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Artist in action

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There is much of significance in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. In a specific context, which does not concern me here, it is an excellent reading of Kafka. In a more general context, which does concern me here, their definition of “minor literature” shares many elements with postcolonial literatures, not least that of linguistic and political contestation. However, what really concerns me here is not what I find enabling in this influential essay, but what I find problematic.

My problems with Deleuze and Guattari’s essay arise from two aspects of my existence or, shall we say, *praxis* – 1) as a critic and teacher of literature and 2) as a ‘creative writer’. Both these aspects are, in my case and often without my endorsement, dubbed ‘postcolonial’. As such, the term ‘postcolonial’ can be considered the ghostly third axis of my critique, divided into two parts here: a largely academic and pedagogic one, followed by a section that is more personal. Finally, in the third section, I offer a rough sketch that, to my mind, suggests a way out.

Talking as a critic and a student/teacher of literature, there are some general problems with Deleuze and Guattari’s text. For instance, their use of a signifier, as is the case of “machine” on pages 7 and 8, sometimes refers to too many signifieds. Similarly, their very discussion of reterritorialisation and deterritorialisation shifts as the text develops. To begin with, deterritorialisation is seen as the first characteristic of minor literature: “But the first characteristic of minor literature in any case is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization” (16). But as the essay progresses, both deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation are implicitly seen as aspects of minor literature: for instance, when Joyce and Beckett are considered, with some justification, authors of minor literature and the former is associated with “worldwide reterritorializations” (19) and the latter with “dryness and sobriety, a willed poverty, pushing deterritorialization to such an extreme that nothing remains but intensities” (19). I am not reducing the significance of Deleuze and Guattari’s exposition of minor literature as a useful category in certain well-defined contexts; what I am highlighting are the problems that one has to encounter in using this category broadly.

I mentioned usefulness in context, and that moves me on to the other – and more specific – set of reasons why I avoid using the concept of minor literature while teaching or studying
postcolonial literatures and colonial literatures sometimes written by Englishmen, like Rudyard Kipling, who lived elsewhere for many formative years. And why, as I shall illustrate in the second part of this essay, I find it a category that fails (like other similar categories) to do justice to the works of writers like me.

Let me explain the first (academic) difficulty with reference to the three characteristics of minor literature that Deleuze and Guattari enumerate, commenting on each characteristic as economically as possible:

A

A minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language. But the first characteristic of minor literature in any case is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization. In this sense, Kafka marks the impasse that bars access to writing for the Jews of Prague and turns their literature into something impossible – the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing otherwise. The impossibility of not writing because national consciousness, uncertain or oppressed, necessarily exists by means of literature. . . The impossibility of writing other than German is for the Prague Jews the feeling of an irreducible distance from their primitive Czech territoriality. And the impossibility of writing in German is the deterritorialization of the German population itself, an oppressive minority that speaks a language cut off from the masses.

Deleuze and Guattari 16

Here, while the point about language effected by a “high coefficient of deterritorialization” can be fruitfully applied to many kinds of postcolonial and colonial literatures, its constitutive ‘impossibilities’ cannot be accepted on face value at least in regions like South Asia and Africa. For instance, to what extent does “national consciousness” in India “necessarily exist by means of [English language] literature”? In Jeet Thayil’s collection, English: Poems, for instance, English is posited as the only ‘nation’ for the poet, which implies the disjunction that exists (at least for authors like Thayil) between the language of their enunciation and the political nation of India. Moreover, if one can argue, as some mid-twentieth-century historians did, that English enabled the formation of a national consciousness in late nineteenth-century India, it can only be done by turning a blind eye to the heavy political antagonism between English and other Indian languages – not only the national language, Hindi, but also other major languages like Bangla and Marathi at times. Finally, if there is a national consciousness of English India, and this is hugely debatable, it definitely does not coincide with the national consciousness of Hindi India or, for that matter, Marathi India or Tamil India or Urdu India. Moreover, English is the language of the educated elite in India and the ‘major’ international/colonial language, but Hindi is the politically and, often, bureaucratically dominant language in India – replaced in some vast non-Hindi regions not by English but by other ‘major’ languages, like Bangla, Marathi and Tamil, all of which have long, rich and (usually) pre-colonial literary heritages.

Other complicating nuances can be extracted from the Pandora’s Box of ‘India’, but let us move on to the next informing impossibility: “the impossibility of writing other than German”, or in our case, the impossibility of writing other than English. This impossibility is deeply problematic for Indians in India, or most Africans in Africa: most of them, being literate in more than one language, always have the possibility of writing in a language other than English. One can
argue that to some extent, for a certain class, the option of English is not a full choice; it is partly a compulsion. But even in such extreme cases, it is a very different type of chosen-compulsion than that of ‘impossibility’. For instance, in a recent article in Wasafiri, the Kenyan writer, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who, after a successful international career as a writer in English has partly eschewed English for his native language, talks about addressing a large group of young African writers, all of whom wrote in English and only in English, but all of whom could speak and write in at least one other African language. When quizzed on their choice of English, the reason that was most often by these young writers was that English was a much easier and simpler language than other African languages and Arabic. At this, Ngũgĩ recounts asking the writers, all of whom had studied English throughout school and university, if they had studied their other language or languages for one year. Not one hand. Six months? Not one hand. One full month? Not a single hand. One week? No hand still, in a group of twenty odd literate Africans. One day: a few hands. Concludes Ngũgĩ: “All their lives, they were surrounded by English in classrooms, books, commercials, street names, print and television media. Not surprisingly, it was indeed easier to write and read” (2). Here if ‘impossibility’ is a factor, it does not come untinged by an evaded possibility, at least in the sense in which Slavoj Žižek claims that “ignorance is not a sufficient reason for forgiveness since it conveys a hidden dimension of enjoyment” (2). Once again, one can see the possibility of the use of Deleuze and Guattari’s definition, but only at a slant, with reservations and explanations required, at least when applied to ‘postcolonial’ writers like me.

Finally, the third impossibility: the “impossibility of writing in German is the deterritorialisation of the German population itself, an oppressive minority that speaks a language cut off from the masses”. As is obvious, there is much of relevance here too: the idea of English-writing Indians or Africans as a dominant minority, though again ‘oppressive’ is a problematic term, given the fact that much political power has shifted to non-English speakers in many of these countries. The rise of Narendra Modi, the current Prime Minister of India, might or might not have to do with a certain kind of ‘fascism’, as the Indian Left claims, but it definitely has to do with the political shift to languages other than English. Even with English, there is a shift from the kind of elite (convent-educated or international) English spoken by Modi’s ineffective opponent, Rahul Gandhi, and the kind of learnt-through-other-Indian languages English spoken by Modi, and almost every successful Indian politician who even bothers to speak English today. This is even reflected in literature, most obviously with the rise of bestselling writers like Chetan Bhagat, whose ethos might be English-convent-educated at times, but it is definitely not the same as those of Vikram Seth or Salman Rushdie – and whose readership is even more significantly different. It is not a coincidence that many of the readers who worship writers like Chetan Bhagat, whether from English-medium schools or not, seem to be the same as voters who have pinned their hopes on Modi.

More problematically, the notion of a ‘German population’ works in the case of Kafka’s Prague, but creates various dissonances in Asian, African and even Caribbean contexts. I am constantly reminded every time some of my colleagues (and I can think of two such occasions during department meetings alone) enumerate the strengths of the English Department as offering various ‘native English speakers’ to our students and fail to list me among those speakers, that English speakers or writers in Asia, Africa or the Caribbean do not translate into an English population. More confusingly, colonial English writers from these parts, such as Kipling, do translate into the terms of this ‘impossibility’, thus obfuscating colonial and postcolonial matters. I can go on with this list, but, as you can see, its teeming contradictions make the use of ‘minor literature’ in many postcolonial contexts rather problematic, if not undergirded by extensive explanatory footnotes and qualifications.
B

The second characteristic of minor literatures is that everything in them is political.

There are two versions of this observation. The simple one is a direct reading of the political, and it runs the risk of a kind of essentialism which is problematic, both with reference to other cultures and with reference to the term ‘political’. If one means ‘political’ in that reduced sense – as opposed to ‘individual concerns’ (and this is initially suggested by Deleuze and Guattari when they say that in major literature, unlike in minor literature, “individual concern . . . joins with other no less individual concerns”) – then obviously one runs into the colonial spectre of an un-differentiated ‘collective’ non-West and simultaneously one overlooks an entire series of postcolonial and feminist theorists who have very precisely and convincingly exposed the political in ‘individual concerns’. If, however, one adopts a more complex reading, which is fairer to Deleuze and Guattari and which is suggested a bit later in their text, one still runs into the need for excessive re-clarifications. For instance, an observation like this one: “Minor literature is completely different; its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes more necessary, indispensable, magnified” (17). This is a rich, and in certain contexts, useful observation, but it once again requires too much elaboration and hedging: for instance, to mention only the obvious fact, how does one distinguish easily between this slippage from individual concern qua individual concern in some texts and individual concern as political in some other texts? Given the simpler reading of Deleuze and Guattari, one can argue that postcolonial authors like R. K. Narayan are not ‘political’ and are motivated by individual concerns qua individual concerns just as much as an English writer like Henry Green. Given the second, more complex reading, one can as convincingly argue that Green is just as political as Narayan, and, for that matter, both are as political as Ngũgĩ. Similarly, it is possible to read V. S. Naipaul’s great novel, A House for Mr Biswas, as framed solely by ‘individual concerns’, but it is just as possible to read that selection of concerns as highly political.

C

The third characteristic of minor literature is that in it everything takes on a collective value. Indeed, precisely because talent isn’t abundant in a minor literature, there are no possibilities for an individuated enunciation that would belong to this or that ‘master’ and that could be separated from a collective enunciation.

I will not labour my point: it is obvious that a perception like this can be a useful tool of exegesis in context. Deleuze and Guattari, because they are writing about Kafka, mostly work within such a context: a European context. But using this perception in, say, a postcolonial context, without some serious grafting and pruning, would be risky and even counter-productive. It would, outside a European literary context, end up replicating old Eurocentric binaries, deeply imbibed by postcolonial writers at times: that between the ‘individualist’ West and a collective ‘Rest’, that between a secular West and religious ‘Rest’, that between a materialist ‘West’ and spiritual ‘Rest’, etc. These are overlapping, mutually supporting binaries. They are also gross simplifications, even if one re-constructs them along more materialist lines (such as the influence of industrialisation, capitalism and modernity) – one can argue that nothing is more materialist and even
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individualist than religion, with its vast enterprises and many entrepreneurs, in India! In one of his books, I think *Arabian Sands*, Wilfred Thesiger notes with some surprise that the Arab Bedouin is the most individualist of peoples but has no idea of privacy. In making that seemingly contradictory remark, Thesiger goes far beyond the usual colonial binarisms which depict the non-West as ‘collectivist’. To apply Deleuze and Guattari outside their limited European context of a discussion of Kafka would be to fail to go even as far as Thesiger in this matter.

The third characteristic forces Deleuze and Guattari to dismiss the possibility of a ‘master’ in minor literatures: “There are no possibilities for an individual enunciation that would belong to this or that ‘master’ and that could be separated from a collective enunciation” (17). ‘Masters’ only exist in major literatures, they argue, and though they slant this lack in minor literatures positively, it remains a hugely problematic statement. One can argue that the existence or lack of masters simply reflects the presence or lack of a critical and discursive vocabulary in the so-called West, unless perhaps if one confines this discussion to the context of Europe and only its ‘minor literatures’, such as that of the German-writing Jewish Czech, Kafka.

Anyway, it is not a matter that can be ignored by authors and critics coming from postcolonial spaces: I continue, as a novelist, to find it deeply irritating that ‘postcolonial’ novelists are celebrated for being great ‘storytellers’ in the Western media, rather than great novelists. It appears that the old colonial discursive relationship of the native informer and the colonial historian has continued in other shapes.

I could continue my engagement with Deleuze and Guattari in other areas, for instance by pointing out how the parallels that they draw between ‘minor literature’ as in Kafka (Czech German context), in Joyce and Beckett (Anglo-French-Irish contexts) and African American writers needs re-definition. The relationship of, say, African American writers, who write in English in a matrix devoid of any African language, to English is very different from that of Kafka or Joyce. It is also very different from that of Ngũgĩ or Chinua Achebe – writers from Africa, who write in English. Similarly, the presence of diasporic postcolonial writers – and much of what passes for postcolonial literatures in English Departments today is basically literature by writers of African or Asian origin born or educated in the UK or USA – ought not to be confused with the situation of postcolonial writers born and educated elsewhere.

2

The situation of ‘postcolonial’ writers born and educated elsewhere, I wrote above, and I repeat it here with the necessary scare quotes. Because that is my situation, and as a novelist and poet, I accept the postcolonial as a description only if it is placed within scare quotes (or applied to a specific work, such as *The Thing about Thugs*, but not *The Bus Stopped*). If I explain this, I might shed more light on my unease with Deleuze and Guattari’s definition – and this time as an author, rather than a teacher or critic of literature. (I leave out the term ‘student’, because an author continues to remain a student of literature.)

“Name one internationally known Indian English writer, apart from R. K. Narayan, and even he did not live in a really small town, who grew up and was educated in a place like Gaya?” one of my good friends said to me when, still in my late teens, I started toying with the idea of becoming a professional writer. At that time, we were all preparing to get into medical or engineering college or, failing that, eyeing the Civil Services. In a small town like Gaya, becoming a writer was never a career option. But I had no desire (and, I still suspect, aptitude) for any of these ‘real’ careers. I wanted to be a writer. I had wanted to be a writer from the time I became aware of careers and vocations, probably before my age could be notated in double digits. When I started articulating this desire in my late teens, everyone around me, including my friends, tried
to talk me out of it. They meant well. And they were partly right: writing is not a ‘real’ profession for middle-class people from small towns in India, and more so if you write in English.

In later years, I have had reason to understand their fear: to some extent a part of me, which is inevitably part of them, continues to share it. Which is why I have always had a job – journalist, academic, etc. – on the side. Or ‘on the side’ is what I tell myself, because such jobs usually consume most of my time and energy. But when you grow up in the middle classes of small towns like Gaya, you cannot set out to be just a writer. The social net under you is not strong enough, and the chasm below it is huge. The presumption of authorship is too much. This is further complicated if you write in English, a language that (as I explore below) has always had a cosmopolitan status in the colonies but has assumed an increasingly metropolitan bias in ‘post-colonies’ like India. This is strange because, once, small towns and villages were more likely to feature in English writing about India: think, for instance, of Mulk Raj Anand’s cantonment narratives, or Rudyard Kipling, or George Orwell in Burma, or E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*.

It can be argued that the literary geography of Indian English fiction and poetry, especially of visibly and internationally published exemplars, is over-determined by and towards certain metropolitan–cosmopolitan spaces at the moment. Some of this is inevitable: English is not only an urban language, but largely a big city language in India. The loud existence of the so-called Indian diaspora (to the West) also has a bearing on the matter. English is far more likely to be employed with a degree of fluency by metropolitan and diasporic Indians than by Indians in villages or provincial towns like Gaya. Hence, the spaces marked out in this language by Indian or Indian-origin writers – at least in its more visible editions – tend to condense towards the metropolitan and cosmopolitan (which are erroneously considered to be the same), whether it is London, New York, Delhi or Bombay/Mumbai.

But the matter is not so simple. If we look at the first ‘major’ novels to be written and published by Indians in English, a slightly different pattern can be observed: R. K. Narayan’s novels were set in the small town, not very different in its urbanity than Kolatkar’s *Jejuri*, of Malgudi; Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* is an account of the message of MK (Mahatma) Gandhi coming to a village; and even Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* circulates in the by-alleys and nullahs of semi-urbanised untouchability. Some of it had to do with the early twentieth-century definition of India as a nation of villages: partly based on socio-economic facts of the times, as employed in Gandhi’s frequent discourse on India’s “700,000 villages”, and partly a consequence of a colonial/orientalist binarism which identified nature and, hence, rurality with the essence of spaces like India.

Despite this early beginning, the urban landscape crept into Indian English writing quite early and had largely taken over its contours by the 1970s. This had to do with changing socio-economic circumstances – the explosion of towns and cities from the early twentieth century onwards, which had come after decades of erosion of rural structures as well as growing industrialisation – and a resistance to colonial-orientalising discourses. Still, what we observed in Indian English fiction in the 1960s–1970s was the necessary consolidation of middle-class *domestic* settings, at their best from variously gendered perspectives, such as in the work of Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai. It is only with the rise of the diasporic generation – identified with Salman Rushdie’s Booker-winning and ground-breaking *Midnight’s Children* (1981) but actually sporadically preceding it in the work of various significant writers, such as G.V. Desani and Anita Desai – that the urban landscape became hegemonic in Indian English writing. It is with Rushdie that we moved to the present situation.

As stated earlier, before Rushdie and outside the easily identifiable ‘diasporic’ circles, there had already been a turn towards urbanity in Indian writing in English – in the works of the early Anita Desai, Khushwant Singh and others. One centre of engagement with contemporary
India as urban and not necessarily rural was, inevitably, Bombay. Indian English poetry, too, as it cohered around Nissim Ezekiel in Bombay from the 1960s onwards was consciously urban (King). Arun Kolatkar came from this milieu, as Amit Chaudhuri’s introduction to Jejuri amply illustrates. This urbanity, as Chaudhuri notes, is not to be confused with the hybrid-diasporic urbanity of Rushdie and related writers, even though the Ezekiel-Kolatkar generations of writers were also, mostly, very well-travelled. As, for that matter, were writers from the earlier generation, such as Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand. The main differences lie not in sheer movement across space but in the discursive relationships that their literatures establish to and between these spaces. One way to understand this might be to look at my relationship to ‘cosmopolitanism’, particularly in the light of what I have said about the metropolitan (including diasporic) slant in Indian English writing and, more than that, the bifocals through which it is usually studied.

It was only when I started teaching literature in bigger cities, especially in the West, that I realised I had grown up as a cosmopolitan in my provincial town in what was then dubbed (in the national public square) – and probably still is – the “most backward and crime-ridden state of India”. Wordsworth’s daffodils never presented a problem to me (and my classmates), though I had not seen a daffodil – there was no TV, let alone internet, in my town in the 1970s – and I even managed, as I graduated to (local) college, to read the Russian classics without bothering to decipher a samovar. As such, when metropolitan kids in London or Copenhagen complain about the difficulty of encountering a Hindi word in an Indian English novel, I have to hide my surprise.

Small towns are associated with provincialism, and the charge is undoubtedly true. V. S. Naipaul sees the colonial peripheries as largely inauthentic and mimic; Aravind Adiga’s narrator in the Booker-winning novel, The White Tiger, calls small towns in postcolonial India (including the exact one where I was born and spent the first 24 years of my life) “half-baked”, and the big city narrator-protagonist of Upamanyu Chatterjee’s cult-classic English, August can only survive his posting to a small town by jerking off in a haze of weed smoke. The list is long. And this assumption of provincialism and resistance to change is not entirely incorrect.

Gaya, the small town in Bihar where I grew up and taught myself the rudiments of writing, was a place set in its ways. Once when a high school friend and I got an ancient rickshaw-puller to sit in his rickshaw, while we took turns pulling it – we went faster and the puller did not object to it, as we were going to pay him his full fare – the news of this breach of decorum reached my parents’ house before the rickshaw got there. The mothers and grandmothers of Gaya were industrious pickle-makers, and I often commiserated with all those bits of lemon or mango in glass jars out on sunny verandas: we were just as thoroughly pickled in traditions. Around 24, when I wrote one of those world-changing articles that young people write at too-frequent intervals, and a mob of religious Muslims descended on my father’s clinic, I felt the full brunt of the provincialism of my community. The mob, egged on by local Wahhabism-influenced Islamists, who were then grabbing control of Muslim spaces in India, was protesting against my suggestions for reforms in customary Islamic practices, especially that of animal sacrifice during one of the Eid festivals. My father refused to call the police – he was afraid Hindu policemen and Muslim mob would equal a riot – and, a believing Muslim himself, spoke to the protestors for 3 or 4 hours. They went away, muttering. But I was also sent away – I caught the first flight of my life and went to Delhi, where I started working as a journalist. Despite my ignorance and apprehension of the outside world, I was relieved to be out of Gaya.

If I had stayed there, I might never have seen Gaya as anything but provincial and backward. Having been forced to leave, I came to see other stories, which I had taken for granted. Wordsworth’s daffodils and Dostoevsky’s samovars are not the only ones. I suspect, now, that it is in the nature of small towns to be resistant to change, just as it is in the nature of the vulnerable to
be conservative. The latter is something that metropolitan Marxists never seem to understand, surprised as they always are by the European working classes letting them down, and the non-European ‘religious classes’ following suit. It does not seem to strike them that change is always easier to contemplate when you have something to fall back upon.

The people of Gaya did not like change, and yet they lived with change. They lived with change more than the people of any metropolis – New Delhi, London, Copenhagen, Tokyo. Just as change affects the poor differently from the way it affects the affluent, it also affects small towns differently from big cities. A small town can be choked by a single change. Or it can blossom. One new highway or a closed factory can mean life and death to it. In metropolises, however, change is less momentous: a bank is turned into a mall, a department store becomes a theatre. The essential selfhood of the metropolis survives such changes – survives anything short of war, actually. You only need to walk down the avenues of Paris or Geneva, with their massive buildings from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to notice this. The metropolis is like the rich: both survive all but apocalyptic changes.

Gaya was not like that. Gaya feared change. Hence, it was provincial, of course. And yet, change lay in its heart — more so, in some ways, than in most metropolises. It is also in the very nature of provincial towns to look outwards — to other places. They can never rest complacent in themselves despite all their provincial rhetoric. In this sense too they are more cosmopolitan than self-contained metropolises: for what is cosmopolitanism but openness to the other?

I grew up looking outwards. It was difficult. Books were almost the only option for me, as my parents disliked travelling. It was hard to find new books. There were no bookshops where one could browse freely. There was just a kiosk at the railway station and Sahitya Sadan, the shop in town that stocked textbooks but also ordered a selection of ‘classics’. Both sold across scratched counters. The books were a strange mix (which is in keeping with the provincial’s character). Dale Carnegie jostled with Charles Dickens; a glossy Robert Ludlum sat cheek in jowl with a dog-eared Robert Lowell. The provincial bookshop is not exclusive, and hence the small town reader has no canon Bloom-ing at him. He has to scramble from Archie comics and Reader’s Digests to Victor Hugo and Pushkin — and suddenly, in some webbed corner, he can discover, as I did in my grandfather’s library, a complete set of Nikolai Gogol and Franz Kafka. Kafka I had heard of; Gogol never. I was in high school then. Both opened up new worlds to me.

When I think of Gogol, I also recall Gagan. I had been sent to Nazareth Academy, the best (and only) ‘English-medium convent’ school in town; only kids from middle-class families in town attended it. But after school, I went to the local Gaya College, which taught in Hindi and attracted a wider selection of students, many from neighbouring villages. Gagan was one of them. A small pock-marked man, he had — for some reason — decided to study English. He loved to practise his English on me. I was frightened of being forced to converse with him, as I could not understand most of it; so thick was his rustic accent. I discovered the reason he was reading English: he knew entire scenes from Shakespeare by heart! Where in his village had Gagan picked up his love for Shakespeare? I now wonder whether all those lines that he recited were not the only English conversation he could have had in his village? Gagan had grown up speaking English to Shakespeare only.

Typically, Gagan disdained Urdu poetry (though his Urdu was much easier to understand) — and so did I in those days. My ability to read Urdu was limited; the ‘convent school’ I had gone to taught only English and Hindi. Urdu was associated, also in my mind, with religious Muslims. I wanted to keep both at an arm’s length. But my ears were opened to the possibilities of Urdu poetry in my college years, during a train trip to Patna. The train was packed, and running late. It was still a steam locomotive in the 1980s. Hence, it was the custom to ‘pull the chain’ when you approached your village, so that the nine ‘halts’ the train was supposed to make were usually multiplied by three during the duration of a trip. As there was no elbow room to read, all one
could do was talk – and overhear conversations – as soot settled on our clothes and faces. On that trip, I overheard an argument over Asadullah Khan Ghalib, the early nineteenth-century poet of Delhi. Someone quoted a *sher* [couplet] by him:

Khuda ke waaste parda na kaabe se uthaa zaalim
Kaheen aisa na ho yahan bhi wahi kaafir sanam nikle

For God's sake, do not lift the veil of the Kaaba,2 O Cruel One;
There too may lie hidden the same unbelieving Beloved.

His interlocutor – both were dressed in ‘half-baked’ provincial garb – objected to the last word of the first line. It is not *zaalim* [Cruel One]; it is *vaiz* [Preacher], he said. At that moment, I realised with a shock that the difference revealed another – far more radical – interpretation of the couplet. If you switch *zaalim* to *vaiz*, the dominant interpretation would become this one:

For God’s sake, Preacher, leave the veil on the Kaaba alone.
There too may lie hidden an infidel idol of stone.

In other words: sacrilege, from the early nineteenth century! Were the debaters in that crowded, smelly, halting train aware that they were discussing a blasphemous verse? Were they aware that their slight difference over a word collected in itself centuries of debate about faith? Were they aware of the cosmopolitan provenance of the verses and the thought – for cosmopolitanism is also an ability to live with differences and nuances. I could not tell. But that is also the point about the cosmopolitanism of provincial places: you can never really tell. Which is why it is so easy for metropolises to tag and claim cosmopolitanism in their own image.

As a writer, it took me time and effort to relate to and express this ‘half-baked’ space – the space of Gaya that framed my consciousness for the first 25 years of my life and continues to influence it – in my writing. The fact that I had to write in English (largely because of historical reasons) made the struggle even more difficult – as did the nature of Gaya, a town where English was spoken only as a professional language among a thin slice of the professional (not, for instance, the business, political or, mostly, the bureaucratic) middle class. I believe I did find or forge ways to express and engage with that consciousness in my writing – creative as well as academic. Today when I set out to write, I do not find the struggle as difficult as I did 20 years ago, because I have worked very hard to hone my tools (and, before that, select the tools I need to use). But I still feel I am mostly writing in a critical void because the discursive and critical terms to make sense of the writing of authors like me are largely missing. World literature, postcolonial literature, minor literature, etc. – these can be grossly distorting tags for authors like me.

When I step aside and see myself as a writer, I find categories like ‘minor literature’ and ‘postcolonial literature’ more coercive than enabling. Sadly, my international and even, much of the time, national visibility as a writer seems to depend on the ability of critics to fit my works into one or more of these categories. I feel I do not write ‘minor literature’, at least in many of the senses deployed by Deleuze and Guattari, and critiqued above. I am not ‘postcolonial’ in the sense in which Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai or Vikram Seth are, or are not, postcolonial. But I am not ‘subaltern’ either in the sense in which an aboriginal *villager* from Jharkhand or a rickshaw-puller in Gaya is subaltern. My relationship to the language of my creativity is neither the same as that of Rushdie and Seth, nor the same as that of the subaltern aborigine – I would say the ‘mythical subaltern’ because he or she will never be encountered in English at least in India, and hence his or her ‘subalternity’ cannot be a radical factor *within* the realm of the *reception* and *criticism* of Indian English literature, whatever it might be outside it.
I continue to feel that, despite Deleuze and Guattari, despite Ashgate and Tiffin, despite Bhabha and Spivak (or, at times, because of them), there is a serious lack of a critical vocabulary to read writers like me.

3

At the core of this lack lies the basic nature of academic discourse, which needs to examine literature from a position outside it. This bid at objectivity takes various forms: economic, political, social, constructivist, structural, readerly or even biological (as in literary Darwinism). In the process, it seems that texts that fit into certain assumptions about literature get to be written about as literature, or the very notion of literature – as anything other than what sells or what the reader reads into it – is implicitly dismissed. Such positions seem problematic to me as both a writer and a scholar of literature. I suggest that literature exists as literature, regardless of reader, market or scholarly angles, and an appropriate critical vocabulary can only arise from a bid to engage with this, even at the risk of laying oneself open to heavily footnoted academic attacks.

I have discussed at greater length in other essays that literature, even in its (probably) earliest form of stories, is above all a thinking device. Facts exist for all animals; fiction only for human animals, as far as we can tell. Literature might even be the earliest instrument for thinking known to human beings, as all religions seem to recognise. This was true of oral literature too, from what one can find in those once-oral texts which have seeped into writing.

Writing made literature even more an instrument for thinking. By enabling the transmission of literary texts across space and time, writing came to demand a different kind of contemplation from the reader. As the Korean-German philosopher, Byung-Chul Han points out, contemplation or deep attention defines human activities. Not multitasking, for instance. Animals have always multitasked in a largely hostile environment: a deer feeds, runs, takes care of its fawn and keeps a look-out for predators, all at the same time. The capacity to pay deep attention, to contemplate, is the distinctive attribute of human animals, Han notes.

Written literature demands a highly complex and focussed kind of contemplation. When we read literature, we engage through abstract writing with a very concrete world, a world that exists elsewhere (or nowhere) but also needs to exist for us at the moment of reading. The contemplation that literature demands always involves engaging with others, for it is not just a text written by someone else but also contains other selves (characters, voices, etc.). At the same time, the process of reading forces us to engage with ourselves too. Fiction, for instance, creates a very fine distinction between truth and falsehood, which is not based on a simplified theory of facts and lies.

Incidentally, it is exactly this kind of contemplation that is the antidote to fundamentalisms: not an alternative reading of a text, but the very process of reading a text, something which literary scholarship demands. That is, unless literary scholarship gets institutionalised into various pre-determined, perspectival readings – political, social, biological, moral, aesthetic, whatever – which are themselves partly and often unconsciously complicit with the fundamentalisms of our world.

In short, literature is not good or bad writing; it is not what sells or doesn’t sell; it is not even just a reading. It is not sheer communication, or what is aesthetically worth defending, or the expression of some national (or global) spirit. Literature is writing that presses against the current limits of language. When Joseph Conrad’s narrator keeps referring to Africans as “cannibals” in Heart of Darkness, but then wonders why they do not attack and eat him despite starving and having the opportunity, Conrad is consciously or unconsciously pushing against the limit of a
historical discourse: the nineteenth-century European tendency to identify Africans with cannibalism. These limits might be historical, political, linguistic, social, gender-related, etc. Mark Twain, for instance, pushed against the limits of established language by inducting dialect, as did many Caribbean or Black British poets. The limits might even be ontological: an engagement with the fact that the language of the self can never fully express or ‘know’ the other, and yet language is our most powerful means to relate with others, to ‘know’ the unknowable.

There is a great need to read literature as that varied collection of texts which encourages such a process of reading. This is not just because of the need to resist various kinds of fundamentalism: religious, economic, political, even (as in highly reductive readings of complex theories) scientific. It is also because, as Han has noted, computerisation is basically opposed to contemplation. The digital world distracts, interferes, multiplies, speeds up – reducing our ability to read, to pay deep attention. We need literature today, more than ever before. We need it not because it is pleasing, relaxing, inspiring, beautiful, ethical, etc.; we need it because it is our deepest instrument for thinking and it trains us to engage in the process of contemplation which made and makes us human.

Perhaps the bid to have rigidly defined critical vocabularies and the trend of academic positivism, though the former was also necessary in the context of early twentieth-century ‘cultured’ readings, orchestrate against the complexity of literature, which always spills over. The first requirement to reading literature is to be willing to exceed one’s own selfhood, something that current critical vocabularies largely fail to do. After all, definition is usually difficult to reconcile with excess – or otherness.

Notes
1 In my view, there is no complex and complete translation of Ghalib in English, and hence, I am not referring to any.
2 For believing Muslims, the Kaaba in Mecca is the holiest of all shrines.

Major references