

Decolonising the Indian Mind by Namvar Singh: Text and Notes

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Paper XII(A): Colonial and Post Colonial Literature

Unit I: Prose. Text: 'Decolonising the Indian Mind' by Namvar Singh

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Decolonising the Indian Mind

Namvar Singh

THE greatest event of world history in the twentieth century has been decolonisation. The century may not have yet ended but the hegemony in literature of Europe and America has certainly come to an end. At the centre of literary creation we have now not Europe and America but the nations of Latin America, Africa and Asia. It is from these countries that works which are creatively exciting and stimulating are coming out, and the initiative lies with the writers of these countries. Whereas the writers of Latin America and Africa are mounting a challenge to the literature of Europe and America in the very languages of Europe, it is mainly in our own non-European languages that the writers of an Asian country like India are hastening the process of decolonization.

While this process had started with the beginning of the century in Latin America, Africa and Asia, it was accelerated after the Second World War. In order to annex this new literary groundswell, the literary theorists of Europe and America have from time to time come up with various theoretical formulations, calling it now "Commonwealth Literature", now "New Literatures in English", and now "Post-colonial Literature." The newest such formulation is "Third World Literature." In one sense, the concept of "Third World Literature" may be seen as a new variation on Goethe's old concept of "World Literature", but it is not quite so innocent. It is in fact but a devious device to maintain the hegemony of "First World Literature," and if we look at it carefully, the formulation "Third World Literature" is nothing but neo-"orientalism" of the post-colonial age. Apparently, in order to define themselves, Europe and America still need some entity "other" than themselves. It is implicit in this Western conception that the Third World too must need some "other" in order to define itself, and who could this "other" be, of course, but the West! To my mind, this is the true perspective in which to evaluate Indian Literature of the twentieth century.

Whether the issue is that of tradition and modernity, or of regional and national identity, or the aesthetic one of experimentalism and the assimilation of indigenous forms, it is hardly possible to look for a resolution except in the perspective of decolonization. Therefore, the very first question to ask is; how aware and active are the Indian writers today so far as the process of decolonization is concerned? Nor is this question one of mere academic interest, as is often the case in our seminars and conferences. The question relates directly to the release of our creative energy. And at this point, I humbly beg to submit that among Indian writers after Independence, the attitude of militant decolonization which was to be seen in the writers of an earlier generation has grown feeble and slack. This may be why we do not have among us a Gabriel Garcia Márquez, a Chinua Achebe or a Ngungi Wa Thiong'o. I often feel that within

the so-called "Third World Literature" of today, Indian literature lags behind the literatures of Africa and Latin America, especially in the genres of the novel, the short story and drama. Needless to say, I make this statement not as any kind of self-rebuke or accusation but with a sense of profound anguish.

Could it possibly be that we have now lost the fervour of the days of our nationalist struggle? Today we have neither that nationalist sentiment nor that nationalism. Nationalism is not a panacea for all ills. It has its dangers too, and it is not as if I am not alive to them. But history has not yet consigned nationalism to its dustbin as a spent force; indeed, if anything, there have been signs of its resurgence in the latter half of our country. Perhaps, so long as imperialism lives in one form or another, there will remain a need for nationalism. But isn't it the case that we have somewhere in the recesses of sensibility come to a silent compromise with imperialism? It is but rarely that one comes across the word 'imperialism' in intellectual circles now, as if the thing itself had ceased to be.

And does this not have something to do with our Independence of 1947? How many of us are aware that we did not gain Independence, but that we were granted it? Now who does not know the difference between being 'granted' something and 'gaining' it? Were it a matter of gaining independence, would we have gained the independence of a partitioned country? How is it that a country which had rejected the partition of Bengal in 1905 accepted the partition of the country in 1947, especially when the basis of the partition was the same; communalism? Over those four decades, such a great change came about that the very language for describing these two events changed. The very word *Banga-bhanga* evokes by assonance *anga-bhanga*, i.e., dismemberment, but what is the resonance by comparison of *vibhajana*, *bantwara* or *taqseem*? It is not true that the *swadeshi* movement which arose in opposition to the partition of Bengal saved the Indian identity from fragmentation, while our acquiescence in the partition of the country in 1947 served to shatter it to bits?

To see how far reaching are the consequence of such fragmentation, let us consider two Indian novels: the first *Cora* (1910) by Rabindranath Tagore, which has for its background *Banga bhanga* and the *Swadeshi* movement, and the other *Samskara* (1965) by U.R. Anantha Murthy, which has nothing to do at all with the partition of India. If these two novels are still comparable, it is because each has at its centre the theme of the search of identity and the crisis of identity. The hero of *Cora* tries for all he is worth to become a Hindu but is eventually obliged to become an Indian. The hero of *Samskara*, Praneshacharya, endeavours to act as a Brahmin priest but after his fall is left a common human being. Each experiences a sense of liberation, and each is shocked into such liberation. The shock for Gaur Mohan lies in the revelation that he is not by birth a Hindu. The shock for Praneshacharya comes through his physical contact with the untouchable girl Chandri. Through their respective baptisms by fire, each emerges a human being. But while the humanising of Gaur Mohan lies in his becoming an Indian, the humanising of Praneshacharya comes about through his defying the many taboos associated with his conduct as an *acharya*. Both the novels constitute an allegory—what one might even call, in Frederic Jameson's phrase, a "national allegory," which has been suggested to be a distinct characteristic of the so-called "Third World Novel".

But what a great difference there is on the question of "identity" between Gora and Samskara—and here the difference is of the essence! Gaur Mohan's last sentence is: "What I had day and night longed to be but was not able to be, I have become today. Today I belong to all of India. Within me there is no conflict between Hindus, Muslims, Christians or any other community. Today in India, every caste is my caste, and I can sit down and eat with each untouchable."

On the other hand, what Praneshacharya of Samskara feels after he has so to say tasted of the fruit of knowledge is described as follows:

The Acharya felt not only remorse, but a lightness in the thought he was now a free man, relieved of his responsibility to lead the way, relieved of all authority. 'What manner of man am I? I am just like you—a soul driven by lust and hate—is this my first lesson in humility?... I am sin, my work is sin, my soul is sin, my birth is in sin.' No, no, even that is a lie. Must forget all words learned by heart, the heart may flow free like a child's....

When Praneshacharya goes back amidst the waiting villagers after this experience, all he can say to them is: 'I'm lost. I know nothing. You do whatever your hearts say.'

On the one hand we have Gora's proud declaration: "Today I am free. I feel no longer the fear that I may be polluted, that I may fall from my caste. I no longer need to watch every step of mine, lest I might be rendered impure through touching the un touchable." And on the other hand we have Praneshacharya's meek freedom! The Acharya of Samskara may indeed speak Sanskrit, but in his speech may be heard the confessional under tone of some existentialist hero of Sartre's or Camus—or I may of course be imagining it! In this confession of Samskara, there may be some trace of the medieval Indian vaishnava saints, but the sense of liberation here is quite something else, whatever its source might be.

In quest of identity, Anantha Murthy too like Tagore returns to India's past. For him, however, this past is something not to be contemplated but simply to be felt. He wants to dig up this past with its roots all complete, and to feel it. For Praneshacharya the past is like that "small sprout of sarsaparilla" which he pulls up by its roots on one occasion in the novel in order to smell it, for the reason that the root has acquired a special fragrance compounded of "that sod of the earth and the space above it." And never mind that what he has "tugged (up) with both hands" is only "half the length of the mother root"! It is because of such a tendency that Samskara bears a clearer stamp of Indianness than Gora. Witness as proof the one hundred and more notes on Sanskrit and Kannada words in the English translation of Samskara! May be that is why Samskara is a more 'Indian' novel in the eyes of Western scholars and readers, while Gora goes unregarded by them. Gora and the traditionally conditioned Praneshacharya both have to do with the Indian village, but how different is the experience of each and the image of the village in each case. Very probably Tagore felt no need to make Gora Indian by contriving scenes such as that of the cock-fight among the tribals!

It is not that Tagore did not wish to be an Indian, but he wished to be so in his own eyes and not in the eyes of the West. Recall for a moment Gora's proud challenges:

We shall not let our country stand like an accused in an alien court to be tried under alien law. We shall not compare ourselves point by point with some Western ideal, in order to feel either shame or pride. We shall

not feel embarrassed in the least before others or ourselves for the customs, faith, scriptures or society of the country we have been born in. We shall take to our bosom with a feeling of strength and pride all that belongs to our country, and we shall keep ourselves and our country from humiliation ... We do not wish to have to prove to anyone whether we are good or bad, civilized or savage ... That we are ourselves is all we wish to feel, and feel it for all we are worth.

Where shall we find today this swadeshi tone, when so many Indian writers consider it a matter of honour to be tried before some foreign court, and to offer proofs of their Indianness before Western critics!

It is our good fortune really that this tremendous responsibility has been claimed as peculiarly their own by Indian writers in English. This is but natural. If truth be told, it is these Indian writers in English alone who are the representative writers of "Indian literature", the literature of any other Indian language such as Hindi, Bengali or Tamil must remain "regional literature."

Anyhow, one of the more important issues which came up for debate after Independence was that of defining the Indian novel. Is there any distinct literary form such as the Indian novel? Or, as this question is being rephrased today; What is the Third World novel, and what are its defining characteristics? Seminar after seminar is being held in this country and abroad to discuss this question, and Indian writers in English as well as Indian professors of English are kept terribly busy. The whole endeavour is to prove that the Indian writers of today have left far behind the tradition of the realistic European novel of the nineteenth century, and that they are constructing a new and indigenous Indian narrative style based on the ancient tales and narratives of India. There is an attempt to incorporate within the process such myths, customs and beliefs of Indian life as are exotic for the West and therefore the objects of its special curiosity. So that the argument may not fall for lack of practical demonstration, our novelists and especially our English-language novelists are putting their heart and soul into the production of such novels. If we were to go by the results, the Indian novels in English today would seem to be rather more "Indian" than the so called "regional language" novels.

Some indication of this trend is to be found in an article by Anita Desai, "Indian Fiction Today", published in the Fall 1989 issue of the well known American journal *Daedalus* and by the illustrative pieces of fiction which appear with it. (In fact, the very title of this special issue of *Daedalus* is "Another India.") This well known Indo-Anglian novelist begins by referring to the Indian provenance of the "magic realism" in Salman Rushdie's novel *Shame*. Then, in an ironic glance at some younger writers, she observes that they are returning to an old fashioned style of narrative which is both "contemporary" and the "latest". As she puts it, "They found themselves travelling so far Westward that, the world being in the shape it is, they had arrived in the East again." Now, if this is "Indian literature", there would seem to be a need to examine afresh the very concept of "Indian Literature" as of "Third World Literature."

On the face of it, such "Indian" writers too are against colonization in literature. But the belief is entrenched in their minds that it is only by having gone through a journey of the West that one can return to the East. The helplessness of the Indian writers of our colonial phase is

understandable, as perhaps also of those post-colonial Indian writers who have been travellers in the West. But how can one accept this as the destiny of the whole of Indian literature?

But some Indian writers do talk like this, and especially during their visits to Europe and America; it is as if they wished to assure their Western audiences that a "journey" to the West is essential for attaining an Indian identity. Only recently, Nirmal Varma has made similar statements in a lecture on "India and Europe: A Search for Areas of Commitment", delivered at the University of Heidelberg. He begins by quoting with approval a statement by J.L. Mehta, an Indian scholar resident in Europe: "In the East there is no way for us except to go through Europeanization and then beyond it." He goes on to ask: "If the colonial experience of the last two hundred years is not a journey through Europe, what else is it?" And then follows the conclusion: "What India needed was to go through the process of a decolonization of the self in order to regain one's "atmatatva" (quiddity), which only one's own tradition can activate and no foreign agency."

The intention here is unexceptionable, but words like "atmatatva" and "tradition" raise at the same time some inconvenient questions. If by "atmatatva" is meant not the given "atman" of vedanta, then it is not something to be regained but a consciousness which needs to be constructed and developed in the very process of spiritual decolonization. The development of such a consciousness is possible only through struggle and struggle with oneself. As for "tradition", it is not something given either. Colonialism too have represented a particular kind of Indian tradition, and in response to it, not one but several alternative traditions have been put forward by India. Needless to say, the business of construction of tradition goes on unabated by neocolonialism.

In the same special issue of *Daedalus* on "Another India", the editorial emphasises more than once that the distinction of India lies in "all that is primordial in that society, that has not simply given way before the power of modern technology." This of course is the image of India that the West has always cherished. If we were to accept this in the name of our tradition, the developed countries of the West would be even better pleased than we ourselves might be. But could this truly be called decolonization? In the name of preserving this primordial Indian tradition, some neo-Gandhian intellectuals within India have been constantly campaigning against modernization and development projects. To all this another new dimension has been added by the call for protection of environment. This too is an aspect of decolonization.

Two years previously in this very journal *Daedalus*, in its Winter 1987 issue, there had appeared an article by Cathleen D. MacCarthy under the title: "From Cold war to Cultural Development: the International Cultural Activities of the Ford Foundation 1950-80." The articles charted the change in policy effected by the Ford Foundation in its cultural activities in South Asian and South-East Asian countries, beginning in 1967. Before this date, the Ford Foundation had been conducting an extensive campaign for promoting a climate of opinion against communism in Asia in particular and the World in general by making financial grants to an organization called the Congress for Cultural Free dom. But after *The New York Times* revealed in 1966 the fact that the Congress for Cultural Freedom had links with the C.I.A., the Ford Foundation continued for a while to fund the Congress under its hastily changed name

and then, after the sudden closure of this new organization as well, it began to act directly in its own right on the policy of "cultural development." Under this new policy, greater emphasis was laid on "preserving one's own existence and on having a name of one's own" than on being "modern". In other words, "identity" was held to be more important than "modernity," regardless of whether the identity was religious or racial or regional or linguistic. That was why greater attention was paid to preserving the ancient traditions of these backward nations. It is not accidental that many movements in favour of all these kinds of "identities" in India also began at about the same time. There may or may not have been some planned conspiracy of the West behind these movements, but it is hard to discount altogether a connection between the two of some kind or the other. How ironical that America cares more for the past of India than India itself, and that at the misery of our tribals and aborigines it is America which is more distressed than we are. Such is Christian compassion.

It was again at about this time that the notion of a "Third World" was conceived, which led in time to the conception of a "Third World Literature". Clearly, this is a figment of the fertile imagination of the "First World", the very axiom of all whose "post-modernist" formulations is the concept of "difference." According to the West, this "difference" is the "destiny" of the East, so, if the East were to go on preserving this "difference" in every possible way, that would be its ultimate value for the West. How different is this view from the old kind of Europeanization and Americanization! And isn't this too yet another devious de vice of colonization?

If some of us today cannot see this deviousness of colonization it is because cultural colonization has become a part and parcel of our consciousness. It is perhaps even lodged in our subconscious and is, in Frederic Jameson's phrase, our "political unconscious". So inescapable is the pressure of this subconscious that we often define our very identity in the language of our erstwhile colonial masters—and not only in their language but through the very concepts constructed by them. The spirit that we seek to exorcise has thus infiltrated the very mantra through which we seek to exorcise it. One cannot help feeling at times that in this regard, the writers of the preceding generation were rather more aware and vigilant than us.

That may be the reason why Indian writers of the post-Independence era have softened a little towards colonialism. A certain ambivalence has entered their attitudes. Such ambivalence itself is often accepted as a characteristic of modernism. It is taken to be not only part of the polite manners of civilized folk, but also a desirable value of modern poetics and aesthetics. Even our language has acquired a kind of ambivalence. The direct robustness of our native prose is changing: one only has to compare it with the so called undeveloped but thoroughly indigenous prose of the nineteenth century for ample proof of it. For this reason, a fundamental question before a writer now is of his language; it was the greatest poetic worry for Raghuvir Sahay among recent Hindi writers. Ultimately this is a problem, as Muktibodh put it, of *Vyaktitvantarana*, or transformation of personality.

The question still remains: How should we oppose the new onslaught of colonization? With our tradition? But which tradition? Tradition itself is a reconstruction: the rediscovery of the past by the present as desired. The colonialists of yesterday and the imperialists of today

are presenting an image of our past which is primitive and chiefly an index of our backwardness. And closer at home, the tradition presented by Hindu fundamentalists is something else altogether, something extremely onedimensional and narrow.

Nor can we find a way out through any "nationalist allegory". If we were to pit an image of our nation against colonialism, whose nation would it be? The nation of those who hold the reins of the state? But what then will be the nation of those who are oppressed by the state and wish therefore to change it? How can those identify with this nationalism who are obliged to live at a level not fit for human beings even forty years after Independence? For how long can a dalit go on sacrificing his identity for the identity of the nation? The nationalist consciousness which prevailed at the beginning of the twentieth century cannot now be revived, nor will it do to be invoking it.

We must confront the problem on the grounds of the present. And on that plane we cannot find an escape route by saying that it is only a limited section of Indian society that has been colonized, and that too superficially. However limited and superficial cultural colonization may be, it is still hegemonic. It is this small colonized class that has claimed to be the cultural and literary avant grade of India after Independence, and it lays claim too to having modernized and developed Indian literature. This class also lays claim to having effected decolonization, and never mind the fact that a lot of it is in reality pseudo-decolonization.

Decolonization does not mean a rejection of the West altogether. There are many even among the writers of the West who have raised their pens against colonization and imperialism. It will be shortsighted on our part to dissociate ourselves from this tradition of the West in the name of a distinctive identity of "Third World Literature."

There was a time when the socialist literature of the so-called "Second World" provided inspiration and energy to this "Third World Literature." Today, that "Second World" too is beginning to disintegrate. But this does not mean that its literature too has gone down the drain. It need hardly be pointed out that the literature of that world is considerably more liberated and exciting today. And it is far more to our purpose as well.

We may wish to look at the challenges of the twentieth century in this perspective. I have no ready-made solutions, and perhaps no one else has either. And even if one did, there is no guarantee that such a solution will satisfy everyone. A writer believes merely in raising questions, and such questions can sometimes be raised through the act of putting things in a certain perspective. Such at the moment has been my effort and intention.

Finally, one last word. It is strange that no one today should be talking about the future, whereas there is a decade to go before the twentieth century ends, a whole decade open to new possibilities and vulnerable to new anxieties and turbulences. Why do we forget that this is the century which has witnessed two World Wars, with the rehearsal for a third one now going on before our very eyes (the U.S.-Iraq war). Utterly unexpected, and a reminder to us that we haven't yet seen the end of imperialism. What was ended is socialism, which was once thought to be the future of the world and about which a writer of the West had written: I have gone and seen the future, and it is working miracles. After all, which way is history headed? What

happened to that concept of 'Progress', which Europe of the nineteenth century and India of the mid-twentieth had such firm faith in? In this context, I am reminded of that angel described by Walter Benjamin who is nothing but History:

His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

The model of this pen-portrait is Paul Klee's painting, "Angelus Novus". After such an ironical image of history, what more remains to say?

Translated from Hindi by Harish Trivedi

LINKS FOR FURTHER READING:

<http://www.slideshare.net/mobile/milan1994/decolonization-of-indian-mind-namvar-singh>

<http://www.wkksir.blogspot.com/2015/05/decolonising-indian-mind-namvar-singh.html?m=1>

<http://www.guffo.in/namvar-singh/2>

DISCUSSION:

To understand decolonisation, one has to comprehend the concept of colonisation first. Colonisation denote the action or process of settling on and establishing control over new land especially one inhabited by indigenous people. Colonisation involves the exploitation of native inhabitants by the marginalisation and destruction of local economies, reorganisation of political structure in favour of the colonisers. But apart from economical or political aspects, the colonising process has much deeper consequences. As a strategy to co-opt the colonised people and rule over them with their consent before, the process of colonisation of the mind becomes an important project of the imperial power. This strategy takes overt/covert forms, sometimes functioning as state policy and at other times insidiously, creeping up on the colonised subject to suggest that s/he is inferior, that his/her language, culture, history, religion, practices, complexion are all inferior to that of the representation of the imperial power. Thus the colonised subject gradually internalise their own inferiority as well as the master-slave relationship. This nullifies the possible resistance to the imperial power. This is how colonisation of mind takes place. This process is subtler and slower than the political and economic takeover. Through the rewriting of histories, languages, education policies, cultural texts, the hegemony is established and the possibility of resistance is eradicated as the colonised subject internalise the superiority of the colonisers.

In his celebrated work *Orientalism*, Edward Said has pointed out the strategies of cultural domination of the Occident over the Orient and provided the methodology for recognising and resisting these strategies in our reading of texts. Colonisation of the minds was a subtle gradual process; the decolonisation process is no less slow. Namvar Singh in this essay identifies decolonisation as the single most significant event of the twentieth century. He expresses his concern about the “new onslaught” of colonisation and explores the ways in which neo-colonisation can be resisted. The apparent solution of turning to tradition or nationalism holds no appeal to Singh. Instead he suggests setting up of a global network of resistance along with many anti-imperial individuals and groups who have actively expressed their disagreement with colonialism and imperialism. According to Singh, we should not dissociate ourselves from the progressive elements of the west in search of a distinctive identity for Third World literature. As Saeed Ur-Rehman has argued, though revivification of pre-colonial national and indigenous reality was an important step by the pioneers of Indian English literature, the continuous rejection of metropolitan and urban Indian reality by many Indian critics has hampered the discussion of contemporary theoretical problems in Indian English criticism. The process of canonization that operates on the basis of an essentialist idea of ‘Indianness’ still reflects how deeply the British education system has affected the process of cultural productions. However, Singh’s resistance to neo-colonialism leads him to find alternative models for a ‘Third World Literature.’ The decolonising of literary studies in the metropolitan academies offered the possibility of the development of postcolonial theory. Harish Trivedi who has translated the essay into English has argued in “India and Post-colonial Discourse” that postcolonial theory is an attempt to ‘whitewash the horrors of colonialism as if they had never been, and a scheme to see the history of a large part of the world as divided into two neat and sanitized compartments, the pre-colonial and the post-colonial.’ For the first time in the history of the Western academy, Trivedi has observed, the non-west is placed at the centre of its dominant discourse. Hawley has aptly argued that if the goals and mechanisms of postcolonial studies are still debated, it is clear that its object of study is also undergoing constant interrogation and that this refocusing participates in the congeries of events tagged as globalization. However, one of the consequences of the decolonising of mind in literary studies in eastern world is the canon reform we have been witnessing in the last few years with the birth of new literatures in English breaking the canon of Standard English literature.

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