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Literary Theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak Named 2025 Holberg Prize Laureate

(BERGEN, Norway) – Today, [the Holberg Prize](#)—one of the largest international prizes awarded annually to an outstanding researcher in the humanities, social sciences, law or theology—named Indian scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as its 2025 Laureate.

Spivak is University Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University. She will receive the award of NOK 6,000,000 (approx. USD 540,000) during a 5th June ceremony at the University of Bergen, Norway.

Spivak is considered one of the most influential global intellectuals of our time, and she has shaped literary criticism and philosophy since the 1970s. She receives the prize for her groundbreaking interdisciplinary research in comparative literature, translation, postcolonial studies, political philosophy, and feminist theory. Spivak has authored nine books and edited and translated many more. Her scholarship has been translated into well over twenty languages. She has also taught and lectured in more than fifty countries.

Spivak's main ethical and research focus has been on post-Hegelian philosophy, and the position of the subaltern, i.e. small social groups on the margins of history who cannot exercise their rights and whose perspectives cannot be included in generalizations about the nation state. In particular, Spivak has focused on subaltern women, within both discursive practices and in cultural institutions.

The Laureate has challenged and expanded the boundaries of contemporary thought both as a scholar, a public intellectual and an activist. In addition to her work at university, she has been teaching for the last 40 years in self-subsidized elementary schools among the so-called "untouchables" and the tribals in the poorest parts of India, as part of her efforts to combat the absence of democratic education in marginalized rural communities across several countries. Her activism and scholarship have also focussed on poverty and development in Africa, with a particular interest in the first languages unsystematized by the missionaries. Through her work inside and outside academia, Spivak has been a great source of inspiration to young scholars, particularly, though not only, from the Global South.

One of Spivak's best known works is her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), which has become a cornerstone of postcolonial subaltern studies. From a consideration of French high theory, the essay moves to the experience of widow-burning in colonial and pre-colonial India, and Spivak explores the ways in which subaltern resistance is not recognized within dominant discourses, challenging scholars to rethink their approaches to representation and voice.

Another significant contribution is Spivak's translation and critical introduction of Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, which played a crucial role in introducing the philosophy of deconstruction to the English-speaking world, i.e. a way of analysing texts and ideas by breaking down and examining the underlying assumptions, ideas, and frameworks that shape our understanding; and including a constructive suggestion within it. It is widely acknowledged that she has taken deconstructive practice in new directions. Her work on Gramsci and education is also recognized widely.

Spivak's influential book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999) further solidified her reputation as a leading thinker in postcolonial studies. In this work, she examines

the intersections of culture, politics, and history, offering a critical analysis of the ways in which colonial legacies continue to shape contemporary realities.

In *Death of a Discipline* (2003), Spivak challenges the traditional boundaries of comparative literature and calls for a new approach that is more inclusive and attentive to social justice. She argues that in the era of globalization, we need to protect the diversity of languages and literature, rather than letting market forces dictate what gets studied. Here, she develops the concept of “planetary” which she had introduced in 1997, when she was requested to commemorate the move from Holocaust to migrancy activism by the Stiftung Dialogik in Switzerland as a way of thinking about people in the world, individual and collective, that emphasizes our shared humanity and interconnectedness, beyond national and cultural boundaries.

Other key works by the Laurate include *In Other Worlds* (1987); *Outside In the Teaching Machine* (1993); *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012), and *Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee and Certain Scenes of Teaching* (2018)—all works that have changed how literary and cultural criticism is practiced, making the world beyond Europe vital. Her latest book is *Spivak Moving* (2024). She is working on a book on W. E. B. Du Bois, tentatively entitled *Globalizing Enslavement: My Brother Burghardt*.

Asked about the importance of the humanities as an academic field, the Holberg Laureate stressed that the humanities must be supported because they teach the practice of learning rather than necessarily the production of knowledge. “No amount of merely being able to use knowledge as intellectual property can lead to a democratic and just society if we have not gone into training in the practice of learning,” she said. “This is to learn that what you approach is not only an object of knowing, but also a subject of learning.”

“Taking the core of Western thought as an object of critical analysis, Spivak has inspired, enabled, and supported otherwise inconceivable lines of critical interrogations—both at the centres and margins of global modernity” says Holberg Committee Chair Heike Krieger. “She is a highly worthy recipient of the 2025 Holberg Prize.”

The Norwegian Government also extends its congratulations. “On behalf of the Norwegian Government I congratulate Professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on being awarded the 2025 Holberg Prize for her groundbreaking work, says Minister of Research and Higher Education Sigrun Aasland. “In these precarious times, we need the expertise and advice from the world’s brightest minds on how to work together towards sustainability, stability and more common understanding. Spivak’s pioneering research has had a significant impact for many decades, and her commitment to development and education in the Global South is an inspiration to us all.”

“I would also like to congratulate Assistant Professor Daniela Alaattinoğlu on being awarded the Nils Klim prize for her important work on the rights and status of excluded groups in society”, says the Minister.

About the Laureate

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has held the post of University Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University since 2007, where she is also a founding member of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society. She was educated first at the University of Calcutta and then at Cornell University, where she completed her Ph.D. degree in 1967. She has since taught at more than 20 universities, including University of Ghana, Princeton University, University of California at Irvine, New School for Social Research, University of Pittsburgh, Brown University, University of Iowa, Northwestern University, and Cornell University.

Spivak is a Corresponding Fellow at the British Academy, a Guggenheim Fellow, and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, as well as of the American Philosophical Society. She has received more than 50 faculty awards, and her many honours include the Kyoto Prize in Art and Philosophy (2012), the Padma Bhushan (2013), and the Modern Language Association Lifetime Scholarly Achievement Award (2018). She holds fifteen honorary doctorates from around the world.

About the Holberg Prize

Established by the Norwegian Parliament in 2003, the Holberg Prize is one of the largest annual international research prizes awarded for outstanding contributions to research in the humanities, social science, law or theology. The Prize is funded by the Norwegian Government through a direct allocation from the Ministry of Education and Research to the University of Bergen. Previous Laureates include Jürgen Habermas, Manuel Castells, Onora O'Neill, Cass Sunstein, Paul Gilroy, Sheila Jasanoff, and Achille Mbembe. Anyone holding an academic position at a university, academy or other research institution may nominate candidates for the Holberg Prize. The nomination deadline is 15 June each year. To learn more about the Holberg Prize, visit: <https://holbergprize.org/>. For press photos, biography, Committee citation, expert contact information, and more, see: <https://holbergprize.org/about-us/pressroom/>.