuses on non-western solidarities and modification of lessons learned from specific conditions to other local situations. Spivak centers her internationalism on the west that maintains the integrity of both poles and burdens the postcolonial feminist with indelible historical marks. While Helie-Lucas speaks of the common enemy ("I don't see how we can get any solution except by identifying the Left forces, however limited their awareness is of our situation, of the evils of international capitalism" [1987, 11]), she does not fasten these lines through larger embodiments or ontological claims.

In using the models considered here (the impossible intimacy of the ethical, mutually creative mother/child, intimate and inaccessible links between western and postcolonial feminisms) Spivak astutely theorizes the possibility of international feminist solidarities that cross national, class, and educational boundaries. She seeks to provide avenues in which women, who share gender and imperial histories but no other conditions, may engage in common, beneficial gift-giving. But Spivak draws the lines of irreducible differences, the pathways created by imperialism and capitalism, and those between the theoretical and political too firmly. Spivak desires a deconstructive politics which would allow groups the ability to engage in enlightenment movements against imperialism, sexism, capitalism, but which would also recognize the limits of that politics. Even so we should question her insistence on the third-world metropolitan feminist's indebtedness to and contamination by the west. Perhaps international feminist solidarities require a greater suspicion of these French (albeit giving) mothers.

Rhode Island College

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