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TOWARDS INCLUSIVENESS: AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN THIEME

By Jaydeep Sarangi

J.S.: Can a subaltern speak? If he speaks, can he retain his position as the subaltern?

J.T.: (Smiling) I sometimes feel that this is a question that is doomed to plague post-colonial studies forever! I have a great deal of respect for Gayatri Spivak, particularly because of her real-life commitment to subaltern causes – translating Mahasweta Devi and so on – but, wrested from its post-structuralist provenance, her question has frequently been misunderstood by others. I often think it would be better if people asked, ‘Can the subaltern be heard?’ The answer to this must be that historically, he, and particularly she, very frequently *haven’t*been heard, especially because the narratives of colonial and other elitist historiographical records have been centred on the written word. So illiterate subalterns have often been consigned to silence. The Subaltern Studies scholars’ work has striven to address this situation and has made a massive contribution, but of course their endeavours still involve speaking on behalf of the subaltern and, while I don’t share the opinion that this is an appropriation that should be avoided at all costs, it’s no substitute for subalterns speaking for themselves.

Today in many of the world’s societies there is a movement towards facilitating subaltern utterance, both in response to the campaigns of subalterns themselves and to interventions by liberal outsiders. It expresses itself in policy initiatives and more general consciousness-raising. Dalits, Aborigines, Native Americans and many other traditionally disempowered groups are all playing a larger part in national dialogues, but at the same time across the globe the gap between the world’s haves and have-nots seems to be widening. The democratization of information that the Internet has brought about has opened doors for vast numbers of people, but it has also created a new group of dispossessed peoples: the information poor, who aren’t heard in global conversations. I’d like to think this situation is changing as more and more people have access to today’s communications technology, but that may be over-optimistic, since as yet it seems that the advances in technology that we’ve seen in recent decades are widening the gap between the information elect and the information poor. And

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then there are the victims of warfare in the world's many trouble-spots, those who have lost their homes, their communities and any livelihoods they may have had in the first place. Everything really. The vast increase in the number of refugees has created another class of subaltern, whose physical statelessness means they exist outside the parameters of national and international dialogues. Of course, refugees are nothing new – in India one thinks of the upheavals in the wake of Partition – but their proliferation in the wake of the Arab Spring and other such seismic changes in the global world order is creating a climate in which they are uniquely unable to speak. It's a global phenomenon. So, at the same time as some subalterns are enfranchised, other groups are dispossessed – physically and discursively.

As for the second part of your question. It reminds me of what some people have called the 51% argument-- the age-old dilemma of opposition parties. While you are in opposition protesting about the need to change the Establishment, you are a minority that can easily claim the high moral ground. When you win a majority, then you *become* the Establishment. The crucial issue is whether you change when you achieve power. It may be that newly empowered subalterns who can speak, and are heard, surrender their subaltern status, but if they are able to express and hopefully address the power imbalances that have previously silenced them, that change seems highly desirable to me. If, on the other hand, they are corrupted by their new access to power, then of course that's totally different. And of course one should add that just as soon as one group ceases to belong to a subaltern minority, invariably another finds itself in that situation. It's as if there's a vacuum that needs to be filled. We can only dream of a truly egalitarian society, and in our own small ways do what we can to help bring it about, just as we should strive for world peace. That should be a part of everyone's personal politics, I feel, whether we're privileged or deprived. I hope you agree (smiling).

J.S.: There are so many writers writing from different positions of the *other*. These writings have become popular at several levels. There is an element of 'exotic' in these writings from the margin. Are we paying special attention to this corpus for a tag associated to it?

J.T.: Certainly in the West, there is a current vogue for exotica, analogous to the Orientalism of past centuries, and literary works are marketed for their supposed insights into 'other'

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places. It's said that the tourist trade in Kefalonia and Kerala thrived after the success of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* and *The God of Small Things* respectively, and the Western appetite for consuming 'difference' seems unabated. It's true of other times as well as other places. The historical novel, which has always been a popular genre, has been more popular than ever in recent years. Hilary Mantel's winning the Man Booker Prize twice for her novels *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies* is evidence of this.

As you say, though, there are very many writers writing from different positions of alterity (otherness) and one person's otherness is another person's familiar territory. So I think it's also interesting to ask whether in, say, South Asia, there's a similar fascination with exotica. In the West the less salubrious sides of Indian life have become a kind of new, reverse exotica. One can see this in the success of a novel like Aravind Adiga's *White Tiger*, which I gather wasn't nearly as popular in India, and a film like *Slumdog Millionaire*, which unashamedly mingles slum life with a tourist's eye view, when for example it travels to the Taj Mahal. Is there an equivalent in India? Possibly in terms of the fascination with dalit writing. This thankfully is coming into its own, particularly in the genre of autobiography, where non-dalits are often acting as scribes. Either way the silenced are being heard, but it seems to me there can be an element of appropriation in the intervention of those from more privileged background. To strike the right note is a difficult balancing act, of course.

Also I suppose the Indian fascination with global affluence is a contemporary form of Occidentalism, but that's a vast subject. So let's not dig too deeply into it just now. (smile)

J.S.: Will postcolonialism travel with the changing demands of time?

J.T.: You know, the term 'postcolonialism' has been used in so many ways, it's hard sometimes to say what it means and so I think one could say it's travelled quite a long way already. Logically it should be obsolete, if one sees it as being concerned with what happened 'after colonialism', or even what happened 'after colonization'. As the various European colonialisms recede into the past, it seems increasingly irrelevant to pigeon-hole writers – writers from very diverse societies, most of which have experienced enormous sea changes since the attainment of their independences – as 'postcolonial'. But then the term is also used

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in other ways, particularly to refer to a set of practices which contest hegemonic structures, situations in which there's an asymmetrical power balance, and of course there will always be such inequalities in the world. From that point of view I think it has travelled usefully and will continue to do so.

J.S.: How will you conceptualise aborigine /Maori/dalit writings these days, in the after-months of so called democratisation of life/society?

J.T.: There are huge variations here, too. In Australia, for example, it's said that to be Aboriginal is a matter of self-determination. Provided one has a modicum of Aboriginal blood, one can decide to identify oneself as an Aborigine, and where writers are concerned there have been several instances of writers who have gravitated towards that aspect of their genealogy. So that would be one way in which one might 'conceptualse' Aborigine writing. I think it reflects the extent to which in post-Mabo Australia, it's politically correct to privilege Aborigine identity, and in one sense this is terrific because it's addressing, and helping to remedy, the brutal discriminations of the past. It's also made Aborigine writing a major growth industry, but, despite this, I'm not convinced that there's been an equivalent change for fringe-dwelling Aborigines. It's those who have progressed some way up the educational ladder, particularly urban part-Aboriginals, who have benefited the most from this transformation in attitudes and, of course, changes in state and national policies. And this seems to me a great pity, both for those who remain on the margins and for the society at large.

I've recently read several works by Native writers from different parts of the world and I've been struck by their passionate concern for ecological issues. Although Native communities have had so much taken away from them and even their age-old epistemologies have been threatened, there is still an acute sensitivity to ecological issues and animal rights and non-Native readers have so much to learn from them. Perhaps I can give you three examples. From Australia there's Alexis Wright's sprawling epic, *Carpentaria*, which is wandering and unevenly written, but immensely powerful at its best. From New Zealand there's *The Whale Rider* by Witi Ihimaera, which was made into a wonderful film that put the emphasis on gender changes – a young girl takes on the ancestral role of the whale rider, which was

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traditionally an exclusively male preserve in Maori society – but in Ihimaera's novel, whole sections are completely devoted to whale experience. And best of all, from Canada, there's Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*, which offers a brilliant dramatization of the contemporary dilemmas facing the Haisla people of British Columbia. This novel works particularly well, because it is completely unsentimental about the older ways, but it has a protagonist with shamanic powers who has contact with them, and again, this time in a subtler but very effective way. Each of these novels speaks not only to its own community but to the majoritarian community of the country that it comes from *and* to a global audience. I feel I've learnt a lot from them, and this is because, quite apart from their themes, they are such wonderfully written books. I'm not sure whether their writers qualify as subalterns, because they are all highly articulate, but they certainly emanate from subaltern communities.

J.S.: The term post-colonialism also is applied to denote the Mother Country's neo-colonial control of the decolonised country, effected by the legalistic continuation of the economic, cultural, and linguistic power relationships that controlled the colonial politics of knowledge (the generation, production, and distribution of knowledge) about the colonised peoples of the non–Western world. Do you think this observation fit enough to describe postcolonial context these days?

J.T.: Not exactly. The 'Mother Country' obviously has some residual importance, because it was responsible for many of the institutions established in the colonial period, but in the post-independence period it exercises little continuing control. That said, neo-colonialism is alive and well in cultural as well as economic contexts and the major force here is American-led globalization. Again, situations vary tremendously in non-Western countries: in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, Chinese imperialism may well soon overtake American domination as the biggest single external influence.

Meanwhile, if we are thinking of literature in particular, then London and New York continue to dominate world publishing, and metropolitan publishers' notions of what is globally marketable can be very different from perceptions in other parts of the world. Where India is concerned, books published 'at home' seem to represent a range of experiences that are very very different from those that published abroad. Books by Indian writers or diasporic Indians

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published overseas are all too often compromised by their need to interpret the country for non-Indians. I don't think we should rush to debunk cosmopolitan Indian writing, but I do think we should be alert to the differences, and the potential drawbacks.

J.S.: Postcolonial critics often emphasise the agency that speakers of English in post-colonial societies have in the way they use the language in their identity formation and to create their own discursive space. Do you consider this contextualised English (i.e. Indian English) as the new variety(model) of English now?

J.T.: Well, language shapes identity and so the recognition of linguistic difference and linguistic variety is crucial to the representation of particular experiences. I wouldn't exactly say that 'contextualised English' is *the* new model for Englishes around the world, but it's certainly *one* way of conveying the local specificities of an experience. Conversely, one also wants to say that different writers will inevitably take different approaches to this. A writer like Chinua Achebe used a particularly stylized, seemingly simple, though actually very complex, form of English, to reflect the registers of the speech of the Igbo people of Nigeria. And of course other African writers, such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, have felt that they should write in their mother tongue, while allowing, in Ngugi's case that is, for translation into other languages – Kiswahili, a *lingua franca* in East Africa, and English – to reach a larger audience. I don't think there should be any prescriptive formula for post-colonial writers, but sensitivity to the implications of particular language usages is crucial.

Where Indian experience is concerned, Amitav Ghosh, who is acutely sensitive to the nuances of language usage and peppers his writing with information on etymologies, cross-cultural puns and wordplay, is perhaps the finest example of a writer who manages to localize his idioms, while explaining them to an international audience. This, though, runs the risk of too much verbal display and writers such as Ghosh, and particularly Rushdie, can leave one feeling there is too much linguistic virtuosity on show.

J.S.: Do you subscribe to the idea of 'english'?

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J.T.: I take it you mean 'english' with a small 'e', as used by the authors of *The EmpireWrites Back* to suggest the E/englishes around the world that depart from so-called Standard English. If so, yes I do. There may be other ways of expressing this, though. For example, if we're talking about writing, we can talk about 'Anglophone Literatures in English' or we can speak about 'Creole Englishes', but yes, I do think it's necessary to differentiate the multiplicity of E/englishes used around the globe from a supposed metropolitan 'Standard English', which was once British-based, but whose norms are now dominated by American English, especially because U.S-speak is the language of the Internet. Then there are valuable terms such as 'Hinglish' and 'Singlish' (Singaporean English), which help to emphasize national or regional specifics.

Related to this is the variety of englishes that may exist in a given country or region. I remember many years ago inviting Nissim Ezekiel to read to a group of students in London and he spoke about his own well-known Indian-English poems. He was particularly interesting when he talked about the variety of Indian Englishes. He spoke about travelling to another state – I think it was Rajasthan – and hearing someone say, 'How are you, I hope.' He said he'd never heard this expression before. It was a different Indian English from what he was familiar with in Bombay.

My own experience has also sensitized me to the prevalence of linguistic continua. I worked for five years in Guyana where there are variant forms of Creole English and a continuum, which could be said to have Standard Guyanese English at one extreme and a 'pure' Creole at the other. It would, though, be rare to find anyone consistently using either of these notional extremes and, most interestingly of all, most Guyanese speakers can change registers at will, slipping in and out of the continuum at various points. I've no specialist knowledge of linguistics, but it seemed to me this raises the possibility of being multilingual, with all the implications that this has for thought and expression, within a single language. Anyway, yes, I like the idea of 'english' or better still 'englishes' – plural.

J.S.: In countries like India there is a threat that the country will lose the depth of its age old vernaculars because of the wide spreading acceptance of English as the daily mode of communication and publication. What is your take here?

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J.T.: The pull towards English as the language of global transaction is obviously increasing its role almost everywhere, and in India one can see this in the popularity of English-medium education, which is so often a passkey to better career prospects. You probably know better than I do, but as yet I don't think it's a very serious threat to the vernaculars. Where writing is concerned, the translation programmes of the Sahitya Akademi and other similar organizations are clearly designed to counter this. But of course using English gives writers an international audience, whereas Hindi and all the other important regional languages leave them consigned to a more limited readership. At the same time it's crucially important to preserve the vernaculars, because the experiences and concepts that are conveyed in them can be very different from any supposed equivalents in English.

J.S.: What can the function of literature be said to be? Is literature a by-product of literary movements these days?

J.T.: It's an age-old question and I don't think there can be any single answer to it. Traditionally in the West, as one of the humanities, literature was often seen to have an edifying role and I suppose its use for campaigning causes, whether this be to raise awareness for minority issues, to counter discrimination on the grounds of class, gender or sexuality, or to promote animal rights, could be seen as a contemporary equivalent, but really the only common ground here is that it is seen to have an ethical function. The major change that has taken place is that whereas once literature was widely thought to express universal truths – and of course for many people it still does – now there's a contrary impulse which takes the view that it addresses cultural specificity and difference. My sense is that outside the West the notion that it embodies universal truths still carries a great deal of weight. The continuing popularity of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* suggests that they are not only wonderful narratives, but also, among many other things, conduct books and texts that offer an encyclopaedic view of 'human' experience, works that provide a bedrock of universal truths.

Beyond this, though, it's surely important not to be too solemn about literature's supposed ideological functions. Often we are attracted to works simply because they entertain. The current vogue for fantasy suggests this and, while it's possible to read texts such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy allegorically, I don't think the majority of its readers come to it for

this. Narrative, though, works in strange ways. Every sentence we write or speak arranges perceptions in some kind of linear way. The questions you're asking me and what I am saying in return are doing this. So, at the risk of stating the obvious, narrative is integral to the construction of meaning and to any kind of identity-construction, whether it's personal or national. Amnesiacs lose their sense of self, because they can't easily tell the story of who they are. Perhaps that's one of the most important functions of literature. Narrativizing makes sense of experience.

J.S.: Is bilingualism a help or hindrance in language acquisition?

I think it's a big help. If we speak two or more languages we become more proficient in acquiring languages, because consciously or otherwise we have a sense of how languages work. More than just this, though: fluent bilingual and polylingual speakers usually have a sense of the conceptual differences that exist between cultures. To speak two languages is to be aware of two sets of cultural codes and this gives one a healthily balanced, relativistic way of looking at the world. Literal translation obscures this. To get inside another language is to understand the cultural codes that operate within the society or societies that speak it. Let me give you an example. When I was a teenager, the first time I ever went to mainland Europe, I travelled to Italy by train and in the carriages there were signs warning people not to lean out the windows – in four languages! The English was a fairly straightforward and functional prohibition: 'Do not lean out'. The German was the same, but it sounded harsher and more staccato: 'Nicht hinauslehnen'. In French it wasn't so very different, but it sounded gentler, softer, 'Ne pas se pencher en dehors'. And then there was the Italian, which was really very different from the other three: 'E pericoloso sporgersi'. This 'translates into English (only it can never be a perfect translation) as 'It's dangerous to lean out.' No prohibition, simply a statement telling you it's dangerous. And one can imagine an Italian speaker saying this casually, perhaps with a shrug of the shoulders – declining to tell you not to do it, just letting you know what the situation is and maybe even implying 'You're free to do whatever you like, but be it on your own head, if you are stupid enough to do it.' To borrow a phrase from French, ironically, it's a more *laissez-faire* attitude, coming from a more *laissez-faire*¸ sometimes seemingly world wearyculture. A famous German philosopher once said, 'No

concept can ever really be translated from one language into another.' This, of course, is a translation.

J.S. In a rapidly changing perspective how do view the emergence of Mandarin and Hindi as dominant languages?

They are mainly 'dominant' within national borders and in the medium-term future this doesn't look likely to change. There are many more Mandarin speakers than there are English speakers, but at present English (englishes?) remains the world's *lingua franca*, and this has been increasingly so in the era of contemporary globalization. I think it's only serious rival in decades to come is Arabic, which has also been an important medium of international communication historically and is likely to see a further upsurge in usage. Meanwhile Mandarin is being taught in English schools, replacing European languages other than French in some instances. So there will certainly be more English adults with at least some knowledge of Mandarin in the next generation.

Hindi is very different, of course, since it hasn't travelled so much outside India's borders, except where, like Urdu, it's spoken by migrants or people of South Asian heritage. Again you will know better than me, but its role within India is complicated as it's less popular in the South. When I was in Chennai, I was struck by the opposition towards Hindi at times. I think, though, that India is very fortunate, like say Canada, in having two languages that are used for national communication, because, as I was saying, this gives many Indians access to more than one system of thought, even if Indian English has its own particular inflections and conventions. And of course most educated Indians are proficient in at least one further language. So as a generalization I would say that the linguistic situation in India is very healthy, though I know this isn't always the case and languages can divide as well as unite.

Might I end by extending this out to a more general plea for inclusiveness, since I think that several of the questions you've asked point in this direction, Jaydeep? The more open we are to experiences of all kinds and from all places, the more likely it is that we can contribute to dialogues that bridge cultures and that's where literature, whatever its provenance and avowed intentions, can play such an important part. It can open up windows onto all the

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world's experiences, viewed not as exotica, but as a conduit that enables us to see others from the inside. Throughout my life I've always been struck by the ways in which people can stereotype others because of ignorance. Sometimes this involves blind contradictions. One hears people talking in a derogatory way about another community, within which they may have friends, whom they would never dream of being hostile towards. They are antipathetic to the unknown, or little known group, not individuals that they know. It's ignorance that breeds such prejudice and the world has hundreds of thousands of books that can dispel such ignorance simply by showing us 'alterity' from the inside. If we open their pages with a smile, we'll find that many of them smile back at us.

But let me end here. These kinds of comments run the risk of turning into a homily and the best writing doesn't lecture to us, it *shows* us, and it entertains us. Thank you very much for your sensitive questions, Jaydeep.

J.S.: Thank you, John! You are so kind to us!

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Bio

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John Thieme is a Senior Fellow at the University of East Anglia, UK. He has held Chairs at the University of Hull and London South Bank University and has also taught at the Universities of Guyana, North London and, as an annual Visiting Professor, the University of Turin. He has been contributing to debates on post-colonial writing since the 1980s and has particular interests in Anglophone Caribbean literature and Indian writing in English. He has also published widely on Canadian fiction. His books include *The Web of Tradition: Uses of Allusion in V.S. Naipaul's Fiction* (1987), *The Arnold Anthology of Post-Colonial Literatures in English* (1996), *Derek Walcott* (1999), *Post-Colonial Con-Texts: Writing Back to the*

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