

# The Cultural World-System and Indian English Literature

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is motivated by a need to understand the impact of some recent world-wide economic and political trends on the cultural production of postcolonial societies. How have these trends impinged upon literature in general and Indian English literature in particular? To what extent can our study of literature benefit from some of the debates taking place in the domain of economics and political theory? Further, in the present context, what sort of explanatory models might be developed to account for certain literary tendencies and practices that are widely discernible? These questions motivate my inquiry. In a sense, then, this paper is concerned not with the analysis of specific texts and their meanings but with what makes these texts visible, marketable, and meaningful in the larger context of our times. I am interested in the role that economic and political forces play in the process of according value and recognition to literary texts in postcolonial societies. I wish to analyse and expose the stratification of writers and books, to examine the manner in which literary reputations are made, to find out how writers move up and down the ladders of fame, success, and celebrity. Finally, I intend to venture into a speculation on the elusive notion of quality and how that relates to the market forces of our time.

## 2. CAPITAL AND CULTURE

What is the relationship between capital and culture? Traditionally, they were thought to occupy different realms. Capital, supposedly belongs to the base, while culture, to the superstructure of value-system. Forces of capital do indeed influence culture but then certain

aspects of culture, especially those that remained farthest from the market, were thought to be almost unaffected, if not autonomous of capital. In a traditional society like India, certainly, much of the culture that was a part of the daily lives of people was almost unaffected by the forces of global capital. In fact, there were entire groups of people, including indigenous people (*ādivāsis*), aboriginal people, forest dwellers (*vanvāsis*), who were entirely outside the market system, even for most of their economic needs. In other words, though culture was affected by the larger economic system, many aspects of it were still relatively untouched by it.

With globalisation, more and more areas of our culture are directly entering the market. Take, for example, food. Except for a few large cities, Indian towns and villages do not boast of restaurants until a few years ago. The culture of eating out was by and large restricted to wayside eateries catering to travellers or to small restaurants in places of pilgrimage. In any case, global capital did not enter the food business until very recently. Food, then, was very much a matter of local tastes and traditions, and even the restaurant business was controlled by local entrepreneurs. But with the influx of Macdonald's, Pizza Hut, Domino's Pizza, Wimpy's and so on, all this has changed. Gradually, the eating habits of metropolitan Indians have been affected by mass-produced fast food and imported cuisine. Similarly, several dishes which used to be made only at home, that is dishes which had no large-scale commercial production, are now made largely outside the home, either by professionals or even by large companies, because their preparation is too difficult and cumbersome. A good example is pappadams: I remember my mother used to make them at home when I was little, but now no one I know would dream of doing so. Another example would be pickles and preservers, which used to be made at home, but now are almost always bought from outside.

Another area of culture which has registered a dramatic growth after the influx of global capital is trend of celebrating special days like Valentine's Day, Father's Day, Mother's Day, and so on. Valentine's Day came and went almost unmarked in the Indian calendar, which is already so full of all kinds of festivals and feasts. Now, it has become a very big ritual in many Indian cities, with cinema theatres, restaurants, greeting card and music companies all colluding to promote teenage spendings.

Forces of capital, then, are not only penetrating even the most

insulated aspects of culture, but creating new patterns of behaviour, supplanting older value-systems with habits of thought and consumption. The whole production and marketing of culture—of music, dance, theatre, cinema, art, and literature—likewise, is now being pursued more vigorously than ever before. That something exists culturally is not enough; if you cannot capitalize upon it, or if you cannot sell it, then it's of little use. This is the current trend in India.

So far I have considered both capital and culture in their usual senses. But what happens if we consider culture itself to be a kind of capital? Pierre Bourdieu raised this question in a slightly different way in his essay, "Systems of Education and Systems of Thought", "... there is diffused within a social space a cultural capital, transmitted by inheritance and invested in order to be cultivated" (201). What he was referring to, however, was the differential and stratified processes of socialization within a capitalist society. These processes predisposed the privileged classes to inherit not just economic or political, but cultural capital too. In this manner, cultural "superiority" was reproduced and reinforced. He was unmasking how the political function of culture was disguised by a whole network of institutions, including the education system, so as to promote anti-democratic social inequalities.

What I propose to do here is to deploy his notion of cultural capital not within but across cultures. A productive way of doing this is by marrying his idea of "cultural capital" to the highly influential world-systems theory.

## I

The latter posited how the capitalist global economy operates a system of dependency leading, in effect, to the "development of underdevelopment." The capitalists, to my mind, were basically structuralists in their philosophical outlook; they were concerned with trying to understand the structure of world capitalism. They saw global capitalism as a world-system, which engendered and reproduced unequal relations between what may be termed as the "core" and the "periphery." The core extracted the surplus from the peripheries, rendering the latter totally dependent on the former. In other words, unequal and unjust terms of trade enforced the economic and social inequalities across the world.

I would like to propose a cultural world-system on the model of the world-systems theory, but with some notable differences. This cultural world-system too is characterised by asymmetrical power relations between core and peripheral states and it too has in-between states which may be said to be semi-peripheral. Further, that the peripheral states practise a sort of dependent culturalism, deriving their main ideas and cues from the core. This is so mainly because the cultural production from the core totally dominates the global marketplace. This domination, moreover, is not random but systematised. The culturally "backward" parts of the world, in addition, also have pre-capitalist modes of cultural exchange as opposed to totally capitalist cultural production of the core states. The result is that these peripheral areas suffer from blocked or inadequate cultural capitalisation, while the core states are autocentric and dynamic. Further, that both these features, that is, cultural underdevelopment in the peripheries and cultural overdevelopment in the core areas are structurally linked. They are linked because finished cultural products emanate from the core, though their raw materials are sourced in the peripheries. The terms of trade are, in other words, stacked against the periphery. Needless to say, in our context, the core consists of the imperial and neo-imperial powers which are the periphery and semi-periphery of the colonized states. Further that by and large, the invaded colonies are at the periphery while the semi-periphery consists of the settler colonies.

There are some important clarifications which are of course in order. First, that development and underdevelopment, in the cultural sense, are not to be taken literally; the underdeveloped countries may actually have a higher level of culture than the developed countries. Indeed, this was the basis of M.K. Gandhi's attack on modernity in *Hind Swarāj* (1909). He argued that Western civilization, by succumbing to modernity, had actually regressed, while the colonized Indians could still be proud of their traditional civilization. This reversal in which the poor somehow were culturally superior to the rich was an important strategy in the process of decolonization which Gandhi led. Of course, Gandhi's idea of culture as the ground of resistances is quite different from the more commercial and utilitarian idea of culture that is prevalent today. That is why the poor are still underdeveloped when it comes to measuring the extent to which they have managed to capitalize their culture. Measured in terms of the market, they are culturally underdeveloped.

FEATURES OF THE WORLD CULTURAL SYSTEM

If we accept that there is a global cultural system, then it is incumbent upon us to try to discover its main features. I have already said that this system operates in terms of asymmetrical power relations. Let me list where these asymmetries are more glaring.

1. *Languages*: First of all, these inequalities work in the realm of the mediums of creative expressions, more specifically the languages of literature. What we observe is the books published in certain languages have a greater visibility and marketability than those in other languages. In fact, languages can be ranked in terms of their market power. English, of course, is the quintessential global power-language. Apart from English, there are a few other major languages like French, Spanish, German, Portuguese, Arabic, Chinese, and Hindi-Urdu, which can boast of a considerable international spread and power. If a writer writes in one of the minor languages of the world, he or she has little chance of being taken up seriously, let alone surviving financially. The world cultural system compels you to write, or be translated, into one or more of these major international languages. The inequality between languages has other more damaging consequences: several languages are dying each year either because their speakers are themselves becoming extinct or because these speakers are switching over to other languages. The global cultural system, then, is forcing greater and greater conformity and homogeneity; as a result, cultural pluralism and diversity are being threatened.

2. *Genres*: Like languages, there is now a growing gap between the profitability and viability of literary genres themselves. Fiction has long ruled the literary roost, but what is truly alarming is the utter marginalization of poetry and drama. The entire vocation of poetry seems to be pushed underground—rather literally, if we take the example of London. While the possibility of new, multi-media genres emerging cannot be denied, the fact remains that the very nature of literature is undergoing a change. The printed word may be dying a slow death, giving rise to the seen and heard or imaged word. Or else, the printed word may be undergoing a change of position and power in the total system of signification, only to reemerge as an adjunct or assistant to the audio-visual.

3. *Authors*: Finally, the cultural world-system is breeding a great deal of inequality and asymmetry between authors. A new star system is now

in place in which authors are ranked and respected not so much in terms of that are indefinable but nonetheless recognizable notion of quality, but simply by how much money and hype they can generate. What this will do to the very idea of good literature remains to be seen; perhaps, what will endure in the long run is quality, but then there may not be any long run to speak of. The tyranny of the contemporary so overwhelms us that we have all begun to believe that the latest is the best.

I have so far outlined some inequalities within the internal structure of literature itself, but when we look across cultures and nations, we notice equally distressing imbalances. These latter, of course, are easily identifiable even in the by now all-too-familiar grids of postcolonial studies. Yet, thinking through these inequalities in terms of the world cultural system makes them reappear in rather more interesting colours.

For example, what we immediately begin to observe is a sort of expropriation of surplus by the core states from the peripheral states. The colonies were originally designed as sources of cheap labour for the metropolis. Today, the metropolis extracts not just culture, but the producers of culture. The major English writers of most of the underdeveloped nations of the world now live in the West or its outposts. This has led to the phenomenon of the diaspora assuming more importance than the mainland in recent critical debates. It is no wonder, then, that most of the major Indian English writers live abroad. This is true of African, Caribbean, and other Commonwealth writers as well.

The books of these non-resident writers, whether they are V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, are then exported back to the countries of their origin, often considered the master-texts that define the realities of these countries. Neo-orientalism, like neo-imperialism, wears new masks and appoints new spokespersons, this time writers of colour. Like multinational companies which use Western-trained MBAs from third-world countries to run their businesses in those countries, the cultural dirty work of the West may now be done by the very natives of the former colonies. The argument that the West also affords an escape route to writers from troubled countries only strengthens my point. That the West emerges as the only refuge of artists fleeing from dysfunctional and failed states makes us ponder over the unequal nature of the world system. Most of these broken states are former colonies of the

very countries in which the fleeing writer seeks refuge. That these states have failed to make the transition into postcoloniality, have failed to survive the empire only underscores the odds against them in the first place. When imperial powers retreat, they ensure that their former colonies too weak, divided, and unstable to survive on their own. The relationship of subservience and exploitation, then, continues, though under a different garb. Of course, all that I have said does not take away from the power of the victims of the system to resist domination. But to glorify and idealise victimhood would be a tactical blunder. It is better to strive for an equitable relationships in which there are neither victims nor victors.

Apart from buying off writers, there is another form of cultural extraction which is rampant in the world cultural system. I had said earlier that the raw materials come from the periphery, while the finished products come from the core states. This can be exemplified by the fact that much of the literature comes from the South while the theory comes from the North. And, arguably, theory enjoys more power than literature itself. Again, it can be argued that a lot of theory is nowadays produced by people of colour—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Abdul Jan Mohammad, and many other names can be cited. But the canonization of these critics cannot take place unless they pass through metropolitan processes of publication and endorsement. Without such recognition from the West they can never attain legitimacy even in their own countries. There are very few exceptions to this pattern and even with these exceptions, however independent their beginnings, until the ruling elites of the world approve of them, they cannot attain world-wide fame.

Another example can serve to illustrate the trend that while the finished products are produced in the core, the raw materials come from the periphery. Even when our writers leave India for greener pastures, they continue to write about India. The unprocessed experience, so to speak, for their novels continues to be Indian, while the value-addition which converts it into fiction is supplied in metropolis. Finally, the finished products, the novels, are printed, packaged, and marketed in and from the West.

Cultural neo-imperialism, like global capital, works best through trans-national corporations which control the production, exchange, and dissemination of culture world-wide. These may be television companies, media conglomerates, or publishing houses. Even venerable old academic publishers like the hoary Oxford University Press have

reconstituted themselves as companies instead of charitable trusts. These TNCs, moreover, are taking over several of the functions and protocols of nation-states. Just as globalization has a special stake in weakening the nation, similarly postmodern theories have also attacked the idea of the nation. In other words, a good deal of the energy of postmodernist discourse actually serves the interests of global commerce. Thus, once the state is weakened, international treaties are put in place which take the sovereignty entirely out of the hands of individual countries. Similarly, it seems to me, cultural sovereignty too will be sought to be taken away from communities and people and vested in the hands of commercial interests.

In the context of the world cultural system, the very special role of the USA needs to be examined. America represents the convergence of several kinds of imperialism; it is this which makes it so unique and dangerous. In addition to economic and military might, it also exercises a hegemony over world culture. Other nations, which have one or the other kind of imperialism no longer seem so threatening. Russia, for instance, continues to have the largest arsenal of nuclear weapons in the world, but its sorry economic state has reduced its power to bathos. Japan, despite its present troubles, continues to be an economic giant. Yet its lack of both military and cultural power renders it less menacing to the rest of the world. Britain, with its partnership not just in economic and military, but in linguistic imperialism did seem to loom large over us not so long ago. But today it looks rather small, eclipsed and overwhelmed as it is by the USA. This is the best example of reverse colonialism that we can find; today it is the UK which is very much the junior partner and ally of the USA, a colony of the latter, almost. No wonder the English suffer from an anxiety of influence which they have solved in their own unique manner: half of the best scholars and critics from England now work for the USA. It is a classic case of backwards integration—a company breaks away from its parent corporation, outgrows it, then buys it back.

Of course, as in any large-scale phenomenon, we see contrary trends at work in the world culture system as well. On the one hand we see a strengthening of commercial activities and the gradual appropriation of the entire domain of culture. This has led to the widespread commodification and commercialization of culture and to the various asymmetries and inequalities that I have spoken about both with the system of culture and across cultures. But there are some positive developments and possibilities too. One of them is the



free exchange of information across the world wide web or the internet. This allows for radically different possibilities of disseminating and sharing culture. A parallel culture almost seems to be burgeoning. How widely accessible and equitable this virtual meeting ground will be remains to be seen. I fear, however, that the forces of e-commerce will try to capture this space too; the dream of the global village, unfortunately, may turn out to be the nightmare of the global metropolis, without diversions or escapes, except to reservations in the outbacks of the world.

Coming back to India, the world culture system has produced a new elite caste in the already over-stratified and hierarchical Indian society. Earlier, we used to speak of two Indias or rather of India and 'Bhārat'. The latter, which lived in our villages was supposedly the real India—rural, illiterate, poor, backward, native, and traditional. India, on the other hand, belonged to the privileged middle and upper classes who lived in the cities: it was modern, anglicised, secular, powerful, but still somewhat suspect. This division could be seen in our literatures: Indian English coming out of the cities and the native literatures out not just the cities but of the towns. English India vs. vernacular India, that was the older antinomy. Now there is a new super-class which consists of resident non-Indians (RNIs). These may be foreigners or aliens of Indian origin; most often, they work for TNCs and earn wages in dollars. Globalization, at least in India, has not really created many new jobs, only a few highly paying ones. In other words, there international, national, and regional strata not just for the currencies of our economy, but for the currencies of our literature and culture as well.

In Indian English literature, we thus have a new class of affluent, globe-trotting, often diasporic international writers. The New Yorker photograph, which vaunted precisely this new mobility and homelessness of the new Indian English writers, made their denational-ization their defining feature. The best recent example is of course Arundhati Roy, who, Cinderella-like, catapulted from total obscurity to international celebrity. Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghose, I. Alan Sealy, Vikram Chandra, Amit Choudhury, Anita Desai, and several others, belong to this category. Then there are the stay-at-home who nonetheless have made it big: R.K. Narayan, Nayantara Sahgal, Khushwant Singh, Sashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Githa Hariharan, and so on. All these have not only achieved varying degrees of international recognition, but have entered the canon. But when there is a new super-class, there

are also new under-classes. That's why there are those who have not yet achieved even national renown, not to speak of international fame and celebrity. Publishers kill their books as casually as they publish them, shelf space always being at a premium.

In all of this, a major question remains about the relationship between the market and between literary quality. I believe that the market can affect, even control the prevailing ideas of quality, but cannot totally kill quality itself. There is something quite transcendental about quality, as Robert Pirsig has so eloquently argued, that it resists such annihilation or capture. In the long run, I believe in the ancient dictum of *satyamevajayate*—Only Truth Triumphs—which, however ironic, is incidentally, also the motto of the Indian state. So, in the end, hype, like froth settles, leaving future generations to look for lasting meaning and satisfaction in works of enduring merit and appeal. In the short run, though, life can be tough for someone who does not know how to market himself or herself. The only solution for those who suffer from this particular handicap is to enjoy one's neglect and marginalization as William Blake learned to do: if you don't get what you like, you have to like what you get.

Is there life outside the market? Well, luckily, there is—but it's one hell of a difficult life. Thus, as Shobha De, put it so eloquently in an interview, "It is not enough to write well, you have to learn to sell yourself equally well." But, the moot question, as in the case of Shobha De, remains: what if you can't write well at all; even then, why is there so great a demand for her work? This question was asked of me by a reporter from the Bombay tabloid, *Midday*, after I failed to show up at the launch of the latest *De* bestseller, a real biography this time, appropriately entitled, *Selective Memory*. I replied, "The answer is simple: people don't want to read Shobha De, they want to own her. The book is the next best thing; in any case, it is a symbol of her. She markets herself, not her writing."

Economic globalization, engendering as it does a world cultural system, has posed new challenges to Indian culture, particularly to Indian English literature. While our writers are richer and more famous than they ever were, we also notice unprecedented inequities and asymmetries in power relations, not only vis a vis English and Indian languages, but between genres, and between authors. While our dependency on global cultural capitalism has deepened and while the exploitation of our cultural resources continues apace, we also have greater opportunities to make profit out of our culture than

ever before. Culture is now no longer merely a way of life, but a way of earning a living. If only we can capitalize on our vast cultural riches, we might end up being not just a great culture producing but also a great culture exporting country.

Before ending I would like to touch on the important question of the scope for dissent in the cultural world system. If I have emphasized the oppressive and hegemonic nature of this system so far it has been for a cause. Unless one unmask the wolf in sheep's clothing, it is impossible to respond to the beast meaningfully or effectively. To consider the present system natural or good would not only be naive, but even suicidal in the long run. Alternatives and challenges to the status quo must be built up across national and cultural boundaries. For this to happen, we shall have to understand the "real" nature of dependency. It is not just that the periphery depends on the core, but in a more ironic and profound sense, it is the core which is truly dependent on the periphery to maintain its present dominance. In other words, it is not just the subalterns who depend on the elites, but more so do the elites depend on the subalterns. Without the latter's cooperation and consent, how will the former enjoy their wealth, status, and privileges? To translate this understanding into mass action would be to start a counter-cultural revolution. But even if not on a mass-scale, individual protests too count and therefore must not be dismissed or devalued. An estimated one billion people tune in to "Baywatch" every Saturday. This statistic not only conceals the fact that over five billions don't watch it, but also the enormous power of the individual(s) holding the remote control to switch off their sets. Perhaps, it is hit and run operations of this sort that will actually set the stage for global change in the next millenium. The world of the future, though dominated by some simple trends, will also have a very complex unconscious of several ignored or repressed tendencies. Cultural markets themselves will witness fierce competition: the viewers/reader/listener's attention will really be at a premium, with commercial interests fighting bitterly to grab it. Switching off, turning away, observing silence, fasting, abstaining from consumption—even walking in the woods or watching a sunset—will be acts of subversion, however small and inconsequential they may seem. And when large cultural conglomerations like India persist in ways of life which go contrary to global trends, their very survival and continued existence will constitute acts of protest.

## NOTE

Andre Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein were probably the most influential of the dependency theorists. Frank's valuable contributions to this discourse include books such as *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America* (1967) and articles such as "The Development of Underdevelopment" (1970). Wallerstein's three books on the capitalist world economy (1979, 1984, and 1987) were also extremely persuasive. Ironically, Frank, in his latest book *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (1998) repudiates much of his earlier work for being Eurocentric; Wallerstein, too, in his latest book, *Utopistics* (1998), focuses on alternatives to the capitalistic world system.

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