



Enriching by Proxy

Anisur Rahman in conversation with Anubhav Pradhan

With a career spanning four eventful decades which not only saw Indian Writing in English come into its own but also postcolonialism, comparative literature, and translation become reigning deities of the academe, Anisur Rahman has been able to develop a keen, participant's insight into the layered journey of literary studies in India. The growing popularity of South Asian Studies and the possibilities and challenges it opens and creates have been the subject of concerted discussion of late. Building up from Rahman's recent publications *In Translation: Positions and Paradigms* (2019) and *Socioliterary Cultures in South Asia* (2019), this interview delves into the contours of South Asia as an epistemic category, the pedagogical and canonical prospects of South Asian literature, intersections of language, orality, and culture, and the often-neglected power of love as a binding, syncretic force.

1. **AP:** Let us begin with South Asia, an idea which has a certain currency as well as limitations and pitfalls. How do you theorize South Asia in your work, and your lived experience?
- AR:** South Asia is both an idea and an extensive experience. It has been a major point of reference in almost all disciplines of knowledge for some time now. We have had critical inquiries into contiguous fields like language and literature, history and culture, sociology and anthropology, education and culture; as also economy and polity, trade and commerce, science and technology, agriculture and water resources, and many more. Considering the continuous engagement of scholars with different aspects of South Asia, it cannot in any way be considered a median or a generic third space any longer.

As for its limitations and pitfalls, South Asia has so far been unfairly considered to be a conglomeration of mutually compatible nations with some kind of a blanket identity. In fact, South Asia is characterised essentially by the richness of its diversity rather than by the illusion of unity. Importantly enough, the self-evolved centrality of its different locations imparts certain uniqueness to what may broadly be called South Asian identity and experience.

With these in mind, South Asia has to be theorised in multiple ways. A New Historicist perspective may be one of the important methods of its study with emphasis on textuality of history and historicity of text. It could also be theorised in Structuralist terms with reference to the study of history and sociology, as well in relation to codes of Deconstruction underlining the warring forces of signification. No less important would be to develop yet another perspective on South Asia in the Marxist context with reference to socio-historical forces and social realism. Being a postcolonial block of nations, it may as well be studied in relation to hybridity, cultural polyvalency, cultural difference and rejection of universalism. By drawing liberally upon these perspectives, I have tried to develop a holistic view of South Asia with reference to its secular traditions, imaginary landscapes, and realistic configurations in literary texts and traditions.

2. AP: In disciplinary terms, would it be pertinent to think of Indology as a progenitor of South Asian Studies? Do you think there are any conjunctions and lineages to be charted here, in light particularly of the abiding influence of area studies?

AR: No, not exactly! Indology is a distinct discipline of Asian Studies that draws upon Indian languages, literatures and cultures: to be more precise, upon Sanskrit language, literature, and Indian faith systems. Having said that in definitional terms, I would however agree that it may be a

distant progenitor of South Asian Studies since there are certain aspects of Indology that may be pertinent to the socioliterary expressions of South Asia.

Similarly, South Asia does not strictly form part of Area Studies since Area Studies is a well-defined discipline of social research conducted in multidisciplinary terms with reference to geographical and cultural denominators. Again, having said that in definitional terms, it should be pertinent to add that South Asian socioliterary locations may be individually and comparatively examined in critical and theoretical terms by drawing upon the broad parameters of Area Studies. Quite possibly, this method of appropriating the tools of Area Studies to study South Asian expressions might be *enriching by proxy*.

3. **AP:** As a teacher, researcher, and administrator of many decades of experience, how do you assess the scope of South Asian Studies within South Asia?

AR: South Asian Studies is temperately current. It has all the promise to stay so in times to come as well. University curriculum all over the world has changed drastically especially after the onset of postcolonial studies and theoretical intervention in support of the same. South Asian Studies, within South Asia, is likely to occupy a greater share in the curriculum for all the right reasons. I say so since our focus of study has shifted considerably towards addressing the questions related to who we are, what are the contexts of our power, and our personal testimonies. Equally important are the questions that we need to address with regard to our difference and hybridism, as also indigeneity and representation.

4. **AP:** Isn't it curious that there are very few courses on South Asian literature in universities in this region? If one was to teach such a course, what do you think would it include?

AR: As I said, the share of south Asian Studies is likely to grow considerably. It might also emerge as a distinct area of studies within departments of humanities, languages, and social sciences. I understand that a variety of courses could be offered within these departments and they could broadly relate to social formations, historical configurations, political dispensation, economic phenomenon, etc.

In the domain of literary studies, intensive work is likely to be undertaken from a variety of angles—linguistic, theoretical, and comparative—with reference to literary histories and historiography, clusters of texts, authors and the like. For developing a comprehensive understanding of literary milieux/movements, one would do well by drawing upon select texts in a historical perspective from each form/genre and put them in a comparative perspective with other texts from another age. This would apply to poetry, fiction, and non-fiction in equal measure. It would be important to add that these texts may be read with important socio-cultural sources which will help develop a broader view amongst lecturers and students alike. However, considering the limitations of space in a syllabus, a judicious selection of texts would have to be made. In order to address the limitations of space, it should always be possible to add a list of suggested readings and the faculty may develop a larger discourse with students both in and outside the classroom which we do in any case.

5. **AP:** Many South Asian languages have come to acquire very specific connotations: Bangla, for instance, is often considered sweet. How do you understand this development, historically and culturally?

AR: While it would be fair to say that every language has its own phonological system, as also its morphological and semantic schema, it is rather notional to consider certain languages as sweet and others as not sweet. This has been

carried through generations. There is also a common belief that their sweetness reflects a certain kind of cultural baggage that they represent. Broadly speaking, this refers to language, speaker, social milieu, cultural patterns, as well as personal and communal behaviour. We are aware that every language has an oral-aural system that represents the speech patterns of a people and their class. In order words, every word has lots of echoes that it carries. These echoes constitute a text: a text that is now literary, now extra-literary, and extra-literary in a number of ways. As such, when you read a text, you get a feel of the cultural baggage it carries which is expressed through words in a given order, an idea put in a certain way and an experience represented in a manner characteristic of the given language and its speakers.

Sweetness of a language is also a matter of larger communal perception acquired and reiterated over time. Urdu and Bangla are two good examples of this and there is much in the literatures of these languages that acquires their strength through their musicality. However, this does not necessarily imply that their literatures are worthy of critical attention only on account of their sound appeal. Every text—specially every literary text—demands a certain kind of language which its author is able to locate and appropriate.

- 6. AP:** To talk a little more about languages, what are your views on orality? Most of our vernaculars underwent the transition from orality to textuality within a fairly short period of time. Do you see it as receding or as recalibrating itself, as part of how the everyday continues to be polyphonically structured?
- AR:** The journey from orality to textuality underlines the steady development and growth of what has the potential to emerge as a literary tradition later. But there is a word of caution here as well. Orality has its own strength and has the capacity to survive independently. Sometimes,

orality suffers and loses its strength once it gets submerged in the quagmire of the written word. This is where the written word takes precedence over the spoken word and challenges its essential nature and character. I do think that the oral is what you rightly phrase as “recalibrating” itself and acquiring newer structures of sound and possible meaning.

7. **AP:** Orality also opens the question of what is loosely and broadly considered the folk—culture, art, even politics. Do you think the old distinctions of the highbrow and the popular hold today, given the unprecedented opening of access and agency orchestrated, in multiple ways, by the digital?

AR: I understand that the distinction between “the highbrow and the popular” is getting obliterated. What is called “highbrow” is under interrogation. A more liberal, democratic world order is pushing the so-called highbrow to the margins. In the world that we inhabit today, there are various kinds of liberties we enjoy and if they are challenged, we suffer, complain, and struggle to get them revived. This implies that there is enough space for interrogation and for developing new norms of life and living. With the rise of the subaltern and the marginalized in particular, this tendency to claim and re-claim one’s due has gained greater currency than ever before. This is much like the case of the centre-margin dichotomy where the margin is no longer marginal or peripheral as it has challenged and erased the very notion of the centre. What I should actually like to emphasize is that the so-called “highbrow” stands challenged now in all democratic societies, including South Asia. In this project, the digital has contributed fairly in this project and the highbrow stays as an alien, standing at some distance. Different modes of expression, other than the digital, have also allowed space to folk art and culture which is yet another mode of establishing the oral.

8. **AP:** There is a strong archivist tendency in studies of the folk, inspired by attempts to preserve cultural mores and repertoire. What, though, is being preserved, how, and for whom? How does one understand—and mediate—the power of the archon, scholarly and otherwise, in such cases?

AR: There is a double edge to this question. Cultural mores may be preserved through traditional archiving but more innovatively through the digital mode, which has already gained currency. But a question of greater concern remains as to who would be its ultimate recipient? I understand that the folk loses its life when preserved in words, or even archived in whatever way—traditionally or digitally. So, the question as to who would be its recipients/consumers evades an answer. After all, folk survives best in its pristine form and loses its essential character when documented or preserved for whosoever and in whatsoever a form. It's a dichotomous situation where technology challenges the traditional mores and the traditional mores are too feeble to resist since their consumers are much less in number and strength than those subscribing to technology. Mediating or controlling the power of the archon, scholars and others, remains at best a question that too evades a clear answer.

9. **AP:** I have often considered a questing, seeking spirit of love to be one of South Asia's greatest civilizational offerings to humanity. What would your views be on the space and transformative scope for love within not just South Asian cultures but also South Asian Studies?

AR: Yes, love is surely one of "South Asia's greatest civilizational offerings to humanity". It has been one of the prime motifs in literary texts irrespective of time and location. Innumerable expressions of this primary human emotion can be located in almost all forms, genres, languages, and literary traditions. Consider the thematics of Indian literature and you would find that love has been

a major mover in all literary expression since the very ancient times. Think of India and think of Sanskrit poetry, for example, to substantiate this idea. Then there are great literary texts in the languages of south India. Coming to the north, you would come across innumerable texts, poets (in particular) who actualize and mythicize love. Apart from these, Persian and Urdu poetry offers great examples to understand love in a larger context. You have romantic love known as *ishq-e majaazii* and divine love known as *ishq-e haqiqii*. The Persian and Urdu ghazal, in particular, may be read in these two contexts. So, readers of love in Indian and, for that matter, South Asian literatures, would need to develop a larger discourse on love in different manifestations—religious and secular—and in the broadest possible terms. This would include the idea and experience of love among all sexes, all ages, all stages and locations. Surely, there is a need to problematize and theorize love in the South Asian context which would be so different from the studies on love carried so far with Western literatures in mind. This has the potential of being a separate project and calls for detailed inquiry into the modes of expression that have actually defined the nature and character of South Asian people and their tone and tenor.

10. AP: Is it fruitful, or even possible, to speak of love and secularism in the same frame? How would you distinguish the latter, secular, from the syncretic in the South Asian context?

AR: Yes, eminently so! Love is a primeval human emotion; there is nothing peregrine in this kingdom of the emotionally possessed. Of course, locations and characters differ but, interestingly enough, it is this difference that makes love worthy of our inquiry. Secular love, if I may suggest, is a larger denominator that clearly includes the syncretic—and this is so true of the South Asian context. Love and secularism stay well together in the same frame.

The best examples may be seen in the Urdu ghazal ever since its very beginnings in the late sixteenth century to now. But this is just one example, there are many others as well. Consider the case of love poetry in the classical Sanskrit and every other language of India from the very beginnings of their literary history. In fact, this is how South Asia distinguishes itself as a unique literary location with a great capital of love poetry in all its *avataars* and in all its possible manifestations.