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South Asian Literary Studies, for Better and Worse¹

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It is uncannily fitting that we are sitting here in Philadelphia to discuss the state of South Asian literary studies, because the first institutional academic expression of the collocation “South Asia” was established by W. Norman Brown just across town at the University of Pennsylvania when he changed its Department of Oriental Studies to the Department of South Asia Regional Studies in 1947, with funding from Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Ford;² 1947: at the very moment of negotiated independence from a European imperial power and the formation of the nation-states of India and Pakistan—at the moment of Partition. Have we learned to read, yet, the emergence of a regional- or area-based academic discipline in the new imperial power, just as nation-states are seceding from an old empire? To what extent should this be thought through as we advocate for future disciplinary formations or think about changing the ones already established?

This was of course the beginning of the alliance of Humanities and Social Sciences that made up the field of Area Studies. Even as we today use the name “South Asia” as a nice, convenient, politically correct and inclusive term that acknowledges there are more nation-states in the region than the giant India alone, we might also remember its codification in Area Studies, for better and worse.

In any case, I do not want to say more about Area Studies here, and I am not interested in settling scores with it as there is still much to learn from its ongoing legacy. Area Studies is often dismissed all too readily today, and scholars confident in their own moral rectitude, forget its commitment to rigorous language-learning and to a form (admittedly unsatisfactory in the present conjuncture) of

interdisciplinarity. However, the general epistemological background of Areas Studies is unavoidable for the present topic, framed as it is under an inherited and generally unquestioned Area Studies heading.

Some questions, then:

- What is at stake in retaining “South Asia” as a niche? What does it represent? What is its *use* as a designator? I summarize some points digested from the original concept-statement circulated to the participants by my friend Sangeeta Ray. My questions are posed in the spirit of critically constructive allegiance. It is of course important to keep working with a professionally and academically representative body such as the MLA for changes that will, one hopes, ultimately be reflected in curricular and more general epistemological shifts. We are obliged to note the terrifying contemporary rightward shift in India, the violent attacks on literary figures, journalists, and other intellectuals across the region, and the national and international theaters of war playing out there. These developments must surely also determine how we presently construct “South Asia” as an object of knowledge or research, in relation to the desires of scholars doing so in the North American academy;
- What desire does the phrase “South Asian Literary Studies” articulate? Does it want to be a literary niche, a disciplinary niche, a forum or wished-for multiple forums at the MLA? What is at stake when it is yoked to the question of a future or futures plural. A future implies a present and a past, and the rubric of our roundtable indicated the trajectory of a fall: we used to be relevant, powerful, at the center of postcolonial studies; now we are in decline, eclipsed by other regions or other headings. In the rubric defining the Round Table, there was even a tone of mourning that could paradoxically threaten the very future or futures we wish for—a mourning threatening to get stuck in a melancholic clinging to a vanished former glory, a lost sense of ascendancy; and
- Why the perceived fall into diminished relevance?

Let me speculate.

For better and worse, a certain stratum of Anglophone South Asia has been a victim of its own success and, correlatively, a victim of the success of the dominant, now-generalized Postcolonial Studies that it helped engender. *Midnight's Children* was Exhibit A for the rubric of our discussion because it has been made representative of “the”

postcolonial novel as such (if there can be any such thing). *Midnight's Children* has arguably suffered for being made paradigmatic for a typology of the postcolonial novel, but so has our collective imagination.

For better and worse.

For better: who can say whether Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Monica Ali, Amitav Ghosh or Jhumpa Lahiri, to take some well-known examples, belong to South Asia, Europe, or America? It might not be such a bad thing that literature written in English by people of South Asian descent or location is now a part of literature written in English in general. So that if you want to be generally literate in literature written in English in the world today, you should have read these writers. And many others, of course. And you should have some understanding of where they are coming from when they write. This would no longer necessarily be designated as "South Asian Literature," however. One might still object to the hideous moniker "Global Anglophone," now a staple of MLA job listings after "Third World" quietly disappeared some time ago. One might also question the metrics of perceived or actual "success": the international literary prize machine, the book fair circuit, or even having one's own forum at the MLA. But still, Global English or Global Anglophone *could* be a site of a certain kind of inter- and intra-regional comparison that would take on board the former British Empire and Commonwealth areas as well as the United States and indeed any literary production in any variety of English. This might be the best solution for Departments of English Literature, where at the moment Global Anglophone seems all too often to signify a very watered down and generalized Postcolonial Studies with a dash of the postmodern—a situation in which "global" even becomes an alibi for ducking any specialist regional knowledge of the kinds of Englishes, their conditions of emergence, and their outcropping in a surrounding ocean of other languages.

Which already gets us into the "for worse" side of the ongoing inflation of the category "Global Anglophone" or "World Anglophone." Categories that have, it seems, reduced postcolonial studies to a low-wattage, less critical incarnation, safe for everyone, where, I repeat and underline, *no regional or linguistic expertise is required* to teach and publish on texts written in or about Africa, South Asia, the Caribbean and the Americas, the Asia-Pacific and Australasia.

The regionalism of "South Asian"-ness has the potential still to be used to undermine nationalism, but this limited capability is canceled out if we put South Asia into competitive juxtaposition with other regions—which would instead merely express a turf-battle or entitled individualist type of resentment that "my" region of more or less distant

origin isn't getting a look in. I do not think we should trade nationalism's chauvinism and exclusiveness for that of an uncriticized regional or continental competition (whether that be Asian, African, European, or American). Conversely, we might wish to use whatever familiarity we have with the grain of South Asian Literatures (and I am by no means an expert), in their pluralized regionality, so as to interrupt, multiply, and displace the construction of a unitary "South Asia" monolith. But if we follow through such an impulse, might not other regional or social units of analysis and comparison prove more interesting and instructive, today?

The *Indian National Bibliography* for 2012, which is the latest edition we have, gives around 800 entries under English fiction publications for that year. Under the other Indian languages, excluding Sanskrit, we have over 7,800 publications.

For English-language fiction we have new works by Indian authors such as P.A. Krishnan's *The Muddy River*, Rumi Nandalal's *Dadu and Other Short Stories*, Mahesh Nataranjan's *Pink Sheep*, Mahindar Simha's *Some Win, Some Lose: A Novel*, or Urvashi Gulia's *My Way is the Highway*. Now I could be wrong, but I would guess that none of the aforementioned works of contemporary Anglophone South Asian fiction have made it onto the reading lists or syllabi of teachers and researchers of modern or contemporary South Asian fiction in North America. There might be good reasons for this: I have not read those books, and they may well be terrible, but in a sense, that is beside the point. What I am trying to do is highlight a disconnection between what we construct as "South Asian Literature" as an object of knowledge for the MLA and the North American academy more generally, and the reality of literary production a bit nearer the ground *even just in the English language*. Because one must now imagine the thousands of novels, stories, poems, and plays that are being annually written in Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Dogri, Gujurati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Maithili, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Santhali, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu. And these are only the languages covered by this official State-sponsored resource. Moreover, I have not even mentioned newspapers and other "non-literary" media that provide a kind of context for literary production.

The *Pakistan National Bibliography* for 2013 lists 28 English-language fiction publications and 675 in Urdu. The *Bangladesh Jatiyo Granthaponji* (Bangladesh National Bibliography) for 2009 lists 2,479 literary works published in Bengali, and 41 in English. The *Nepalese National Bibliography*, the most recent edition of which I could find was for 1996, lists no literary works in English, 73 in Nepali and 5 in

Newari. We have to take all these figures with a grain of salt, because of low compliance with the depository laws in the region.

These spaces are evoked in the rubric of our panel as the vast body of South Asian Literature—and, I would add, as what is being written and not noticed. If students of Anglophone South Asian literature made the effort to find out about what English-language literature was actually being produced in the subcontinent, I have no doubt that the tired “national allegory” and other paradigms would quickly become impossible frameworks with which to represent literary currents. I am not a fan of just sticking with English, but I am also realistic about what is achievable pedagogically and in terms of advanced research. For better and worse.

But let us give rein to a bit of idealism (for better!) for a change. Perhaps a possible future of South Asian Literary Studies lies in learning collectively and comparatively to read all the languages of the subcontinent, wherever they are spoken and written (including English), and in studying their literary (formal, poetic, rhetorical, thematic) transactions with each other and the other languages of the world. What is traveling around there? What kinds of transmutations are happening between sites, works, writers and readers that are not on the circuits where global literary success is measured and decided? Where are there border crossings and where closed frontiers? These will not just conform to the lines drawn by colonial cartographers and policed by nation-states. If we refuse what Ngugi wa Thiong’o has called the aesthetic feudalism of placing cultures and literatures in competition with each other—which is one step away from putting them into a ranked hierarchy—then we may accede to a principled deconstitution of “South Asian Literary Studies” that, in approaching the texture of ground-level multilingual production in the subcontinent and beyond, will be obliged to disclose and invent alternative regionalities rather than recapture former glories.

Notes

1. This is a lightly edited and augmented version of a position paper presented at the Round Table session “Future(s) of South Asian Literary Studies,” organized by Sangeeta Ray at the Modern Language Association Annual Convention in Philadelphia, January 6, 2017. The paper retains the marks of an oral presentation in a specific context, and should be read in that spirit.

2. W. Norman Brown, “South Asia Studies: A History.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. vol. 356. November 1964, p. 54-62.