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*AIJAZ AHMAD. *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. New York: Verso, 1992. 358 pp. US$ 29.95

*SARA SULERI. *The Rhetoric of English India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. 230 pp. US$ 10.95

*GAURI VISWANATHAN. *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*. [1st ed. 1989] New York: Columbia, 1992. 206 pp. US$ 14.50

Surely, I am not the only comparatist who has felt, at least on occasion, that the burgeoning field of postcolonial theory ("poco" for short) is not only enmeshed in self-verifying jargon, but singularly lacking in the cross-linguistic dimension that its very topic, the tumultuous effects of European cultural expansion since the Renaissance, ought to have as pre-requisite.

The institutional pursuit of Commonwealth Literary Studies by another name — perhaps in the sense that war is a continuation of diplomacy — postcolonial theory has been almost exclusively confined to an anglophone frame of reference, with an occasional bow in the direction of the francophone writers of Africa and the Caribbean. There are, nonetheless, some encouraging signs of progress on this front: to wit, the three texts lumped together above, though their scope and arguments can only be sketchily reproduced in the narrow confines of a book review.

Sara Suleri's *The Rhetoric of English India*, a study that spans texts as diverse as Edmund Burke's parliamentary tirades (1788), Fanny Parks's *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque* (1850), Kipling's *Kim* (1901), Forster's imperially "erotic" *Passage to India* (1924), much of V.S. Naipaul's oeuvre, as well as Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, focuses exclusively on English language writing, though in ways, I would argue, that are intrinsically comparatist.

For example, the first precept Suleri sets forth is that "colonial cultural studies" must disrupt the "emplotment" that conjoins culture and nation in a

single quest for salutary origins. A second postulate is that the "rhetoric of binarism that informs contemporary critiques of alterity in colonial discourse" (3) must be also dispelled. Implicit in this injunction is the premise that the postcolonial subject is not only largely a projection of English language discourse, but that the (post-)colonized Other is heterogeneous, and partakes of his or her own multiple linguistic traditions. Suleri, accordingly, inveighs against the tendency she dubs "alteritism": the reification of the colonized Other and the continual inscription of its essence into discourse on literature sited, in whatever way, within the colonial, imperial or postcolonial spheres. If, as she suggests, the "language of alterity can be read as a postmodern variant of the obsolescent idiom of romance" (11), its logic will then inevitably lack the nuance necessary to seize the "diverse ironies of empire" (9) and to render the "economy of complicity and guilt ... in operation between each actor on the colonial stage" (3), but will merely serve to reiterate the "academy's continuing fear of its own cultural ignorance" (12) — and here Suleri is correct, in my opinion, that however deconstructionist academics become, their sole institutional justification is the dissipation of ignorance.

What is encouraging about *The Rhetoric of English India*, then, is that the discursive strategies she depicts are portrayed as the end product of a collusion between English and Indian "idioms." Suleri herself would be the ideal scholar to push the terms of this discussion a step further and to show how those figures are idiomatic not only within a given language, but across discrete languages. She is the author of a well received autobiographical work on postcolonial existence, *Meatless Days*, and the dedicatory epigraph to her father is a doubtessly well chosen couplet from the Urdu. This reader, in other words, feels brimming beneath the surface of her text, especially in her concluding chapter on Salman Rushdie, another linguistic universe in terms of which this anglocentric academic study is itself a worthy but relative achievement.

Though Sara Suleri mentions Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest* only three times, her debt and the affinity between the two books is manifest, the principal dissimilarity in their intellectual strategies being that whereas Suleri is first and foremost concerned with tropes and figures, Viswanathan treats rhetoric as an institutional, ideological and even ideational construct best read against the "continual modifications of British educational goals and the strategic maneuvering that produced English studies in India" (169). In her introduction, Viswanathan offers thanks to Edward Said. In my own opinion her work marks a considerable advance on the legacy Said has left us, given her appetite for detail and nuance *in situ*. As she explains it, Orientalism, the current of learning and colonial policy that advocated the inclusion of Sanscrit, Arabic and Persian within the British educational apparatus in India, can only be understood as one among other colonial strategies, especially Anglicism, the school of thought that English studies alone could convey the religious values allegedly immanent in

Shakespeare and Milton but that could not otherwise be inculcated for practical political reasons. Hindus as much as Muslims took offense at the introduction of Christian discourse into India, and official British policy remained one of religious neutrality.

Gauri Viswanathan's proposition, however, is an even more powerful one, and has direct implications for anglocentric postcolonial theory, since she holds that English literary studies in India predated and in fact shaped and moulded the institution of same in Britain. This is no mere matter of chronology. It is historically patent that English literature entered Indian educational systems with the passing of the Charter Act in 1813, whereas in the metropolis English literary studies were not imposed in the classroom until 1871. Viswanathan's argument goes much further: India, she insists, served "as an experimental laboratory for testing educational ideas that had either been abandoned in England or fallen victim to insuperable opposition from entrenched traditions and orthodoxes" (8). In India these controversies were couched in terms of debate between Orientalists, Anglicists and utilitarians but, as Viswanathan persuades us, the nineteenth English literary canon was devised with prime reference to the needs of imperial overseas education. It follows that English literary culture of the imperial period must be thought of not as expressing an internally coherent English nation, rather as derivative of a transnational project that, if I may borrow Gayatri Spivak's expression, "messed with" *English* identity too. This characteristic of colonial cultural practice has specific implications for postcolonial theory, since a case could be made that the cultural agenda at the centre, in the metropolis, is currently and similarly being set by peripheral, that is postcolonial, writers and thinkers. Admittedly, for the time being this hypothesis is hard to prove. A cover article in *Time* (No. 30, 1993) can be a pretty epiphenomenal event. Moreover, in an age of racist reaction to the internal consequences of migration induced by empire, imperialism and, now, fully mature transnational capitalism, it is perhaps more plausible to think the opposite. Let us remember, though, that at the apogee of the British empire and during the periods Viswanathan discusses, English cultural chauvinism was widespread — which did not keep the colonial stub, as it were, from wagging the imperial pit-bull.

Another cautionary note: this ostensible potential of the postcolonial agenda may not be quite as progressive as it may seem. Late in her book Viswanathan also reminds us that "even the most inclusionary curriculum can itself be part of the processes of control ... as the history of Orientalist education [in nineteenth-century India] demonstrates" (167).

This brings us to the third work: Aijaz Ahmad's *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literature*, a text so Marxist as to appear, at first, anachronistic. I do not mean that remark to be dismissive, since Ahmad may turn out to be right, or at least to be as right as anyone — if I may be allowed a postmodern *boutade* — since

the rise and fall of Marxism itself should be a reminder of how relative intellectual fashions are among the North American and European cognoscenti. There is moreover an undeniable elegance in Aijaz Ahmad's critiques of Frederic Jameson, Edward Said, Ranahit Guha, or Homi Bhabha; and veterans of past ideological wars will immediately recognize both their manner and their matter: high Marxist argumentation of a Trotskyist persuasion. Ahmad's take on Rushdie's *Shame* should, accordingly, be read against Suleri's chapter on the same classic "poco" locus as an exemplary statement of divergent political orientations. In the same way, the "clarification" of Marx's supposedly pejorative portrayal of India as "despotic" belongs to a polemic genre those trained in the ideological battles of the sixties and seventies will recognize in their sleep.

For comparatists who find these political quibbles tedious, Ahmad's historiographical passages will be the most congenial, especially the chapter entitled "'Indian Literature'" — around which both single and double quotes must dance. And though this chapter too is predicated upon class analysis, it does expose in detail the methodological and epistemological challenges confronting literary history on the subcontinent, and from a position that will warm the cockles of a comparatist's heart.

Let me therefore squeeze in an excerpt from that chapter, one which impinges directly upon the constituency of postcolonial theory as presently construed:

> Literary study in our time and our place [late twentieth-century India, Pakistan and Bangladesh], more than ever and more than elsewhere, needs to be transgressive, and the very first transgressions need to be, in the most obvious and literal senses, against "English" and against "Literature." No solid scholarship of an "Indian Literature" is possible unless we recoup, in active and viscerally felt ways, as much for reading and writing as for speech, our bi- and multilingualities. Nor is a full reappropriation of our old literatures, classical or medieval, possible unless we are willing to wander across all sorts of boundaries that are said to separate History from Philosophy, Anthropology from Linguistics, Religion from Economics, and "Literature" from all these and much else besides. (281)

The interdisciplinary imperative in the last sentence will ring familiar to many North American and increasingly to European academics. But for Aijaz Ahmad "interdisciplinarity" in India must be accompanied by multilingualism. And that, of course, is *our* problem, at least if we intend to situate ourselves *vis-à-vis* South Asia.

It is common among "poco" theorists to vituperate against "Orientalism," but Orientalists were the first and are virtually still the only Western scholars to recognize the need to learn at least one Indian language before pontificating upon India. Above I suggested that postcolonial studies in English might have

an influence upon contemporary postcolonial studies analogous to that Gauri Viswanathan sketched out for English studies in the nineteenth century and, it would follow, postcolonial cultural studies are proactively reshaping the English language canon at the metropolitan centre. What postcolonial studies do not do — and about this we must be frank — is shape or even understand and explain what happens outside of that centre, at least beyond the ken of English. In this respect, Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest* is exemplary. Her concluding sentence defines her swoop, and that of a properly modest monolingual postcolonial theory: "I am hopeful that with sustained cross-referencing between the histories of England and its colonies the relations between Western culture and imperialism will be progressively illuminated" (169).

A somewhat more precise fix on how we might study the comparative literary histories of England and its colonies is provided by Aijaz Ahmad, who does not hesitate to praise the attractions of English as *langue d'appoint*, an international vehicle with its own advantages, and drawbacks. Ahmad does insist, however, that English be contextualized in India, at least as a matter of "literary study":

> Only by submitting the teaching of English Literature to the more crucial and comparatist discipline of Historical and Cultural Studies, and by connecting the knowledge of that literature with literatures of our own, [can] we can begin to break [the] colonial grid and to liberate the teacher of English from a colonially determined, subordinated and parasitic existence. (283)

It would seem that until they learn to connect knowledge of English literature with Indian language literatures, those who have embraced postcolonial theory are destined to remain part of the problem, not the solution. (GEORGE LANG, UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA)