

## Aijaz Ahmad and Narrativizing Indian Literary Cultures

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Aijaz Ahmad's highly influential essay "Indian Literature: Notes towards the Definition of a Category" was first published as a chapter in his seminal book *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (1992). Many of the essays published in this book, notably "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'", "Salman Rushdie's *Shame*: Postmodern Migrancy and the Representation of Women" and "*Orientalism* and After: Ambivalence and Metropolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said" were first published in various reputed journals. By Ahmad's own admission, the chapter- "Indian Literature" too has its basis in seminar presentations held at Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University in 1988.<sup>1</sup> Ahmad's essay is concerned with several issues of importance pertaining to the unwieldy category of Indian literature. Ahmad discusses theoretical and institutional problems encountered while talking of a separate entity such as 'Indian Literature'. The essay is written from a purely Marxist perspective as is typical of his other writings too, constantly making a case for reading texts in their materiality and resisting their appropriation by dominant and hegemonic discourses. Ahmad ultimately posits several methodologies that could be effectively followed to define the scope and characteristics of what could be authentically termed as 'Indian Literature'.

This essay is field-defining for several reasons, not to mention the obvious implications that follow from its very suggestive title. Running over forty pages and nine sections, the essay addresses the central problem of defining Indian literature given its uneven historiography, the multilingual milieu of Indian culture, the mixed and sometimes fuzzy origins of various Indian literary genres and lastly, the status of English as a language in India. These questions are complex and answers to them are by no means direct. While the attempt of discussing such a range of issues within the scope of a single essay does lead to some methodological inconsistencies (discussed in the later part of this essay), the achievement of the essay lies in its proposal of reading Indian literary productions in a multilingual framework with an increased emphasis on comparison and interdisciplinarity as methodological tools in order to create their historiography.

The purpose of this essay is to delineate the ways in which Ahmad problematizes the category of Indian Literature. It also tries to critically analyze formal features of this essay primarily in terms of its organization of content and arguments. Offering an insight into the strategies of argumentation used by Ahmad, this essay tries to explore its merits and contribution to Indian literary criticism. It would also try to highlight some of the methodological problems primarily related to Ahmad's language and divisions of the chapter. Furthermore, this essay will try to analyze whether Ahmad's hypothesis actually leads to a conclusion consistent with it or is it beset with ideological contradictions. Finally, it attempts to locate Ahmad's essay within a certain brand of Indian literary scholarship that has dealt with the questions of Indian literature arguing that there is a certain inconsistency (especially in Ahmad's essay) when it tries to address the

question of “unity in diversity” of Indian literature, falling into the same essentialist trap which they seek to oppose.

The basic premise of the chapter is that the category of Indian literature cannot be spoken in unitary terms. Therefore, it is an exploratory foray to chart out methods through which the complex layers characteristic of Indian literature can be understood. Ahmad draws attention to the central problematic of the essay right at the beginning hypothesizing that – “I find it all the more difficult to speak of a ‘Third World Literature’ when I know that I cannot confidently speak, as a theoretically coherent category, of an ‘Indian’ Literature.” (Ahmad 243). His prime agenda in the essay is to lay bare, by the means of various examples from Indian literary history, the inefficacy of any form of “syndicated” (a term he borrows from Romila Thapar) approach towards Indian literature. Through this essay, there is resistance expressed against convenient piling up of individual histories of different Indian languages in favor of a more nuanced narrativization which takes into account the differences and commonalities along various Indian literary cultures.

Apart from the recognition of various heterodox traditions that constitute Indian literary cultures, Ahmad also points to the urgent need for systematic recuperation of various literary forms and traditions. He argues that owing to “unreliable modes of transmission” such as orality, the complex process of development of Indian languages is not understood in its entirety (247). Modern Indian languages have solidified absorbing various overlaps and influences that are characteristic of languages such as Hindi, Urdu, Tamil and Malayalam. Ahmad cautions against accepting all that is canonized as ‘Indian Literature’ in the following words- “gaps in knowledge, as well as the great fluidity and unquantifiability of what is known, should be chastening for anyone who sets out to theorize about ‘Indian Literature’” (247-48). He implicates Orientalists like Schlegel and Winternitz as well as nationalists such as Aurobindo Ghosh in the project of privileging classical Sanskrit texts known for their spiritual and religious overtones.

Ahmad also discusses at quite some length the hegemonic place of English language in India and the role played by colonialism in consolidating its privileged position in the country. His strategy is to juxtapose the views of people like Gandhi, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Raja Rammohan Roy and Vivekanand to argue that the introduction of English did not elicit any straightforward rejection from such reformers and nationalists. In this discussion, he weaves in his advocacy of Comparative Literature as a discipline as well as a radical overhauling of English departments in the Indian universities. For Ahmad, the problem is not that English was “inserted into India in tandem with colonialism” but that “it is, among all Indian languages, the most removed, in its structure and ambience, from all the other Indian languages” (250). He rightly presupposes English as *one* of the Indian languages and argues that postcolonial theory has wrongly placed too much emphasis on English as a means of religious conversion of the natives into Christianity.

For Ahmad, English is carrier of modernity and technology which, however, is responsible for the creation of a class of intelligentsia actively engaged in the translation of literary texts- from English language to other Indian languages and vice versa. Given the fact that most of the translation projects involve English and at least one Indian language rather than translation between other Indian languages, English becomes the language in which ‘Indianness’ gets articulated. Such translations tend to get canonized leading one to believe in a highly selective range of ‘Indian literature’- one that significantly leaves out the relatively untranslatable i.e. the oral and performative cultures of India.

Ahmad moves on to point out the shortcomings of public institutions in India as far as meaningful research work in the field of Indian literature is concerned. In this respect, he posits

the unsuitability of English as a medium of translation, the pressing need for specialists and multilingual intellectuals. He draws categorical attention to the groundswell of material support required for revamping these institutions.

Another problem that he draws attention to is the overlapping of genres that constitute Indian literary cultures. Ahmad suggests the need to assemble “genealogies of genre” because the question of proliferation of certain genres and exclusion of others is linked to the question of dominant ideology, the question of what Ahmad calls “the politics of transgression and containment” (251). A clear charting out of the histories of various genres is also important in the context of print capitalism for many of the genres existing prior to it were largely multilingual as well as oral.

It is through the delineation of such problems that he arrives at his own suggestions about the construction of a category of Indian literature which, given its heterogeneity and size cannot be uniform and yet be nuanced and holistic. The methodology which he ultimately posits is one which is comparative and interdisciplinary. In this respect, he strongly suggests that “Literary study in our time and place...needs to be transgressive...against ‘English’ and against ‘Literature’” (281). What he seeks to propose is a narrativization of Indian literature through a deep comparative study across disciplines such as Anthropology, Philosophy and History.

The study of English language and literature in India, according to Ahmad should be a part of the larger discipline of Historical and Cultural Studies. The methodology of research in such a discipline would encourage study of English in meaningful relations with other Indian languages. Such relations must be recognized not only with respect to English ‘language’ but also across similar knowledge patterns scattered in literatures written in various *bhashas*. A project of such kind that wins Ahmad’s approval is Sisir Kumar Das’s *A History of Indian Literature*- a comprehensive compendium of histories of Indian languages and genres put together side by side in a comparative fashion.

While positing this crucial role which English must play in modern India, Ahmad also looks at the typical Indian literary critic in the present scenario who is quite different from the one belonging to an earlier generation. His methodological strategy is again the juxtaposition of the different kinds of pressures and motivations that drove each in order to make a larger argument about the “professionalization” of the academia. Ahmad criticizes the “increasing Americanization of the profession” which requires academics to publish in journals largely keeping in mind what topics would be ‘marketable’ (280). On the other hand, Ahmad seems to be expressing nostalgia for a typical bilingual Marxist literary intellectual who was “an activist...he would teach English in accordance with the English literary canon but *write* not criticism, not English, but poetry or fiction in his own tongue” (280). Ahmad’s analysis of the academia is only partially correct as I attempt to show in the last segment of my essay.

Ahmad’s essay is in large part about languages and methodologies. An examination of these aspects with respect to his own essay—“‘Indian Literature’: Notes towards the Definition of a Category” is particularly worthwhile. The essay makes use of several examples discussing the complex histories of several Indian languages. He brings in vast knowledge of such histories also in the form of detailed endnotes. An interesting case in point is one of the endnotes, which details the manner in which Farsi had come to be aligned less with its Iranian origins than with Hindi, owing to the large number of translation work carried out in this language.<sup>ii</sup> Farsi came to be known as ‘Subuk Hindi’ loosely translated as ‘refined Hindi’, which was closer to Sanskrit in terms of the prestige, it commanded than other Indian languages. This alerts us to the intricate ways in which languages tend to overlap and take different forms in the Indian context.

Ahmad's position as a Marxist also leads him to question the nation-state approach in the construction of Indian literature. His oppositions to nation-state approach as being obstructive to the recognition of diversity inherent in Indian literature and his predilection for unwrapping the instabilities of this mammoth category places him within the tradition of scholarship that has focused on construction of Indian literary history such as Sisir Kumar Das, Amiya Dev and Harish Trivedi.

One could benefit by placing Aijaz Ahmad's essay in the tradition of Indian scholarship that has focused on the questions of what constitutes Indian literature. This tradition of critics include GN Devy, Sisir Kumar Das, Harish Trivedi and Amiya Dev- all of whom have invested considerably in asking pertinent questions in meaningful perspectives about literary historiography of India and the effects of colonialism in marginalizing Indian languages which have forever been under the pressure of master-languages such as Sanskrit and English.

When Aijaz Ahmad claims that he cannot confidently speak of Indian literature as a category existing *a priori* for theorization and hence, positing a need for compilation of nuanced empirical knowledge, he comes close to GN Devy who suggests in *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism* (1992) that what Indian literature is in need of is "a realistic historiography and not so much of a theoretical discussion" (Devy 124). Similarly, Amiya Dev, while arguing for the need of Comparative Literature in India proposes that "Indian literature is not an entity but an interliterary condition in the widest possible sense" (Dev 5). What is beneficial through all such arguments is the prominence given to various *bhashas* of India in which myriad literary formations take place as well as the great role played by translation in facilitating dialogue between Indian languages including English.

Ahmad's detailed discussion about the institutional inadequacies in India finds expression in Harish Trivedi's book *Colonial Transactions: English Literature and India* (1993) in which he proposes his *Panchadhatu* (five elements) model that makes space for five courses spanning across literature in English from England, New Literatures in English, Literature in a classical language as well as Indian literature in English and Translation.

All these scholars can be credited with questioning the validity of the category called Indian literature problematizing aspects such as its definition in terms of historiography, the markers of "Indianness", the several institutional hurdles that make the study of literatures produced in India difficult and reductive as well as the appropriate methodologies that may be adopted to view the large body of Indian cultural productions in the contexts of production, reception, change and assimilation.

To offer concluding remarks, one could say that Aijaz Ahmad's essay to a large extent challenges the homogenizing approach towards Indian literature, best exemplified in Sahitya Akademi's slogan proposed by Radhakrishnan- "Indian literature is one though written in many languages." The essay successfully debunks this notion and convinces us that for 'Indian Literature' to be a valid category, it must be treated not in singular but in plural terms for it is the plurality and polyphony of Indian literary cultures that give it its character.

What we now witness, slowly but surely, is a greater interest in Indian literary traditions evident from the increased number of dissertations and researches devoted to topics related to the field of Indian English writing, translation, folk cultures, Comparative Indian literature and so on. There is now an increased inclusion of Indian literature in its various forms, be it Indian Writing in English, Indian Literature in English Translation as well Indian Literary Criticism. Not

many would deny that it would be much more sensible to speak of “Indian Literatures” rather than “Indian Literature”.

Apart from this, the essay makes the reader revisit the idea of ‘Indianness’. It talks about treating ‘Indian literature’ in a vocabulary which does justice to its challenges. Ahmad radically hypothesizes that the idea of Indian literature must be analyzed in all its complexity with a primary focus on the gamut of Indian languages the works of which must be translated into each other facilitated by proficient and multilingual scholars in Indian institutes. The essay definitely acts as a point of reference, even though one may ultimately contest Ahmad’s positions as one is acquainted with newer literary works produced in India, those that are produced in the North-Eastern states, the Dalits, women, testimonies by Partition refugees, LGBT community as well as the radical works of the Progressives. What one witnesses in these is an extreme diversity than any unity which could be spoken of or pinned down to certain basics.

When Ahmad along with others such as Sisir Kumar Das talk about the diversity of Indian literary cultures, they also imply at the same time that it is however possible to speak of certain factors that bind these cultures. But their works (especially Ahmad’s essay, as I have argued) do not spell out or clearly enumerate the points of such intersection or commonality. This central contradiction of these authors, and in the context of my essay, Ahmad’s essay on Indian Literature leads to a tension between celebrating the eclecticism of India while still being in search of the essential. His point about the need for mutual translation work between other Indian languages without the intervention of English is valid to a large extent, although not completely feasible.

One also tends to feel that Ahmad’s bemoaning of the invisibility of the older kind of intellectual who could deeply feel the distance between the two linguistic cultures he embodied must give way to celebrating (albeit with caution) the role of English as a language of facilitation. The fact that English has, to a large extent, well assimilated as part of Indian cultural scene, it is quite possible that certain authors and intellectuals may not feel the kind of linguistic cultural distance with it as Ahmad argues. Indian English novelists and poets such as Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy and Nissim Ezekiel articulate as much ‘Indian’ concerns as have authors writing in Indian languages.

What is therefore required is not to treat English as ‘superior’ language owing to its colonial roots and hegemonic influence but rather to see it at par with Indian languages through a conscious process of, what Makarand Paranjape calls “vernacularization” (Paranjape 91). The wisdom lies in using English to our own ends by facilitating a dialogue between other Indian languages through translations between them. It would include articulating themes which are closer to Indian realities, writing in English which reflects our cultural specificity (famous example being Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* or even Amitav Ghosh’s novels in the present scene), and most importantly, engaging with Indian literary critical traditions in meaningful ways rather than writing works which are mere imitations of the West. Insofar as Ahmad’s essay propels the reader to think deeply, even change one’s position vis-à-vis his own essay and provide logical standpoints from where one could argue and analyze contemporary Indian literary scene, this essay does remain a successful and (for all its resistance to definition of a category), a field-defining one.

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<sup>i</sup> See Ahmad iv. All the references to Ahmad’s essay in the present paper are taken from the version printed in this book, 243-85.

<sup>ii</sup> See Notes (no.13) to this chapter . Ahmad 340.

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