

a letter for Iraq

Dearest,

Sitting in cafes and museums of Europe, Amsterdam to be precise, places where you have not been, nor where the dark and the green that is in you, in the delicate lines of your face, in the curves of your eyes, are never reflected. I carry you in the lines of my palms.

Except perhaps in their Tropen, colonial museum, where you lie fragmented in the objects which they have torn apart from their history, like limbs from the whole, live body, and put on display. There my sweet, in clay, wood, beads, pieces of bamboo, your humble body is offered to my sight as artefacts. I cannot touch you, this is Europe, you are a museum piece, a million miles of distance by air, a fantasy formed in airline posters and shatterproof fibreglass which preserves the death of our everyday lives, to create their civilization.

And now there is spring in Europe, the sweetness of the purple crocuses, the white of the hyacinths, the blue of the iris melt you with their sun. Trees whisper their green secrets and in the official museum of the city they display their prizes, horrors, visions of war and peace, in an exhibit of photo journalism. For decades Europe nurses its sores. When they heal they are photographically provoked to bleed, to let the pus of memory ooze out. Europe remembers - its nazi past. In slow rhythm strikes chest, forehead, forces tears and grimaces. But behind the collage of guilt, memories and predations of the past Tropens, British museums, nazis later, send bombs, cameras and transforms a war into lightshows and videogames. Your body- arab, indian, black, vietnamese, chilean, panamanian, nameless, dark, splinters, cracks into a thousand pieces thrown up into the sky by jets of oil. Every pore of your body visible to the radar eye of the dark. Wind of peace blowing in the operation desert storm whistles through the pores of

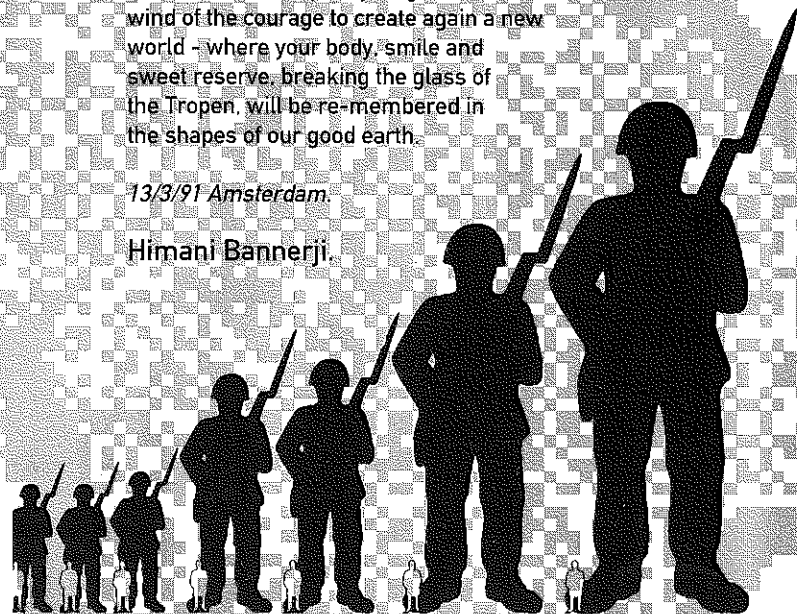
your singed skin. A hundred thousand sorties without blood!

Dearest, the soles of your singed feet, your child's body charred- a charcoal graffiti of history, your old man's unruly tears, swollen veins in the hands, your young woman's defiant curse, your old woman's hands raised to an Allah who has fled the sky of starwars and taken refuge with the dead Mesopotaiian gods. Ya Ali, Ya Hassan, Ya Hussein, Karbala in flames a second time and a horse runs wild, with hooves of fire through the bombed streets. And the good King Haroun al Rashid once upon a time in Baghdad in a child's book flees with Duldul into an ocean of blood. Your cry rips apart the television screen - will no one stop this war machine? My sweet, say nothing to them. Nothing has stopped their march of civilization, while their blind hearts whisper tales of our savagery and their strategic adjustments. Let us hold each other by the hand and walk together through our myriad lives.

In this terror of a golden spring, where the clay jar holding the ashes of our ancestors, the gentle hand of time reaching out to be held, is smashed, crushed, thrown into the grime of betrayals, wars, cynicisms, let us my love go together into that cave, where others wait with a secret sign, where darkness holds the key to dawn, where conspiracy sings in the wind of the courage to create again a new world - where your body, smile and sweet reserve, breaking the glass of the Tropen, will be re-remembered in the shapes of our good earth.

13/3/91 Amsterdam.

Himani Bannerji



Interview with Aijaz Ahmad

April 9, 1993 Toronto, Canada

(with Sourayan Mookerjee,
Rinaldo Walcott, Kathryn White)

Professor Aijaz Ahmad has taught English literature at Rutgers University in the United States for the last twenty years. Before going to the U.S., Ahmad had lived in both Pakistan and India and established a considerable reputation as a political activist and organizer with the sub-continental left and as a contemporary poet of Urdu. Recently he returned to India to take up a research post at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi. Over the years he has published poetry in Urdu, translations of poetry from other languages as well as various books and articles on society and politics. His most recent book, *In Theory*, published by Verso, is a comprehensive and historical exploration of the politics of the intersections of post-colonial, postmodern and poststructuralist theory which has quickly provoked considerable controversy and, in some quarters, even hostility. His next book, forthcoming from Verso, is entitled *Contested Terrains: Studies In the History and Historiography of Nationalism*.

Border/Lines: The three of us have talked about how today there is, on the one hand, an openness to theory but at the same time there also seems to be a shutting down of certain questions or positions particular those related to Marxism. So while we were all pleased that your book seemed to open up a space to address these issues again, one of our questions to you would also be to tell us more specifically what you mean by poststructuralism?

In the beginning of the book you talk about a whole engagement with continental theory—hermeneutics, Bakhtin, Benjamin, Gramsci, but then later on, I guess as a polemical term, this whole conglomeration becomes simply poststructuralism. Yet I know from another of your essays that you speak positively about Bakhtin, for example—who is someone I'm quite interested in. So I guess what I want to ask you



is, firstly, how do you conceive of poststructuralism and secondly, what, if anything, would be the positive side of this movement?

Aijaz Ahmad: Ok, a couple of things. You might have noticed that in my talk yesterday I said that I regret I will postpone my own engagement with poststructuralism yet again. I was joking with myself because that is actually how I see what I've done in this book. I have referred to poststructuralism but my concern has not been a systematic engagement with, or developing a critique of it as a whole, but with the ways in which certain poststructuralist positions resurface in the kinds of writing and critical discourse I'm engaged with. In other words, for me it is not an engagement with Foucault, but the way Foucault resurfaces, let's say, in Said's thought. In the use that I make of Althusser's work, the engagement is not with him but with how Althusser's arrival in the Anglo-American academy is used to stage a new kind of Marxism in which the question of class political agency and those kinds of questions have been suppressed under the weight of very heavy kinds of theoreticisms. Now in retrospect, I think that it is somewhat unfortunate that I did that, that perhaps I should have engaged somewhat more systematically with these other positions that I'm mentioning. In the writings of the kinds of critics that I'm talking about, poststructuralism very often resurfaces in the form of platitude, vast sorts of generalizations, but also as a reference point which somehow validates this kind of work. So that's one sort of thing. [Secondly], poststructuralism, as you very well know, is so vast a thing that its boundaries are very hard to fix. Is Foucault a post structuralist? Was Foucault a structuralist? At what point does he cease to be one? If he never was a structuralist in some precise sense, then in what sense could he himself be a poststructuralist? The book that I'm doing now is not going to be about literary theory. The historiography of Indian nationalism will be a major concern there. There will be a very lengthy chapter on Islamic movements and Islamic nationalism.

I do think that one of the things one absolutely has to do is to refuse this pressure that now all of history has to be re-



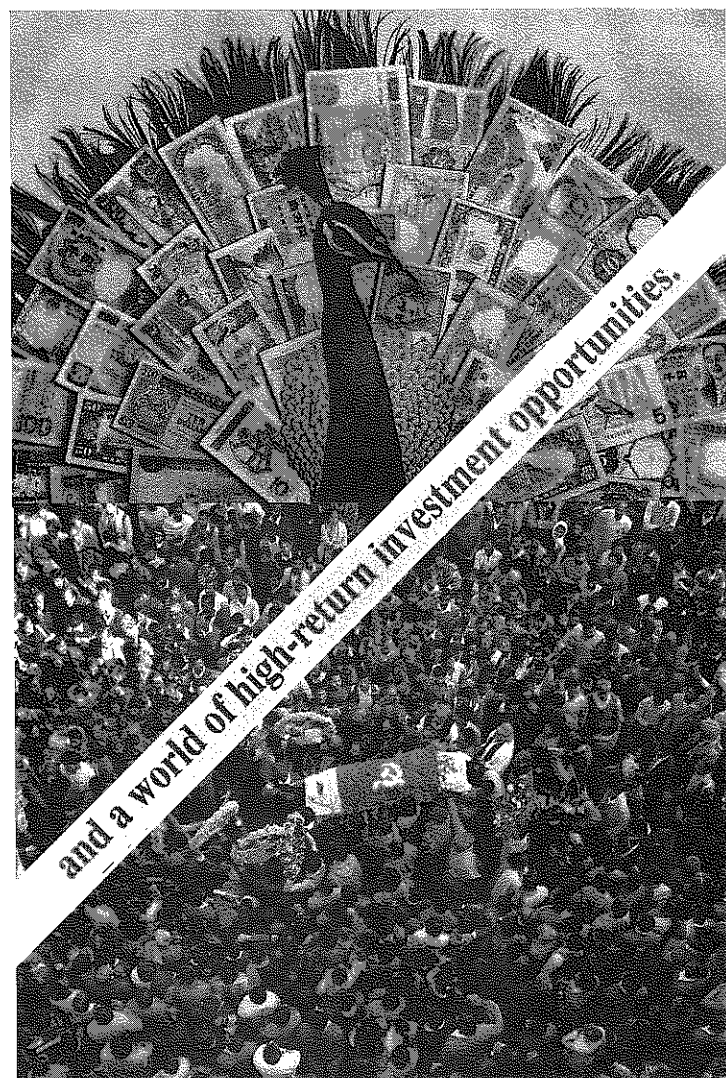
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Funeral of murdered street theatre actor and activist Sarder Hashmi, 3 January, 1989. Sarder, a member of the communist Party (Marxist), was beaten to death while performing in the industrial outskirts of Delhi, allegedly by followers of the then ruling Congress (I) Party of Rajiv Gandhi.

read according to the protocols established by post-structuralism. In fact, the book that I'm writing has very little engagement with these protocols at all. And if I were to come back to any of these things it would probably take the form of an actual engagement in the very terms of that thought and, in that, Derrida is very fundamental. I mean, if you're going to do epistemology, Derrida is fundamental to that. Myself, I would say that Foucault's work, especially his historical books, means a lot more to me. And, I personally think that when the dust settles, Derrida will last, essentially, in the field of hermeneutics—and not much beyond that, whereas Foucault's influence would be found across the social sciences, essentially through the work he has done in what one might call history. In that, I think the marvelous thing about Foucault is that with *Discipline and Punish* onwards his whole sense of the fundamental historical shift in the seventeenth and eighteenth century is related to Marxist ways of periodizing history.

B/L: Foucault and Derrida are most often associated with poststructuralism. But people often also use poststructuralism as an umbrella term to cover a variety of thinkers and approaches. What about some others like, for instance, Bakhtin, Heidegger, Gadamer?

Ahmad: Well, they are all quite differently positioned. One very central position would be that of Lacan, for example, if you're dealing with, let's say, people like Homi Bhabha whose influence in literary theory is now quite considerable.



Sheba Chhachhi

B/L: You also have to deal with how Lacan and Foucault don't fit together.

Ahmad: That's right. And Foucault and Derrida. Foucault and Derrida don't fit together philosophically at all. So you know, this sort of eclecticism which is already there in these derivative positions, one would have to come to terms with Bakhtin? Yes, and no. Bakhtin essentially answers the questions posed by structuralism in the sixties before those questions were raised but in response, precisely, to that particular kind of linguistics on the basis of which structuralism was then staged some forty years later. So in that sense Bakhtin is both pre-structuralist and a poststructuralist. As far as French structuralism is concerned, his rediscovery in France was one of the central moments of the crisis of structuralism. And one of the reasons why structuralism enters into crisis very quickly, within a matter of a decade or less, is the rediscovery of Bakhtin's texts which had already posed the critique.

B/L: But as you also point out, in your essay "Between Orientalism and Historicism," one thing that is different about Bakhtin is that his theorizations of language are always socio-logical.

Ahmad: That's right, that's right. Which is partly why two quite different things happen. One is that although Bakhtin is discovered — his texts are rediscovered by people like Kristeva and Todorov — he's also very quickly suppressed as

the major critic of structuralism. In fact, that is also the moment in which Derrida's critique of European philosophy up to and including structuralism becomes the dominant one in France while Lacanian psychoanalysis and Foucault's shifts become the major engagements with structuralism. Bakhtin in Paris is actually discovered and suppressed in the same moment within those two or three years. So just as the insurgent moment of '68 is both an insurgent moment and a normalizing moment, the uses of '68 for stabilizing an anti-communist left takes place very quickly by '71-'72. I think that's the sort of thing that happens to Bakhtin in France. By the time his work comes to North America interesting things happen. First, the disassociation of Bakhtin from Volosinov. There is the suggestion that everything is written by Bakhtin, and so the work that we know as Volosinov's has no autonomy outside the *Dialogic Imagination* for example. Volosinov becomes a kind of pre-history of the later writings of Bakhtin which consequently become the more mature writings. It is the Bakhtin of *Rabelais*, the Bakhtin of the *Dialogic Imagination* which is said to be the real Bakhtin. There is a sense of unease about those earlier writings but essentially Bakhtin is staged here, then, as a person who is always an anti-communist and anti-Stalinist. This identification of anti-Stalinism as anti-communism per se is also of some interest because if you do not belong to a politics which makes a distinction between these then to say that someone is anti-Stalinist is to say that they are anti-communist. So Bakhtin is immediately slotted into a double origin: Marxism as a purely formal position, so as to survive Stalinist autocracy, but much

more fundamentally Russian mysticism—someone who was always unhappy about the Bolshevik development of the Soviet Union. In many circles what is most celebrated about Bakhtin is the carnivalesque and this is very quickly assimilated here into a politics of pleasure. The emphasis here is not on the dialectic of opposition to orthodoxy, to dominance, in a medieval form of politics — in which the people actually posed their politics against the church in the form of the carnival before class politics was available to them. This is the pre-capitalist form of class politics if you wish. Instead of that, the emphasis here, in terms of Bakhtin, shifts to a politics of pleasure, eruption of desire, desiring machines, so that the work of Bakhtin becomes a kind of early Deleuze and Guattari, an 'anti-Oedipus.'

B/L: But class politics has also had its own cultural politics all along however much this has been, from situation to situation, either kept under guard or allowed to run loose and intensify. Isn't this the significance of the medieval carnival for us today? Wasn't the impulse behind the 'politics of desire' the creation of a form of politics whose point of departure is class politics but which refuses to settle down into only that fight and takes aim at other targets such as at the social bodies of patriarchy, racism and homophobia? Wasn't that the impulse behind these ideas even if one wanted to then say all of this was received and taken up in North America in an aggressively anti-Marxist context where class politics is carefully taken out of everything.

I want to pursue this issue of your evaluation of the politics of the 'theory' of the title of your book. Now, with regard to this question of the politics of this 'theory'—if you mean by this only poststructuralism—one of the claims that is always advanced on its behalf is that its critique of 'Western' rationality, of the subject, of the philosophy of history, is actually the strongest of any critiques of imperialism. One of the things that makes *In Theory* an important book, in my view, is that it takes up this claim by looking at the work of people like Said, Bhabha, and Rushdie. But I'm still wondering, not only at the absence of Spivak from your considerations, but also at what an evaluation of the politics of these particular theories, especially on the question of imperialism, that does not also address the work of people like Derrida and Foucault directly can teach us in the long run.

Ahmad: Well one thing is that I think it is unfair to either like or dislike a book because of what it does not talk about. A book can not talk about everything and should be read mainly for what it sets out to do. I think I have made it quite clear that the book is really about a certain historical moment in which literary theory increasingly calls itself theory in general. What is going on is something of a take-over of the humanities by literary theory in which disciplines like history, disciplines like sociology, disciplines of this kind are tremendously under pressure to institute methods in which everything is read as a text, so that very literary kinds of hermeneutics get privileged over painstaking archival research. Books which have a very thin archival base or no original archival work but which fall within these thematics are getting to be highly valued in the field. Literary history is claiming to be history. As for your

specific points (a) that I do not refer to Spivak and (b) that we might learn something about imperialism by looking at positions inspired by Foucault, Derrida et. al.—well, the omission of Professor Spivak was a matter of politeness, and I now believe I should have been equally polite toward Homi Bhabha as well. The interesting thing about Foucault is that he has virtually nothing to say about imperialism. We should have examined this silence, instead of simply adopting his protocols for the study of imperialism—even cultural imperialism. Derrida speaks of such things more directly, but what he has to say hardly ever goes beyond the familiar liberal positions.

B/L: For me the question of the politics of theorizing and how it is being contested arises in reading your book *In Theory* and listening to your talk yesterday. Poststructuralist thinkers who work on colonial discourse and or Third World literature and nationalism etc. hardly engage the voices of Third World intellectuals. I think that much of the theorizing taking place in the academy today does not go far enough, does not engage some of the voices that I feel need to be engaged. But in *In Theory* and in your talk yesterday, you dialogued with multiple voices from the Third World. You invoked Cabral, you talked about Negritude, and you talked about these as interesting ways to think about culture and how nationalisms are constituted, and how classes and class formations are struggled over, across and through. It seems almost as though contemporary theorists do not take the voices of theorists like Cabral and

Nkrumah and others seriously enough to engage them. In the sixties and early seventies those voices were engaged but that dialogue has now vanished. It seems that a type of Eurocentred theorizing is flourishing where to invoke the voices of Foucault, Derrida, etc. is to be theoretical. Even a voice like Derrida with its colonial origins is not located in Algeria where we might be forced to think differently about the contributions that he makes to current debates. I'm just wondering if you can talk about that in the context of your own work.

Ahmad: Well okay. Let me start by saying something somewhat different from what you present. One aspect of the book, which for understandable reasons has not been noticed in the American discussion, is the simple fact that other than the Jameson piece, the book was written in India, spoken in India, published in India, before it arrived in London. It was not designed to address questions which are pressing the American, or the Western, academy, or the American obligation regarding research; but questions which, because of the power of these academies, are pressing the Indian intelligentsia. You see, there isn't a sharp distinction there because questions that press these academies immediately start pressing us in India because of the power these academies have. But then, there are certain questions which are pressing here that do not press there. One very striking thing is — you know this question of the Third World? — it is in these countries that somebody becomes a Third World person; you're a Third World person because you're in Canada. In Calcutta, you call yourself a Third World person, people would send you to a psychiatrist. But because this happens and because of many other reasons—some very weird ones—one does, in India, deal with the category "Third World litera-



ture," "Third World politics". In India, Third Worldism has a very different shape, a very historical shape—after all, it goes back to Nehru in 1955—so one then deals with it in those terms. So what I deal with, and what I don't deal with, in the book has a lot to do with the questions that one was facing there. The occasion for me to start writing about Edward Said was because Edward Said was being taught in the methodology course in the graduate programme in the university in Delhi, and I said methodology! and that was the beginning of it. Now then, once one starts writing about it, one starts writing about a great many other things as well. But that, for example, has still left its traces, in the sense that much of the book is occupied with three definitions in Foucauldian method, and you know, those sorts of things: methods and historicizations. That is one sort of answer I would give, that in my work, these references to either Eurocentred sorts of emphases—Derrida but not Cabral—come partly because of the positions they occupy in the academic world which then presses on academic work.

B/L: I would like to push the question a little bit more and try to come across more clearly. I felt that you were willing to dialogue with voices that often get cut out of the debate around post-colonial theorizing. To invoke people like Cabral and Nkrumah as examples of some of the people who participated in anti-colonial, nationalist organizing in the Third World and who were/are intellectuals though their work is hardly taken up in the current debates — what made you continue a dialogue with this work? We know that these nationalist struggles were not uncomplicated sites but rather that they represented a complex mix of intellectuals and peasants/workers within a class organization of cultural nationalism that imagined the peasantry/workers as being the "soul" of the new nation in very contradictory and complex ways.

Ahmad: In my own development Cabral's writing, especially his essay "The Weapons of Theory"—and another essay of his which I've forgotten the exact title of but it's something on the question of roots (Return to the Source) — writings of that kind and also writings on the actual organization of the struggle in Guinea Bissau were very important for me. When I was in my early twenties the writings of the Le Duan who became General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party, and a great deal of work of the organizational kind that was undertaken in Vietnam was something very central to me. Writings of Mao on the programs of post-revolutionary society but also on the reproduction of the bourgeoisie, in post-revolutionary society on the basis of ongoing commodity production, these were things that were very important to me at a certain point. So I'm actually very much formed by what you're calling these other voices. Much of what I say easily today is actually based on twenty years of thinking about all that. I agree entirely with what Cabral says about cultural alienation — that it is a problem essentially of the petit-bourgeoisie who lose their roots in their own culture. Considering that in Guinea Bissau there was no bourgeoisie (there was a petit-bourgeoisie there), "Return to the Source" essentially meant going back to the peasants. What he actually says is



that the removal of the colonial state is absolutely central for recovering the national culture — which in the case of Guinea Bissau is the culture of peasants. Now in a very different way, yesterday, I was saying that the way the subalternists historians think of nationalism, is in one respect remarkably similar to the way Congress intellectuals think of nationalism, both identify nationalism with Gandhi, Nehru, the great leaders, the upper-class intelligentsia, the canonical figures. I think the starting point has to be the opposite one. Some twenty million peasant households participated in the national movement, but under the hegemony of the bourgeoisie. This discrepancy between the immensity of the mass base and the hegemony of a relatively weak national bourgeoisie is the real problem in understanding the trajectory of this nationalism. It was, in numerical terms, the largest peasant movement in history, more numerous than Mao's movement in China — but the popular forces could never effectively challenge the hegemony of the bourgeoisie. Instead of facing up to this problem, the subalternists speak of "dominance without hegemony," as if the Congress had some sort of army to force the peasantry. Simultaneously, they vastly understate the level of mobilization — as if anything other than mass pressure can account for the departure of the British. In effect, they simply evaporate the problem. A good beginning was made with Sumit Sarkar's *Modern India*, but the ascendancy of people like Partha Chatterjee in the subalternist's ranks has served to disorient the project as a whole. I think we need to return to those basic questions and some comparative

understanding of those Asian and African countries which have undergone analogous processes should be very helpful — more helpful than the turn to poststructuralism etc.

Likewise you know what has been suppressed is part of my development. Someday I will write about it, but part of my anger at subalternists in India is that the whole history of communists both organizing and writing about the peasantry, all the tribals in Central India and so on, is simply denied as if it never existed, as if the writing about these classes starts with the subalternists.

B/L: You mean how the subalternists have been taken up both in the Indian academy and in North America.

Ahmad: One of the reasons why the subalternists have a greater influence abroad than in India is this enormous claim of originality, as if things start with them, as if there were no histories which they are both suppressing and quoting. I may write about this particular phenomena at a future date, but this claim of utter originality is true of avant garde groupings generally, something I talk about in the book in a very different way where I talk about modernism. Modernism claims that its forms of narrativity have no pre-history. As if Kafka could write his novels without a nineteenth century tradition available to him. The reasons why something like *The Trial* appears so realistic once you have exercised your suspension of disbelief, or "The Metamorphosis" reads so realistically once you have accepted that this person has become a beetle, is that all the techniques of realistic writing are there and Kafka knows how to write a realist novel, except that he



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doesn't write realistically; that's all.

B/L: I'm wondering if it's not possible to think of multiple modernisms. I'm thinking here of African-American work, in particular literature. I understand that you have taught courses in African-American and Caribbean literature. Do you think of that work — for example the work of Richard Wright — as inhabiting a realist tradition while also struggling around questions of modernism, people like Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston whose work I would place between a realist and a modernist tradition with other kinds of influence coming into place such as anthropology. I'm just wondering if you can speak to that work as a moment in modernism or if you can speak of multiple modernisms?

Ahmad: Generally speaking I would say that one of the striking features about, let's say, the canonical modernism is that the commitment to certain kinds of politics is evaporated from the surface of the texts, and especially notable is the suppression of class politics. What happens in the Caribbean and African-American modernisms is that the issue of race particularly, and of class, being what it is, they cannot evaporate these issues even if they want to. The desire is much less, but even when there is a desire they simply cannot evaporate these questions in the same way. So that Aimé Césaire actually finds a way of writing a modernist poem foregrounding the whole issue of race, colony, etc. The same thing happens to lesser or greater degrees with the African-American modernism. The other thing is that in the canonical modernism most writers situate themselves politically quite consciously in the anti-communist trend, whereas in the United States the black intelligentsia of the interwar periods have a very different relationship with the communist party. Their perception of the labour movement, their perception of

the communist party is very different. Many of them started careers in the communist movement, published in the communist presses and some of them were even members of the communist party. So even in terms of organized politics they are located very differently. You know even Langston Hughes, not to speak of Richard Wright, was involved with the communist party. So what I'm suggesting is that the modernism of colonized people, of the black people, cannot really observe the protocols of the canonical modernism of people like T.S. Eliot, or Ezra Pound, or Gertude Stein.

B/L: It seems to me that we are in a very ambivalent place right now because on the one hand we've got the virtual canonization of Zora Neale Hurston for example, being led by Henry Louis Gates, Houston Baker and others. Hazel Carby has provocatively asked the question of why is it that Hurston gets all of the attention at the expense of people like Richard Wright who have articulated a very clear grounded political vision of the world. She challenged us to think what is being lost when black academics and scholars are not willing to take up explicitly political work.

Ahmad: But you see this is the same thing; the same move in that direction. It actually starts in the '50s going to the '60s. The lucky break that they got was that one of the most talented black novelists, Ralph Ellison was an anti-communist. It is with the publication of *Invisible Man* that the devaluation of Richard Wright actually begins. Wright and Ellison are pitched as the two opposites in black fiction in which Richard Wright is a mere naturalist. *Native Son* is said to be deeply marred as a novel because of this naturalistic need and it's becoming a mouthpiece of the communist party at the end of the book etc., etc. and for twenty years you had the Ellison hegemony. Now what is happening with Zora Neale

Hurston is that it is partly sort of pandering- Henry Louis Gates's pandering to black feminism — where he himself is deeply patriarchal, but this is his way of pandering to black feminism. Now we won't talk about Ralph Ellison so much; we will also include Zora Neale Hurston in that same project. She is of course a very significant novelist but what interests me here is the politics of this appropriation and the overall reshuffling of the African-American counter canon.

B/L: I'd like you to talk a little bit more about how you see the relationship between feminism and Marxism, because as I was reading your book it seemed to me that this relationship wasn't problematized as much as I thought it should be. What I mean is that I think that a number of feminists, originally located theoretically within Marxism, moved away from that position because of the failure of traditional categories of Marxism to address questions specifically related to gender politics. And even those who remained within the framework of Marxism had to rethink, or negotiate with Marxism, often in a way which drew on other approaches derived from theorists such as Freud, Lacan, Foucault etc.

Ahmad: I think what needs to be problematized is both the category of feminism as well as the category of Marxism. I don't think that the term feminism is any less problematic because there are so many kinds of feminisms. There are certain kinds of feminisms which can have a deeply educative function for classical categories of Marxism. There are other kinds of feminisms which are irreconcilable, so that, in fact, one of my regrets about the question which you are raising in terms of the book is that the term "feminism" is used too broadly, without specification or qualifiers. About that, in fact, I'm much more unhappy than the fact that the term poststructuralism is used too broadly. The second thing that I will say is that, yes absolutely, historically there has been an immense failure in the history of both Marxism and of communism in addressing the question of gender, and what we now call economism in the history of Marxism itself surfaces. I think, most starkly when you deal with the issue of gender, far more starkly than it does in issues of modes of production and things like that. In fact, I'm much softer on what is called economism when you're dealing with periodizations of history. I still want to keep a lot of the energy of what has been rejected today as economism by those who want to deny the centrality of the economic structure as such. But when it comes to the issue of gender I think that the problems of economism become much clearer.

However, I also think that Marxist engagements with the questions of gender have, even in the past, not been quite as mechanical as many strands of modern feminism suggests, either in writing, or in the practice of communist countries. In other words, it is from the standpoint of revolutionary transformation itself that those insufficiencies stand out most starkly. After all, women had dreadful pay in the Soviet Union certainly, but in no part of this world did Muslim women go as far as they did in the Asian republics of the U.S.S.R. You only have to compare the status of women in the Asian republics, which were historically far less developed, with countries like

Turkey, Iran and Tunisia, the showcase of modernization in the Islamic world. So that's simply to say that one needs both to respond to and to think very, very seriously about the kinds of criticisms that are raised. But one also needs to keep, you know, some sense of history. After all, from Engels through Luxemburg, Kollontai and many others, there was a Marxist tradition that was not inferior, let us say, to their contemporary suffragettes. Now having said that, my sense is that the refounding of the communist movement, which is what I'm most interested in, is going to involve not only different kinds of organizations and different kinds of social agents but also some very fundamental rethinking of the very historical categories of Marxism. My sense is that the very category on which Marxism has historically rested, namely labour, is going to have to be theoretically redone. Just what do we mean by this category labour, and how does it surface in classical Marxism as a theoretical category. That is something that we have to understand historically.

However, it is my sense that it is not only Marxism which has to gain from the encounter with feminist writing, but feminism itself needs to actually encounter Marxism, beyond the polemic, in all its categories and all its histories. That certainly is my position. There isn't some unified thing called feminism that has the pedagogical status of correcting the theory and history of Marxism. It has to be a much more reciprocal relationship. Just as we can no longer think of labour, of the proletariat, of the working class, of workers, purely in non-gendered terms. I think it's not really possible to think of gender except

by going through all of these material processes and trajectories that constitute gender in actual history. Gender is a historical category; it is even a way of appropriating certain natural realities socially. Gender is, so to speak, the social and historical ways of appropriating nature and biology.

B/L: You said in your talk "Theorizing Nations: Nationalism and its Potentialities" that the nation-state is a necessary terrain for anti-imperialist struggle. I want to ask you about your thoughts on solidarity at the international level both between national labour movements and with other movements for social justice? Also, how do you theorize the place between the local and the global which recognises the fluidity of international capital. For example, I'm thinking of the North American Free Trade Agreement and how capital can move to Mexico unconditionally but Mexican labour moves to North America only under restrictive and disadvantaged conditions. How do we do politics that must at once address localized contextualized realities but also address international realities and not dissipate the two.

Ahmad: The situation is at least in one respect very different in countries like India. The global situation presses you essentially in relation to the imperialist countries. Even when we read an African novel it comes to us published from London, it is published there, it is recognized there, they decide that this is something important, it is worth being exported to the world market and so on. Now in the imperialist countries there is a very different kind of situation, especially with the mobility not only of capital but of what I call



techno-managerial and professional strata. The number of people in India today who have been trained in the advanced countries is so vast compared to the colonial period that there is no comparison. The impact of the metropolitan university on everyday life in India is very, very direct for the middle classes but then through them to the country at large. This impact is far greater today than it was in the colonial period. So those lines of demarcations do not hold now.

I think the way the world is actually constituted global transformation actually goes through the local and by the local I mean certainly the locally local. It is absolutely essential to have movements and politics which address issues of particular forms of local oppression. But to the extent that the nation state continues to be the moment of contestation for all of those structures of power you have to have, at some level, what one might call a counter-state which is to say a party. It is simply not possible to struggle eventually against any form of structural oppression without going through the nation state and what you find is that it is in fact the same single structure which holds together patriarchy, class oppression, racism. The logic of capital is such that this concentration is in fact increasing whereas its organization of social life mystifies that as if it is in fact getting more dispersed, which it's not. Revenue powers, legal powers - all of this is getting much more centralized, so that you in fact need very flexible forms of politics - not the classical communist party form but very flexible forms of both dispersion and concentration. In the military arena, that was invented by the Vietnamese: dispersion and concentration. That was their great contribution to military theory. We need a political strategy which in fact does both. That is why some dialectic between what we now call social movements and what has historically been called communism has to be re-thought in very different sorts of ways.



B/L: It seems that we've now posed the challenge of articulating a postmodern/poststructuralist politics, given the way that you have just described the concentration of capital which is happening at the exact moment when social movements are becoming more and more fragmented.

Ahmad: Well I don't know whether I would so quickly pretend that I understand what a post-structuralist form of politics means in the sense that the history of the communist movement has always gone through local politics of organizing the locality on the immediate issue that's facing the locality. When Pakistan came into being and brand new industrial cities started and the proletariat came in from the ends of the earth how do you start organizing these people? What is their main anxiety? - that they would die away from home that is their main anxiety. For a peasant just recently having become one of the proletariat, the horror is that you would die away from home. So how do you organize the first union you collect money to send the corpses back to the village. That is what you do first, that is how communist organizing in Karachi started, by starting a collective fund for the workers to send the corpses back and to buy the right cloth to wrap the bodies in and to do the ritual by preparing the corpse and sending it back home. Now this is not poststructuralism; this is communism. I want to know what poststructuralist politics is. Micro-politics is what communism always did. It is the aggregation of those things. You started by identifying particular problems in particular places and you organize people on those issues and the sense that you need a common organization, a single political party, to create linkages among local struggles, grew among the people from the experience of how difficult it is to win in an isolated place - and more difficult to defend the gains in a local circumstance. Party building always went from the local to the general, from factories and neighbourhoods to the country as a whole. Nor did the theoretical primacy of the working class prevent you from party work among other classes and social strata. None of it is new. What is new is the claim that different groups have interests so different as to be exclusive; that problems can only be addressed at the immediate level where they arise, only by those who are directly effected by them; that no one has the right to represent anyone else because no representation can be true; that there are only particular interests - no universality. This, Marxism will not accept. Because neither politics nor morality can be left to mere contingency. There has to be some idea of universality and the common good.

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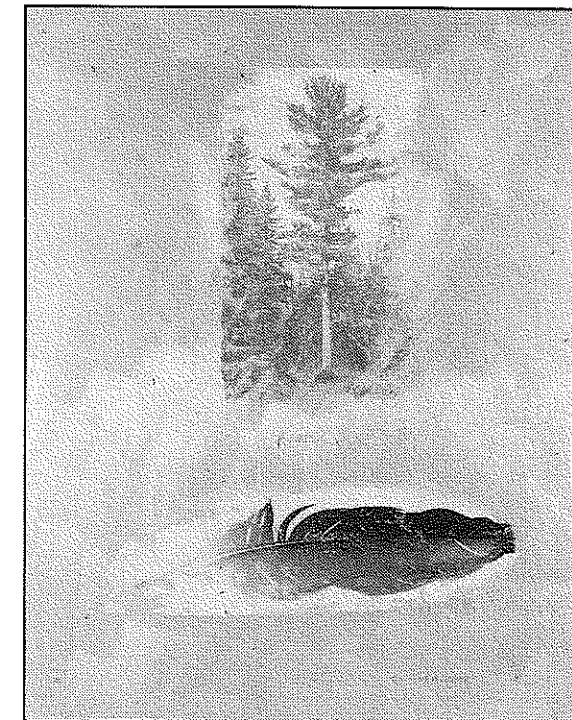
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