



Why Be Happy When You Could Be in Love?

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Abstract

This paper engages the extraordinary, but little-known, story of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's textual contretemps with the "mad" Bangla poet, Benoy Majumdar, who long ago wrote a collection of love poems to her. In recounting this episode, it grapples with the poetics and politics of "identity's last secret," wondering how we are led to translation as the sublime object of comparative aesthetics. Yet such is the double bind of theory that like the poet's unrequited love it can never be translated—or following Spivak, *de-transcendentalized*—into reality. In the end, does the poet's adored object (*ishwari*) remain merely a "Dream-Girl," confined to the pages of poetry, never walking out of his text into reality?

Keywords: translation, textuality, artifice, narrative process, poetics, double bind

I

Every piece of writing is a project or puzzle. Even a poem is an attempt not just to tell a story or convey a mood but meet a particular demand or find a solution to a specific problem. The predicament may have real-life origins but, in writing, it devolves into telltale textual trouble.

Writing it out or writing oneself out of it is a process – *being* and *becoming* – of making out, of a whole epic of longing and loss, one big bang.²

Or at least a shudder, gasp, groan, or whimper: to focus the entire passion, ache, and tenderness of a body on a single throbbing rasp.

Diving into a murky pond until one hits soft bottom, wading through a lot of sludge until one finds the elusive amulet somewhere in the mud.

No more, Rushdie-like, hitting the spittoon – and *missing*.

Instead, the story's material covering, bush of woolly fuzz, must be sheared, trimmed, pared, to uncover the delicate, even tender, twist in the tale.

The well-oiled, tightly coiled plot-devised, a gadget, whirring and humming, might thrash about, bestirred, before it can be contained, taken to its pinnacle, before it is wound down.

The yarn, taut, stiff or spun around the spindle, must be unwound before it can be woven into fabric, turned tactile and pliable like textile.

The amorphous flux of expectations, the sum of so many incidents, events, details, and frissons must be brought to a head, climax, then abut into some definite, defined, meaningful gesture of closure. An exclamation if not expiry, nonce if not nugget.

Like consuming, draining, distilling vast quantities of snitch, tosh, drivel, twiddle, twaddle, tittle-tattle, poppycock, claptrap, balderdash, hogwash, bunkum, snot before being knocked out, *knocked up*, by a single, vital, potent, twang, plunk, plonk; no trick, ploy, ruse, hoax, prank, swindle, scam, thwart, con, scumbag, or rip-off, but the singular, sole, surviving fix, the compelling sure shot, that breathes new life.

The solution to a great narrative challenge thus boils down to arriving at that irreducible, incontrovertible, iridescent clunk, clasped fistful of twisted precious metal, purified, smelted, cooled and shaped, from heaps of ore blasted out of huge sides of rock, dug out deep from the bowels of the earth, in dark, smoky, and dangerous mine shafts, at last to be curiously formed, yielding something if not of use value,

capable of buying or being exchanged for objects of material utility or need in a real world, at least, *at last*, a well-wrought urn, a thing of beauty, a joy forever? Only that is fit to be left in the outstretched or eager cupped palm. Every other exertion is worthless self-indulgence, wasted seed, only to be discarded. What he can offer her must be like a prize, a gift, a trust, produced after exacting and strenuous labour. That accomplished, he may allow his industry some let, feeling he hasn't expostulated or cried out in vain.

But sometimes, the telling of a story is more of an unravelling. Like peeling layers of onion, teary-eyed, arriving at hardly any core. A fruitless, tearful ordeal. The chosen problem refuses to yield. There is no way out, literally, of the logjam. The burden of the plot, the narrative responsibility, must be dumped, else disowned, though so distended, for it cannot be discharged. Limping away, hobbled with dissatisfaction, is one way of moving away after a stiff fall. One thus cuts one's losses, extricating oneself from the fictional fix in which one has been snagged.

That is nearly what happened. His poem was occasioned by the sort of issues that Hanif Kureishi outlines at the start:

[W]hy love is difficult, sex complicated, living painful and death so close and yet placed far away. Why are pleasure and punishment closely related? How do our bodies speak? Why do we make ourselves ill? Why do you want to fail? Why is pleasure so hard to bear? (3)

Doubtless, much writing, indeed great literature, is occasioned by such questions.

His poetic persona was hitched to the brave, strange, contradictory, outrageous, incomprehensible, enraging, destructive, destabilizing, addictive, unforgettable, impassable, impossibly compelling character of someone he loved and lost, not once but twice over.

She had become the enigma that he could not unravel, the protagonist of the tale that could not be told. He was strapped down, transfixed; how to get out, buy his freedom? His Scheherazade had hexed him. How to write himself out of her spell? The roles had reversed; she held the keys to the kingdom. She had power of life or death over him. Only a story might save him. But he didn't know how to tell it. He was staring at mimetic doom.³

The poem came to him with this challenge. She was a shy bride, but endowed with a deadly dower. If he couldn't solve her puzzle, he would lose her, but not in any ordinary way: she would consume him, eat him up. Like the female praying mantis or spider devouring its mate, just after the act, so the father becomes food for his just fertilised, forthcoming, about-to-be offspring.

Such was the dire distress decreed upon his unsuccessful psaltery. The given goal and consequences of not attaining it so clear, his script ought to have been spare, sparse, sure, purposeful.

On the contrary, the burden of barren vineyards and blighted fruit confronted him with the prospect of certain ruination, insolvency, poetic bankruptcy. His organs and instruments of inspired curiosity, cunning artifice, artful invention dangled uselessly in cul-de-sacs, dead-ends, plugged-up alleys, corked passageways, barricaded by lanes. His creative cargo couldn't reach its port, all outlets stoppered; it remained clogged and clotting, as if under embargo.

From being smitten with the character herself, his difficulty shifted to a complication in composition, an insurmountable conundrum, a knotty bundle of contrary pulls and impulses that he could not untie.

He was all wound up, hopelessly entangled.

How, *who*, would unwind him, give him his due surcease? How would he diffuse—*defuse*—his charge? How to discharge his dues, convey the consignment, hand over the shipment, relinquish the responsibility, deliver the goods, drop the weight, release the burden of song and sense, retail (*retell*) the detail?

How?

But, ultimately, he did not have to abandon or resolve his predicament. He found the resources to grapple with it. It was hard labour, but in the end, he felt he had his prison break. He made it – *O let the guerdon of my song be one kind kick, lick, from thee.* (Yes, click that like-button!)

The truth is that he found unexpected help from what he was *reading*. The poem was thus realized as a consequence not only of the poet's punked-up personal anguish, but also of the scholar-skunk's unrelated, but almost equally demanding, research. The latter figured the riddle that the former was trying to crack.

The reading pointed the way to the writing; the dilemmas of the one had their resolution in the other. What the one ripped enabled the other to rap. It is as if two parts of his sunk psyche, schizo-analytically odd-balling one another, finally conjoined in an act of healing, homage, integration, paddling the skimming skiff with both oars. A tremendous blast, accompanied, (un)embarrassingly by an equally loud letting out of air.

The report of one, merging with the echo of the other, heard if not smelled for miles on end, lighting and stinking up to the high heavens this benign *bun-do-bust*, blunderbuss, of burlesque.

II

It was a reunion, a significant convergence. Something that he had been preparing for all his life. A long pilgrimage to a sacred confluence. Now suddenly he was upon it.

He probably knew this deep down in his bones: writing is born not from life, but from other writing. Words come out of other words; they don't originate in lived experiences. It's a bit like money. It comes out of money, not from anything else.

But producing money out of money, words out of words, is not as easy as it sounds. It is not only talent you need, but a lot of labour. You must have a real appetite for it. It takes over your life. It interferes with other plans, with the daily business of living, eating, sleeping, shopping, even fornicating. It's like a heady addiction. It can get you high, but also pull you down. It is lonely. It is dangerous.

But it is what you live for. At least from time to time. This is what you do. This is who you are. Better to accept it; there is no escape from it.

It is this story that he must recount here. And in doing so, acknowledge his debt to the two texts in question and their authors, who helped him not just to write it, but actually to understand what that entailed, what was really at stake.

If it was the first text that got him started, it was the second that took him to a head. If he had not found the former he would not have dared to enter the secret heart of the tale, to put his finger into what resembled a beehive. But once there, he was ensnared, entrapped, with no way out. It was the second text that showed him how to exit the snatch. Without the latter, he could not have found it in him to bring the unravelling plot to a clinch if not conclusion.

In this process, the text started in one fashion, but finished in another. There was a shift, a change of directions, a turn somewhere along the way. Without such a recalibration, he was sure to have floundered. But it was an unexpected convolute that revealed the clandestine bud. Looking back, that might seem typical, standard to any exercise in narration. But the twist must not seem like a trick—mere device, artifice, contrivance, or curl, utterly lacking in conviction. It should not just be plausible, but persuasive. It should appear to arise out of absolute necessity. It should ring true; it should be forceful. He felt that kind of conviction when, after changing track, he found a way. It was the exhilaration of that discovery that he also wanted to convey.

The composition in two parts, thus, became the tale of two texts, his narrative toil in engaging them, and the ensuing denouement. Had he solved the mystery, overcome his handicap? Or did the enigma remain inviolate even till after the end? He could not be certain; perhaps, it must be left to the reader to judge. But as far as he was concerned, he was done: he had found what he was after, he was finished. *Tamám shud, consummatum est.*

III

When he started, he had considered calling this poem, “*Phire Esho* ____.” Meaning, roughly speaking, “Come back ____,” where “____” was the heroine’s name. But, as he has already confessed, in the actual writing of it, he was led elsewhere, to another place; that is how his poem, his ____, his *dash*, showed her true face, *gash*. What was her secret? What was the stubborn heart of the matter that so resisted telling? Where was the art that could show him the path out of that intractable thicket of plot?

That answer, when found, seemed so immensely promising, throbbing and pulsating in its evident elegance and sturdy starkness. Purely from the point of rhetorical prudence, it ought not to be revealed in the beginning. It must be prepared for, curiosity evoked, suspense built. Narrative economy, notwithstanding the temptation of instant gratification or cheap thrills, could hardly favour its being given away cheaply, at the very start. Premature disclosure, if not discharge, would certainly prove disappointing, a short-lived thrill, unlike a long-lasting classic. The secret given away too soon, who would read on? Such an objection, no doubt, carried weight. But the second part of the composition turned out to be a screwball, *screw-up* – burlesque, rather than poem. Wait. That was not all. There came a third part too, totally different from the first two, a modern day Tantra, retelling an ancient myth. What was going on, then? Hit or miss, *ms.* or a miss?

Shouldn’t his argument be stated at the outset? At least as a token of a writer’s earnestness? Aren’t writers, after all, in the gist business? Wouldn’t it be only fair to give a foretaste of what was on offer to the reader to decide whether to leave now or stick on till the end?

Such were his doubts at the outset.

But who knows what is expedient or even strategic in such narrative matters? Who cares for the too cautious?

So should he take the risk of telling all right away, stuffing it in the face, so to speak, with the *Recto* as yet barely begun?

Yes! He decided on an impulse. He would go for it.

There it was, stated as plainly as possible, the enigma of arrival encapsulated in a terse testimonial.

There could be no return, only renewal.

That is why the original title had to change. From *Phire Esho* to something else.

Phire Esho, was more accurately, *turn back*—but, as he had just grasped, there could be no *return*, only *renewal*.

Of the latter, of *renewal*, he did not know much till later.

But half-way into his trans-genre text, he became slowly, dimly, painfully aware that there could be no return.

Phire Esho would not work. She would not return.

That was not the solution to the existential or narrative puzzle. There was another route to take, far more dangerous, even fatal.

It was to find the blood trail that leads to a gap, a wound. To that he had to find his way. That was the solution to the real—and narrative—problem.

So the journey of his poem, which is also the story of its composition, was from the clues afforded in one text to the real trail revealed in another. At the risk of alienating poetry lovers and revealing too much of the pedant in the poet, this is what must also be told. To do so, would also be to acknowledge the help that his story received from its dual sources. To re-read, reinterpret those very texts, to acknowledge their value was the least that the pedant could do to support the poet.

The poet must turn back, *phire āsā*, into a critic, the best kind of reader. How else really to appreciate the writings of those we admire? To write, to critically engage with them, aren't these the ways to show how much we care, how much others matter to us? This, then, is the third way, which combines both the creative and critical, combining writing with interpretation. It is translation, turning one thing into another, literary as well as cultural translation, a carrying over, carrying across, in which primary text ceases to be itself and is reborn in another tongue. "Translating into English," in fact, is the most common form of translation these days. And it is to that we must turn next.

IV

In the unusual form of a poem followed by an essay, followed by the poem again, or the essay sandwiched between poems, or a poetic essay, which combines prose and poetry, this composition, actually has two major sources, the writings of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Jeanette Winterson, one a critic-theorist-translator, the other a fiction writer and essayist. I do not know Winterson personally, but I do know Professor Spivak slightly.

So it would be good to begin with her. Both the aborted first title, *Phire Esho* _____ and what remains as yet, *Identity's Last Secret*, come from the twelfth chapter, "Translating into English," of Spivak's *Aesthetic Education in an Era of Globalization* (256-274).⁴ Actually, *Phire Esho* _____ is from another book that she mentions and translates from. But more of that anon.

Of her twenty-odd books it is *Aesthetic Education* that is perhaps the most deeply felt and moving. The harvest of a quarter century of enunciation and performance, it actively pursues "a distracted theory ... of the double bind" (ix). She found it, Spivak claims, in the "the suggestion" that "the humanities can somehow learn to resolve double binds by playing them" (ibid.).

In the very middle of the book, at its heart as it were, is this essay, "Translating into English." And the last third of this essay grapples with Spivak's "particular ambivalence" – or should I say double bind? – in dealing with an extraordinary collection of poems. This is the volume that poses a challenge to her. Why should that be the case when she has, with consummate, casual, sometimes caustic, competence disposed of several better known, not to speak of much more difficult, tomes? Why is this book at once exciting and exacting to her, both as reader-critic and translator-subject?

The answer is at once strange and startling. Unlike any other, it is in reading this one book that "she makes the mistake of thinking the named subject is she" (273).

The collection in question is by the "mad" poet, Benoy Majumdar (1934-2006), first published in 1961, the year Gayatri, not yet twenty, left for the United States. The following year, it was reissued under the title that it came to be known by, *Phire Esho Chaka*. Spivak herself translates the title as "*Come Back Wheel*," though *phire* has the sense of turn, so "turn back," with its sense of both coming and returning, might work better. (Spivak, after all is a much better critic than translator; even as latter, it is owing to the former's skills that she really makes her singular and stellar contribution.)

Spivak glosses the title thus: "The Sanskrit *chakra* of the surname means wheel and is transformed into *chaka* in modern Bengali. A cunning translation" (271). (Again, Spivak is probably mistaken; "*chaka*"

here serves as a pun, not translation: a double-entendre, it refers both to wheel and to Spivak herself.) Why would she, or anyone, link the title to her surname?

Because the book is dedicated to Gayatri Chakravorty.

Speaking of herself in the third person, Spivak explains: “Chakravorty did not know the poet, although she had noticed the intensity of his gaze” (271). Against this is the testimony of the poet, unreliable though it might be, appearing in a Foreword of a reprint over forty years later:

This book of poems, focused on a girlfriend, and dealing only with a plea for love is indeed a diary.... If you think only of me, this poetry is only a plea for love Yet, because any one part is applicable to many situations connected to love, social theory, politics, science and many other topics, therefore one should be able to find a successful realization of any kind of situation in the lives of any sort of reader, male or female. (Quoted in Spivak, 271)

In alluding to Spivak’s reading of this collection, I celebrate how Majumdar’s prediction – or wish – has indeed come true.

He has, arguably, found a “successful realization” to the sort of situation that I have tried to settle in my own poem.

V

Benoy Majumdar’s collection, *Phire Esho Chaka*, enjoyed a brief revival, partly as a result of the international fame of she to whom it was dedicated.

No wonder, it was about his putative connection with Spivak that the poet was asked repeatedly. In his slim, *Complete Works*, Spivak finds a letter written in 1992, setting the record straight:

Gayatri Chakravorty was a student at Presidency College, and came First Class First in English in her B.A., in 1960 or 1961 A.D. [actually 1959], thinking that she alone would understand my poems the book *To Gayatri* was addressed to her, and therefore I called the book *To Gayatri*, and I wrote in the book what I had to say to her. (Quoted in Spivak, 562)

Majumdar seems deliberately to have underlined the relation of the poems to Spivak, first by naming the collection after her, then changing the title to an indirect, but unmistakable, allusion, and finally by returning to the original title in his complete works. “*Gayatrike*” – To Gayatri – could there be any doubt that the poet, with such unambiguous re-naming, definitely intended the connection to be known?

In an earlier interview given in 1986, when asked, “Were you in love with Gayatri?,” Majumdar replies:

Hey, no—I only knew her for two or three days – she was a famously beautiful student of English literature at Presidency College – then she went off somewhere – to America or someplace, I’m not sure.

Then why write poems about her?

One must write about someone, after all. Can one write forever about mango trees, jackfruit trees, and tuberose? ⁵ (Quoted in Spivak, 562)

Despite these disclaimers, the editor of the reprint, Kanakabati Dutta, cannot help but think that “there is some connection between Benoy’s perceptive glance” and Spivak’s “spreading Derrida”; not utterly dismissive of this unlikely claim, Spivak politely remarks, “Perhaps there’s something there.” Aside from Dutta’s wrong dates – Spivak reminds us that she started teaching Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault in the 1960s, not the 1980s (561) – there is no disproof, let alone reproof.

How that might have been, though, is left to our imagination: what could the poet’s gazing at her have to do with Spivak’s reading, translating, teaching, and generally “spreading” Derrida? Spivak not only left Kolkata for the US in 1961, she never even read Majumdar’s poems, “although she knew the fame of the book, and that it was dedicated to her” (271).

Twice in the essay she asserts: “There is no question of response” (271, 272), “other than what you read here” (271), a disclaimer that seems unnecessary in a book published in 2012 because the poet is already dead. But the caution was probably still needed in 2005, when the essay first appeared in print. Spivak justifies her indifference to Benoy’s poetic, if not pathetic, fixation:

Many of the poems lament her absence, his loneliness without a response. It is not clear that such lamentations, included in poetry, require “response” in the ordinary way. Must the lost object not remain lost for the poems to retain their exact verbal contour? (272)

This, to my mind, is the crux, *double bind*, that makes our two texts intertwine.

Doubtless, Benoy’s poems, with their repeated identification of the person addressed, were pleas for some kind of response. But what response could be given? Spivak suggests that the poems themselves would have somehow failed if they had actually made it extra-textually, as love letters or appeals for attention, drawing the Gayatri of flesh and blood into the poet’s net of desire.

The loss of the wished-for object is the precondition, according to Spivak, of the very substance if not success of the poems. That is why Spivak, it would seem, is more concerned with the “problems of entering the protocols of a text” (271) than with what happens to the poet in real life. As a matter of fact, it is reported that the poet went “mad”—and died. Perhaps, Spivak was afraid that during his lifetime, any reaction, other than what she offered as a critic, might actually exacerbate the poet’s illness.

But, as we know, the reprint forty years later in 2002, is even more insistent; Majumdar has the title from *Phire Esho Chaka* back to the much more direct and unambiguous *Gayatrike*, to Gayatri. Isn’t his entreaty for a response even more urgent? But Spivak, the addressee, is resolute: “There is no question of response. The occasion of these poems has been translated into the transcendental” (272). The poems, in other words, have been occasioned by nothing real, nothing material, nothing to do with her; the poet imagined it all. No response is called for or possible.

Yet, despite such a disclaimer, she cannot help reading the poems in a somewhat more personal way, relating some lines not so much to herself as to the real, not so transcendental, aspects of the experience of the poet, who was “in and out of mental hospitals for the last forty-odd years of his life” (272). After all, “there are poems that delicately hint how ‘madness’ must be managed”: “I will now be mad, at last by insane claws / Will prise out the angel’s home address, the door” (ibid.).

In the light of the poet’s sad demise and a last narrative poem, not included in the original publication of 1961, Spivak’s cryptic remark on how the “occasion of these poems has been translated into the transcendental” acquires a special poignancy. Majumdar, in that supplementary poem, actually imagines that he and his “Dream Girl” will be united in heaven after their deaths, but in still youthful and real bodies. In that afterlife, his divine mistress (*amar ishwari*, as he addresses her), reminiscent of Beatrice to Dante, “promises

that she will spend ... an eternity of shared conjugal life” (274) with the poet whom she had ignored so completely all his living years. His unrequited love has its only fulfilment in the projected afterlife in which both poet and muse, Benoy and Gayatri, are *translated* to heaven.

If so, do Benoy’s poems, lamentations as Spivak dubs them, call for a response in the real world? Or is the very opposite their demand – if the lost object were found, wouldn’t the very *raison d’être* of the work flounder?

Does my text, too, demand a real response from a real person but if one were ever forthcoming, would that negate its very reason for being?

VI

Spivak has been inflexibly unsentimental so far, refusing to identify with the person addressed, the person the collection is dedicated to. She approaches the poem only as an(y) other reader would. But then, almost unintentionally, she betrays herself. How? I would argue that it happens, inevitably, in the simple act of considering herself as not mere reader or critic, but as *translator*.

Almost in spite of herself, reader becomes translator: every act of translation is an act of betrayal, after all—*traduttore, traditore*. In “translating into English” Benoy’s Bangla poems dedicated to her, she not only betrays the “original” text, but the person addressed by the poems, herself in the “original,” as the love-object of the poems. She has, through translation, owned up to the poems after all. Not as the poet’s real-life beloved or object of desire, but as a textual mother, re-birthing them in another tongue.

Spivak’s refusal to be seduced by the text is revealed, at last, to be only partially successful; though she has repudiated any easy or flattering identification with the person of her name to whom the poems have been dedicated, she still hopes, with another sort of possessiveness, that “they will not be translated soon” *because* “at last I would like to translate them” (272). No one else will translate these poems, but she must – because she is, somehow, implicated in them.

Playing with her double bind – is she albatross or crow? – she has still found a way out, not as the poet’s lover or heavenly mistress, but as his earthly translator. She is especially taken, in the process of such a preliminary translation as offered in the essay, with the poems’ auto-erotic textuality, especially with the poet’s “repeated references” to himself as “a letter lying on the wrong threshold, destined to err”:

Come and pick me up like torn bits of a letter
Put ’em together for curiosity’s sake, read once and leave
As if to disappear, leaving them like a slant look. (272)

Again, we see Spivak’s inadequacy as translator – wouldn’t “askance” have worked better than “slant”? But Benoy, her poet-lover himself, would never agree. What does it matter if someone else can translate him better? It is only Gayatri he desires; her holding him in her arms, even textually, is bliss – after keeping him at arm’s length for so long.

After all, as translator if not lover, she has picked up the torn bits of the mangled body of the poet’s unrequited and doomed love, turning the pleas back to poems, giving their disintegrated and scattered fragments the purpose and direction of a letter which has finally reached its cherished destination, thus allowing herself as their translator, to be conquered not by the poet’s love, but by the irresistibility of his poetic intention.

Yet is her posthumous healing touch unfinished, as is her double bind itself unresolved; the poems have not yet found their real translator, only the intended one. Spivak, after all, has offered but a sampler, quoting some, translating only a few of the poems. After preaching so much against transcendence and advocating so strenuously the imperative to de-transcendentalize, Spivak cannot alter her equation with the text: “I am the figure of the girl, the translator thinks, making that easy mistake, and this book offers what the poet sees as he casts his net. I come up both ways, albatross and crow. This is a lesson: to enter the protocols of a text one must other its characters” (274).

But isn't she too late? The poet is already translated to heaven. He is dead; there is no longer any danger of any physical contact or contamination. Spivak, the atheist, cannot believe in any sort of afterlife. But what of the afterlife of texts, as Walter Benjamin put it, in translation?

Gayatri, Majumdar's “Dream-Girl” and *ishwari*, has owned up to a few of the poems addressed to her by translating them into English. But the dead poet's unrequited love remains trapped in pages of poetry, restless, just as the collection itself remains untranslated. No peace here or in the hereafter?

The *chaka* cannot turn back; the poems dedicated to Gayatri will remain never fully owned up or acknowledged. And as to a heavenly reunion, its prospects too must remain one-sided, with the poet's wished-for fulfilment remaining transcendent, while his beloved critic-translator persists in atheistic insistence on de-transcendentalizing both textuality and sexuality?

VII

One of the unintended consequences of Spivak's reading of Majumdar's book is that the latter invites comparison with another, whose author was much more fortunate in actually getting the girl.

I refer to Talbot Spivak, Gayatri's first husband, whom she married when she was just twenty four, divorced thirteen years later in 1977, but whose surname she still retains. Talbot was a fellow-student at Cornell. He published a novel, just one, *The Bride Wore the Traditional Gold* (1972), which covers some of their life together. Long out of print, the text is difficult to get. On Amazon, stray copies may be found, but at extortionate prices; I found one priced at \$343.

Arguably, its connection with Gayatri, how she is portrayed in it, is its only interest today. When published, it had a small, somewhat mixed reception. A note in *Kirkus Reviews* observed: “The tone is nice, the prose style clear and simple, but the structure is marred by the inclusion of trivial lists and conversations culled from the author's seventy notebooks, which seem a cop-out for genuine recreation of the past” (<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/talbot-spivak/the-bride-wore-the-traditional-gold/>).

Even then, before Gayatri was an international celebrity, it is her presence in the book that illuminates. The half-Jewish Philadelphian narrator is simply besotted by her. The narrative is driven by his “ongoing love affair with his Brahmin (B.A. at sixteen) wife” — actually it should have been B.A. at *seventeen* wife. Does that alone make for worthwhile reading rather than the “very intricate (or interesting) byways of the author's mind” (*ibid.*)?

In the novel, the character modelled on Gayatri teaches not high theory, feminism, or Marxism – but Sanskrit! A Brahmin who teaches Sanskrit, the very anti-thesis of the Marxist-Materialist-Feminist-Post-colonialist Gayatri the world knows?

Wait, there's more. The narrator, as it happens, is constantly “worrying about her possible affair... with a middle-aged mediocre poet.” But oh! could that possibly be a reference to Majumdar? Was he a private joke in the young couple's courtship and romance?

The *Kirkus* reviewer knows nothing of poor Benoy's plight, though.

Peregrine Wingfield's comment on Amazon is perhaps more to the point, if not incisive:

Very witty, touching novel by Gayatri Spivak's first husband. Hard to guess that the petty fascist he describes would turn out to be one of America's leading radical intellectuals. The girl in the novel sounds like a petty bourgeois tramp, fresh off the boat from Calcutta, armed with a fake BBC accent and a thoroughly screwed up personality. Perhaps it's all fiction, but anyone wanting a glimpse of Gayatri Spivak "at home" should read this. (<https://www.amazon.com/bride-wore-traditional-gold/dp/0394472853>)

We have too high a regard for Gayatri-di to be seduced by such scurrilous speculation.

But we cannot help mentioning that Spivak has been pilloried in another novel, Rukun Advani's *Beethoven Among the Cows* (1994). A famous, oft-quoted jibe runs: "Professor [Lavatri] Alltheorie's *Collected Marxist Phonecalls* had outsold *Gone With The Wind*... Her *Collected Feminist Faxes* was in press. Her opponents defined her subject-position with a law—Lavatri's Law: Incredible Articulation + Incredible Incomprehension = Incredible Salary."

The character based on Spivak actually appeared earlier in 1993 as "Professor Lavatri Lavatory Spewhack" in a slim booklet called *Indian History from Above and Below* published from Lucknow by Rukun's father, Ram Advani, a respected bookseller, with a well-frequented bookshop in Hazratganj. One of the parodies, "History from Below," appeared in the *The Statesman* earlier. In it, Rukun spoofs Spivak's famous essay as "'Can the Subaltern Squeak?'" in a satire titled "Hiss and Tell: The Loud Ladies' Journal."

Here, then, is the double bind of love, such as all of us find ourselves in at one time or the other. Our love can never be translated – or, following Spivak, *de-transcendentalized* – into reality.

Benoy's "Dream-Girl" must remain a dream, confined to the pages of poetry, never walking out of his text into reality. Poetry remains poetry; it is never incarnated in flesh, except in a theological sense. Likewise, love fully requited and reciprocal remains a dream, never fulfilled in the here and now, but always postponed to the never-never of the hereafter. And yet we cannot stop loving—just as we cannot give up dreaming just because dreams are impossible to realize. (Isn't revolution itself such a dream?)

Spivak herself inspires poems of unrequited love, a campus romance which in real-life ends in divorce, and, much later, a rather merciless satire, from "above and below."

The girl to whom the poem is addressed, whether Benoy's Gayatri – or "____," the object of this poem – never (re)turns. Only in words can she be secured or tethered, never in life.

Entrammelled in a text, but lost in real life, our heroine becomes a blur on the horizon of memory, leaving only a wound, a rent, a gap in the fabric of desire. The poem remains just that, a poem, never translating itself into a missive, a plea, a petition, with a real "intended," who then responds, rewards, or returns to the poet.

NOTES

¹ This paper is an excerpt from Part II "Recto" of "Identity's Last Secret," a trans-genre work that combines poetry, criticism, and a modern Tantra. I presented a portion of this excerpt at a public lecture at the Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya, when I visited as the External Programme Assessor in late September 2017. I thank Professor Sharmani Patricia Gabriel and her hospitable colleagues and students for this opportunity.

² Chow Mo-wan: In the old days, if someone had a secret they didn't want to share... you know what they did?

Ah Ping: Have no idea.

Chow Mo-wan: They went up a mountain, found a tree, carved a hole in it, and whispered the secret into the hole. Then they

covered it with mud. And leave the secret there forever.

Ah Ping: What a pain! I'd just go to get laid.

Chow Mo-wan: Not everyone's like you.

-*In the Mood for Love* (2000) Dir., Wong Kar-wai

³ That every relationship, sexual or otherwise, is a power exchange is our daily experience, but few realize that this is also true of every act of writing. Jeanette Winterson shows this quite graphically in *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011). Her book suggests the title of this essay, though it might as aptly have been called "Why Be Happy When You Could Be Screwed"?

⁴ An earlier version of this chapter by Spivak appeared in Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood, eds., *Nation, Language and the Ethics of Translation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005): 93-110.

⁵ Spivak wonders whether the poet's reference to the "mango trees, jackfruit trees, and tuberose" requires interpretation, but passes on after hinting that she might attempt one later. To me, the size and progression, from mangoes, jackfruit, to tuberose, suggests process, ripening, death: the mango is a smaller, breast-shaped fruit; the jackfruit, much larger, suggesting a full womb; tuberose are often offered at funerals. But perhaps, I am being fanciful here.

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