



# NORLIT 2011

Conference on literature and politics

ROSKILDE, AUGUST 4.-6. 2011

ISBN: 978-87-7349-818-7

Papers published in relation to the NORLIT 2011 conference are made available under the CC license [by-nc-nd]. Find the terms of use at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/dk/legalcode>.

Papers, som er offentliggjort i forbindelse med NORLIT 2011 konferencen stilles til rådighed under CC-licens[by-nc-nd]. Læs mere på <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>, hvis du vil vide, hvordan du må gøre brug af de registrerede papers.

Accessible online: <http://ruconf.ruc.dk/index.php/norlit/norlit2011/schedConf/presentations>

Lotta Strandberg

Helsingfors universitet

lotta.strandberg@helsinki.fi

---

## **Reading Indian English Women's Writing-Between Identification and Alienation**

Fredric Jameson's argumentation in his seminal article "Third World Literature in the Era of Multicultural Capitalism" (1986) seems today, twenty-five years later, somewhat outdated. Feminist, cultural, diasporic, racial and queer studies have all contributed to expanding our horizon or what Jameson refers to as our "conventional Western habits of reading". Nevertheless, Jameson raises two important questions for our present purpose. As Jameson locates himself so clearly within Western academia, he asks how we should read these "alien" texts and how they can fit into the canon. His point of departure is the canon and the reader (both of them Western). These aspects constitute first two misapprehensions when reading across cultures, and I address both, briefly, before turning to the third misapprehension and Githa Hariharan's novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992).

I will in this paper develop a reading position for Indian women's writing. The position I develop is specific to Githa Hariharan's novel and cannot be universally applied to other third world or even Indian writing.

The paper is divided into three sections, each analysing one of the obstacles in cross-cultural reading.

- Texts Across Cultures
- Readers Across Cultures
- Politics Across Cultures

The third and last obstacle is politics which will be addressed through the reading of the novels. The analysis of Shashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence* (1998) envisioned in the abstract is unfortunately omitted due to lack of space.

*The First Obstruction: Texts Across Cultures*

Jameson's article and Aijaz Ahmad's critical response to him, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the National Allegory" (1987), have by now almost reached canonical dimensions.<sup>1</sup> Ahmad mainly reacted to one central aspect in Jameson's article: his assertion that "all third-world texts are necessarily [...] to be read as [...] national allegories" (Jameson 1986: 69). Jameson's division of the world into first, second and third world, Ahmad retorts, makes third-world literature, by default, a radical alterity to first-world literature. Indeed, the category "third-world literature" is highly problematic, since it refers neither to a literary tradition nor to a somewhat utopian notion of world literature, but makes world capitalism its decisive parameter, assuming that literary manifestations differ with access to capital. The division, Ahmad continues, homogenizes both the third and first world and does not account for the complexities within either category, nor for the fact that the world of capital, in fact, is one (Ahmad 2001 [1992]: 95-122). Jameson continues his argument:

Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic—necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society. Need I add that this is precisely this very different ratio of the political to the personal which makes such texts alien to us at first approach, and consequently, resistant to our conventional western habits of reading? (Jameson 1986: 69)

An encounter with otherness or radical alterity prompts Jameson to a comparison with the familiar, which on every account is deceptive. It leads him to compare the national allegories of the third world to national allegories of the first world. Although he warns against reductionism, he still concludes that the radical alterity of third-world allegories lies in an overt and conscious integration of the private and the political, which in first-world allegories, by contrast, is unconscious thus requiring interpretations in order to display a social and/or historical critique (Jameson 1986: 79-80).

Obviously, national allegories exist in Indian English literature amongst a variety of

---

<sup>1</sup> Jameson's and Ahmad's articles were both published in *Social Text*, where subsequently Jameson also responded to Ahmad's critique. When Ahmad's book *In Theory. Classes, Nations, Literature* (1992) was published, the reactions were fierce. Ahmad's critique of Edward Saïd was the main reason for the reactions, but his earlier article on Jameson also had its critics. Dedicating its 1993 Fall Issue 6-1 to the debate, the journal *Public Culture* contained ten articles and Ahmad's lengthy reply. This interesting and entertaining reading experience of almost 200 pages is maybe best characterised as scholarly combat.

fiction, which cannot be described as such. But Jameson's argument has contributed to making national allegory a dominant interpretative strategy for Indian English literature (in e.g., Rege 2004; Petersson 2008; Gopal 2009).<sup>2</sup> Rosemary Marangoly George rightly warns that fiction not fitting the demand for national allegory risks not being read, researched and/or published (George 1996: 108). Indian literary texts fitting Jameson's requirement are often, but certainly not always, written from within the first world. Explorations into Indianness, Indian history, nationhood, and identity can then easily also be explained as a typical diasporic rather a third-world phenomenon. In addition, reading Indian English novels as allegorizing the nation is not sufficiently accompanied by other critical aspects, which remain largely unexplored and novels, which fit badly into the scope of national allegory, resulting in odd chapters that contain mostly women writers like Githa Hariharan. Even Geetanjali Singh Chanda resorts in her otherwise brilliant reading of Hariharan's first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* to seeing it as "nation writing", when she argues that the novel "forces [...] a reading of the mother as a mother country because of the political and largely Hindu-Indian framework" (Chanda 2008: 130).

Consequently, national allegory is imposed as an interpretative strategy on literature which so obviously does not allegorise the nation or deal with nationalism or national identity. The gendered implications are also obvious and women writers, particularly those located in India, like Hariharan, are often overlooked both by readers and scholars, who define the Indian English canon (Strandberg 2006). Joel Kuortti has analysed the field of Indian English women's literature and concludes that only a few writers have an "overwhelming presence" in every engagement with Indian English fiction. (Kuortti 2002: xi-xiii). The writers he mentions also totally dominate histories of Indian English literature, to the extent women enter at all, of course. David Damrosch's findings also support Kuortti's overall point that interest and critical work centres on a few writers, which over time basically remain the same (Damrosch 2006).<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Since much postcolonial critique revolves around the power difference between coloniser and colonised, it unavoidably centralises the nation as a dominant theoretical and analytical category.

<sup>3</sup> David Damrosch notes that, although the largest recent shift within comparative literature has been the emergence of world literature, the consequence in scholarly work has merely been that Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Edward Saïd and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak are used to discuss the canon of William Shakespeare, William Wordsworth, Marcel Proust, and James Joyce. He observes that there is nothing that indicates a shift in the canon and the MLA bibliography entries show little change. He also demonstrates a disparity in attention

*I now turn to the Second Obstruction which I call Readers Across Cultures*

Jameson argues:

[...] as western readers whose tastes (and much else) have been formed by our own modernisms, a popular or socially realistic third-world novel tends to come before us, not immediately, but as though already-read. We sense, between ourselves and this alien text, the presence of another reader, of the Other reader, for whom a narrative, which strikes us as conventional or naive, has a freshness of information and a social interest that we cannot share. The fear and the resistance I'm evoking has to do, then, with the sense of our own non-coincidence with that Other reader, so different from ourselves; our sense that to coincide in any adequate way with that Other "ideal reader" – that is to say, to read this text adequately – we would have to give up a great deal that is individually precious to us and acknowledge an existence and a situation unfamiliar and therefore frightening – one that we do not know and prefer *not* to know (Jameson 1986: 66, emphasis in original).

The process of alienation, which Jameson outlines in cross-cultural reading experiences, is not limited to third-world fiction, but occurs whenever a reader is dislocated from the position of "ideal reader" or what James Phelan defines as the authorial audience. Jameson insists that, since a Western reader does not coincide with the authorial audience, it requires the Western reader to "give up a great deal" in order to adequately read the text, resulting in "fear" and "resistance". This poses two severe problems. First, it defines a reader as a consumer, who is not to be challenged, but satisfied, and second, it posits that, unless a reader feels that s/he is the authorial audience, that is, the intended target group, the text has "a social interest we cannot share". Considering this reader position, it is not surprising that Indian critics and scholars complain that Western readers are only interested in diasporic experiences and/or Indian encounters with the West, while issues such as the articulation of Indian identities lack appeal (Gandhi 1997; Chaudhuri 2001).<sup>4</sup> Amit Chaudhuri, for example, argues that Western readers lose interest in literature that focuses on Indian realities and identity formations

---

between non-Western writers, where Salman Rushdie, Nadine Gordimer, Naguib Mahfouz and Lu Xun top the list of scholarly attention (Damrosh 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Amit Chaudhuri published an anthology of modern Indian literature, *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* (2002), to counter Salman Rushdie's anthology *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997* (1997). Chaudhuri's anthology is more balanced and certainly includes more non-English writers than Rushdie's. However, as Francesca Orsini observes, there are, of course, important uncovered areas omitted as, for instance, partition literature, *dalit*, communist and working-class literature (Orsini 2004: 322).

(Chaudhuri 2001: xix).

Readers' horizons of expectation are obviously situated in time and space. The more readers feel that they miss out on or are unable to identify with the characters in a novel, the less likely it is, that the novel is within their horizon of expectations. Granting that literature, which stretches beyond a reader's horizon of expectation, is difficult to digest, we cannot assume a homogeneous reader position for the "we" in Jameson's argument. Is it then white, male middle class and heterosexual, or how is it defined? Already Wayne Booth noted in his definition of unreliability that a reader is never in a value-free position: "I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with norms of the work [...] unreliable when he does not", he adds that readers can, based on their "mature moral judgment, identify such morally and intellectually deficient narrators" (Booth 1983 [1961]: 158-159, 7, 307). This implies that to determine a narrator's reliability or unreliability both the internal logic of the text and the reader's "mature moral judgment" has to be evoked. What Jameson considers frightening and is reluctant to give up, is his ability/right to pass moral judgement. He is, in fact, outlining an extremely conservative reader. Tradition and convention shape and guide his reading experiences, which in encounter with third-world fiction cause him to characterise them as "unconventional" and "naïve".

Deploying either mythical material or folklore, as Hariharan often does, creates a striking difference between Indian and non-Indian reader positions. Two aspects dividing the authorial audience seem most relevant for Githa Hariharan's novel. The mythological terrain she moves in differentiates the reception in the authorial audience and activates for an Indian reader extratextual material, which non-Indian readers are unfamiliar with. What for a non-Indian reader might seem as a curious one-liner in Hariharan's novel, can for an Indian reader be a culturally and politically vested statement. This produces very different readings. The very familiar story material can entice Indian readers into reading more into the novel and inundating the analysis with mythological, historical and cultural contextual material, in fact, a recurring phenomenon. On the other hand, a non-Indian reader can miss out on how the material functions in the novel by focusing on its "intrinsic Indianness". Instead of recognising that the material could be used to provoke change, the reader might conclude the opposite – that the Indian imaginary is static, an equally often recurring phenomenon.

Jameson's demand to be the focal point or sole recipient of the text would under these circumstances result in rejection. The Indian context Hariharan moves in is a political and social setting with concerns, which this anticipated reader is unfamiliar with and thus

uninterested in. This egocentric reader is very dissimilar to the reader-position I will outline in the following. Its premise is not a value-free position, but an engaged and responsible encounter with otherness, which by no means is restricted to cross-cultural reading, but applicable to all reading. Yet, because of the reasons envisaged for Jameson's reader, it becomes more urgent when reading texts across cultures. To define reading as a responsible encounter with otherness might seem an unconventional approach to literary studies, but as Stefan Helgesson (2006) argues this perspective is present in at least three critical traditions: Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics in *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960); the postcolonial critique exemplified by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *In Other Worlds. Essays in Cultural Politics* (1988) and *Outside the Teaching Machine* (1993) and Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), and the ethical critique based on Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy exemplified by Derek Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature* (2004).

Spivak has argued persistently for a responsible and ethical engagement with the other. Most forcefully this comes across in *The Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), in which she revises and expands her earlier work. She argues for a responsible renegotiation of disciplinary practices and the inclusion of "other" literatures and languages. The challenge is to assume or imagine the position of the other reader, which requires, as Spivak argues, to read from the place of the (im)possible (Spivak 1999: 6). The bracketing, as Mark Sanders observes, puts impossibility under erasure without cancelling it (Sanders 2006: 13). The difference from Jameson is striking, since for Jameson the responsibility lies with the text, which needs to fit into the horizon of expectations of the reader. In Spivak, on the other hand, we encounter a call for a reader, who both accepts a heterogeneous authorial audience and is responsible for the success of the "reading contract". Spivak envisages cross-cultural reading as contextualised close reading, which is constantly aware that both reader and text are situated. She visualises literary studies as follows:

Here we stand outside, but not as anthropologist; we stand rather as reader with imagination ready for the effort of othering, however imperfectly, as an end in itself. [...] This is a preparation for a patient and provisional other, and forever deferred arrival into the performative of the other, in order not to transcode but to draw a response (Spivak 2003: 12).

The mode of reading that Spivak advocates demands a dialogic approach, in which both the reader's and the text's situatedness and value systems are recognised. As Spivak argues, such interactions are always imperfect. Since we can never actually become the other, it will always by default result in imperfection. According to Spivak, it is, however, the only way we

can “draw a response” and enter into dialogue, aware that we can be wrong and imperfect. I understand openness in Spivak’s vision as a dialogic engagement with the text and its context, which gains importance particularly when studying gender negotiations.

*This leads me to the Third Obstruction which is entitled Politics Across Cultures* and which a reading of Githa Hariharan’s first novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) exemplifies. The novel has a traditional marriage plot. The protagonist Devi is a well-educated, upper-class South Indian, who finalises her education with a Master of Arts degree at an American university. It is clear that the purpose of Devi’s education is her personal development and maybe the enhancement of her chances in the marriage market of affluent, liberal middle- and upper-class professionals, rather than improving her standing in the labour market. She returns home to Madras, where her widowed mother awaits her. After a period during which the mother and Devi make up for lost time, Devi marries Mahesh and moves to his parental home.<sup>5</sup> Her husband is mostly away on business and Devi is emotionally confused, bored and unhappy. The couple tries unsuccessfully to get pregnant. Eventually, the marriage fails and Devi elopes with a musician Gopal. The novel ends with Devi’s return to her mother’s house, when the relationship with Gopal fails.

Most readings never question Devi’s return to her mother (e.g., Rege 2004; Sunder Rajan 2004; Chanda 2008). Comparing the novel to Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence* (1988), they interpret Devi’s return to her mother as a demonstration of more agency, than Deshpande’s female protagonist, Jaya, who opts for marriage and takes back her husband. Devi’s return home to the mother is, of course, an alternative to staying with the husband, but none of these actions are as such very “revolutionary”, which has often lead critics to conclude that these bourgeois novels with miserable women see few alternatives for women. Neither of these female characters see a life outside the family as alternative, results in an exaggerated emphasis of the “doll house” problem, which centralises marriage and

---

<sup>5</sup> In India an extended family is normally patrilinear. Brothers and their families live together. Normally Indian girls are married out of their own family and into the family of the groom and move to the house of their in-laws. Although the nuclear family has become more common in recent years, it is still an urban phenomenon and unusual in most parts of India. The family structure in the protagonist’s childhood home is somewhat different. The family lives in the city as a nuclear family, but during summers, the women return to the ancestral village and live in the household of the paternal grandmother. After her marriage, Devi moves into the house of her husband.



heterosexual relations as the main site of oppression for middle-class women. This is a reading strategy which is both traditional and conventional in feminist literary critique and still dominates readings of third-world women's writing. To focus on this aspect of the novel unmistakably leads feminist scholars to disappointingly recognise that these female characters implement an ambiguous feminist agenda. Josna Rege, for example, argues that "women's resistance can never be unambiguous within the Indian patriarchal framework, and [...] the transformation of victim into agent *takes* place at great personal cost" (Rege 2004: 145). I am not sure that agent surpasses victim, when it comes to personal sacrifices, but obviously, what Rege seems to suggest is that since family is the realm for both identity formation and oppression, the tensions are great, as are the sacrifices. The transformation from victim to agent is seen as the most important, if not the only, feminist strategy. In addition, for the readers who focus on the doll house problem, "family" signifies the same as in Ibsen's *The Doll House*, that is, the heterosexual marriage. The assumption, that women's problems and feminist solutions are universal without simultaneously recognising that both the problems or the oppression and the political struggle against it are routed in time and place, constitutes the third hindrance. Its implications are as severe as Jameson's assumption regarding national allegories, resulting in homogenising both the literatures and the readings. . To recognise the universality of the politics of oppression and resistance does not entail an assumption that the politics are identical. The doll house readings centralise marriage and the male characters, while they, apart from the obvious, in fact, play a minor role in Devi's development as a character. Rather than disposing of the family all together, Hariharan's novel sets out to reshape how women in kinship relationships affect each other and both partake and resist the oppression of women. Hariharan's most significant contribution to a feminist agenda, as I see it, is her renegotiation of kinship relationships and it is precisely the return to the mother, which calls for it.

The first-person narrator Devi, who lovingly recalls her grandmother, does not waste much empathy on her own mother. Instead, she is quite condescending. Sita is portrayed as cynical and conniving, her letters to Devi in America are premeditated in their tone and length, everything she does conspires to the master plan to get Devi married and "disposed of". "[L]ike a veteran chess-player she made her moves" (TFN 14), she "played her next card" (TFN 16). Sita is even described as evil, when she sends away the orphaned cousin Annapurna, because she became too friendly with Devi's father (TFN 76-7). Neither the character Devi nor the narrator reflect upon the obvious erotic and flirtatious underpinnings in

the description of the relationship between Devi's father and Annapurna, which could place the mother's actions in a different light. Instead, a total lack of sympathy for the mother's position dominates the description.

It is hard to believe that Devi would go back to a woman she so disdainfully depicts, and who, she believes, treats her like a pawn on a chessboard. After the marriage, Devi never ruminates on her relationship to her mother, who enters her self-obsessed thoughts only once (TFN 83). Sita vanishes and only Mahesh refers to her from time to time. Since Devi's return to the mother is not explained and lacks foundation in her internal focalisation, the event becomes abrupt and somewhat unexpected.

The internal logic of the novel, the way the characters are construed, the values vested in them all point to the impossibility of a return home, yet she returns home. Furthermore, if Devi pictures her mother as the perfect wife incarnate, how can she assume that she will take this renegade daughter back? Would it not be more plausible that she would reject Devi? Both characters must undergo substantial change to accommodate this ending and herein lies Hariharan's greatest feminist contribution, I argue.

Hariharan conducts a substantial reformulation of the social roles, through which the characters relate to each other. This contribution is unrelated to heterosocial patterns and kept within the realm of female kinship relations, which is important. As the family is a depot for both affirmation and oppression, Hariharan's renegotiation implicitly suggests that women also partake in the oppression of women, and thus there is a need to change homosocial kinship relations so as to not replicate oppression.

Most readings of the novel never draw attention to the discrepancy between Devi's actions and the depiction of the mother, Sita, nor do they question Devi's return to her mother. Here we come across the most interesting aspect of cross-cultural reading, where reading positions differ substantially. Is it so that an Indian reader is more inclined to accept the unreliability, because of a tacit understanding that despite ironic and condescending descriptions of family members, kinship relations at least partly foreclose an articulation of individual agency in the Indian context?<sup>6</sup> Where does the reading strategy based on the the doll house problem come, and why is it assumed that this novel primarily deals with the heterosexual marriage problems?

---

<sup>6</sup> I am obviously influenced by Alan Roland's study of the difference between the we-self and I-self which he observes in family relations in India (Roland 1988: 8-9).

The reader position I have outlined based on Spivak presupposes that the socio-cultural setting functions as a basis for the reading. It guides the reading toward and understanding of which aspects are dominant for the understanding of the novel. This approach differs radically from Jameson, who seem to argue that all third world novels are national allegories, and from the feminist scholars who read the doll house problem into all novels that feature a marriage.