

## Review Article

# *From Colonialism to Indigenism: The Loss and Recovery of Language and Literature*

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THE MOST CONTENTIOUS aspect of what we call literature is its relationship to history. The bond between them is both inextricable and problematic, and one could survey this relationship from Sir Philip Sidney's comments on the differentiation between "the probable truth of poetry" and "the particular truth of history" to Fredric Jameson's edict "always historicize." A study of literature inevitably involves a study of its history and a determination of its sites and modes of discrimination — in effect, an arrival at the critique of literature and historical constructions. But these definitions are determined by an authorizing culture, so that the course of literary history is bound to be affected by the systems of domination and control. Since history as it is institutionalized today is of Western origin, it is not unusual to view historical consciousness as a specifically Western prejudice by which the presumed superiority of the modern, industrial society can be retroactively substantiated. The universalist claims of Western epistemology have generally operated to appropriate and control the Other and in the subsequent historical movements the colonial construction of the Other, obliterated its subjectivity, leaving no space from which the native voices could be articulated. Fortunately, the postcolonial resurgence, especially among the non-Western societies, contests the invidious representations and un masks the hegemonic pretensions to recover the signifying function usurped by colonialism.

The interpellative phase of British rule in India went through a complex process of mediation, and was sustained, to a large extent, by textuality, while colonialism functioned as a discourse wherein the colonial subjects were appropriated by a system of representation. In *Masks of Conquest*, Gauri Viswanathan uncovers the manner in which the introduction and promotion of English studies in India was used as an effective instrument of colonial control. In her analytical and closely argued account she studies not only the oppositions or differences, the familiar tropes of colonial discourse analysis, but also the affiliations and overlaps which determined the construction of colonial education and discursive formations, for colonial education was not a case of an outright imposition. That, of course, is not to underplay the asymmetry of colonial intersection, though Viswanathan would differ with some nativist cultural critics that colonialism engendered a "cultural amnesia" in the subject people. The native recipients can neither be wholly conditioned nor devastated by the master culture. It would be naïve to believe otherwise.

Physical acts of conquest and aggression constitute only one aspect of colonial domination. Much more devastating is cultural invasion through language and educational practices. While tracing the historical trajectory of the British Empire, one can easily find that, in addition to the use of brutal force, more insidious ideological weapons like English language and values were used for the desired effect. Since all histories are informed by their own contingent ideologies, the author discusses how the ideology was used to mask the discursive practices and how the humanistic ideals of education were harnessed by the British for their social and political ends. Viswanathan substantiates the Gramscian idea of the relation between culture and power that cultural hegemony can be best established through the consent of the dominated. Indeed, the project of the British Raj was geared to this end. The British educational policy and its effects are the crucial reference points for studying the colonial period.

The European "civilizing" mission was but a ruse for the British territorial control over India, and the author records the

peculiar irony of history that the British involvement with Indians' education emerged from their concern over the depravity of their own people, since the rapacity of the Company men was bringing ignominy to the British nation. All the same, the move was not unconnected with evolving a strategy for domination and control of the "natives." Warren Hastings, Governor General of India (1774-85), was quick to endorse Orientalism as a policy of "reverse acculturation," as a measure to assimilate the rulers into the culture of the ruled. His rationalization was based on the "right of conquest," and any knowledge useful to the state acquired with tacit or enforced support of the ruled was sought to be validated as the gain of humanity. With this began the program of appropriating Indian languages to serve as crucial inputs in the construction of the system of rule. With the textual productions began the establishment and definition of an epistemological space, and the discourse of "Orientalism," as it came to be known, had the effect of converting Indian forms of knowledge into European objects. That knowledge was to be converted into instruments of colonial rule. By a subtle ploy the English literary text was also made to function as the locus of authority, so that the Englishman himself was effectively removed from the plane of ongoing colonial activity while the literary text functioned as his surrogate. At the same time, Orientalism also served to present an invidious representation of India as a cultural "other" by situating it in a classical period which endowed it with a transhistorical "essence," a clever indoctrination to disengage the Indian mind from the material domain and, hence, from the machinations of the colonial economy. However, Lord Cornwallis, who succeeded Hastings, was more concerned with establishing the legitimacy of the colonial enterprise, and proposed a system of British laws as well as the policy of segregating the British ruling elite from the natives, which was responsible for the rise of Anglicism as the counter-movement to Orientalism. But despite their ostensible opposition, both positions were complicit in the project of domination, and Viswanathan uncovers the manner in which the apparently conflicting views of Anglicism and Orientalism converged to reinforce colonial hegemony in education.

The English Education Act of 1835, based on Macaulay's (in)famous minute, was the watershed in the colonial education policy, which made English the medium of instruction. Meanwhile, Christian missionaries were getting restive with the largely secular component of English studies. The Clapham Evangelical Charles Grant, particularly opposed the disjunction between religion and state. He maintained that if the British wanted enduring hegemony, it was imperative that the natives be made to subscribe to Christian moral and spiritual ideals. Condemning the Hindu polytheistic caste society in no uncertain terms, Grant wanted a single code of "One Power, One Mind" to govern society. While officially the British government remained committed to religious neutrality, the Christian missionaries were getting tacit encouragement to propagate Christian dogma.<sup>2</sup> The teaching of English literature abetted Christianization, since structural congruences were perceived and established between Christianity and English literature. But there was also a simultaneous disavowal of the unity of religion and literature, resulting in a shift in emphasis from the centrality of Christian texts to that of British institutions and laws, a move that also accorded with the Utilitarians' concern for effective control over the natives. Viswanathan explains the connection between the disavowal of Christian influence and the affirmation of British institutions and values by using the theoretical formulation provided by Homi Bhabha who uses the concepts of "hybridity" and "ambivalence" to describe the dynamics of the colonial encounter, although Abdul JanMohamed has argued that ambivalence is itself a product of "imperial duplicity" and that underneath it all is a Manichean dichotomy between colonizer and colonized that structures colonial relations.

The British were in fact so intent on imposing their cultural system on Indians that at the time when the classical curriculum was under fire in Britain from the votaries of "useful knowledge," in India full emphasis was being placed on English as a branch of classical study. Perhaps this was intended to fill the void created by the growing distaste for classical learning in Britain, just as it also aimed to make the Indians realize the cul-

tural impoverishment and inadequacy of native learning against the superiority of Western knowledge.

Viswanathan steers clear of any oversimplification of a cause-effect determination or a mere teleology of history while underlining the complicity of colonialism and the discipline of English studies. She argues convincingly that, along with historical contingencies in the cultural confrontation between Britain and India, there were also mutually supportive agendas. In his book *The Intimate Enemy*, Ashis Nandy has also stressed that there had been psychological structures and cultural forces which supported or resisted the culture of colonialism in British India. The colonial engagement lent itself to the creation and reification of social groups with their varied interests. The Filtration Theory advocated by Macaulay and John Stuart Mill for promoting a small group of English-educated elite only contributed to the linguistic stratification of Indian society. On the other hand, we also find that the discourse of differentiation which runs through the social and political map of nineteenth-century India parallels the formation of the nationalist elite. Perhaps Viswanathan could have stressed the point further that in the intersecting histories of colonialism and nationalism, particularly in the project of cultural nationalism, English became a highly contributory, yet also unifying agency for the nationalist intelligentsia, a role it still plays in the postcolonial nation-state. That, perhaps, also proved "the failure of English" from the British point of view. Viswanathan does not find the English education policy very consistent, even though British power might have been sustained on the English language, to an extent.

The moral vigor invested in English studies also betrayed the British apprehensions that it might play a subversive role, and Utilitarians like Henry Maine thought that an overtly literary education would only feed Indian nationalism. Lord Curzon was astute enough to see the chief threat to empire in a new English-educated elite who would invoke the political rhetoric of British liberalism to embarrass British imperial practices. Hence the moral imperative in education was loosened to wean Indians away from liberal humanism. Curiously, Britain

followed a reverse trajectory and sought to strengthen moral values in education. In India, the creation of a *babu* class (Philistines, in an Arnoldian sense) had its own problems, and the British administration faced a dilemma of its own making by providing education to the natives, thus fueling their aspirations. By then denying them access to higher services, the British turned education into an arena for social conflict. However, it was this conflict that also created space for native resistance to British rule, as Viswanathan notes: "The colonial subject's resistance to British rule occurs in the ideological space created by this contradiction, transforming education in its dual aspects of social control and social advancement into the supreme paradox of British power" (*Masks* 165).

This paradox did create enabling conditions for political decolonization, but it was by no means the sole factor, since decolonization is a much more complex process and an engagement with its politics and practices requires interrogation of its textual figuration. That is a major argument of Viswanathan's book. Now that a loose affiliation of texts, revisionary reading practices, and literary histories are being institutionalized under the disciplinary rubric of colonial and postcolonial studies, the analytical rigor of her searching critique should prove to be very useful. It will also break down the fixity of the dividing lines imposed by the simple binary of colonizer/colonized, which, though as an enabling fiction has served an instrumental and historical purpose, should not detract from the awareness that the oppositional politics of the colonized was mobilized also from pressures other than colonial authority via multiple social mediations. The difficulty with any warring dichotomy is that it sets up its own orthodoxy that could bedevil any project of postcolonial studies. English studies, which had its beginnings as a strategy of containment, stirred up a host of questions about the interrelations of class, culture, state, and modes of assertion. Viswanathan does not offer a facile critique of colonialism. While analyzing the legitimating structures invoked by the dominant narrative, she advances the thesis that appropriation, definition, and subordination were all caught up together in a system of representation. Hence any national or regional

tradition cannot be analyzed independently of its historical implication in the British colonial enterprise. Resistance is not a simple modality, and decolonization as a process involves an ongoing dialectic between hegemonic centrist forces and perpetual subversions of them.

The role of empire in the history of English studies has profound implications for current debates on curricula in India, and Viswanathan warns against any exclusive appeal to "either universalist or relativist value, religious identity or secular pluralism," as they are insufficient signifiers of historical realities (*Masks* 167). Referring to the history of conflict between the various groups in India — the East India Company and the missionaries, the Parliament and the East India Company, the Anglicists and the Orientalists — she dispels the myth that the canon is necessarily the outcome of the political supremacy of a group, for the Western literary canon evolved out of a position of vulnerability, not of strength, and authority was often used to camouflage that vulnerability.

G. N. Devy's "*Of Many Heroes*": *An Indian Essay in Literary Historiography*, emerges out of his concern for the already existing, alternative approaches that would restore native agency, a task that he had begun with his earlier, provocative, and hotly debated Sahitya Akademi award-winning book, *After Amnesia* (1992). The polyphonic title of the book echoes the remarks of the tenth-century Indian literary critic Rajashekhara, about the Indian poetic tradition having multifarious strands. Devy's starting point is Western historiography, based on the Western discourses of knowledge about non-Western cultures. The overarching assumption is that the cultures living by myths are ahistorical and not representative of fully developed social consciousness, and that they need to be understood objectively and scientifically by the other predominantly European societies endowed with an advanced historical vision. He questions the West's basic assumption of the concept of time, understood as linear for Western societies and cyclical for non-Western cultures, because it implicitly valorizes Western progressivism over a supposed retrogressive cycle to which its "others" are doomed. On the other hand, the notion of time in Indian

metaphysical thought is beautifully captured in Bhartrihari's metaphor for time as the bird catcher, suggestive of duration entrapped within eternity. This concept combines with the semantic theory of *sphota*, which maintains that meaning exists in pre-verbal or eternal form, so that meaning and temporality are interrelated in the human cognition.

Devy takes these departures to ground literary historiography in an Indian conceptual framework. He addresses the basic question whether there was any history in India prior to India's contact with the modern West. The Indian past, as he discovers, is rich in diverse traditions of canons that can be classified into fine basic categories: *suta* literature, *mantra* literature, the *shastras*, *akshara* literature, and *prakrit*. The Indian literary heritage encompasses the forms and movements from the earliest oral traditions to the later written critical commentaries which scrutinize the vast corpus of literary production. The basic attitude to historiography is formulated in relation to the *suta* texts, which recognize the "presence of the past" but not the "pastness of the past," and explains the persistence of a view of tradition in the face of modernity. T. S. Eliot, alone among Western critics, could appreciate such an aspect of tradition, and his theory of the impersonal in art is not much removed from the concept of self-effacement in Indian art. However, Devy tends to confuse traditional authority with historical authority, when he portrays the *Puranas* as historical records. The *shastras*, of course, with their human authorship, have a clearer historical perspective, having given rise to the principles of linguistics and poetics. The book also underlines the fact that along with the mainstream literary texts, which were governed by the conditions for canon formation, there was simultaneous growth of *prakrit*, the parallel streams of literatures, which followed their lines of non-canonicity and remained unaffected by the conventions of scholarship.

While outlining the precolonial historiography, the author also refers to the awareness that had come about that literature and history did not coalesce and that literature could be seen in its alterity to history, despite their containment in the same temporal space. He makes a survey of medieval Islamic writings and



mentions Al Badaoni, a prominent scholar, who chronicled the literature about the time of Akbar. A significant aspect of Al Badaoni's historiographical practice is that he does not use "genre," "canon," or "language" as principles of classification. His basis for literary history is "sect," which incorporated a literary community. Devy finds that such chronicles, though avowedly centered on Islamic texts, are also in consonance with the pluralistic approach that characterizes Indian critical thinking.

In his discussions of the concepts of literature, culture, and history from the Indian past, Devy cautions against importing any Western models that are mainly the motivated projections of the Western idea of progress. In this connection, he cites the example of Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry* (1774-1790), which pursues an agenda in complicity with Orientalism based on the idea of a uniform advance from "barbarism to refinement," from "rudeness to elegance," placing the non-Western "primitive" races on the lowest scale. Orientalism itself was part of what Devy calls "Savageology," which introduced the dichotomy of imagination and reason, with imagination as the overwhelming attribute of the "primitive" people threatening to destabilize Western "reason." Such differentiations are altogether absent from the Indian quest for wholeness in art, which was adversely affected by the Western ratiocination directed at "humanizing" those inhabiting the "darker" areas of the globe. Perhaps this is what had prompted Ananda Coomaraswamy to remark, "What a fall from the Stone Age!" Another questionable premise on which Warton's historiography was based was the use of space as a metaphor for imagination, so that in his perverse cartography, the South and the East represented imagination, whereas the North and the West represented reason. Having mapped this out, Warton speculates on the possibilities of literature as a civilizing force, which Macaulay was later to complete as his imperial mission.

The Orientalist scholarship followed a similar agenda but employed a different methodology. It froze the "essential India" in the distant past, conjoining the European Enlightenment and the Indian *Puranic* tradition, to advance the thesis of a progressive deterioration of Indian society. To counter this

discursive practice, Devy highlights the role of Aurobindo, the philosopher-critic, who revitalized Indian critical thinking. He offered an original historiography for Indian literature, avoiding both William Jones's enthusiasm for India's past and failure to reckon with the rise of *bhasa* literatures and Macaulay's dismissal of the entire tradition of Indian literature as being of no consequence. Aurobindo reaffirmed Indian poetics and was not oblivious to the enabling strain of literary tradition. Yet he did not shy away from a nationalist critique of Indian literature.

The most significant chapter in Devy's book is "Post-Colonial Indian Approaches." Having diagnosed the impoverishment of the Indian critical sensibility in the institutional teaching of English literature in India and the colonial period of critical "amnesia," Devy highlights the crucial issues of "local" or "universal" literature, modernity, and national convergence, on the basis of which a framework for modern historiography can be built. Aurobindo's *The Future Poetry* had already shown the way by harmonizing cultural specificity with a certain kind of universalism. Thus we have the *Marga* view of culture and history which also rests on the congruence of divergent streams.<sup>3</sup> According to the writer U. R. Anantha Murthy, Indian literature has no clear affiliation with either tradition or modernity. But we find a less reifying view of tradition in Bhalchandra Nemade who considers it an essentially foreclosed system and maintains that, since literature is a subsystem of culture, tradition in postcolonial societies is a means of recovering nativistic self-awareness.<sup>4</sup>

It is time such nativism is demystified in the light of current postmodern and postcolonial approaches. Nativism can be a liberating impulse if it fights against the universalistic claims of Western discourse, but it would be dangerous to flaunt it as a badge of cultural exclusivism. It must be kept in mind that its relationship with other ideological formations like the nation, class, gender, religion, and caste is extremely complex and mediated. Nativism is progressive insofar as it resists the destruction of native plurality, but it can also be regressive if it simply creates an alternative past and obstructs the evolution of a modern sensibility. In fact, the academic discourses which deploy

the rhetoric of premodern and (unqualified) anticolonial indigenism also reinscribe an essentialist notion of traditional India, which was part of the orientalizing discourse. Vico has remarked that traditions are live and not passive and are the product of human beings. Nativism, however, tends to reify traditions. Another difficulty is that its value is perceived only in relation to its opposite, and hence nativism is itself locked in a stifling binary, a situation which creates its own kind of orthodoxy. The "native-colonial" paradigm ignores the various categories of class, gender, and caste within the native formation itself and overlooks the heterogeneity of such formations. The crucial issue of gender has been hitherto elided. The polemics about cultural amnesia fail to take into account the double colonization of woman — by colonialism and by patriarchy. Gandhi had provided some respite to women by enlisting their participation in the Indian freedom movement, but they were soon forgotten thereafter and relegated to the backyards of patriarchal dispensation.

A redeeming historiography would also take into account the issues invoked by subaltern and feminist discourses and incorporate elements hitherto marginalized, since marginality is not only a site of deprivation but also of radical possibility. Devy, however, does not pay much attention to the intervention of feminism into the field of modern literary criticism, which too needs to be freed from Western forms of hegemonic discourse that ignore the social realities specific to the third world countries and the forms of oppressions that women in these countries undergo. Devy concurs with Salman Rushdie, who questions Commonwealth Literature as a false category, but he misses the point that Rushdie himself is patronizing toward the new literatures and berates the *bhasa* literatures, even though some of them have longer traditions than what is taken to be the mainstream English literature, or Indian writing in English.

Any simplistic theory of nativism will flounder if it merely fetishizes national origin and denies historical production of subjectivity. While re-excavating the original terrain of precolonial cultures, we cannot ignore the ruptures that colonialism creates when it enters that domain. Devy aptly raises the

issue of institutional dominance, since practices of representation always implicate positions of enunciation. Such a cultural strategy is useful for retrieval or creation of an independent identity, which does not, however, diminish our ardor for a plural, secular society. The book refers to various other issues relating to para-literature, self and the Other, translation, nation and narration, which direct the course of literary historiography and should guide us through the act of inclusion/exclusion, so that many more heroes may emerge through the mists of time.

## NOTES

- 1 Gauri Viswanathan. *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*. Delhi: Oxford UP, 1998. Pp.x, 206. \$14.50. G. N. Devy. "Of Many Heroes": An Indian Essay in Literary Historiography. Mumbai: Orient Longman, 1998. Pp. ix, 213. Rs. 290.
- 2 For a detailed analytical study of the destabilizing effects of religious conversion in a pluralistic society, see Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold*.
- 3 *Marga* (literally, the way) refers to the mainstream Indian tradition dominated by the Brahmanical Sanskrit culture, as distinguished from *Desi* (local, native) referring to the regional language expressions. *Marga* is metropolitan while *Desi* (also *bhasa*) is vulgar or subcultural. Panini's grammar (fourth century BC) suggests a formal determination for classical Sanskrit, the *margi* language. *Bhasa* is used in the sense of modern Indian languages like Hindi, Marathi, Kannada, Tamil, and Telegu which have fairly long histories. These emerged from the Middle Indo-Aryan and Tamil. In fact, the dialectical opposition between "Indian" and "Western" seems so stark that one often ignores the dialectical categories within the "Indian," between Sanskrit and the *bhasas*. Despite protestations that English is being indigenized, there is considerable prejudice against it as an effective medium of "Indian" cultural expression. Devy envisages the modern Indian tradition comprising a tripartite relationship: *Marga*, *Desi*, and Western, each of which conflicts and collaborates with the others. He pleads for a realistic historiography of Indian literatures for which a nativistic self-awareness is required so as to restore the memory of the *bhasa* literary traditions, lost in a "cultural amnesia" during the colonial period.
- 4 Bhalchandra Nemade (b. 1938) is a Marathi novelist-critic. He is credited with advancing in 1983 a literary movement called "nativism" (*desivad* in Marathi), adopting the concept from the American cultural anthropologist Ralph Linton. Nativism emerged as a militant, aggressive assertion of one's native cultural heritage, to countervail the threats from homogenizing, though not necessarily alien, cultural systems. The nativists use history, orality, linguistics, and folklore to counter the claims of the Brahmanical Sanskrit tradition on the one hand, and the colonialist (European) culture on the other, so as to provide space and articulation for the *bhasa* tradition. Devy firmly believes that nativism has opened the possibility of rooting literary criticism in the *bhasa* tradition.

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- . *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief*. Delhi: Oxford UP, 1998.