

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

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In literary criticism as well as in popular imagination it is often the norm to assume “universality” to be the supreme achievement, and ultimate value, of a literary text; the classical status or canonicity of a Shakespearean drama, for example, is established and perpetuated through its supposed ability to project emotions and situations which humans, regardless of genders, generations and locations, can relate to. The customary reception of a South Asian text, however, presents a misfortune’s child. Neither academic experts nor general readers deem it quite qualified for universality; rather, the obsessive debate in its case revolves around its “cultural authenticity”. It is more often dubbed as creative reincarnation of pre-existing white stereotypes, or at its best, patted and petted as authentic ethnic representation reclaiming its “own” narrative.

In the case of reception/evaluation of South Asian literatures, racial and ethnic affiliations of the writers thus seem to persist as a major determinant. Many western reviewers and critics tend to consider such writers’ ethno-racial backgrounds as integral to understanding the meaning and value of their texts. For instance, the reviews of diasporic novels that appear in leading literary magazines in the UK or the USA bear an unmistakable testimony to it. They tend to identify them as “ethnic” writers and award them with representative status of their respective ethnicities. Such identification of South Asian writers and the consequent ghettoised critical appraisal of their texts are deeply problematic as they hint at the discriminatory practices existing in the critical reception and interpretive system of literature. It is crucial, therefore, to understand how reviewers and critics manipulate these writers’ ethno-racial origin in a bid to ascribe cultural authenticity to their texts, thereby placing their texts automatically into a peripheral-inferior literary category and accentuating anthropological curiosities rather than aesthetic standards and universality of those writings, for the market.

As they pursue creative exercises in an acquired language, South Asian English writers are fated to confront, since the onset of their creative practice, two sets of readerships with apparently contradictory expectations from them. Jasbir Jain explains the situation through the case of diasporic authors. He points out that in such authors’ works the western readers expect a revisit to their pre-conceived cultural images of the *other* while the reader back home remains eager to see a positive portrait of her own culture (85). South Asian Writing thus seems to be perceived as a literary phenomenon that is generally culture-specific, and consequently, incapable of addressing universal human condition and concerns. Such politics of reception, as I understand, is tainted with a critical injustice that is tantamount to academic racism, where universality remains the western prerogative. Paradoxically however, such an approach, rather than exposing any inherent inadequacies of South Asian texts, betrays its own limitations in judgement, especially its tragic failure to recognise essential overlaps and shared symbols across cultures.

This paper thus strives to deal with some fundamental questions involving the status, scope, and strength of South Asian writers and their works: Are their writings qualified to address the human condition across tense and geographies, general human concerns, and common emotive reality? Or, are they only capable of the limn of respective cultures and communities, and specific emotional universe? Are South Asian writers *writers* proper, or ethnographers, mere representatives or spokespersons of their cultures, and countries of origin? And then, is it not an unfair or flawed interpretive enterprise that looks at locations and affiliations of artists to measure their gifts? Relevantly, my discussion will also provide a critical coverage of associated issues including the hegemonic politics of publishing houses, exoticisation, commoditising culture for mass consumption and so on.

Questioning the Binary of Specificity/Universality as Applied to Literary Texts

There is a widespread interpretive infrastructure and critical culture that appears to ignore the very “literariness” of South Asian texts or of any writing from the non-West for that matter, and to see them, especially the ones from diasporic authors as part of a travel market or armchair tourism, to allude to Sunetra Gupta’s observation. They are treated primarily as “exotic” cultural commodities, as anthropological, socio-political and historical documents, and this treatment amounts to more than a simple undermining of their literary worth; this is rather a blatant refusal to acknowledge their very existence and identity as a literary category located in human imagination. South Asian Diasporic authors, in particular, have shown a tenacious reluctance to accept their representative role; Jhumpa Lahiri, for instance, has said that to be treated as spokesperson for a certain community, even when it is well-intentioned, can be “stifling,” and that she never self-consciously tried to address issues of identity (Bahadur). Bharati Mukherjee, Sunetra Gupta, Monica Ali and others have categorically expressed their deep disappointment at this reductive definition and evaluation of their works, which ghettoised them and prevented them from effectively thriving as creative writer per se. The literary establishment in the West has a marketing strategy of promoting such writers as “authentic” experts of their respective ethnicities ready with native, “exotic” locales or cultural items to woo their audience. Neel Mukherjee recounts, for example, how he was advised by a British publisher to include more of India’s “heat and dust,” “smells and colours” in his debut novel *Past Continuous* (2008) so that he could make the book “a fluffy, romantic, weepy Exotica Fest” (Mukherjee 1).

There will, of course, be culture-specific elements in the language and narration of creative pieces but at the same time, and despite that specificity, they remain immensely capable of transcending their immediate temporal reality and distinct cultural nuances to connect to larger human questions or general human affairs, and achieving timelessness, trans-historicity and universality. A critically just, academically sound and more objective way to approach a South Asian text, therefore, would be not to launch an anxious and obsessive investigation into its cultural authenticity. Rather, along with registering its contextual signatures, one needs to be conscious of its ability and possibility to relate to the wider range

of human experiences and expectations. A critically objective/just interpretation will appreciate how a good number of these texts deal with situations, issues and emotions that are simultaneously immediate and eternal, local and global, and ultimately, how they create beauty for beholders of all creeds and continents. It would indeed be a flawed — and even “racist”— critical endeavour that fails to recognise the gifts of great artists irrespective of their race and region, that fails to appreciate that like the pieces born in other cultures, South Asian stories are simultaneously, and ultimately, human stories.

It is only usual that a creative writer would more often collect her characters and materials from her immediate reality, but her creative imagination makes her piece transcend the boundary of the tangible context where she locates herself. A literary text, thus, has a twin birthplace; it is simultaneously born in a culture and in the mind of an author: one relatively concrete, the other fluid. Therefore, it mostly eludes the dizzying reduction of becoming an exclusive expression of a particular time and tradition, and kindles afterlives. The binary of specificity/ universality, thus, is not valid; rather, an inherent fusion, or a simultaneous flow, of specificity and universality in a particular work allows for reception of that work by a wider audience; readers are drawn to it not only for anthropological curiosity, or news-value, but also for the fact that they can connect with converging human destiny, common human aspirations and frustrations portrayed in it. Thus we see, while many South Asian narratives are entangled with effects and struggles associated with colonial memory, they also deal with characters and issues that would appeal to a wider range of cultures and audiences. The issues in them like struggles for freedom, pitfalls of nationalism, post-independence South Asian modernity, intricacies of human relations, the eternal tragic tension between limitless human desires and limited human capacities etc. imply this overlap of context-specific and trans-tending themes, and aid in the understanding of a broader literary objective/agenda outside of the context of colonialism.

It would indeed be a flawed academic undertaking to erect a specificity/ universality binary, since that would expose a tragic absence of important insights into human life and cultural evolution: to begin with, the essential overlap, interconnectedness, and points of convergence among cultures and communities. Secondly, defining a text as a mere culturally specific creation is to pass a judgment on its literary quality, while axiomatically underestimating its worth and capacity, potentials and possibilities. Rather than viewing these works in this parochial manner and limiting the outcome of the author’s efforts, it is imperative to consider their larger connections and wider impacts, and to comprehend the broader resonance of certain struggles depicted there. It is indeed insular and parochial to assume that South Asian writers are capable only of representing cultural specifics.

Analysing Selections from South Asian Creativity in English

“Sultana’s Dream” (1905), a short story by Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain, one of the first women writers of the Indian subcontinent to creatively engage with the language of English, envisions a Ladyland where entire public affairs are exclusively managed by ladies, and men are kept in *Murdana*, a counterpoint to *Zenana* (exclusive segregated space for women in a

Bengali Muslim household). Zenana and Murdana are culture-specific, but challenging the normalisation of male monopoly is global in its intellectual coverage. And because of its mix of familiar literary forms — parody, satire, science-fiction, fantasy, allegory and so on — it becomes easier for people from any cultural background to connect to the struggles of Hossain's characters. The text is dyed the colour and character of the culture lived by its writer, but at the same time one clearly sees its affinity with voices of gender equity worldwide; one can readily connect to the insight it offers: that patriarchy, irrespective of its cultural location, remains more or less similar in its operation, in its obsession with control and in its reluctance to share resources and respect with women. Relevantly, in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), one can see how the Bangladeshi diasporic patriarchy in Britain “seeks to transplant gender norms of its country of origin and imposes domestic seclusion on women under its control” (Hasan 59). Ali's or Hossain's stories, then, are dealing not only with things “ethnic” but also with things “universal”.

One of the ways to see how universal the concepts within a work might be is to compare the work to another exploring similar issues or ideologies but written at a different time period or from a different cultural context. A critic thus compares “Sultana's Dream” to “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Gilman in an attempt to “illustrate how the protagonists of the two writings are culturally, socially, economically different, yet somehow they are same” (Ahmed 659). The narrator in Gilman's story is confined to one room, and of course, confined socially like Hossain's women in *Zenana*; there are obvious parallels. Despite differences in characters and plot, the general thematic statements of the works sound similar if not identical. These women seek measures to obtain their freedom in their respective situations; they pursue it in their own distinctive ways, but remain singular in their intentions. The line between cultural specificity and universality becomes less distinct and the extent of impact of the works becomes significantly wider, if the reception of works produced in the global South becomes more trans-tending.

Again, by limiting the parent-children relationship in Jhumpa Lahiri's story, “Unaccustomed Earth,” to the expectations Ruma faces as a daughter of Bengali immigrant parents, the reader would miss the universality of such familial relations and obligations. The short story titled “Grandmother's Wardrobe” by Aali Areefur Rehman — a lesser-known Bangladeshi writer in English — on the other hand, projects an ironic vision of life through the protagonist Mr. Osman's surprising discovery of gold coins in an ancestral wardrobe and his subsequent loss of memory that renders the just-discovered fortune entirely futile. R K Narayan's *Financial Expert* or *The Guide* and many of his other works, despite being replete with culturally nuanced details of an imaginary town called “Malgudi”— reminiscent of Hardy's obsession with Wessex — are also profound reflections on universal human predicaments, and ironies in life. Readers can always draw wider conclusions about the meaning of their works rather than restricting those to particular situations and culture-specific effusions. Many of the situations portrayed in such works may happen anywhere/anytime. The writers may have an insider-perspective on a particular culture and ability to write from a singular outlook but they still connect such experiences, thoughts and ideas to their larger understanding of

humanity. Again, some of the stylistic choices in these pieces are distinctive — use of local idioms and phrases for example — reflecting the nuances of particular ways of life while many of those are general, leaving their works open to plural explanations and connections.

Anita Desai's *In Custody* (1984) has exceptionally distinct ties to the context in which it was written, any audience, however, could relate to the sense of loss Deven Sharma, a Hindi Professor who loves Urdu (stereotyped as a Muslim language), experiences as a result of his existential circumstances that involve the gradual decline of a language and a parallel eclipse in his own life. A significant part of the setting in Adib Khan's *Seasonal Adjustments* (1994) and *Spiral Road* (2007) consists of 1947 Partition of India and 1971 Bangladesh War but in these texts too, one would immediately encounter narratives moistened in universal wisdoms: that nobody wins in a war, not even those who are declared winners; or that nationalism could become advanced tribalism in its training of hatred (Akhter, "Monograph" 263). Coming to Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000) next: the novel is set against the backdrop of a violent civil war during the mid-1980s and early-1990s in postcolonial Sri Lanka, and presents a grim catalogue of forced disappearances, racial attacks, kidnappings, beheadings and many other forms of extreme violence perpetrated by the government as well as the armed insurgents and separatist guerrillas. Ondaatje, however, expresses his reservations about the novel being "taken as representative" of the Sri Lankan reality in the West ("Maya Jaggi" 251), and emphasises the *fictionality/universality* of his account: "In many ways, the book isn't just about Sri Lanka; it could be Guatemala or Bosnia or Ireland. Such stories are very familiar in other parts of the world" (253). The understanding of war as a universal and perennial catastrophe is corroborated in the text itself by a character who states: "*The problem up here is not the Tamil problem, it's the human problem*" (*Anil's Ghost* 245; italics mine). Again, in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, interpersonal relationships between individuals of warring communities restore hope in a civilisation wounded by 9/11. Many of these aspects and aspirations are, no doubt, distinct to the times and communities presented within the texts, but it is possible to apprehend their trans-historicity and thematic expanse, their larger implications and significance at any point in time or any location.

Critical apartheid or academic racism, however, is a fate not exclusive to South Asian Writing. The promotion and review of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) made it apparent that the novel's mainstream-popularity and critical acclaim were, to use James Procter's thoughts, "undeniably bound up with issues of race and ethnicity" (111). Tellingly enough, three years later, when Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* was released, she was heralded as the "new Zadie Smith" and her novel has since been reviewed in ways that allude to what Kobena Mercer calls the "burden of representation" (65). Assuming these writers' ethno-racial background as something fundamental to the assigning of meaning to their works, as has become routine in metropolitan spaces of "the literary thing" and academe, attests to a general prevalence of inequality, racism, and stereotyping in the process of reception and evaluation of literatures. Now, if we look at Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), while it might be intriguing for readers of different backgrounds to understand the more culturally-charged actions of the protagonist, they could, however, easily see how Achebe's Okonkwo meets a fate that he

struggles to avoid all his life, and realise that his individual struggle for retaining self-respect and his eventual failure to preserve it encompass their very own predicaments. Reducing any of these works to being ordained and read as culturally specific representation, therefore, is to undermine their ability to evoke wider geo-political, emotional and reflective resonance, and their capacity to unravel profound truths about general human affairs. Why should we accept that universality is an absolute prerogative, an automatic inheritance only for British or American texts, and that South Asian or African texts lose claim over it by birth and the ultimate they can achieve as per ascriptions of the metropolitan market and review industry is cultural accuracy?

Monica Ali's Fiction and the Dynamics of Critical Apartheid

To clarify the role of ethno-racial backgrounds in the case of (western) evaluation and reception of South Asian literatures, the politics around Monica Ali's fiction may be cited as an appropriate case in point; I want, therefore, to harp on Ali in some detail. With the publication of her debut novel *Brick Lane*, Ali quickly attained — thanks to an instant, frenzied chorus by the British media and cultural establishments — the status of a celebrity ethnic icon, a phenomenon that had deep implications and long consequences:

The *Brick Lane*-writer Monica Ali's status as an ethnic icon — an image so hyped by the white media — automatically curbs her creative freedom of representation and confines her to ghettos. Consequently, Ali's other pieces are ignored, not because of their lesser literary merit but for their author's treading into “not-permissible” grounds, that is, “non-ethnic” materials. The audiences back home and within diaspora ... question her right to write about “home” just as the West could not appreciate the European or American settings and characters in her later books. ... *Brick Lane* thus becomes the metaphor that embodies the poetics and practices of this intricate, intriguing politics in which the hegemonic publishing industry in the West along with the grinding U.S.-U.K. review machine ... has rather a decisive role to play. (Akhter, “Politics” 95)

It is significant that the Granta Editor Ian Jack commended the book specifically for bringing news from Banglatown (qtd. in Haq 23), an area of East London inhabited by a sizeable Bangladeshi community in Britain. Although Ali herself has always been keen on resisting ghettoisation, and although she has a set of other equally brilliant novels to her credit post-*Brick Lane* — *Alentejo Blue* (2006), *In the Kitchen* (2009) and *Untold Story* (2011)—that accommodate diverse characters, themes, settings and genres, she remains shrouded still by the spectre of her debut novel which is “eternally invoked almost as the ‘code of conduct’ for her to keep her within the ‘rightful’ track of writing” (Akhter, “politics” 109). One of the major factors behind the not-so-warm receptions of Ali's post-*Brick Lane* novels is obviously that they unsettle reception and publishing industry expectations in the West from an “ethnic writer”, by choosing to travel beyond “the defensive little patch offered by one's own culture,

literature and history” (Said, *Culture* 49) and appropriating the “undue” privilege of “speaking to all humanity” (Pamuk 277).

Adib Khan — another important Bangladeshi-origin writer who writes from Australia — once said that with his orientation and experience of diverse peoples and places it might be possible for him to “fictionalise a white Australian’s experience” (28). And he has explored the possibility in his fourth novel *Homecoming* (2003) where, in an entirely Australian setting, he narrativises the life trajectory and war memories of Martin Godwin, a Caucasian Vietnam Veteran. After three years of *Homecoming*, Monica Ali would plunge into a similar venture by setting the events and characters of her second novel *Alentejo Blue* in a fictional village Mamarrosa, located around a rural region in Portugal named Alentejo. Reviews swarm in, shocked at the uncaging of the “ethnic” author: when Sean O’Brien remarks in *The Independent* that Ali is “without purpose in Portugal”, Andrew Riemer indicates that there are many who would consider her an “outsider” to Alentejo and would think that “she could have written what many — perhaps even her publishers — might have expected of her: another tale of Asian immigrant life in contemporary Britain”. Along this line of thinking, Ali does not own the license to make the “white” landscape of Alentejo her fictional setting; no wonder the novel failed miserably to add another bestseller to her credit.

The point, however, remains that there can be many versions of a particular location or situation, and readers are free to derive meaning in one way or other from all of those. After all, a place refers not only to a physical landscape but also a metaphorical/ conceptual space; our imagination and associations significantly shape our perception of a place. The overwhelmingly negative response to *Alentejo Blue*, therefore, may be termed as an act of academic/intellectual apartheid, as the underlying assumption of such response was that South Asian writers are best authenticated to write about South Asian locales, which tacitly intervenes into Ali’s “right to write”. Does a creative writer really need to qualify as “insider” in the authenticity game to be eligible to deal with the concerned reality? In fact, an author, irrespective of her current locations and subject positions, has the right to write about any country, culture and community she wishes to. One cannot choose for the writer her subject or setting; one could rather critique her choice.

In the Kitchen, Ali’s third novel, apparently corresponds to industry-and-reader expectations in the West by mapping migrant experiences, albeit from an unconventional perspective that takes in white male focalisation, and the portrayal of mainly African and Eastern European migrant communities culturally and linguistically different from Ali’s. The novel slowly unsettles the common plot of a crime fiction, despite its sharing many patterns and motifs of that fictional subgenre, to expose the underside of today’s “multicultural”, globalised Britain plagued by human trafficking, forced prostitution, enslavement and gender discrimination. Still the novel failed to impress the alleged arbiters of taste for the mainstream western readership – the critics. Christopher Taylor thinks that “sociological musings are only very cursorily dramatized [here], being plonked in the mouths of mostly one-note characters”, while Stephanie Merritt comments that though Ali “wrong-footed her readers” with *Alentejo Blue*, she has now returned to “the familiar territory” and “picks up *Brick Lane*’s themes”.

Ali, nevertheless, deviates once again in *Untold Story* to offer a hypothesis of the princess of Wales Diana's survival of the 1997 car crash in Paris and provides her with an alternative life: faking her own death and living in anonymity in the midwestern American town of Kensington in the form of Lydia Snaresbrook. Imagining an obscure life for Lydia, the novel shows the futility and cost of perpetually remaining in the limelight, and embodies eternal human longing for a carefree life. Here too, Ali has used the ambience and techniques of popular thrillers but it could not gain much readership in the West, or acclaim from the critics located there. Joanna Briscoe even describes her fictional adventure with Diana's tragic death as "ill-advised, debatably insensitive," while Michiko Kakutani cares to assure us that Ali is ultimately "able to address some of the same questions of identity and exile that animated her earlier work". It is as if a writer like Ali is bound to act as "the mouthpiece for neighbourhoods and ethnic demographics" (Sandhu) and to write only *Brick Lane*-ish stories forever!

While talking to the black British novelist Diran Adebayo, Ali refuses to accept that *Brick Lane*'s success is embedded in either her ethnicity or the realist depiction of a minority community, rather she reiterates her belief that people have shown interest in her novel because "they can relate it back to their own feelings about family" (351), among other things, indicating some sort of universality about her art. She says:

I read London journalists saying, 'It opened up a whole new world that I didn't know about that was so fascinating', and I think, 'Well, if you were so interested, it was always there on your doorstep and there have been other things written about it'. I don't actually think that's why they enjoyed the book. I think the fact that people will be reading it in Polish and all those other languages does say something about the real reason why some relate to it. I wrote it simply to tell those stories. (351)

Though Ali offers a different rationale to her novel's impressive reach, her ethnic background nevertheless persists as a major factor in the reception of her novels in the western market. Dave Gunning argues that "although the realist form plays some role in determining how the literary works of black British and British Asian writers are consumed, as offering a particular object of knowledge, the relation of the text to the imagined figure of the author is often the more important aspect" (782). In a similar fashion, Rajan and Sharma acknowledge the role of ethnicity in the reception of South Asian writings and points out that the western publishers "hone in on the fact that [South Asian writers in English] carry a stamp of ethnicity/authenticity based upon some pre-arranged understanding of South Asianness without which they cannot be slotted, branded, read, and written about" (161). After all, "exoticised ethnicity sells in the West" (Yusuf, 85).

The Issue of Cultural Rootedness vis-a-vis Exotic Ethnicity

Ironically, at "home" too, South Asian writers' worth depends on the extent of perceived rootedness in, or isolation from, their civilisational and cultural bonds. In the Indian literary scene, for example, language remains the primary site of contestation, and the question

of the complex relation of power between English and other *bhasha* literatures is still a major issue. M K Naik emphatically proclaims that Indian English Writing “constitutes one of many streams that join the great ocean called Indian literature”, and is an “inevitable product of the nativisation of the English language to express the Indian sensibility” (5). Another Indian critic considers the domain to constitute an essentially minority literature whose themes and concerns are peripheral to the lives and experiences of majority of the Indians (Paranjape 124). And there lurks the apprehension too that the vernacular literatures of India are being ignored internationally due to the hegemony of Indian English Writing, especially with the growing body of diasporic Indian English creativity representing India to the West. Thus the burgeoning field of Indian writing in English translation as an increasingly visible-viable territory of Indian English writing. Naik laments the existing “unhappy relation” between Indian English and regional language writers, and opines that one cannot dismiss all Indian English writings as “fake” simply because it is written in English, and that at the same time, the Indian English writer must not dismiss “his regional brother” as a “country cousin” simply because he himself happens to write in a world language. The “acid test”, he says, will be “how much is he true to his roots?” (Naik and Shyamala 251).

No wonder then that many western reviewers and critics would see postcolonial/South Asian writers as “insiders” with firsthand experience of their native cultures, and receive their narratives primarily as manifestations of their ethno-racial subject positions. In other words, these books are considered cultural ambassadors or, to use Meenakshi Mukherjee’s phrase, “interpreters and authentic voices” (178) rather than aesthetic and imaginative interventions in the creative commons, or meditations on contemporary socio-historical debates, or outcomes of genuine literary-creative praxis. Arundhati Roy may very well be cited as another case in point here to explain how such writers’ ethno-racial affiliation becomes a signifier in the promotional campaigns of their works by their western publishers and literary editors, to the extent that *The God of Small Things* (1997) was marketed as sort of her autobiography. To quote Jan McGirk, “Beautiful, outspoken and unconventional Roy, 37, represents the spirit of the new India unfettered ... ” (19). Publicity posters showcased glossy photographs of Roy with an “exotic” face, wispy tendrils of hair framing eyes that gazed dreamily, beckoning readers to open and enter the enchanting world of her fiction, leaving much ambiguity though as to “whether the referent is Roy or her book” (Toor 13). Roy’s ethno-racial profile is disseminated in such a way that no assessment of the novel, as Anuradha Marwah puts it, “is possible without references to [her] life and ... without her photograph” (65).

The hegemonic metropolitan publishing and marketing establishment thus promotes “ethnic writers” with a view to catering to the taste of their readership through creative elaborations of already-existing white stereotypes, fetishised symbols of the “distant, exotic cultures”. This is, in fact, one of the reasons behind negative receptions of many a text by the “home audience”, since they suspect authors of such works to be commoditising their cultures through the exoticised representations readied for instant mass-consumption. In their eyes, these authors are opportunists, even “traitors” encashing *home* to further their writerly career.

Importantly however, the race-kinned readers of the author both at home and in the diaspora tend to dismiss any negative portrayal of “home” as inauthentic even when it happens to be a useful interrogation into the home culture.

Let me note at this point that the application of the idea of authenticity in the case of a literary text can be very intriguing, since such a text does not have a stable set of meanings. Rather it continues to generate meanings not only because of its metaphoricity or symbolic capacity but also because readers with vastly different cultural backgrounds and life-experiences perceive and interpret the same text differently. One thus needs to understand the fact that authenticity is often manufactured as a marketing strategy, and that a text turns out to be a “commodified artifact that enables it to become marketably authentic” (Huggan 158). Also, “an object remains ‘authentic’ as long as it performs the task it is supposed to, and loses its ‘authenticity’ as soon as it stops functioning in an expected way” (Sánchez-Arce 139). The authenticity game is thus pegged to some preconceived understanding of things; unless Monica Ali and Vikram Chandra “supply the West’s perception of Bangladesh or India, they will not be treated as ‘authentic’” (Nayar 22) and will not be allowed to be viable commercially. They must, as Fareena Alam puts it, “carry a burden of ‘representation’ whether they want to or not”; any deviation from the desired narratives endanger the sale! But on the other hand, as Alam points out, western readers and critics would not criticise writers like Nick Hornby for failing to represent the true London, or Jilly Cooper for not being able to capture the objective reality of the lives of polo players. Helpfully, Richard Dyer — in his book *White* — offers some valuable insights into the sinister dynamics of such apartheid and racist supremacism: “As long as race is something *only applied to non-white peoples*, as long as *white people are not racially seen and named*, they/we function as a human norm. *Other people are raced, we are just people*” (1; italics mine).

In such a geo-political matrix, South Asian writers are assumed to have predominantly ethnic point-of-view even when they continue to produce literatures that introduce locales and protagonists outside of their originary cultures or ethnic particularities, even when they refuse to identify themselves merely as ethnic writers — a label that segregates and “hyphenates” and ultimately, relegates them to the “multicultural” margins of global literary practices and discourses. Such assumptions or the implied approach, like the one that determines the fate of texts like *Alentejo Blue*, as I argue here, is largely reflective of white supremacist and segregationist influence in literary and academic domains. Thus we see Zadie Smith defending herself against the tendency of the western literati to situate her works within a black literary tradition; she asks western readers and critics:

Do you go to Don DeLillo and say, “He doesn’t represent middle class white people enough”? ... No. You give him complete freedom. Why would you limit writers of any ethnicity or gender to be a sex or class politician and give freedom to white writers to write about absolutely anybody? (qtd. in Procter 102)

Similarly, Monica Ali contends, “any literary endeavour ... stands or falls on its own merits regardless of the colour, gender and so on of the author”. She adds, “a male author does not need ‘permission’ to write about a female character, a white author does not transgress in taking a black protagonist”. Indeed, literature “is not in the business of copyrighting certain themes for certain groups”; it is rather “self-validating” (Rushdie 14). And it brings discredit on readers and critics when writers require feeling embarrassed or being apologetic to write about cultures and communities different from those alleged to be their “own”, and are commercially punished for venturing into domains marked out for them as beyond the threshold.

Towards a Resolution of the Debates

To wind up, let me reiterate that using ethno-racial affiliations of South Asian writers as a major yardstick for the evaluation and reception of their texts is indeed problematic because, as James Procter claims, to “reduce writers to the role of representatives who are expected to delegate, or speak on behalf of a particular community, is to curb their artistic freedom” (102). Besides, the tendency to characterise such writings as predominantly socio-historical and cultural documents amounts to a blatant dismissal of them as primarily products of creative imagination. I argue that such an approach towards a particular literary tradition is biased and unjust, and reflective of academic/critical apartheid. The propensity for consigning this literature to a lesser position — in terms of “literariness” and universality — is perhaps to be traced in the politics of identity based on colonial binarist understanding or otherisation that ultimately serves to perpetuate western supremacism. This insular, parochial attitude to writers’ capacity or texts’ possibility obviously fails to take into account the fact that individuals and cultures are never entirely divergent from each other, but are shaped and shape as co-eval constellations in conversation.

In my understanding, *universality* — that people irrespective of their geopolitical and cultural location and diverse affiliations would be able to relate to the cultural and emotive reality portrayed in a creative piece — is a valid yardstick to judge the worth of a literary text. The problem arises when western literary canons enjoy a monopoly over universality, and others, like South Asian Writing, are axiomatically deprived of the expanse. My point is: to say that the ultimate worth and possibility of a South Asian text lies in its portrayal of South Asian reality is to defile its profile as a literary creation, and thus to perpetuate the supremacist hegemony of western literary establishments. As an English text written by denizens of “whiteness” in Britain or in America may address issues and emotions of people regardless of their locations, so the south Asian texts, despite exuding the ambience, tone and tensions of a particular culture, are simultaneously capable of moving from roots to routes. One should not receive/critique South Asian Writing only or predominantly as a representational category erasing its primary identity as a literary entity with trans-possibilities; rather one should refer to its cultural beginnings while properly acknowledging its due share of universality. As Aime Cesaire has said, “no race has a monopoly on beauty, on intelligence, on strength / there is

room for everyone at the convocation of conquest” (qtd. in Said, *Reflections* 314). It should not be that only western texts are propagated as fits for the universal slot, and others continue to be eternally held for display and patronisingly promoted as fantastic/exotic cultural objects that satisfy anthropological curiosity or supply the appetite for news and spectacle. In fact, many postcolonial, South Asian, or diaspora writers, by dint of their unique writerly positionality and “insider-outsiderness” are arguably in a position to apply multiple lenses to portray universal human realities.

It would indeed be a critical misconduct if we do not recognise a piece of literature in terms of its literariness in our act of interpretation; the issue is supremely important, since otherwise we would not be able to explore its possibilities fully, both as an aesthetic and a representational category in which nodes of specificity and universality remain enmeshed. Literary texts, despite their being informed by the particularities of a culture, are defined by their trans-tendencies; they possess a manifest ability to smudge cultural borders and allow for their reception by a wider audience.

To conclude, I do not find problems with the rubric “South Asian,” or with “universality” as a significant yardstick. I probe rather into the intention of critics and the markets they hope to nudge and discourage with regard to South Asian Writing in this paper, and argue against the western narcissistic politics of reception inflected with critical apartheid whereby certain literary traditions are pushed into ghettos and denied their share of the “magic,” that is, the metaphorical, symbolic attribute that distinguishes Literature from other human narratives. I also argue against the notion that being rooted in a culture automatically nullifies the possibility for trans-possibilities. As I have shown, the binary of cultural-specificity/universality is flawed and racist as far as literary creativity is concerned. In a literary narrative places, peoples or periods become metonymic; they stand there as metaphor for a wider spectrum of human situations, and voices echo other voices across tenses and territories. Moreover, it is possible to conceive universality by imagining it as *a composite* of varied human experiences rather than *an amorphous essence* of the same, and many of the South Asian creative writers in English, with their “hybridised” writerly consciousness and plural positionality, with their orientation to diverse humans, languages and cultures, are perhaps no less qualified to portray variegated human reality compared to their (canonical) western colleagues who have so far been qualifying for universality!

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