NEGOTIATING ORIENTALISM: LITERARY HISTORY, TRANSLATION AND SOUTH ASIAN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

> Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.
>
> (*Culture and Imperialism*, 7)

The objective of this essay is to suggest ways of advancing a conceptual framework for understanding and evaluating the amorphous and often problematic body of South Asian Literature in English. There has been, for the most part, a self-consciousness about dealing with this body of work, an uneasiness about its current status, its legitimacy and its unequal relation to the vernacular literatures. Its growing popularity in the global literary marketplace has often worked against its legitimacy, even signifying its liminality in South Asia. Makarand Paranjape, who devotes an entire monograph to the evaluation of the space occupied by Indian English literature, claims that he will proceed with his inquiry "even if that sometime entails bringing IE [Indian English] literature down a few notches from its surplus elitism and putting it in its 'proper' place" (20). David Damrosch refers to Indo-English as an entity "with its ambiguous status somewhere between a foreign and a native language" (27). Literature in English is at once local and foreign, original and translation, national and global. It has been shaped by certain cultural and social forces that are at least partially colonial in origin, and it shapes our notions of national and transnational realities. Its reach is limited in some senses and vast in others. How many people read Rohinton Mistry in India, one might ask? By the same token, how many people read his novel when it was chosen by Oprah Winfrey for her book club? How do authorship and agency function in a global literary marketplace? Despite a substantial body of criticism that has appeared in the last two decades, none of these conceptual issues has been addressed in any great depth, and the purpose of this paper is to explore some of its dimensions, keeping in mind the worldliness of texts that Said so eloquently talks about.

The approach of this paper is broadly Saidian in that it recognizes the interconnectedness of forms of knowledge and affirms the need to locate this body of literature within a contextual literary history. As Linda Hutcheon puts it, "in all his books and many articles, the ethical responsibility of the intellectual and the potential complicity of academic forms of knowledge with institutions of power were in the foreground" (805). It is equally true that Said tends to privilege Western literature and also pay little attention to vernacular literatures. Imperialism and

power are often his foci, and that slants his work in particular ways. That said, his insight into the complexities of orientalist discourse has provided a much-needed methodology to investigate the multiple dimensions of literary history. This paper is in part a defense against the ostensible orientalism of South Asian writing in English, although the main objective is to suggest a methodology that would avoid the pitfalls of naïve generalization.

Part of the challenge is of course one of scope and taxonomy. How does one define the boundaries of a literature that spans at least three continents? Within this multiplicity, do some literatures take precedence over others? What is the relation between national and diasporic literatures? South Asian literature has meant, quite often, Indian writing in English, with Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh being somewhat peripheral to the enterprise. Singapore, Malaysia, the Caribbean, and Fiji have occupied even more ambiguous spaces. In recent years, the spotlight has been captured by diasporic South Asian writers who are located in the West. These spaces have been determined historically and contained within the general rubric of "third world literatures," although a basic contention of this paper is that any comprehensive appraisal needs to accommodate these diverse literatures as being linked in multiple ways. Occasional anthologies and handbooks trace for us the bio-critical information we need about this burgeoning field, but they hardly attempt a unifying frame or a holistic analysis.[1]

At the heart of the problem is the absence of a literary history for South Asian or even Indian literature. There has been a tradition of histories of literature, with Srinivisa Iyengar being a notable figure in this corpus, but very few attempts have been made to advance a comprehensive literary history that locates writing in broad cultural and historical terms.[2] Histories of literature have tended to seek

[1] Jaina Sanga, for example, characterizes this body of work by stating that "they show us a vibrant, exotic, chaotic world where people seem more robust and spirited than in most other contemporary fiction; where exuberance and compromise infuse daily life; where religion and politics matter profoundly; where the follies and foibles of humanity are showcased with precise satire; and where ancient traditions are brought face to face with the conventions of modern living.' (xii). Paul Brians makes the observation that "it would be absurd to refer to 'the South Asian reality.' There is no such thing. South Asian literature is a kaleidoscope of fragmented views, colored by the perceptions of its authors, reflecting myriad realities – and fantasies." (6).

[2] Iyengar's major work has served as a major resource to scholars who followed. But the fact is that Iyengar was interested in and foregrounded the history of literature rather than literary history. The historical and cultural context that enabled particular works to appear was not a matter of much concern in his work.

thematic links as a way of establishing a teleology and a tradition. Postcolonial theory has generally favored broad categories such as nationalism, resistance, and recuperation as markers for forging connections and establishing coherence. While such approaches are necessary, they fail to account for the vast heterogeneity of South Asia. South Asian literature in English is at some level a translation that needs to be seen in relation to the culture from which it originates. Particularly in a body of work that involves the specificities of many nation states and the multiple configurations of diaspora, the links cannot be forged without a prior understanding of the various political and social intersections that shape the writing of literature. Censorship in Singapore, the coup in Fiji, ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka are all salient aspects of literary history. Quite often Marxist scholars have provided the major impetus to write literary histories, even in vernacular languages such as Tamil. In methodological terms, readings of Indian writing in English have been contained within a New Critical school, often with a noticeable Leavisite influence.[3]

Meenakshi Mukherjee and Paranjape are two scholars who come to mind with regard to contextual studies of Indian writing. Paranjape provides several markers – class, caste, education etc. that provide the evidence for a particular reading of this literature. His concern is not South Asian writing, but within the framework of his analysis of Indian literature in English, he invokes notions that locate authors within hegemonic roles. The motif that runs through his work is privilege, by birth or social circumstance, and that partially explains the elitism of the corpus itself. His work is a sustained effort to demonstrate the orientalist underpinnings of this writing, as it creates for the West an image that caters to the stereotypes that essentialize and exoticize India. While the points that Paranjape makes are astute, they do not constitute a literary history that takes into account the specificities of political and cultural reading in a diachronic account of literary evolution.

In the absence of complex literary histories, the practice of evaluation has been somewhat arbitrary. At its most obvious there are those who critique and those who champion this literature. Studies of individual authors have served a metonymic function in providing an appraisal of the whole body of work. Among others, V.S. Naipaul has, at various times, expressed his concerns about this body of writing. He has reservations about the Caribbean and about India, although not for the same reasons. About Indian literature he is openly dismissive, and the only Indian writer he admires, namely, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala is, according to him, not Indian. The

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[3] The work of C.D. Narasimhaiah, for instance, was influenced very strongly by F.R. Leavis, and that has been a dominant trend in critical works produced by Indian scholars. For instance, see *The Swan and the Eagle: Essays on Indian English Literature* (1968).

notion of aimlessness underscores his critique of Indian writing, which amounts to claiming a hiatus between the social realities of the country and the preoccupations of the literature. Having said that in Narayan there is a contradiction between form and content, he adds: "The younger writers in English have moved far from Narayan. In those novels which tell of the difficulties of the Europe-returned student they are still only expressing a personal bewilderment; the novels themselves are documents of the Indian confusion" (216).

Raja Rao provided an early defense of Indian writing in his well-known preface to *Kanthapura*, but it is not clear whether his essentializing gesture constitutes a valuable defense of the corpus itself. The novel that follows the preface has moments of embarrassing orientalist gestures, although the novel deserves an important place in the overall analysis of this corpus. In more recent years, Rushdie has celebrated the status of writing in English, but then Rushdie's view, expressed in his introduction to the anthology he edited together with Elizabeth West, is seriously misinformed and quite unlikely to win supporters, even among the converted. In the process of celebrating literature in English he discredits writing in other Indian languages, a strategy that feeds into an unproductive binarism.[4]

In some respects, it is difficult to avoid Rushdie in any discussion partly because he remains the litmus test for the validity of this corpus. The controversies he and his novels have initiated hardly need to be recapitulated, but it is worth keeping in mind that he has, in various roles, provoked a re-thinking of the value and role of Indian and diasporic writing. The narrator's wonderful tirade in Rushdie's *Shame* about the inherent limitations of western affiliation becomes a characteristic statement about the debate. As the narrator puts it: "*Poacher! Pirate! We reject your authority. We know you, with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies?*" (28) The self-caricature of the narrator amounts to both resistance and capitulation.

The issue, then, is that without a nuanced conceptual framework, this literature, collectively, becomes a form of orientalist discourse in that it offers a body of scholarship that projects India or South Asia as a fictive and marketable construct. In short, South Asian writing in English now becomes a neo-colonialist enterprise that serves up South Asia for the consumption of the west. Its complicity in neo-colonialism is tacitly acknowledged in the number of texts that discuss Indian literatures without drawing attention to writing in English. Aijaz Ahmad, in his

[4] In the Vintage edition of Indian writing in English, Rushdie, in his introduction, makes the observation that the best of Indian writing in the last fifty years has been produced by authors who write in English. Apart from being misinformed, this point of view reinforces a binarism that is ultimately counterproductive.

discussion of Indian literatures, quite deliberately ignores writing in English, thereby suggesting its liminality and its lack of significance. He is in fact one of the many scholars who adopts this approach. In short, even the legitimacy of this literature becomes an issue when scholars carefully avoid discussing it. The South Asian author who writes in English is thus inevitably the rich and glamorous but marginalized figure who need not be taken seriously.

It is possible to draw up a long catalogue of titles that work with certain assumptions and fit nicely into the colonialist mode. The titles – *Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Hullaballoo in a Guava Orchard* (1998), *Born Confused* (2002), *House of Mangoes* (2001), *The Death of Vishnu* (2001), *Mangoes on the Maple Tree* (2002) etc. - are suggestive of overt exoticism. The quest novel, for instance, is also a case in point which works in the shadow of orientalism. Graham Huggan discusses the structure of the quest novel as a staple feature of colonialist writing that carries an undertone of orientalism. Paranjape's impatience with *Journey to Ithaca* is precisely a result of that paradigm which is used to distort local realities.[5] At a time when provincializing Europe – to use Dipesh Chakrabarty's felicitous phrase – appears to have engaged scholars in various disciplines, writing in English reveals an air of vulnerability as an accomplice of Western hegemony.

To some extent, the conditions of production and distribution are germane to the popularity of this body of writing. Largely sustained and championed by the West, it needs to cater, consciously or otherwise, to the tastes and demands of a western readership. Is there, then, a reiteration or reconfirmation of orientalist practice? It hardly needs emphasis that in the last decade or so, the lion share of postcolonial literature has been taken by South Asian writing, and the material conditions that have enabled that prominence have originated in the West. Take, for instance, the sharp contrast between the accolades that Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* received in the West and the resistance it encountered among Sri Lankan critics. In Qadri Ismail's unrelenting attack, *Anil's Ghost* is "not much more that the typically flippant gesture towards Sri Lanka so often produced by the west" (29).[6] The sharp

[5] Paranjape offers a spirited critique of the novel in his *Poetics*, arguing that Desai's intertextual framework and understanding of the Aurobindo Ashram are seriously flawed.
[6] The *Macleans* write up gives priority to Ondaatje as an international writer first and a Canadian writer second. Says Brian Johnson: "Ondaatje is our most international author. Quintessentially Canadian, his fiction deciphers identity and bleeds through borders" (67). Brenda Glover's essay appears to move in the direction of an allegorical reading, where the details of the novel, while important in themselves, also imply a larger process at work. "In each of his novels" says Glover, "Ondaatje creates an extreme situation with a small cast of central characters, through whom he is able to explore the dynamics of displacement,

contrast between the two is a measure of the suspicion that South Asia is being packaged for the West by this group of native informants.

The fact that Indian or South Asian writers project themselves quite often into their writing might well be an indication of a certain desire to explore, justify or celebrate their own positions with regard to their enterprise. Take, for instance, Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Zulfikar Ghose or Suniti Namjoshi, and often this is precisely what they do as they interrogate the conditions of their authorship by self-consciously inserting themselves into their own texts. A cynical view of this process would claim that the authors feel the need to perpetuate self-justificatory myths about themselves. Sarah Brouillette's work demonstrates that the phenomenon is not specifically South Asian, but one cannot avoid speculating about the use it has for these authors who constantly feel beleaguered.[7]

I think there is a certain puzzlement, a measure of unease about this work, with the result that writers and critics tend to fall back on models of explication that are not entirely adequate. We have, for example, a tendency to enlist postcolonial theory as a way of dealing with this literature. The dominant model of resistance and recuperation becomes a way of talking about nations, identities, modernity, and so forth. "If the whole history of Western textualities" says Aijaz Ahmad, "from Homer to Olivia Manning, was a history of Orientalist ontology, Third World Literature was *prima facie* the site of liberationist practice" (64). Within the umbrella network of Third World Literature, such a model would seem feasible. And certainly within a particular historical reading of the colonial experience, such a position would make sense.

With all its strengths and insights, the postcolonial model may not be the best approach to South Asian Writing in English. The model of resistance and recuperation as it applies to Africa and the Caribbean may not have the same validity for South Asia. In South Asia – and this has been pointed out by many scholars, including Gauri Viswanathan,- the complex narrative of hegemony and agency cannot be articulated within a universal postcolonial model. The model is not totally inapplicable, but its manifestation requires some thought. Chinua Achebe and R.K. Narayan may have written at more or less the same time, but surely, the same yardstick cannot be applied to them. Resistance was central to Achebe, whereas Narayan was much more at home in the hybrid world that colonialism had produced. It would be difficult to explain the work of, say, Robert Caldwell and his role in

isolation and alienation, as well as strategies for survival" (79). Both Johnson and Glover are overtly appreciative of the novel.

[7] Brouillette recently completed her doctoral thesis at the University of Toronto. Her study is entitled "The Politics of Postcolonial Authorship in a Global Literary Marketplace."

fostering a Dravidian consciousness through his philological work in South India within a postcolonial model that places considerable emphasis on the confluence of political independence and cultural decolonization. In short, there is a need to move beyond current theoretical approaches in order to locate and ground South Asian writing in English, and if one universalist model is likely to be inadequate to explain this heterogeneous body, it is still necessary insist on alternative paradigms. Marxism and New Criticism have served as useful vehicles for understanding certain aspects of this writing, but they do not succeed in providing a matrix for understanding the multiple dimensions – and intersections - that constitute this body of writing.

There are at least four significant aspects that are germane to conceptualizing South Asian writing in English, and none of these has been dealt with adequately. The first is the need for a literary history that moves beyond national boundaries and provides a complex reading of political and cultural context. The second is this literature's relation to vernacular or local literatures. Here again, such comparative analyses must transcend the binaries within which the differences have been analyzed. The third is the role and function of religion in South Asian literatures. The presence of religion in South Asian writing has become something of a cliché, and that has masked the real issues that need to be addressed. The fourth is the notion of translation as a possible model on which to discuss literature in English.

Literary histories are relatively recent even in the West, and Marxist critics have played an important role in demonstrating their importance. Such literary histories tend to be national in most cases, while South Asian writing requires a broader framework. A comparative approach that accommodates differences while working with the notion of an identifiable "South Asianness" would probably yield the best results. Whether it is possible to assert a primordial "South Asianness" would in itself be a difficult issue to resolve, but it is nonetheless one that needs to be undertaken in order to test the validity of a comprehensive literary history. At the same time, any literary history will have to take into account the diversity that exists within national boundaries. For instance, the social and cultural trajectory that informs the southern part of India is decidedly different from the North. Hence authors and movements need to be seen in relation to both local and national traditions. A literary history that attempts to locate writers such as Arundhati Roy and Shashi Tharoor must inevitably recognize both the forces that shaped the ethos of Kerala and the factors that influenced India as a whole.

The notion that vernacular literatures have to be invoked in any discussion of South Asian Writing in English is nothing new. In various ways, scholars have

dealt with this issue, but the thrust has been to create a binarism of sorts within which one side appears to be flawed in some respects. In any conceptual framework it is probably necessary to avoid the binary in favor of a model of continuity and complementarity. Once we move away from a mindset that homogenizes vernacular literatures within a "purist" model, it becomes much easier to see continuities. The objective here is not to erase constitutive differences but to recognize that literary traditions tend to accommodate convergences, and monolithic models may well obscure fruitful lines of inquiry.

The tradition of Tamil literature would serve as a useful example to demonstrate some of the pitfalls of a purist model. Other literatures may not have the same history, but they too may have evolved through a process of accommodation and transformation. Tamil literature has the distinction of having retained a very long unbroken tradition. While precise dating continues to be an issue, the earliest written literature probably goes back to a little over two thousand years. A monumental text that is almost treated reverentially by scholars is *Tolkappiam* – a Jain work written probably at the tail end of the Sangam period (200 BCE to 300 CE). Some of the current debates that have taken place have much to do with the manner in which *Tolkappiam* serves as the epitome of literary achievement in Tamil. As a text that offers a comprehensive poetics for literature in Tamil, this text has, quite rightly, achieved canonical status.

It is now becoming increasingly clear that this text has shaped our understanding of Sangam literature. The framework of *Aham* and *Puram* that determines scholarly exegesis of Sangam literature owes much to the classificatory system established in *Tolkappiam*. K. Sivathamby's analysis and close reading of this text reveals that the objective of the work might well have been to educate a non-Dravidian readership.[8] If this theory holds, then the text is an attempt to codify, analyze and comprehend the earlier literature along the models available within a Northern Sanskritic tradition. In fact, *Tolkappiam* might have done for Tamil studies what Orientalism did for the West: it provided the frame for understanding an alien culture. The irony here is of course that the most hallowed text for Tamil literature might well have be, in some respects, a "foreign" text. Even more paradoxical is the fact that the very text which is often thought of as the crowning achievement of a "pure" tradition may have been influenced by the "other" at the very outset.

This is not to say that *Tolkappiam* is in some ways a subversive work. It certainly is a work of great profundity. But it raises interesting questions about

[8] Sivathamby's many articles on this topic have appeared in a number of journals and in his collected essays.

notions of authenticity and taxonomy. It establishes a grid for understanding a body of writing, which then becomes a template for literary appraisal. There is a need to make a distinction between a kind of worldview that creates a body of knowledge and a grid that provides a method for looking at a corpus of writing. Orientalism created a body of literature while *Tolkappiam* shaped our understanding of literature that preceded it. Literary historians have a number of related issues to contend with, but the argument here is that the major canonical work in Tamil literature that determines our understanding of literary history was non-native, so to speak. And having thus created a framework for understanding the local and the authentic, it provided a scaffolding for forms of resistance as other forms of newness entered the literary scene, as with the Bhakti literature of the sixth century.

The poetics of Bhakti literature is beyond the scope of the present paper, but the important concern is that from the time of Bhakti writing to the modern period, the various forms of otherness that entered the Tamil literary scene and the resistance they encountered had much to do with the role and function of *Tolkappiam* as a seminal text. A search for the autochthonous and the authentic is deeply problematic in the Tamil literary scene, and it has been more complex by ideological concerns that are suspicious about forms of hybridity. It is possible to argue that the secularism of Bhakti literature is a manifestation of the *Aham* – love or domestic – tradition of Sangam poetry.[9]

Thus when a poet such as Subramanya Bharati was writing some of his major love poetry at the turn of the twentieth century, he was drawing on at least three traditions: first, there is the tradition of inner and outer poetry that had been codified by *Tolkappiam*; second, he was also using oral forms that evolved alongside written traditions; third, he was responding to the force of British Romanticism. The confluence was striking in his work as it was in the work of several others.

Granted that Tamil literary history is clearly one of the many histories that are available, it is still worth remembering that the notion of authenticity is a difficult concept to sustain. An inquiry into writing in English that implicitly works with ideas of authenticity is likely to face impediments that are unproductive. An analogy here might well be the kind of debate that grew around the publication of Keri Hulme's *the bone people*, and the exchanges between C.K. Stead and Margery Fee about literary tradition. The entire brouhaha about what constitutes an authentic New Zealand literary tradition and whether *the bone people* needed be seen as a

[9] My understanding of *Tolkappiam* and Bhakti literature has been altered significantly by my discussions with Professor Sivathamby. His work on this text has been ground-breaking, and I would like to acknowledge my profound debt to his work and his discussions with me.

Maori or a hybrid work have to do with a desire to establish lines of authenticity and purity. It might well be more productive to think in terms of continuity and bifurcation rather opposition.

Elsewhere I have tried to argue that Spivak has attempted an analysis of Narayan's *The Guide* along these lines.[10] There is much to be said for the manner in which she frames her analysis, and her desire to connect the novel with traditions that are non-Western. In fact she implicitly offers a framework that departs from western model. I would move away from her argument about influences to invoke a landscape-based literature in Tamil, which finds expression in Narayan. Traditions of Sangam poetry reformulate themselves in the context of modernity in Narayan. In short, the reference to Tamil literature alerts one to the dangers of adopting purist models as the basis for literary history. At the same time, a comparative mode enables us to see continuities and frame writing in English with conventions that have operated for centuries in Tamil literature.

The reference to Bhakti literature and its hybrid origins also leads another aspect of South Asian writing in English that requires careful scrutiny. Bhakti literature was essentially religious, whose worldview was shaped at least in part by secular thought. It is important to remember that the Bhakti period made India religious in a profoundly cultural sense. South Asian writing in English on the other hand is secular literature that is underpinned by religion. From its very origins, religion has remained integral to literature in English. At some level the constant recourse to religion, even in the most secular texts, participates in an orientalising discourse as it reiterates a binary that, as is well documented, becomes problematic. Madan's article about religion in India, which appeared in a special issue of *Daedalus* devoted to India, is of particular relevance as is Anita Desai's essay in the same issue about the need to recognize the role of religion in literature. Madan quite right points out that is impossible to discuss India without drawing attention to religion. What is less clear is the precise function of religion in literature.

I have argued in another paper that the academic study of religion and literature is still in its infancy in South Asia.[11] If one were to concede that position, then it follows that the relation between religion and literature has not been explored fully. The fact that religion figures prominently in literature does not amount to a critical statement about its role in Indian or South Asian writing. The analytical framework for mapping the function of literature is still not properly in place.

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[10] For more information, see *Postcolonial Text* 1. 2 (2005)

[11] Unpublished paper on theorizing literature in religion in a South Asian context given at the Congress of Humanities and Social Sciences in Winnipeg in 2004.

Explication of religious presence – and there are many studies that exemplify this approach – does not necessarily explain the role or religion.

The issue of the academic study of religion is in itself deeply controversial, in the West and the East. It is a debate that has complex origins and an equally complex history. It is now becoming increasingly evident that since we do not have a clearly defined academic framework for the study of religion, our approach to the relation between religion and literature tends to be broadly theological. Such an approach tends to be moral and ethical in ways that not only fail to capture the self-conscious analysis that continues to take place in literature, but also leads very easily into an orientalist reading of this body of work. It is possible to argue that writing in English, particularly because of the language that has Western origins, is well placed to interrogate aspects of religion as it relates to culture in ways that are not always easy to vernacular literatures. To claim that Narayan and Raja Rao valorize religion or that Roy debunks Christianity does not amount to a rigorous study of how these writers engage with religion in a secular ethos. Religion is germane to the manner in which social relations function and how landscape gets configured. Religion thus becomes a strong subtext even in the most secular South Asian literature.

Such an approach complements the idea of translation that is central to writing in English. David Damrosch in his seminal work on translation and world literature offers a useful methodology, although his notion of translation tends to be at times too literal and categorical to be applied to South Asian writing in English in any straightforward manner. However, his argument goes one step further from that of Rushdie who claims that something is lost and something is gained in translation. Damrosch makes the argument that translation is a form of enrichment. In fact he goes on to argue that something is gained in translation, using modes of circulation as a point of reference. In a very complex and erudite manner he demonstrates that as texts circulate in areas that are outside the culture in which they originated, they take on a new lease on life that is empowering.

The issue of whether a translation is better or worse is probably less important than the recognition that South Asian writing in English is a form of cultural translation. It is probably much easier to demonstrate this by drawing attention to diasporic writing where the circulation is clearly outside the area of origin. It is possible to assert that even the works that are intended solely for a South Asian readership are a form of translation. The difference between this and the literal translation of a text is that these works are also the original as they are translations. As originals they continue to project forms of so-called local

knowledge, while as translations they bring to the texts very different literary and ontological traditions.

It is because South Asian texts written in English are translations that an uncritical acceptance of local traditions as background material becomes counterproductive. Hagiographical readings of Narayan or Rao, for example, may well forget the nature of translations. In fact authors themselves may forget that their task has the strength of translations. The idea of translation implies an original, which does not exist, in a literal sense, with writing in English. There is, however, an original of sorts, and that is the literature written in the vernaculars. And if we discount the idea of an unequal binarism, we would recognize that here the original and the translation occupy a symbiotic relation to each other.

An aspect of translation that needs to be explored carefully is, of course, the nature of language itself. While there is general consensus that early South Asian writers used a kind of language that was imitative and later authors created their own idiom, discussion of language hardly goes beyond that. At what point does language move beyond local "flavor" and engage with the task of *forging* a new idiom? Forging, at one level, implies imitation, subservience, and admiration; at another it suggest transformative power and new energy. Since what separates South Asian writing in English from the vernacular languages is the language itself, it is necessary to look carefully at the function of literary language.

My position with regard to conceptualizing South Asian writing in English is in many senses probing and reflective. The objective, however, is not to offer an authoritative model but debunk the notion that South Asian writing in English is a residual form of orientalist writing that continues the tradition of so much colonialist writing. Also, we cannot move away from traditional categories unless we recognize the need for a conceptual framework for looking at these literatures that share so many other spaces but are linked by several common threads. Even scholars who are skeptical about some of the critical assumptions that underpin the work of Edward Said agree that he was one of the rare scholars who has demonstrated the value of close reading with an awareness of the worldliness of texts. In some ways, that is exactly what is needed for conceptualizing South Asian writing in English, keeping in mind that any holistic approach must recognize the immense complexity of the task itself.

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