
No Nations, but Classes

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In 1973, during my only visit to Calcutta, I had the opportunity to meet a few Communist “cadres” in the home of one of them, an elderly gentleman. I remember hardly anything of that visit, except that a portrait of Stalin was hung in the room in which we met. This struck me with wonder since I had learned to regard Stalin as a mass murderer to be compared only with Hitler. My hosts were, however, not embarrassed by my question about why they displayed this portrait. Their answer was simple and straightforward: Stalin had been a great Communist leader. I did not make a comparison with Hitler in that conversation, but I wonder now whether that would have made any difference. As I later learned, Hitler is often seen in India as a great fighter against British imperialism and a friend of Subhas Chandra Bose, the Bengali nationalist leader who joined with the Germans and the Japanese against the British in World War II.

I was reminded of this incident when, twenty years later, I read Aijaz Ahmad's *In Theory*. Of course, Ahmad shows no sympathy for Stalin, but his book reminds one of the strength of a rather isolated Indian communism, whether in the form of the Communist party of India or its offshoot, the Communist party of India (Marxist), or the Maoist Communist party of India (Marxist-Leninist). In Western Europe, only Italy and perhaps France have comparably robust communist move-

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ments, but in India, unlike in these nations, Communists have held crucial executive power over considerable periods of time, by governing two important Indian states, Kerala and West Bengal. The political importance of Indian communism is reflected in its intellectual strength, both inside and outside academic institutions.

Those of us who live in Europe or the United States need to bear in mind the intellectual presence of communism in India when reading Ahmad's book. Otherwise, it would be hard to place Ahmad's view that the recent collapse of the Soviet Union and the other socialist governments of Eastern Europe is part of a global triumph of imperialism, or his related opinion that "*on its own terms*, the economic performance of most of these countries was actually not bad. The Soviet Union did double its living standards in the quarter-century after the war and made further gains in the next decade, up to 1980; . . . People in several of the Comecon countries lived even better than those in the Soviet Union" (24). After reading this kind of outdated propaganda it hardly comes as a surprise when Ahmad states that "the movements that came to power in 1989 and constitute the majority inside Russia as well—aided, surely, by imperialism, but with the momentum of mass mobilizations—have turned out to be not only reactive but reactionary, in the strict sense" (26).

This is not the place to try to come up with counterarguments about what I tend to regard as the collapse of Soviet imperialism, and its aftermath. My aim is simply to show the extent to which Ahmad's theories are not merely Marxist but are part of hardline Indian communism. This is important since it sets the tone of the book, which is judgmental about people who have not chosen to follow the party line. Edward Said is the main target, but in his case Ahmad at least gives a lengthy—and at points rather convincing—argument why he does not agree with many of Said's positions. The same is not true for his unconscionable personal swipes at the Bengali historians of the Subaltern Studies group, who have chosen to develop a radical politics that is not communist. Partha Chatterjee's important book on *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (1986) is not engaged but rather merely dismissed in a footnote as an attack on Nehru and a romanticization of Bankim Chattopadhyay. Ahmad criticizes Said for promoting Ranajit Guha to a "postcolonial intellectual," without really engaging Guha's work. I agree with some of Ahmad's criticisms of Said's rhetoric, but I find it disturbing that Ahmad himself subsequently also refrains from engaging Guha's work and instead simply falls back on the well-worn communist strategy of casting suspicion upon Guha as a "typical upper-layer bourgeois" (210). Again, we should recognize that Marxist theoreticians in India tend to see the "Subalterns" as misguided traitors of the revolution. Ahmad's style of

inquisition reminds one of the attacks by French Communists on Foucault in the 1960s.

Much of the book should therefore be understood in the context of Indian communism's efforts to retain the theoretical high ground in Indian radical politics. Terry Eagleton's comment on the back jacket, that Ahmad has written a "courageously unfashionable critique," seems therefore correct, except for the term "courageously." Ahmad himself also makes much of "go[ing] against the contemporary current" (x), but in fact he simply follows the Communist party line, which, when one lives in academic circles in Delhi, does not seem to me courageous at all. The strange thing, however, is that the book deals with the category of "Third World Literature" and is published in London, for a metropolitan audience—all of which he criticizes when discussing Jameson, Said and the Subalterns. There is something highly contradictory in a book that argues against the selective canonization of certain kinds of Third World texts and the complete ignoring of others, but which itself remains focused on the West and its canon-formation. The only literary figure discussed at length by Ahmad is Salman Rushdie, a writer who lives in the West and writes in English for a largely Western audience—in short, a writer who is part of the Third World canon—and much of what he has to say about the gendered nature of the novel *Shame* has already been said by others.¹

This is not to say that Ahmad does not try to come up with a positive contribution to the study of Indian literature. His main claim here, however, is that we should not look at this literature from the perspective of "nationalism." So, for example, in his critique of Jameson (previously published in *Social Text*) he makes much of the fact that the nation became a problematic in Urdu literature only at the moment of independence (118). He misses here the immensely important extent to which the Urdu language was implicated in the struggle to define Muslim and Hindu nations. Even the rise of the Urdu novel or, for that matter, the Hindi novel cannot be understood without relating it to its immediate context of linguistic politics.² I do not know anything about Urdu novels, but, if Ahmad is indeed right that the nation is not a primary ideological problematic in Urdu novels in the colonial period, then it is important to note that it is an important problematic in Hindi novels, poetry and plays, characterized by the slogan "Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan."³ What should be explained, accordingly, is why an "Urdu,

1. See Grewal (1988).

2. See Lelyveld (1993).

3. See Chandra (1992, chap. 3, "Defining the Nation").

Muslim, Pakistan" did not characterize preindependence Urdu literature. Ahmad misses the importance of the nationalist construction of linguistic and literary boundaries here because, as a Marxist, he thinks that classes are real and nations are unreal.⁴ This fallacy has long made it difficult for Indian Communists—as well as for many secular socialists like Nehru—to come to grips with the phenomenon of religious nationalism, undoubtedly the most important political fact in twentieth-century India. The wars between communist states in Indo-China—Vietnam, Cambodia and China—and the failure of Marxism to explain nationalism have led Benedict Anderson to write his *Imagined Communities* (1983). One wonders what historical events would impel Ahmad to engage either the phenomenon of nationalism or that of religion.

Much of *In Theory* is thus devoted to a rather vicious attack on what Ahmad sees as bourgeois intellectual fashions, and to a high-spirited defense of Marxism. There is even a chapter defending Marx's Orientalist views on India, expressed in his journalistic work. This defense leads Ahmad to endorse Ravinder Kumar's typically Orientalist view of precolonial India as a land of "substantially self-regulating village communities" (234). The obscurantism of such positions derives from a highly eclectic reading of current Indian historiography. It would have been better if, instead of this curious defense of an Orientalist view of India, which Marx shared with many of his contemporaries, Ahmad had presented an analysis of the concept of the Asiatic mode of production and its use from Wittfogel up to the more recent structural-Marxism of Maurice Godelier. Such a discussion would at least have provided a basis for a materialistic interpretation of Indian civilization, from which he expects much more than I do. From my point of view, paying attention to the Marxist debates about "the Asiatic mode of production" has the benefit of showing the poverty of Marxist thinking, hampered as it is by party politics. Again, what I find disconcerting in this book is the abundance of denunciation and the lack of constructive theory on such elusive topics as Orientalism and Indian literature. It almost seems from Ahmad's writing that Marxism became unfashionable only as part of the victory of imperialism and that there are no strong intellectual arguments against it. To show this, one would have to engage the arguments put forward by writers like Foucault, Derrida or Deleuze, and not simply dismiss poststructuralism as "*repressive and bourgeois*" (36).

4. Editor's comment: For discussions that problematize the connections between English language, colonialism and nationalism, see Svati Joshi, *Rethinking English: Essays in Literature, Ideology, History* (Delhi, 1991); Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, ed., *The Lie of the Land: English Literary Studies in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).

The positive and substantive contribution of Ahmad's book is the long chapter on the category of "Indian Literature." He rightly argues that this category is not constituted by either high Brahmanical textuality nor by the assembling of the main texts of the different regional languages. In his view, Indian literary history must be considered in relation to a larger perspective on the historical development of Indian civilization. This difficult approach is clearly the way to go, although I do not agree that literature is "objective[ly] determin[ed] in the process of the material development of a culture" (244). Nevertheless, this chapter illustrates the theoretical difficulties in dealing with Indian literature. It should, in my view, be required reading in courses dealing with Indian literature, although, again, there is a remarkable contradiction in this text—on which I have commented above—in that Ahmad really writes for a Western audience that does not know—and is not expected to know—about the subject, Indian literature.⁵ There is little engagement of literary productions in India and in those few cases in which Ahmad engages a particular strand of literature, such as the medieval Bhakti literature, we are only offered clichés about this literature's anti-Brahmanical nature, and its democratization of literary language.⁶ While reading Ahmad's book, I happened to also read Sudhir Chandra's *The Oppressive Present; Literature and Social Consciousness in Colonial India* (see above). This book also has problems, but at least it deals directly with a number of Hindi, Bengali, Marathi and Gujarati texts and authors. Ahmad writes about literature only at a considerable remove.

Ahmad argues that his chapter on "Indian Literature" stands as a counterpoint to his criticism of the category of "Third World Literature," though ironically his book is obviously written not for an Indian market but for a world market of readers who have become interested in theories about Third World literature by the work of people like Said. Considering the lengths to which Ahmad goes to debunk Said and the Subalterns, there is a remarkable silence about gender in the book. In an essay on the Rushdie affair, Gayatri Spivak asks the fascinating question, "Where is ShahBano?"⁷ Here I am likewise tempted to ask why Ahmad does not engage the work of Spivak, who is perhaps the most important poststructuralist critic today, and who explicitly deals with Indian literature in her work.

5. This particular problem of the representation of "things Indian" to a Western audience can be illuminated by reference to Marx's understanding of history, as done by the "Subalternist" Dipesh Chakrabarty in "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian Pasts'?" published in the "poststructuralist" journal *Representations* (Winter 1992).

6. See my critique of these clichés in van der Veer (1987).

7. Spivak (1989).

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