

Universal/Culture-Specific?: “Critical Apartheid” in the Reception of South Asian English Literature

A. F. M. Maswood Akhter

Abstract

South Asian Writing in English is often perceived as a literary phenomenon which is culture-specific, and incapable of addressing general human condition and concerns. Literary critics as well as general readers hesitate to consider a text from this literary tradition qualified for universality, rather, for them, it can be at its best an *authentic* cultural representative. Very crucially, such undermining and neglect of a writer’s capacity or her text’s possibility rob her of her primary agency/identity as *writer*, and relegate her to the position of a mere curator, ethnographer. I describe such unjust politics of reception as critical apartheid or academic racism where *universality* remains the western prerogative. I argue that by perceiving a South Asian author as capable only of being spokesperson for her community or her works as singularly representative of a specific culture, one limits the outcome of the author’s efforts, and undermines the value of what we gain from her texts. Through an engaged analysis of some thematic and stylistic choices in South Asian English writings, my paper prepares a case against reductive definitions and pigeonholing of such texts, showing how one can easily comprehend the universality of certain struggles and expectations portrayed in them even as they carry unmistakable signatures of their respective cultures.

Keywords

South Asian Writing, Critical Apartheid, Academic Racism, Cultural Specificity, Universal Human Reality, Politics of Reception