Unearthing of Indian Writing in English: Conversation with Christopher Rollason and Ludmila Volná

Interviewer: Dr Nilanshu Kumar Agarwal

Dr Christopher Rollason is a British national living in France. He obtained his Ph.D. from York University (England), with a dissertation on Edgar Allan Poe. For eight years up to 1987 he was a member of the Department of Anglo-American Studies at the Faculty of Letters of Coimbra University (Portugal). Dr Rollason has worked in recent years in various contexts -- institutional contacts, conferences, publications, etc. with the following universities: Surrey and Manchester (England), Caen (France), Bologna (Italy), Vigo and Córdoba (Spain), San Marcos (Lima, Peru), and Kakatiya University (Warangal), CIEFL (Hyderabad) and IIT Kanpur, all in India. In March 2006 he was a Visiting Professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University (Delhi). He is a member of AEDEAN (the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies). He is also a founder member of the Spanish Association for Interdisciplinary Studies on India (AEEII).

Dr Christopher Rollason has published widely on Indian Writing in English, on authors such as Raja Rao, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Vikram Chandra, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy and Manju Kapur. He has edited and refereed for several Indian journals.

Dr Ludmila Volná has written her PhD thesis on the representations of India in Indian writing in English and teaches courses on IWE at Charles University in Prague. She conducts her research at IMAGER, a research group of the University of Paris XII and has published on Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, Raja Rao, Anita Desai and others and extensively on R. K. Narayan. She has also presented her results as invited lectures and at international conferences in India, in the United States and in a considerable number of European countries.

Dr Nilanshu Kumar Agarwal talks to these two Western scholars of Indian literature in a scholarly way. The interview focuses mainly on the issues of translation, relevance of IWE, the changing phase of English Studies in India, and several other general topics related to literature.

NKA: Where does poetry / imaginative literature originate from? Poetry comes as naturally to a poet as leaves to the branches. This instinctive activity cannot be forced on anyone. In a way, creative literature is the outpouring / vomiting of personal emotions. Wordsworth had held the same view: 'poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.' Do you agree to this assumption? Or do you consider the role of intellect/ logic in the modification of the literary text more important? Or, should a poet adopt 'the middle path', choosing the best of both the worlds?

LV: Poetry certainly comes naturally to the poet as an outpouring of his/her emotions, it is a 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.' But this is not necessarily in contradiction with the workings of intellect. In my opinion the character of the creation has also much to do with the intellectual background of the creator. But this is not to say that in the process of creation the intellect of the author has to be put to work consciously. Rather, an imaginative piece of writing can simply reflect the internal make-up of its author (which includes emotions and intellect) in a less or more complex manner and can

be entirely spontaneous.
CR: I suggest the middle path. As I see it, the lyric poem – images, emotions, sensations – emanates from the unconscious. Yet at the same time the poem is a piece of made work, a construction in language. Edgar Allan Poe highlighted this "madeness" of the poem his essay "The Philosophy of Composition", which explains in rational terms how he wrote went about writing "The Raven", a poem of desire and death steeped in unconscious material. The poet I see, then, as both seer and maker.

NKA: If creative literature is the release of the inner emotions, is not Indian Writing in English marred by creative and intellectual dishonesty? Poetry, an instinctive adventure, emerges at the level of highest emotional upsurge. The language of that instinctive pattern cannot be an alien one. I think the deepest emotions are represented in literature of one's native language. If something has touched an author really, he or she can express it only in his or her first language. A foreign or second language is concerned with our mental wellbeing; it is not something emotional. Suppose my hand is burnt, what will be the medium of my expression? Poetry can flourish in one's language of emotional make-up. So, if an Indian English writer is creating poetry in English, how can it be spontaneous? How can the author claim to be following the tradition of sage Valmiki, in whom poetry emerged without the slightest whiff of artificiality on seeing the killing of the Kraunch birds?
LV: First, let me say that I entirely agree with Raja Rao's statement that the English language is not alien to the Indians. It ceased to be alien as you, Indians, have appropriated it in the same way (and perhaps even more so) as anyone else who is not a native speaker of English and has come to work with/in English. I am persuaded that a second language can become a means of expressions for emotions, even very deep emotions, and I believe that it greatly depends on the individual poet's situation, attitudes and preferences. For example it may depend on to what kind of experience or feelings the given language is closely related for that person. Here I am speaking from my own experience. Being a Czech native speaker living in France and working in English, I feel as most natural for myself to speak Czech to the Czechs and even to my cats while when writing poetry (including that on my cats) I can only do it in English, or occasionally in French - when it comes to a phenomenon characteristically related to my life in France. Never in Czech. Apart from that, I would only very reluctantly accept to write a scholarly paper in Czech. I simply do not feel like it. That does not mean that I do not love my mother tongue, on the contrary, I feel most intimate towards it. Nevertheless, I cannot help writing, both creative writing and scholarly papers, almost exclusively in English.
CR: There are IWE writers who have had all of their education in English and who describe English as coming more naturally to them than their native language. Surely the point is to write in the language one masters best. Then there are also bilingual poets such as Jayanta Mahapatra, who has published in both English and Oriya.

NKA: Indian English literature is soaked in Indian myths and traditions. The authors use numberless mythological references. My question is: whom do the Indo-Anglians target as their readers? Due to the over-use of Indian references, sometimes they may become unintelligible to the western readers. How will a westerner understand the allusions from

classical Indian mythology and native ethos? I am citing a few verses from Sarojini Naidu's poetry to explicate my point:

> To Indra's golden-flowering groves
> Where streams immortal flow,
> Or to sad Yama's silent Courts
> Engulfed in lampless woe,
> Where'er thy subtle flute I hear
> Beloved, I must go! (qtd. in Iyengar 218)

Even, Indians cannot be the readers of this type of literature, as most of the Indians are not well-read in the English language. In a way, the readership of Indo-Anglian literature is very limited. It has become a literature of the elite class. It is accessed only by those Indians who are fortunate enough to get an English-language education. So, is not this literature a mere plaything in the hands of the upper-class people, who use it as a thing of fashion or snobbery? Is it not far removed from the masses? Is it not read only by a society of drawing room idlers, casually?

LV: Let me start my answer with a question: do the Indian authors writing in English NEED to target some particular group of readers? If they use myths while writing in English it is perhaps because they cannot do otherwise, the myths are a part of their culture. Their works are spontaneous creations which come out of the innermost wells of their beings. That precisely makes the charm of their works, Indianness mediated through the English language! It is the task of the reader to try and understand as much as possible the work he or she is reading, not the task of the writer to make his or her work one hundred percent accessible at all costs. It is an acknowledged fact that the degree of 'intelligibility'/understandabilty of a literary work of art depends on the general culture and the education of the reader. And does a good work of fiction or poem not become a means of instruction itself, especially within Indian culture? So the Western reader gets not only entertainment but also information on India and the Indian reader receives perhaps a stimulus to learn English better. Let then the Western reader become acquainted with Indian culture and the Indian reader become literate in English. And why, after all, should the Indian literary works written in English not be translated into Hindi and Indian regional languages, especially if they are translated into other non-Indian languages?

CR: There can certainly be a problem of accessibility of IWE works to non-Indian readers who are not already immersed in Indian culture, Raja Rao's "The Serpent and the Rope" would not be immediately comprehensible to all and sundry non-Indians. Still, the reader can take a text's Indian cultural references as connoting a general "Indianness" without seeking to know each and every denoted meaning. Meanwhile some Indian classical texts – the Bhagavad Gita, the Ramayana – and hence some classical references - are much better known abroad than others. In the Sarojini Naidu poem you quote, I myself recognize the Indra and Yama allusions, but admit that not all non-Indian readers will. Regarding Indian readers of IWE texts in India, let us not forget that English is the only language used in India that is of national reach. A Hindi text risks being understood by few in Tamil Nadu or Kerala: this is less true of an IWE text, since English is more widely understood in those states than Hindi. Nor do I think the pan-Indian English-

speaking community is that small: the university-educated are too wide a group to be airbrushed away as "the upper class". It is also the case that an IWE text can be made available to non-English-speaking Indian readers in, say, Marathi or Malayalam translation. Cases in point are - as regards IWE texts translated into various Indian languages - Vikram Seth's "A Suitable Boy" and Vikram Chandra's "Sacred Games".

NKA: What should be the language of one's creativity—one's native language or a second/alien one?
LV: For a large number of writers this would of course be the mother tongue but in principle it can be any language expressing by the means of which one feels at ease, that which does not feel alien.
CR: In most cases it will of course be one's first language. However, some people are genuinely bilingual and therefore free to choose.

NKA: What should be done to promote the literature in native regional languages?
LV: The translation work cannot be overestimated here. To translate between Indian languages and into English and other, non-Indian languages. As far as I know it has been the Sahitya Akademi's prerogative for several years to promote the former.
CR: Translate, translate, translate! Into English, into Hindi, and between Bengali and Tamil and all the rest. And into non-Indian languages too.

NKA: Are there sufficient translations of regional literary works into English? What do you think are the essential qualities of a translated literary work? How will you distinguish transcreation from transliteration?
LV: In fact there have been perhaps a surprisingly large number of works in regional languages translated into non-Indian languages. Not only into English but we find an impressive number of works being translated into French from Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Malayalam, Tamil and other languages. And one can find translations from Hindi, Urdu and Bengali also in Czech, for example, not speaking of translations of classical Sanskrit works. Whether the number is sufficient is hard to say, of course the more the better. A translation is always a kind of re-creation of the text, I believe. Not only should the translator try to be faithful to the original as much as he or she can, but also the work must be understood by the readers into whose language it is translated. So it is always a kind of compromise between the two. The scope for 'imaginative flight' for translators is given by their capacity to find the most suitable expression in the language into which they translate.
CR: It is obviously vital to translate works from Indian languages, including Hindi, into English: the more the better! I should add (I live in France) that on the French book market there exist a surprising number of translated works from Hindi, Bengali, Malayalam etc. Most of these are directly rendered, i.e. not going through English. You can find them in the bookshops. This fact is insufficiently well known. It is thus not only a question of translation into English. A translated literary text needs to strike a balance between fidelity to the original and culture and accessibility to the host culture. Transcreation – I believe the concept has been particularly explored by P. Lal – differs from translation proper because it is a much freer process. It is in line with a long Indian tradition, as with the many different language versions of the Ramayana, most famously

the Tamil version, which are retellings and not translations of Valmiki's Sanskrit narrative. However, a transcreation should be billed as such and not presented as a translation in the strict sense.

NKA: Can a translator always be faithful to the original? Sometimes, he or she deviates from the original. Do you grant such deviations to a translator? There is a typical dichotomy involved in a work of translation. On the one hand, a translator cannot digress from the subject. The other side of the coin is that if translators do not deviate from the original and sticks to the text, where is the imaginative flight for them? A translator is chained by classical bondage of rules, customs and regulations. So, where is the scope for imaginative flights for a translator? Should a translator be subjective or objective?
LV: A transcreation is clearly not a translation and should be distinguished as such, it is what is in the Indian context also called 'a rendering.' A number of renderings of the classical Sanskrit texts into English have been done and quite often Indian writers have rendered their own works from their native language into English or vice versa, especially in the period of the beginnings of Indian writing in English.
CR: Transcreation and translation proper are not the same thing, and each has its advantages. The transcreator can be subjective: the translator proper needs to be objective.

NKA: What are the problems of Indian English criticism? What do you think are the major issues before Indian critics? Are these critics following the ancient Indian tradition of Rasa, Dhwani and Alamkara? Or are they playing 'the sedulous ape' to the western critical tools? Are there certain attempts to evolve an individual perspective, different from the ancient Indian aesthetics and western critical theory? There is an onslaught of theory from the West. Are the Indian critics able to maintain a separate identity? Who are the major contemporary Indian English critics who have evolved a new and innovative approach in their critical works?
LV: Indian critics should follow their own way - which does not mean an absolute rejection of Western criticism. I feel, nevertheless, that they should also try to set the critical approaches relevant for Indian writing on Western critical circles and be sceptical towards any post-colonial theory which is subject to simplifications or distortions with regard to the specific features of Indian culture and literature. Indian critics should certainly not allow any kind of theoretical colonization. Theories like dhwani-rasa have not yet found their way into broader critical circles. On the other hand, IWE has already its own well-established tradition of Indian critics, starting with Srinivasa Iyengar, Prema Nandakumar, or C.D. Narasimhaiah, and going on with names like Harish Trivedi, Vrinda Nabar, Meenakshi Mukherjee, Subhendu Mund, GJV Prasad, Nilufer Bharucha and many others, all of whose approach can be classified as a singular contribution to Indian English criticism.
CR: There are very significant names in Indian criticism – Harish Trivedi, GJV Prasad, Meenakshi Mukherjee, Gayatri Spivak – but, alas, how well are any of them known in the West outside the ambit of postcolonial studies, or perhaps tranalation studies? This said, surely Indian critics wishing to make their mark internationally would do best to master both Indian and Western points of view? Still missing is the Indian critic who will bring rasa theory to the outside world's attention as an alternative to Aristotelian perspectives.

NKA: What are your views about the English studies in India? English studies were introduced in India to colonize the minds of the Indians. ~~It was used by the Empire to conquer the souls of the colonized people.~~ About the determination of the British to introduce European literature in India, Governor Lord William Bentinck declared that "the great object of the British Government ought to be the promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India, and all funds appropriated for the purpose of education would be best employed on English education alone." (qtd. Iyengar 27). In the light of the aforesaid facts, is it not proper to exclude certain colonial texts from the syllabi of English Studies in India? In their place, should we not introduce translations of certain classics of regional languages? It will be a sort of decolonization of English studies. I think the curriculum of English studies should consist of Literature in English language in place of Literature of England. Your views please.

LV: In my opinion the study of English in India should be given a place analogous to that which it occupies anywhere else. English studies are nothing more but nothing less either than English studies. If we study English then we should certainly include classical texts written in English and that is irrespective of the place where it is studied. It should include all literature written in the English language, certainly not just literature of England. Examples of what you call "certain colonial texts" should be, on the contrary, studied, I believe; not from a subordinate position but in the proper historical perspective, they should be studied by a 'decolonized mind.'

CR: It is usually said that Macaulay's "Minute on Indian Education" was aimed at imposing British perspectives on Indian minds. However, if you read that text closely you will find a subtext, namely that he does also advocate developing modern Indian languages – rather than Sanskrit or Arabic– with a view to those languages acquiring a scientific and technical vocabulary. The technology introduced by a colonial power can be reappropriated for national purposes post-independence. No-one in India suggests tearing up the railway lines simply because the British had them laid. Karl Marx predicted that teaching Indians western technology would ultimately lead to India reassuming its place as a great nation. Mulk Raj Anand in his novel "Untouchable" saw technology as liable to bring about social progress in India by liberating dalits from the most menial tasks. Meanwhile, the idea of "excluding" certain "colonial texts" from syllabi sounds risky. Shakespeare remains the most important writer in English and introduced more words into the language than anyone else. Kipling's "Kim" is still valuable as transmitting aspects of the colonists' idea of India. Edward Said found "Kim" redeemable. This said, there is anyway a growing tendency worldwide to teach "literatures in English" – British, US, postcolonial – rather than "English literature".

NKA: The MNCs are hiring a number of Indians. One requirement for entry into these organizations is fluency in English, but the problem is that the comprehension power of Indian students in the English language is very weak. Will it not be better to teach the students about the minutest intricacies of the language in place of lecturing on a number of irrelevant and colonial texts of England? What do you think?

LV: The only way to solve this problem is certainly to improve the quality of teaching of the English language as such. Learning English does not necessarily need to be a part of English studies, in other words, it is possible to learn good English without majoring in

English studies. At the same time it is necessary to realize that the "minutest intricacies" of the language are conveyed precisely by the literary works of art.
CR: I think there are two separate issues here. It is not necessary for all professionals proficient in English to be English studies majors. One thing is service courses in English for those studying economics, technology, etc. Another is the content of degrees in English studies as such. Meanwhile, I do not accept the notion of literary studies as "irrelevant". Creative writing expands a language's boundaries and is a privileged means of access to, precisely, its "minutest intricacies".

NKA: What are your views about the publication process in India? Publishers do not easily come forward to publish a new and budding author. Most of the time, they ask for money from the poets / authors instead of giving them royalties. Similar is the case with certain journals. They also charge for subscription / membership. In this way, new and innovative approaches to literature may be kept hidden from the eyes of the world. Please comment.
LV: The reluctance to publish a new and unestablished author is nothing specific to India. It is, more or less, the case anywhere else too. New authors and innovators are not always appreciated, theirs is not an easy lot. This is a sad, nevertheless generally valid reality.
CR: I am not in favour of the practice of asking authors or contributors for financial input into books and journals. I find it counterproductive.

NKA: Can electronic publication be an alternative to print publication? I think negatively about it. Publication on internet cannot replace print publication. One can easily get one's material published on internet. But the real issue is – whether people take it seriously. Readers go through blogs cursorily. How many genuine readers do bother to indulge in the text on internet? It is not suitable for serious academic research. What do you think about all this?
LV: We are perhaps still more used to print publications. Nevertheless, while it is true that one can publish whatever one wants on his or her own blog, there are very serious internet journals published from prestigious universities where it is not so easy to get published. The advantage of these journals is of course that they are accessible to a large number of readers and thus academic research can benefit from them. Very often the readers and the authors can come into direct contact via e-mail. On the other hand there is a large number of print journals or other publications which are of poor quality. It is then necessary to have the criteria for serious academic research in mind and to act selectively both with regard to printed matter and to internet material.
CR: There is in fact a large amount of serious academic material online. Today, the bibliographies to articles reflect this. What worries me is that a lot of academic journals are paying sites. This I find contrary to the free circulation of knowledge, a principle vital to the Internet which also, I believe, corresponds to the Indian notion that knowledge exists to be shared.

Work Cited

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