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**The Fiction of 'Subaltern Pasts': Shashi
Deshpande and Sunetra Gupta**

Saikat Majumdar

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The Fiction of ‘Subaltern Pasts’: Shashi Deshpande and Sunetra Gupta

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English in a liminal space: The call for modernist aesthetics

Written 66 years ago, Raja Rao’s lines in his Foreword to his novel *Kanthapura* have become much debated buzzwords in Indian-English writing, maybe postcolonial Anglophone writing in general: “One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word ‘alien,’ yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up – like Sanskrit or Persian was before – but not of our emotional make-up” (Rao, vii).

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The issue of whether English is the language of emotional or intellectual make-up in colonial or postcolonial India, admittedly an important one, is not of interest to me here. What is of interest is the curious hybridity of experience and expression Rao sees English as signifying in the context of Indian life, in the liminality of its position between alienness and familiarity, never quite committing itself to either. He goes on to write: “We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us”.

Rao was writing in 1937, ten years before India’s independence from British rule. Since then a lot of water has flowed under the bridge, not only with respect to the complex cultural politics of decolonization and consequently the status of the colonial language in a country of dozens of indigenous languages, but also in terms of the theorization of such politics in the academia, both in India elsewhere, including the metropolitan universities of the West. Even so, many would probably be in varying degrees of sympathy with the Indian poet and critic P. Lal’s argument today, made to much controversy in the sixties: “English is one of the Indian languages, or putting it differently, a recent and very much alive and kicking adoption in the Indian family of ‘vernaculars’” (Lal 30). Lal is

of course, very much aware that if English *is* an Indian language, it is so in a different way than Hindi or Bengali or Tamil is, and this awareness is reflected in his comparison of the position of English in India to that of Latin in unbalkanized, pre-Reformation Europe, even though the statistics he draws attention to – that of around two million Indian native speakers of English (at that time) – simultaneously complicates his analogy. Clearly he is himself conscious of this complication, which puts him at sympathy with Rao’s observation above, and this echoes in his call for a vital language for Indian-English literature that can contain such dichotomies: “King’s and Queen’s English, yes; Indian English, why not?; pidgin, inflated and gluey English, no” (Lal 18).

The status of English in India as an official, institutional language that shapes a large part of its public discourse – that of bureaucracy, higher education, governmental and corporate business inscribes it partly as a predominant pan-Indian written language, and this is perhaps one important way in which it differs from countries where primacy is easily attached to the spoken form – “the English speaking world,” as the expression goes, there being none that approximates the realities of “the English reading (or writing) world”. Part of the significance of English comes from its presence in ‘writing’

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– clearly due to infrastructural and political implications of a colonial past. This entry of this ‘writing’ presence, as it were, is indicative of its powerful ‘supplementarity’ that Derrida perceives as ‘contaminating’ mythic notions of the original purity of spoken language as those Rousseau subscribes to. As he writes: “Our language, even if we are pleased to speak it, has already substituted too many articulations or too many accents, it has lost life and warmth, it is already eaten by writing” (Derrida 226). The primacy of the colonial language in spoken discourse in a postcolonial country like India, demonstrates, even literalizes the degree to which the holistic reality of the language can be largely ascribed to the “insertion” of “that dangerous supplement”.

This ‘contaminated’ appearance of the colonial language may initially appear to have affinities with Raja Rao’s attribution of “intellectual” (as opposed to “emotional”) status to it, but eventually it goes beyond it – the intellect seeps into emotion, writing into speech; spoken English is just as much a reality in India, even if its historical power may lie in the domain of the written. Such a deconstruction of binaries, in fine, leaves it in the liminal space Rao sees English suspended within the matrix of Indian reality, even though it defeats his binarism of the discourses of emotion and intellect. Next to admitted-

ly pertinent debates as to which figure is more vulnerable to 'othering' in postcolonial literatures – that of the colonizer or the colonized – what remains an oft-ignored truth is that within this reality it is therefore the *English language itself* that most affects, and is affected by, the duality of subjectivity and 'otherness.' It lingers in between, deconstructing the polarities of intellect and emotion, strangeness and familiarity, institutional power and familial intimacy, writing and speech.

I would like to argue that this deconstructive balance, especially when reflected in the fractured representation of Indian-English literature is significantly related to an interlocking of a firmly rooted subjectivity and a more destabilizing 'otherness' that often demands a sensitivity and intricacy of aesthetic for which the discourse of literary modernism is uniquely suited. Qualifying Raja Rao's description of the fractured world refracted in Indian-English writing, P. Lal writes: "Tchekov's bit of broken mirror by a river's edge catching the full moon, is a good analogy; English used by Indians attempts at present to capture special nuances which 'full' mirrors cannot catch" (Lal 34). Such a fractured worldview, in all its wistfulness and humor, significantly corresponds to the way modernism pushes language to the very limits of representation, the way it draws attention to its "willed interference with the transparency of

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discourse,” its dislocated temporal and spatial practices, and finally, to the thematic and stylistic fragmentation that challenges the epistemological certitudes of realist fiction. My analysis of the coming together of the fractured sensibilities of modernist and postcolonial fiction here takes place in my reading of the work of two Indian-English novelists who in my mind espouse a tradition of postcolonial modernism more than most Indian writers writing in the English language today.

The fancy-dress party of Indian History

In his introduction to his edited anthology, *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, the Indian novelist, poet and critic Amit Chaudhuri, points out the predominance of current notions that delicacy, nuance and irony, belonging properly to the domain of the English novel and to Enlightenment Reason, are suspect in the discourse of postcolonial fiction which finds a better ally in postmodernist modes of narration, in magic realism, in poststructuralist self-referentiality and the Jamesonian national allegory that privileges historical discourse over the literary, culminating in the depiction of Indian history as “a fancy dress-party or the Mardi Gras, full of chatter, music, sex, tomfoolery, free drinks and rock and roll”(Chaudhuri xxv). While *Midnight’s Children* remain the seminal work of the national allegory, there have been several novels since

then which evince, to various degrees, an interest in the idea and the structure of the national narrative – significant among them would be Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth, Pouring Rain*, and Mukul Kesavan's *Looking through Glass*.

With respect to the Indian subcontinent, the preferred site of the national allegory is a unified imaginative topos created out of Indian heterogeneity that works as a pan-Indian milieu, and the favorite subjects of its historical discourse are the larger, public processes of nationalism and nation-building, or nation-breaking for that matter – like the development of the nascent republic and its constitutional ideals, riots, wars and crises in the cabinet government. And after Jameson's declaration of the fusion that takes place between the private and the public lives in 'third world' cultures, such larger national processes can be conveniently made to enter a metaphorical relation with the private lives of fictional characters, as Saleem Sinai's Bildungsroman echoes the growth of the nation in *Midnight's Children*. However, such metaphoric or magic-realist connotations of the private and the public inevitably end up oversimplifying the more complex ways they influence or find expressions in each other, and implicitly construct a hierarchy of binaries where its constructions of the public is always more significant than the private and the latter's reality is made to

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fit into certain perceptions of the former. Also, as Chaudhuri points out, the magic-realist national allegory, notwithstanding its surface irreverence and polymorphous plurality, reveals politico-aesthetic assumptions that are surprisingly traditional and mimetic - Indian life is plural, amorphous, ‘hybrid,’ colorful and ‘exotic’, and therefore the Indian novel must be the same. The ethos of such postcolonial narratives, he feels, is thus, ironically, often overlaid with liberal humanist verities - the goodness and necessity of multiculturalism, the evil of colonialism and fundamentalism, leaving little opportunity for their play in the amoral space that is so essential to several strands of Indian aesthetic and spiritual culture as for instance those shaping the Sanskrit epic *The Mahabharata*. He goes so far as to say: “William Carlos Williams said of *The Waste Land* that it had returned poetry to the classroom; and there are those who, when reading some postcolonial narratives, will feel that they have gone back to their Indian Certificate of Secondary Education history textbook” (Chaudhuri xxvi).

In the further examination of this binarism of the private and public, the local and the national, a useful epistemological tool is Partha Chatterjee’s distinction between the “inner” and the “outer” domain of national culture, that of the state and the community, and finally, between “elite” and “subaltern” poli-

tics. Chatterjee emphasizes the significance of the “inner” domain of national culture when he writes in *The Nation and Its Fragments*: “The home, I suggest, was not a complementary but rather the original site on which the hegemonic project of nationalism was launched”. The recognizable totality of the post-independence, Nehruvian, secular India of the national allegory is therefore likely to suppress, not only narratives of the “inner” domain, but also subaltern histories of local and regional specificities and the agency of the marginalized populations that South-Asian subaltern historiographers like Guha, Chatterjee, Chakrabarty, Prakash and (in a different way) Spivak has been trying to restore. As Chatterjee writes, after telling the story of the Bengali stage actress Noti Bindini: “Indeed, the opening up of the whole problematic of the national project within and outside the domain of the state makes it possible for us now to make the radical struggle with colonialism, contained many possibilities of the authentic, creative, and plural development of social identities that were violently disrupted by the political history of the postcolonial state seeking to replicate the modular forms of the modern nation-state” (Chatterjee 136).

As such, if the frequent conflation of postcolonial and post-modernist narrative modes have led to totalizing, rational/sec-

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ular myths of Indian reality that valorize a certain version of the “outer” domain, I would like to argue that it is that mode of aesthetics conventionally associated with modernism that can provide an adequate means of reading the intricacies of the “inner” domain, of the nuances of the local and the regional, and also do justice to discourses of the marginalized and the subaltern *within* the nationalist and anti-colonialist projects. Especially when it comes to the refraction of the liminal nature of postcolonial reality through the fractured worldview of Indian-English literature, it is such a modernist literary aesthetic that engages with it most enrichingly, at the same time avoiding the totalizing claims of the national allegory.

That modernist aesthetics can be an important means of apprehension of the modalities of ‘otherness’ is itself something of a novel claim that is made by Derek Attridge in a forthcoming book on J.M. Coetzee. Attridge writes: “My argument, briefly, is that what often gets called the self-reflexiveness of modernist writing, its foregrounding of its own its own linguistic, figurative, and generic operations, its willed interference with the transparency of discourse, is, in its effects if not always in its intentions, allied to a new apprehension of the claims of otherness” (Attridge 17).

Beyond the national allegory: Two Indian-English novelists

My example of post-colonial modernist aesthetics is the fiction of two Anglophone women writers from India, Shashi Deshpande and Sunetra Gupta. Attridge's claim of the potential relation of modernist aesthetics and the ethics of alterity can be seen as especially relevant in this tradition of women's writing, but what is perhaps more intriguing is the way an essentially modernist foregrounding of subjectivity is held in a delicate tension with a constantly vigilant awareness of what I call the ethics of 'otherness' inherent in such discourses, in a liminal state where one is indeed indistinguishable from the other. Of the two, Deshpande has been writing since the mid-eighties, and Gupta published her first novel in the mid-nineties, but they can be seen together as having projected a distinctly modernist aesthetics in their fiction, which has amounted to an implicit and silent critique of this dominant tradition in South-Asian Anglophone fiction. This is also no doubt the reason behind their marginalization in the current hype and attention South-Asian Anglophone writing has been receiving of late, as such aesthetics as writers like Deshpande and Gupta espouse in their fiction is clearly disfavored by the current Rushdie-Jameson tradition of postmodernist postcoloniality.

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The novels of both Deshpande and Gupta are rich with distinctive modernist characteristics, as for instance, the importance of a sense of place, one that is both situated in, and disperses the idea of a nation, as opposed to the larger, unified, pan-Indian imaginative topos of the post-Rushdie national narrative. Indeed, the Bombay and Bangalore of Deshpande’s fiction is as really rooted and sensually evoked as some of the most memorable locales in the vernacular literary traditions of India –Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyay’s Nischindipur, Quarratulain Hyder’s Lucknow, London, or Sylhet. Here Sunetra Gupta is poised in an interesting space, delicately suspended between the sensual concreteness of places and their heavy memories which linger over her work on one hand, and a strong pull towards a psychological interiority which often inclines towards an emotional and philosophical abstraction. The physical spaces enclosed by London, New York, Princeton, Calcutta, the house Mandalay in *A Sin of Colour* are at the same time real and ethereal, and this tension between physicality and interiority is also a strikingly modernist one.

Another significant element of this aesthetics of postcolonial modernism relates to the use of ordinary English words like “door,” “bus,” “station” to achieve the creation of a way of life that has naturalized the cultural hybridity of colonial and post-

colonial life, especially in its urban, middle-class incarnation to the extent that it renders redundant, even spuriously faddish the Rushdiesque “chutnification” of English and its scattering of untranslated Indian words and phrases and odd sentence constructions. With regard to the issue of linguistic and cultural hybridity in the context of (post)colonial life, the Indian novelist Amit Chaudhuri writes in his insightful introduction to *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*: “Hybridity, however, can frequently enter texts in subtly disruptive, rather than obvious ways; it need not be worn like a national costume” (Chaudhuri xv). Such a belief in the evocative ability of everyday words and their encoding of deep-rooted cultural history, nowhere better expressed in Anglophone Indian fiction than in the fictions of Gupta and Deshpande (and a handful of others) is clearly a modernist assertion, a rebuttal of a Sausseurean loss of faith in the power of words to capture a real physical world. This strongly felt yet subdued hybridity in ordinary English words also echoes Raja Rao’s identification of the subtle balance of alienness and familiarity of the language in the context of Indian life, as also of the creation of the kind of ‘otherness’ Attridge sees modernist aesthetics uniquely sensitive to.

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The crucial idea here is ‘ordinariness,’ as I feel that it’s modernism’s commitment to the dailyness and the banality of the world, the ‘cotton wool of daily life’ that forms the fabric of its unique and subtle sensitivity to modes of ‘alterity. The radical replacement of the worthwhile, ‘grand’ subjects by epiphanies of ordinary train rides and purchase of breakfast-bread seems to be a significant step in the foregrounding of the ineffable ‘other.’ The strangeness of the chronicling of such base matter is followed by an inexplicable wonder at its beauty, leading to a destabilization that is both pleasant and eerie. And this is the juxtaposition such postcolonial modernist fictions always achieve with a remarkable degree of success. The shy hybridity of cultural translation, as of the color and texture of traditional Bengali dishes, into not only the English language but something of the impersonality of a globally intelligible discourse is paralleled by the delicate celebration of the ordinary as extraordinary – a maidservant mopping the floor, seen in a frieze of classical dance, the pattern of *mehendi*, a colorful dye, on the hands of a young Marathi girl’s hands, wet hair sticking to one’s legs after a drenched tour through a monsoon shower in Calcutta.

Indeed, born, brought up and educated in several different continents, Sunetra Gupta’s background is highly cosmopoli-

tan, and one may add, diasporic, as much as any author of Indian-English fiction, and so are most of her protagonists, but that has not detracted from the importance of the local, the concrete evocation of specific times and places in all their physicality in her fiction. The diasporic, somewhat dislocated perspectives of the protagonists, and in certain cases, those of the invisible narrator, creates relationships with the locale that are at once intense and distanced, deep with affection and humor, on part of a viewer-participant who is both an integral part of and peripheral to such atmospheres. Above and beyond the 'otherness' of English in the context of Indian life noted by Raja Rao, there are added distances to be bridged – the mindboggling cultural diversity within India, and this deepens the dislocation in the perspectives and sensibilities of the sensitive, brooding female protagonists of Gupta's Bildungsroman-like novels.

Such dislocated, fractured sensibilities play a crucial role in all of Gupta's novels, especially in her early work, as in the novels *Memories of Rain*, and *The Glassblower's Breath*. Modernist aesthetics celebrates the ordinary with a mode of articulation that is far from ordinary, that which Attridge identifies as "its willed interference with the transparency of discourse", and this arguably heightens the dichotomy between the fa-

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miliar and the alien. This ‘alienness’ of discourse is striking in Gupta’s fiction, in a profound sense of the aesthetic craft, an Empsonian ambiguity and a complexity of prose, richly figurative, full of myth and the heavy shadows of memory, a brooding interiority of consciousness. Modernist fiction is sometimes considered to move between two poles – the extreme subjectivity of Lawrence and Woolf on one hand, and the clinical detachment of Joyce’s artist paring his fingernails on the other. Gupta seems heavily tilted to the direction of the subjective, an inclination which goes with the relative lack of humor in her fiction. A figure like, for instance, Malik Solanka of Rushdie’s novel *Fury*, Cambridge academic turned maker of Little Brain dolls, protagonists of his popular TV program on the history of philosophy, seems unlikely in her world. Gupta seems neither capable of, neither inclined towards that kind of mockingly self-ironic gesture that is so representative of postmodernism.

But even this foregrounding of subjectivity, intense and liberated within the fictional paradigms, remains true to the construction of alterity, mainly in the location of the Indian woman, as with the characters of Niharika in *A Sin of Colour* and the nameless female protagonists of *Memories of Rain* and *The Glassblower’s Breath*. Attridge’s claim of the potential rela-

tion of modernist aesthetics and the ethics of alterity becomes especially relevant with the dynamics of style and subject in Gupta's fiction, but what is perhaps more intriguing is the way an essentially modernist foregrounding of subjectivity seems to constitute an ethical awareness of the 'Other' *through* such subjectivity rather than *against* it. Take for instance the passage where the narrator-protagonist of *Memories of Rain*, a Bengali girl from a middle class Calcutta family, appears before her brother's English friend, Anthony, whom she is later to marry – and the way her own appearance, distanced and de-subjectified, is refracted through her own consciousness: "...and she was summoned to take out to her brother and his white friend a kerosene light. And so she appeared to him a second time, lantern-lit, in the damp darkness, a phantom of beauty, and his eyes roamed for a time after she had disappeared inside, the ghost of light that her presence had left, there beside him, in the rain-swollen dark" (2).

Shashi Deshpande's female protagonists are perhaps even more memorable in their finely individualized etching and in the subsequent dialectic of subjectivity and 'otherness' their location within the fictional matrices inevitably create. She employs the interiority, the figurativeness and a sense of a Dedalusian "stasis" to apprehend the intricate and elaborate

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fabric of the Indian extended family and especially the place of the woman in this traditional structure. In two of her finest novels, *Roots and Shadows* (1982) and *That Long Silence* (1988), she positions two unforgettable Indian women, Indu and Jaya respectively, within the matrix of the traditional, large extended family, though in very different locations with respect to individual achievement, personal freedom and power. But in both cases, the family looms large as a powerful and a paradoxical structure, replete in equal amounts with love, caring, pettiness, rivalry, patriarchal dominance, the play of materialism and idealism, ambition and its curtailment – rooted in specific cultural and geographical spaces that deeply shape their texture – Bangalore in the first instance and Bombay in the second. It is interesting how the very modernist motifs of a self-conscious preoccupation with literature and creativity, especially in their juxtaposition with the more commercial forms of journalistic writing, something which both protagonists, both writers, actually perceive as commercial and vulgarized genres that they have to take recourse to against themselves for the sake of more secure and stable financial rewards, sacrificing, as it were, their aesthetic integrity in the process. Indu is a successful journalist (and a less successful fiction writer) who returns to visit her father’s family – a family she had alienated by an unconventional marriage to a man of another

caste – following the death of her grandmother, the matriarch of the family, to find that the deceased has left her very substantial properties entirely to her, and to counter and immerse herself in the complex socio-psychological entanglements that follow. Jaya, less successful and less empowered than Indu, is a failed writer who churns out the occasional women's column in a popular daily, tries to reconcile herself with the intricacies of womanhood in her social context and the claustrophobic shadows of her past as her husband, a civil servant, is troubled by allegations of professional malpractice. Both novels are distinctly modernist in their narrative modes, abandoning linear narration for endless digressions, fragmented interior monologues, movements back and forth in time following the course of the protagonists' memories and brooding minds, in a manner strongly reminiscent of Julia Kristeva's 'semiotic' discourse challenging epistemological certitudes of dominant patriarchal orders. Both are unselfconsciously 'Indian' in a cultural sense, providing no contextual annotations of relations, notions, customs and rituals that hardly translate beyond their immediate cultures, much less the whole of India; nor do either protagonist feel compelled to provide any background information for the reader to grasp a coherent chronology of events in the middle of the lyrical, trance-like stream of consciousness, unapologetic introductions of

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personal dreams and nightmares, disjointed threads of family narratives, through which the novels are narrated. In fact, though both novels have significant movements and reversals at the level of concrete action, the narration rarely gives a feel of such movements; much of these movements are in fact recapitulations of events and patterns of the past, and even events of the present follow the protagonists’ intense, rambling brooding on their implications. They are also deep celebration of the subjective, in its psychological intensity and the overarching point of view of the narrator-protagonist – a subjectivity that is distinctively modernist, unlike its depthless decenteredness in postmodernist fiction following its critique in poststructuralist thought. However, the characters and the narration of Indu and Jaya are also distinctly different in a way that cannot be done justice to in the limited space here, but both novels are united in their use of a distinctly modernist mode to foreground a subjectivity that is simultaneously intense and liberated within the fictional paradigms and true to its construction as the silent ‘Other’ (“the weight of that long silence of the other half of the world,” Deshpande quotes Elizabeth Robins in the epigraph) in the context of its socio-political reality.

The relevance of the critique and subsequent postmodernist decentering of subjectivity in the context of certain non-Western cultures has in fact been questioned by postcolonial writers like Amit Chaudhuri, who claims that notions of the self, realism, authenticity etc do not often have the same position in much of such traditional cultures as they have had in models of Western reason, be it logocentrism dating back to the Greeks or the Cogito of the Enlightenment, positions that have been of late, uneasy and suspect, and this is ambiguity often gets neglected in postcolonial fictions that work from within a postmodernist space. Also worth remembering here is the celebration of subjectivity in Black American women's fiction, as an instance where a modernist foregrounding of subjectivity has been integral to the formation of a minority discourse that challenges hegemony of Eurocentricism through the very act. Such fictions as Deshpande's and Gupta's, in this sense, offer us what Jessica Berman, describing a similar dynamic between ethics and aesthetics, subjectivity and otherness in Virginia Woolf, calls "ethical folds" – "...the ethics of Woolf's writings rest in the folds between ontology and epistemology, between an intimate ethics of eros and a recognition of the public responsibility to respond to the face of the other". Such a fold, Berman indicates, is arrived at through a negotiation between Levinasian conceptions of the other as "infinitely for-

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eign” and feminist configuration of ethical relations with the other through intimacy, in a more “personal sphere” that is the unique hallmark of a tradition of modernism which, I’d like to argue, also informs the location and sensibilities of the female protagonists of both Deshpande and Gupta.

In many ways both Deshpande’s and Gupta’s fictions reflect the elitism of high modernism, Gupta’s probably in a more obvious way than Deshpande’s, in her stylistic aesthetics, but also in her subject matter. Many of her characters are academics, scientists, writers and philosophers, preoccupied in a contemplation of their work with a solemnity and a kind of lost idealism that clearly sets itself as different as the deliberate playful irreverence of much postmodernist fiction. Her world is often one where the old British Empire has directly given way to the feudal aristocrats of Bengal, as the Roy family in *A Sin of Colour*, who comes to own the house Mandalay, built by a British officer, or the son of the family, Debendranath Roy, who goes to Oxford as a student, an example of the privileged upper-middle class of India who has access to the best of the cultural and intellectual traditions of both the old Empire and his native country. The academic career of his niece Niharika bears striking correspondence to that of Gupta herself, who studied at Princeton and Imperial College, London, before be-

coming a reader in Zoology at Oxford. The privileged nature of the author's career, educated at some of the best institutions of the Western world, is of course, fairly typical of a large cross-section of Indian-English writers who usually hail from the educated, urban middle and upper-middle class, a fact which often, though not always finds reflection in the worlds they create. This draws attention to the fact that the assessment of the colonial and postcolonial phenomenon of Indian-English writing as a discourse situated on the margins of the canon is a considerably complicated one. While postcolonial Anglophone writing can be seen as existing on the periphery of the English canon in its Euro-American incarnation, the fact that its authors are, more often than not, part of the most privileged, articulate and empowered sections of the postcolonial communities invariably complicate such locations, reminding us that the issue of 'class' is a potentially important one here. The relation of Indian-English writing with modernism, or for that matter, postmodernism, will have to take into account the not only the historical position of their authors with respect to the former Empire and global canons, but also their places within the respective colonial or postcolonial societies.

Attridge's argument about the modalities of 'otherness' that modernism is so sensitive to, therefore, cannot be uncom-

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plicatedly applied to the ethical location of postcolonial writing, even if such locations happen to be on the periphery of Euro-American canons. Inasmuch as the protagonists of such fiction are subject to an ‘othered’ status in western societies, such a claim is true, but what I’d like to emphasize as the nodal point in modernism’s relation to alterity, especially with relation to these two writers, is its celebration of the ordinary. In fact, one needs to be vigilant in a too easy identification of women’s writing with such modalities as that of alterity, the personal sphere or, at a different level, with the “inner domain” of national culture as those I’ve hinted throughout this essay as contributing to the dimensions of rich modernist aesthetics, as easy conclusions about such paradigms can always lead to false gender-based essentialisms, even as they hold rich ethical, political and aesthetic possibilities if perceived sensitively. Indeed, Partha Chatterjee points out that these numerous binaries operating within nationalist discourse of 19th century India, as that of the inner/outer, spiritual/material, home/world, feminine/masculine, helped to confine this discourse within such essentialisms and merely erected a new patriarchy as a hegemonic construct. Even as the inner sphere of home and the family continues to be important in these novels by Deshpande and Gupta, neither of the lives of their female protagonists are circumscribed within the domestic confines

of home, and their aesthetic and professional endeavors, admittedly of varying range and intensity, make such binaries as home/world collapse, and hint at the intricate ways the public and private interact and influence each other. Even as they are aware of their “othered” status in a patriarchal society, their educational and professional qualifications, their place within the middle class considerably complicate such statuses. Significant components of such lives, operative within the undefined liminal spaces of the inner and the outer domains is therefore, less the stuff of minority history than the material of “subaltern pasts,” as another Subaltern historiographer, Dipesh Chakraborty, has put it. In *Provincializing Europe*, Chakraborty speaks of those irrational moments of history which cannot be integrated within the dominant, rational, teleological and historicist narratives, those which “...are marginalized not because of any conscious intentions but because they represent moments or points at which the archive the historian mines develops a degree of intractability with respect to the aims of professional history” (Chakraborty 101). Subaltern pasts can equally belong to the privileged or the marginalized populace, and as an example of the former Chakraborty describes superstitious rituals prevalent among the upper class Brahmins, rituals which have been either left out of historicist narratives or have been rationalized and secularized to be

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made part of such narratives. To modify Attridge, therefore, I'd like to argue that modernist discourse such as Deshpande's and Gupta's are not only significant ways of apprehending the 'other,' but an important way of chronicling 'subaltern pasts' of the marginal and humdrum moments of daily life, which are neither quite the same as the narratives of the 'other' or the disempowered, nor the goings on in the "inner domain," though admittedly they have undeniable relationships with both and perhaps also overlap with their spheres. Such subaltern pasts are neither male or female in character, just as they are neither specifically related to the lives of the privileged or the marginalized. That this narration of "subaltern pasts" through this sensitive modernist aesthetics has been predominantly done by women writers like Shashi Deshpande and Sunetra Gupta, however, is hardly coincidental. Within this feminist tradition of postcolonial modernist fiction, I'd like to argue, lie the unique power of its epiphanies, its ineluctable modality of otherness.

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