
LITERATURE, POLITICS AND CULTURE: A DIALOGUE WITH AIJAZ AHMAD

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Source: *Indian Literature*, Sept.-Oct., 1994, Vol. 37, No. 5 (163) (Sept.-Oct., 1994), pp. 7-12

Published by: Sahitya Akademi

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44295541>

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Interview

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MANGESH KULKARNI, JATIN WAGLE
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I. On Intellectuals, Criticism and Translation :

MK : How do you look at the growing salience of relativism in the field of literary and cultural criticism—the tendency to deconstruct texts from colonial, class and gender perspectives? Can there be an integral critical theory which is not simply essentialist?

AA : Postmodernism has given essentialism such a bad name that to talk of irreducible reality induces some kind of a guilt. The facts of both socio-political origin and location remain incontestable and significant. Yet, a certain kind of commonality of experience cannot be denied. Let me here stress the point that 'location' is to be defined politically, not in a merely geographical fashion. Thus, Marxists constitute the 'Second World' irrespective of their geographical location, while contemporary Indian intellectuals are frequently more cosmopolitan than their Western counter-

parts. But relativity can not be entirely escaped. As Bakhtin points out, language itself is relational: meanings get constructed between the mouth of the speaker and the ears of the audience. Post-modernists make the mistake of looking for an absolute space, which they do not find and consequently lapse into nihilism.

JW : How do you view the possibility of a Marxist literary criticism, which overcomes a certain kind of excessive economism or a tendency towards vulgar Marxism? In this connection, how do you respond to the modern Marxist literary theories, especially Adorno's theory of Modernism?

AA : While talking to me about Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, Edward Said remarked that Marxism was a method of changing the world and not of reading texts. In that sense, there is no absolute possibility of a Marxist criticism. But to go to the other extreme, as Sartre says, Marxism is the horizon beyond which one cannot go. Marxism is never total, but it must constantly totalize itself by assimilating bourgeois knowledges, as the bourgeoisie has immensely superior means of production of knowledge. Thus, Habermas has evolved an eclectic theory by doing precisely this. I myself have used Foucault within a Marxist framework.

JW : Let me amplify the question about Adorno. How do you respond to his idea of an auto-critique for Enlightenment? Do you view it only as a destructive critique of Reason or can it be described as a conscious attempt to lend a certain critical power to the concept, in the context of modernity?

AA : Reason is its own best friend and enemy. It has to criticise itself not only through methods that are known, but must also seek to explore the ones that are unknown. Hence, the critique of

Enlightenment from within is necessary, but Adorno was too *avant garde*, elitist and romantically pessimistic to provide such a critique. Habermas, however, can truly carry forward such a project whereas Adorno became available for a postmodernist project such as the Foucauldian one. Habermas's ongoing critique of postmodernism is truly valuable. This is not to say that I completely accept the theory of communicative action. Adorno's critique of mass culture or the culture industry is valid up to a point, but what Adorno misses out on is the potential for democratization in mass culture. The culture industry does seek to and succeed in appropriating it, but this can and must be resisted. Adorno could not understand the dialectic of popular culture. His negative attitude towards Jazz reveals this, as also his European, almost racist, bias against Africa.

MK : Now that we are on to the subject of postmodernism, what do you think accounts for its popularity in U.S.A., where you have lived for a long period of time?

AA : The intellectual life in the U.S.A. is sterile, as there is extreme specialization and compartmentalisation, by virtue of which, the intellectual loses all his vital connections with reality, and is reduced to the status of an abstract painter. Hence, postmodernism becomes both possible and popular in American academe. In India, except to those belonging to the wealthy strata, postmodernism is simply not a viable option in terms of coping with every-day life.

AS : How do you view the politics of literary translation, especially in the Indian context?

AA : English is the medium through which we come into contact with the rest of the world and translation from the regional languages into English

could be seen as contributing to the formation of a pan-Indian literature. But this is a tricky terrain, and even an admirable project such as the publication in English of a comprehensive anthology of women's writing in India, edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, reveals the possible pitfalls : an eternal feminine soul is projected which finds its unity only in the tonality of English. A word of caution about the translation of poetry : it is nearly impossible. Transcreation is fine, but it should not be confused with translation.

II. On Fascism, Imperialism and Nationalism :

- AS : In one of your recent talks, you said, 'Every Indian male is a potential fascist.' Could you elaborate on this?
- AA : The patriarchal family is the site where a male fascist mentality is constructed. But it must be borne in mind that there are in the Indian family, relations of affection which are still intact, if only because our society is still not a fully capitalist one, and human relations are yet to be thoroughly reified. However, these relations are being eroded, resulting in the eruption of violence, as is witnessed during communal riots.
- MK : Now that we have reached the threshold of politics, let me cross it by asking you a specific question with regard to the interpretation of canonical Western texts as being complicit in the imperialist project. Said's critique of Camus's fiction as a literary transposition of the French colonial engagement in Algeria, is a case in point.
- AA : Said is right in drawing attention to the 'political unconscious' in Camus's *Oeuvre*. I myself had detected the colonial bias in *The Stranger*, much before O'Brien or Said articulated such a critique. This was partly because the Algerian war was in

the air when I grew up and colonialism in that part of the world, was a tangible reality to me. One needs to understand the specificities of settler-colonialism in Algeria and also of Camus's location as a working-class settler to figure out the political sub-text in his fiction. His Cartesian prose can be seen as an attempt towards class over-compensation and assimilation in the Parisian intellectual world.

MK : In this framework, what does one make of Camus's support to the Arab cause during his career in Algeria? It was only after the outbreak of a violent freedom movement that he adopted an ambiguous position.

AA : An elite liberal can afford to side with the oppressed when there is no major ongoing movement of the latter, demanding definite changes in status-quo. But when such a movement gets going, the former takes a carping attitude by highlighting aberrations which are inevitable in such a movement. This was also true of Camus.

JW : Would you like to comment on the contemporary significance of nationalism which is the theme of your work in progress, and also on the related problematique of nativism?

AA : In the age of imperialism, one must hold on to one's nationalism without ceasing to be critical of nationalism as such, and without embracing indigenism or nativism. When nationalism is linked to projects of political vice-regalism and cultural homogenization, as is the case with India, it needs to be questioned. There is nothing that can be identified as the essence of the Indian nation. Yet, one sees no acceptable way of breaking up India into smaller national units. For one, this would make it easier for the imperialist forces to penetrate and control the region. Moreover, there is the question of conflicting minority rights.

Thus, the right of Kashmiri Muslims of self-determination as a minority within the Indian nation, clashes with the right of the Kashmiri Pandits as a minority within Kashmir. Yet, I do support the project of decentralization. □

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The classical Tamil poems translated by A.K. Ramanujan reproduced in *Indian Literature* No. 162 were from *Poems of Love and War* published by Oxford University Press, New Delhi and the classical Kannada poems, from *Speaking of Siva* published by Penguin India, New Delhi. We thank both the publishers. The unintended delay in acknowledgement is regretted.

Editor