

Storytelling, Writing and the Novel

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"Don't you know you're not supposed to be here?" the British 'Hon. Sec'y' of Gezira Club (Cairo) had barked at Edward Said when, as a boy, Said took a shortcut across the club premises in the assurance that his father was a member of the club.¹ When young Edward began to explain, he was brusquely silenced with the order, "Don't answer back, boy. Just get out, and do it quickly. Arabs aren't allowed here, and you're an Arab!"

This is an almost typical experience of the colonised qua the colonised, and it can be textually encountered in various forms, ranging from the anecdotal (as in the Indian writer R K Narayan's retelling of a school inspector in India who would only accept European examples of geography) to the physically abusive (such as M. K. Gandhi being thrown out of a railway compartment in South Africa). The space of Gezira Club as an Arab-free colonial zone obviously existed more in the minds of people like the 'Hon. Sec'y' and on the paper that such minds spawned. As a place, it was so contiguous with its vicinity that an Arab boy could walk in and out of it, or could do so if not policed by the gaze of the 'Hon. Sec'y'. Talking of Orientalist texts, Said was later to write that "such texts can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe."² In some ways, the space of Gezira Club, as experienced by young Edward, was as much the creation of texts and the language of certain mindsets as the various barbed wire spaces of Palestine-Israel are today. They were, like what Said described as 'Orientalism' later on, not simply or even necessarily 'wrong'; they were closer to limitations, simplifications and, at times, distortions of the complex possibilities of places. One can argue that much of the oeuvre of Edward Said returns us again and again to this conflict between space and place, and that one of Said's main concerns was the recovery of places while not denying – as some postcolonial theory does – the uses of spatial demarcation (e.g. the Palestinian 'nation-state').

However, 'limitations, simplifications and, at times, distortions' of the complexity of places are not a feature of Orientalism, or even simply imperialism. They are a feature of any dominant discourse. The dominance of a discourse can be measured less by its 'truth-quotient', if there is any such thing, and more by its ability to structure ("explain", "describe", "record") reality in its own terms, as Michel Foucault has indicated in various contexts. This is not to claim that discourses are 'fairy tales', and hence any one is as good or as bad as any other; but it is to underline the base of power on which a dominant discourse depends and at the same time, dialectically if you will, creates.

Today, when 'multicultural' and/or postcolonial literatures have come to be accepted at least in the publishing world and Anglophone academia, a certain relation of 'post-colonial' reality has started assuming the contours of a discourse. Some of it unconsciously shares the enabling discursive elements of Orientalism, as understood by Said: the depiction of the non-European Other in terms of lack or negativity. But even the kinds of literature that do not subscribe, consciously or unconsciously, to such a notion of Otherness have to address the relationship between exoticism and the need/ drive to transcend one's own space.

After all, to narrate/read the 'post-colonial' is always to engage with that which is not just 'colonial'; to narrate/read the 'non-European' is always to engage with that which is not just 'European'. The process requires an effort to transcend one's own space, particularly so on the part of the 'Western' or 'Global' readership of postcolonial literatures: this can also be the discursive spaces of a preferred language of writing, as in the case of Anglophone literatures. However, this bid to transcend can very easily lapse into exoticism on the part of the writer, the reader, the critic or all three.

I would like to argue that the two – exoticism and

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'transcendence', so to say – are different and illustrate that with reference to some recent 'postcolonial' fiction. Put simply, exoticism (negative or positive in its connotations) constructs the 'other' space in a way that does not disrupt, inconvenience or question the space of the self. It is this that Graham Huggan, for instance, critiques in his reference to the awards culture of Booker etc., as "prizing otherness." However, the actual Other – irreducible to the self in its alterity, while demanding a response from the self, as Emmanuel Levinas puts it – is occluded, reduced to a negativised/simplified Otherness in such attempts. In this sense 'exoticism' is an easy way out of the problems of 'transcendence', which always calls the self into question. Levinas would add that this calling of the self into question is a necessary condition to the irreducible presence and inescapable recognition of Otherness/alterity. Actually, Levinas goes further: he adds that it is not the self that calls itself into question in the face of the Other; the self is called into question by the Other. But I shall return to this later on.

To begin with, let us look, first, at the privileging of story-telling that is so much a part of postcolonialist orthodoxy and has been accepted by general critics too (who, however, sometimes echo a strand of Orientalism in seeing postcolonial authors as 'story-tellers' rather than 'novelists'). A glance at the blurbs of recent fiction indicates that there is too much storytelling and too little of anything else in the global book market: Monica Ali, Yann Martell, post-Satanic Rushdie, Khaled Hosseini etc. It appears that today the highest compliment critics can pay a novelist is to describe her as a great storyteller. Where would that have left Proust, Joyce or Camus?

Historically speaking, it is doubtful that novelists with intricate 'stories' between their covers were primarily storytellers. Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-2) are not easy to read stories, or even meant to be read simply as stories. In *Dead Souls* (1842), Gogol does not turn the very 'marketable' idea of selling the 'dead' into a thriller or a thigh-slapper. Zola's *The Ladies Paradise* (1883) is not simply an entertaining 'Dallas'. But look at any of the novels being currently placed on the front shelves of the large bookstores, promoted by book clubs, overloaded with advances and awarded prizes like the Booker, and you come across (sometimes excellent) storytelling, and little else. Where are the novels experimenting with narration, style, ideas, conventions, newness? They are being written, but they are not visible – and not winning the Booker either.

There was a time when storytelling needed to be championed. After all, storytelling is the proletariat of novel-writing, just as basic, as essential, as likely to be dismissed by the cerebral classes. And yet an excessive

celebration of storytelling is problematic. There are at least two major objections to this predominance of storytelling in the art of novel-writing today: the first one relates to the genre, and the second to the world around it.

To take the generic objection first, at least those of us who write in English have no excuse to ignore the name of the genre. It is true that every once in a while a critic or a novelist tries to define the genre, usually by highlighting one of the many elements that go into it: plot, story, language, characterisation, individualism, print, whatever. But the genre defines itself also in terms of novel-ness: by definition, a novel (at least in English, where it is not a 'roman') is something new. Hence, one can argue that the premium should be not on storytelling – which is an age-old art – or any other component of the novel, but on experimentation and contestation in the novel as a whole.

I am not arguing in favour of newness for the sake of newness. I am aware that the novel grew to strength with the rise of industrial capitalism and that newness remains one of the gods of capitalism. Like all gods, it is capable of much mischief. And yet, to take newness out of the novel – at least as self-aware contestation, re-questioning, experimentation – is to take the novel out of this world.

My other – worldly – objection relates to the ways in which storytelling (unlike the narrative of a novel) operates. Storytelling is a collective art. It depends on large areas of agreement. This is what explains, partly, all those novels by 'coloured' writers that finally tell us about the confusion of Third World immigrants in the West, or about Indian or Muslim women contending against (Eastern) patriarchy in London or New York, thus echoing Orientalist tropes. It is not that such stories do not exist, but they are told more often because that is how 'Western' readers see 'Eastern' women and men. What about other stories – for example, that of Indian women with professional degrees and work experience who marry into the US or Europe and are turned into housewives for years or forever, because their visa do not permit them to work? I know more Eastern women turned into housewives by the 'West' than Eastern women who are being civilised into modernity by contact with the West, but I am still to read about the former in prize-winning novels.

Even promising 'bestsellers', like Ali's *Brick Lane*, Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and Marina Lewycka's *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* display this 'consumerist' bias in favour of stories that are already visible, 'shared' stories. This explains why the stories of *Brick Lane*, published at a time when visa, custom and 'anti-terror' restrictions had begun to impact even on privileged commuters from the East, culminates in this scene: Two

Bangladeshi women, middle-aged immigrants, decide to go skating. But you cannot skate in a sari, says one. Oh yes, you can. You can do anything in England, replies the other.

There is no suggestion of irony in this narrative. And while I will gladly concede that some women can do things in London that they cannot do in, say, Kabul, the fact remains that some women can also do things in Jakarta, Delhi or Karachi that they are not allowed or able to do in London or Copenhagen. Way back in 1987, Ravinder Randhawa, a pioneer of modern South Asian writing in England, had published a hilarious, gendered novel, *A Wicked Old Woman*, playing with exactly these possibilities and prohibitions: its protagonist was an immigrant woman who pretended to be old in order to wrangle more personal space within England. Of course, the novel never became a bestseller.

If literature, as is often claimed, is meant to challenge and question, then it appears that many eulogised recent novels depend on questioning the 'other', not the reading 'self' in the West. *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*, an admirable work of humour in many ways, nevertheless depends on stereotyped perceptions of Communism and the conflict between 'new' and 'old' East Europe. It also offers fair dollops of complacency to us in the West, constantly highlighting the rational, democratic, tolerant aspects of England. Similarly, Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, another promising first novel, does something remarkable – and unnoticed by critics. Praised as a "masterful story" of Afghanistan, it keeps us in Afghanistan until the first years of Soviet control and invasion, then it skips the Mujahideen phase and returns us to Afghanistan only once the Taliban are in place. Would it be possible for a writer to narrate the Mujahideen – those equivalents of the "founding fathers" of America, according to one US president – and still write a bestseller? Or have we become incapable – at least in the supermarkets of literature – of reading novels that make us question our own roles and assumptions, our own complicity in the horrors of the world?

We are increasingly told stories that can be pulled off the shelves of our age's discursive supermarkets and do not have to be retrieved from some remote corner-shop; they are stories that encourage us not to think too much. Perhaps that is why even excellent first novels, like Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, and Booker-winners like Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, tend to be so lenient about nomenclature, mixing up Hindu and Muslim names with no narrative justification, not even that of the 'unreliable narrator' claimed by Rushdie when critics accused his *Midnight's Children* of historical errors. After all, what's in a name, as long as the brand – in these two cases 'India' – is apt?

What is 'an interesting story': something 'all of us' find 'interesting' or 'share'? By these supermarket standards, Proust's stories were not worth telling, and Joyce was not capable of telling his stories well. Come to think of it, even Shakespeare, though not a novelist, hardly ever told an original story or told it 'well': consider Hamlet, that moronic ditherer!

Interestingly, such is the hold of 'storytelling' on global and postcolonial writing that even highly intelligent writers fail to see its implications. For instance, Arundhati Roy *The God of Small Things*, a Booker winner and an excellent first novel, was obviously written (and read) as championing small stories, submerged secrets, repressed memories, subaltern experiences. This was stressed not only by the title of the novel and its structure and narratives but also, very clearly, by an apt quotation from John Berger right at the start: "Never again will a single story be told as though it's the only one." But then, in its unconscious kowtowing to the myth of storytelling, it goes on to contain lines like this one:

It didn't matter that the story had begun, because kathakali discovered long ago that the secret of the Great Stories is that they *have* no secrets. The Great Stories are the ones you have heard and want to hear again. The ones you can enter anywhere and inhabit comfortably. They don't deceive you with thrills and trick endings. They don't surprise you with the unforeseen. That are familiar as the house you live in. In the Great Stories you know who lives, who dies, who finds love, who doesn't. And yet you want to know again.³

There is something deeply and disturbingly contradictory in a novelistic discourse that begins with the Berger quotation – with its deep suspicion of meta narratives – and then goes on to celebrate storytelling, because it is seen as oral and subaltern, quite unconscious of the fact that it is also highly hegemonic. After all, the kathakali act replays one of the two main epics of Hinduism in this case, and a story that works because its endings etc are known is above all hegemonic. In fact, as I have argued, for a narrative to be celebrated as storytelling, it has to draw upon hegemonic and dominant narrative strands and tropes. If it draws upon 'lesser' or 'subaltern' ones, it will not be heard or read as a 'great story.'

In the 'postcolonial' context, this means that certain aspects of colonial narratives are repeated again and again, consciously or not, with or without irony. Some I have already listed. But there are others: for instance, the centrality of the colonial bridge. Again and again – in different ways from Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* to Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the postcolonial novel returns to the cultural bridge of colonisation, Anglophone colonisation in the case of India, at the expense of so many other bridges. Similarly, when it celebrates 'hybridity', it

usually sees this hybridity in Anglophone terms: hence, an Indian who speaks English is a hybrid, but a Tamil who speaks Marathi is largely left un-narrated in his specificity (or even implicitly reduced to a kind of mono-cultural denseness). Similarly, there is often an undue stress on 'English' as a language, almost (as in Jeet Thayil's excellent poetry collection, *English*) the only "nation" available to the writer. The celebration of 'creoles' complicates but does not change this equation, as the creoles being celebrated are always English-based (in the Anglophone context), and hence return us to the fecundity myth of colonisation. This leaves out the condition of other kinds of postcolonial writers, whose relationship to English is different. In all these cases the 'space' of discourses (also those contained in a particular language) tends to push into a specific *place* of enunciation in such a way as to make the *place* visible in terms that reduce its alterity – either by making it transparent or by making it exotic (that is, 'different' but only in terms permitted by the dominant discourses, in the sense in which Ziauddin Sardar talks about the "double victimisation" of Pocahontas in the successful Disney animation film).

The problem, it appears, has to do with negotiating similarity and difference. Writing across cultures, which have already been narrated by Orientalism and associated colonial discourses, post-colonial authors can either copy or reverse the narratives of the past. This is more so if what is required or expected of them is 'great storytelling': the registers of 'greatness' in 'storytelling' are already over-determined by the past. Both options, however, lead to a privileging of the colonial bridge, a re-usage of Orientalist narratives. Both are ways in which 'exoticism' – a construction of the Other by the self – returns in the garb of a postcolonial narrative. Such a return might question the 'Other', but it does not question the 'self': for instance, one can argue that Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* is a *great* (and greatly disturbing) novel for readers from a Muslim background, but it is a largely soft and comfortable one for most non-Muslim Western readers. As stated earlier, exoticism constructs the 'Other' space in a way that does not really disrupt, inconvenience or question the place of the self, or does not do so to the same extent.

On the other hand, perhaps, the attempt to transcend the self, even when it echoes some exotic narratives, can be used to bounce back from the space of otherness to question the self. Perhaps that is why a text like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), despite its colonial connotations and despite the prevalence of 'universal' readings that it elicits, is not a soft text.⁴ For it does not just tell a 'great story'; it gets all tangled up in its attempt to tell and not

to tell the stories that could not be told then, the stories that became just a civilised lie of imperialism. It does not manage to present the half-visible, but it does – unlike soft fiction – record the deeply disturbing existence of that which was "not supposed to be here." It does not just use language as something transparent, which it never is, but as something whose limits have to be pressed beyond what it says to what it does not say and sometimes cannot say.

NOTES

1. Edward Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir*. London: Granta Books, 2000 (1999). p.44.
2. Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. London: Penguin Books, 1995 (1978). p. 94.
3. Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*. London: Harper Collins, 1997, p.229.
4. I have borrowed the term 'soft fiction' (as implicitly opposed to 'hard fiction') from the French writer and critic, Dr Sebastien Doubinsky.

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