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# The Centre Cannot Hold: Two Views of the Periphery

## **Abstract**

In George Eliot's *The Mill of the Floss*, Maggie Tulliver, who cannot find a definite agenda to give a direction to her life, laments to her brother, '...you are a man Tom, and have power, and can do something in this world'. Tom's retort, 'then, if you can do nothing, submit to those who can', sums up very simply the lack of option for those outside the power structure.<sup>^</sup> In cultural discourse as well, a certain centrality is appropriated by those who have power, and the rest are left: in peripheral positions with no choice other than submission. The relationship between the centre and the periphery need not however be fixed for all time, and theoretically speaking there is scope for synchronic and diachronic variations. In this paper I would like to discuss in very broad terms the relation between the centre and two peripheries - European critical traditions in relation to India and Africa at different points of history.

# The Centre Cannot Hold: Two Views of the Periphery

In George Eliot's *The Mill of the Floss*, Maggie Tulliver, who cannot find a definite agenda to give a direction to her life, laments to her brother, '...you are a man Tom, and have power, and can do something in this world'. Tom's retort, 'then, if you can do nothing, submit to those who can', sums up very simply the lack of option for those outside the power structure.<sup>1</sup> In cultural discourse as well, a certain centrality is appropriated by those who have power, and the rest are left in peripheral positions with no choice other than submission. The relationship between the centre and the periphery need not however be fixed for all time, and theoretically speaking there is scope for synchronic and diachronic variations. In this paper I would like to discuss in very broad terms the relation between the centre and two peripheries – European critical traditions in relation to India and Africa at different points of history.

A generation ago when I began to study literature as an academic discipline, like many others in my situation in India, I submitted to the central ideologies of power in the literary and intellectual domain which at that time in our universities were Anglo-American in origin and male in outlook. One's competence in the field was measured by the extent to which one could emulate the dominant critical tone, assuming a voice that was not intrinsically one's own. If one felt uncomfortable in this double-bind, both as a woman and as a post-colonial subject, it was not an uneasiness that could be articulated in the accepted rhetoric of academic discourse. Hence in India students of literature learnt to operate within the restrictive frameworks of mime and ventriloquism, attempting desperately to convince themselves of the universality of all literary values, the need to safeguard the purity of literature from the contamination of all 'extrinsic' approaches in order to uphold a neutral, systematic and safe methodology.

Since then the position of the central academy has altered – and although changes move from the centre to the periphery somewhat slowly, the shifts taking place in the metropolis are beginning to touch our institutions as well. The Anglo-American traditions of formalism and empiricism have been

overtaken by European critical traditions based on dialectical thought; philosophy, history, psychoanalysis and political ideas are now seen as inextricably interwoven in the literary text; ideology, instead of being an impure and embarrassing baggage, has become one of the central concerns of critical discourse. The resultant inclusive and more open ethos offers a greater possibility of voicing the kind of uneasiness I referred to at the outset. The new rhetoric even provides a well worked-out vocabulary of dissent. Journals in English from the centre, like *Poetics Today*, *Critical Inquiry* or *New Literary History*, not only allocate space for discussing gender and race differences in the reading and writing of literary texts, but also offer special issues on the impact of imperialism on subsequent literature. Most of these discourses, however, have been initiated at the centre. Whatever exciting new ideas have entered this domain in the last ten years – from Edward Said's *Orientalism* to the recent writings of Abdul JanMohamad and Homi Bhabha – have had to pass through the centre; that is, they have had to be validated by Columbia or Cambridge or Sussex in order to return to the periphery. It seems worth speculating whether such radical and rigorously worked-out discourses are at all possible within the limited parameters of the academic institutions in the third world countries (in India at least there is a general obliviousness of the political complexities and cultural contradiction inherent in the situation of an English teacher in a post-colonial classroom), or, worse still, whether even if they are possible they would get a hearing at home unless they are routed through a channel that touches the centre.

One of the difficulties of initiating new theoretical premises at the peripheries, and thereby obliterating the distinction between the centre and the periphery, is that some of the most crucial terms of the discourse, its categories, genres and concepts, are historically linked with certain phases of literary development in Europe. The problem is further compounded in India by the fact that the major literary figures in India from the nineteenth century onwards, even when they wrote in the Indian languages, wrote within the discursive limits set by the study of English literature and in some cases deliberately set out to emulate the examples and sequences that constitute literary history in Europe. For instance, a number of major novelists in nineteenth century India consciously adopted the models of Scott's historical fiction or the formal realism of the nineteenth-century European variety in their attempt to incorporate the new genre called the novel into the existing pre-novel narrative modes.<sup>2</sup> Critics in India for over a century have taken these attempts at their face value, judging these works in terms of how well they correspond to the western paradigm. Only very

recently does one perceive a murmuring of dissent, a recognition of the fact that the true importance of these narratives lies in the nature of the mutation that took place, and an assertion that the cultural significance of the altered form need not necessarily be judged by the parameters of the western realistic novel. Another kind of example from the nineteenth century is provided by Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-73). After a few undistinguished attempts at writing poetry in English he turned his creative energies to Bengali and emerged as a major poet who extended the syntactical and rhythmic possibilities of the language by drawing simultaneously upon English and Sanskrit models. Tracing this process of interpenetration, not only of style, diction and generic model but also of literary and ideological assumptions, could well have been a step towards a new aesthetic. But instead of entering into this complex endeavour, most discussions of Dutt's work have stopped at highlighting his simpler achievements, like his introduction of the sonnet form and blank verse in Bengali and his writing of a memorable epic poem in supposedly Miltonic style. There is often a gap between a writer's conscious intent and the created artefact, allowing a space for theoretical speculations to enter. The literary texts of nineteenth-century India are rich in such possibilities. Bankimchandra Chatterjee, another seminal intellectual and literary figure of the nineteenth century, was once relegated to a fate similar to Dutt, reduced to merely being 'The Scott of Bengal'. But of late, a body of sophisticated critical writing has been growing around his prolific output (fourteen novels, extensive writings on religion, history, culture and society) – a criticism which focuses on him as the hub of a complex network of historical tensions and cultural pressures and uses his case as a take-off point for a new theoretical discourse on colonial India. It is interesting that much of this recent and interesting writing on Chatterjee has emerged from the academic disciplines of history and other social sciences, rather than from literary studies.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, this cross-fertilization of disciplines that is necessary for critical theory has not been very evident in India until recently, although the situation of the historian in India and the literary critic has some parallels. The basic conceptual frames in both disciplines have been drawn from the centre. The historians, for example, have for some time been engaged in a debate about the nature of the Bengali Renaissance that is supposed to have taken place in the nineteenth century. Originally the term Renaissance was applied to this particular period in India in view of the many parallels between this cultural and intellectual movement and the historical phenomenon that heralded the end of the medieval period in Europe. The

idea of the Bengali Renaissance was generally accepted in India until the historians of the seventies challenged it and offered a serious critique of this concept by attempting to show that if modern Europe is taken as 'the classic demonstration of the progressive significance of an intellectual revolution in the history of capitalist economy and the modern state, then the intellectual history of nineteenth century India did not have this significance. As the harbinger of a bourgeois and a national revolution the Indian Renaissance was partial, fragmented; indeed it was a failure'.<sup>4</sup>

It is worth noticing that the historians who evolved the idea of an Indian Renaissance *and* those who challenged it are none of them willing to relinquish the analogy with European history as the basic frame of reference. For the earlier historians it is the similarities, and for the latter the dissimilarities, with European history that constitute the crucial factor. Similarly in literature, the literary histories of different Indian languages – published by the Sahitya Akademi (Academy of Letters) – invariably divide their material into medieval and modern periods, presumably because the same periodisation is generally applied to European literature and because their writers feel uneasy if the material in an Indian language does not fit this pattern. For example, they relegate the Bhaki movement, which was fairly wide-spread in time and place in India, safely to the medieval period, because medieval literature in Europe too is marked by religious modes of perception. Unable to liberate themselves from analogous thinking, they mentally translate the Chhayavad movement in Hindi poetry into Romanticism, and alienation of the existential variety is imposed on post-war writing in India when the actual political situation and philosophical presuppositions were quite dissimilar.<sup>5</sup> Using invisible grids generated in another context to analyse and evaluate texts and events is a practice that seems common both to history and literature in India. Yet the situations of the historian and of the literary critic are basically not the same, because unlike the developments of history which are caused by their internal logic and by larger forces beyond individual control, the texts of literature are often created as conscious artefacts with individual signatures, although the form they actually assume is the product of an interplay between deliberate design and unconscious modification through subterranean cultural pulls. However, in both cases, instead of first adopting an analytical framework in which the specific material is to be then somehow fitted, we should be required to construct independent categories or concepts and other theoretical relations in order to understand the particular literary or historical situation in India.

On the face of it, this may seem an obvious enough requirement. But the actual practice implies many difficulties. Involved in it is the complex problem of opening our theoretical constructs of the perpetual interaction between generalisations formulated at the level of universal theories and particularities perceived at the level of the specific time, place and culture. It is the continuing tension itself that sustains the dynamism of literary theory. In India, so long as the parameters of theoretical discourse are set by the available texts in English, nothing important will ever be achieved, because English texts, regardless of their literary and other values, have always been isolated phenomena in India unconnected with the network of pressures that determine the basic cultural design. These texts do not become points of intersection of larger social, political or historical forces. It is the Indian language texts that throw up theoretical possibilities. An emerging tendency – as yet not fully formed – is to turn to the nineteenth-century texts in the Indian languages and treat them as hinterland that would sustain the trade and the development of theoretical discourse. This enterprise, if it is to be fruitful, needs the collaboration of disciplines other than literature.

The case of literary theory for India is complicated by various factors – its long colonial history; its infinitely longer pre-colonial heritage; its plurality of languages and culture; and its limited literacy rate, which makes any experience with the printed text a special preserve of the privileged. In many ways the experience in Anglophone Africa is similar, and in many ways it is radically different.

In most countries of Africa the colonial history has been much shorter in duration than in India, but the suppression and denial of pre-colonial African culture has been much more ruthless. Perhaps as a reaction to this one finds that the creative writers in Africa take very definite aesthetic stands. All the major writers in Africa today who write in English – including Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o – have powerfully articulated their critical norms and defined their positions regarding life and literature, assuming the centrality of Africa to their experience. This is very different from the situation in India, where there is generally much more cultural acquiescence, a greater acceptance of literary and critical fiat issued from the western metropolis and a wider separation between political engagement and literary or critical pursuits. As an illustration of this I would like to examine not a text in discursive writing, but a novel – Ngugi's *Devil on The Cross* (1982) – as a statement in which several theoretical concepts converge. After writing four very successful and much-discussed novels in English –

*Weep Not Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1966), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and *Petals of Blood* (1977) – in all of which Conrad, Greene and Kafka are part of the shared background of the reader and the writer, Ngugi turned to a different kind of narrative in *Devil on The Cross*, which was first written in Gikuyu (*Caitaani Mutharabaini*). This was more than a mere linguistic switch. All texts, it is commonly agreed today, are reinscriptions upon already existing pre-texts. Since Gikuyu does not have a tradition of novel writing (though it has a long tradition of oral narrative), Ngugi did not have to operate within the unspoken framework on any novelistic conventions. The orality of culture in Gikuyu does not put the emphasis on the text as much as a culture based on the printed word does. Ngugi has elsewhere said that in his community ‘the spoken word had a power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning. Our appreciation of the suggesting magical power of language was reinforced by the games we played with words through riddles, proverbs, transposition of syllables, or through nonsensical but musically arranged words<sup>6</sup> and through parables and stories that were exchanged on every social occasion and meeting. Ngugi tries to capture the quality not only in the texture of the narrative but also in the structure of the novel, which gradually unfolds in a freewheeling manner. Anecdotes are linked with episodes either in a chain or in backward loops, some introduced as fables that link traditional wisdom with contemporary situations, others as part of the realistic fabric of the narrative – all done in very broad strokes and not in the subtle and muted techniques of his earlier work.

From Ngugi’s viewpoint the response to a novel is also an important aspect of its total value. ‘The reception of a given work of art is part of the work itself; or rather the reception (or consumption) of the work completes the whole creative process involving that particular artistic object’. *Devil on The Cross* sold 15,000 copies in Gikuyu alone in one year, before being translated into Kiswahili and English. It was read out in homes, in buses, in offices during lunch breaks and in public bars, and was reintegrated back into the oral tradition. This appropriation of the novel into the tradition of group reception is an experience quite different from what happens to a printed text, where solitary enjoyment is the norm, reconfirming the one-to-one relationship between the author and the reader. Ngugi consciously attempts to de-isolate the phenomenon of literature and liquidate the distance between the educated few and the people, an important fact that all Third World writers have to come to terms with.

Between the publication of his last English novel (*Petals of Blood*) and the writing of *Devil on The Cross*, his first Gikuyu novel, several important things had happened to Ngugi, and one of them was his involvement with the

community theatre in a village called Kamiriithu. The total participation of the community pointed out to him, more sharply than any theoretical argument could, the marginal nature of his earlier novels in English, where his material and his audience were 'geographically' separated. The unprecedented popularity of these plays, scripted and performed by the whole community, was seen as a threat to the government of independent Kenya, and Ngugi was imprisoned for a year without trial. *Devil on The Cross* was written when he was in prison; in Gikuyu, because with the English language one takes on certain conventions and expectations which he wanted to relinquish, and also because the language distanced him from those he wanted most to communicate with; and in the form of a novel, because the isolation of the prison cell precluded the possibility of any community activity like drama. The choric composition that he tried in drama was impossible in a novel, but he attempted a certain transparency in the narrative voice so that the individual point of view of the author would not obtrude.

Choice of the right narrative form was not enough for him unless he could forge a content that would engage the attention of his new audience by touching upon the weight and complexity of their daily struggle. For this purpose he chose a theme which was as much about the situation of a pathetic and exploited girl – a typist without a job, ousted by a landlord and jilted by her boy friend – as about the moral and spiritual chaos of present-day Kenya. Not only emotionally, but physically too the girl was a wreck; in her attempt to fit other models of beauty she painfully bleached her skin and straightened her hair. 'She could never appreciate the sheer splendour of her body. She yearned to change herself in covetous pursuit of the beauty of other selves'. The metaphoric intent is fairly overt. At the ending of the novel, two years later, the transformation of this once-exploited girl has taken place on several levels. She is a more confident and powerful individual now, in control of her life and destiny. Her choice of profession (she is now a skilful garage mechanic, with a degree from a polytechnic) itself is a declaration of her independence from both sexual and racial stereotyping. The battered and passive woman of the opening chapter emerges victorious at the end – and the ritual killing of the rich old man, her seducer and the symbolic figure of corruption and decadence, becomes a necessary act of exorcism. The gun shot at the end throws up melodramatic reverberations – it is certainly tendentious and also marked with a vague sentimentality. Ngugi, schooled in contemporary English fiction and its norms of obliqueness and understatement, could not have been unaware of the dangers of this ending. But he deliberately eschewed neutrality and opted for a mode and style that fitted with his ideology a newly emergent theory of literature which this novel seems to embody.

Several questions arise out of this experiment. Does changing the language itself guarantee a reversal of a process or is it merely a symbolic repudiation of an epistemic model which is indeed too deeply internalised? Ngugi of course does not change the language alone, but attempts to recast his entire narrative mode and change the writer-audience relationship – the production-consumption pattern in literature. Is this then to be seen as Ngugi's resistance to the centre's attempt to appropriate him, as it was about to do: a declaration of his independence from the western literary tradition in which he was schooled? It is significant that in the English translation of the novel, published by Heinemann, the jacket blurb tries to link the book with Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* rather than with Gikuyu oral tradition, certainly indicating a continued effort at appropriation. Ngugi writing *Devil on The Cross* in Gikuyu is a crucial event both as an actual happening and as a gesture, highlighting not only the need to decolonise the mind but also the complex range of difficulties inherent in the attempt, because whether we want it or not, the irreversible process in the world today seems to be more towards homogenisation and standardisation, supported by market economy and political forces, than towards the maintenance of diversity and the autonomy of regional culture. Ngugi's action may be seen as more than an individual and isolated act; it may be seen as part of a strategy of resistance which the sensitive points at the periphery are bound to put up against the manipulation by the centre, and against the possibility of eventual absorption by it.

## NOTES

1. George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (1962), Book V, Ch.5.
2. This issue has been discussed in detail in my book *Realism and Reality: Novel and Society in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985).
3. Much of these writings are very recent, and some still unpublished. Some of those who have contributed to the new discourse on Bankimchandra Chatterjee are Partha Chatterjee, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, Sudipto Kaviraj and Gayatri Spivak.
4. This faith in the sequence of English literary history as the universal sequence has sometimes gone to absurd lengths. Terms like Renaissance, Romantic Movement, Modernism, and Post-modernism have not only been used out of context but have been applied indiscriminately to what is supposed to be a similar historical progression in India. One dissenting voice comments: 'By planting a "Romantic Movement" in the virgin soil of our literary historiography, we hopefully tried to ensure the sprouting of a healthy crop of modern literature in all our languages'. See Sujit Mukherjee, *Towards a Literary History of India* (Simla, 1975), p. 18.
5. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986), p. 11.
6. *Ibid*, p. 82.