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## CHAPTER FOUR

### SPECTROGENETIC TRANSLATION IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS* AND ELSEWHERE

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[T]he untouchable is what fascinates and orients the work of the translator.  
He wants to touch the untouchable [. . .].  
—Jacques Derrida, *Des Tours de Babel*<sup>1</sup>

#### Enchanted Translation

In tracing historical difference in postcolonial thoughts, Dipesh Chakrabarty dwells on the incommensurability of the European discourse of history and modernity with the “life-worlds” of the “subaltern,” in which he thinks that “gods, spirits, or the supernatural have agency.”<sup>2</sup> Historicism, or the European idea of history, either leaves the subaltern—a designation he confers on everyone once colonized by European powers—in “the waiting room” version of history or reduces their enchanted world (a world in which gods and spirits have agency) to secular, humanist, and universalist concepts. He cites, as an example, the history of “work” in South Asia where “work” is associated with an enchanted context in which its success depends on an agential intervention of gods and spirits. Translating this concept of work into the notion of “labour,” an abstract universal category of sociology or capitalism, leaves out this enchanted context and reduces it to a concept regulated by the idea of homogenous

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<sup>1</sup> In “Des Tours de Babel,” 191.

<sup>2</sup> *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, 72.

and empty time that defines European modernity. Chakrabarty's project of "provincializing this Europe" consists of overcoming Europe's "rough translation" of the subaltern other. This provincializing is possible only through an enchanted or spectrogenetic<sup>3</sup> mode of translation of non-European subaltern life-worlds, which, for him, should be "non-modern" and "cross-categorical." Unlike its universalist counterpart, the spectrogenetic translation has no obligation to be secular; and it is cross-categorical as it partakes in "barter-like term-for-term [as opposed to implicating any universal categories] exchanges that bypass all the implicit sociologies of our narratives of capitalism."<sup>4</sup>

Chakrabarty finds an example of such a translation in an eighteenth-century Bengali religious text, *Shunya-purana*, which gives an account of "exchange of identities between individual Hindu deities and their Islamic counterparts."<sup>5</sup> In this text, the Hindu deity Brahma is said to have incarnated as Muhammad, Vishnu as Paigambar, Shiva as Adam, Ganesa as Gazi, Kartika as Kazi, goddess Chandi as Haya Bibi, and goddess Padmavati as Bibi Nur.<sup>6</sup> Chakrabarty cites another example, "still quite common in India,"<sup>7</sup> rituals of the *Vishvakarmā puja*, in order to show that the subaltern life-worlds not only have a barter-like term for term translation of "divinities," but also have rituals in which the concept of labour is inflected by divine agency as if the worker had been ghosted by or translated into *Vishvakarmā*, the god of work himself.

Although entwining colonialism and translation is hardly a new insight—having been explored by a host of scholars, ranging from Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak to Tejashwini Niranjana and Talal Asad—what is remarkable about Chakrabarty's interpretation of translation is how it can be deployed simultaneously as an instrument to expose Eurocentric discourses and ideologies that masquerade as universals when it comes to translating the subaltern life-worlds, and yet paradoxically, by proposing cross-categorical or spectrogenetic translation, as putting forward alternative universals in which subaltern life-worlds are translated in an

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<sup>3</sup> The term "Spectrogenesis," though inspired by Derrida's deployment of "spectrality" associated with "ethics," event, and justice, is used here to refer to the practice of translation that Friedrich Nietzsche characterizes as conjuring up the dead past for the present. It is used in order to distinguish the Derridian notion of spectrality from the phenomenon that uncritically resorts to enchanted and exotic language to designate and translate the time and world of the Other.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 77.



enchanted language that, as opposed to the language of science,<sup>8</sup> articulates the invariable ghosting of the subaltern by gods and spirits.<sup>9</sup>

Yet Chakrabarty is not alone in wielding the diction of enchantment or spectrogenesis to articulate the silences imposed by colonialism and empire. Mahatma Gandhi famously translated<sup>10</sup> the “untouchables” as “*harijan*” or “god’s people.” Such translations have taken place in the recent works of fiction written by South Asian writers. In her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1998), Arundhati Roy treats the untouchable character, Velutha, as an eponymous “god” in the novel. No doubt, Gandhi’s or Roy’s spectrogenesis is an invention of a new idiom to address alterity or to articulate silences imposed on the other by the dominant culture. At the same time, however, it nevertheless reveals another form of exoticization. It tries to “foreignize” or spectralize the other in order to domesticate it in the linguistic and ideological economy of the same.

My essay attempts to critically examine this reverse universalism of “spectrogenetic translation.” The problem with the spectrogenetic translation is that it uncritically makes gods and spirits the original or categorical model for translation. When gods are posited as the original (i.e., the norm and goal toward which all translations move), such a translation subjects what it translates to the regime of the arch-ghost—God and its institutional and ideological incarnations: nation, ethnocentricity, empire, and neo/colonialism. It is against this universalizing tendency of spectrogenetic translation that Derrida employs his notion of spectrality or

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<sup>8</sup> In the “rough translation” of the scientific language, the word *pani* in the Hindi language and “water” in the English language that may ultimately convey the same meaning, are mediated by H<sub>2</sub>O and, hence, this scientific and modernist articulation that mediates differences of a particular language is considered a “higher language of science” capable of appreciating “the capacities of the human mind” apart from cultural or historical constraints (Ibid, 75).

<sup>9</sup> Such a barter-like, localist, rhetorical, and enchanted translation helps Chakrabarty emphasize the non-secular, mythic, and enchanted nature of the subaltern life-worlds. It also subverts the Europeanist obsession with history together with its compulsion, as in the Jamesonian project, to “always historicize” (Jameson, ix) and its conviction that everything can be historicized. By claiming that the past contains things and events that cannot be historicized, Chakrabarty suggests that it can only be narrated through the media of fiction and film as it is “pure narration,” a truly enchanted antidote to the rough translation of colonialism.

<sup>10</sup> Here the term “translation” is used in the same way as does Chakrabarty, to distinguish it from the modernist and universalist translation which is implicated in colonialism, and to mark it as a force of resistance and agency of the subaltern in which gods and spirits have agency.



hauntology. In *Specters of Marx*, he critiques Karl Marx's simultaneous fascination and obsession with, and "terrified hostility" towards ghosts and spirits, and the latter's attempt to exorcize the ghosts through critical analysis. Chakrabarty thinks that deploying gods, spirits, and rituals is in itself an effective strategy for articulating the life-worlds of the subalterns; as a result he does not seek to expose the underlying politics of universalism inherent in spectrogenetic translation. In contrast, Derrida keeps "haunting" separate from universalizing notions of gods and spirits. For him spectrality is an impossible and impresentable ghosting of the other.

At the same time, Derrida's notion of translation, too, remains restricted to the Biblical myth of the Tower of Babel. In the myth, God plays the role of the deconstructor as he confounds the tongue of the children of Shem and thereby obstructs the construction of the Tower to reach the heaven. Spivak, on the other hand, proposes a different form of spectral translation in which it is not gods or spirits, but the figure of the mother that haunts all translation. Translation for her is a violent shuttling back and forth from the figure of the mother and the mother-tongue to which translation is indebted. With Spivak's concept of the mother-debt (*matririn*), I examine the limitations and conditionings of gift and debt in the enchanted and spectrogenetic translation in Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*.

Besides exoticizing what it translates—as do Gandhi's *harijan*, Roy's "god," postcolonial theories' "subaltern," and the NGOs' "*dalit*,"—spectrogenetic translation also implies that the other (in this case the "untouchable," which is again a translation only) is easily available for translation, development, righting (both as giving rights and correcting or moral/spiritual uplifting) as well as writing. The argument here is not that one cannot translate the other unless one "belongs" to those that one translates.<sup>11</sup> The very act of translation initiates a process of alterity because translation, to quote Antoine Berman, is "the trial of the foreign" or the opening up the "foreign work to us in its utter foreignness."<sup>12</sup> As Lawrence Venuti remarks, the ethics of translation is foreignizing in that it

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<sup>11</sup> That is the reason why it is difficult to agree with some critics of Roy's novel — e.g. Vinita Bhatnagar, who criticizes Roy, together with Rohinton Mistry and Mulk Raj Anand, for reducing the "untouchable" characters to "familiar stereotypes" (106), or Arun Prabha Mukherjee, who, in the foreword to Omaprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, lambastes Roy for portraying "dalits" as tragic figures or objects of pity, and for appropriating their voice in order to contain the Dalit experience, as opposed to giving it expression (x).

<sup>12</sup> "Translation and the Trial of the Foreign;" 277.



resists "ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism, in the interests of democratic geopolitical relations."<sup>13</sup>

Yet it would be Eurocentric to assume that only Europe is ethnocentric and historicist because the "non-West," too, is equally steeped in ethnocentrism. The critique of colonialism should be extended to what Talal Asad calls "the forcible transformation [of the non-West] in the translation"<sup>14</sup> within the so-called postcolonial societies. Listening to the other of the others, as it were, and interrogating the enchanted and the "spectral nation"<sup>15</sup> are imperative to move beyond postcolonial theory's easy binary of the secular and modernist Europe and the enchanted and spiritual subaltern life-world.

Arundhati Roy's debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1998) complicates Chakrabarty's rather simplistic opposition between a modernist Europe and a subaltern South Asia by locating the plot of the novel in a Christian community that has not yet shed its Hindu residuals. Roy implicates the conversion—often described as the translation—of Christian and Marxist ideals into the local, more traditional Hindu social practices of caste and purity. It can be argued that Roy also holds suspect views such as those of Louis Dumont,<sup>16</sup> which perceived the caste system to be too "different from our [Western] social system in its central ideology" to entice any serious readership.<sup>17</sup> And yet, for Roy as well as for Chakrabarty, the spectrogenetic translation of the other remains a gesture that contains the other by circumscribing it with an enchanted diction of myths and gods.

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<sup>13</sup> *The Translator's Invisibility* (London: Routledge, 1995), 20.

<sup>14</sup> "The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology" in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1986), 157.

<sup>15</sup> This is an obvious echo of Pheng Cheah's *Spectral Nationality* in which he critiques various forms of organismic nation in the name of the figure of the ghost, which is for him "epitomized by the postcolonial nation" (383). A couple of things are problematic here for me. For one, a postcolonial nation is not always spectral, which is to say, habitable to "ghosts." Another is that Cheah posits Derrida's notion of specters as if it were a matter of simple binary between organism vs. specter, or physicality of the living vs. the aphysicality of the ghost. As a result, he misses in Derrida the subtle distinction between the arch-ghost and specters.

<sup>16</sup> Dumont, the French anthropologist, wrote *Homo Hierarchicus*, one of the noted anthropological studies of caste system in India. In a typical anthropological move, Dumont locates caste system as the sole marker that distinguishes Indian society from the west.

<sup>17</sup> *Homo Hierarchicus*, 1.



Roy employs spectrogenesis in her portrayal of Velutha, a *paravan* (a variation on *pariah*), as the eponymous god of the novel. Even though there may not be any direct link between Gandhi' and Roy's use of the terms, it seems that like Gandhi's *harijan*, Roy deifies Velutha and endows him with enchanting qualities. Roy's attribution of extraordinary skills to Velutha, who in the novel is called "the little magician,"<sup>18</sup> makes him an exceptional character in the cruel economy of sameness as exemplified by other characters in the novel.

In the world of the economy of reception, communication, and reproduction, which are often confused with translation, Roy's translation of Velutha as the god of small things resembles what Walter Benjamin would call the "continuing life" of the original through translation. This afterlife that the original acquires through translation metamorphoses the original in a manner that reveals its kinship to a "pure, universal language" that is the totality of the singular intention or meaning of all languages.<sup>19</sup> This pure and universal language is referenced by Benjamin as a "higher language," to which he attributes "the royal mantle" and the "thought of god"; it is this language that informs Roy's enchanted translation of Velutha as the god of small things, as for Roy, Velutha not only dons the royal mantle, but represents the god himself. For Benjamin, however, the task of the translator is to aim at the intangible,<sup>20</sup> or, in Derrida's words, "to touch the untouchable,"<sup>21</sup> which exceeds the easy binaries of the mother-tongue and the target language, modernity and primitivism. Unlike Benjamin and Derrida, Chakrabarty and Roy resort to employing a translation reliant on the easy binary of the disenchanted world of modernity versus the enchanted world of subalternity, or of small gods and the big God.

As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer have shown us, myth, magic, and the Enlightenment are not diametrically opposed to one another precisely because "myths which fell victims to the Enlightenment were its own products."<sup>22</sup> Not only did the Enlightenment define itself as the opposite of myths and magic, it gradually turned itself also into a mythmaking machine through the culture industry and media. In not examining the complex genealogy of the mythic and of scientific knowledge, and furthermore in assuming them to be complete opposites, Chakrabarty, Roy, and some readers of her novel fail to grasp this subtle

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<sup>18</sup> *The God of Small Things*, 71.

<sup>19</sup> "The Task of the Translator" *Delos* 2 (1968), 84.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 86.

<sup>21</sup> "Des Tours de Babel," 191.

<sup>22</sup> *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 8.



reversal between the world of myth and the scientific world. As a result, readers of Roy's novel in India often compare Velutha, not only with the Gandhian *satyagrahi* [a practitioner of non-violent resistance, who follows direct action or *satyagrah* against injustice] and thereby confirm the affinity of Roy's "god" to Gandhi's recasting of "*dalits*" into *harijans*<sup>23</sup>—but also compare Velutha with Jesus himself.<sup>24</sup> The equation of Jesus and Velutha as carpenters also brings the latter close to Chakrabarty's *Viswakarma*, the artisan-god, whom Chakrabarty posits as an expression of the subaltern life-worlds in India. The narrator in the novel notes that while Velutha knew "more about the machine in the factory than anyone else,"<sup>25</sup> he also was "a little magician" as he could "make intricate toys—tiny windmills, rattles, and minute jewel boxes out of dried palm reeds; he could carve perfect boats out of tapioca stems and figurine in Cashew nuts."<sup>26</sup>

The magical skills of an "engineer god" (Chakrabarty's translation of *Viswakarma*) attributed to Velutha, however, overlook the other side of this enchanted translation. In his work on *Viswakarmā*, Isvarsaran Visvakarma, describes two distinct figures of the same artisan-god. Visvakarma finds that in comparison to the *Rāmāyan*, the *Māhābhārat* offers a more comprehensive discussion of this deity. As the distinction between the divine and the demonic deepened during the *Māhābhārat* era, so did the distinction between two facets of the same God: *Viswakarmā* as the craftsman for the gods, and *Maya Viswakarmā* as the craftsman for the demons. As a result, two distinct traditions of artisan-deities flourished in northern and southern India based on *Viswakarmā* and *Maya Viswakarmā*, respectively.<sup>27</sup>

Interpretations of the splitting of *Viswakarmā* in the *Māhābhārat* pose profound implications for interpreting the spectrogenetic deification of Velutha in Roy's novel. In the text, Velutha is not only god of small things, but can also be interpreted as a magician, as Christ, as *Viswakarmā*,

<sup>23</sup> In the "Introduction" of *Arundhati Roy*, R.K. Dhawan writes: "Even when he [Velutha] knew that his end was imminent he continued to remain a Gandhian, an apostle of peace and non-violence" (20).

<sup>24</sup> In a comparative study between *The God of Small Things* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*, Rosy Misra remarks: "The Story of Velutha can be interpreted as an extended allegory of Christ's life. Like Christ he is a very good carpenter, like Christ he remains non-violent. And again, like Christ, he dies saving other people—saving the reputation of Ammu and her family" (114).

<sup>25</sup> *The God of Small Things*, 72.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 71.

<sup>27</sup> *Bhāratiya sāhitya tathā silpa mem Viswakarmā*, 87 (translation mine).



a *harijan*, and eventually, as Chakrabarty's subaltern whose life world is ghosted by gods and spirits. Yet unlike the splitting of *Viswakarmā* in the *Māhābhārat*, Roy in her novel ignores this logic of demonization: Isvarsaran Visvakarma's reminder casts Velutha, the craftsman from southern India, in the tradition of *Maya Viswakarmā*, who although a god with creative energy, is associated with demonry. Thus Chakrabarty's and Roy's cross-categorical translation uncritically exoticizes the other without interrogating the ideological stakes behind the translation. They overlook the fact that myths and rituals, and gods and spirits are not at all discrete categories on the other side of the historicist and modernist Europe. These categories are equally implicated in anthropological and ethnocentric tendencies that also inform colonialism. As such, their enchanted translation ironically resembles what it attempts to critique—imperial Europe and its rough translation precisely because, as Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi clarify, obsession with the idea of the original or the starting point is what characterizes colonialism.<sup>28</sup> One must distinguish the after-life or the spectrality of translation from the Gandhian tradition of spectrogenesis in which gods and spirits, *harijans* and subalterns, and untouchables and *dalits* are conjured as absolutist and foreignizing categories in order to domesticate them to the calculative and to the “homolingual address”<sup>29</sup> of the nation.

### The Touch of Translation

Translation is inextricably related to spirits, gods, and ghosts. Friedrich Nietzsche compares the process to the conjuring of ghosts by breathing life into the dead past. By recalling the Roman and modern French practices of translation, Nietzsche observes that translation has become a form of taxidermy in which the translator breathes his or her soul into the dead body of the past in order to revive it for the present. Such a translation, for him, lacks historical sense, which he defines as a tendency that considers the dead to be alien and an ugly embarrassment to the living. He critiques translation for its conquest, as it was for the Romans,

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<sup>28</sup> “Of Colonies, cannibals and vernaculars,” 4.

<sup>29</sup> In *Translation and Subjectivity* Sakai uses the term “homolingual address” to describe “a regime of someone relating herself or himself to others in enunciation whereby the addresser adopts the position representative of a putatively homogenous language society and relates to the general addressees, who are also representative of equally homogeneous language community” (3-4). This includes people who speak different languages, but are “homolingual” in addressing the other.



but also because it is subjected to the present and to the living to the exclusion of the historical, the dead, the foreign, and—one may argue—the spectral.<sup>30</sup>

While Nietzsche critiques spectrogenesis in translation, he neither elaborates upon whether we can leave the past untranslated nor discusses the ethical aporia involved in this process. Samuel Weber seems to address these questions by comparing translation to touching without taking. He locates the origin of translation in the Biblical story of the Creation. His argument is built around Eve's account of God's prohibition in which she not only eats the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, but touches the Tree itself. Weber notes that in this instance, Eve's touching of the Tree may be regarded as "a form of taking, and turning *likeness* into *sameness*" inasmuch as eating of the fruit makes "Man" more like God.<sup>31</sup> God intervenes in the course of human life by expelling Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden after they have disobeyed him and eaten the fruit. This intervention for Weber fulfils one of the conditions of translation in that it speaks to the distance between God and Man. It is this distance that not only defines translation as touching without taking or possessing, it also, when we take into account the Biblical story that Man was made in the likeness of God, implies an internal division within God, a possibility in which God is pitted against himself.

In order to further explicate the internal fissure within God, Weber recounts the story of the Tower of Babel in the city of "Babel," which means "the gate of the god." In Babel, humans attempted to "touch" heaven by constructing a Tower that would metaphorically raise them to the level of God by allowing them to seek a regime of a single city, a single name, and a single language. Yet here again, God intervened and confounded their tongue. As such, the symbolism circumscribing Babel does not let the Semites touch and take heaven, but rather reveals the necessity of translating and the impossibility of securing precise meanings through the task of translation.<sup>32</sup>

In his reading of the story of Babel, Derrida also talks about the internally divided nature of god himself. Derrida argues that this division in god can be seen in the very word "Babel," which he argues does not just mean "God." Babel is the proper name of "God the father," therefore, like other proper names, it cannot be translated. But at the same time, "Babel" is translated as "confusion." God's proclamation of his proper name is not only God's interruption of the Shems' "colonial violence or the linguistic

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<sup>30</sup> "Translations," in *The Translation Studies Readers*, 67.

<sup>31</sup> "A Touch of Translation: On Benjamin's 'Task of the Translator,'" 70.

<sup>32</sup> "A Touch of Translation: On Benjamin's 'Task of the Translator,'" 72.



imperialism,” rather by imposing his name on the imperial project of the Tower of Babel, God also makes it impossible to translate his name precisely because it is his proper name.<sup>33</sup> Derrida argues that the “war that he [God] declares [on the imperialists] has first raged within his name: divided, bifid, ambivalent, polysemic: God deconstructing [both in the sense of god who deconstructs and the war that deconstructs God].”<sup>34</sup> This is a “Babelian situation,” which, as Derrida puts it elsewhere, “performs the situation it describes.”<sup>35</sup>

A double bid or command that “haunts all proper name[s],” argues Derrida, is instituted at the moment God declares war on the Shems: translate me, don’t translate me; respect me as a proper name, yet understand me; and preserve me within the universal language.<sup>36</sup> This injunction that indebts all translators is an aporetic debt that cannot be easily discharged. God’s demand to “understand me,” which binds the translators, is not an enchanted expression of sheer agency, but rather characterizes his “wretchedness” as intimate to all proper names.<sup>37</sup> As soon as God imposes his law on the tribe, he weeps over his name, which he gives to himself as a name, but this gift leaves him “destitute in his force and even in his wealth, he pleads for a translator.”<sup>38</sup>

Thus Derrida’s God—divided within himself and among the tribe, in debt, yet obliging, forbidding and pleading for a translator—differs significantly from the god of the missionaries, who is left untranslated by the missionaries themselves in order to mark the inherent superiority of the God of the missionaries, and hence, the Latin and Castilian to the derivative Tagalog.<sup>39</sup> It differs from Chakrabarty’s gods of cross-categorical translation, which presupposes the barter of the whole and solvent gods. While Derrida’s wretched God pleads and weeps for a translation that is at once imperative and impossible, Chakrabarty’s gods are comfortable equivalences of one another. Unlike a god who “discheminates” and detours himself, Chakrabarty’s gods return to a pre-capitalist, barter-like, and localist original without division and contradiction.

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<sup>33</sup> “Des Tours de Babel,” 174.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 170.

<sup>35</sup> *The Ear of the Other*, 103.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 103.

<sup>38</sup> “Des Tours de Babel,” 184.

<sup>39</sup> Vicente Raphael in *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society Under Early Spanish Rule*, 29.

Chakrabarty exemplifies this mode of translation by recalling a nineteenth-century insurgency of the Santals [tribal populations in the Indian provinces of Bihar, West Bengal, and Orissa], who rebelled both against the British and the local elites. Examining the testimony of one of them: "I rebelled because Thakur made an appearance and told me to rebel," Chakrabarty, in a move critical of the Subaltern Studies' claim of subaltern agency, argues that in a non-Western society agency lies in gods and spirits. As anyone can see, however, Thakur is also an honorific used by some of the caste Hindus, and as in the *Viswakarmā* example cited earlier, over time the caste Hindus must have forced themselves as gods on the Santals. By both refusing to historicize this possibility and not trying to distinguish Santals' Thakur against the other Thakur, Chakrabarty is foreclosing translation.

Karin Littau critiques the economy of the polysemic and bifid god with its debts, which she finds involved in a sort of barter where one aspect of God the father is pitted against the other to the exclusion of the "mother tongue." Following George Steiner's classification of two myths of translation—Babel and Pandora—she proposes the latter as *the* myth of translation. Pandora not only brought "confusion" by accidentally opening the box, but her name is, etymologically "the giver of all gifts," "she who was given all gifts," and "the gift of all the gods."<sup>40</sup> By rejecting the economy of debt, Littau opens the dimension of gift in/of translation. Pandora and her tongue are referenced as excessive, rather than incomplete, and hence a "pleading for translation," would run the risk of inviting endless future supplementations by men.<sup>41</sup> Littau rejects the Freudian schema of woman as lack. Instead Littau recalls Luce Irigaray, who argued that the female sex should no longer be conceived as a lack, a wound, but as the embrace of two lips, and two more again: the lips that speak and the vaginal lips that touch.

Both against the enchanted, economic, and "excessive" narratives of translation, Gayatri Spivak opens a scene of the gift of the mother and its economy of debt with her ethical concept of *matririn*—the mother-debt. Spivak likens translation with the human infant's grabbing and shuttling between an "outside indistinguishable from an inside [that] constitutes an inside" and inscribes or encodes everything the infant grabs into a sign system of things grasped.<sup>42</sup> The shuttling is a "violent production of the

<sup>40</sup> "The Primal Scattering of Languages: Philosophies, Myths and Genders," available online at: <http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Lite/LiteLitt.htm>.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> "Translation as Culture" in *Translation: Reflections, Refraction, Transformations*, 238.



precarious subject of reparation and responsibility” precisely because the infant/translator comes to realize that her mother tongue is one language among many. Unlike Littau’s redoubled lips that touch to bring the gift of excessive cornucopia, Spivak’s violent shuttling from one object to another or from one language to another is the continuing life of mother, the “unmotivated giver of the gift (of life).” Spivak continues: “I grasp my responsibility to take from my mother tongue and give to the ‘target’ language through the ethical concept-metaphor of *matririn* (mother-debt)—a debt *to* the mother as well as a debt (that) the (place of the) mother *is*.”<sup>43</sup> With the example of the Australian aboriginals, who have “lost touch with their cultural base” Spivak argues that the “guilt” of considering one’s mother tongue as one among many in the world where “[a]ll we have is bilingualism, bilateralism” and bilingual dictionaries not only at once propels one to work on translation but also makes any easy return to the mother tongue or paying back the *matririn* impossible. Unlike the cross-categorical translation, which implies not only solvency but also an indivisible agency, the *matririn* introduces an impossibility of paying back for a translator/infant who herself comes into existence through the relay (not the barter) of supplements.

### The Gift of Translation

It is from the perspective of this impossible translation of the mother-debt and the constant work it calls for that I consider Roy’s *The God of Small Things*. Roy’s novel revolves around a complex circle of debt and death, reparation and return, and memory and mourning, all of which are, unsurprisingly, built around the figure of Ammu, mother of the twins, Rahel and Estha, whose points of view dominate the narrative of the novel. Aijaz Ahmad faults the novel for being anti-Realist, anti-Communist, almost pornographic, and for subjecting Ammu to “unnecessary death.”<sup>44</sup> What he misses is the central impulse of the novel—the return of the dead or haunting. While he accuses Roy of reducing “the human complexity of the characters,” he himself appears to reduce the novel’s complexity to “the inter-caste sex.”<sup>45</sup> Deepika Bahri’s subtle, but powerful, rejoinder to Ahmad cites Adorno’s critique of “petty bourgeoisie’s hatred of sex”; Herbert Marcuse’s conviction that the inexorable entanglement of joy and sorrow, celebration and despair, *eros* and *thanatos*, cannot be dissolved

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 240.

<sup>44</sup> “Reading Arundhati Roy *Politically*,” 106.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 104.



into the problems of class struggle; and Marx's early writing where the emphasis is on the human world in which love can be exchanged for love, and trust for trust. Bahri adds that the redemption of the felt experience brings about a more equal exchange in which the sensuous structure is momentarily released from the press of social administration.<sup>46</sup>

Bahri, thus, rightly identifies a very significant current in the novel—a cross-categorical translation or barter in which love can be exchanged for love, and gods for goddesses. The novel—even though it plays with the notion of the return of the specter, which belongs to the realm of the gift, to the unconditional arrival or return without guarantee—is already conditioned by a calculative project of exchange and reparation. Spectrogenesis differs from spectrality in the sense that if the former conjures up the figure of god or spirit in order to reduce it to the already known, programmed, and conditioned project of liberation, the latter, as Derrida explains, is a figure without guarantee. The first thing spectrogenesis does is to name the specter—the *harijan*, the god of small things, subaltern and so on—in order to make him or her as something recognizable, identifiable, manageable, contiguous, and contemporaneous—even though spectrogenesis names it in exotic and absolutist terms. Gandhi's description of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar<sup>47</sup> comes to mind here when he told Mahadeo Desai (a staunch supporter and associate of Gandhi) that he thought Ambedkar was a Brahmin. Gandhi said: "Till I went to England I did not know he was a Harijan. I thought he was some Brahmin who took deep interest in Harijans and therefore talked intemperately."<sup>48</sup>

If we consider this aspect of spectrogenesis, which portrays the other in the image in which it wants to see them, then we can understand the difference between Velutha, the magician, and his despicable father, who is not only one of the villains in the novel, but, with his prosthetic eye, courtesy of Ammu's mother, is physically repulsive, too. One cannot identify the specter insofar as it is the visible-invisible and the sensuous-non-sensuous that appears from beyond the binaries of the present, past, or future. Since one cannot identify it, the specter also, like the bifid God, or Pandora with multiple tongues, is impossible to translate. Unlike the absolutist translation of spectrogenesis that discourages further translation, the translation of the specter is a must because we cannot leave the specter unresponded to and unmourned for. This always happens, but if there is a

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<sup>46</sup> *Native Intelligence*, 232.

<sup>47</sup> Indian leader of the "*harijans*," who also became law minister of the government of India (1947-51).

<sup>48</sup> *The Diary of Mahadeo Desai*, 52.



task or a duty of a translator, it is to try to pay the debt of the specter that is impossible to pay.

Spivak locates precisely this task of paying the debt of the figure of the mother (tongue) in her ethical concept of *matririn*. Roy's novel is obsessed with the circles of return and reparation, of payment and propitiation, and of barter and betrayal. Unsurprisingly, Ammu is at the helm of these transactions as she shuttles back and forth between many figures including her own mother, Mammachi, and her aunt, Baby Kochamma. Ammu is a subject in debt to the mother, and, since she herself is a mother, it is also her debt for which the story eventually seeks reparation. Mammachi, for example, is in a strange series of debts—first to the banks from which Chacko, her son, has borrowed money to modernize the Paradise Pickles in which she is “a sleeping partner.” Then she finds herself secretly paying the women from the factory who Chacko summons to fulfil his “man’s needs,” or to relieve his Marxist mind and feudal libido. She also finds herself in debt to Chacko’s British ex-wife. Her beneficence to Velutha’s father makes him feel too indebted to keep quiet about his son’s affair with Ammu. And above all she is indebted to Chacko, who once had intervened in time to stop Pappachi from beating her. After having inherited all of Ayemenem’s property by default, Baby Kochamma has been living the life of a teenager, although she is in her eighties. She is deeply indebted to the furniture and jewelry Mammachi had left behind when she had died, and to the American TV channels that brought her “The Bold and the Beautiful,” and “Santa Barbara,” where “brittle blondes with lipsticks and hairstyle rigid with spray seduced androids and defended their sexual empires.”<sup>49</sup>

The only person that does not have any debt to pay, apparently, is Ammu herself: She does not feel indebted to Chacko’s male chauvinistic mechanisms, or to her scheming ex-husband who wanted to trade her off for his job. She is, however, indebted to someone for something of which she herself is not aware of until the day her niece Sophie Mol visits Ayemenem from England where she has been living with her British mother. The opposing worlds inside and outside of Ayemenem are simultaneously presented on the eve of Sophie Mol’s arrival when the drama of reception is staged, and this intersection eventually excludes Ammu and her children from Ayemenem. While on-stage, the play of welcome to Chacko’s ex-wife and his daughter, Sophie, advances with Chacko’s mother and other family members surrounding the guests, off-stage, Rahel discerns a gliding figure, whom David Punter has called a

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<sup>49</sup> *The God of Small Things*, 28.



"ghost,"<sup>50</sup> of Velutha, who arrives at the scene uninvited and unnoticed. From the margins of the play Ammu also notices him, mostly metonymically, by "the ridges of muscle on Velutha's stomach [. . .] rise under his skin [. . .] man's body. Contoured and hard. A swimmer's body. Pointed with a high-wax body."<sup>51</sup> Ammu saw in Velutha, a little boy "helping Vellya Paapen [Velutha's father] to count coconuts. Holding out little gifts he had made for her flat on the palm of his hand so that she could take them without touching him. Boat, boxes, small windmills."<sup>52</sup>

The memory of the reception of the gift sweeps Ammu away from the reception party honoring the arrival of Sophie Mol and from the calculative world of multiple debts around Ammu. It triggers in her an immense compression of time in which "[c]enturies telescoped into one evanescent moment," and she recalls "the walking backward days," which in turn crystallize in a moment when he saw that "when he gave her gifts they no longer needed to be offered flat on palms of his hands so that she wouldn't have to touch him [. . .]. He saw too that he was not necessarily the only giver of gifts. That *she* had gifts to give him, too."<sup>53</sup>

It is Velutha's giving of the gift of small things—boats, boxes, windmills, and moments on the riverbank—that makes him the god of small things. As these small gifts are juxtaposed against the petty calculations and mean transactions in the world of debts, they also represent Roy's subtle transvaluation of values through which she subverts categories by showing that what looks small to the world blinded by calculations is in fact the only thing that has any stature and significance. This remarkable reversal that elevates Velutha to the level of a deity brings Roy's narrative close to the discourse of a gift, which, as Derrida so aptly characterizes "is another name of the impossible."<sup>54</sup> Yet as soon as the gift in the novel is brought to the plane of barter-like and cross-categorical exchange (boats, boxes, and windmills exchanged for her gifts, or vice versa) the gift disappears, and we are left in the world of dischargeable debt. By compressing the whole history into a magical and exotic moment, Ammu thinks that she can "return" to that golden time of childhood where giving and receiving gifts, and touching the other (Velutha) were possible.

In this starkly spectrogenetic moment Ammu seems to emerge anew as fully present to meet with Velutha in his early childhood—also made fully present by sloughing the skin of History and by erasing all wounds and

<sup>50</sup> "Arundhati Roy and the House of History," 195.

<sup>51</sup> *The God of Small Things*, 167.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>54</sup> *Given Time*, 29.



scars of old wars. However, her spectrogenetic translation that conceals shrewd calculation, assumes that, with its magical agency, it can pay for all the violence of history, all of its hurt and humiliation, including the backward walking days when the *Paravans*, or the “untouchables,” were required to walk backward sweeping away any footmarks they would leave on the pavement so as not to pollute the land for those of caste—status who may walk upon it later. This desire to make the past contemporaneous, to make it present and symmetrical with the living, is tantamount to assuming that one can return to and appropriate the past and thereby render it wholly reparable. Such a decisionist moment decides on the past as well as on the future, and allows for the assumption that past debts can be paid back and that gifts can be returned and reciprocated. By shoring up this presentist and decisionist moment of spectrogenesis, Ammu and Velutha reduce the gift to the economy of the cross-categorical transaction, and thereby seek to discharge the debt they have incurred from their childhood. They also ironically repeat the backward walking days in which a *Paravan* was not supposed to leave any trace. Ammu’s god therefore remains a figure that leaves “no footprints in the sand, no ripples in water, [and] no image in mirrors.”<sup>55</sup>

Similar moments of spectrogenesis occur in the way Ammu and Velutha relate to their bodies and to each other in terms of the bodies. Their bodies acquire an exotic dimension by becoming vehicles of transgression and transformation much as described by Partha Chatterjee in his notion that caste attaches to the body and that a critique of the caste system is possible only by analyzing the bodies on which the processes of caste, including violence, have been mapped.<sup>56</sup> Moments of spectrogenesis are also evident in a cycle of “returning” or of discharging the debts of history. As many of Roy’s readers would agree, her portrayal of the protagonist, Ammu, as a woman “who dreams a lot,” who transgresses the laws of religion by marrying a Hindu man, and who breaks the laws of love by loving an untouchable, is perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the novel. While Chacko never failed to remind his sister, Ammu, that she had no “Locusts stand I,” (which can be read to mean that she had no local

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<sup>55</sup> *The God of Small Things*, 206.

<sup>56</sup> In *The Nation and its Fragments*, Chatterjee argues that as caste attaches to the body, not soul, the popular common sense or practical religions like *Sahajiya* and *hathayoga*, whose focus is the “self-disciplining of body,” provide an implicit counter-point to the alienation caused by the dominant religion. These practices work to purify the body so that no pollution, the prime worry of dominant religion, touches it, and one has the opportunity for “daily affirmation of proprietorship” over one’s body (196).



standing and that she was already divorced), she never flagged in her struggle to regain control of her life. She was tired of "the proprietary handling" of her body by her family. She always "wanted her body back."<sup>57</sup> She knew it was hers.

Ammu's realization that her body is her own is an important moment in the story as it precipitates her transgression of the love laws, which is indeed a form of translation as it involves touching and, most importantly, an internal command to transgress the laws that govern to whom she can physically, emotionally, and mentally demonstrate love. Ammu had transgressed love laws earlier, too, when she had married of her own will out of Christianity and then had sought a divorce to escape from that loveless marriage. But when she falls in love with Velutha, this time her transgression is more radical and grave as it challenges many laws at once and, as in the Biblical story of the Fall, the transgression involves a vertical fall down the ladder of castes. Ammu transgresses the laws of the Ayemenem household by going beyond its physical boundaries to carry out her nocturnal excursions with Velutha; the socio-political laws of the caste Christians by physically crossing the river that separates the touchables from the untouchables; by loving an untouchable; and by entering the "History House" that had once belonged to "Kari Saipu," an Englishman who "went native" by speaking Malayalam, wearing *mundus*, and by taking in a young, native, male lover.

The very moment in which Ammu reclaims her body is also the moment when she realizes that she owes something to what she thinks she owns. In this sense, Ammu's dream or spectrogenesis of the god of small things, Velutha, seems to be the act of discharging her debts both to her body as well as to Velutha. Metaphorically, his body symbolizes not only myths and magic made visible by the birthmark of a Lucky Leaf on his back, the harbinger of the Monsoons, but a mythical and mystical body Ammu endows him in the process of discharging her debts to her own body.

A curious accord takes place when these two bodies, two spaces, and two times join. Addressing Heidegger's concept of gift, Derrida argues that giving what one actually does not have, e.g., the body of the other in this context, is for Heidegger the gift as a type of presence and, hence, justice.<sup>58</sup> In light of Derrida's comment, Ammu's gifting of her body to Velutha can be interpreted as a gesture from her to him indicating a type of restitution to him, a pre-emptive defence against the violence that she

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<sup>57</sup> *The God of Small Things*, 211.

<sup>58</sup> *Specters of Marx*, 26-27.



knows he will eventually experience against his own body by society because of their taboo relationship. Her gift may be read as a gesture towards justice, beyond the market of petty calculation and in view of a past filled with hurt and humiliation. She is giving what she does not have; even he does not *have* it; it is proper to him, it belongs to him only, but he does not know it. Justice and gift beyond law, beyond duty creates this accord and jointure with what is proper to oneself.

Yet Derrida finds that the Heideggerian gift is conditioned by presence, as a result of which the receiver of the gift is made contemporaneous to one's own present. He asks, is not a gift given "to the singularity of the other to his or her absolute *precedence*, to his or her absolute *previousness*?"<sup>59</sup> Ammu's paradoxical and double incorporation, her gift of an enchanting body to Velutha in order to pay the debts of her own body, or breathing her soul into the untouchable body for her own sake, as Nietzsche would have said, is a well-known trick of conjuration that makes this curious accord or jointure merely an exchange of the cross-categorical barter. In spite of the fact that she has transgressed/translated love laws by touching an untouchable, and by making a gift of/as translation to the other, Ammu brings her gift back to the plane of reciprocation and reparation. If a gift is ever to take place, it ought, like a specter non-contemporaneous to us, to remain impossible—not in the sense of a utopia that remains forever to come, but in the sense that it requires infinite "work" rather than any quick magical trick to solve all the ills of history and to decide on the future. What is problematic in the accord or jointure of this gift is that it is not only conditioned by Ammu's time but that it also conceals the calculation under the language of necessity and excess; it stops all further calculations, and hence all debts, work, and responsibility. In the same way that the narrator locates terror thousands of years before the Marxists, Christians, and colonialists, Ammu takes her tryst with Velutha and the resultant terror as part of their destiny: "Biology designed the dance. Terror timed it. Dictated the rhythm with which their [Ammu's and Velutha's] bodies answered each other."<sup>60</sup>

Unlike Nicholas Dirks, who argues that casteism as we know it is a modern phenomenon, "the product of the historical encounter between India and the Western colonial rule,"<sup>61</sup> Roy's narrator argues that the terror began long before colonialism. The narrator implies that one needs to look beyond the comfortable binary between oppressive colonialism and the original precolonial moment to locate this terror. However, instead of

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>60</sup> *The God of Small Things*, 317.

<sup>61</sup> *Castes of Mind*, 5.



exploring deeper into history and the present, and instead of analyzing all the forces that contributed to the terror—which is, of course, impossible—Roy's narrator commits again to a comfortable thing: S/he stops examining and calculating by raising these mythic, exotic, and, even, scientific visions of biology, fear of nature, women, and powerlessness.<sup>62</sup>

As a result, Roy's analysis of terror closely resembles Chacko's "historical perspective," according to which history for the "Anglophiles" (such as him) in India is locked up in a room. Anglophiles are "trapped outside their own history and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away." Chacko explains that to understand history they have "to go inside and listen" to what the ancestors are saying, which they cannot.<sup>63</sup> What is available to them are whispering shadows that they see from the windows. They are prisoners outside history; they are sailors "unanchored on troubled seas," who "may never be allowed ashore."<sup>64</sup> The Anglophile's sorrow, which is not sad enough to matter, is therefore comparable to the Earth Woman, Chacko seems to suggest, for whom the whole human civilization began only two hours ago.<sup>65</sup>

Between Chacko's grand narrative of history—or of the multiple times of the Earth Woman that belittle everything and everyone—and Ammu's grand narratives of mother nature, body, biology, and destiny the debt of which surpasses all obligations, there remains little passage for singularity and difference. What is missing from these tales of arch-ghosting is *matriline*, the debt to the figure of the already absent and perhaps *small* mother, in other words, the very work of infinite calculation, debt, and responsibility. With her enchanted translation, Roy, like Chakrabarty and Gandhi, succeeds in exposing the violence implicit in the imperial and historicist narratives of hierarchy and hegemony. Yet by resorting to the enchanted and spectrogenetic translation that exoticizes without examining critically, she ends up leaving her readers with the same universalist narratives that ultimately erase the infinitesimal difference, singularity, and smallness. The uncanny correspondence between Ammu's "subliminal urge of the Man to destroy" that results in her state of general victimization and Chacko's post/colonial condition takes us back to Chakrabarty's claim that whoever participates in the life-worlds dominated by universalist narratives has the subaltern past.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *The God of Small Things*, 292.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>66</sup> *Provincializing Europe*, 101.



The generalized sense of victim-hood or guilt represented by Roy's notion of primordial urge and the universally destructive nature of Man, and Chakrabarty's notion of generalized subalternity are problematic, for we are all, to quote R. Radhakrishnan, "touched by the West,"<sup>67</sup> and there cannot be any prelapsarian original outside to it. This, however, does not either lead us to the kind of guilt that Spivak evokes in relation to her concept of the mother-debt. Whereas Spivak's *matririn* implies the translator's shuttling back and forth to translate something of which there is no original and therefore that cannot have an already-designated name, such as the subalterns, *dalits*, gods, *harijans*, gods of small things, and so on, both Roy and Chakrabarty lead us to believe that not only the Original exists and can be reached or returned to through the enchanted translation outside all dominant narratives, but also that any debt to this Original can be discharged through the spectrogenetic translation that enchants and exoticizes it.

Once we understand Roy's insistence on "returning" to the beginning, or to the original, we also get a better view of the "scene of incest," at the end of the novel. As we know, this scene in the novel immediately precedes the recounting of Ammu's meeting with Velutha on the bank of the Meenachal as if this is supposed to clear the *matririn* of the guilt and trauma Estha and Rahel have been carrying until then:

"Esthapappychachen Kuttapen Peter Mon," she [Rahel] says.

She whispers.

She moves her mouth.

Their beautiful mother's mouth.

Estha, sitting very straight, waiting to be arrested, takes his fingers to it. To touch the words it makes. To keep the whisper. His fingers follow the shape of it. The touch of teeth. His hand is held and kissed.

Then she sat up and put her arms around him. Drew him down beside her. They lay like that for a long time. Awake in the dark. Quietness and Emptiness.

[. . .]

They were strangers who had met in a chance encounter.

They had known each other before Life began.<sup>68</sup>

It is not difficult to see that this scene is meant to return, repeat, restitute, and relive *matririn*—especially Ammu's union with Velutha—and also to repair, redress, and right the wrongs done to both of them by the society in which they reside.

<sup>67</sup> *Theory in an Uneven World*, 157.

<sup>68</sup> *The God of Small Things*, 310.

Rahel and Estha are also both traumatized and haunted by the events that follow Sophie's death, especially Velutha's arrest, his brutal murder by the police, and the role the children were made to play in incriminating him. The constant shuttling and grabbing of the guilty children bring them close together and render them a comfort to one another. When Rahel goes to meet Estha in his room and calls him, along with her address emerges the apparition of their mother, particularly their mother's mouth that merges with that of Rahel. Estha, doomed into a terrifying silence, touched their mother's mouth, in the image of his sister's, for the words. In this enchanting, confounding, and Babelian scene, Estha and Rahel were not only breaking proper sexual laws by committing incest, as in the myths of the Fall and Babel, their address to each other in the borrowed words of their mother also con-fused them. With multiple lips and voices they touch each other, and seem to touch the other pair—their mother and Velutha—as well. The specters of Ammu and Velutha seem to dictate them to go closer as if it were their mother and Velutha, or their ghosts to be more precise, who were dictating them to transgress.

Yet, instead of staying with the ghosts, especially their mother's ghost, or instead of responding to them, talking with and to them, in and with their words, Rahel and Estha, now complete strangers, chase the familiar—unfamiliar ghosts away in order to return to the intimacy of the womb in which they were twins. This desire to return to the state before “life began” forestalls *matririn* and the detours of the specter together with its unexpected and incalculable gift. Through the union of the emptiness and quietness, they transfigure into the “dizygotic” (re)fetalization that they were “before life.” The transgression of the love laws has taken place, but the transgression/translation is not for the after-life of the mother or for the ghost of Velutha, who haunts them, but for the perfect state before Life. As their transgression turns into a cross-categorical translation, or the spectrogenetic entwining of two equivalent agencies, what is exorcized away is nothing but the specter. This exorcism of what is non-contemporaneous, this sacrifice of what does not fit the homogeneity of the empty time, and this violence that defaces is exactly what Derrida calls the “absolute evil” of the fully present life.<sup>69</sup> Roy's spectrogenesis fails, as did Gandhi's before her, or Chakrabarty's, but not without awakening us to a simultaneous and urgent task to translate and not-translate that which does not yet have a name, one impossible to name and touch, yet something which we cannot and should not leave unnamed and untouched.

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<sup>69</sup> *Specters of Marx*, 175.



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