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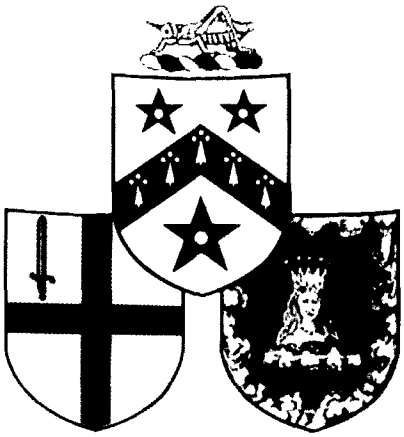

GLOBAL VOICES: SECOND-RATE WRITING FROM THIRD WORLD COUNTRIES?

A Lecture by

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Global Voices: Second-Rate Writing from Third World Countries?

Professor Lynette Hunter

Of course the question mark is there in the title because I do not think the writing is second-rate at all. Nor am I happy with the description 'Third World Country', with its implicit evaluation of a place as not the best, nor even the second best, but making a third rank. But both these rankings imply a 'first rate' writing and a 'first world' country, the relationship between which is at the centre of this lecture. The relationship calls upon a notion of national literatures and national identities; and necessarily also asks how individuals and writers relate to those national identities, and how the people living in those nations relate to either or both. The basic questions I would like to work around today are these: do artists represent us culturally? and, is the artist a cultural hero?

In the first lecture of this series I mentioned that artists are traditionally the licensed transgressors of the state, the people who are allowed to question, criticise, even subvert the activities that nations allow their citizens. And that word 'allow' needs some explanation. Think about the democracy we live in, one man - one vote, although of course these days it's one person - one vote. But the idea that we might all somehow converge upon parliament and express our opinions is simply not practical. (It is almost practical in this electronic age, but not quite.) Our country, along with many European nations over the past few hundred years, has decided upon a representative democracy as the governing strategy of the state. If you have a representative democracy, you need a sense of what will be represented; and until this century that meant a small group of citizens of property. You also need ways of negotiating over appropriate representation, and, failing this, at least agreement about adequate representation - a sense of this will have to do.

Now, representation in politics and art as representation are closely connected. Art is where representation is questioned and possibly changed. Revolutions are supposed to change things, but they frequently end by substituting one group for another. There have been many studies in recent times about the problems with this model of 'adequate representation', partly because, in contrast to the past 250 years, there is now a much greater diversity of people to be represented; and partly because after the full franchise did arrive, in this country in 1929, many people still found that they were not represented. The frustration over that could be said to be the root of the 1968 unrest.

But WHY were people not represented?

One reason is simply that the representations hammered out over the previous 250 years to 1920, had had all sorts of effects on those people excluded from representation - almost as if shadow-representations were being built behind the mirror. Think of Alice in Wonderland: on one side she's a prim and pretty, well brought up young girl, and on the other she's a mass of strange dreams that can't get free. Think of Jekyll and Hyde, and the multitude of split personalities that litter the 19th century novel. Think of all those fantasies where people go to try to make their own representations, to escape. Think of Peter Pan.

Another reason people found they were not represented is that recognised, valued and legitimate ways of presenting the individual, which had been in place for 250 years, are difficult to shift. When you gain access to political power, you are expected to behave the way everyone who has had power has behaved, rather than carve out a new kind of activity. So, for example, the dialect stories of the mid-

19th century that tried to present the language and way of life of people outside the ruling groups, are long forgotten because they are not 'proper English'. And writing from the English-speaking places outside of England has had difficulty being recognised and valued in proportion to its ability to fit the allowed representations on offer.

What I would ask you to keep in mind is this rather caricatured sense of 'allowed' representation.

It causes terrible problems for writers who use the English language in ways that are specific to other cultures, and today I want to talk about writers from Canada and from the Indian sub-continent, although we must remember the increasing number of writers in England itself who would fit this category, as well as writers from many other parts of the world. Even more narrowly, since later lectures will discuss other writings, I want to talk about the writing from people in different cultures and societies, writing that, to varying extents, educators and publishers in this country do recognise and value. Hence these writings are implicitly fitting into allowed representations, even as they challenge them. What I would like to suggest is that these writings are frequently perceived by people in England as talking about relationships between nation and individual, between state and subject, which are similar to our own; whereas, they may in effect be suggesting something else.

The problems facing English language writers from Canada or from India or Pakistan or Bangladesh or Sri Lanka, are different, but are bound to the same source: that the language is imbued with the traditions and structures of another nation. For some, that other nation has swept in, taken over, and to a very great extent simply ignored and therefore erased the values of the existing culture, and because it is so powerful, its language conveys power. Every time you use English, you are using the language of the powerful, the language that has painted your own history out with a swathe of crimson blood. How can you use that language without duplicating the erasure? For others the relationship with English is more tricky: English may be your language of birth, but it may well not be the same kind of English as the valued language of the privileged people who rule. How can you use that language as a representative medium without duplicating the light interlocking not only between the individual and the ruling powers of the nation, but also between the subject and the state? The nation being partly if not wholly someone else's country, to which you are writing yourself in as subject, subservient to, allowed by.

Franz Fanon, who as you will know was a critic from the middle of this century, dealing with French colonialism, used the structures of psychoanalysis to try to describe the terrible schizophrenia that resulted from the dilemma, most famously in his book *Black Face, White Mask.* He described a seemingly inextricable mirroring, that others such as V.S. Naipaul wrote into his book *The Mimic Men.* More recent writers, such as Homi Bhabha and Salman Rushdie, have extended the image further; and those people who care about this writing have argued that the books write back to the Empire, or have picked up on Rushdie's phrase that the Empire is writing back to the centre after many years of being overwritten by it. But there is a terrible sense of oppositionality, that what the writer does is only in reaction to something they see in the mirror, that they are locked in a continual debate or contest that can never break, never bring anything new.

Margaret Atwood wrote a poem about this called 'The Circle Game', not explicitly about new writings in English, but about families and daily life: that children get caught into ritual games that come to define their lives into a series of oppositions - child/parent, lover/loved, individual/society or history or geography or nation - and the desperate need to break the code. She later formalised it into a book, published in 1973, that many people dismiss, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature.* But this book, or essay, outlines the structures of victimisation as the main force in cultural domination, and is absolutely clear about the need to act not against the culture that

dominates but against the position of victim, although she is not so clear on how this might be carried out.

Much more recently, earlier this year in fact, Amitav Ghosh was quite open about how he saw this working. In some readings, his work could be an excellent example of the Empire writing back to the Centre. Ghosh writes books that you don't want to put down: they are accessible, and tell a good story. His novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* negotiates precisely the oppositions of 'power' and 'colonised' in a novel that isolates and relates across 100 years of history in the India of the 1890s and that of the 1990s, from a later New York perspective of around 2020. He takes a form found in many other writings from the 19th century on, the mystery or detective story, and crosses it with a little science fiction. There are echoes here of Charles Dickens's classic thriller 'The Train Driver' or of G.K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*, but it is more like that radical announcing of the post-modern in French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet's *The Erasers* that has many progeny, not the least among Canadian writers.

This form of the novel questions certainties, factual, behavioural or moral, by establishing counter-examples, in much the same way as the certainties themselves are established. *The Calcutta Chromosome* raises issues central to colonialism, racism and power, by dramatising or giving a narrative to the previously unheard. And the strategy is extremely important because we can hear it easily; the 'Centre' can recognise the issues and actually listen to suggestions. But at the same time the strategy casts the lives of the previously unheard largely into recognisable characteristics; it binds them to roles and spaces that the Centre has allotted - especially those of science which make up much of the content.

Ghosh has said in a recent essay that the Indian novel in English allows for a universalising civilisation and, paradoxically, at the same time, a sense of place and parochiality. The combination of universality and parochiality is a central feature of the novel as a genre, and of the history of response to modern 'representation', that we are all unique individuals at the same time as being 'universal' or representable. But there are two problems. First, whose 'universal' is this? According to Ghosh it's the Nobel Peace Prize universal. The universal of people in the 19th century who all read each other's novels; in other words the universal of a very small group of like-minded writers and critics, people among the privileged and powerful. That it is valuable is undoubted, but that it is universal is not. And second, the 'place' conveyed is bound into that universal; it may, by its parochial detail critique, satirise, or ironise it, but it must take the grounds of that universal as the floor upon which to dance. Of course the novel is a genre chronologically concurrent with representative democracy in western nations. It has been a central place to discuss, contest and possibly re-draw those representations. It offers a form that people can feel comfortable with at the same time as engaging them. So it is not surprising that publishers and educators in this country are more interested in the novel than in poetry.

There are many ways of challenging this interlocking relationship between the novel, representation and the nation, and I will now go on to talk about several more writers who all offer different approaches. Writers for example like Githa Hariharan whose novels and short stories focus on the detail, the parochiality of personal experience, drawing on the mythology and the stories of the older people around her. *The Thousand Faces of Night* is more an example of writing back to the Empire, embedding the novel with folk-tale. It is significant that Ghosh has said that folk-tale is truly universalising just because it leaves out the parochial, and is found these days more in the media or in film. But Hariharan uses it with the opposite impetus: far from being universalising, it is intensely local. This book uses folk-tale structurally to break down the larger assumptions that the novel form

can carry. The sheer weight of local story and the many diverse interpretations it can generate, questions the stability of the grounds on which we might base an evaluation.

Ghosh describes these stories as originating in the *Panchatantra* or *Five Chapters*, compiled early in the first millennium and passing into Arabic in the sixth century as *The Thousand and One Nights*. It can be no mistake that Hariharan's book is called *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Hariharan uses a completely different set of stories to challenge the fixity of 'representation' that is on offer from the British colonial past and the United States' colonial present. These stories 'allow' her to live differently, or at least to suggest that this is possible. Their permission comes from quite a different place, not particularly powerful in the global democracies, and her corporation-man husband never does understand them.

At the other extreme, pushing the 'universals' into such excess that they disintegrate, if you like, is the writer Salman Rushdie. If we take his novel-allegory *The Satanic Verses*, we find a book that on the one hand makes large claims for a perception that is transnational and universalising. It can move from Pakistan to England and metamorphose the culture as it does so - which is one of the main reasons people have been so upset with it. On the other hand it speaks in a profoundly moving way about the difficulties of migration, the way that lost culture stays with us like a ghost limb that we've forcibly had to amputate. I think most people have had similar experiences, but not necessarily on the same scale, even though there are more and more people world-wide who have become 'migrants'. In fact, *The Satanic Verses* is a major contribution to English culture, and possibly only to English culture, because it attempts to subvert the usual English representations of immigrants from Pakistan and Moslem immigrants from many countries, as 'foreign', by writing ways that immigrants become part of society and no longer foreign. In other words, though it may be the 'Empire writing back to the Centre', it is also a re-casting of those terms, where 'Empire' has disappeared, where 'Centre' and 'margin' are dissolved into a joint existence.

What is interesting though is that despite pushing the 'universals' of race and ethnicity out of the picture, Rushdie's artist is still a hero. The Artist is the one who can open up possibilities for others. In a sense this was Rushdie's undoing, the book was too heroic. It claimed to represent people who are making their own negotiations with society. It is as if the book works for the in-place English rather than the immigrant society. But part of the problem with *The Satanic Verses* is how the book is written. How many people have actually read it? Very few from my personal questioning. Rushdie plays radically with words, syntax, and rhythm, and produces what I call the '100-page introduction' novel, which the reader has to learn how to read as they go along. We all need good reasons for this investment of time, and if we don't have them we won't persist. My reasons were that I had read and enjoyed other Rushdie novels; I had read similar works in roughly the same contexts and was willing to take a chance on this one for their sake; and most important I had a reading community with which to discuss. Other readers clearly had different contexts for reading, contexts that read the book as naturalistic rather than allegorical; those readers also had different reading communities which were either not supportive so they stopped reading, or were constructing quite different arguments to those of my own. However, it is through that radical play with language and literary form that Rushdie manages to push the universals over the edge.

If style is perceived to be difficult, readers will often stop reading, and the tension between writing 'differently' to make 'literature', but not writing 'too differently', preoccupies many: writers write to be read after all. Margaret Atwood is a writer who has chosen not to play with the building blocks of language, to which readers frequently find it difficult to adjust their ears. Instead, she experiments with genres of the novel: romance, travel writing, the gothic, horror/mystery, science fiction: larger scale techniques familiar to us via film and television. This emphasis on genre makes her writing,

like Ghosh's, eminently accessible: she has single-handedly kept Virago publishing from sinking, such is her popularity. And people do listen to her. Yet she is also often held to be banal because the writing can seem too conventional.

Atwood's work is, if you like, concerned with two Centres: England and the United States, and she is far more worried about the latter. For example, take her novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which the United States is characterised as a paradigm for the 20th century political systems of extreme individualists versus the totalitarian state, here conveyed by fundamentalist religion. The state clearly allows only certain roles to valued citizens, especially the women who function as Marthas, Handmaids, Wives, or sink into the mass of Econowives. The book is an exceptional display of how easy it may be to be brainwashed, to go along with, to become complicit in, those roles or representations. Its narrative offers an allegory of Nazi Germany or collaborative France, but also of Iran and the Roumania Atwood was visiting on behalf of the international organisation PEN in the early 80s when she was writing.

Her next novel, *Cat's Eye*, offers more gentle criticism of England. It starts off with the extraordinary double life led by a young girl and her family who live in the backwoods of Canada because the father is a biologist, while World War II rages across the other side of two oceans. When the family eventually move to Toronto after the war, the girl, Elaine, has to learn how to *be* a 'girl', and her brother has to learn how to be a boy. In a section marvellously titled 'Empire Bloomers', with all the double senses that conveys, the girls learn from Eaton's Catalogues - Eaton's being like a Canadian version of John Lewis

> *here we treat these catalogues with reverence. We cut the small coloured figures out of them and paste them into scrapbooks. Then we cut out other things - cookware, furniture - and paste them around the figures. The figures themselves are always women. We call them 'My lady'. 'My lady's going to have this refrigerator', we say. 'My lady's getting this rug'. 'This is my lady's umbrella'.*
>
> *Grace and Carol look at each other's scrapbook pages and say, 'Oh, yours is so good. Mine's no good. Mine's awful'. They say this every time we play the scrapbook game. Their voices are wheedling and false; I can tell they don't mean it, each one thinks her own lady on her own page is good. But it's the thing you have to say, so I begin to say it too.*

They learn from the School about going into the 'girls' door, about the English flag and the British Empire; they learn from their mothers about what women are allowed to do. And the boys learn similar things on their side of the playground. Eventually Elaine learns how to be an artist, and her brother how to be a scientist: the paradigmatic representors of the nation. Elaine's paintings, that we see throughout the novel, are expressions that negotiate the representations around her. Each section of the novel has one focused piece of art, such as the triptych of her mother, that fades her image completely out of the picture by the third panel; or the women who fall off the bridge onto the jagged rocks of the men below; or the Three Muses: the marginal people of Elaine's life, Miss Stuart, Mrs Finestein and Mr Bannerji. Given that the novel traverses the difficulty women have in loving one another, even the claim that they are brought up to hate one another, Elaine never quite works this out, never paints a picture of this except in the very effort of producing the book.

Her brother learns the science of the stars, a fantastic world, displaced from our own yet supposedly powerful. He never negotiates the real world, but lives in a narcissistic cocoon. And 99% of the time he fits into this heroic mould, or it fits him. Just occasionally, when he goes chasing butterflies on a

military exclusion zone, or when he attempts single-handedly and single-mindedly to halt a terrorist hijack, do we see his self-absorption for the narrow megalomania that it is. He dies in the hijack events simply because it never crosses his mind that the terrorists will not obey him. Atwood's artists may also be heroes, but at least they lead split lives: in public and responsive to the media, supposedly responsible to the public and representing them, negotiating representations for them; but also in private as individuals, subject to representations, bound by them. At least, unlike scientists, Atwood implies, the artist knows that they are not personally a hero, only representing that nation/individual negotiation.

Atwood's *The Robber Bride* is a novel for the 1990s. Her central characters are mostly women: the marginalised, the self-marginalising drop-out, the conventional, and the New Woman. This last is global, transnational, amoral; wildly seductive, promising everyone something yet in the end taking all energy away. Here Atwood introduces the interesting concept that nations and national identities can twist us and mould us and distort us, but at least we have 400 years of learning about how that happens; we have the rules of thumb to know how to work in that system. In a transnational, global culture we just don't know enough, yet, about how to respond. And the struggles are shifting. As nations lose their economic controls to global structures, where does power over negotiation lie? Perhaps the relation between the nation and the individual can become an important agency in responding to global pressures that will inevitably come alongside the need to create and maintain markets for transnational corporations. Just as along with MacDonald's we have the extraordinary volume of writing on national and local foodstuffs, so perhaps with art, along with the Nobel Peace Prize literatures that Amitav Ghosh describes as 'universalising', we will have the local literatures and new kinds of emerging national literatures seeking to resist, criticise and re-draw the representations allowed this time by the global.

What's fascinating about Atwood is that she can lay it all out as a possibility, in great achievements of imagination, but does little to suggest how we might act as individuals. At another extreme from her explicit commentary, almost like criticism, on the nation and transnational capitalism, is the writing of another Canadian Michael Ondaatje, which focuses on the individual as subject. His early, richly metaphorical writing and lyric prose documents, in book after book, the tension of the artist as simultaneously heroic lawbreaker and structuring legislator. Many of you will know *The English Patient*, either in book or film form, which is the product of a long line of inquiry about the rights of the individual as against the rights of ruling powers. In the preceding novel from which he brings a number of characters, *In the Skin of a Lion*, Ondaatje talks about the artist as a social being, part of a very small community of anarchists, whose actions, which all stem from passion and love, seem to change nothing in the face of the ruling powers. But, their stories and dances give them presence, insert them into history, allow them to clothe their shadows and represent themselves. Ondaatje here allegorises the whole procedure of art within Canada. The country has few representations of its own, no history of own. The artist doesn't represent people within the nation, but gives people the agency to represent themselves - although Ondaatje doesn't go so far as to say that this has an impact on the nation.

The English Patient puts the morality of individual and state more starkly, strips it of its 'artistic' justification and leaves only passion or love. Does the passion of the stateless individual have any rights? Do the 'unrepresented' have any guidelines or responsibilities to behaviour? Why should love respect the 'sides' of global warfare? If all war is immoral, does it matter? Ondaatje gives us many guidelines in the book as to the responsibility we all should shoulder for global awareness - but how to connect that with the intensity, or indeed the banality - of daily life. He does remind us of the brutality of fascism; he does explicitly foreground the other worlds of Asian and North American that could have remained outside the conflict yet somehow get caught up in it, and he reminds us of the

nomadic worlds of North Africa which continue on outside the conflict: this is not a *world* war. And if we have problems with the betrayal, then why should the artist be let off the hook when they 'betray' their nation? is this another example of the difficulty of working within a transnational society where we just do not yet know what the guidelines are?

As Ondaatje has matured, and particularly since he wrote the family history *Running in the Family*, he has become more and more aware of who holds power in his society. But the nation he sees is not a well-defined state, but one that acts almost as another individual within the larger scale of transnational global power. The shift of economic power from the nation state to the transnational corporation fundamentally disarranges the relationship between the subject and the state. If Atwood's artist both represents the public and is also the subject of representation, is both heroic and unheroic, Ondaatje's artist is almost blind to the public. His artist knows the public exists but does not interact with it; his artist behaves as a hero when it is simply inappropriate, or the public takes him as a hero when of course he's 'only human'.

Despite many similarities, there's a gulf of difference between these Canadian writers who frequently turn to other people's stories and histories to write their own, and the Indian sub-continent writers who have a parallel tradition on which to draw. Many of you will be familiar with the work of Gayatri Spivak, and her work on finding a vocabulary that values what cultures outside the mainstream are doing in terms of what she has called the 'subaltern'. I have a problem with 'subaltern', although I respect the work being done, partly because of the connotations of sub-inferior, or altern - alternative - not necessary; but also because 'subaltern' is the lowest rank of British officer, not powerful but representing power. Many of her discussions deal with the marginally powerful people like intellectuals or valued writers who are privileged if not part of the ruling group, although it has to be said that recently she has paid more attention to people right outside issues of ruling power.

More real for me is the work of Himani Bannerji, a Hindu from Pakistan, now working in Canada. In one piece of autobiographical criticism that acutely describes her experience of writing in English, and is remarkably similar to Githa Hariharan's work, she bases a story that is a grieving for her mother's death within an allegory taken straight from Bengali epic. Parts of it read like a grossly out of place Angela Carter horror story, until Bannerji talks us through it. A brief example:

> *She gently pulled me towards her, while walking nimbly into the forest. In the gathering darkness I noticed that her feet were faintly luminous and suspended above the ground. Keeping her great head poised, her gaze fixed at the gnarled entrance and tremendously muscular arms of the forest, she uttered repeatedly.*
>
> *- Bhayang nasti. There is nothing to fear. Aisho. Come.*
>
> *....Where shall we go? I asked, where hide and seek shelter for the night? What will nourish us and quench our thirst?*
>
> *- Woman's body is both the source of uncleanliness and life, she said. So have the sages spoken. Let us go into that gate, that body, she said, to ascertain the verity of their famed masculine, Brahmin intellect and pronouncements. Let us, O daughter of woman, enter into your mother's womb, the disputed region itself, where for many months you sat in abject meditation and waiting, nourished by the essence of her life....*

Bannerji goes on to try to explain the context for her relationship with her mother, but notes that:

> *we can perhaps see how it expresses a sensibility alien to English and the post-modern literary world that we inhabit. I need to struggle not at the level of images and language alone - but at the levels of tonality and genre as well. It is a text with holes for the Western reader. It needs extensive footnotes, glossaries, comments, etc. - otherwise it has gaps in meaning, missing edges.*

From this point she tells us not about the social and familial context for the writing, but the literary. How the epic, and fiction that used its motifs, was a form read in the mid-20th century largely by women, for relaxation. How Bengali literature and even language was the common world of the home and the ordinary daily lives of common people, rather than the English-language world of men working at their business. Hence to her, the Bengali epic brings memories of being with her grandmother and mother. And she tells another kind of story about this closeness:

> *I am about eleven years of age, by now secretly nourished with the romantic and sentimental extravaganzas of much of 19th and 20th century Bengali fiction. I know however that I can not disclose much of what they call in Bengali 'untimely ripeness' to grown-ups. But I am lonely. My brothers are young and callow. We are too high up socially to mix with many people, and Hindus to boot in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan which substantially narrows socialising. I say to my mother, 'Do you think it's fair that Gobindalal should have killed Rohini like that? I don't think she alone is to blame'. My mother is not pleased.* Krishnakanter Will, *Bankim's classic fiction on lust, adultery and murder is not her idea of a young girl's reading. A flour and dough covered hand grips my wrist. 'Don't touch those shelves, don't ever read these books without my permission. They are not meant for you'. 'What should I read then?' I ask defiantly. 'Read - read - good books. Those you have in English'. 'I don't enjoy reading in English', I say. 'I have so much trouble figuring sentences out, that I don't even notice what they are really saying. And besides why do you have them if they are not good books?' After a short period of silence she said, 'OK, you can read some of them. Read* Anada Math. *Read* Rajsingha, *but definitely not* Bisha Briksha *or* Krishnakanter Will.

This kind of writing is Himani Bannerji's linguistic and literary home. If English language readers from outside that culture and society want to read it, they have to be able to fill the gaps. Again, I think we need to ask why we would try to do so? Bannerji argues that people outside ruling power, and people working on words outside recognised valued and canonical literature, not only have another culture, but also one that has far more potential for thinking about radically new ways of relating to national culture. Turning to other literary traditions can open the door to different kinds of actions and representations that we could take up. In Canada, however, turning elsewhere is tricky. The only alternative traditions of writing are steeped in canonical value, British, American, European. But there are a lot of writers, not ones who are published in this country though, who are trying to make traditions and communities of value out of the structuring elements of language and literature, and often not with the novel.

I would like to end with one of my favourite writers, the Canadian Frank Davey, who is a precise and very funny observer of the way that images catch us, hold us down to certain kinds of behaviour, and what we might do to act differently. One sequence he wrote about 10 years ago has considerable currency, *Postcard Translations*, which he worked on out of postcards sent by his great uncle to his grandmother in the 1890s. Take for example, 'The View'. All the 'translations' offer a title, which

refers to the picture on the front of the card, then a section of continuous prose which unpacks responses to the picture, and finally a single italicised line of short phrases that are like icons that the picture generates. With 'The View' the scene is clearly a landscape, and we immediately find out that it's a mountain scene. But the first time reader will not necessarily know what to do with the prose that follows. What is interesting about the formal devices is that the reader has to allow the title, prose and icon-line to intercomment, in order to make much sense of what is there. Again, why should we bother to try? I bothered because his society is supposedly close to mine and I wanted to find out about it. I also knew so many people who liked him as a person, that I guessed I might find something to like in his writing.

For example, the first line, 'Mountains can be humanised in a 3 by 5 field', clearly relates to 'Man and nature' or possibly 'Museum quality' or even possibly 'the local'. But what it most tellingly connects with is the statement that postcards allow the traveller to package nature. Postcards are not to do with art, because art questions and criticises packages for the world, even if it builds new packages at the same time. What postcards do is allow ordinary people to find a shorthand code for saying the unsayable. When we get a holiday postcard, we don't usually get excited about the image itself; they are invariably slightly faded and rather flat two-dimensional pictures. What we respond to is the implication that the scene holds the ability to cause emotion or physical response - here, in the only line that is attributed directly to the feelings of the writer, the way the spirit of the mountains will 'rise toward' us, engulfing us. But the end result of the postcard is that the natural landscape and the emotion become cultural objects, things that can be exchanged without any emotion and with little thought.

To work in any other way, the postcard must be relentlessly personal and local. This particular piece means more to someone who has travelled the trans-Canada highway than to someone who has not. If you know the prime minister at the time, held by some to be recklessly ignorant, then you read the 'supertanker sunsets' with a dry ironic humour. And if you know Frank Davey, the phrase 'eggcups', apparently completely out of place in that final line, you will recognise as an invitation to laugh at incongruity, to play at making something make sense: do they sit before the writer as he gazes out toward the Eibsee; or do they work like small inverted mountains; or, like a storm in an eggcup, do they contain immensity of the individual that is otherwise trivial or banal to others; or...? But the point is that the significance of the card, the energy that makes it more than simply a banal cultural object, comes from Davey's re-description or his writing around its implications.

Many of the postcards explicitly address the way popular culture is important for maintaining political representations, while art should try to challenge it. At the same time the cards frequently raise the issue of colonial and cultural domination. An individual may come to terms with a mountain in Canada or India, in much the same way. But if nature is packaged by commerce to satisfy the western tourist, then ways of representing it in India, become a version of western cultural domination. Yet how can we make sense of, understand, speak to, communicate with, other cultures without re-packaging each other into inadequate commodities? In one answer, 'The Elgin Marbles', Davey juxtaposes, 'The postcard hereby becomes an important vehicle of exchange and a foundation of the shared values of human culture', with 'You should see the African collection'. Despite the 'universal' values of the Elgin Marbles at the British Museum, 'You should spend as little time as possible in Athens', because of pollution. Despite the Attic grace, these peoples were also 'scandalous, barbarians'.

The italicised counterpoint makes the paragraph resonate with Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', which itself raises questions about the validity of western metaphysical traditions, and how to cross cultural, social and historical difference. At the same time, the question of who 'owns' the Elgin Marbles

raises issues of cultural ownership. Why does Athens want the Elgin Marbles back? Is it because there is only one copy and it should be a national resource? That the acropolis functions to define part of the cultural specificity of Greece, and that the Marbles are in London is a sign of continuing cultural domination? Perhaps, Davey suggests, 'You should try fibreglass' and produce many replicas, just as books are multiply replicated writings? This might circulate the image more widely, like a suddenly popular work deriving from a small but significant publication. At the same time, entrance into the world of commercial objects could release the representation into uncontrollable global significance.

Davey goes so far as to suggest that places outside 'valued' literature, like postcards, not only offer radically new ways of relating to national culture, but of contributing to it and shaping it. Representations are no longer something the nation allows its individuals, and that artists negotiate on behalf of individuals. Instead the representations carried by words can become the way that individuals very specifically contribute to a national identity, and that their own actions no longer need the writer as artist to mediate them but can be worked on by each person within a specific writing and reading community.

Things to think about:

1. It strikes me that Atwood, Rushdie, Ghosh and Ondaatje, *are* involved in thinking about the 'Centre' or the 'Empire' in ways that partly lock their writing into its assumptions. This writing is valued and listened to, and seems to speak directly, even though to greater or lesser extents, to readers in England precisely because its assumptions are familiar. Yet each of them pushes the novel into new areas, with a variety of techniques that destabilises that familiarity and suggests other relationships. What diverts the reader's attention from alternatives is that there is still the continual return to the writer as the person responsible for representing the dilemma of the individuals in their nation. The artists are to a greater or lesser extent heroic.

2. Other writers, it seems to me, are not so concerned about a wide readership, or about appealing to the 'universals', but do care about finding ways to say the self, to articulate personal experience, alongside canonical value, and in areas that have nothing to do with representation, but with involving the reader in thinking about how to say their own experience. (Hence the recent interest in diaries, journals, autobiographies.) When doing so, as we can read from the writers discussed here, there is a radical difference between those such as Hariharan and Bannerji who call on other parallel traditions, and those like Davey who cannot do so because their 'traditions' are thoroughly imbricated with the English and American language outside of which they want to work.

3. American postmodernism, which dismantles the available traditions from a position of cultural power, is, I would suggest, in a rather different and often cynical position, compared to, say, the Canadian writers like Davey who are trying to work alongside traditions in a different space. American postmodern novels like those by Brett Easton Ellis, or even English ones, by for example Ian McEwan or Martin Amis, often seem to strive for a 'thin' two-dimensional quality of surface. In contrast, writers from countries not in the same position of cultural power, are often laying foundations through challenging and difficult work into which they invite us to join.