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# Asha Varadharajan

## **Abstract**

I like to think of Helen as 'the argumentative Indian' that English propriety and Canadian restraint conspire against my realising in my own person. I use this phrase in its colloquial sense, with the raucous humour and deep affection that has characterised our friendship, to evoke the ready interlocutor, passionate opponent, and kindred spirit that she has been over the years.

## ASHA VARADHARAJAN



I like to think of Helen as ‘the argumentative Indian’ that English propriety and Canadian restraint conspire against my realising in my own person. I use this phrase in its colloquial sense, with the raucous humour and deep affection that has characterised our friendship, to evoke the ready interlocutor, passionate opponent, and kindred spirit that she has been over the years. I happened, however, to be reading Amartya Sen’s *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, History and Identity* (2005) and Pankaj Mishra’s *From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt Against the West and the Remaking of Asia* (2012) while composing this essay and, documenting as they do pre-colonial, decolonised, and revolutionary sensibilities as constituents of a non-secular, deterritorialising, and non-Eurocentric discourse (anti-Eurocentric in Mishra’s argument), their writings enable me to articulate what I have hitherto only felt: the singularity and geopolitical tilt of Helen Tiffin’s ‘moral imagination’ (I hope to elaborate upon the pertinence of Sen’s discussion of Jonathan Glover’s phrase). In the essay that follows then, serendipity and idiosyncrasy shall be my guides.

If I may switch worlds and frames for a moment, this essay gives equal consideration to a different lens through which to produce a retrospective account of Helen Tiffin’s fashioning of the postcolonial: I choose as exemplary of current Anglo-American debate the reflections by Neil Lazarus and Timothy Brennan in *Race & Class* 53.1 (2011) and the essays featured in *New Literary History* 43 (2012). I deploy these ruminations and assertions to suggest why and how she has remained in the vanguard of the shifting terrain of privileged postcolonial angst despite being identified (an identification she would not resist but for different and, in my view, more compelling reasons) with an often dismissed, maligned, underrepresented or forgotten disciplinary formation, that of comparative Commonwealth literary studies. I should say that I have reminded myself of a substantial cross-section of Helen’s prolific critical contributions, but with a desire to engage with their spirit rather than with the letter of her persistent grappling with the geo-historical, cultural, institutional, methodological, economic, and environmental determinants of meaning and value, effect and action, and bodies and affects in her wide-ranging literary interpretations. The question that animates this lively and provocative corpus has always been ‘who or what counts and why/not?’ and ‘who is it whodunit?’ My aim, in a similar vein, is to indicate what still matters in her writings not only to draw ‘the roadmap for a future postcolonial studies’ (to borrow Brennan’s phrasing 107), but to insist that her lauded position

within what one might dub a postcolonial orthodoxy is a consequence of her heterodox and heretical persuasions. In tracing her significance within the field of postcolonial studies and commenting on the prescience of her interventions in it, I want to show all the doors she opened for later scholars.

In 'Postcolonial Remains (2012)', Robert Young writes,

settler colonialism has managed ... to affiliate itself to the emancipatory narratives of anticolonial struggles — witness the widely circulated *The Empire Writes Back* of 1989, which assimilates all forms of colonial liberation into a single narrative of freedom from the imperial metropolis. What this passes over ... is the extent to which the achievement of settler self-governance enforced the subjection of indigenous peoples and indeed increased the operation of oppressive colonial practices against them. In almost any settler colony one can think of, settler liberation from colonial rule was premised on indigenous dispossession. (25)

First, Young mistakes the premise of *The Empire Writes Back* for its conclusion: the shared experience of colonisation is its opening proposition that becomes progressively nuanced, multiplied, and even contradicted by the literary encounter with Africa, India, the Caribbean, Australia, and New Zealand. The combination of abrogation and appropriation the authors discern is not synonymous with 'freedom' and the possibility of a single narrative denied by the ambiguity and complexity of the strategies of representation and expression they analyse and the sheer geographical and cultural diversity of the regions from which these tactics emerge. Even the common linguistic inheritance of English becomes dispersed, diffused, dissipated and, paradoxically, enriched, by 'englishes'. By the same token, the authors do not apologise for describing patterns of convergence and divergence in struggles for liberation, as Young describes them, and towards the decolonisation of the mind, as the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* would describe the literary texts they examine.

I do not wish to indulge in a conflict of interpretations of what is after all a 'widely circulated' (Young 25) work, although I cannot resist challenging Young's surprisingly casual treatment of its argument. It is certainly true that the publication of *The Empire Writes Back* was a moment of affirmation, and the work itself a modest compendium of a postcolonial literary efflorescence; thus, its purpose was not identical to what Young rather melancholically asserts has always been postcolonialism's concern: 'to locate ... what remains invisible, unseen, silent, or unspoken' [because] postcolonialism has always been about the ongoing life of residues, living remains, lingering legacies' (21). While the subjects of *The Empire Writes Back* certainly contend with imperial legacies, theirs is not a morbid pursuit, and their works signify voice and agency rather than silence and powerlessness. This distinction, however, is crucial, because the 'shifting conceptualizations' (Young 20) of postcolonial theory acquire manifestly different contour and depth when they adumbrate 'the revolt against the West' and the 'remaking' of subjugated peoples rather than the exclusions of Western dominance.

Pankaj Mishra's splendid tale of the 'extraordinary sequence of events and movements ... that together decided the present shape of Asia' (9) challenges the 'dangerously misleading' 'assumptions of Western power' from the vantage point 'of the collective experiences and subjectivities of Asian peoples' (8). Mishra appears to adopt Young's method of locating 'the hidden rhizomes of colonialism's historical reach' (21) when he elicits the fantasies 'of national freedom, racial dignity, or simple vengefulness' in Asian hearts and minds. Mishra's subtle shift in emphasis from Western dominance to encroachment, and from Asia's subjugation to sullen endurance, however, marks the journey to potency and self-respect rather than a sifting of the remains of Empire. Mishra evokes 'colored pride' (2) in the outcome of the Battle of Tsushima that transcends distinctions of class and race in his recording of 'the recession of the West' (6), tracing the convergence 'of lines of history in individual lives' (10). He thus unabashedly produces 'a single narrative' of the emergence of Asia from the ruins of Empire. In light of Mishra's achievement, the search for common ground among experiences of colonisation and aspirations to freedom and dignity in colonised peoples in *The Empire Writes Back* seems neither naïve nor tendentious.

Second, no intellectual with a modicum of historical knowledge and the semblance of a moral conscience, least of all the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*, would refute the intimate connection Young makes between settler liberation and indigenous dispossession; indeed, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin characterise settlers as invaders throughout, develop the connotations of place and displacement, and focus on the construction of indigeneity within narrations of nation and settler identity rather than annex indigeneity to settler identity and culture. I want to mention, in particular, Helen Tiffin's 'Recuperative Strategies in the Post-Colonial Novel' (1987), in which she demonstrates Patrick White's radical interrogation of the 'order of Europe' by 'the *ordered absence* of the Aboriginal presence' (39 [my emphasis]). She abandons a preoccupation with representations of the self or other to '[disrupt] the notion of pioneering and settlement ... and [foreground] the conflict and annihilation of cultures and systems on which imperial expansion depends' (41–42) without ignoring in the process the 'radical fractur[ing]' (42) of Ellen's composure and inviolateness. I mention this still convincing reading of *A Fringe of Leaves* in order to describe the accoutrements of a post-colonial settler consciousness that refuses both the pleasures of capture and containment and the consolations of a 'spiritual accommodation' (43) between cultures entertaining, instead, the possibility of a deracination of imperial orders of intelligibility and value. This move on White's part, and in Tiffin's explanation of it, envisions a far more disturbing and ambiguous terrain for the interaction between cultures, while leaving both open to negotiation and reinvention. It must be said that the violence of invasion and annihilation cannot be glossed over in such post-colonial reordering of societies, but the significance of the necessity of relation born of the simultaneous recognition of equivalence and incommensurability cannot be gainsaid.

To my mind, the conclusions Tiffin draws from her extraordinary interpretation of ‘the psychic paradox that is the colonial legacy’ (123) in ‘Melanesian Cargo Cults in *Tourmaline* and *Visitants*’ (1981) resonate powerfully with Young’s call for the interrogation of ‘the ongoing life of residues, living remains, lingering legacies’ precisely because Stow represents the entangled, rather than assimilated, past and imagined future of ‘native’ and ‘visitant’. As Tiffin puts it, ‘the cults depend for an impossible restitution on the very forces which degraded them in the first place. The destruction and the hope of millennial rescue from it are irretrievably linked’ (123). Neither Stow nor Tiffin wants to deny the hope of regeneration and restitution to ‘native’ cultures, but they do seek to complicate the desire to resuscitate ‘integrity and wholeness’ (123), particularly when cultural boundaries become undecidable in the face of an inescapable and hostile present. Tiffin’s elaboration of ‘the curious nexus of power, shame, dislocation, promise and dissatisfaction that have been the legacy of colonial visitants everywhere’ (124) finds its intriguing corollary in the epilogue to Mishra’s *From the Ruins of Empire*.

In charting the journey of Asian intellectuals who, by virtue of their education and experience, were both marginal to their fellow countrymen and charged with the task of ‘articulat[ing] their deepest predicaments, needs, and aspirations’ (300), Mishra concludes that the revolt of Asia has resulted in ‘an ambiguous revenge’ because its agents were themselves ‘[p]ersonally powerless’ and ‘lurched between hope and despair, vigorous commitment and a sense of futility’ (300). The ‘psychic paradox’ for Asian elites has been the impossibility of reconciling themselves to ‘the dwindling of their civilisation through internal decay and Westernisation while regaining parity and dignity in the eyes of the white rulers of the world’ (300). The gap between ‘formal decolonisation and true sovereignty and dignity’ (303) recalls Partha Chatterjee’s foreboding about the derivative discourse of nationalism which has left ‘native’ communities with nothing left to imagine and with the baleful contemplation of an emergent Asia on the threshold of ‘repeat[ing], on an ominously larger scale, the West’s own tortured and tragic experience’ of modern ‘development’ (Mishra 307). Mishra’s deceptively triumphalist narrative of the remaking of Asia ends on a sobering note decrying the ‘bitter outcome of the universal triumph of Western modernity’ (310): what drives the new Asia is not a dream of the restitution of cultural integrity but the ‘pursuit of endless economic growth’ that ‘looks set to create reservoirs of nihilistic rage and disappointment among hundreds of millions of have-nots’ (310). In this regard, it is worth noting the depth and seriousness with which Helen’s numerous essays on V.S. Naipaul address his controversial obsession with mimicry as the fate of the B. Wordsworths of the world and his cynical treatment of wannabe revolutionaries and anti-colonial insurgents. Whatever one may make of the ire Naipaul provokes with relish among ‘believers’, the ironies of the colonial legacy are only too visible. Helen’s willingness to risk asserting the equal importance of disappointment and futility as constituents of the postcolonial predicament may

well be attributed to the sensitivity with which she illuminates the paradoxes of unaccommodated settler sensibility, but it is also a testament to her talent for complexity, to her desire to expose the full range of affects and dispositions, not all of them rousing or inspirational, in the writings back to Empire she has made peculiarly her own. If, as Mishra claims, the victories of the East are ‘truly Pyrrhic’ (310), Helen’s early endorsement of complementary strategies — Wilson Harris’s concept of ‘infinite rehearsal’ (1987 31) whereby the “‘rereading” of a particular cultural archive ... interrogates and revolutionises the terms of its production and continuing existence’ (1987 31) and work analogous to that of antigens that replicate and then expel intruders by altering their function and direction (1987 31) — keeps the hope of cultural regeneration, economic equality, and socio-political transformation alive in the wake of complicity and contamination.

In ‘What postcolonial theory doesn’t say’, Neil Lazarus, with his customary elegance and perspicacity, excoriates scholars in the field of postcolonial studies for their failure ‘to situate the historical projects of colonialism and imperialism in the determinant contexts of the inception, consolidation, and development of the modern world system’ or within ‘the enfolding historical dynamic ... of capitalism in its global trajectory’ (7). This failure results in a tendency to ‘construe “colonialism” as an exercise solely in *political* domination, of the global projection of *power*’ (11 [emphasis in original]). The ‘specific regimes of accumulation, expropriation, and exploitation’ (10) that served to ‘[undermine and disrupt]’ ‘the material, and ‘moral’ or symbolic’ (12) economies of local cultures and communities thus disappear from analysis despite literary efforts to ‘[identify] the social conditions of existence in the (post-)colonial world’ (12). Lazarus is concerned to close the gap between the ‘purviews of “literature” and “criticism”’ (14) because he ‘see[s] it as ... testifying both to [the] abstraction [of postcolonial criticism] and to the tenuousness of its grasp of the central realities of life in the “postcolonial” world’ (15). To this end, Lazarus, following Fredric Jameson, demands ‘a new type of literary comparativism; namely the comparison ... of the concrete situations from which such texts spring and to which they constitute distinct responses’ (14).

Despite reading Lazarus with both sympathy and attention, I was struck by how his essay also testifies to the absence of communication between postcolonial criticism in his scheme of things and the literary comparativism in Commonwealth literary studies that Helen has ‘pioneered’, altered, and challenged during her career. In ‘Opening Panel’, she expresses what has remained fundamental in her critical essays: the meaning and value of individual works must be considered within their context (26). It is this principle that animates her adherence to ‘cross-cultural humility’ and to ‘homework’ (30) in the practice of literary interpretation. The meaning of ‘concrete situations’ in her criticism extends both to the ‘most intimate roots of speech and signification’ (29) and, as her essay ‘History and Community Involvement in Indo-Fijian and Indo-Trinidadian Writing’ (1983)

demonstrates, to patterns of linguistic and psychic adaptation to economic misadventures/regimes of expropriation and exploitation such as slavery and indenture. The mutual imbrication of symbolic and material economies is perhaps most astonishingly revealed in her systematic and unsentimental account of how horticulture and agriculture in the Caribbean became inescapably associated with servitude, torture, and exile. Thomas Thistlewood's entries in 1781 reveal how crops bear the weight of these associations and the history of plantations: 'Wednesday, 14<sup>th</sup> February, 1781: Had Dick flogged for letting them plant potato slips the wrong end in the ground' (Tiffin 2000 149–50). The 'radical alteration' rather than disruption here is to the Caribbean landscape itself which witnesses the establishment of a 'monoculture' dependent 'on the kidnapping, transportation and enslavement of Africans, and, after 1830, on Chinese and Indian labourers whose "return" indenture agreements were rarely honoured' (149). For Helen, too, literature has always been in the vanguard of identifying the social conditions of (post-) colonial existence; however, Jameson's 'always historicize!' might be her 'enabling political horizon' (Brennan 104) for the examination of modes of production and systems of accumulation and extraction that were not, or not yet, identifiably capitalist.

Lazarus's next charge is that imperialism is typically defined in civilisational terms as a dematerialised and unhistorical 'West' which is routinely conflated with a Europe reduced to the colonial history of some of its states. This attribution of a false intrinsic civilisational unity or community of values to 'Europe' produces a blunt instrument of diagnosis — "western" thought [is] Eurocentric, colonizing, logocentric, rationalist' (15) — and fails to account for the fact that Europe was both the product and initiator of a process of conquest and cultural transformation (Bartlett qtd in Lazarus 18). Lazarus's point that this approach identifies 'Europe' as both the source and the very form of domination (the latter, surely, is the unilateral imposition of the logic of capitalism) is well taken, but it is not clear, at least in this essay, what such critical scrupulousness and courtesy (attractive on their own terms) would accomplish in altering the stakes of postcolonial criticism. Sen, too, in his quest to establish an affinity rather than a clash between civilisations, challenges the classification of the cultures of the world (xiv) but from the receiving end of the identification of the West with rationality, materialism, liberty, tolerance, rights, and justice (285) and in the interests of the cultivation of moral sentiment and imagination premised on 'reasoned humanism' (287). Sen's refusal to confuse the embrace of 'civilisation' with colonial compliance and deprecation makes sense in a postcolonial world born of the asymmetrical dialectic between modes of knowing and being. But, as his own essays on Tagore and Gandhi reveal, the distinction between British civilisation and British administration was crucial to colonial subject formation, notwithstanding the irony of 'the colonial metropolis supplying ideas and ammunition to post-colonial intellectuals to attack the influence of the colonial



metropolis!’ (133). Tagore wrote that the rule of law and order was a mockery of civilisation and had no claim on his respect (107), surely the beginning of the moral distance between Englishman and Indian: ‘*We are not going to follow the West in competition, in selfishness, in brutality*’ (Mishra 299 [emphasis in original]), a distance marked in civilisational (characterological) terms.

Mishra’s new configuration of Asia is a clever amalgam of the Orient that figures in Edward Said’s magisterial work — ‘the continent being defined here in its original Greek sense, with the Aegean Sea dividing Asia from Europe, and the Nile as the border between Asia and Africa’ (8) — and the ‘cumulative heft’ of ‘populous nations’ such as China, India, and Indonesia that ‘now seems to pose a formidable challenge to the West itself’ (305). He deliberately conflates the ideological with the geopolitical in order to dislocate the trajectory of ‘modernity at large’. Perhaps because of her antipodean perspective, Helen’s literary criticism was prescient in its scrutiny of ‘Asia’ and/in the contemporary Australian novel (1984) and, by extension, in its unsettling of the meanings of both ‘the West’ and ‘Australian’ in the discussion of novels that feature political, metaphysical, anthropological, and somatic encounters with Asia as the means to re-conceive Australians’ ‘psychic relationship with the universe’ (1984a 479). If, as Partha Chatterjee argues, ‘[a]nti-colonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty ... by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains — the material and the spiritual...’ (qtd in Sen 156), the Australian (settler) novelist’s dilemma was that (s)he could lay claim to neither a distinct material nor a distinct spiritual culture and thus sought in ‘Asia’ the potential, as Tiffin pointedly suggests, for the transfiguration of social function into metaphysical purpose. In short, while it might be salutary for criticism to refrain from dividing the world into ‘civilisational blocs’, authors and texts have continued to find meaning and value in these albeit phantasmatic projections that demand an ethical deracination from ethnocentric assumptions, economic brutalities, and political complacencies. It remains to be seen whether the ‘cumulative heft’ of countries such as China and Indonesia will return the novel to the patterns of representation before 1950 that Helen identifies: ‘the exotic Asia delighting the tourist’, ‘the infernal Asia torturing the jungle soldier, or the non-union Asia threatening to destroy the democratic rights of the working man’ (468).

In ‘Plato’s Cave: Educational and Critical Practices’, Helen compellingly argues that the aim of education in the colonies was ‘to diffuse a grammatical knowledge of the English language as the most important agent of civilization for the coloured population’ (145). The ‘belief in the excellence of all things English’ was instilled through the mechanism of learning by heart. As she goes on to explain, ‘[t]o learn by heart is to absorb into the very processes of one’s being the material so taught’ (145), to imbibe the ‘abnegation of the Caribbean body’ (2000 153) in the transformation of stance, accent, and gesture. In this unequal exchange between imperial production and colonial consumption, ‘the coloured population’

learned to view itself as an imperfect rendition or a dangerous aberration (147). In these circumstances, the dematerialised or unhistorical idea of the West is irrelevant; what matters is its ‘efficacious [repetition]’ and circulation (153). Besides, as she asserts, post-colonial societies, according to writers such as Achebe, Raja Rao, Wole Soyinka, Wilson Harris, and George Lamming, even, I suspect, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, experience these economic incursions as ontological fractures that must be overcome by an alternative metaphysics or a transformation of the accidentals of European cultural time into the endurance and serenity of spiritual time or by acts of cultural reclamation (see Tiffin 1988). Even if the idea of Europe will not hold, its capture and containment of colonial cultural imaginaries cannot be explained away by modes of production and their uneven development across time and space. The interrogation of the European episteme is thus ‘metonymic of contemporary cultural formations in the continuing struggle over the word’ (1988 171). Helen has always been uncompromising about the inherently political character of this struggle, castigating

certain tendencies within Euro-American post-structuralism and post-modernism [for seeking] to appropriate and control ‘the other’, while ostensibly performing some sort of major cultural redemption, ... and assimilating post-colonial works whose political orientations and experimental formations *have been deliberately designed to counteract such European appropriation, and, it might be argued, have themselves provided the cultural base and formative colonial experience on which European philosophers have drawn in their apparent radicalization of linguistic philosophy.*

(1988 170–71 [my emphasis])

The danger of once again making ‘the rest of the world a peripheral term in Europe’s self-questioning’ (1988 171) must, she has contended, be assiduously avoided, and, in this sense, she has had no desire to close the gap between the purview of criticism in post-colonial studies and of post-colonial writers. For Helen, the ontological fracture of Europe will never be more than ‘a titillating *possibility*’ (172 [my emphasis]) whereas the task of establishing the terms of an opposing system is all too pressing for the post-colonial world (173). These are claims that I believe Lazarus, Brennan, and Benita Parry, among others would find congenial; I would suggest that in the combined critique of euro-centrism and anthropocentrism that animates her more recent work, her analyses of the colonial extraction of resources, transplantation of species, and destructive importation of farming practices, and her integration of the critique of development, of the might of multinational corporations, and of the colonial origins of the unequal trade patterns in globalisation, Helen is in tune not only with Parry’s warning against separating environmental crises from the logic of capitalism (2012 347) but with Lazarus’s insistence ‘that whatever else it might have and, indeed, *did* involve — all the way from the systematic annihilation of whole communities to the cultivation of aesthetic tastes and preferences — colonialism as an historical process involved the forced integration of hitherto un-capitalised societies ...

into a capitalist world system' (11 [emphasis in original]). My aim is of course not to make each over in the other's image or even to detect unacknowledged affinities between these critics but to asseverate that the arc of Helen's career incorporates all of these significant shifts in emphasis while remaining true to her situation within the institution and 'political anachronism' of Commonwealth literary studies and to her modest sense that criticism cannot serve as panacea or cure for the ills of the world. As even her early writing on botanical gardens in the Caribbean indicates, the survival of the species has always been in question in the nexus of environment and empire.

Sen writes of the need to cultivate moral sentiment under the influence of reason as a restraint against atrocity but Helen's intellectual curiosities and commitments have never been drily ethical or dully political. I had never thought it would be possible to feel joy rather than say grim self-congratulation or, at best, pleasure, in the conduct of what Sen describes as 'consequential analysis' — the desire, with Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita* to fare well rather than only forward in matters of life and death — (3–6) until I met her. Her atheism means that her gods are many, neither innocent nor pure, and always game to defy the rules, but not averse to a spot of (usually warranted) self-righteousness either. I am still mindful of the doubleness of Derrida's phrase 'the ends of man'; like to balance concern over human overpopulation with Sen's discussions of the invisible and pre-emptive mortality of women; believe anthropocentrism can be displaced but that anthropomorphism cannot be transcended (although Jane Goodall's recent demonstration of the speech of chimpanzees gave me pause); and carry a mobile phone (Helen first drew my attention to the scandal of mining for Coltan). Helen never fails to turn me upside down and inside out and to remind me of Bentham's unanswerable question: 'can they suffer?' For these and many other gifts, I want to say



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## NOTES

Footnote from Chapter XVII 'Of the Limits of the Penal Branch of Jurisprudence', p. 283:

The day has been, I grieve to say in many places it is not yet past, in which the greater part of the species, under the denomination of slaves, have been treated by the law exactly upon the same footing as, in England for example, the inferior races of animals are still. The day *may* come, when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them but by the hand of tyranny. The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor.\* It may come one day to be recognized, that the number of the legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the *os sacrum*, are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or, perhaps, the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day, or a week, or even a month, old. But suppose the case were otherwise, what would it avail? the question is not, Can they *reason?* nor, Can they *talk?* but, Can they *suffer?*

\* ref to Louis XIV's Code Noir

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