

## **a reading list for (avoiding) postcolonial theory**

**Sukriti Issar**

‘Can the Subaltern Speak’ or CtSS by Spivak is a hegemonic text – with 46,000 citations it is frequently cited in history, South Asian studies, gender studies, postcolonial theory, sociology, anthropology and more. It is also notoriously difficult to read.

If you find yourself in the unenviable position of reading or teaching Spivak, here is a short syllabus I wrote up. This could also be useful as a reading list for prelim exams.

Postcolonial theory is not useful for empirically driven work, and its obscure writing is no help. Read the CtSS together with these other readings that I found useful. Let me know how it goes! Invite me to your class or your reading group!

This is a short reading list [perhaps for two weeks] of articles that work well together. An effective teaching strategy is to have readings that complement / challenge each other, or a reading + its 'application'. This would be a useful list for historians, South Asianists, and for anthropology and sociology. Gender studies would be particularly well suited since Spivak is crying out for a counter-hegemonic reading. If anything needs to be read against the grain, it's Spivak. I have also included discussion questions with this reading list.

**a) Eagleton, Terry. 1999. In the Gaudy Supermarket. *London Review of Books*, 21, 13.**

- This is a well-known critique of postcolonial theory, written by a literary critic, who notes that; ‘One whiff of irony or humour would prove fatal to its self-regarding solemnity’.

**b) Greenblatt, Stephen. 1997. The Touch of the Real. *Representations*, 59, 14-29.**

- It might be useful to read Geertz’s Thick Description as well, and cross-read it with my paper *Hustler and the Mooch*. The part of Thick Description where Geertz borrows from Gilbert Ryle to write about winks and twitches could do more for training students in historical analysis than much of postcolonial theory.

**c) Issar, Sukriti. 2024. The Hustler and the Mooch: Slavery in Late Eighteenth-Century Bombay. *Slavery & Abolition*, 45 (2): 264-282.**

- This is an empirical case about an enslaved woman. How might Spivak’s arguments in CtSS apply to this case? How

might the methodology of questioning developed in this paper apply to Spivak's work in 'The Rani of Sirmur'? How does this writing and analytical strategy compare to Geertz's ideas in thick description?

**d) Moran, Arik. 2015. The Rani of Sirmur' Revisited: Sati and sovereignty in theory and practice. *Modern Asian Studies*, 49, 2, 302-335.**

- This article provides much needed historical context and a different reading to the paper by Spivak on the 'Rani of Sirmur'.

**e) Sarkar, Sumit. 1997. *Writing Social History*. Delhi: Oxford University Press. Chapter on Decline of the Subaltern in *Subaltern Studies*.**

- This chapter is a critique of the subaltern studies collective.

**f) Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1985. The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives. *History and Theory* 24, no. 3 (1985): 247–272.**

- This paper was written at the same time as CtSS. As it draws on an empirical archive, and has a counterpart critique in the paper by Moran, it is a useful paper for group discussion.

**g) White, Hayden. 1976. The Absurdist Moment in Contemporary Literary Theory. *Contemporary Literature*, 17, 3, 378-403.**

- He writes about the 'Absurdist critics who criticize endlessly in defense of the notion that criticism is impossible'. I think this sums up what CtSS does – it analyzes scattered events related to 'subalterns' (which include the words of a queen regent !) to say that speech is impossible.
- This piece also gives us a way to think about criticism and literary theory. CtSS is an attempt to bring literary criticism to bear on historical research. It can be difficult to judge its merits without a critical apparatus to approach it with. The time needed for that could be spent more fruitfully in the archives or doing fieldwork.
- If you want to develop a taste for good literary theory, try Tolkien on *Beowulf* or Bakhtin on *Rabelais*.