

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

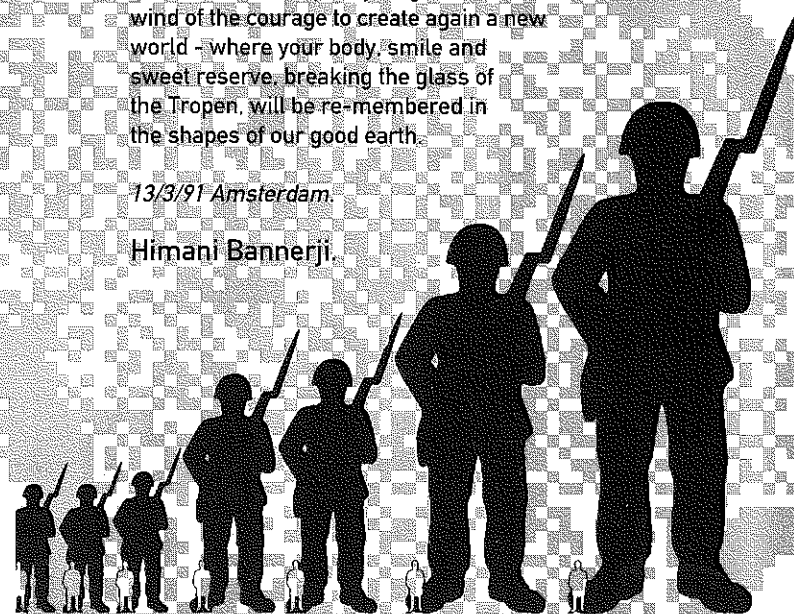
your singed skin. A hundred thousand sorties without blood!

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 Mesopotaian 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-