

Globalisation and the Culture of Marginality

I am happy that the proposal statement of the 6th Biennial International Conference of Comparative Literature Association of India evinces its apprehension of the process of homogenisation, cooption and appropriation and ultimately marginalization of many vital but less fortunate cultures and their literatures by the dominant cultures in all parts of the globe.

It is generally said that non-literate cultures are 'knowledge blanks' which need to be filled in with the modern knowledge of different disciplines and dominant cultures. But cultures are never 'blanks'. In some matters, for example, in the ecological management' practices used by tribals are far superior to anything we could teach them. The tragedy is that modernism has imposed a single perspective in dealing with human culture and today this kind of fixed perspective is challenged by the indeterminacy of experience. The search for one truth in the many is at odds with the relativist experience of anthropology. The point is to dignify subjective experience, not to deny reality; to appreciate imagination, not to disregard reason; to honour our differences, not to underestimate our common humanity.

The whole question of margin and marginality is quite complex. In Indian social structure margins are untouchables, dalits, tribals, bonded labourers, child workers and exploited women and economically the poor

people. In literary hierarchy, it is oral and tribal languages and literature, languages on the verge of extinction or languages which have a place in census report but do not figure in the 8th schedule of the constitution. Let us take a poem in translation of the Indian oral tradition;

What is man's body? It is a spark
from the fire,
It meets water and it is put out.
What is man's body? It is a bit
of straw
It meets fire and it is burnt.
What is man's body? It is a
bubble of water,
Broken by the wind

This poem, a gonda tribal song of the Indian oral tradition is not usually studied in courses on literature or included in discussions on the sociology of literature and art and yet the history of Indian literature or for that matter the history of any literature of the world, does in no way commence with written literature, and in the oldest periods of Indian literature we find not written words, but only texts handed down by the word of mouth. It needs to be emphasised that the world of the oral tradition very much belong to the field of literature : it can throw light on literature proper and is itself part of literature as it is mostly commonly understood. Indian tradition thinks that folk or tribal literature is the creation of the conscious mind of the prehistorical man and there is hardly any difference between the conscious mind of the prehistoric and the

modern man. In Indian context oral, tribal or folklore are not the residue of the past, nor the behaviour of the uncivilized but it is the continuity of a rich culture and also a process of making the present more life worthy.

In its final analysis, I am sure, this conference will like to assert that there is no scope for the literate tradition to hold orality in the margin and in very low esteem. In fact this is done on the Western analogy of great/little tradition. In Indian context the desi/margi contrast in fact represents two different expressions of the same tradition, not different traditions. They are the two poles of the same continuum.

To give an example, if the story of King Oedipus by Aeschylus is a representation of great tradition then what will one say about this story from the India oral tradition heard by Prof. A.K. Ramanujan from a half blind Kannada Tribal woman and later included in the book 'In Oedipus : A Folklore case book'. The story goes like this :

A girl is born with a curse on her head that she would marry her own son and beget a son by him. As soon as she hears of the curse, she willfully vows she'd try and escape it, she secludes herself in a dense forest, eating only fruit, forswearing all male company. But when she attains puberty, as fate would have it, she eats a mango from a tree under which a passing king has urinated. The mango impregnates her; bewildered, she gives birth to a male child; she wraps him in a piece of her sari and throws him in a nearby stream. The child is picked up by the king of the next kingdom, and he grows up to be a handsome young adventurous prince. He comes hunting to the same forest and the cursed

women falls in love with the stranger, telling herself she is not in danger any more as she has no son alive.

She married him and bears him a child. According to custom, the father's swaddling clothes are preserved and brought out for the new born. The woman recognizes at once the piece of sari with which she had swaddled her first son, now her husband and understands that her fate has really caught up with her. She waits till everyone is asleep and sings a lullaby to her new born baby :

Sleep
O Son
O grandson
O brother to my husband
sleep O sleep
sleep well.

Then she hangs herself from the rafter with her sari twisted to a rope.

If this is little tradition then who cares for great tradition. After all in Indian literary context both *shastra* & *loka* or *margi* & *desi* are always taken together – to understand the entirety of India's aesthetic tradition but of course not as a monolithic unity but as diverse structures complementing each other. The complementariness of *loka* and *shastra* is very deep and intricate. In the folk story of the marriage of Shiva & Parvati, the words of praise for Shiva are *shastra* oriented but the words of

praise for Paravati, who is the mother of the universe, are folk in content. In *shastra* the loom of a weaver and the wheel of the potter is used to explain many intricate theories. But unfortunately being steeped into Western literary theories, as we were, we never gave any place to oral/folk literature in the histories of literature in different Indian languages. Dr. K.M. George in his two volume history of comparative Indian literature added a lengthy chapter on Indian folk literature but it was just an addition not an acceptance of folk in the totality of Indian literature. Oral/folk literature could not be resurrected from its marginality. It was for the first time Sisir Kumar Das in his two volume history of modern Indian literature recognised oral/folk literature as a strong voice of the literary tradition of India. While describing, the literary scene after British crushed down the 1857 war of Independence Prof. Das reveals that there was a complete silence in the Indian literary world about the war of Independence and if there was any voice to be heard that was only of praise for the British as described in the *kasidas* of Mirza Ghalib or in the Gujrati poems of Narmad or Bengali by Ishwar Chandra Gupta. But at the same time some kind of an ambivalence was very much perceptible in their writings and hence Narmad writes also about *îðàæ*. Ishwar Chandra Gupta writes satirically about British raj and Ghalib bemoans the tragedy of the situation prevailing during that time. However the bards of oral poetry gave vent to their feeling of anger and frustration against the British during that period of silence and subjection. This oral voice became a constant refrain later for the Indian poets to write poetry of revolt and freedom, which became a major thrust in the making of Indian literature. Orality or folk are never marginalised in India, it is always accented as an alternative tradition and

alternative is never understood as 'the opposite'. If you want to draw a white line, you need a black or grey or any dark colour background, so it is a mistake to say white is the opposite of black or grey or blue. We have to make use of black or grey or blue in order to bring out white in all its distinction. Here in India the glory of 'mainstream' literature rests not by marginalising but by accepting oral or folk as complementary. This is the thesis of the two volumes of the History of modern Indian literature by Sisir Kumar Das also the beginning of the reinvention of Comparative Literature which actually started in the year 1991 with the publication of these two volumes. I am sure this complementariness of *loka* and *shastra* or the reinvention of comparative literature will continue as basis for many other conferences to understand the range and the entirety of India's aesthetic tradition and negotiate the whole issue of marginality.

In economic terminology margins have an economic principle of identification through separation from the centre. Besides there are many other approaches to negotiate this whole issue of margin, developed, developing and underdeveloped countries, South and North divide or as it happened in the beginning of the comparative literature when Western scholars made major European literatures as the area of study knowing well that there existed many great literatures outside the Western world. This kind of euro-centric attitude and colonial bias marginalised Asian and African literatures in the study of comparative literature. Today if there is a buzzword in cultural critique, says Gyatri Chakravarti Spvak, it is marginality.

There has been a constant attempt in the name of economic unity or world market or globalization or political unity or by positing a category called Indian literature as one literature to overlook and marginalize the differences. It is possible to look at Indian literature as a unified universe because of a common core of metaphors and symbols, myths and legends, conventions and norms that have evolved during the last thousands of years despite all diversities, linguistic and non-linguistic creating a sense of unity. But this unity of Indian literature emerges only when one understands it in the pluralistic context or in the context of cultural diversity. Indian literature demonstrates unity through acknowledgement of differences.

However, globalization has become a threat to cultural identities and specificities. It would appear that globalization or global market in the name of development usurps spaces of taste, fragrance and sensuousness and ultimately local culture, value, significance and belief. Since the global market is a giant market it has to override the specificities and take recourse to generalities. It is a totalizing market.

The emergence and dominance of proscenium theatre in India could illustrate this point in a telling manner. Once the proscenium theatre was adopted by us, many forms of theatrical presentation, expressions, complexities to be watched from close quarters were pushed out of the so-called urban theatre and out of its theatre space. Similarly many forms of performing arts would go out of popular appeal since they cannot be brought successfully on the small screen which has emerged as the most powerful instrument of the global market.

It creates cultural destruction like introducing water hyacinth in a pond -- first it takes over and kills other water dependent plants – then it spread until it covers the entire surface of the pond-then it sucks up oxygen from the water until the fishes die. If not checked may cause the political self rule to be compromised by outside forces, the international power brokers.

The greed-based economic development leads to impoverishment and under development of others resulting in the degradation of *prakriti*, ecology and *nari*, the honour of women. The greed based economy is the direct result of our material and physical lust and insatiable desires leading primarily to the exploitation of women and pollution of environment.

Mahasweta Devi in her story 'The Hunt' describes how ceaseless exploitation and marginalisation of women and nature can be stopped.

She describes vividly how an illegitimate tribal woman Marry Oraon, can fight to save the depredations of nature and the honour of women, who tend to be marginalised as sex commodities only.

In the annual hunting festival of their tribe she kills the contractor who had raped her and thereby deals out justice for a crime committed against her and the entire tribal society, against illegal deforestation, against nature, against oppression of women, against patriarchy, against neo - colonialism and against sustainable development.

The road, the big road symbolising the greed-based development is the enemy.

It will take away whatever crop a tribal grows, and in times of famine and natural disorders like floods, development zealots will come in lorries and trucks and take away their children to be sold in other places as bonded labour and women to be used for sex, and then sold for prostitution.

This story by Mahasweta Devi resists development which leads to the impoverishment and underdevelopment of others which results in the degradation of the environment and the displacement of people which exposes the disparities in our country and uses violence as power.

When the system fails to ensure justice, cultural ecology resorts to violence.

The irony is that global market on one side usurps local culture but without local it cannot function and flourish. The basis for consumer culture is advertisement but without using the language of the local people, their ethos of the family life, religion and behaviour one can't sell the product. The TV serials about family life following the traditional social norms and the use of mythologies even by star TV indicate that global cannot survive without local. The global can reach us only being local. The global has to locate itself; has to have a locus. But the local language of advertisement is turning to be abbreviated and codified :

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It is also affecting the creativity of the writer because his value is now determined not by his aesthetic value but by his market value and as a result serious writers in every Indian language are being completely marginalised. The literary texts are now relegated to the background and cheap popular literature is pushed to the fore ground which is even effecting the folk and the tribal sensibilities. Literary magazines have already vanished. Culture is slowly turning into a commodity to be sold. The subject matter or the theme or the aestheticism of a literary text is not important today but its packaging and marketability.

The bilingual language of the global market, Hindi & English or Bengali & English or any other Indian language and English has increased the domination of English and the other languages are being appropriated. It is affecting our use of language and also has an impact on our socio-cultural thought process.

The big question is, will our languages, culture be able to resist globalization. Will our languages remain languages as created by us or as created by the forces of global market.

One can reason it out that when we could resist colonialism, why can't we resist this onslaught. Raja Ram Mohan Roy had a double resistance -- from inside as well as from outside. Because of inside

resistance he went to Veda and Upanishad and founded Brahma Samaj. He also published a newspaper in Persian language which was the result of his outside resistance against colonialism. Tagore had a similar resistance from outside as well as from inside which resulted in his developing the notion of a synthesis between East & West.

But today, on one side, we are not feeling threatened at all. The general pattern of thinking is that add it and but and allow America to enter. A writer's talent is now determined by his capacity to have his writings published in English translation by Penguin India.

On the other side, we are feeling threatened and as a result conservatism makes an entry in our thinking and writing. When the Empire came in the subcontinent the Bengal renaissance took place leading us to new thinking, new approach to life. Now with globalisation conservatism is spreading its wings. This is the primary reason for the demand for *swedeshi* by a section of people which can't be equated with the demand for swedeshi by Mahatma Gandhi, who used it as a handle to fight the colonial domination. But today in the process of raising the bogey of an imaginary nationalism we are talking more and more as how to save creative literature from the onslaught of global market. The spirit of showing traditional domestic lives where a woman is shown as a stereotyped Indian women or mythological serials are the result of this kind of conservatism. This is creating more of a problem for the inside structure of literature and not helping to save literature at all.

On the other side, it is being said that globalisation can't be stopped, that is the key to progress. It has brought changes in our lives. Acceptability and open mindedness have increased. The global impact has given birth to feminism in India a very positive sign towards the empowerment of women. In India the women writers accept the feminine construct as a valid construct and use the inequality to expose marriage and widowhood, sexual servitude, the problem of bearing and rearing children in poverty, gender discrimination and other forms of exploitation. Here feminism means total upliftment of the entire society and therefore writers like Ashapurna Devi dream of an ideal domestic scene where women would enjoy the same rights as men in affirmation of human values. In the writings of Anees Jung also, you find these women oppressed as they are, yet they talk of fulfilling relationship, the joys of marriage and children, the exhilaration of breaking free from the bonds of rituals and exploitative social practices and sing with joy and pray in the name of God. Feminity, by definition, for these writers, is not a limiting value but an expanding one – holistic, eclectic, trans-specific and encompassing of diverse stirrings. The women's movement in India, is different from the Western feminist movement which seeks enemies and expresses itself through anger and confrontation, which is based on a notion of a totalised oppression of women across cultures and nationalities unleashed by unequal gender, patriarchy and to certain extent capitalism. Feminity, in India, is a struggle for a certain basic principle of perceiving life, a philosophy of being. It is a principle and a philosophy that can serve not just women but all human beings.

The new thinking or open mindedness has helped in exposing the suppression and persecution of Dalits and the inhuman ways of using child as a labour. The urge to impart education to girls has increased. Now there is an awakening to be seen in the marginalised area of the society. Now we all are seen as apart of the global village.

But as world citizen of this village we realize that this is a creation of Western civilization, a point in the relentless process of westernization of the globe; the terms and conditions for living and participating in the life of this village are laid down by the west. We, who live in India in homes and forests, sometimes even on the pavements of the roads of metropolitan cities are being asked and goaded to want to be living in this village as world citizen primarily for two reasons :

- 1) We matter as a potential market. The global players of the west would like to buy and market India, also in India and therefore the allurement of the global citizenship. Infact, WTO, GATT, World Monetary Fund are all tools to conscript us as world citizen for the benefit of west and its market.
- 2) We are now asked to be partners in the war with terror started by USA after 9/11 but the war has now turned into an unholy war.

The issue of multiculturalism is related to this notion of global village. It is true that globalization does not accept diversity. Its nature is to coopt, homogenise and appropriate all diversities for maximum gain and go for

one homogenous culture but in the process it has realised that local and regional concerns are to be protected for utmost gain and profit and hence acceptance of multiculturalism has become a strategic necessity. It is also a strategy for the functioning of democracy, which is based on a single vote system.

Infact, multiculturalism in the post-industrial society in America, Canada, Europe and England is used as a political weapon, a method of ruling a country of people of different cultures and ethnicity. The principle is, we rule and they the lesser breeds may get on with their little live and breedings. Master wouldn't dream of intervening unless something is done that might undermine his place at the top, in which case all this cultural relativism goes quickly through the window. Multi-culturalism is not decentredness but making it more powerful through a clever machination.

Multiculturalism, however, has a positive value. It has helped Asians to make their presence felt in the main stream living in the west and they even at times call the shot. Multiculturalism demands obedience to authority of ethnic groups. This may be a negative dimension but it is also a reaction to the eurocentricism of last so many centuries. Demand for multi-culturalism is a rebellion against the Western man's intellectual arrogance. Multiculturalism is a stage of historical awakening in the West. It has three central insights :

- i) The cultural embeddedness of human beings.
- ii) The inescapability and desirability of cultural plurality and
- iii) Plural and multicultural constitution of each culture.

India's multicultural concern is a historical fact and part of India's tradition. The singular thing of India is that it is plural. This plurality is a self-conscious feature, which recognizes not merely the existence of differences but also seeks to find some kind of commonality in these differences. India, as a result, has always welcomed the other but for the west, the other, an inalienable entity external to oneself is both a source of terror and an object of desire. Sartre's famous statement 'Hell is the other' carries a strong echo of Hegel, who always defines one's identity as identity against the other either to be appropriated or to be destroyed. But the western mind knows well that if he succeeds in completely subjugating the 'other' the identity of his own self becomes dubious. He wants to become whole by destroying the other but without the other, he becomes nothing.

This is the tension, today, of the western man. He is now living in a multicultural situation and he has to understand that the demand for separate identity is symptomatic rather than an ultimate objective. Each group is just saying, give us our space, in which we can feel we belong, give us our culture, our religion with which we can live with others and with honour. Recent banning of head scarf of the Muslim women or turban ban of Sikh community in France indicates a tendency to uphold and support only what is practised in their culture and entertain a biased approach towards what is valued in other areas. The idea of 'good life' is no more confined to one's family, society or country but is related to people who are not seen as tools of exploitation but as persons who are equally informed, responsible and creative. Under any kind of division between centre and margin between us and them, it is difficult for the

world to survive but at the same time, particularly, in the emerging conditions of global markets and the communications, desire for a unicultural polity can be harmful to minority rights and cultural difference. It creates hierarchical multiculturalism instead of egalitarian and liberal authoritarian polity. It is not integration or assimilation of the minority with the majority social group but the feeling of community, which needs to be revived to bridge the gap between the centre and the margin.

Let me conclude by referring to two more issues, diasporic literatures and poetics of the dalits in the context of the whole issue of margins.

Writers of Indian diaspora relate to two homes and two cultures simultaneously – the culture of origin and the culture of adoption. In diasporic writing one can see a cultural encounter, the bicultural pulls and the emergence of a new culture. To prove the point let me quote some lines from Sujata's bilingual poem published by aunt lute books :

Days my tongue slips away
I can't hold on to my tongue
it's slippery like the lizard's tail
I try to grasp
but the lizard darts away

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I can't speak – I speak nothing
Nothing

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The first group of Indian diaspora were indentured labourers. Their creativity was mostly oral. They were all to be seen in the margin. The children of the first group by their adoptability, in strict and education created a new brand of diasporic culture which was a liberated experience for them but Edward said calls it a show of schizo prania and Homi Bhabha hibridity.

The second group was joined by voluntary migrants who were professionals academics and businessmen in the 40s and 50s of the last century. The writers were Nai pauls and Rushdies and the old vetrans were Raja Raos, Desanis and Kamala Markandays who made a place in the West as Indian English writers but the older group was read by the west primarily to understand the exotic India and idiosyncrasis of Indian society and the gap between the centre and the margin remained as wide as ever. However Naipauls and Rushdies were successful to bridge it to a great extent.

The third generation diasporic writers in English, who settled abroad and accepted by the West by virtue of their talent are Vikram Seth, Amitabh Ghosh Shashi Tharor, Amit Chaudhuri, Jhumpa Lahiri and others. They are able to a great extent make their presence felt without any validation from the centre. In fact, they themselves are the centre.

Sahitya Akademi includes the English writings of the diaspora in its history of Indian English literature. However, the issue of other diaspora writers, writing in Indian languages, has a different history to tell. Except a few of the Indian language writers like Alokranjan Dasgupta, Usha

Priyamvada, Sati Kumar, Dev & Rode others have no place in Indian literary historiography. These diasporic writers are dedicated to their writings but occupy a second space of exile and cultural solitude. They, in India itself, are kept in the margin. Sahitya Akademi blacks out these writers from the histories of literature in different Indian languages brought out by them. These writers establish their identity in the home away from home and generate their diasporic literary consciousness by a complex network of historical connections.

Dalit literature articulates the pain, indignation and fury of a most creative and imaginative segment of Indians, marginalized and oppressed since the time of the *smritis*. In fact it constitutes an *avante garde* attempt at forging an alternative nationhood of a caste-free society. This literature raises questions, interrogates and registers protest and also subverts. Otherwise, it knows, it will be consumed and completely marginalised. Dalits now challenge the tone and content of the existing literary canon created by the *shastra* protagonists and decentralise the whole process of literary movement. It creates an alternative aesthetics and extends the linguistic and generic possibilities of literature. Dalit poetry rejects the norms set by *shastra* poetics and throws over board classical values like propriety, balance, restraint and under-statement. The diction of these poets is deliberately subversive as it challenges the middle class notions of linguistic decency redraws the map of literature by discovering and exploring a whole new continent of experience that has so far been left to darkness and silence. However, with the recognition of the *dalit* literature by the establishment it has now become more mature, sober, larger in its concern, more conscious of form, less angry and complaining. The recent

phase of dalit literature has broadened the scope of its concerns and transcended the ideology of destructive hatred. It is now more concerned in creating its own path and seeking its own direction rather than spending their energy in proving the incompleteness and incompetence of traditional, established aesthetics. Dalit critics like Sharan Kumar Limbale want to establish a poetic of the margin in its own rights independently of savarna initiatives. They want to reject the centre and in the process want to affirm the importance of a more radical deconstructive path.

The very fact that in many parts of the world the discipline of comparative literature is now defined as cultural studies indicates the broadening of its scope. The days of cultural complacency are over. No more can we be content with a self-ascertained sense of cultural superiority. The inclusiveness and expanded scope of comparative literature liberate us from cultural prison and help us to develop a bigger perspective where more than judgement understanding through dialogue has become the axiom of comparative literary studies.

Reinventing Comparative Literature does not mean drawing new meanings of a text or reinterpreting a literary movement, say, Bhakti movement. If a text has the potentiality of multiple meaningfulness then every generation draws out a new meaning of the text, reinterprets the historical complexities of a movement and rediscovers a text and places it into limelight again.

Reinventing comparative literature in Indian context actually means to redraw the contours of Indian literature as a category including in it oral, folk, tribal and dalit to give it a new totality – and also recreating comparative criticism because in the modern times we moved from Sanskrit poetics to Western theory by ignoring the Bhasa traditions of literary criticism in Tamil, Marathi, Kannada, Hindi and also in other Bhasas – Every Bhasa has a continuous history of literary expression guided by its own inner dynamics and hence the Sanskriti heritage and Bhasa heritage need to be seen in terms of a single historic continuity. Moreover, the formalistic theory of literature of Sanskrit poetics or the modern theories of Western poetics are totally insufficient to analyse and explain the *dalit* (protest) and *gramin* (rural) literary heterodoxy. Hence the literary theory in modern India needs major innovations to give it efficacy and that will be the real reinvention of comparative literature.