

Engaging with Critical Theory: A Response

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Many in India and elsewhere are suspicious of critical theory. Theory is alleged to have created a post-disciplinary disruption in promoting the “cult of irrationalist perceptions” in the form of “post-absolute relativism, post-disciplinary revolt and subaltern politics” (Ashok 2002:106). Even an obituary on Jacques Derrida in *New York Times* calls him an abstruse theorist implying that his theory has no relevance to our existential reality. The so-called accusations and suspicions turn into resistances in raising the question “why theory?” that is tied to other questions as well such as: “which theory?” and “theory for whom?” Theory, it appears, has an inexhaustible appetite or popped up thirst as the Pepsi ad goes *yeh dil mange more*, and in the process, has invaded all domains of knowledge production. Its consumerist agenda follows the “market economy” model in that “Theory’s multiplex of approaches suggests: shop around; roll your own; pick’n’mix...It is, precisely, where Theory has arrived with its espousal of multivalence and multiculturalism and its suspicions of canons, and evaluation, and, in effect truth-claims”(Cunningham 2002:27). This status of theory has not only created a lot of anxiety among the traditional liberal humanist western scholars and critics but also has unsettled the postcolonial critics with the question “what to do with theory?” or “how to deal with it?” Notwithstanding apprehensions and anxieties theory has penetrated into the postcolonial academia in a big way and to an extent has lost its exclusivist Western veneer. The conundrum that theory has thrown up (either in the context of its appropriation or rejection) has compelled us to explore two contentious and contesting positions: Is theory totalizing, hegemonic and in its practice does the West still control and condition non-western ways of thinking? And is it enabling, reflexive to what one does and who one is hence empowering so that one can comprehensively and competently speak to power and authority from any location?

Theory and its discontents

Resistance(s) to theory should not be construed *only* as a postcolonial phenomenon; there have been/are voices of resistance from within the Western academia as well. It is observed that “the

discourses of theory continue to proliferate and recombine into new discourses, profound incompatibilities and mutual contradictions emerge in assumptions, aims, and methods, making it increasingly unlikely that any single

meta-or master-discourse will achieve the desired condition of institutional domination” (Felperin 1985:2). Further, resistance to critical theory challenges the notion that critical literary theory has no real work to do, or results to show. Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels in their article “Against Theory” (*Critical Inquiry* 8:4, cited and included in Mitchell’s volume 1985) have worked hard to show the irrelevance of theory thereby striking against both sides of the debate criticizing, on the one hand, theoretical objectivists like E. D. Hirsch, Jr., and on the other, proponents of indeterminacy like Paul de Man. The attack is not just on a particular way of doing theory but on the entire project of critical theory. Responding to Knapp and Michaels’s position W. J. T. Mitchell in the introduction to his edited volume *Against Theory and the New Pragmatism* (1985) maintains that it is not correct to dismiss theory’s claims polemically but it is necessary to call upon theory to clarify its claims, not to mystify them, with authority and without the easy assurance of intellectual fashion.

Theory’s legitimacy or authority, for me, springs from its constitutive dynamics in interrogating its own assumptions, and throwing up insights instead of being blinded by its own power. The inbuilt apparatus of self-questioning is theory’s strength. As Paul de Man maintains, resistance to theory is inherent in the theoretical enterprise itself, and the real debate should focus on theory’s methodological assumptions and possibilities not against theory as a body

of knowledge as such. Further, any position against theory is to engage with alternative/counter theorization. As Howard Felperin very rightly observes: “To write upon—or against—theory is to enter into and inhabit theory, and thereby abandon all hope of resolving its problems from a safe distance”(1985:4). It is therefore not easy to resolve the contradictions that theory has thrown up but to make use of the insights of theory for critical practice. Beyond the question of legitimacy what critical theory does or does not do then should be looked at not as an instrument of Western domination but as a knowledge system having implications for alternative critical and cultural knowledge practice. One should look at traveling of theory as traveling of ideas; such a movement, according to Edward Said (1983), is productive and nourishes intellectual and cultural life. It is not that ideas always travel from the West to the East; the reverse is also true, as Said makes a forceful case of how the eastern concept of transcendence has influenced an entire period of creative writing in the West.

Theory in the postcolonial context in general and, in the Indian context in particular, needs to be explored for its relevance instead of being out rightly rejected. I would argue that theory is empowering for it helps us to interrogate different structures of power and authority. It has empowered us in our attempt to dismantle the logic by which a particular system of thought and behind that a whole system of

political structure and social institution maintains its force.

Theory in India: Between Indigeneity and Indianization

The theory debate in India primarily circulates around questions: what happens to indigenous Indian literary theories in the wake of critical theory and how and to what extent critical theory could be Indianized? Let me start with the latter question first as to whether theory needs to be Indianized at all, if so how much and also to what extent. It is interesting that we talk about theory's irrelevance and also appropriate it for our own intellectual activities. From ideology critique (Aijaz Ahmed) to cultural critique (Ashis Nandy), from articulation of gender difference (Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Kumkum Sangri) to subaltern historiography (Ranjit Guha and others) the effort to produce an indigenous Indian theoretical position after post-structuralism looks suspiciously derivative or glossed over with the unmistakable mark of Western theory as an impulse or the driving force. Without disputing the fact that in these critical articulations there have been projections of alternative critical positions thereby making a claim to alternative knowledge. I find it difficult to vouch for the theories developed by Indian scholars as indigenous; they are at best efforts at Indianization in the form of filling in the content with local experience as an important vector following a framework borrowed from the West. Most of our over-cited, so-called indigenous theorists

except a few work in metropolitan universities and live abroad. And most of their important works have been published only after 1980s in the wake of high theory.

Of course, it is pertinent to ask what happens to Indian theories of meaning and reading in the prevailing situation. Classical Indian theories such as Rasa, Dvani, Vakrokti and theories on grammar do have relevance today. Most of these theories have been applied by scholars in comparative reading of critical theories of the East and the West. However, these theories have remained fixed in their methodological application, lacking in dynamism. And again all of these theories may not be applicable in today's context except a few. For example, the *srhadaya* or empathetic reader concept is used in bringing a greater understanding and transparency to reader-response theories. Indian theories of meaning can be always co-opted for understanding let us say Derrida and deconstruction. Harold Coward's *Derrida and Indian Philosophy* (1990) and Carl Olson's *Indian Philosophers and Postmodern Thinkers: Dialogues on the Margins of Culture* (2000) are two of the only too few Western commentaries which link 'India' with 'Europe' in the thought of Derrida and contemporary Western philosophers. The first is a sound comparative study, whereas the latter aims to be more imperative, in a manner that advocates an attitude of openness and learning across cultures without the hierarchizing tendency often witnessed in comparative studies.

Back home, Kapil Kapoor makes a forceful plea by arguing that if we are grounded in our own thought it would enhance “our understanding of even the live issues of Western debate. For example, the Buddhist *apohavad* and its critique by Mimamasaka Kumarila Bhatta and Bhartrihari’s elaborately argued theory of linguistic conservatism—all these provide an explanatory perspective for recent Western history of ideas about language and interpretation”(2002:83). Drawing a parallel to Plato’s discussion in the *Sophist* with the *Advaita* critique of ‘difference’, Kapoor suggests that one can even evaluate Derrida’s use of this concept in his theory of meaning. Kapoor not only underlines the critical–theoretical parallels between Indian and Western theories but also seeks a possible synergy between the two that may result in collapsing the divide while opening up hitherto unmarked perspectives in our negotiation with Western theory.

Nativist Politics

Notwithstanding Kapoor’s gesture to have an agreeable space for negotiation for mutual benefit beyond indigenusness and Indianization, the nativists make a strong case against Western theory while championing the nativist cause. They argue that critical theory, a Western product has invaded the critical space in India that has been recovered from the colonial control. Let the native speak without influence or contamination! This assertion raises the question: Is there a pure state of articulation available to the native? The answer to this question is not

easy and any answer for that matter is not free from an inherent ambivalence. Balchandra Nemade’s essay “Sahityateel Desiyata” has triggered the nativist debate in the country. Namde says:

In the hullabaloo of formalism, structuralism, aestheticism, and similar branches of philosophy which are indifferent to geopiety, and comparative literature; technique-oriented, extrovertive theories like symbolism; universalist master-narratives of Freud, Marx and others; and the popularity of an industrial-technological-scientific-secular sensibility, and so on, European literary ideologues forgot that every human group has its own culture. Obviously, it is impossible for every community on earth to be European. Even those few European writers who had retained their consciousness of the native principle in spite of their exploitative colonialist society could not discern between the Self and the Other because their nativism was automatically recognized as international on account of the imperialist colonial mechanism active during the time. In short, till the mid-twentieth century, the situation was such that nobody felt the need to take heed of the native sensibilities of smaller and poorer regions because their emotional world was considered narrow and limited. Among those who strived to trade in English, French, American, and other currencies, only Tagore, Achebe, Soyinka, and the like, were noticed. Otherwise, the scenario was such that nativism should not exist at all (1997:234-35).

The question arises: can nativism as a theoretical proposition sustain itself? Is nativism sensitive to other positions in a multicultural and multilingual country like ours or is it too narrow and exclusive? Namde's argument underlines that he is exclusively for the Marathi language and literature as he further adds: "Basically, nativism is entirely self-manifest as in the plants and trees that patiently grow and live in their own soil. But there are critical moments when cultures, which are challenged, must become aggressive. At such moments, even the usually soft-spoken Dnyaneshwar must aggressively demonstrate the power of native expression by saying "We will demonstrate how sweet our deshi-Marathi language is." Or is a great pandit like Bhatobas, a 13th century leader of the Mahanubhava movement in Maharashtra, to become "narrow" and "stubborn," declaring, "I know none of your Sanskrit; ask me only in Srichakrdhar's Marathi" (236)." Nativism, according to Namde, is the assertive expression of one's right to exist as one is. Namde's nativism sounds very narrow in that it does not even recognize the interdependence and complimetary between the Marga-Desi paradigm. The subtext of his statement sounds anti-Sanskrit, then how do we begin talk about Indian literary culture? Although Namde contests the Universalist assumptions of the Western theories in that he takes a strong position, however, his thesis looks skewed when we think of other thinkers and creative writers such as Raja Rao and Anantha Murthy in the

context of our national-cultural oneness vis-à-vis vernacular/linguistic sub-nationalisms.

Raja Rao in his preface to *Kanthapura* (1974) has said that we have grown up in India looking at the wider world as part of us therefore we should not write either as an Indian or an English man. The critical impulse behind Rao's assertion is that we should write as a world citizen although our experience and location would continue to be Indian. Anantha Murthy (2005) trying to resolve the Marga-Desi conflict has metaphorically equated the Marga as the Royal Highway and the Desi as the connecting sub-roads. He sees a necessary connection between the two, as could be between a peasant consciousness and Brahminical discourse. In using the trope of front yard versus backyard in the context of regional/national and global awareness and articulation, Anantha Murthy feels that the front yard represents the outside world while the backyard represents the magical world of our own experiential and existential reality. As the past always exists in proximity with our present experiential reality with all its contradictions and conundrums in forms of plurality could we then afford to think of living in a world that is exclusive and self-enclosed?

The nativist noise about indigenous writing and reading strategies, and theory and interpretative methods is askew as it excludes exchange and engagement with the West in a purposeful

way. Is there then a possibility of moving beyond the “us” and “them” binary? The question therefore is: can we engage with critical theory productively beyond binaries? The problem with critical theory in our country is that its practice is mostly derivative. If our study of theory has to be dynamic and creative we need to engage with theory differently.

When theory travels like the traveling of local knowledge in older times for the benefit of others it gets appropriated and readjusted to one’s own cultural discourse. Following this line of argument one may say that even if appears heterogeneous, postcolonial theory having drawn its insights from western critical theory has spoken to and for us in an authentic way. How does one place the empowering position of the postcolonial theory alongside nativism? Are they complementary or mutually exclusive, because one has grown in the native soil and the other both born of local climate and culture but nourished by outside knowledge? Can we then afford to erase the historical experience in coming to our postcolonial condition? Should not such an erasure result in another endgame of conscious amnesia? The polemics around such disjuncture are not conducive for alternative knowledge production.

The call from praxis has been useful to the postcolonial creative as well as critical efforts. One of the most dominant aspects of the resistance model is postcolonial textuality in the form of writing back to the center. The textual politics has taken a lot from Western

theory and has turned it in favour of the postcolonial writer. The writing back to the canon to chutneyfication of English is part of this endeavour. Further, theory empowered disciplines such as feminism, gay/lesbian studies and postcolonial theory have emerged as new humanities that challenge the older humanities while opening up new horizons for inquiry. In a changing scenario the concern therefore should be to address what happens to a text and a reader where meanings are plural and there is no consensus about anything. Does theory eclipse the text or liberate it? Is a reader liberated to find meaning of any text to his/her advantage or is there only interpretative chaos? How do we then interpret texts and strategise pedagogical practices where theory and its application are crucial?

What happens to the text?

One of the accusations is that theory not only contaminates texts, it also dehumanizes a reader. For a reader is overloaded with the Pyrrhonisms of theory that strains his mind with too much suspicion hence he is not able to complete the hermeneutic circle and instead keeps on rupturing it all the time. Such a position underlines the repressed prejudices that conform to our general view about theory, instead of asking us to look at a set of interpretive presuppositions that make one read the way one reads. Shouldn’t we try a little bit harder, and investigate into the origin of our views, their consequences, in order to locate and identify *why* is it that we see things in a certain way and resist seeing it in other ways? This

understanding certainly will help us in knowing how theory liberates a text thereby bringing into focus the genealogical and epistemological issues that make a text what it is all about. Theory driven reading of a text to my mind not only empowers a reader, making him reflexive to his own location, history, self-possession and culture but also unbares what a text holds inside its body. In addition, the academic aspect of theory is important, the way we use theory for pedagogical practices, particularly in the context of English studies in the country.

Theory and English Studies in India: Problematising Pedagogy

The penetration of critical theory into Indian academia has made English studies disquieting which is so far, secured within an unchanged almost static inherited colonial institutional and instructional structure. The debate on the complex destiny of English studies in India in the wake of critical theory has deepened as some express their anxiety about the stability of the discipline while others cry for change. In a postcolonial context, the study of English literature can no longer be underpinned to its twin traditional functions of pleasure and prophecy: pleasure as a product of the colonial bourgeois's leisure that etches out an attitude in celebrating the reading of English literature as a means of acquiring the correct cultural taste underscored by colonial standards; and prophecy that privileges the Western/Christian cultural world view over an Indian learner's own on the premise that the West is the

repository of superior civilizational values. All these have changed. A pedagogic strategy today needs to address the process of decolonization while examining the political dynamics, economic imperatives and social concerns of a postcolonial state. Exploring the postcolonial pedagogical problematic, Kostas Myrsiades and Jerry McGuire offer an interesting context in their work *Order and Partialities: Theory, Pedagogy and the Postcolonial* (1995). Introducing the theme Lalita Pandit and Jerry McGuire (1995: 7) argue that there is a need for re-looking at the postcolonial pedagogy that will assist redefining our objectives, reorienting learning vis-à-vis existing models. They take note of the failure of global models, global aspirations, global assumptions, of the necessity to recognize distinctions and the subversion of distinctions, of a new regime of inquiry marked both by passionate intensities and the peculiar demands of multicultural selectivity. What emerges is a postmodern multidiscipline whose analysis of postcolonial pedagogy repeatedly reflects back on its own enmeshed participation in the global exercise of postcolonial power.

The global exercise of postcolonial power can probably be ensured in recognizing the critical theoretical dimension of postcolonial discourse. There is a critical turn in the postcolonial pedagogic structure that has challenged the older paradigm. It undermines the authority of the author, democratizes the canon and considers the

coverage model dead. Each one of the skills such as reading, writing, listening and thinking that stimulates the learning process under the earlier model becomes problematic: “Reading, what? Thinking, how? Writing, why? The first question brings up issues of the canon and the archeology of ideas; the second raises issues of construction of knowledge, and the hierarchy of cultural anthropology; and the third presents issues of production of texts as cultural artifacts...” (Kar et al 2003:13). Besides these critical issues, the larger concern is how education can provide individuals with the tools to better themselves and strengthen democracy by creating a more egalitarian and just society; in other words how to deploy education for social change.

The strategic goal of liberation is problematic in a multilingual, multicultural country like India, where identity and history are crucial issues. Politically sensitive and contested issues such as secularism, marginalization and minority rights assume significance in what we teach and learn. Issues of representation, ethnicity and nationalism further problematize the context of English studies in India. To make English studies sensitive to the multifaceted predicament of a postcolonial country we need both a “critical” and “engaged” pedagogy: critical because in contrast to the unitary and homogenized colonial model we need a model that can negotiate between/among plurality of languages, cultures and ethnicity, and engaged because those who teach need to commit

and transgress in guiding the learners with ways and means of learning differently. In the words of A. Darder, “Unlike traditional perspectives of education that claim to be neutral and apolitical, critical pedagogy views all education theory as intimately linked to ideologies shaped by power, politics, history and culture” (1991: 77).

As a post-discipline English studies is on trial today. Teaching of English within marked boundaries and a contained pedagogic situation, advocated by Edward Said, (1983:12) is no longer operative today or even desirable. Instead it is necessary to liberate the learner from “disciplinary ghettos” as Gayatri Spivak remarks, that in these most definitely post-colonial times, a teacher needs to consider how the object of study is to be constructed or gets constructed in the classroom to make it meaningful (1992:281). Therefore *what* one reads is immaterial, *how* one reads is preeminent. What is important is not teaching per se, but allowing the learner to situate him/herself in the pedagogical process in changing/shifting contexts. We know that the process of knowledge production undergoes transformation not only because of historical necessity but also due to changes in our situation and consciousness. The study of English literature therefore should not be organized *only* around authors and texts and the specific contexts of their interpretations but through an interrogative process that should lead the learner, as Freire says, towards a “practice of freedom” (1986).

Plurality of reading strategies, whether theory driven or otherwise, should work to the advantage of the learners in that they can simultaneously relate the world of the book, a public world, to their own private worlds, while developing an attitude for open enquiry, looking at the cultural and intellectual roots of our diverse world in exciting and challenging ways. If that is the Holy Grail, the final aspiration, then we need a critical pedagogy that will enable a learner to ask questions beyond and alongside the aesthetic, stylistic or thematic organization of a text. For example:

Race: are texts written by dead white European males more valuable than those writers elsewhere, living or otherwise? Gender: are texts by men about their life experiences more valuable than those by women? Are heterosexual experiences more normative than homosexual ones? Culture: are texts produced in the West more significant than those produced elsewhere? Politics: does the colonial text qualitatively excel the subaltern discourse? Textuality: is the written text to be privileged over the oral? Are printed books more worthy of preservation than hand-written palm-leaf manuscripts? Code: is one language a more reliable vehicle for communication than another? Value: is New Historicism a more efficient interpretive approach than deconstruction? Ideology: are some political institutions (constitution or rule of law) or systems (democracy or dictatorship) inherently better or worse than their counterparts? Epistemology: is

intuitive, experiential insight more reliable than scientific, acquired knowledge? (Kar *et al* 2003:13:14)

Has theory a future? In lieu of a conclusion

In sum it is appropriate to say that we have to look at what works and what works effectively while engaging with critical theory. A new pragmatism has to be worked out that would help us moving beyond the disputes among/between theories for academic domination and finding out what not only works but works to our advantage. As the above example demonstrates we need a plural reading strategy instead of devoting much time looking at the competing advantages and disadvantages of any particular theory. Although some critics have already declared the death of theory, to me, it refuses to die and get buried. It always happens that after a period of high growth the triggers of that growth may dissipate but not the very phenomenon itself. Even the emerging trends in critical practice such as pragmatic, secular and ethical criticisms are nothing but a recycling of some of the earlier ideas with changing emphasis, trying to move out of the so-called indeterminacy of high theory for creating a more comprehensible world. Could we then call it the death of theory?

If we consider theory as an endless problematizing of our beliefs and practices, of our suspicions and mistrusts then one may legitimately ask what is its future? Do the mistrusts and suspicions help us in visualizing a future? Do they

cohabit with faith in recovering a vision beyond? One may suggest that doubting the present is having the faith in a future. As John D. Caputo maintains: “If there were no theory, there would be no future, just the endless repetition of the same.” (<http://www.jcrt.org/archives/04.2/caputo.shtml>). The vitality of theory lies in its vision for the future, on what is coming! Such a realization, I hope, will take us beyond the West versus the rest divide and nativist closures while keeping the future open as a possibility, and not as an illusion.

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*One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of more evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.*

William Wordsworth
The Table Tuned

*The end cannot justify the means, for the simple and obvious
reason that the means employed determine the nature of the
ends produced.*

Aldous Huxley
Ends and Means