

Translating Into English: Discussion Questions

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is a philosopher and a translator from French and Bengali. She is interested in issues of postcolonialism and feminism. This essay is a speech she gave at a conference of translators at India's National Academy of Letters. She sets her discussion in two contexts: (a) the way in which the concept of transcendentalism has been treated by various philosophers and their translators, and (b) her own translation work from Bengali into English. (There is also, at the end, a story about a long-distance stalker that serves as a metaphor of translation and transcultural identity – but it's a little less relevant. Because she doesn't always explain her references, the article can be opaque at times, but its central ideas focus on issues and experiences will be of interest to us as we move forward.

1. Spivak gives three examples – translations of Marx, Foucault, Lacan – where the translator has, in one way or another, missed a major point. What is Spivak's larger point in analyzing these translations? What is it that the translator that should be doing?
2. What, according to Spivak, are the implications of translating *into* English? What responsibilities does that position entail?
3. What are Spivak's central reflections on her work on translating Devi? How does she approach translation? What is her goal in making the translation? In what way might her position as a translator from "languages of the global South" inform and explain this tendency?
4. What kinds of problems does Spivak encounter when translating Mazhar? How does the larger history – linguistic, military, cultural -- of Bangladesh inform her work?
5. On p. 104, Spivak ties her poetic translations to the discussion of philosophers that she started with by asserting that both the poetry and the philosophy attempt to get to a kind of non-religious transcendentalism – but that that connection has been misread. In what way might similar types of failures of communication be prevented by "responsible translation"? In what spheres?
6. The story of Spivak's stalker-poet is a bit intense, but she's trying to use as a metaphor for translation in general. What is that metaphor? How does it fit with the rest of the article?