

INTERVIEW

New common wealth of writing

An interview via email with John Thieme, editor of *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, by Ziaul Karim, about different issues and concerns that surround the aspect of New Writing.

FOUNDED in the 1960s, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* is a pioneering and remains a leading academic journal to provide a forum for discussion of New Writing in English from outside the traditional centres of the West. The trend in New Writing in English, especially from outside Britain and America over the past few decades has continued to flourish, thereby enriching what was once thought to be traditional 'English' literature with new vigour and insight. In the last decade or so especially, the West has also witnessed a phenomenal amount of attention and media hype lavished on publications from non-Western centres and particularly on writers of South Asian origin, something that was unthinkable before. This changed literary scenario has made the world a more cross-cultural place than ever before. Academics are grappling to theorize this new in and out of creative writing, thereby giving a new meaning to the narratives from the so-called margins of literary mainstream.

John Thieme is Professor Emeritus of English Studies at South Bank University, London. He has previously taught at the Universities of Guyana, North London and Hull, where he was Professor of New Literatures in English. He has published extensively on post-colonial writing, particularly Caribbean, Canadian and Indian literatures. His books include *The Web of Tradition: Uses of Allusion in V.S. Naipaul's Fiction* (1987), *The Arnold Anthology of Post-Colonial Literatures in English* (1996) and *Derek Walcott* (1999). His most recent book, *Post-Colonial Con-Texts: Writing Back to the Canon*, is in press for publication by Continuum in December 2001. He is currently working on a study of R.K. Narayan and a glossary of post-colonial studies. He is also General Editor of the Manchester University Press Contemporary World Writers Series, Consultant Editor for the *Literary Compendium of Pears Cyclopaedia*, and Editor of the post-colonial sections of the electronic *Literary Encyclopaedia* and the *Annotated Bibliography of English Studies*.



The editor: John Thieme

emphasis on new writing and national culture in the world of critical discourse now than what it was a couple of decades ago. But the critical tools that are being used to understand and analyze new writing are often replicated of the traditional centre. Do you think a new discourse is essential for the new writing that has developed in the post-colonial world? Or is it possible to escape from the old metropolitan-colonial axis?

JT: Yes, I do think a new discourse is needed. But the problem is: how does one evolve such a discourse? Post-colonial theory, which is itself a many-headed beast, has tried to address this situation, but whenever it tries to provide a framework for bringing very different literatures together, it runs the risk of homogenizing them and creating a new discourse which is often still metropolitan-centred. So, yes, in important respects, this is a new form of colonialism, though I would tend to put the emphasis on "globalism" instead of "colonialism" in this context, since this is a more potent force today and it seems to me that it's an illusion to think of globalization as creating a world community of equals. It smacks too much of McDonaldization or, as some people have put it, coca-colonization.

How does one escape from this and create a new axis? I think it's difficult to do this if one is attempting to communicate across cultures, such as the dominance of English as a world language American rather than British English in most cases, though the variant forms of the language are themselves a fascinating object for study. One notable attempt has been the Subaltern Studies project, a Delhi-based initiative, which has attempted to recuperate cultural forms that existed in parallel with the elite culture during the colonial period, but remained autonomous. I think this involves an optimistic premise, since very little was completely untouched, but nevertheless admire the aspiration involved.

ZK: *Two streams of thoughts have come to the forefront of critical discussion -- one is the concept of globalization, and the other is national culture. Globalization is viewed by many as a new form of imperialism and logic for new monolithic world culture at the expense of the richness and variety of native cultures. How will the two negotiate themselves in the twenty-first century?*

JT: Whatever one sets out to do, I think the extent of the interaction between cultures is greater than ever before and so any attempt to preserve "pure" national cultures is doomed to failure. Also contemporary cultural theory has taught us that the degree to which cultures interpenetrated one another in the past is greater than most of us ever realized: Christianity flourished in South Asia before it reached Western Europe; staple Western drinks such as coffee were exotic in Europe when they first became popular just over three hundred years ago. This porosity is, then, a reality that we have to live with, but it doesn't mean that hybridity is all of a piece and it would be a mistake simply to surrender to the pressures of the negative aspects of globalization. I think we should be endeavouring to cherish the richness of the local and national specifics of cultures, while realizing that these specifics are hybrid. In other words, we should try to harness "global" resources to promote both cultural difference and dialogue between cultures.

ZK: *With the growth of 'New Writing in English' there has been resurgence in English writing in post-colonial world. With this changed situation the other national literatures of post-colonial cultures slowly being sidelined. Suddenly we are in a world where if you do not speak English you do not have a voice. In the post-Cold War era where English has virtually become the lingua franca of the world, national literatures would definitely face a difficult situation. As an editor of *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, how you are looking at the issue? Is it part of your editorial policy to promote translation of national literatures of the post-colonial cultures?*

JT: The scope of the *Journal* doesn't extend to promoting translation itself, since we mainly publish critical articles, but we do encourage submissions on Commonwealth writing in other languages.

ZK: *There has been a greater*

nostalgia really a situation in which wonderful Indian writers using English, such as Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry and Amitav Ghosh, who is a particular favourite of mine, fulfil roles that were once taken up by writers such as John Masters or Paul Scott or M.M. Kaye.

JT: Yes, I think so, if I understand you rightly. Again, post-colonialism becomes a kind of Orientalism in which both writers and readers collude in creating an "authentic" dialogue that is in fact shot through with convenient appropriations. There's a kind of justification for this, of course, in that cultures are not hemically sealed, but I still think that the tendency to write and read in terms of expectations about the post-colonial or the national is regrettable. Arguably, as I've said, one can achieve a healthy balance by attempting to render local specifics, while recognising that such specifics are themselves hybrid. Again, it seems to me that a writer such as Amitav Ghosh does this brilliantly. Take his novel *The Shadow Lines*, for instance. This is a book that speaks across cultures and identifies "global" issues, but it does so through close-ups of particular social situations, most chillingly the effects of Partition in Bengal. It's a very fine example of being able to move in both directions.

ZK: *The theme of exile and a sense of displacement are present in most post-colonial writing. Is it only recently we are experiencing writers from post-colonial societies are setting their stories in a western scene. Salman Rushdie's Ground Beneath Her Feet and Vikram Seth's An Equal Music, for example. Do you feel that the early sense of displacement is gradually wearing away, and we would move and more experience colonial writers' exploring west from a decolonised point of view?*

JT: Yes, I think that displacement has been a concern of post-colonial writing for a considerable time. For example, the writing of the first generation of post-war Caribbean migrants into Britain, the so-called "Windrush generation", is centrally about displacement, both physical and psychological. Writers such as George Lamming, V.S. Naipaul and Sam Selvon are all concerned with this. Today I think there's a movement beyond this and a writer like Caryl Phillips, who is of Caribbean descent but grew up in England, has produced an anthology of writing by British people born outside the country. Its title is *Extravagant Strangers*, an allusion to *Othello*, which of course is an archetypal study of a displaced outsider in Europe, but more interestingly its sub-title is "A Literature of Belonging". So this suggests a movement beyond seeing migrants and their descendants as exiles; it insists that they should claim an *equal* space. And yes, this is a form of decolonization, but perhaps it also reflects the extent to which globalization (which in its negative aspects we're viewing as a new form of colonialism) legitimizes anyone's right to write about anything; and more importantly often provides them with the experience to do so.

ZK: *The focus in this area has always tended to be on fiction writers. Why do poets, essayists, and dramatists get left out of the discourse? Surely there are outstanding writers in these genres that deserve attention and discussion. What on this important question of 'multi-genre' representation in general?*

JT: Fiction always travels more easily, especially in terms of the mass-market kind of promotion I've mentioned. It's only the occasional poet who gets anything like this kind of attention; current examples would include writers such as Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and Les Murray, significantly none of them English or American. But, of course, even they don't achieve the same kind of audience as writers such as Rushdie, Margaret Atwood or Michael Ondaatje. I think, though, that you're right to imply that this has particularly been the case where South Asian writing is concerned and this is a great pity. Western perceptions of Indian poetry, for example, seem to have got stuck in a time-war and until comparatively recently most of the attention was still being lavished on the Nissim Ezekiel generation, who mainly belong to a late modernist tradition. It's almost as if the West settled for a convenient version of what Indian poetry in English might be, not exactly as a form of exoticism but as an encounter with something that was satisfyingly "different" without being too demanding so. Consequently the younger generation of poets has suffered, particularly when they draw on very local subjects and

traditions or when they are challenging cosmopolitan, as is the case with a poet such as Sudeep Sen, who is constantly rated as being among the finest young international poets. I think Sudeep is not fully fortunate in not finding a wider audience as yet and there is perhaps a particular reason for this. He is a brilliant craftsman, a very assured poet technically so most would say a poet's poet and I don't think this difficult aspect of his work is fully appreciated. If one thinks about the recognition that poets such as Derek Walcott, on whom I've written a book, Les Murray and Seamus Heaney have received, it's as much, if not more, for what they are saying about cultures as their technical brilliance. Simpler poets than Sudeep Sen receive more attention, but hopefully as time goes by this will change.

Drama, of course, receives no international attention until it is translated and I suppose non-English language drama is always going to be something of a poor relative in a world where English has become the lingua franca. So translation is all-important. In the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* we've recently published an interview with the French choreographer, Annette Leday, who has collaborated extensively with Kerala dance theatre practitioners, for example in staging a Kathakali *King Lear*. This seems to me the kind of work that helps to build bridges across cultures and provides a fine example of how the local and the global can be productively brought together. I'm proud that we were able to print this interview in *JCL*, and to play our own small part in this kind of dynamic cultural brokerage.

ZK: *Do you think that The Journal of Commonwealth Literature needs to have wider mainstream distribution, so that academics, students, lay readers from all parts of the world can have access to it and afford it?*

JT: I'd love to see the *Journal* have wider distribution and I've been in discussions with the publishers concerning this. Regrettably, its commercial base is an academic journal with a majority of library subscribers. While one knows that every library copy will be read many more times than those sent to individual subscribers, it would still be pleasing to see it priced in such a way that lay readers around the world could afford their own copies.

ZK: *What are your future plans, both for this journal and your own work?*

JT: Future plans for the *Journal* mainly revolve around the matters we've discussed. I'd like to see it publishing more material on writing in languages other than English. There are thousands of languages in use around the Commonwealth and, to take an example I've not mentioned before, we receive hardly any submissions on French-Canadian writing, let alone Canadian's many minority languages. I'd like to see the *Journal* reaching more individual subscribers. Above all, I hope the quality of what we publish can get better and better. I feel very positive on this score, since we're receiving more submissions than ever before. Regrettably it means that we have to disappoint many potential contributors, but it does mean that we are publishing more and more very fine work. My own future plans include completing a glossary of post-colonial studies for the publishers, Arnold. I edited a large anthology of post-colonial writing, which appeared five years ago, for them and this is reaching a wide audience. Last year I completed a bibliography of Commonwealth and post-colonial writing for the British Council and so the glossary will as it were complete a triptych. Then I can concentrate more on my own writing. I'm currently writing a book on R.K. Narayan, whose fiction I have always admired greatly. I was fortunate enough to meet him, just the once, in Chennai in late 1997, and since then I've spent time researching his papers in American libraries in Boston and Texas. So all the groundwork for this book is done, though most of the writing lies ahead.

I continue to do quite a bit of writing for reference-works and I'm currently working on encyclopaedia entries on Amitav Ghosh. And then there's all the editorial work: in addition to the *Journal*, I edit a book series for Manchester University Press and I've recently become an editor of an on-line literary encyclopaedia, which is a very exciting project. I hope this will become a major resource and, if so, it will be an example of globalism as its best, providing free access to information on literature to anyone or rather anyone who has access to a computer and can read English. Perhaps that's a note on which to end: globalism is enfranchising everyone in theory, but in practice it's creating a new information elect. I think this is a slight improvement from older divisions along rigid economic lines, but in many cases the difference isn't that great. The starving millions in the famine-torn regions of Africa are as cut off from information as they are from food.

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ESSAY

Naipaul's Islam : A one-way street

Naipaul's failures are personal; but the trouble begins when he is projected as a major intellectual spokesman of the West and readers are asked to take his views about Islam seriously, says Faisal Shahriar

Squalor and stench attracted his attention more than scenic beauty and fragrance.

THE Swedish Academy Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for 2001 to V. S. Naipaul barely a month after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. Timing is the heart of the matter as Geof Boycott would have said. The Trinidad-born Britisher has been amply rewarded for his five-decade-long service to Western letters. But the Nobel Prize had eluded Graham Greene for almost an equal length of time. Sometimes exotic guests are more welcome than home-bred products.

V. S. Naipaul can boast of some distinguished ancestry. In the initial period of European colonization of the East, the human traffic was essentially a one-way affair: traders, military conquerors and scholars journeyed from Europe to the then exotic Orient with their diverse quests. Some sought gold and spices, some pure "glory" while others were mesmerized by the hypothetical mysteries of Asia. It was only later that the reverse traffic began, with awe-struck wogs travelling to Europe, only to come back with glowing accounts of Western splendour and might. Rammothen Roy was one of the first travellers from Europe to India; the Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib was another, though his was a very prosaic journey, intended to claim back a direly needed inheritance. But the first of a very influential stream of travellers from India was Babu Satyendranath Tagore, eldest brother of poet Rabindranath. He was the first Indian I.C.S., a group which decisively influenced Indian opinion of Europe in general and Britain in particular, at least until the First World War. They were unabashed admirers of everything that emanated from the West, be it clothes or music or poetry or something as potentially complicated as the desirable shape of political things to come for India. For some, if not most, of them, "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" was political medicine as appropriate for 19th century India as for revolutionary France, with the right dose of Westministerism added. In his youth, as he was to admit himself later, Rabindranath was an ardent admirer of the West. Disillusionment was to set in later. In a speech delivered on the occasion of his last birth anniversary, he described the long route he had covered, over decades spanning two centuries, from Anglophilia to the sad realization that Western socio-political medicine was not appropriate for India.

In these matters, the emergence of Gandhi after the war marked a watershed. Aping the West, metaphorically speaking, rapidly went out of fashion. Although Gandhi sometimes harked back to the hypothetical Golden Age of Hinduism, possibly the most immediate outcome of the phase of anti-British movement under his leadership was a turning away from the West in socio-cultural matters and a search for India's own heritage, however unpleasant it might have been. Since then, in matters cultural, India has learnt to hold its own.

But the ghost of Westernism refuses to be laid to rest. Part of India's post-independence intelligentsia has refused to sever its cultural ties with the West. In an attempt at reverse cultural colonization, some South Asian writers have claimed a Western audience as their birthright as "spiritual children" of the West: some have found it. They are products of post-colonialism, a very significant term; apparently, it's almost impossible to drift totally away from the mother country. However, the post-colonial writers are not excessively enamoured of the virtues of the West. All that they demand, and quite often get, is a middle-brow Caucasoid audience. For fervent appreciation, the West still has to depend on a much older species: the brown sahib. The late and not-too-lamented Nirad C. Chowdhury was a celebrated example. Born in a lower middle class family in the deep backwoods of colonial East Bengal, he was inspired by a ferocious passion after reading English literary classics at a tender age; too tender, some would say. The after-effect of the experience stayed with him as, after decades of yearning, he finally settled down in England, truly a dream fulfilled.

Compared with Nirad C. Chowdhury, V. S. Naipaul's route was much more tortuous. It began in what is now the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh from where his family moved to the Caribbean decades ago. For Naipaul, the link with India has always been an uneasy legacy. It is something that cannot be denied, but neither can it be owned fully. In the '50s Naipaul moved to the Oxford. The rest is history. Over the following decades, he succeeded in making his mark on Western letters. But, somehow, his Oriental heritage continued to haunt him, in ways in

which only the Orient can haunt. In recent years, Naipaul has veered away from fiction to non-fiction. He has focused mainly on India, his ancestral land, and Islam in his non-fiction. The link between the two is of vital significance, though not exactly obvious at first glance. Although Islam has become part of the social history of South Asia over the last one thousand years, a certain school of Indian politician-historians would like to go back to India's "pure", Aryan past. For them, as for Naipaul, the last thousand years of South Asian history are the cause of acute embarrassment. But their stages are entirely different. Whereas the former have to fight it out in the political arena of the region, Naipaul, as the Western man-of-letters, can afford to adopt an apparently more detached position. But even then, Naipaul's specific Indian ancestry continues to haunt him.

"Beyond Belief", the latest of V. S. Naipaul's books on Islam, was published in 1998. Naipaul starts off with a testamentary prologue where he states that in the 20th century, the travelogue has replaced the novel as the vehicle of the zeitgeist. But, he maintains, the author can distance himself from the scene in the same way as Victorian novelists claimed to attain Olympian objectivity. In the first chapter, Naipaul becomes as involved in his material as the Victorians, if not more. He starts off on the wrong foot, with a hypothetical dichotomy between Arab and non-Arab Islam. Islam is essentially an Arab religion, Naipaul asserts, and in some sense, non-Arab Muslims are not "real" Muslims. Obviously, the analogy can be stretched to assert that non-Palestinian Christians are not "real" Christians. That would leave only a few hundred thousand Christians in the world. Although Christ began with Saint Paul, no one has ever assumed that he would have preferred his doctrine never to have crossed the Mediterranean.

It's obvious from the prologue that Naipaul either holds some deep grudge against the monotheistic religions or he lacks any sort of empathy towards them. The principal ground for grudge seems to be the hypothesis that somehow, non-Arab Muslims lost their identity after

European colonizers, to be supplanted by immigrant Indian and African labour. In a poignant passage in "Beyond Belief", Naipaul recalls stories heard during his childhood days in Trinidad of descendants of the pre-Columbian inhabitants of Trinidad coming over in canoes from the mainland to perform their traditional rituals at the sacred places of their forefathers. For the Indians and Africans living on the island, it was an enigma. Trinidad had been turned into a plantation economy: the whole purpose of the island was to produce sugar for the colonial metropolis. So the boy Naipaul was doubly deprived: he could not claim India as his motherland, neither did he have any link to Trinidad's past, however shadowy it might have been. It was an abominable metaphorical vacuum. Out of this vacuum grew Naipaul's fascination for the past, however irrelevant it might be. And for him, the only past that was also possible was India's pre-Islamic period. Possibly it was a mere co-incidence, but out of this co-incidence has grown Naipaul's whole attitude towards Islam. For Islam is the socio-political force which ravaged India; not only that, it never truly acknowledged the debt that Islam supposedly owes to India itself.

So apparently, Naipaul would like Islam to curtsy in two directions: to the zeitgeist that immediately preceded it, in a sort of grateful acknowledgement, and towards the West for its myriad marvels.

What Naipaul fails to understand is that over the last 1500 years, Islam has developed a distinct set of socio-political criteria of its own by which Muslims evaluate the performance and potential of other societies. But in Naipaul's perception, it's an exclusively one-way traffic: towards societies, be they Caucasoic or sub-Himalayan, sit in judgement over Islam while Muslims act as passive observers and nothing more. It's Naipaul's very personal perception and he had never taken the trouble to find out whether the supposedly passive agent finds the idea agreeable.

If nothing else, the conception of Islam as a passive historical agent provides an extremely distorted view of human society over the last

becoming Muslims: they went adrift from their national heritage. Analogically, post-Vedic Indians had certainly strayed from their heritage and Kalidasa was not a proper Indian. If only Naipaul had taken the trouble to study carefully the history of his adopted homeland, he would have known that over the last three thousand years, even as small a territory as the island of Britain has absorbed influences from as diverse sources as the Roman legions and the Scandinavian Vikings, to its own considerable benefit.

Naipaul is not exactly hostile towards Islam. It's just that he feels uncomfortable about it. Unfamiliarity may be part of the explanation. Firstly, he thinks that non-Arab Muslims are not grateful inheritors of their respective pre-Islamic pasts; secondly, they do not give adequate recognition to the hypothetical debt they owe to the present-day West. Analogically, few people, if any at all, expect present-day Americans to feel any sort of gratitude towards the Red Indians, the original inhabitants of North America, most of whom have died out anyway. On the second count, it would appear that Naipaul is personalizing a historical phenomenon. Collectively speaking, there are few conceivable grounds for Asiatics at least to feel gratitude towards the West. Personalization, it seems, is the principal flaw in Naipaul's perception of Islam. Grandson of Indian immigrants, he was born in the British Caribbean colony of Trinidad. By the time he was born, the island had become a synthetic human entity: Trinidad's original inhabitants had been driven away

one and a half thousand years. After Christianity, and unlike Hinduism, Islam undoubtedly has been the most vital socio-political force shaping the course of human history over the last 1500 years. Even if Islam's historical role is totally ignored, the fact that it has provided the most potent non-Western political alternative on a global scale since the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979 and, more so since the end of the Gulf War, cannot be denied.

The apparent flaw in V. S. Naipaul's perception is most probably due to the fact that he treats Islam as a static phenomenon: for him, the hypothetical damage that it caused to Indian society centuries ago is more important than its dynamic present-day role as the only viable political alternative to the West. It logically leads to the other wonder: Naipaul fails to acknowledge that far from one-way admiration, except for exceptionally brief periods, the long-term interests of Islam have always been diametrically opposed to those of the West. In his failure, he belongs in the illustrious company of the late Emir Faisal of Hijaz, the friend and patron of Lawrence of Arabia, the noted British adventurer.

Naipaul's failures are personal; but the trouble begins when he is projected as a major intellectual spokesman of the West and readers are asked to take his views about Islam seriously. Much of it derives from a very idiosyncratic view of the history of Islam; it also assumes total silence on the part of the audience. Unfortunately, that is no longer a tenable postulate.



V.S. Naipaul: A singular writer