Gaining Visibility Through Theory:
A Review of *Other Tongues: Rethinking the Language Debates in India*

Nalini Iyer and Bonnie Zare, Eds.
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Dynamic in form, this anthology addresses two significant issues pertaining to literary and cultural studies. Through a range of genres—theoretical prose, testimonial narrative, interrogative essay and engaging interviews—it addresses the academic, aesthetic and market perspectives on the production and reception of literatures of India, as well as the problems regarding authenticity. Contributors of this anthology have tried to overcome the binary of English/Bhasha writing, diasporic/native experience, and offer new perspectives on the relation between literature and culture, by looking at "what makes for the heterogeneity of Indian English literature" (9). They do so by talking about the challenges involved in translating texts/experiences to meet the demands of the market. The contributors consider translation as a mediation of languages, writers and audiences (xiii) and examine the role of culture in shaping the production and reception of literatures.

Having begun as a pre-conference round-table at the annual South Asia conference in Madison, the project of the book is viewed by the editors and some of the contributors as a response to Rushdie's immature remarks (1997) and Naipaul's dismissive comments (2002) on what has now come to be regarded as "bhasha literatures." (Rushdie said that Indian English writers have contributed more than the writers of 18 Indian regional languages, while Naipaul stated that there are no good bhasha writers on par with Indian English writers.) This specific location gives a radical design to this anthology by reflecting upon what the editors prefer to call "the language debates of India," referring to the relationship between English and bhasha literatures. Contrary to the radical voice assumed by the editors, the lone contributor representing bhasha literature, Mahesh Elkunchwar, humbly says: "It is very difficult to write in English about certain things Indian" (84). He raised questions about how many Indian English writers speak and write in their native languages and read their own bhasha literatures. But, he does not squarely dismiss their writings as elitist or inauthentic: "That the Anglophone writers have different sensibilities does not stop them from being Indian writers" (82). Elkunchwar's questions about Indian English writers and their relation to

bhasha literatures applies equally well to the contributors of this book. One hardly finds a reference to a bhasha source in their writing, as they depend solely on the translated texts available in English. So, their anger against Rushdie and Naipaul seems unwarranted.

Partly in agreement with Elkunchwar's view of the relation between writing and culture, Nalini says, "Although there is a significant loss of intimacy with culture for an individual who is unable to read or write in his/her native language, he/she can compensate for that loss through translation of orality and can gain much from a critical multi-linguality" (19). This helps the writer to move away from the assumed relation between authenticity and aesthetic culture, saying that the success of diasporic writing depends upon "how accessible the work is to non-native audiences and how difficult or easy the writer makes the work of cultural translation for her readers" (27). The fact that these translators/essayists who have done just a handful of translations—unlike translators like Constance Garnett who have devoted their entire lives to this task—rush to theorize their position vis-a-vis postcolonial rhetoric seems to indicate their desire to embrace marginality for academic gains. Bhasha writers and translators within the bhasha languages have ignored Rushdie and Naipaul's comments and have continued to work, which was perhaps the best way to react.

Such a cultural translation is possible only if there is a close tie between literature and commitment, as can be seen in C.S. Lakshmi (Ambai)'s SPARROW (Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women) and Rukhsana Ahmad's SALIDAA (South Asian Literatures in the Diaspora Arts Archive) projects. These projects, along with the discussion of the Calcutta Writers Workshop and the interviews with committed editors of translations like Mini Krishnan, Urvashi Butalia and Geetha Dharmarajan, hint at the elitism and inauthenticity of the "language debate" central to the postcolonial South Asian Literary Studies. These independent women publishers/editors not only redefined market demands, but also constructed a promising future for the so-called bhasha literatures in the world market.

However, the contributors unconsciously endorse the same binary of English/bhasha that they want to overcome, as they situate their argument within a postcolonial framework. It is because of this that they fail to take into account the history of anti-Hindi protest in Tamil Nadu (in fact, Periyar looked at English as a non-hegemonic language compared to Hindi) and the language debate initiated by Ambedkar in his significant essay on "Linguistic States" (*Babasaheb Ambedkar:Writings and Speeches*, Vol I, Government of Maharashtra, 1989.pp.139-201). This makes us realize that while the turn towards bhasha literatures has helped expand the rigid conception of "Indian literature," it has also made it possible for the one-time postcolonialists to appropriate Edward Said's notion of the "Other" and assume a radical position. More than this theoretical appropriation, what is to be noted is the way the experience of dominant castes is foregrounded in the name of native[Tamil] experience:

"Such Krishna compositions as 'Aadaathu Asagathu' (Immobile) and 'Thaiye Yashoda' (Mother Yashoda) are sung commonly *wherever Tamils gather in a religious mood* [Emphasis mine]" (156). By saying that "there is a strong Brahmin or upper-caste connotation to his songs *now,*" the author cleverly twists the truth about the Brahmin domination in Tamil society by making it a construct of the rhetoric of the Dravidian movement. This suggests that there is little difference between the way dominant castes foregrounded their interests as nationalism during colonial times and the postcolonial intellectual's appropriation of "native" experience.

Moving beyond the postcolonial agenda and the "political correctness" vis-à-vis dalit literature, Anushya Sivanarayanan's interrogative essay on the canonized first Tamil dalit novel *Karukku* looks at how the Tamil text that gained its meaning in the context of Ambedkar's centenary celebrations received a different meaning in its translation in the context of globalization. Placing her argument within the changing paradigm of Dalit Studies, she asserts: "by refusing to move beyond, she [Bama] proves the essentialist justifications of those who continue to oppress her in the name of caste" (145). Unable to provide a "thick description," she argues that the English version makes the statements sound like stock rhetoric inserted into the narrative (146). The argument, unlike the usual comments on vernacular or dalit literature, seems to come from an informed reader of sources in the local context.

The focus on English translation enabled the erstwhile postcolonial Brahmins (whose anti-colonial rhetoric has come into question with the dalits' celebration of colonialism and the colonial masters for providing basic education that was denied to them by the nationalist caste Hindus) to talk of marginality in the theoretical and cultural domain. Viewing translation as a metaphor helped them to highlight the complexities of diasporic experience and to ponder:

> [W]ho writes for whom, in what genres, and what languages? How do writers translate 'native cultures' for their varied audiences— whether domestic or global?. . . How do authors' locational history and language choices affect their audience, their popularity with non-native reading groups, and, ultimately, their inclusion in academic literary canons? (25)

But who can deny that such theoretical extensions also help the erstwhile postcolonialists gain visibility within this glocalised new world order? While opening up the vast canvas of bhasha literatures through translation and offering ways of perceiving heterogeneous Indian culture, this anthology incidentally informs us about the way the work of committed individuals is appropriated for theoretical justification by the Indian elite class. Readers familiar with bhasha literary history and the politics of representation in the multilingual, multicultural India would not agree that this anthology is speaking for "other tongues" but would hear the "same tongue" that once articulated a self-interested political nationalism.