

Tradition, Modernity and Post-Modernity/The Local, National, and Global:  
Challenges in Theory

by □

Makarand Paranjape □

Professor of English, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi--110067

I □

Preliminaries □

In India those of us who work in theory tend to fall into three broad categories, the regionalist, the nationalist and the internationalist. Not so much by the content of our work but by our discourse-styles are our real positions revealed: the nationalists speak in a language which their Indian peers can easily comprehend, while the internationalists, their sights fixed on distant academic horizons, essay in these postmodern days to a bedazzling but self-defeating obscurity which may justly be termed "vaguology." When the verbal froth settles, the poverty of their ideas is quickly exposed. The regionalists, on the other hand, define themselves in opposition to both these categories: they are uncomfortable with the discourses of both the nationalists and the internationalists. They consider both positions as betrayals of the interests of the immediate community in which they live and work. This third position which seems to be gaining ground, abandons the idea of the nation altogether and hitches its wagon to some special interest group, regional, linguistic, religious, casteist, gender-based or otherwise. Its proponents ceaselessly attack the ideology of nationalism as being hegemonic and oppressive, but they speak little of what will replace it. Needless to say, these positions are not mutually exclusive, but often overlapping and interconnected. □ Perhaps, this opening paragraph has already betrayed my position which I need not spell out with unnecessary bluntness. Yet I believe that literary theorists who almost as a second nature start off problematizing other people's positions ought to, first of all, apply the same treatment to themselves. What better way to do this than by a series of preliminary questions: What sort of literary theory do we need? How will this theory deal with the problems of tradition, modernity, and postmodernity? And what are our responsibilities as Indian literary theorists? I hope the answers to some of these questions will emerge if not in the course of this paper

then at least in the responses which it evokes. □

It is only after we problematize our own positions that we can begin to demonstrate the seriousness of our intent. Only then can we ask ourselves where we stand vis-à-vis our own special region or community, our country or nation, and the West or the world at large--the three broad "camps" between which we scuttle and to which we owe partial allegiance. If we do not ask ourselves who we are and who we want to become, I am afraid we'll end up demonstrating the kind of futility enacted by Birbal's instructive lesson on how not to make *khichadi*: tie the pot to the ceiling while the stove is on the floor. To offer a more pertinent example, we will become like those of our Third World postmodernists who assert their difference with the dominant culture of the West in terms sanctioned by the West and only after the West has officially endorsed such expressions as articles of its newly proclaimed postmodern creed. The fact is that most of us are and have always been different; but some of us are fortunate enough to be different in ways which are comprehensible and marketable in the West. There is a difference, surely, between those who are different and those who have become the brokers of difference.<sup>1</sup> □

That is why I wish to reintroduce into the contemporary debate an older agenda of anti-imperialism and nationalism. Our forefathers bequeathed it to us with much toil and tears, but in these days when nationalism has itself become a dirty word, we are wont to forget this legacy easily. No doubt, there is much more to anti-imperialism, whether political, economic, social, or cultural, than nationalism. No doubt, nationalism is itself a flawed and compromised doctrine. But why turn our backs on its life-sustaining springs? What else do we have to rally together except the idea of a civilization-state which promises social justice, equality, federalism, and democracy? We may want more democracy, more decentralization, but we cannot seek it by destroying democracy, by ruining the commonweal in the name of an illusory internationalism or a fragmentary regionalism. □

Ideally, of course, we would like to be regional, national and international in an enabling sequence--deeply committed to local causes in such a manner that we can also participate in larger national and international academic discourses. I am not ruling out such a possibility, but merely sounding a note of caution. In our anxiety to be accepted by the West, we easily capitulate to its blandishments. Internationalism, then, is merely a cloak that the hegemonic West wears. We must, therefore, be prepared to choose what we are first: national or international. Being national does not, in itself, deny the possibility of being international,

but if we start off wanting to be international, then we may end up being denationalised instead. □

Similarly, we need to choose between an enticingly empowering regionalism, chauvinism, communalism, or some other form of special interest in the name of caste, religion, language, or region, or gender, and a slightly emasculating but much more stable nationalism founded on equality, secularism, and democracy. It is easy to succumb to the former for temporary gains, but what then will happen to the nation? If we start off wanting to be merely regional or communal then we will end up losing our nationhood altogether. And what a disaster that would be: to regress to a stage when we were a hodge-podge of scores of feuding principalities and fiefdoms, wasting their energies in internecine warfare, easily prey to outside exploitation--in sort, to become so many Bosnias or Beiruts. □

The questions that we face as Indian literary theorists are therefore clear: whom do we serve? Is theory merely an imported commodity which we must reassemble and re-export? Is theory merely a tool with which we can attack the Indian state and support some narrow, special interest? Or is theory something which sustains all of us, regionally, nationally, and internationally, which becomes a true bread for the soul, which can give us hope and direction, which can sustain us in our moments of crisis and self-doubt? What kind of literary theory do we want?2 □

## II □

### Three Enclosures □

In the *mela* of contemporary India are three large *pandals* in close proximity, each of which houses its own deity: tradition, modernity, and postmodernity. What is their relationship to one another? Are they in sequence, one leading to another? Or are they simultaneously present, overlapping, and organically fused? What does each *shamiana* in this vanity fair of ideas contain? Let's take a closer look. □

### Tradition □

By itself, tradition suggests a weight, a burden, an oppression almost. It is an area of prestige and privilege, both facilitating and regulatory. It encompasses the customary and the habitual. Often it is a dead weight, a stone that crushes us into the dust. It can be cruel, ruthless, and omnipotent. Tradition disallows freedom. It is reluctant to change, resistant to the new. It is full of prohibitions and enforceable sanctions. It is blind and mechanistic, unthinking and unreflective. It is a surrender to the past, a betrayal of the present. □

But in relation to its neighbour, modernity, it becomes a refuge, a haven, a nursery. It allows the coexistence of a multiplicity of life forms, of cultural patterns, of ways of life. It is the source of wisdom, of knowledge, of technologies of survival. It shelters the forgotten peoples of the world, the marginalized and the destitute, the scum and refuse of progress. It is an area of diversity in opposition to the uniformity of modern structures. Many shapes, many colours, many designs, many languages, many tastes, many sights, many smells nestle in its nooks and crannies. □

It absorbs change, mutes its destructive potential, cushions its hard blows. Like a mother, it sustains us all. It encompasses everything that is handed down, repeated, or reinterpreted. It may be deep, but it is also flowing. It accommodates the new and quickly domesticates it. It traditionalizes the non-traditional. Thus, it penetrates both modernity and postmodernity. Science has a tradition; protestantism has a tradition; even revolution has a tradition. □

Modernity □

Here, there is motion and bustle everywhere. A new race wants to refashion the world in its own image. It rejects the past with an impatience and vehemence which are both frightening and magnetic. Its vanguard is Youth, always impetuous, always thirsting for new conquests. In one hand it bears a pen and in the other a sword; when one doesn't work, it uses the other. It started with the cry of liberty, fraternity, and equality, but ended with the blood of innocents on its hands. Its shield was religious book camouflaging a gold-seeking sword. This enormously powerful deity, browbeaten or propitiated by its impatient votaries, yielded up unprecedented powers. Its devotees conquered nature, learning how to end starvation, nakedness, and homelessness, but also how to destroy the entire planet, decimating all living things. □

It raised a quarter of the world in 150 years to unprecedented levels of prosperity and power, but left the rest in darkness, misery, and poverty. Its legacies include the two world wars, the holocaust, and colonialism. It made the industrial revolution the motor of the world and now promises more pelf, more profit, more self-aggrandizement in the post-industrial information age of high technology and brain power. □  
Modernity, like the Statue of Liberty, holds aloft its torch, inviting the benighted nations of the world to follow its lead. Its buzz word is development; it promises untold progress but results in unprecedented triage. Foreign aid, international agencies, and inappropriate technologies are its handmaidens. A world not united but even more unequal has emerged in its wake, devastated with overpopulation, unemployment, and despair. The very planet has been driven to the brink of annihilation

through this rapacious techno-modernism. □

Postmodernity □

This is a new deity, still being shaped and crafted, from the half-consumed remains of modernity. Its single cry is freedom, more freedom. Modernity's child has turned around to devour its own mother. Postmodernity speaks the language of plurality, of multiculturalism, of dialogue, of difference, of the end of master narratives, of the break down of the centre. It tells us, look the doors are open again. All those whom modernity excluded and drove out of the promised land can come back. □ It seeks to correct the excesses of modernity, but in the process has created its own excesses. Most of its proponents are outsiders to Europe who have little to lose by attacking the establishment. Like forgotten bastard children, they have returned to reclaim their patrimony. They have unloosed an epistemological anarchy, attacking the very foundations of Western knowledge systems. They celebrate indeterminacy, a new moral and cultural relativism. In its wake, the largest nation-state in human history has broken into several pieces. All over the world postmodernity seems to signify the end not only of imperialism, socialism, but of nationalism itself. It attacks global capitalism, but underestimates its resilience; capitalism has already incorporated postmodernity.<sup>3</sup> □

But who is that shadowy figure which lurks like a looming specter outside the tent of postmodernity, threatening to engulf it, to overwhelm it? It is the rising tide of reaction, reasserting older and supposedly dethroned master narratives of racism, imperialism, fascism, and fundamentalism. It is supremacist in outlook and speaks the language of conservatism. It bears the canon on its head, like a halo. All the old values of centralized authority, history, and humanism accompany it like sentinels. In a hoarse chuckle it hisses its prophecy: "The end of postmodernism is not too distant. On its ashes we shall create the promised land. The future belongs to us." In the meanwhile, third world lings, still wish to make hay while the Western sun shines. Before the gates close, they wish to rush in and grab what they can. □

Having peeped into these three enclosures, what are my conclusions as an Indian literary theorist? Well, first of all, it is clear that in the highly competitive, cut-throat global supermarket of ideas, our best chance for survival is if we do not jettison tradition altogether. It is not that as Indians we have no direct access to modernity or postmodernity. But the fact remains that what is uniquely ours and ours alone, what we are saddled with whether we like it or not, is tradition. Tradition is what the West doesn't have. Tradition is what they long for because they have lost it.

For tradition they have to look outside of themselves, to India, to us. Through us, they can reclaim their lost past, reexplore their links with forgotten wisdom, retrace the source of their now dried out river of spirituality. Tradition, then, is a domain that we know best and which we can best use to sustain ourselves and our fellow Indians. □

The engines of both modernity and postmodernity are firmly in the control of the West. And they are not about to surrender their drivers' seats. Our participation in these discourses is at best peripheral, our continued investment in them risky. Moreover, let alone postmodernity, even modernity hasn't been properly domesticated in India. We are a society in which the modern usually forms a thin and easily peeled-off layer over older ideas, systems, and structures. Those who inhabit only the modern are doomed to superficiality and sterility, like stunted and diseased freaks, trapped in an artificial subculture which allows little air, water, or sunshine. We see such raw, unformed minds in the semi-literate lumpens that roam our semi-rural townscapes as also in their super-sophisticated, ultra-modern urban counterparts who always look to the latest from the West to fashion their lives thereby remaining restless, insecure, and uncertain of themselves. □

As to postmodernity, it is merely a concept to us, merely an imported toy. I agree that it has tremendous anti-authoritarian possibilities; it also ties up our various regional movements with a world-tendency for autonomy and decentralization. But its sustaining currents, at least intellectually and ideologically, are somewhat alien to us. Remember, India is still the home of orthodox Marxists, Stalinists, Modernists, and other such creatures, which have become extinct elsewhere in the world. In the West, for instance, everything is in a post- phase-- post-structuralist, post-Marxist, post-feminist, post-industrialist, and so on. Here, we are more or less in a proto- stage: proto-capitalist, proto-industrial, proto-feminist, and so on. To apply postmodernity uncritically and unreflectively to our situation, then, would be rather inappropriate. □

In the final analysis, what makes us unique in India is not so much the dominance of tradition over modernity or the dominance of modernity over postmodernity or vice-versa, but the simultaneous and continuous existence of each, quite contrary to world trends. In India, tradition, modernity, and postmodernity all flourish cheek by jowl, without one supplanting or extinguishing the other. This inherent multivalence characterizes our reality more than any one label. The real challenge, then, is not only to come to grips with each or to use one strategically against the other two, but to deal with the simultaneous relevance, promise, and threat of all three of them, not only in relation to themselves in India, but also in

relation to the West.□

### III□

#### The Interface□

In the foregoing two sections I have set up two sets of ternary concepts, regionalist, nationalist, and internationalist on the one hand and traditionalist, modernist, and postmodernist on the other. Is it possible to make these sets have a meaningful intercourse with one another? Will such an interconnection prove fruitful to our endeavor to evolve a viable Indian critical praxis?□

I have already said that of the first set, our best option is to hold on to tradition firmly. Of course, this is not sufficient. From our location within tradition, we shall also have to explore modernity and postmodernity. Our tradition has already absorbed a good deal of the modern, starting with Rammohun Roy's use of the Enlightenment discourse in his dealings with the nascent colonial powers, to our present day fixation on development as the panacea for our poverty and backwardness. The use of modern concepts and strategies to critique tradition has been a part of the standard practice of our social reformers for the last two hundred years. Contrarily, we have used the insights of tradition to critique the excesses of modernity: the best example of this, of course, is Gandhi. Now we can extend these possibilities by using tradition which has already assimilated a part of modernity to critique postmodernity, as I have elsewhere, or to use postmodernity in conjunction with tradition to critique our continuing investment in the modern.

A similar range of options is opened up when we try out various combinations of the regional, the national, and the international. The national can be used to resist the oppressions of the international; the regional can be used to resist the national; and the sub-regional can be used to resist the regional. On the other hand, the regional and the international can be aligned against the national or the regional and national aligned against the international. Finally, the national and international may themselves combine to exploit the regional, the tribal, the marginal. Such combinations are available within the set. But when the two sets interface, even more challenging permutations emerge.□ For instance, it will soon become obvious that the regional and subregional are easily aligned with the postmodern in that both celebrate the fragment, the subaltern. Likewise, the national and the modern may be seen in a close relationship because the national project is, so far as India is concerned, a modern one. This also explains why the national easily becomes the oppressive and the hegemonic, just as modernity does. The traditional can also be connected with the postmodern because

postmodernity, in rejecting modernity, often retrieves what modernity rejected, which is tradition. The excavation of traditions from the debris of modernity is also one of postmodernity's tasks. From another point of view, the international, not the national, is the arena of modernity. Supplanting nation-states with nation-markets can be seen as the culmination of capitlistic hegemony and thus of modernity's cherished dreams. A revival of tradition, similarly, may be seen as an international phenomenon, in which case the international is the site for fight between different versions of modernity and postmodernity. And so on. □  
 To simplify the possibilities and choices, I propose the following schematic model: □

Postmodernity (P)	International (I) □
Modernity (M)	National (N) □
Tradition (R)	Regional (R) □

From these six categories, we might derive numerous permutations and combinations. I am not interested in all of these in their mathematical plenitude. Instead, I propose the following broad responses: □

1. The Postmodernists □

a. Postmodern internationalists. To this group belong all those who have found their home in international postmodernism. From their location therein they oppose forms of the modern and the traditional, both at the regional and the national levels. Examples: most NRI and, to use Dhirubhai Seth's inversion, RNI (resident non-Indian) critics. □

b. Postmodern regionalists. This is an interesting variation of the above. They believe that it is by a wedding of the local with the postmodern that our polyphony is best expressed. They are opposed, in their own way, to both postmodern internationalists and to various kinds of nationalists, whether traditional or modern. □

c. Postmodern nationalists. This is an unlikely combination because the national is usually a modern site, one which postmodernism would seek to decenter. □

2. The Modernists □

a. Modern internationalists. The best example of these are Marxists. The Marxist project is, essentially, modernist in its outlook and ideology. A recent example of this position can be found in Aijaz Ahmad's *In Theory*

where he advocates a unified socialistic thrust against international capitalism. Like other modernists, these critics oppose postmodernism as being anarchic and relativistic.□

b. Modern nationalists. A good example of these are the BJP-VHP-RSS combine. Their versions of both nationalism and Hinduism are modernist. To them the nation is the most important item of their agenda. Therefore, they have little use for both international postmodernism or for traditional and regional identities.□

c. Modern regionalists. These include Ambedkarites such as the BSP and other special interest groups agitating to change society radically. Their project is also imbued with the modernist impulse which allows them to consider themselves the custodians of truth. They are opposed both to nationalists and internationalists, as they are to traditionalists and postmodernists. Tradition, to them, is a source of oppression as is the nation. Their aim is to capture power locally so they have very little to with the international arena. Similarly, they have little use for the blurring of binary oppositions as advocated by postmodernism.□

3. The traditionalists□

a. Traditional internationalists. This is another unlikely combination. The tradition of internationalism is very young, going back perhaps to the Enlightenment. But we know that such internationalism was itself Euro centric. Tradition, almost by definition, implies something which the West has foregone in its embrace of modernity; hence, it cannot be anything but localized in the so called traditional societies of the world.□

b. Traditional nationalists. This is a very interesting and innovative category whose chief representative is Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi tried to offer an alternative definition and model for the nation, one which stressed a decentred and diffused svaraj, rather than a monolithic, modern state with power concentrated in the hands of a few. It is this type of nationalism which I think inspires a people-oriented criticism of the nation.□

c. Traditional regionalists. These are not at all opposed to the traditional nationalists. For instance, workers of the Narmada Bachao Andolan are supported by those who have a Gandhian view of the nation as a territory belonging primarily to the people and not to the state.□ Both b) and c) would be opposed to modernists, either of the regional, national, or international variety. All international interventionism, as exemplified by the World Bank or the IMF, would be seen as a version of

modernity. (In this sense, the fight between capitalism and communism can be one of modernity's internal quarrels.) They would also oppose postmodernisms, especially of the international variety, as lacking a moral centre. Traditional world views give an enormous importance to a society's ethical, religious, and spiritual goals. B) and c) might, however, make common cause with postmodern regionalists. □

I have merely outlined what I consider some of the more important kinds of alignments. Actually, many more combinations are possible. The categories, too, will doubtless overlap and change. Moreover, as I have suggested in the case of modernity, there are internal dissensions within tradition and postmodernity as well. Mapping all of them would complicate the model inordinately. However, what is more significant is that our choices will depend on whom or what we consider threatening, oppressive, hegemonic, and what we consider life-giving, empowering, enabling. But, if we define our broad agenda as that of developing a viable indigenous tradition of criticism, then it will immediately be clear that the biggest obstacle to this is our continuing subjection to Western modes of thought. In other words, decolonization will have to be built into any theory which we wish to construct for ourselves. Therefore, a constant Other will be the "international" because that is where we shall locate the West. If the international is the Other, then the best counter to it is, as I have already suggested, the national and the traditional. □

We can make our theory more flexible and humane if we also allow for various other combinations within this broadly national-traditional framework. For instance, we may allow a traditional-regional combination to propose a desi awareness of our several overlapping but distinct linguistic and cultural traditions as opposed to the hegemonic marginal nationalism or internationalism. To save the even more subaltern folk narratives, we may even combine postmodernism with the subregional to resist the oppression of the literate regional. Both the regional and the national combined with tradition and postmodernism may be used to oppose the modern, international capitalistic juggernaut. When, on the other hand, tradition gets too onerous, we may invoke the fruits of modern rationality, even of international irrationality to counteract it. Against religious fanaticism, for instance, modernity is a necessary tool. When regionalisms threaten to tear us apart, the national is a useful counter to them. And so on. □

What I have been arguing for is a civilization centred critical theory which also takes into account history, politics, and ideology. The national and the traditional may be deeply implicated in the international

and the modern, yet without the former we shall lose our distinct cultural identity, becoming another faceless lot of migrants in what is being touted as a universal condition of homelessness and loss of identity. Instead, it is important to see ourselves as being the heirs of a rich, diverse, yet distinct cultural and civilizational tradition called, for lack of a better word, India. This India may, further, be identified with a certain geographical and political entity, allowing for changes in boundaries and political entities. The best site for this identity, at least at present, is the Indian nation-state, which nonetheless shares several sociological, religious, and cultural features with other sub continental neighbors. Furthermore, this area is to be distinguished from the developed world not only by its state of economic and social organization, but also by its adherence to different values and belief-systems, and its differing modes of cultural expression. It is only such a definition of our aims, priorities, and affiliations which will allow us to judge and locate ourselves and our peers amidst the confusing welter of contemporary critical styles and methodologies. □

#### IV □

##### Sequel □

The question of how these two sets of terms or their variations directly affect our literary production must be taken up separately. Here, I shall only venture a beginning in that direction. The first task is to clarify the relationship between tradition, modernity, and postmodernity as broad philosophical, historical, and cultural categories with their specific, though often equally generalized, literary equivalents. □ Though, it would be dangerous to hastily equate modernity with literary modernism, for instance, or postmodernity with literary postmodernism, the links between them ought to be obvious. Modernism, like modernity itself, is everywhere under attack today. In the West, modernism has been dead for decades; here, it is in its last throes of life. Like modernity, modernism was anti-traditional, Western in its outlook, somewhat simple-minded in its belief in the new and its denunciation of the old. It bred a brittle, often fragmented sensibility, alienated from what might be called the "real" India. It's avant garde affected numerous purges to evolve a hyper-refined, over-vetted canon of pure art which would constitute the "great tradition" of this minor tradition. It exalted irony and lack of commitment; it distrusted romanticism and mysticism; it was essentially urban and Westernised, anti-nationalist and skeptical in outlook. It abhorred enthusiasm or rapture; it disliked emotion, mood, or melody. It was a dry and precise kind of literature, well-suited for detached and repressed descriptions of outer and inner landscapes. It was, finally, authoritarian and rewarded conformity. □

This modernism is, thankfully, dying. But we must remember its greatest service. It freed literature from the stranglehold of tradition. In nature, we don't find movements or violent uprisings. But in culture, which is man made, structures are erected; there is an entire ongoing process of institutionalization of ideas, inventions, and images. In the shadow of these powerful and hegemonic structures, nothing new can take root or grow. Therefore, usually a vigorous and violent deconstruction is necessary before some new form, movement, or idea can take shape. Modernism created this space by dismantling tradition. □

Now that the glory days of modernism are over, postmodernism has all but supplanted modernism itself. There are new heroes and heroines in place of older ones; there is a new faith, a new dogma, and I am afraid, a new oppression in place of the older one. Soon it will be time to celebrate the death of postmodernism and the birth of something new in its place. What will it be called? Traditionalism? Or, perhaps, this literary Kalki to come will have an appropriate prefix to contrast the "post-" of postmodernism. After "post-" the only way to go seems to be "neo-": neo-classicism, neo-romanticism, neo-modernism, and so on. Another procession of movements, ideas, books, and idols. □

Similarly, we need to work out the relationship between the regional, the national, and the international with our literary production. We know the regional or its equivalents have given us powerful literary movements. The best example is the efflorescence of Dalit and women's literature. This has been widespread in several Indian languages in the last twenty years or so. On the other hand, literary modernism, which also held sway over several Indian literatures, was essentially internationalist in its thrust. It is, of course, possible to argue that folk literature, Dalit literature, and the literature of other suppressed minorities is also postmodern in that it celebrates the fragmentary and the local. But we also know very well that this kind of localism is very different from the aesthetic of irresponsibility which Western postmodernism has come, at least partially, to signify. Much of Dalit writing, on the other hand, is informed by a modern rage against tradition. In this context, the "national" still remains the elusive and tantalising domain which every major writer wishes to aspire to. To be able to write a novel or a poem which embodies the aspirations of an entire culture rather than a small group of people is still, at least implicitly, the goal. Even the internationalism of a Satyajit Ray is based on such a notion of an Indian nation and identity. I would therefore argue that the national is still the most challenging literary domain, more difficult to span than the immediately enticing local

or the backdoor entry into the international. Thus, when Vikram Seth or Salman Rushdie aspire to a place in world literature, they do so only via constructing (or deconstructing) the nation. □

Even as we are being drawn into a willing embrace with international economic systems, our differences with the West are still stark and obvious. The West needs novelty--whether in lipsticks, cars, or ideas. The market must be fueled with newer and newer products to keep the universal religion of consumerism going. But what of us in India, both short of cash and of the infrastructure to be market leaders in academics? We must, I believe, resort to our cottage industries, alternate culture models, and ecologically friendly production techniques. Let us go desi if not swadeshi in our ideas; let us support the doctrine of small is beautiful. Let our theory be home grown and home spun. Our resources are unmatched; we only have to glance again inside the shamiana called tradition to see what a cornucopia it is. Also, discards from the West, imitations, adaptations, import substitutes of all kinds will also do nicely. The final goal is, of course, self-reliance, independence, dignity, and co-existence in the international community of ideas, not domination, exploitation, and counter-imperialism. □

To break this cycle of oppressor-oppressed, colonized-colonizer, definer-defined, and so on, perhaps we can bypass the long and painful route that the West has taken to reach its present utopias of postmodernism. Why go through the same cycle of violence and oppression, colonialism and war, holocaust and atom bomb? We, with our limited and outdated knowledge systems, perhaps knew the truths and insights of postmodernism before the West did.<sup>5</sup> Remember, we don't have to go through modernism in order to reject it because we haven't reached there yet. So paradoxically, if the West wishes to return to something untainted by modernity, it is to us that they must look for inspiration, just as we continue to look to them and modernity to encash a cheque which has already bounced in the West. □

V □  
Commentary □

1 I don't normally subscribe to the conspiracy-hunting club of Indian Orientalists. Lest the term sound puzzling, these are the Indian spawn of Edward Said. Their agenda is to re-read the West supposedly for the benefit of the West showing the West how contaminated and evil its seemingly benevolent designs were. They say very little to their fellow Indians, but like hungry dogs keep barking at the West for a few scraps of

meaty recognition. Yet, I am reminded of a wise observation of the great Hindi critic, Namvar Singh. Postmodernism, he says, contains a curious paradox: we have the literature and they have the theory. Now, by positing theory as a substitute for literature, the West seeks not only to contain and control our production of literature but perhaps edge out our literature with an onslaught of their theory. That's why I emphasize resistance, subversion, and protest in a time when we seem to have adopted the path of the internationalization and dollarization not just of our economy but also of our culture. □

2 Before ending this section it would be useful to consider how the challenge of postmodernism is seen from within the West. In a recent visit to India, Fred Dallmayr, the eminent political theorist, spoke of the impact of the overthrow of the canon on Western academia. His position is somewhat Habermasian: he advocates more not less knowledge. Yet, he opposes the epistemic anarchism that equates, say, an obscure (to the West) philosophical system such a Vedanta to the very central tradition (to the West) of ancient Greek philosophy. "We need to know who we are, what our Self is, before we can appreciate our Other, don't you think?" If we apply this to India, we are paradoxically in an opposite situation. Our entire academic system is Western in orientation; thus, we are trained to understand and recognize our Other before we can understand and recognize our Self. Never mind, let us reach our Self at least through our Other, the West. But the danger is that many of us never reach our Self at all; some of us try to, but get lost in our Other; others don't even try. Some of us, don't even reach an understanding of our Other, the West. We flounder all our lives miserable in mistaken and misunderstood identities. It is this loss of subjectivity which is most frightening. □

3 Though I am skeptical about the much-touted virtues of postmodernism, I do not wish to be entirely dismissive. In fact, I am aware that for many, postmodernism has been an explosive, liberating, almost religious experience. Not having any other source of emancipation, postmodernism was what served to transform such neophytes and to change their lives. My response to this fact is simply an acceptance and acknowledgement: to each his or her own infinity. If postmodernism works, then that's wonderful. If reading Derrida and Foucault can enlighten our urban intellectuals, that's great. But I think we need to remember that liberation is more important than the means of liberation: cling not to the means of liberation for therein lies slavery as a wise man once put it. □

4 See "Postmodernism and India: Some Preliminary Animadversions." In *A Way of Leaving So As to Stay: Papers in Honour of Professor S.*

Viswanathan, eds. Sudhakar Marathe, et al. (Madras: T.R. Publications, 1994) 89-109. In this and in other essays like this I have attempted expose and problematise the power relations behind our reception of Western knowledge. Without foregrounding the inequality of our postcolonial transactions, it would be futile to embark on any project of decolonization. To me a viable decolonization cannot, at least at present, take on the West directly. Rather, what is required is a different discourse, one that we can handle and control. This may overlap with the dominant Eurocentric, "international" discourse, but is not entirely contained by it. For a detailed exploration of such a possibility, see *Decolonization and Development: Hind Svaraj Revisited* (New Delhi: Sage, 1993). The book is an extended neo-Gandhian imaginary dialogue between a Student and a Teacher on India's contemporary intellectual and social problems. □

5 There are two ways of looking at the verbal and rhetorical over-refinement of the postmodernist discourse. One is to see this as irreducible and integral to its semantics. If so, postmodernism is not paraphrasable. In that case, the only way we can participate in this discourse is by approximating to its verbal textures as Homi Bhabha or Gayatri Chakravorty-Spivak have done. But such a participation is available only to a very few. The rest of us must be merely onlookers from outside frosted windows on such cosy scenes in the grand drawing rooms of Europe or America. □

Contrarily, we can consider postmodernism as paraphrasable. If so, then what it says is nothing really new, but the way it says it is new as are its emphases. I tend to subscribe to this latter view. I believe that nothing we can say that is really new, because the very content of human consciousness has a certain pattern, almost like our collective genetic structure. But there are newer ways of expressing ourselves and saying things. There is a continuous rewriting of older narratives in newer languages. We from the old world have access to many of these narratives in various languages, layered upon one another like thousands of warak foils. Thus, I believe that the insights of postmodernism are accessible to us through what we have inherited, not only through a perpetual exile in alien and alienating elite discourses. □

-End-