

Forum

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Comparatism, Partition, and the Vernacular

TO THE EDITOR:

For the first time in years, I recently went through an issue of *PMLA* (May 2011) within days of receiving it in the mail. Did it pique my interest because I have lately been thinking and writing intensely about topics dealt with in detail in several articles? No doubt. Dalit literature, cosmopolitanism, comparatism—these topics, albeit sometimes with different valences, appear in my *Flesh and Fish Blood: Postcolonialism, Translation, and the Vernacular* (U of California P, 2012). It was certainly instructive to find critical interests that seemed pressing to me as I wrote my book approached from alternative angles; unlike the *PMLA* critics, I have been exploring these topics, as well as others, in conjunction with a notion of the vernacular that I am keen to recover for against-the-grain scholarly work. In an academic context sometimes profoundly but at other times facilely focused on the global, I probe a broadly construed notion of the vernacular for its critical potential. While the *PMLA* authors and I might part company on specifics, I value the disregarded canons and critical perspectives advanced by Toral Gajarawala, in “Some Time between Revisionist and Revolutionary: Unreading History in Dalit Literature” (126.3 [2011]: 575–91), and by Susan Koshy, in “Minority Cosmopolitanism” (592–609), and I appreciate Susan Stanford Friedman’s succinct and revivifying statement of existing knowledge, in “Why Not Compare?” (753–62). I recognize that in multiple ways these critics indicate fresh (not to be confused with unprecedented) avenues of inquiry. I hope that my interest is not simply personal.

More particularly, I would like to draw attention in the comparatist spirit recommended by Friedman to a topic broached by both Koshy and Gajarawala—the Partition of India. Koshy identifies the importance of the Partition of 1947 (as well as that of 1971) in producing a South Asian

history deeply marked by multiple modalities of diaspora. She finds this complex diasporic history figured in the stories of Jhumpa Lahiri's collection *Interpreter of Maladies*. Gajarawala, on the other hand, notes that the Dalit texts she examines refer to the Partition rarely and that when they do they challenge its centrality in the conventional narrations of South Asian history. Because of this "unreading" of nationalist historiography, she says, the Dalit texts complicate historicist strategies of literary analysis.

Koshy and Gajarawala, then, read the Partition in contrary ways and to contrary ends. The differences between their readings are instructive for my purpose, which is to suggest extensions and emendations of their arguments. My inclination, emerging out of an attention to the vernacular, is to refuse—like the Dalit texts examined by Gajarawala—what may be called the exceptionalism of a Partition-oriented account of South Asian history. It cannot be denied that the Partition, sometimes described as the largest displacement of humanity in the shortest period of time, is one of a handful of pivotal events in the twentieth-century history of South Asia. It is also true that vast segments of South Asia remained relatively untouched by it and that in parts of the region (e.g., South India) the Partition is more an abstract and bureaucratic than an experienced or viscerally felt reality. A vernacularized approach to South Asian history—attentive to the differing experiences of different regions—is one way to expose Partition exceptionalism: the view of the Partition as a singular event set apart from and above others.

A critical approach routed through the vernacular might also throw useful light on Gajarawala's reading of Dalit texts. Is it really true that Dalit texts are mainly characterized by a rejection of "the overwhelming weight of the historical in our systems of interpretation" (587)? Or might it rather be that alongside an unreading these texts advance an alternative history sometimes hard to recognize without a sensitivity to vernacular forms of knowledge? The Buddhism recovered and constituted as a version of history by Dr. Ambedkar and, before

him, by the Tamil Dalit intellectual Pandit Iyothee Thass suggests the latter possibility. As, in a different way, does P. Sivakami's Tamil Dalit novel *The Grip of Change*. This alternative history, I would suggest, is more easily recognizable when we attend to the vernacular, for it is in vernacular forms of knowledge above all that such a history has persisted, often for centuries. Can a similar argument be made about the texts that Gajarawala reads? I cannot say, because I have not yet read them, but the question is worth asking. In any event, her particular reading should not be generalized into an argument about Dalit texts as such.

I hope it is clear that my aim is to suggest, in a spirit of commendation and dialogue, how a robust notion of the vernacular might extend intriguing aspects of the arguments initiated by Koshy and Gajarawala, or else resolve vexatious conundrums in them. While I have focused on these two critics, my remarks are made possible by a form of comparison across languages and cultural contexts. I thank Koshy and Gajarawala as well as Friedman for their contributions.

S.

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Repl

Like S. Shankar, I wanted to read some of the essays in *PMLA*'s May 2011 issue immediately. I would add that I thoroughly approve of the changes that Marianne Hirsch and Patricia Yaeger brought to the journal as its editors. *PMLA* now regularly highlights new fields (witness the essays on oceanic studies in the May 2010 issue and on animal studies in that of March 2009) and includes special sections addressing issues shared across many subspecialties in these fields.

Shankar's letter performs the kind of juxtapositional comparative reading that I advocated as one fruitful method of comparison—that is, the setting of two (or more) texts side by side, paratactically rather than hierarchically, to see what new general insights such a juxtaposition might enable. Susan Koshy's argument