

Language, Nation and the Question of “Indian Literature”

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It is difficult to claim to be a specialist in “Indian Literature.” The Indian constitution recognizes 18 languages, and literary production is not confined to these. Most scholars working on Indian literature, in fact, work in no more than one language tradition. In other words, the study of “Indian literature” is always partial, and always mediated by the experience of reading in one or at best a few Indian languages. However, this sociopolitical reality is often overlooked in the collective and global understanding of Indian literary practices. As is often the case with parts and wholes, some parts stand in more often for the whole and are granted greater representational power by the institutions of literary production and study. Thus in the age of globalization, “Indian literature” in the international bookstore has actually come to mean “the Indian novel in English,” and this perspective has been mirrored by a sophisticated academic critical apparatus that has based its understandings of and insights into Indian literature, both colonial and postcolonial, almost entirely on this small field. Larger questions about Indian literature as a category remain quite rare, despite over two thousand years of literary production in the subcontinent. And, of course, the novel in English only comes into its own in the mid-twentieth century. So when we speak of a part standing in for the whole, we are speaking of a very small part indeed.

Doubtless the difficulties of grasping Indian literature through the usual disciplinary lenses of genre and period, in addition to those of linguistic heterogeneity, have contributed to the lack of its theorization as a category. But discussion of these difficulties, I contend, needs to be a crucial part of the enterprise of studying Indian literature, though this does not have to result in an attempt to define Indian literature as a singular, unified field. It is rather that discussion of the difficulties implicit in arriving at such a definition, if not the impossibility of it, is stimulating and useful: both in understanding the effects and limitations of the various analyses and insights that currently obtain from what together comprises the study of Indian literature in the Western academy, and in opening up new ways of approaching this literature. This exercise may seem curiously archaic when, under the sign of globalization, the institutional articulation of the study of non-Western literatures in the Western academy is moving away from the Westphalian national-literature model contained even

within the currently dominant sign of the postcolonial (an aggregationist model in its literary incarnation) to that of a re-theorized and at least nominally de-centered world literature.¹ Even in a move from a theoretical framework in which space and time are fixed in a hierarchical relationship (that of colonialism) to one in which culture and power are seen to flow more unpredictably and promiscuously (globalization) the work of unpacking “national traditions” remains necessary; in its absence we risk reifying or simply just carrying over partial understandings of less studied bodies of literature into the new theoretical models.

To better contextualize the challenges of studying Indian literature, I begin with an examination of the modes of circulation of Indian literature in the West; the entry of Indian literary scholars into the Western academy in the 1980s and 1990s; and the status of translation in the circulation and study of Indian literature. In the next section, I examine significant recent attempts to theorize the category of Indian literature, by P. P. Raveendran, Sisir Kumar Das, and Aijaz Ahmad. The shadow of nationalism falls across all three of these attempts, resulting in either a jettisoning or deferral of any idea of Indian literature as a category on the one hand, or, on the other, in a dubious conflation of nation and literature. I present in response an alternative relational approach to the problem of mapping Indian literature. The study of Indian literature, I argue, must be a comparative, multilingual, and translational enterprise.

The institutional and structural relationship between contemporary models of postcolonial literary scholarship and the earlier model of Commonwealth studies has already been described in some detail.² For the purposes of this discussion it may be sufficient to note that the study of Indian literature in the postcolonial mode inherited from Commonwealth studies the unexamined notion of English as the default language of literary composition. This notion may have made sense in a comparative paradigm that had English literature (in both the national and linguistic senses) as its normative center³; however, it has curiously persisted even as that hierarchical model has been abandoned. To understand this link, we have to look first at the processes by which Indian literature becomes visible and available in the West. In the case of literature in English, its very production one might argue has tended to be modulated by the pressures of a split market. The organization of the Indian English publishing industry remained until fairly recently in a subsidiary relationship to its counterparts in London and New York. In the post-Rushdie boom of the 1980s and 1990s, major novels in English were almost always published first in London and only later by an Indian imprint. If the growth of a relatively newly lucrative “home market” that has begun to mature in the last decade means that Indian writers in English no longer need to be first published abroad to gain an audience in India, Indian fiction in English has nonetheless come to be defined by those books and writers who are scouted for the international market, and who are nominated for and win international awards. The framing of the discourse around English-language fiction in India has itself come to be

dominated almost entirely by the discussion of international awards and the concomitant lucrative advances that writers deemed to be potential award-winners receive. The cultural capital that circulates around the figures of the internationally-marketable writers has a much higher exchange rate than that of the “home market” writers, and the same is true of the divergent value ascribed to international and national awards. English-language winners of the Sahitya Akademi awards, for example, often have no publishing deals outside India. Whereas the names of the winners of international awards are on the lips of the literati both outside and inside India, very few literary critics working in English, let alone lay readers even inside India would be able to name recent winners of the Sahitya Akademi award in English.

Furthermore, these international awards and the access to global visibility and representation that they facilitate are restricted entirely to writing in English. It is difficult to say what the fate of literatures in the other Indian languages would have been on the global markets if there were no appreciable Indian literary output in English. It is clear, however, that contemporary Indian writers in languages other than English do not enjoy even a fraction of the international readership in translation into English that their peers from Latin America or continental Europe do. As Lawrence Venuti and others have argued, translation already occupies a secondary and somewhat suspect status in the discourses and ideologies of literary worth.⁴ I suspect that this hierarchy becomes intensified in interactions between cultures when the target culture's language is among those in which the source culture expresses itself. That is to say, an audience that reads a particular language might be more apt to let translations perform the mediation of the other culture if this culture did not also have a literary tradition in that language; where it does, writers in this language may become the designated reliable guides to their cultures. The situation is magnified when English is the dominant language of global information and commercial exchange, and institutions and networks of valuation and validation in English already exist. Literary validation functions as an entry into the global publishing industry, and simultaneously an entry into the parallel academic market/system.

The admission of the Indian scholar working on English-language Indian literature into the Western academy mirrors and intersects the entry of English-language Indian literature into the global literary market, of which the scholar is an integral part. Indian literature is in all likelihood sold more in university bookstores than in the mass market, particularly in the United States. Most relevant here is the educational background of the large majority of Indian literary scholars who arrived in the USA beginning in the late 1980s and whose careers, as graduate students and faculty, parallel the rise of South Asian literary studies as a more or less discrete sub-discipline in the American academy.⁵ While this group is multilingual, the primary medium of instruction through their school and college years would have been English. In high school they would likely have had another Indian language as a “second language” and read a very

limited amount of fiction and poetry in this language, but would not have developed any coherent sense of its literary tradition. Their undergraduate and graduate educations, in various forms of English Honours syllabi across the major cities (and predominantly from Delhi and Calcutta Universities) would have been so canonical as to warm the hearts of conservative culture warriors in the USA. Their disciplinary training, in other words, was within the parameters of the classic English department. This made and continues to make it easy for these scholars to enter, as graduate students and faculty, Anglo-American universities which did not and do not need to find new, unfamiliar homes for them. For Indian scholars educated and working in other Indian languages such pathways, with a few exceptions, did not and do not exist. This also means that the critical lenses and approaches through which Indian literature is viewed and studied were and are influenced by both the prevailing critical modes in the Anglo-American academy and by linguistic-disciplinary boundaries. Interdisciplinarity has thus come to mean attention to work in departments of History and Political Science. But a multilingual conception of Indian literature or a focus on contemporary translation studies has never been seriously proposed. As Tilottama Rajan has noted in the North American context, “globalizing literary studies has not resulted in an increasing interest...in Sanskrit, or even Hindi” (par. 19).

Why the novel? Again a number of factors come into play. For one thing, nationalism has been the major preoccupation of postcolonial studies since its inception, and the novel has been the privileged site of the literary study of nationalism. Indeed, one of the most influential texts in the larger field, Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, identifies the novel as one of the prime vectors in the rise of the discourses of nationalism. Fredric Jameson's controversial argument about national allegories too was made in the context of the novel. “Nation and narration,” to use Homi Bhabha's phrase, seems to have been aligned early with the “nation and novel,” thus relegating other forms of narration to the margins of literary criticism. In the case of Indian literary criticism, however, it is also necessary to note the relative visibility of the various forms of Indian literature in the 1980s—the period during which the majority of scholars focusing in Indian literary studies in the West came of academic age. While these scholars would not have studied very much Indian fiction at the university level in India, by the mid-1980s the profile of the Indian novel in English was beginning to rise dramatically. For students who wrote BA papers on D.H. Lawrence or E.M. Forster in New Delhi to move to writing MA theses and PhD dissertations on Salman Rushdie or Anita Desai under the aegis of postcolonial studies at American universities did not require archival retrieval. In contrast, Indian poetry and drama did not have a highly-visible tradition in English at the time. In fact, while poetry in English may have a slightly higher profile now, it would be fair to say that there are probably only very few dramatists of note in English even today. Lack of visibility of English-language poets and the weight of the vernacular poetic and dramatic

traditions—often not available in English translation and certainly with very little supporting secondary work present even for the little that is available—has resulted in the novel's becoming the exemplar of Indian literature in the Western academy, and the novel in English in particular. A glance at the last decade and a half of issues of journals that publish regularly on Indian literature, such as *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *South Asian Review* and *ARIEL* will demonstrate the overwhelming emphasis on the novel in the criticism.⁶ While this emphasis may not be so striking in scholarship on other postcolonial literatures, it is a notable divergence from the status afforded poets and dramatists in their own Indian vernacular and literary contexts. More intriguing is the case of the short story form. The short story has a long and distinguished history in many Indian languages and it might not be an exaggeration to say that in some—Hindi, for example—it is the major form of expression of prose fiction. While the form does not have quite as rich a history in English there is nonetheless a tradition of the short story all the way from R.K. Narayan's Malgudi stories through Anita Desai to recent collections by such globally celebrated writers as Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry and Vikram Chandra. The fact that even stories by major figures such as Rushdie and Mistry do not figure in metropolitan South Asian literary criticism is testament to the hold of the novel.

The symmetry in the construction of a disciplinary home for Indian literature, the particular texts studied, and the academic training and venue of specialists is striking. At least one more factor remains to be noted: the structure of global publishing and distribution noted above increases the visibility of English-language writing from India in the mass market as well as the availability of English language texts to the supply systems that procure texts for university bookstores and libraries. For literary scholars situated far away from the contemporary Indian publishing scene, the advent of the internet has not assisted scholars in remaining current with literary happenings in India; text selection therefore becomes somewhat arbitrary and is often dependent on what is easily accessible. The result can be gauged quite simply by checking the number of entries in the MLA Bibliography for criticism on Indian writers in English. Beyond the overwhelming statistical dominance of work that references Salman Rushdie—hits for Rushdie outnumber those of all the other major writers combined—the correlation between what is available in the West and what is studied in the West is noteworthy. To underscore the incongruity of this situation, one might imagine establishing a study of contemporary American literature only on titles available in a New Delhi bookstore. Of course, if writers in English who are not published in the West do not get as much attention as their more globally-available counterparts, writers in other Indian languages are almost completely excluded. Major writers in various languages are afforded the occasional glance, but the selection is often indiscriminate, and does not include major (and award-winning) writers of the postcolonial era. Further, it almost entirely excludes younger writers who are contemporaries of the

English-language writers listed above. One might argue that this exclusion is only reasonable, since Indian literature is studied within the context of English departments. Before addressing this question more fully, however, it is time to return to the one with which this article began: is it even possible or desirable to speak of “Indian Literature” as a category?

Recent discourse on Indian literature as a category is inextricably linked with the discourse of Indian nationalism. As Paul Willemen articulates in his preface to *The Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*, the problem is that of trying to articulate an account of “any particular art-form in terms of a nation-state's achievements” (9). We ask ourselves, to paraphrase Kwame Anthony Appiah, whether the Indian in “Indian Literature” is the same as the Indian in “Indian Nation,” and if in talking about the former we are helping confirm the latter.⁷ This is the position that P. P. Raveendran takes in his essay, “Genealogies of Indian Literature.” Raveendran questions whether Indian literature as a unified field bearing the marks of a unified literary sensibility in fact exists, and goes on to add:

[I]t might be pertinent to point out that “Indian literature”, ontologically unified object that is theorised as connected by a shared discursive history and shared epistemological concerns, is not the same as “literature in India” or “literatures in India”. (2558)

Raveendran notes that the problem with the idea of a national literature for avowedly nationalist writers such as Subramania Bharati is the difficulty of resolving the varied expressions of the many into one unified voice. How could they speak of an Indian Literature, and by extension of an Indian Nation, when this expression seems multiple rather than singular? Bharati's resolution of this dilemma was to state that Indian literature speaks in 18 languages—drawing on official nationalism's slogan “unity in diversity”.⁸ Raveendran, faced with the same question, gives a different answer; his essay ends by powerfully repudiating the very notion of an aesthetic category of Indian literature mapped onto a nationalistic one:

[O]ne certainly cannot present Indian literature as the expression of an essential Indian spirit or of a commonly shared sensibility, because the nation in question is stable only on the map of the world. Its borders keep changing from writer to writer, from reader to reader and from subject to subject. This is what one is to deduce from the lack of a perfect fit that exists between the images of India appearing in, or the nations constructed by, Saadat Husain [*sic*] Manto, Mahasweta Devi, Gopinath Mohanty, Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, Laxman Gaikwad, Bama, VKN, U R Anantha Murthy and Shashi Tharoor, to mention a few representative “Indian” writers from various languages. No one would dare to talk about an essential Indian spirit running through the works of these writers who share the same nationality and perhaps the same period of writing, but whose histories, contexts, mindsets, experiences, lifestyles, languages and sensibilities are different, from the other. (2563)

As a caution against ahistorical homogenizing tendencies of nationalism, Raveendran's essay is certainly valuable. However, it does not really help

us in suggesting other ways of approaching various “literatures in India” as a category. First, the doubts Raveendran expresses about the possibility of a unified national literature in the face of heterogeneity of actual literary traditions are not in any way specific to the Indian literary situation. One might ask whether even in a predominantly monolingual literary context, as in that of the USA, for example, we would be able to reconcile the “histories, contexts, mindsets, experiences, lifestyles, languages and sensibilities” of even all its major writers into one unified, national literary sensibility. Raveendran may mean to caution against any sort of nationalist determination of a literary culture, but this does not tell us anything about the Indian case. The reference to the heterogeneous linguistic context in India—every writer Raveendran refers to above uses a distinct language—may appear to move us towards specificity, but upon closer examination this does not prove to be true. After all, we could repeat this exercise for a range of writers in almost every Indian language—with the possible exception of English-language writers, who tend to be fairly homogeneous in their social origins. In Marathi, for example, could we say that the milieus inhabited by a P. L. Deshpande, a Namdeo Dhasal, a Bhalchandra Nemade, and a Kiran Nagarkar are the same in the ways enumerated by Raveendran merely because they write in the same language? Raveendran is rightly dismissive of the idea of the official nationalist position of “a literature written in many languages.” But his emphasis on language as not only the incubator and mediator of literary identity and utterance, but also its final container seems to lead him to a position where he does not even allow for any way of conceiving connections between Indian literatures other than the spurious ones that align with an official nationalism. Thus, even though he acknowledges the work of critics such as Ayyappa Panniker who speak of specific Indian ways of narration and the reiteration of mythic elements, for instance, he is not able finally to conceive of an Indian literature in any way other than in distinction from and in opposition to “non-Indian literature and...the perspective of the non-Indian reader” (2563). This formulation is, however, highly unsatisfactory, not least because, keeping as it does to the contours of political mappings, it is not very useful for grasping the writing of the pre-colonial and pre-national periods. Indian literature, Raveendran says, can only be invoked “as a theoretical category in order to signify the distinctiveness of India’s literature in relation to the literature in the rest of the world” (2563). What he does not tell us, however, is what this “distinctiveness” consists of.

One way out of the bind Raveendran imposes would be to accept the contemporary Indian nation as the container of Indian literatures and stress within it a repertoire of common themes and narrative strategies, rather than an essentialist conception of the nation mirrored in a singular literature. After all, even if we say that the Indian nation is consistent with the current geopolitical map, this does not mean that we cannot look for relationships among literatures produced within this space. This approach seems favoured by Sisir Kumar Das in his monumental *History of Indian*

Literature. In his preface to the last volume, Das appears to anticipate Raveendran's objections when he describes his approach as contesting "the idea of 'heterogeneity' that completely subordinates the commonalities in [Indian] cultures" (xiv). Das disavows the nationalist vision of "one literature though written in many languages," but his own formulation remains, finally, within a nationalist framework. On the one hand he tells us that "Indian literature is a complex of literatures, related to one another, at times by geographical proximity, at times by a shared history," but he then adds that "[t]he phrase 'unity in diversity' is still useful, though unfashionable" (xiv). There is after all a difference between "relations" that arise from geographical proximity and shared history, and "unity." This contradiction is furthered in his epilogue:

What is revealed through constant exploration by the writers is a diverse India, composed of many races, many civilizations, many regions, and many languages. The discovery of each part only leads to the exploration of the other. Indian literature, through its representations of the concrete men and women and of the familiar regions constantly going beyond its confines and moving towards Bharatvarsha. (419)

Whether Das intends the concept/space of Bharatvarsha, which he has earlier described as more spiritual than territorial, to be understood as distinct from the geopolitical space of the nation is not clear. But his conception suggests a category of Indian Literature that does not emerge from the Indian nation (whether real or imagined) but rather articulates it: if for Raveendran Indian Literature is that which is produced in the Indian nation, for Das Indian Literature is that which helps us imagine the Indian nation. Both formulations are somewhat tautological, but Das's appears to allow for a view, depending on what we make of the idea of "Bharatvarsha," of a composite India that does not map exactly onto shifting political boundaries.

The notion of a unified Indian Literature also finds a somewhat contradictory expression in Aijaz Ahmad's formidable enumeration of the difficulties of identifying a coherent object of study called "Indian Literature" in his *In Theory: Nations, Classes, Literatures*.⁹ On the one hand he convinces us, quite comprehensively, that the archival and linguistic work needed for scholars to be able to speak confidently about the "Indian" in Indian literature has barely begun; on the other, he seems at times also convinced, even in the absence of such work, that this unifying coherence does exist. We might say that Ahmad's argument is less about "Indian Literature" as a category than about limitations in traditional approaches to its study. But when we separate the concerns about methodology—keeping in mind his warning that traditional studies themselves bear the marks of nationalism, or at least share its genealogies—we find Ahmad curiously positing a unified literature; at the same time, he is reluctant to elucidate the principles of its unity and appears to argue against this unity through the essay. After beginning in large part by premising his argument on the difficulty he feels in speaking confidently of "Indian Literature" as a category, he goes on to note the

following:

...the 'national' literature of India finds its principle of unity not in linguistic uniformity but in civilizational moorings and cultural ethos, hence in histories of 'literary' movements and even compositional forms which have crisscrossed geographical boundaries and linguistic differences. (255)

Putting "national" in quotation marks wards off the specter of nationalism but does not render the idea of a "'national' literature" any less axiomatic. And while at an intuitive level this talk of shared "civilizational moorings and cultural ethos" sounds right, or at least desirable, it is not clear from Ahmad's essay how he arrives at this conclusion. If, as Ahmad convincingly argues in the rest of his essay, we do not yet have at our disposal the genealogical and taxonomic work needed to elucidate the generic qualities and formal aspects of most Indian literatures, from what do we deduce their unifying civilizational features? Is it possible to grasp the latter as a category of knowledge without the former? Ahmad is not after all speaking simply of geographical proximity and shared history, as Das does. What exactly are these "civilizational" moorings and what constitutes this "cultural ethos"? Are they specific to particular religious traditions? One would not think so given Ahmad's suspicion of the refraction of Indian aesthetic traditions through a high Brahminical lens. Are they emblematic of an attitude to, or relationship between, religion and the everyday that crosses particular religious boundaries? And setting aside the composition of the shared "Indian," is there anything *literary* about the way in which "Indian Literature" might be grasped, once all the work needed to elaborate its component literatures has been done or at least begun? Ahmad's answer may quite reasonably be that it is too soon to tell, and indeed this conviction is voiced a number of times in the piece. But if that is the case, then it seems all the more necessary to articulate why these literatures need to be studied together in the first place. The idea of a unified Indian civilization may seem commonsensical but nonetheless requires some rationale. For example, we could think of parts of the modern state of India, most of the north-east, for example, which do not share the civilizational moorings that Ahmad has in mind. Most of the languages in this region are from entirely different families than the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages and nor have these regions and peoples always been part of "India" prior to colonialism and independence. Ahmad's privileging of civilizational moorings would seem to exclude them from his conception of "Indian Literature"—and we could say the same of Das as well. The reason for this discrepancy, I suspect, is that while Ahmad's critique of prevailing approaches to "Indian Literature" is premised on there being (unexplored) inter-connected histories and transactions among most of the literatures of India, he is also very conscious of the difficulty of separating a unified conception of "Indian Literature" from Indian nationalism. There is the desire to fill in the missing histories of Indian literatures; but there is also the awareness that to fill it in as "Indian Literature" in the singular is to partake of a

problematic nationalist narrative. Hence his brief comments about the shared “civilizational ethos” of Indian literature get buried in the body of the essay when we might expect them to be the focus of it.

I do not in any way mean to sound dismissive of the insights of these scholars, particularly Das, whose project comprises the most comprehensive aggregation of Indian literary history to date, or Ahmad, whose methodological critique remains essential reading for anyone engaged in the study of Indian literature. I am, however, drawing attention to a shared assumption in all their conceptions of Indian literature: that it be grasped (or dismissed) as a unified “Indian Literature.” There is, however, no compulsion to grasp it in this way. Das’s descriptions of the inter-connectedness of Indian literatures do not necessarily have to end in the “unity” that he cherishes. Nor do we need to study Indian literatures together on account of a shared civilizational ethos, as Ahmad implies. And we have to remember, as noted above, that the schema suggested as alternatives to that of nationalism cannot in fact account for all the writing that emerges from what is now India—for some connections, the contours of the Indian nation are in fact necessary. But this recognition should also not lead us to reject, as Raveendran does, any attempt to study them together merely because nationalism insists we should, to its own ends of flattening cultural diversity and absorbing the myriad ways of narrating community into a master narrative.

Our view of Indian literature could instead be relational—emphasizing points of connection, influence, and genealogy, as well as points of divergence and indeed difference. The point is not to find some way to willy-nilly grasp these literatures together, or to create a catalog of characteristics all Indian literatures could be said to share; it is instead to emphasize that despite the cultural and linguistic differences between various Indian literatures, they can only fully be grasped in relation to other literatures around them. Our organizing framework would be neither the articulation of a national “unity in diversity,” as it is for Das, nor the evocation of an amorphous civilizational ethos, as Ahmad suggests. It would simply be enough to point to overlapping cultural and political constellations and the literary representations of these constellations that, in turn, resonate with the various Indian literary traditions. Some of these traditions could have ancient civilizational links, while others may be the accidents of modern nation formation. While some of these constellations can be traced back to antiquity, others emerged only in recent centuries, and yet others only after independence. Thus it becomes undesirable to speak of an “Indian Literature,” not only because we do not have the disciplinary tools to chart its terrain and genealogy completely, but also because to grasp it via any kind of unity distorts as much as it clarifies. This does not mean that we cannot grasp connections that are commonly perceived to exist. To say that Hindi and Bengali literature should be studied together, for example, (though not, of course, only together) does not have to mean making the claim that Bengali and Hindi are two voices in which one sensibility speaks; it can mean instead that the development

of particular genres in one language is modulated or illuminated by developments in the other. Nor does this mean that we cannot speak more generally of particular forms such as the “Indian Novel,” which comes into being more or less along with the Indian nation, and in which many of the key issues of Indian nationalism are worked out. Indeed, one might be able to argue that the “Indian Novel” is a coherent category across the various Indian literatures, as long as we remember that the Indian novel is not the same as “Indian Literature.” We thus conceive of the field as an ever-shifting mosaic: occasionally cohering into discernible patterns, clearer in some places than in others, but dependent always on a point of critical emphasis to come into focus.

In this essay I have traced the trajectories by which the study of the Indian novel in English has by and large substituted for the study of Indian literature in the Western academy; and I have suggested that prevailing attempts to raise the question of Indian literature at a broader, unified level have for various reasons failed to provide a way out. The discontinuous, relational approach that I propose as an alternative is, of course, making a case for studying Indian literatures as a comparative, multilingual discipline—and this case should be quite clear and convincing from the work of Das and Ahmad. But it may still seem reasonable to say that this should be the emphasis of as yet unconstituted departments of Comparative South Asian Literatures.¹⁰ While the formation and proliferation of such departments would indeed be a highly welcome development, there are good reasons for scholars working in English to pay close and urgent attention to literatures in other Indian languages. I will close here with a brief discussion of these reasons which I hope will also serve as illustration of the point with which I began this essay: that the work we can do in failing to find satisfactory answers to the question “What is Indian Literature?” is more urgent than the question itself.

First, postcolonial literary criticism in general, and criticism on Indian fiction in particular, has not always been concerned with questions of aesthetics or form—where access to the original language of composition would be an absolute necessity. While in recent years more critical work on the aesthetics of Indian literature has begun to emerge, the thematic approach is alive and well, and literary texts are usually examined for the ways in which they embody colonial or postcolonial narratives of the state. Indeed, when it comes to the study of the colonial period it is quite common to come across references to works in translation. Rabindranath Tagore’s novel *Ghare Baire*, for example, is often cited in discussions of gender and nationalism. It is not clear why this cross-linguistic approach should not translate to the postcolonial period, or for that matter more fully to the colonial period. I am not suggesting that critics working in English produce theories about literatures in other languages or examinations of literary language and form based on translations; merely that there is little reason to refrain from drawing on these texts for the kind of thematic analysis that is representative of much postcolonial literary criticism today. Postcolonial criticism is, in fact, poorer for not doing so.

While it may not be feasible for critics to become specialists in multiple language traditions, we can, as Vilashini Cooppan has argued on behalf of a reconstituted notion of “World Literature,” become responsible and unashamed generalists.

Finally, the importance of translation studies in the Indian literary context cannot be overstated. While translation studies as a whole is a growing field in the Anglo-American academy, much of this work in the larger field is specific to European cultural contexts and literary traditions. Theories of translation in the South Asian context remain somewhat thin on the ground, with the most prominent work on translation confined largely to the colonial period—particularly the ideologies and politics of translation in the late 18th and 19th centuries—and to the politics of translation across an East/West divide.¹¹ Not very much is available yet on translation in an Indian context; both in understanding the linguistic, structural, and political challenges facing the translator, and in analyzing and theorizing the representation of a multilingual society in any particular language tradition. I refer here both to translation of texts between languages and to translation within texts in particular languages. (How) does literary translation or the negotiation of multilinguality in seemingly monolingual texts aid an understanding of a heteroglot society?¹² If India can be said to be a nation, or South Asia a region in/through translation, how is this reflected or commented upon in its literatures? How does cultural translation work within India itself or across the region? These are questions we need to explore more fully.

As literary critics we have to make some fundamental shifts in our approach to the field. As scholars of Indian and other South Asian literatures we need to develop and exercise literary fluency in more than just English (after all most of us in the Western academy learn one or the other European language to satisfy doctoral language requirements). However, the study of translation as activity and text needs additionally to become an integral part of our work. It is not simply that translation is all we have in lieu of being able to read in 35 different languages or more, but that translation is key to the Indian and larger South Asian literary field. Whether it is under the rubric of South Asian or Indian (and other national) literatures, our work needs always to be aware of the multilingual contexts from which they arise. It is time for us to end our near-exclusive focus on literature in English. Placing all the literatures of India, or indeed of South Asia, in a critical context is not going to be the work of any one scholar. But until we begin to place the archive with which we are familiar in conversation with adjacent archives, we will be left with a partial vision: not of some illusory whole of “Indian Literature” in the singular, but of the very subset in which we claim expertise.

Notes

1. The recent collection *Teaching World Literature* provides a good

overview of the reframing of the idea of world literature in the Western academy.

2. See, for example, Huggan (especially the conclusion) and Watson for a more general account of the relationship between postcolonial studies and Commonwealth studies; see Chakladar for a more specific account of related approaches to Indian literature in the two fields.

3. As Rushdie puts it in *Imaginary Homelands*, “Eng. Lit. at the centre and the rest of the world at the periphery” (65).

4. See Venuti’s *The Scandals of Translation* for an account of the stigmatized status of translated texts.

5. I include myself in the second wave of this ongoing (im)migration; I began my graduate work at the University of Southern California in 1993.

6. This of course suggests as well the professional pressures felt by those who write about Indian literature in the academy in the context of very limited, and shrinking, venues of scholarly publication.

7. After Kwame Anthony Appiah’s 1991 article, “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?”

8. The motto of the state-run Sahitya Akademi (or Literary Academy) of India is “Indian literature is one though written in many languages.”

9. See Chapter 7 of Ahmad’s study, “‘Indian Literature’: Notes Towards the Definition of a Category.”

10. South Asian, rather than national literatures, seems to be the logical conclusion of my argument. After all, interactions between adjacent languages and the literatures created in them (which in turn work to constitute their languages of composition) do not respect national boundaries. A relational view of the literatures of the various nations of South Asia permits us a definition of South Asian literature that arises not from a sense of extra-literary political goodwill or a sense of regional cooperation (as that of SAARC, say) but from the material and textual histories of these literatures themselves. I do not pursue that logical conclusion here for a few reasons. First, the category of South Asian literature needs a much greater theoretical elaboration than I have room for here; secondly, there is a danger here of subsuming the entire region’s cultural production to that of India—in other words, in institutional reality South Asian literature is far more likely to be a synonym for Indian literature than for Pakistani, Nepali, Sri Lankan or Bangladeshi literature. It is necessary to be sensitive to this reality and not theorize too glibly from the Indian context; indeed, the problems with eliding “South Asian”

with “Indian” may become all the more clear when we pay closer attention to the “Indian” in “Indian Literature.” For a nuanced discussion of South Asian Literature as a category, see Amardeep Singh’s ““Names Can Wait””: The Misnaming of the South Asian Diaspora in Theory and Practice” in *South Asian Review*.

11. See Tejaswini Niranjana’s influential *Siting Translation* for an example of the former and Gayatri Spivak’s “The Politics of Translation” for an example of the latter.

12. For a rare example of such an approach, see Bishnupriya Ghosh’s astute reading of Upamanyu Chatterjee’s “relexification” of Bengali in English in his novel, *The Last Burden*. Ghosh borrowed the term “relexification” from Chantal Zabus in her *The African Palimpsest* (1991; 2007), pp. 111-73.

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