



## Ethics in Experience: The Politics of Epistemology and Representation

*Chinmaya Lal Thakur*

M.A. (F) English,  
University of Delhi, Delhi.

### Abstract

The paper begins by discussing the ways in which the Western metaphysical tradition works with a hierarchical binary between theory and experience that privileges the former at the expense of the latter. Then, it deals with the manner in which Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai in their well-known work *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory* (2012) undertake a critique of such a binary. They prefer Levinas and Gramsci over Habermas as they try to explicate the ethical implications involved in the endeavour of any contemporary Indian social scientist to theorise the lived experiences of a community to which he/she does not belong. This paper then establishes a parallel between Sarukkai and Gopal's interest in the ethical implications of epistemological enterprises and Gayatri Spivak's reading of J.M. Coetzee's well-known novel *Disgrace* (1999). It concludes by suggesting that this parallel need not be stretched too far as Spivak's reading, in that it deals with a *literary* text, cannot be expected to be guided by the rules that govern the social theory determined, non-literary enterprise of Guru and Sarukkai.

**Keywords:** *metaphysics, epistemology, lived experience, ethics, Coetzee, singularity, literary*

The metaphysical tradition of thinking that extends from Plato to Heidegger has been shown by Derrida to be characterised by the unsuccessful yearning for a 'presence' that would supposedly serve as the ultimate foundation for being and meaning.<sup>i</sup> This presence which has been understood in different terms by different philosophers<sup>ii</sup> has always been conceived as being complemented by an (inferior) Other. Derrida's critique of Western metaphysics highlights through Levi Strauss's work<sup>iii</sup> that the said complementary binary structure is always threatened by a contradiction which puts the structure itself into question and raises legitimate doubts about the apparently secure and palpably available presence that guides the structure and yet lies outside it. One of the several binaries that need to be deconstructed by highlighting the contradiction in its conception is the one between theory and experience.

## INTERVENTIONS



**CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 1, (ISSN 2454 -9495)  
SPECIAL ISSUE, JANUARY, 2017**

Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai in their book titled *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory* (hereafter referred to as *The Cracked Mirror*) exactly undertake the project highlighted above. They emphasise that right from its beginnings, Western metaphysics has been marked by the very significant influence of Plato's view that daily and lived experience cannot be the material for theorisation. It is paradoxical of course that theory aims to precisely explain such an experience which it actually treats, to paraphrase Derrida, as its inferior Other. Not surprisingly, Plato argues that theory, understood as rigorous thinking that is oriented outward from the thinking subject in a universally homogenising impulse, is an act of the 'Extraordinary'. (224) However, it is to Guru and Sarukkai's credit that their project in *The Cracked Mirror* also recognises the sheer metaphysical weight of the view that separates the thinking subject capable of or intending to theorise experiences completely from these very experiences, the view that is best expressed in Rene Descartes' famous remark, "I think therefore I am". Descartes' statement implies that the thinking substance i.e. the *cogito* gets completely separated from the objective, physical world including the body of the subject and as a result, everything that lies outside it becomes the ultimately unknowable Other. This is the moment of the birth of the subject of modernity which, by definition, is thus incapable of *knowing* the Other without putting its own existence marked by a certain process of sense-perception into question. Guru and Sarukkai are certainly astute enough to realise the ramifications of such a metaphysical gesture.

Therefore, the argument about experience in *The Cracked Mirror* can be understood to be working at two levels. One, it engages with the manner in which an 'individual's' experience might be understood and possibly theorised by the individual him/herself and two, it seeks to complicate the mechanism through which a person might seek to understand the experience of another person in/and another community. The latter, it isn't difficult to recognise, is a 'Third-World'/Indian imperative underlying Guru and Sarukkai's endeavour that seeks to explicate specifically how a social scientist might theorise the lived experience of a Dalit, a woman, or a person from the working class in a location where such scientists, unfortunately, draw most of their cognitive categories of critical judgement from the Western philosophical tradition.

## INTERVENTIONS



*CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 1, (ISSN 2454 -9495)  
SPECIAL ISSUE, JANUARY, 2017*

In this essay, I will focus my attention on the second strand of Guru and Sarukkai's argument about experience. This is because both of them locate the possibility and implication of ethics in the context of the 'experience' of the Other. The attempt is of course not to suggest that ethical considerations in the first instance are not important. After all, in what and where should be the ethical be 'located' (with)in an individual when his/her own body is the Other in question is a crucial point of interrogation.<sup>iv</sup> However, since the ethical is located by Guru and Sarukkai in situations where the social theorist confronts and seeks to theorise the lived experience of a community that he does not *know*, the paper would also deal with two viewpoints that present equally interesting but opposing methods to deal with the problem.

*The Cracked Mirror* presents the reader with the understanding of Habermas on the one hand who is of the view that reason, rational consideration and communication, in a universalist space marked with the presence of the public sphere, can make the individual theorist realise the force of the historical discrimination that the Other community has suffered by putting him/her in the position of the one who shares the historical guilt. Thus, for Habermas, universalisation ultimately dilutes the guilt of the theorist. (44) On the other hand, Sarukkai contrasts this position with that of Emmanuel Levinas as one asking for theory to be marked with 'living with the Other' (45) which entails the sharing of the lived experience of the subaltern community in question, suggesting the coming together of the epistemological (the act of theorising whose impulse is to *know*) and the emotional (arising out of the lived experience of the community). This endeavour clearly does not require the dilution of any guilt on the part of the theorist as he/she comes to inhabit and participate in the lived experience of a certain community. (45) Drawing from Levinas and John Dewey, Guru and Sarukkai also present their own views to the reader which this paper takes into account.

Sarukkai argues that the apparently unbridgeable separation between experience and theory is the culmination of a variety of historical factors. The metaphysical tradition that has treated experience as the inferior complement of theory as highlighted above, he suggests, was further strengthened by the developments in the field of science and technology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which completely bracketed off experience as material that could be the

## INTERVENTIONS



*CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 1, (ISSN 2454 -9495)  
SPECIAL ISSUE, JANUARY, 2017*

basis of theorisation. (134-135) Such bracketing off was possible because the intellectual discourse around science then presented it as embedded in the realm of ‘curiosity’ unbridled by any ethical or moral responsibility. The scientist could claim that his/her endeavour to theorise and explain did not have to be grounded in terms of ethics because he/she was driven simply by curiosity and therefore his/her enterprise did not entail making any value judgement of morality.

Sarukkai thus ultimately asks for a coming together of experience and theory, especially in the discipline of social sciences, in a manner that their merging becomes the site for the generation of the ethical. This ethical, he argues, should be grounded in a philosophical tradition that recognises at least two things. One, that Western philosophical thought’s emphasis on a radical separation between experience and theory implies, cognitively, a temporal lag between the two. In this line of thinking, it is assumed that the subject ‘experiences’ through the five sense organs and the experience is *then* mediated through language, reason, and perception. (138) Sarukkai interrogates this lag and demonstrates that it is a ‘construct’ because no experience is possible outside the domain of sense perception. In other words, the reception of the sense organs cannot also be spontaneous (Sarukkai makes an exception for ‘brute experience’) to the extent that the reception needs to be taken as unstructured by thinking and language. Two, taking the inevitable intertwining of experience and theory thus demonstrated into consideration, it is crucial to remember that when consciously choosing to theorise experience, the theorist undertakes an ethical task. It is imperative for him/her to realise that the categories he/she utilises to in order to theorise the lived experience of the Other community come to constitute the vocabulary in which the community is recognised, sometimes even among its own members. In a fissured social discourse which is marked by competing claims of various epistemologies, it is indeed of critical political and ethical consideration that the vocabulary available to a community should serve as the ground for its resistance against historical marginalisation as well as appropriation.

In comparison to Sarukkai, Guru locates political agency not (only) within the ethical choices that the social theorist might make in order to categorise experience through theoretical

## INTERVENTIONS



*CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 1, (ISSN 2454 -9495)  
SPECIAL ISSUE, JANUARY, 2017*

categories but (also) in the solidarity based coalitions that members of the subaltern classes might forge to fight discrimination. An opposition to discrimination, according to Guru, is thus possible only if the immediate or primary experience of the individual of the subaltern community can be theorised through ideas and mental abstraction into a more unified, communal, and shared sphere of experience. In other words, much like Sarukkai, Guru also desires that lived experience be the material for the onset and progress of epistemology. From within an acknowledged Gramscian paradigm<sup>v</sup>, he suggests that such epistemology would be capable of resistance and subversion because it will be provided by the very dominant discourses that seek to contain it in the first place. This, in other words, would prove as subversion from the inside as the systems of domination would lead such experiences to become more communally inclusive as the individual would realise his/her power to leverage gains materialised on grounds of the socio-political position he/she might occupy.

It is indeed very interesting to note that Sarukkai and Guru's argument about linking experience with theory is almost congruous with what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak highlights in her discussion of the moment marking the 'eruption' of the ethical in J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* (1999)<sup>vi</sup>. Spivak's reading is sympathetic to Levinas (she does not even consider Habermas) as, much like Sarukkai and Guru, she recognises that Levinas's thought provides for the possibility of a linkage between ethics and epistemology. She argues that the eruption of the ethical marks an interruption in and postpones the epistemological enterprise as during that moment of the eruption, all pre-existing basis for the continuation of the enterprise ceases to exist. (195)

To understand Spivak's argument in greater detail, one would have to comprehend the manner in which she reads, what can be loosely termed, the 'contract' between Petrus, the black farm labourer in Coetzee's *Disgrace* whose social position is increasingly getting strengthened in the officially colour-neutral post-Apartheid South Africa and Lucy, the white daughter of David Lurie who owns a farm where she maintains her garden and home which are getting increasingly threatened in the face of her weakening socio-political position.

## INTERVENTIONS



*CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 1, (ISSN 2454 -9495)  
SPECIAL ISSUE, JANUARY, 2017*

When Lucy is raped by a group of young men including a relative of Petrus, to Lurie's surprise, she decides to neither terminate her resulting pregnancy nor seek legal remedy. She gets into the said contract with Petrus which entails Petrus recognising the child as his and Lucy accepting Petrus as partner/husband who would be responsible for protecting her. Spivak argues that, figuratively speaking, by negotiating on such instrumental terms with Petrus, Lucy undoes her rape. This is because she also understands Lucy as the site of the 'eruption of the ethical' as the latter manages to realise the force of discrimination committed on the Blacks by the Whites and takes a decision which entails beginning from the position of 'nothingness' i.e., in Spivak's terms, the site where all pre-given epistemological baggage is dropped. This gets reflected in what Lucy says to Lurie, "...yes, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again...To start at ground level. With nothing...no property, no rights, no dignity." (Coetzee 204-205) It must be apparent that Spivak's reading of Lucy's decision parallels the concerns of Sarukkai regarding the ethical implications of the endeavour to know and live involved in the situation of a 'metropolitan' social scientist seeking to theorise the lived experiences of the members of any subaltern community.

Therefore, if one were to critically analyse the views of Sarukkai, Guru, and Spivak on an axis marking the relationship among experience, epistemology, and ethics, then one would realise that they are ultimately espousing the cause of a new or interrupted epistemology that comes into contact with the experience of the Other/subaltern community to present the birth or eruption of the ethical. Yet, a crucial difference appears to exist even within this shared endeavour as Spivak's argument about ethical politics, as distinct from Sarukkai and Guru's, seems to have become possible by the fact that she is engaging with a *literary* text i.e. the said novel by Coetzee. Such difference can be explicated if one were to return to the moment of Lucy's decision to (re)engage with those around her in terms of the 'nothing'.

*Disgrace* is marked by a tightly constructed narrative that moves almost entirely through the point of view of Lurie. As a result, Spivak and other readers of the novel are simply not provided with any information to be able to completely explain the implications of Lucy's choice of the 'nothing'.<sup>vii</sup> Coetzee does well to not put words into Lucy's mouth at this crucial

## INTERVENTIONS



*CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 1, (ISSN 2454 -9495)  
SPECIAL ISSUE, JANUARY, 2017*

juncture and allows for her self-realisation to remain as forcefully independent as possible. Thus, the ethical in *Disgrace* seems to exceed and lie beyond any conventional critical exegesis enabled by recourse to historical, philosophical, or sociological contextualisation. Yet, this ultimately indescribable implication of the ethical is perhaps not allowed within the rule-driven, logical, historically determined and absolutely certain domain of the ethical implications of social theory that Sarukkai and Guru are interested in *The Cracked Mirror*. In other words, even as one can see a strong parallel amongst Sarukkai, Guru, and Spivak in terms of a consideration of ethical politics in the face of the Other in their respective critical commentaries, one cannot ignore the fact that Spivak's discussion is about a literary/fictional text that simply does not allow her to establish with any certainty the 'nature' of the ethical. As a result, one can argue that even as Sarukkai, Guru, and Spivak engage themselves with considerations of epistemology marked by the subject-object binary in the face of the Other, the 'nature' of Spivak's endeavour is quite different from that of Guru and Sarukkai.

---

### Notes

<sup>i</sup> Derrida discusses the limits of the Western metaphysical tradition in his essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences".

<sup>ii</sup> As Derrida suggests, several terms denote the metaphysical 'presence' such as essence, existence, substance, subject, consciousness, man, God etc. (353)

<sup>iii</sup> The specific reference is to Strauss's *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1947) which can only progress with its argument marked by the nature-culture binary if it keeps the incest taboo out of consideration. The taboo is potentially capable of disrupting this binary. (382)

<sup>iv</sup> This is highlighted in the manner in which Sarukkai discusses Descartes' understanding of experience and its ramifications in *The Cracked Mirror*. He correctly states that the Cartesian self is marked by a vital distinction between the split parts of the self- one which experiences and the other that decides through judgements. He argues, "experience gets sidelined in this [Cartesian] view since judgement is *in* the self but experience is *of* the world". (61)

<sup>v</sup> Gopal Guru argues that the Gramscian condition to the possibility of ethical theorization is the establishment of the link between a person's social position and his/her experience. (120)

<sup>vi</sup> Spivak's essay "Ethics and politics in Tagore, Coetzee and certain scenes of teaching" discusses Coetzee's *Disgrace* in relation to Tagore's 1910 poem "Apoman" (translated as "Disgrace").

<sup>vii</sup> Even as I have been aware of the work of Derek Attridge such as *The Singularity of Literature* (2004) and *The Work of Literature* (2015), amongst that of others, that stresses the 'singular' nature of literature as distinct from other disciplines, I must thank my friend Anibal Goth for alerting me to the possibility of making this crucial point about the distinction between the literary and the 'non-literary' with regard to this essay.

## INTERVENTIONS



**CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 1, (ISSN 2454 -9495)  
SPECIAL ISSUE, JANUARY, 2017**

---

### Works Cited:

Coetzee, J.M. *Disgrace*. London: Vintage Books, 1999/2000.

Derrida, Jacques. "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" in *Writing and Difference*. London: Routledge, 1967/2005. 351-370.

Guru, Gopal and Sundar Sarukkai. *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012/2013.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Ethics and politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and certain scenes of teaching" in *The Indian Postcolonial: A Critical Reader* Eds. Elleke Boehmer and Rosinka Chaudhuri. Oxon: Routledge, 2011. 195-213.