

Locating/Dis-locating Indian Literatures: A Story of Hits and Misses

by RANA NAYAR

It is customary to pay more attention to the problem at hand than to the language in or through which it is articulated or expressed. But the language used for positing any problem, being a matter of conscious, subjective choice is often reflective of an ideology we subscribe to, willy-nilly. I wonder if it would have been possible for us, in the English departments, to posit this problem in the manner we have, say fifty years ago. This is not to suggest, however, that we are fifty years too late in positing this problem (though that, too, is not entirely false position, either) but that we couldn't have possibly done so without the benefit of the post-modernist jargon, we all find ourselves implicated in, now.

It was not until the 1960s that the concept of location entered into our lexicon. But this it did, as we all know, by leaping across the discipline of architecture within which it had originated. It was through this process of interrogating, overturning, breaking down and dissolving the artificial boundaries of disciplines that the groundwork was laid for the now-too-popular interdisciplinary approach, we often use as a critical or methodological practice. And it hardly bears repetition that post-modernism came into existence in the US, specifically in response to the living cultural/literary/artistic practices that had emerged there after a nagging discontent with or a perceived demise of the modernist agenda. It's another matter that we have now moved so far away from the specificities of post-modernism that it's threatening to become yet another liberal humanist, universal myth or fiction. Why else would we use it with so little thought and so much of aplomb, as we often do? It is often argued, with total disregard to the historical/cultural conditions that, we in India, too, have entered into a post-modernist phase. Now, this is something that needs to be problem-

atized as an issue by itself and certainly calls for a separate discussion. However, I would refrain from addressing this question, as in that case, the risk of digressing from the subject on hand is much too obvious. All I would say is, that rarely do we ever pause, if at all, to question, interrogate or problematize the specific ideology behind our brave efforts at teaching, popularising and circulating the post-modernist baggage in and outside our classrooms.

Let me return to my original point, which was, that our ideology is often reflected in our choice of language as well as our perception of its special role and function. The manner in which we have chosen to articulate the problem becomes dubious, even suspicious, for a variety of reasons. One, we are using the post-modernist language to reflect on the status/function/relevance/positioning of Indian literatures, assuming that Indian literatures/society have already entered into the post-modernist stage of 'late capitalism'. Two, these reflections have been organised and sponsored by the English department, which has, for several years now, been advocating the cause of the Anglo-Saxon canonical tradition. Three, the fact that appears most anomalous, rather anachronistic, is that we are deliberating over the fate of Indian literatures in a language which, in a genuine post-colonial sense (there might be a false variety of it, too), could only be seen as a disruption, not a continuity in our historical experience. My purpose in enumerating these reasons was mainly to unmask the ideological contradictions that are likely to surface, each time we talk of locating Indian literatures.

Having said as much, let me now come to another set of problems, which are not so much ideological as methodological in nature. When we talk of locating Indian literatures, first and the most immediate question is, where and in relation to what? Location is, after all,

by its very nature a relativistic, spatial category. So we need to ask ourselves, are we talking of locating Indian literatures within the English department? If it's their location within the canonical Anglo-Saxon tradition, then it might mean dis-placement of the canon and emergence of a counter-canon. Going by the history of canonical shifts in the past or our own efforts at opening up of the canon, all one can say is that it is a very dismal scenario, indeed, offering little encouragement and very little hope. Whatever anyone might say in defence of such experiences in the past, the fact is that we have only succeeded in exoticizing, fetishizing or showcasing Indian literatures in our Departments of English. At its worst, it's only a form of tokenism as despite our best efforts, Indian literatures continue to have only marginal presence in relation to English literature, whose fossilised centrality is almost an undisturbed fact. Even after fifty years, we find it nearly impossible to precipitate any major paradigmatic shift in Macaulay's agenda we have followed so scrupulously, so religiously for over hundred and fifty years. Such is our affiliation to the canon that whenever an attempt is made to loosen it up from inside or outside, our personal conveniences parading as social attitudes often drive the last nail into all such brave efforts. Most of our efforts in this direction have either been aborted prematurely or carried out most half-heartedly, at a great cost of personal/social embarrassment, of course. While it may have its own politics, it would not be desirable to go into its complex rationale or ramifications, at this juncture. That much of this would perhaps be viewed as a misplaced sense of cynicism, is as obvious to me as it would be to anyone else. However, if this is not to be treated as a piece of warped cynicism, then I propose that we, in our English departments, take the route that Ngugi had taken some thirty

years ago in Nigeria. He led a campaign not so much against English literature per se but for the revival and resurgence of African literatures, which ultimately resulted in the closure of the English department in the University of Nigeria and its replacement by the Department of African Languages and Literatures. I wonder if we are really prepared for this kind of radical or revolutionary step that demands not merely location, but re-location or rather re-placement of Indian literatures vis-a-vis English literature. If it sounds a little too revolutionary or forbidding, perhaps we could think in terms of another alternative. This would mean creating a space within which attempts at de-hegemonizing, de-centring English departments could effectively be made. In actual practice, it would mean that Indian Literatures in Translation are accorded the centrality that has been denied to them so far, while English (read British) literature, with nothing more than a marginal presence in the World Literatures, is re-located in our textual/literary practices. Isn't location primarily a matter of spatial displacement, spatial adjustments or re-adjustments, after all? If anyone of these alternatives does find favour with our departments, that by itself would take care of my cynicism to a large extent.

Let's turn to the next question now, which begs several questions, in fact. Are we going to talk of location of Indian literatures within their specific socio-cultural matrix? If so, then who is going to perform this function, and where? Will the Departments of Indian Languages, operating within the hallowed precincts of the academy, perform it? Or is it something that is, at best, left to the untrained critics outside the academy? First, let's look at the critics working inside the academy. Now this particular class of critics has, for a few decades, been labouring rather heavily under the influence of the Western critical theory. It is almost as if they have developed, to borrow Harold Bloom's memorable expression, an acute 'anxiety of influence'. One of the several forms this anxiety often takes is a constant worry on the part of a majority

of critics operating in the Departments of Hindi or Punjabi literatures, as how to keep abreast of the latest 'product' rolling off the 'knowledge production units' in the West. As soon as the metropolitan centres in the West offload a new product, it is immediately appropriated, circulated and canonised, often in form of a shoddy translation. Ironically enough, the reverse does not always happen. The same kind of vulgar haste is certainly not witnessed when it comes to translating the very best that is available in our own literatures into other Indian languages, including English, for their inclusion in the canon. As a result, the balance of power often tilts dangerously against the production or reclamation of the indigenous literary/cultural traditions, but settles rather favourably towards the wholesale, uncritical consumption of the 'goods' from the West. It's perhaps this mismatch between consumption and production that could be responsible for our cultural deficit, the impoverishment of our own literary/cultural practices.

No doubt, ours is essentially globalized space of high connectivity within which the ideas tend to circulate with much more frequency and rapidity than had ever happened earlier. Consequently, the Western critical theory is readily available to any young researcher or even a trained critic operating in the field of Indian literatures. While in certain cases it may not be very clear how the use of these Western critical paradigms in relation to a modern or contemporary text in any of the Indian languages would create an anomalous situation, in others, its incongruity becomes glaringly conspicuous. A situation might obtain where Lacanian or Foucauldian strategies/textual practices are also tried out in relation to *Gurbani*, Waris Shah's *Heer*, Baba Farid's or Kabir's poetry. Though there is much to be said in favour of eclecticism, it certainly cannot become a wayward expression of anarchic impulse. Just as literary production is context-specific, so is critical production. Whenever critical enterprise ceases to be context-specific, and tries instead to transgress the boundaries of its specificities, it

threatens to become a dangerous engagement, a self-defeating endeavour. It ceases to be a critical enterprise, and becomes instead a non-reflexive form of satire or parody. It's this kind of 'anxiety of influence', bordering on the parody, if not mimicry, that is often very difficult to sympathise with. An average critic of Indian literatures finds himself caught in a very peculiar dilemma, an inescapable bind that is, how to read contemporary texts in absence of indigenous textual/literary practices, without sounding either archaic or obsolete? Sanskrit poetics is no longer serviceable and *bhasas* are yet to throw up 'poetics' suited to the intrinsic needs and requirements specific to each Indian language/literature. Western critical paradigms provide the lack, fill up an absence, which might often be felt but is rarely ever articulated. It's in this peculiar sense that Western critical/textual practices have come to occupy, through sheer default, a pre-eminent position within the Departments of Indian literatures, too. And how our obsession with such practices has inevitably led to a gross neglect of literary history/historiography of Indian languages or literatures is obvious enough. How many of us are actually interested in locating works produced in Indian languages within the specificities of that language, its history, its literary tradition, its genealogy of forms/ideologies and the reading practices motivated by them?

Another major problem that it has given rise to is, that, having been fed on a heavy dose of Western metaphysics and epistemology, an average critic of Indian literature has begun to harbour this mistaken notion that 'textuality' is all, that the real power flows from the barrel of 'discourse.' This has created a situation, where he, too, like his Western counterpart is now content to be the critics' critic or a star, someone who addresses all questions pertaining to literature/language, textual/cultural practices only for the benefit of circulating them among his own community of fellow critics. It is as if literature has cut itself from its roots, the people, as if they are only fit enough to be the

subjects of literary works but not at all worthy of being treated as their recipients. Perhaps this is what creating a discourse is all about. In a society where 'late capitalism' has already made inroads, which is how Frederic Jameson has described the American society, 'discourse' does make sense, but does it make as much sense in our society, which is hopelessly striving to catch up with different stages of evolution, be it feudalism, capitalism, modernism or post-modernism, all at once? While we do come across critics willing to make a literary work sound more mystifying than it actually is, we rarely ever come across the ones whose effort it is to pass on or communicate an understanding of literature to those to whom it rightfully belongs, the common people. Though we continue to bemoan the loss of reading habits/culture, readership et al, yet what do we do really to locate our literatures, where ultimately they should, in the hearts of our people?

In good old times, for those who couldn't have a direct access to complex, overtly Sanskritised structure of pure Vedantic thought, the mediation of *Upanishdic* aphorisms or *Puranic* narratives was always available. Or for those who couldn't grapple with the complexities of *Gurbani*, more accessible forms of *Japji Sahib* or *Janam Sakhis* were always around. Whatever remained inaccessible to people in pure thought was often conveyed through the medium of popular narratives. Narratives have traditionally been used in our context as vehicles of theory or even for the purposes of theorising, almost as essential ancillaries to pure thought. In one of her much-proclaimed essays, *The Race for Theory*, Barbara Christian has made a similar observation about Afro-American Women writing, too. Unfortunately, our critics have chosen to cut themselves off from people at a time when they ought to have made a conscious effort to engage with them. Discourse is a luxury of those who have already laid the foundation of a civil society, not a prerogative of those who are still striving to do so. In our context, literature or literary practices, writer and/or critic need to move towards

society, not away from it. And it is this 'moving away' that really sums up the burden of 'anxiety' I had spoken of earlier. Critic has ceased to be a mediating agent between literary practices and social/cultural practices but has instead become a self-indulgent, self-exhibitionist dilettante. In such circumstances, critical enterprise often turns into an incestuous activity that produces very little of readable and much less of stuff serviceable to people. Once this kind of mediation runs into an impasse or a dead-end, all attempts at locating Indian literatures within their specific socio-cultural context are bound to come a cropper. Do I need say that this is too serious a question to be left to a bunch of random critics outside the academy?

Above all, there is that mammoth question of ideologies of languages/literatures competing for space within the official, bureaucratized, institutional practices. If I sound too mystificatory here, let me say, for the sake of clarity, that I'm troubled by the question of the relative status, function, even power-distribution of languages in our own practices. In 1952, around the time we were laying the foundation of our nation-state, we had accorded to English the status of an official language as we found the question of national language almost impossible to settle. This status was granted for a limited period of time, until 1963, but once the battle for the national language became bitter and even fiercer in the late 1960s, it was extended indefinitely. Without going into the history of how it had created North-South divide in our midst, snowballing into a major crisis, too well known to be repeated here; let me just say that the only winner in this battle has been English. It was the white monkey that triumphed and walked away with the biggest slice of the cake in this fight between the two black cats. Neither Hindi could be declared as the national language, nor did Tamil find acceptability in the leviathan Hindi heartland. And it was through sheer default, owing to our total incapacity to settle this crucial question of national/official language that English has marched on triumphantly to its present,

sovereign, dominant position. I don't object to English, I'm only worried about the ideology that is inscribed in it. As a teacher of English, I can't help going back into the historical contingencies for which it was introduced in India or to put it somewhat differently, fastened like a saddle upon our backs, something we haven't been able to throw off. And within our globalized space, English has not only reasserted its pre-eminent, hegemonic position but is increasingly being seen as the single most dominant tool of self-empowerment. As a result, the Indian languages, which have already lost out the first round of battle against English, are now threatened with the prospect of losing the war. And if that happens, that is, if it hasn't happened already, Indian literatures will perhaps continue to jostle for space in our elitist, highly bureaucratized, hegemonic territories without getting anywhere.

If you want to know more about how our institutional practices have, in the past fifty years or so, worked to the determinant of our own literatures, all you need to do is to compare the classic case of Arundhati Roy and Gurdial Singh. Arundhati manages to sell more than a million copies of the only novel she has written (and for all you know, she mayn't write another), whereas despite having invested a life-time in the cause of Punjabi, say Indian, literature, Gurdial Singh hasn't managed to sell more than a couple of thousands of all his works put together. Whatever be the skewed logic of the market/language or marketability of the languages, quite simply, there is and will always be a much greater space available to English than can ever be occupied by all the Indian languages put together. Right from the word go, the dice is heavily loaded against the Indian languages/literatures. And pray how are we going to change this situation, to re-locate this game of linguistic/literary ideologies contesting a battle that is, and will remain unequal? Or for that matter, what are our institutions such as Sahitya Academy or National Book Trust doing, set up exclusively for the purpose of promoting and circulating Indian

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languages/literatures in the international market? Just read this, if you haven't heard it already. All the books in different Indian languages that are awarded the coveted Sahitya Academy award annually are supposed to be translated and made available into other Indian languages, including English. Let me only talk about the fate of Punjabi language and its English translations. According to an insider, sometimes translations take as many as fifteen years to see the light of the day as the translators, apparently men of power and influence, keep getting the contracts renewed every year without actually doing anything much. National Book Trust took three long years to bring out my translation of Gurdial Singh's *Parsa*, and there are no less than three hundred typographical errors in a three-hundred-page novel. Surely, that's not the way Indian literatures can hope to put their best foot forward in the international market. I have been told that National Book Trust publishes our literatures not for marketing them in the international circuit, but for dumping them into their large, commodious warehouses. If this is the way our own institutions treat our literatures, with scant respect but a great deal of contempt, can our literatures ever hope to find space anywhere except among the moth-eaten monuments?

Location of Indian literatures, I say again, is an extremely problematic but not entirely an unfamiliar terrain, which has always witnessed more 'misses' than 'hits'. Within the small space of this essay, I have done nothing except locate the centres of my marginal confusions or worries on this question of central importance. And this I'm doing in the modest hope of initiating a dialogue so necessary for restoring Indian languages/literatures to that pre-eminent position, they always deserved but never could legitimately claim as their own.

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