Interview with Amit Chaudhari

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Allahabad Conference Volume

We are happy to inform you that the volume dedicated to the Forum's Allahabad conference theme has just been published by Taylor and Francis in UK and Routledge in India under the title *Media and Utopia: history, imagination, technology*. It is part of the ongoing series of the Forum on Contemporary Theory “Critical Interventions in Theory and Praxis.” The present volume has been edited by Arvind Rajagopal from New York University and Anupama Rao from Columbia University.
AV: I will start by asking about your double life as an academic and an artist. How do you partition time? How do you do both things? Do you consider yourself...?

AC: Firstly, I don’t consider myself an academic...

AV: Despite your academic training and position?

AC: Yes, despite my academic training and position. I read English as an undergraduate at University College London, but that was part of a strategy to go to England to get published and make a reputation as a poet. I was always interested in reading literature and thinking about literature, and I became increasingly interested in reading literature closely and thinking of literature as potentially a very exciting form of reading. That fed into my writing as well. But as I said, the strategy was to be in England and somehow then be picked up as a promising young poet, and that’s why I was an undergraduate at UCL. My interest in literature had probably always preceded any pursuit of creative writing as a vocation.

After I finished my B.A., I took a year off, began to write my first novel A Strange and Sublime Address and then applied to do D. Phil at Oxford. That again was part of this ongoing strategy to try and become a published poet. But of course I began this novel. Then I took six years to complete...
my D.Phil. For the first four years I did nothing at all and then in the last two years I wrote a D.Phil. The D.Phil was very unusual, in that there was very little research in it in any conventional sense. Oxford asks you to produce an original piece of scholarly work for the D.Phil, which means that it need not contain any original thinking, but it needs to have some original research in it. Mine didn’t have any original research.

I spent one day in the Bodleian and that one day I took my *Collected Poems of D H Lawrence* with me and stared at the *Collected Poems* and didn’t know what research I should be doing. And then I thought okay, I don’t have to abide by the superstition and I’m not going to go to the Bodleian again. So I basically produced that D.Phil thesis from a way of looking at the poems, from a reading of the poems and from looking at the *Collected Poems* themselves. It was a rather unusual D.Phil thesis and I am surprised it was passed.

I finished this D.Phil which was eventually published by Clarendon Press, ten years later, because of Tom Paulin’s championing and it was reviewed by Terry Eagleton. But before I finished my D.Phil, I did achieve my subterranean agenda, in that my first two novels, *A Strange and Sublime Address* and *Afternoon Raag* came out before I finished my D.Phil. And *Afternoon Raag* came out before my viva.

**AV:** What happened to the poetry that you had gone to publish?

**AC:** The poetry fell by the wayside. Because as I began to explore a particular form of my fiction I began to find that the preoccupations of poetic language and perception were being subsumed by this odd kind of novel that I was writing. So then, I got a proper job with an academic sounding position only in 2006. I was offered this position at the University of East Anglia, they created a position and invited me and they named the Chair – “Professor of Contemporary Literature.” That made me sound like a proper academic.

**AV:** No wait, what year did you get your D.Phil?

**AC:** I got my D.Phil in 1993, the year of publication of *Afternoon Raag*.

**AV:** And thirteen years after that you got an academic job?

**AC:** So from 1993 to 2006 I was more or less writing full time, except two years when I was a Leverhulme research fellow at Cambridge. I went back to India after the Cambridge thing; that was my last stint as a full-time resident of the UK. After that until 2006 I only did one-off stints here and there – Columbia University, a professorship in Berlin and so on. I continued to write, until the University of East Anglia invited me to apply for a job. It was an interesting kind of position for someone who did academic, creative and critical writing and would serve as a bridge between these different kinds of writing. And I said this is something that interests me but I didn’t want to go back to live in England.

So they created this position by which I would teach a term a year at the University of East Anglia. I took that up from 2006 onwards and began to do some teaching there, teaching both literature and creative writing. I had never taught creative writing before. And as I said I got this academic-sounding chair called Professor in Contemporary Literature and then some people began to call me an ‘academic’. The moment people began to call me an academic I realized that I would rather be called a writer than an academic. Earlier I used to get nervous of being called a ‘writer’ because I thought I hadn’t earned my credentials as a writer. So I was producing one book after another and then people would call me ‘writer’ and I would feel a bit fraudulent. But once people began to call me an ‘academic’ I rushed towards being called ‘writer’.

**AV:** So, as somebody who both writes and teaches, and as somebody who deals in all these things – in literature and literary theory, and also in criticism and also in creative writing…

**AC:** I am interested in criticism, yes. That I am interested in.
AV: But now you also teach creative writing.

AC: I teach creative writing in a way slightly different from the way it is usually taught. Partly I work with the Iowa Writers Workshop sort of model. But I bring to it a fair amount of thinking about the theoretical and critical concepts underlying even the most banal kind of creative usages that we encounter. And I allow those kinds of discussions to emerge organically from a text that an apprentice writer has written, somebody who is a part of the workshop. I don’t put it in a compartment and say it is something that Deleuze has spoken about or whatever.

In fact unless it again arises organically I don’t refer to a literary theorist any more than I refer to, let’s say The Simpsons (or any text from popular culture) or I refer to The Great Gatsby (or a literary text). I allow all these kinds of things to come together in a conversation, because they are there in my mind without any particular kind of hierarchy. This lack of hierarchy has nothing to do with any political position about popular culture being as valid as high or literary culture. It comes because there are genuine convergences in the way I think between these various fields.

AV: So do you find yourself thinking in a way that puts all of these things into a rubric or a framework like ‘the humanities’? Is the idea of the humanities something you ever use; is it helpful for you to think in those terms?

AC: It is helpful for me to think in those terms without taking as a given what the humanities might be. So the question is always how to find a new language and argue for extending the way we think about things. Take the symposium I organized in December 2014 in Calcutta on something I called ‘literary activism’ and you will find a kind of definition of that in the mission statement I wrote. You will find that on the UEA creative writing workshop website and maybe elsewhere as well. That was an argument to not let go of the humanities but also to make the humanities itself a part of a discussion.

Certainly, I feel that on the one hand the humanities is an improvised field in the world, but particularly in India. On the other hand I feel that the humanities cannot be a protected field; it cannot exist within some kind of time warp or cocoon. It needs to be disruptive, something that evolves, and the kind of convergences I have talked about – that occur within a single a conversation or in a single essay or a thought process – need to be reflected in the way that I understand ‘the humanities’.

AV: So, this creative writing / literary activism workshop that you just held, do you see it as …

AC: I’m sorry, just to clarify – there are two creative writing workshops in a year and the literary activism symposium is a symposium where people present papers. It’s a mix of academics, writers, translators, publishers – all of them are thinking of the literary as something potentially disruptive in a globalized world where the market has made the literary quite a safe thing – partly because it has become a very commercialized and partly because academics have a very hands-off attitude towards the literary and in a sense want to evade it. So the symposium was meant to address that. (http://ueaindiacreativewritingworkshop.com/symposium-on-literary-activism/)

AV: Do you see it as a response to some kind of a perceived crisis in the humanities, or do you see it as a response to an institutional lack in India – in literature / literary theory / the humanities / creative writing / all of these – or it is something that has evolved from your own journey rather than in response to an environment?

AC: It’s all of these. I would say it has certainly evolved from my own journey, but my own journey itself is a response to the environment. Everything I have done is a response to the environment as it appears to be and as the environment proclaims itself to be. The environment suggests that we will accommodate certain things and not others, and then you think to yourself ‘Why?’ And then you try to find out whether it will indeed accommodate other things. So the idea of doing a PhD but writing two novels is not something that the environment proclaims is okay to do. You try and test the
environment. Now I see in retrospect that I was doing these things. But today, having been writing and thinking about these things for the duration of my life as a published writer which is 1991 to 2015 - 24 years - but it goes back to before I was a published writer so it goes back to 1987-1988 so it’s more than 25 years – I can now speak about things not only in retrospect but as processes and thought processes which I am a part of right now, on the back of everything I have done knowingly and unknowingly in the last 25 years.

Now, all those things were a response to what the environment was and also to upheavals in the environment and the fact that the environment changes completely in a way that we could not have foreseen – the way books are published today; the way books are spoken about today, read today, and especially in India, the kind of culture that exists today is not something I could have foreseen in 1988 or 1989.

Also the changes happening now, the symposium that happened in December 2014, the conversation we are having right now is maybe something I wouldn’t have foreseen 7 years ago, when everything in India seemed to be defined by a certain idea of the postcolonial novel. The fact that that would break up and splinter is not something I could have confidently foreseen. But I know that I too have contributed to that splintering in what I have argued for and the way I have written etc.

So now we have a slightly more splintered kind of environment. But again, one cannot take that for granted and again it would change; change occurs all the time and the environment is very much part of it and responding to it is very natural. Now – crisis in the humanities, yes. But let’s stop to think about a phrase like ‘crisis in humanities’. For me personally it is not very useful to think of it in that way, because the term has such a broad thrust that my mind stops working.

I need to think of other kinds of approaches to it and other angles to it, which have come from my personal responses to what’s been happening. I would say that what I have been looking at or thinking about, are various things – what globalization has done, since the mid-1990s; what the free market has done to the way we think about writing; what happened in India – the kind of privileging of postcolonial studies, the privileging of certain kind of discourse to do with the nation – what that has done to the way we think of humanities, to the way we think of the aesthetic, of the artistic; to the way we think or don’t think of sensory experience.

And then the educational system geared to create cardiac surgeons, geared to create people who are going to move to America, to New Jersey or wherever to become cardiac surgeons. I am using that as a kind of metaphor. And what’s happening to the humanities as both a symptom and as a kind of participatory thing in all of these.

AV: So let me put it another way – supposing you were to think in terms of institutions around you in Calcutta or around Calcutta – Calcutta University or Jadavpur or Shanti Niketan or Calcutta Center and so on: Is there a way in which you think it would be at all useful for you to locate your response or your desire for literary activism or your desire to stage a rethinking or a re-imagining of literature or the work of literature, in these institutional settings? Are you at all in dialogue with them? Do you invite students from these places, do you invite faculty? Are there writers located at these institutions that you are friendly with or engaged with them in some way? Or are you functioning in a new space that you have created on the side – or in the middle?

AC: This is the way the first ‘literary activism’ symposium worked: There were 3 venues for this 3 day symposium, which comprised people giving talks and also panel discussions in the evening, in the Seagull Bookstore. The talks and lectures were delivered at Jadavpur University and at Presidency University. The symposium was open to public and the press was reporting on it. A mix of people gave those talks – you had an academic like Derek Attridge, you had writers such as myself, there were one or two others and poets, translators. There was Jamie McKendrick who has won the Forward Poetry Prize, and edited the *Faber Book of 20th Century Italian Poems*. (More
information at: http://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/jamie-mckendrick). There was a publisher David Graham who used to be the managing director of Granta and Canongate Books. Although it was happening in the universities, we wanted people from outside of the university to also come to these talks, and they did.

But I would say, to answer your questions directly – whether this constituted a dialogue with the university or the people in them and in what way – I have engaged in a dialogue with them and with the students. I always wanted to engage in a dialogue with the students especially because I find them very open, very intelligent, before they get kind of appropriated by the system – which they do unfortunately, and I have noticed this again and again. As they start looking for jobs, the pressure to conform – the outward pressure and maybe the inner pressure more than anything else – is immense.

But I do like encountering them at that point of time, before they have succumbed to those pressures and when they are intelligent and interested in all kinds of questions and things. So I have gone to Presidency University and spoken to students there, it’s a very academic scenario but I’ve also been very impressed by the caliber of students after the kind of changes which made Presidency College a University and got it a new faculty and all of that. And I have delivered the Infosys lecture at Jadavpur University, “On the Origins of Dislike,” which you’ve heard when I gave it at Harvard.

AV: Yes.

AC: And in that way I have tried to engage with the faculty as well. There will always be a minority of people in the faculty who will engage with what I am saying. There is always going to be minority within the faculty who are restless or restive and want to revise the positions that have been their entrenched positions and will welcome what I’m saying. And that’s true of faculty in the universities but it’s also may be true of a minority in intelligentsia and for younger writers and critics, writing anywhere. So I see Caravan’s discussion of my book of essays, Clearing a Space in that spirit. The magazine carried that discussion because there must be a restiveness over there to do with the default positions and also a response to the fact that I am looking outside of that default position to articulate new ways of thinking about these things. There is an engagement or a desire for engagement but at the same time I would say the default positions are still very entrenched.

The default modes of thinking are very difficult to overcome even by the most well-intentioned of people. And here I am not only speaking of India but also of very good universities outside where I have spoken and have been responded to in a very particular and fulsome way.

Let’s say I am talking about a very well-known American university where I gave a talk, and I had a very sensitive response to the talk and the position that I was articulating. At dinner people were talking about the works of South Asian novelists, mentioning individual novels, purely in terms of themes. And they were saying – and these were not literature professors, only maybe one out of five would be a literature professor, mostly they were teaching history or anthropology or teaching the social sciences – saying, ‘I’m teaching that book because we need a book on fundamentalism or Partition or gender or whatever’. And it seemed to me that this alluded to a larger kind of problem, that South Asian books written in English would only be addressed thematically.

The complexity, the conundrum of literature was the domain of books written in Europe or America or Britain, by those who know possibly the Indian languages too, though they don’t get talked about. But South Asian books, the Indian novel in English must be treated as a resource for a theme which is of interest and not really approached in any other way that engages with its literary complexities.

AV: So what you are saying is that, in a sense form and content become broken apart and content as “theme” gets appropriated into other disciplines as though these are books on a subject – the subject of caste, religion or whatever.
AC: Exactly.

AV: And formal and literary properties of language and formal innovations, and questions of genre etc. are completely sidelined.

AC: Genre, formal innovation, language – none of these in the literary work abjures what we call “theme.” But the theme cannot be separated from them as if it was some kind of theological truth which is the soul of the work while the rest is a dispensable body which is not really significant. It’s as though the truth of the work as a whole lies in its thematic truth.

Now, the pleasure of reading and the challenges of reading reveal to us, all the time that such positions are untrue and untenable. But both orthodoxy and intellectual laziness make us profess this untenable position again and again. And the untenable position also leads us to look at the book in isolation of its time, its language, its history – its literary history, its world region, the entire literary canon to which it belongs. Books are taught in isolation and the great ethos of our age has been to celebrate books in isolation. The Booker Prize does that for instance. It will aggrandize and almost grotesquely magnify the idea of a particular book by an author.

So what I am saying is that even among the most well-intentioned people there exist these habits of reading. The Indian novel in English post-Rushdie got appropriated almost helplessly into this habit of thinking immediately after Midnight’s Children. These habits die very hard it seems. For those habits to die people need to be thinking on their feet all the time and accept no givens. And people are not prepared to do that.

My engagement with institutions comes with the knowledge that these habits are there. I am continually surprised both by the restiveness that wants something more, and also by the resilience of these habits and their capacity for survival, even when they are quite ostensibly unproductive or counter-productive.

AV: So let me just ask a last question, as a way to sum up our conversation. Basically from what I understand – this way of seizing on the “theme” of a novel and reducing literary works to the thematic treatment of ideas, these habits of reading, they are probably also an effect of postcolonial studies and the domination of this agenda of “writing back to Empire” and so on. A lot of literary and aesthetic experience gets subsumed to the political meanings of literature, especially South Asian literature and especially as it’s read in the Western academy. And in a way you could argue that this in itself constitutes a kind of crisis in the arts and in the humanities, in the sense that we have inflicted upon ourselves an amnesia about how to read and enjoy and experience literature as literature, not as just as “themes” or as content or as political or social commentary.

AC: Also the fact Ananya that we don’t need to take the idea of literature and the idea of modernism as concepts that the West gives to us – that we also have to contribute to those ideas ourselves, from where we are writing.

AV: Right.

AC: We don’t just merely extend them by saying that these ideas are not valid and we here in postcolonial cultures have different ideas. We actually have very interesting histories of literature and responses to literature as part of our cultural formation. But we don’t bring them into play; can I just say, also, we don’t bring certain parts of ourselves into play. You know we have suppressed the most sensuous part of ourselves when we talk about things in public.

And one of the manifestations of that is that we don’t talk about the style – literary style or writerly style – when talking about the history writing, for instance. We generally don’t do that. In most other cultures when people talk about historians, they also talk about the signature styles of those historians or at least of the major historians – or even of the major philosophers. And over here again it’s the theological kind of attitude, that what the man said and his message (or her message) is what we must concentrate on, it’s as if the language is some kind of container.
Interview with Amit Chaudhuri (June 4, 2015)

And we cannot only connect that with postcolonial studies, we have to look at it in the context of aspiration in the age of globalization; the aspirational classes; zeroing in on English – the most advantageous of the languages, in terms of speaking and learning that language. And then also seeing that language – because they see it basically as the stepping stone for something else – seeing it as a kind of body, as a kind of container. And that language must be instrumentally, pragmatically used for information, for self-advancement, for self-improvement, for networking, but the texture of the language as it varies from culture to culture, person to person, time to time – we have no sense of those things at all. We zero in on English but we look at it completely instrumentally as something that is only important because it contains something else.

Unfortunately, this is true not just for English – this is the default position now in India. It’s the position we have towards the English language but now it is the position we have towards any language. Which is why we now find that very few Indians can speak or write English very well but when you ask them to speak or write in other languages, they actually don’t, they can’t. Indians write and speak any Indian language only cursorily because the default position about language is, it’s just a means to an end. A language – English, Bangla, Hindi, any language, is not real to us any longer. What it contains and what it might lead to in terms of self-improvement and self-advancement – that’s real.

So we find a lack of mastery of language per se, whether it’s the Indian languages or whether it’s English. I come across people, again and again, who are sensitive, intelligent young writers but they don’t write English perfectly and then I say ‘Why don’t you write in some other language which is yours, which is right for your cultural context?’ But they don’t know that language very well either, because they are emerging from a culture in which we have forgotten to think about language as a thing in itself.

AV: And we have forgotten how to read.

AC: And therefore, how to read. So, it is not the postcolonial studies; this is the reality now of the aspirational classes and the context of globalization. Postcolonial studies has in a way segued into this type of scenario, this attitude towards language and anything in language, like literature. As I said, again with postcolonial writers whether they are novelists or thinkers – the language is not talked about. In case of post-colonial novelists, language is talked about only in as much as it demonstrates some kind postcolonial truth or verity. Otherwise language in itself is not important. But language is one of our sensory experiences which also connects to the thought process. So language is just one of those things which we suppress, we consider it as phantom, as expendable.

AV: This sounds like a crisis to me.