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# The Globalisation of Literature

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Realising that in order to speak of globalisation, I needed to know the exact meaning of the word, I went to the Oxford Dictionary, which told me that 'global' is worldwide and that 'globalisation' means making global. These dictionary meanings, however, are no more than the bare bones of a word, for words have meanings that go beyond their dictionary definitions. The flesh and the soul of a word comes from us, from the way we use the word, from the context in which we use it and from the values we set on the concept the word stands for. Words can change their meanings in the course of the years, though the dictionary definition remains the same, because the values attached to the concept have changed. Sir Ernest Gowers in his 'The Complete Plain Words' cites the revealing example of the word 'imperialism' which, from being regarded as 'a larger patriotism', became a word with a rather unpleasant connotation, because of a change in the ideology that no longer regarded empire building or colonising as a noble

enterprise. These being looked at with askance, the meaning of the word was debased as well.

The word globalisation too, within the sense of 'world-wide' itself, can be looked at in two ways, one positive and the other negative. I'd like to illustrate this with two very personal experiences.

Growing up in Nehru's India, when imports went against both the policy of ultimate self-reliance and our economic situation, good fountain pens were one of the many things of which there was a great dearth. The locally made ones were few and these were terrible, with bad nibs and leaking bodies. In the late sixties, when we went abroad for the first time, one of my prized purchases was a Parker pen. In later years, each time I went abroad I bought myself a good pen. Now, in the last few years, all these pens are available in India and available all over the place. This, the result of the policy of liberalisation, is to me also the best of globalisation. Good things available everywhere and easily.

An example of the other view of globalisation: years ago in Bombay we found the vegetable sellers excited about a new kind of French beans, which they said were foreign. Being a rarity, they were both desirable and expensive. But later, in the next twenty years, more and more of such varieties took over and nudged out the indigenous species, which are now

almost extinct. This means that, without our knowledge and without our having any choice in the matter, we have lost our store of indigenous seeds; we have no choice now but to buy what is produced from the seeds made available in a global market. This, then, is the negative face of globalisation, a process which snuffs out the regional and the indigenous, which imposes a conformity.

However, I am going to speak today, not of pens and vegetables, but of literature, which is a part of culture. And culture, one imagines, is an entirely different matter. Or, is it? Looking at the world around us, the question is bound to arise: when the world is so closely linked as it is now, when increasing and easier mobility, when satellites, TV, e-mail and all such things have knitted us closer than ever before, can we remain closeted in our own small worlds? Can anyone be untouched by this explosion in the exchange of information and ideas, by the rapid and constant movement of people around the world? When one goes abroad today, nothing is entirely strange. Young people dress in almost the same way in all countries, when we switch on the TV, whether it is Cairo or Amsterdam, we get the same programmes, McDonalds and Pizza Huts stand out like familiar landmarks everywhere, whether in Johannesburg or Khatmandu. Even earlier, the Beatles and Elvis Presley had connected the world with their music, girls were swooning over them in all countries. And of course, through the greater part of the last century, there

has been Hollywood, the most successful invader of the world. In recent years, Hollywood has moved a step further towards being global. While earlier, the movies that the world saw were only US-based, now we have movies which feature not only different countries, but different cultures as well. And, apart from the small movie makers like Merchant Ivory producing movies about an Anglo-Indian in India, or about Jefferson in Paris, or Mira Nair embracing India or Cuba in her folds, Hollywood block busters have been made on Gandhi, on the last Chinese Emperor. Even serious culture went global with Peter Brooke's Mahabharata, which had a cast of international actors and shows in different parts of the globe. Coming to books, some books are everywhere as well - not only books like Chicken Soup for the Soul, or a John Grisham, a Dick Francis, or a biography of Princess Diana, but serious literary books too. Our own Indian writers are part of this; Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy or Amitav Ghosh are read all over the world, their books are translated and sold in countries everywhere.

Yet literature is set apart from other cultural expressions by the fact that it uses language. Movies need language too, but the visual component is equally, if not more important; whereas for literature, language is not only the container, the sheath, it is, to a great extent, also the substance of literature itself. And the world is and will continue to be multi-lingual. How then can literature go global? Perhaps a

look at India, a multi-lingual country, is a good entry point to an understanding of this very complex and odd concept of global literature.

The first thing to note is that, even today we are not sure that there is such a thing as 'Indian Literature'. The debate whether there is or is not such a category goes on, the arguments continue to rage. There is a theory that each language literature is distinct and unique, since, in the words of a scholar, Nihar Ranjan Ray, literature is absolutely language-based, and language itself is shaped by its locale and the socio-historical forces that have operated on it through the years. Another theory is that the literatures of the various Indian languages have much in common and are linked by 'a common core of metaphors and symbols, myths and legends, conventions and norms that have evolved in the last 1000 years' (Prof Sisir Kumar Das). Examples of this cultural unity are the two epics which have been told and retold in all the languages and the Bhakti movement which spread through the entire country. Prof Umashankar Joshi points out how Andal in Tamil Nadu (before the 8th century) and Meerabai in Rajasthan (16th century) both accepted Krishna as their spouse, while there is a very close similarity between Akka Mahadevi's (Karnataka, 12th century) and Lal Ded's (Kashmir, 14th century) Shiva bhakti songs as also their lives. With these uniting factors and an integrated cultural milieu, Indian literature, even if in different



languages, can be regarded as one. There is also the third theory that lies between these two, which regards the geographical factor as being the uniting one; that is, all these literatures can be called Indian because they are all part of the geographical entity called India.

In a sense, these theories can be used in debating the idea of a global literature as well. But, above all, there is one curious component in the idea of Indian literature which sheds much more light on what global literature means. This oddity is the place of English within the literatures of this country. English, unlike the other languages, was not born in this country. It was brought in by the colonisers, imposed at first, then enthusiastically embraced and adopted, so that we began, not only to use the language for working purposes, but to produce literature in this alien language. Now, after more than a century and a half, we have a sizable literature in the language, and though still regarded as an upstart, as alien and elitist, it has established itself as part of the writing of this country. Nevertheless, it is very different from the other languages, most of all in this, that it belongs to no one region. While all the other major languages have a region, a State, English belongs nowhere. Which, oddly enough, has given it an advantage, for, since it is read all over the country, this writing has become the only pan Indian writing. And being in English, it is the only writing that is visible to the world outside, which has given it, even if wrongly, the label

of 'Indian writing' in the international sphere. For years R.K.Narayan, Raja Rao, Anita Desai or Nayantara Sehgal were the only Indian writers for the world, just as now it is Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy and the rest, while the language writers continue to remain unknown. English writing also became part of a category called Commonwealth literature. Perched on this raft, it floated out to join English writing from other once-colonised countries to form a group called post-Colonial writing or third world writing. Today, this writing, together with the writing from Britain and the United States, and translated literature from some other countries, is what can be regarded as international writing. Is this then global writing?

A fact that we need to remember is that this is not an entirely new phenomenon. Literature has always travelled. Stories from the Arabian Nights, or Aesop's Fables or even the Panchtantra went beyond their countries of origin and were current in a great number of countries. I was fascinated to learn in an article by the Marathi writer Gauri Deshpande, written on the project she undertook of translating the Arabian Nights into Marathi, that the first Marathi translation of the Arabian Nights was published in 1890. And this translation was based on the English translation of an original French translation! Equally interesting is the story of the global movement of the Panchatantra, stories which originated in India. They passed into Arabic from a sixth

century Persian translation, from the Slavic languages into Greek, from Hebrew into Latin and thence to German and Italian, from which last language it entered Elizabethan England. These stories are now, according to Amitav Ghosh, (from whom I take this account) part of a global heritage. In our own country, the epics travelled easily through the country and beyond to South and South East Asia. The poet and scholar, the late A.K.Ramanujan, in an essay titled 'Three Hundred Ramayanas', asks, 'How many Ramayanas? Three hundred? Three thousand?'

But these were oral narratives. Written texts are somewhat different. Not only is their movement more difficult, the written or printed text is rigid. And the secret of the mobility of the oral stories was that they were adapted by each people, making them more suitable to their own contexts, their locales. Appropriating them, in other words, and making them their own. Which is not easily possible with written texts.

Nevertheless, books too have made their way across the world. As Amitav Ghosh says, in his delightfully written and equally delightfully titled essay, ('The March of the Novel through History: the testimony of my grandfather's bookcase') fiction has been thoroughly international for more than a century. In his grandfather's bookcase, for example, there were, apart from the Bengali novels of Bankim Chandra, Sarat Chandra, Tagore etc., the Russian novels - Maxim Gorky, Dostoevsky,

Tolstoy, Turgenev, the Europeans like Maupassant, Flaubert, Victor Hugo, the Americans Steinbeck, Upton Sinclair etc. Most libraries of the time would have also had, I imagine, Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontes. And later, there would be Galsworthy, E.M.Forster, Sartre, Camus, Kafka, Hemmingway, James Joyce, Fitzgerald and so on. I can remember the bookshelves of my own childhood, in my own home and in others, most of which had some of these, as well as Daphne du Maurier, P.G.Wodehouse, Somerset Maugham, Graham Greene, etc. Today as Amitav Ghosh points out, people would have Marquez, Nadine Gordimer, Michael Ondaatje, Ben Okri, Salman Rushdie, Gunter Grass, etc., on their shelves.

The curious paradox about the fact that fiction has travelled so easily and so much is that the novel is, in its nature, inherently regional. It is, as Ghosh says, 'founded on a myth of parochialism in the exact sense of a parish.' Jane Austen's words, in a letter to a niece who was writing a novel, 'three or four families in a country village is the very thing to work on,' have now passed into literary legend. Literature, specially the novel, is a writer's response to society. Ideas are worked out through people and their lives. And these lives are lived in a particular region which has a social, political and cultural context - all of which is intrinsic to the novel. The writer, in other words, creates a definite world. Since identification is one of the major doorways through which a reader enters fiction, how did the novel reach readers for whom the world

so created by the writer was an unfamiliar one? How could I as a girl living in a small town in India identify so easily with Jane Austen's 18th century England or Dickens 19th century England? What is or what are the factors that make it possible for a novel to go globe trotting?

At the most basic level, there is the language. For the novel to be read by readers all over the world, it will have to be in a language that a great number of readers can read. Today, English is such a language. The philosopher and scholar George Steiner calls English a planetary language, the only rival to which now is Spanish. All those books in Ghosh's grandfather's cupboard, all the classics in my father's library at home, were in English - either originally written in the language or translated into it. This language, like the literature it embraced, travelled to us in India and to many others through the world, on the backs of the British Empire. English education brought us the classics which were studied by us in school and college, it gave us the entry to all other English books, to the translations which were plentiful in the language. American literature, in the shadows at first, became part of the reading diet of the English reader through the world because of the proliferation of fairly cheap paperbacks that flooded all countries. Today, the strength of American publishing, as well as the increase in American cultural domination, means that readers everywhere have a great number of American books on their shelves as well. And the

quick response of the publisher to the market means that a prizewinning author - a Nobel or a Booker Prizewinner, for example - is translated into English almost immediately after, making it possible for readers all over the world to get quick access to the book.

This means that a book needs to be in English to enter the global market. Nevertheless, this is not enough. I will take the example of two books, fairly recent publications, to probe into this. The first one, originally written in English, is 'The Ground Beneath her Feet' - the latest Salman Rushdie novel. The other is a very recent translation by Prof Ramchandra Sharma of an old Kannada novel 'Kanoor Subbamma Heggadithi' by Kuvempu. Both are vast and sprawling novels, with large canvases and a great number of characters. Kuvempu's novel is, however, deeply rooted in a region, in a particular part of Karnataka. The language - and here I mean the way the language is used by the people - the customs, the references are all very local, rooted not only in the region, but in the communities the characters belong to. The author makes no attempt to simplify or to explain anything to a reader, possibly because he knew that his readers were those who would be familiar with the things he was speaking of.

Rushdie's novel, on the other hand, is global in a literal sense, for it is set in different parts of the globe. The characters too are global, being from all parts of the world.

The points of reference here are those most English readers today in any part of the world would be familiar with. For example: Nehru, Indira Gandhi, the Beatles, the Kennedys, popular contemporary music and the world of music. People like Michael Jackson, Madonna, John Lennon, Princess Diana etc., are seen in some of the characters and are again easily identified by a great many readers the world over. Now while both the books are in English, Rushdie's book clearly presumes a larger and a more cosmopolitan readership, while Kuvempu's novel, though a classic in Kannada and excellently translated, is not accessible to this kind of a global readership. The ordinary reader would be confused by the world the characters inhabit. The clue that one gets hold of after comparing these two books is that to be global there has to be just enough of the unfamiliar to make it seem exotic and such of the unfamiliar as can be explained and understood by a varied readership. Being in English is obviously not enough. Being considered an excellent novel is also not enough; to be accessible to a large readership, the novel has to be shaped for that readership, the unexplainable removed, the awkward stumbling blocks put aside.

I am not implying that Rushdie has done this kind of thing deliberately. He does not need to. Being the kind of person he is, a truly international figure, a man who is at home in any part of the world, this international frame of reference comes naturally. A writer like him can address the world

with ease. Today, in an age of migration, there are a great many writers with this mindset, writers who are, in effect, citizens of the world. As the writer Pico Iyer puts it, 'I am an example of a new breed of people, an intercontinental tribe of wanderers. Nothing is strange to us, nothing is foreign - visitors in our own home.' If we look at the list of writers whose names are known through the world, whose books sell everywhere, we will notice that a great number of them belong to this 'new breed of people', as Pico Iyer terms them. While they originate from a number of different countries - the West Indies, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, China, Japan, etc, all of them have settled in a Western country. The India-based writers, who are part of the internationally known group, are those who spend a great deal of time outside the country. This means that their experiences and their sensibilities are those of very cosmopolitan persons. But even more significant a fact is that they also have access to Western agents and publishers - another must for any book to become global. 'I think the biggest mistake we have made is not to have an agent,' a writer friend wrote to me after a visit abroad; which is true. Publishing is big business today. The small publisher is an almost extinct species - only those who have specialised and found their niche manage to cling on precariously to survival. It is only the big publisher who can sell books on a global scale. And it is only the agent who knows what this publisher wants, the agent who can shape the author's material for such a publisher.



This kind of globalisation of writing has also been helped by the migration, not only of writers, but also of intellectuals and scholars from all over the world to Western capitals and universities. From their vantage points in reputed institutions and universities, they have been able to give validity to writing from their own countries. Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, as also the theory of post Colonialism, have brought into the limelight books from the once colonised countries. These have ensured that such texts from countries other than the West which have been endorsed by these scholars have entered the academic canon. It is through Gayatri Spivak's translation and her appraisal that Mahashweta's works became known internationally, a service which A.K.Ramanujam did for Anantmurthy's Samskara and many other Indian texts. It made a difference that these books were translated and praised by scholars who had a standing in Western academia. The conclusion one is forced to draw is that literature can enter the realm of the global only if stamped and authenticated by the West. In a recent review of the Oxford Guide to Contemporary Literature, the reviewer, Vijay Nambisan, notes with chagrin the inaccuracies in the entry on Indian literature, the perspective that is so wholly that of an outsider. Who is this contributor and what are his credentials, the reviewer asks. Could they not have found an Indian scholar who knows the subject infinitely better? Aijaz Ahmed uses the term 'cultural imperialism' to describe such a phenomenon. That the literature of these

countries is also termed 'third world literature' would certainly support such a view.

The most essential element of globalisation is however marketing. In fact, globalisation itself is a concept that has been successfully marketed by those who want to sell their goods world wide. To watch the advertisements on TV during the World Cup was a revelation; it showed how well and how successfully this is now being done. I began by saying that I am speaking of literature, not of pens or vegetables. But the book is sold today in the same way a fountain pen is. And so is the author who is part of the selling of the book. The author's personality and looks are used to sell the book; the better the showperson the author is, the greater the sales. The huge advances given to some authors call for a global market; it is the only way that the publisher can recover the money. And therefore, world wide readings, signing sessions, interviews, appearances on TV become essential points of the marketing of a book. Incessant publicity about the book, ensuring that it is constantly talked about, also helps. Books are sent into the world with the tag of 'great' or 'the best' already attached to them. The very publicity surrounding these books ensures that they are reviewed everywhere and quickly.

What will this kind of globalisation of literature do to a national or a regional literature? Will it lose its place, its

value? Rushdie, who is perhaps the most global author today, has through his writing, his life and his statements like 'the migrant is the central, the defining figure of our century of wandering' put global writing right in the center of the literary map, pushing others into the margin. In fact, in his famous, or rather infamous article, in which he gave English writing the pride of place in Indian literature, he refers to the writing in the Indian languages as being parochial - using the term in a derogatory sense, as being insular and limited. One thing is certain: regional isolation is no longer possible. It is also true that with the increasing speed and ease of communication, the world is to a great extent coming closer in the matter of tastes. But to imagine that we will all read the same kind of literature, is like saying that, because Coca Cola is available world wide, we all drink only Coca Cola. To state that literature will become global and that global writing is the best writing, is to make as rash a generalisation as saying that the best writing is regional. The best writing can never be strait jacketed. And while humans share much more with people all over the world than ever before, it is wrong to imagine that our national, our regional identities will cease to matter. However much the world opens out to us, there is an intrinsic human sense of rootedness, of wanting to belong, a desire to stake out our own little territories, which leads to a greater involvement with all that is closest to our homes. Our major concerns will continue to be those closest to our lives, arising from our immediate environment,

from our individual situations. The fierce ethnic conflicts in different parts of the world, even at a time of erasing of national boundaries, seem to indicate that in a world of increasing globalisation, ethnic identities are, as a matter of fact, becoming increasingly important.

And it is through our culture that we define our identities even to ourselves. Which is why our response to a Kishori Amonkar, a Bhimsen Joshi, a Balamuralikrishna, or even to a song from 'Kuch Kuch Hota Hai', will be greater than our response to the musician who was, some time back, promoted fiercely and persistently on TV and who performed through the globe against a backdrop of the most exotic locales. Slightly twisting the title of a recent article on Indo-Anglian writing by Vikram Chandra, 'Nowhere and Everywhere', I would say such a musician is everywhere and nowhere. Literature, more than any other cultural expression, carries the identity of a people. It is Shakespeare who even today defines the English identity, Tagore the Bengali identity and so on. Therefore the literature that defines this identity to our own selves, will continue to exist, will continue to matter. The writer herself writes from a rootedness and it is from this rootedness that universalities emerge. As Ghosh puts it, 'to locate oneself through prose, one must begin with an act of dislocation'. It is with this dislocation that the writer moves from the particular to the universal. The human universalities that we can respond to, enable us to make even a book set

in a strange society or a different time our own; certain books can transcend both time and space. But if we look at the books that have done so, whether it is Tolstoy or Dickens or Jane Austen, we will see that these books are deeply rooted in their own society. Yet they reach across time and space and speak to us directly because they speak of our own concerns. As Terry Eagleton says, 'We are incapable of doing anything other than reading our own preoccupations into works of literature. This is why certain works of literature retain their value across the centuries.' These I would call universal books as opposed to global. Undoubtedly, in the contemporary world of hard sell, books sold aggressively and skilfully become global in the sense of being sold and read all over the world. A Dick Francis or a Ruth Rendell is sold the world over, but without in any way detracting from the skill of these writers, the fact remains that these are mere entertainment, soon forgotten. But universal books enter the consciousness of readers and become part of their lives.

'The greatness of an author has little to do with the subject matter itself, only with how much the subject matter touches the author'. A statement made by the Russian writer Boris Pasternak. Which is true, for it is only if the author is deeply involved, committed to what she/he is saying, that the book will touch the reader. But such a book, even if it is great, may not reach readers the world over, unless it gets a prize, is marketed and sold aggressively. Some of the books I have

read in the recent past, books which have deeply touched me, which have become part of me, are nowhere on the lists of the best sellers that have now become a regular feature of our times; yet I know that they will have become as important to many readers all over the world as they have to me. Familiarity with the locale is not the only point of entry for the reader. There is also an identification with the issues, with the characters, their predicaments, their ideas. And there is the magic window of a writer's genius. In an essay titled 'Dislocations', the writer Rose Zwi, whose parents had moved from Eastern Europe to Mexico and then to South Africa, speaks of how strange the children's books she found in the library in South Africa seemed to her. With her Jewish background of persecution and rejection, she just could not relate to the English school children's cosy world of midnight feasts and games. And then, she says, 'I stumbled upon Dickens. Laughing and crying my way through his novels, I decided to become a writer.' The world of Dickens was actually just as strange to this child in South Africa, but the genius of the writer drew the reader into it.

Undoubtedly the fact of publishing having become a big industry puts an enormous pressure on the publishers to sell as widely and as much as possible in order to recover their money. It means that economics controls and dictates the spread and availability of books. It means that a certain common denominator is used as the standard for what will

sell. It means that literature has to be shaped for universal acceptance, like the beauties for the Miss World or Miss Universe contest are. Such writing will have as little to do with good literature as the winners have to do with real beauty. There is in all this a celebration of mediocrity, of which the success of the movie Titanic is to me an outstanding example. So that global writing ultimately means, 'shelf after shelf of sameness, the easily marketed, the easily displayed, apparently the easily read'. This kind of globalisation is, in effect, just another face of what Prof Umashankar Joshi calls a 'super Colonialism'. Looking at the things that the world now has in common - jeans and pizzas and cokes - we will notice that most of these come from the most powerful country in the world today - the United States. This is the new, the super Colonialism. The developing countries are the markets where the goods of the developed countries are sold, they are the consumers. It is never an equal exchange.

But there is also the positive side of globalisation, which means that today it is increasingly possible for people from all over the world to share things. To have access to one another's cultures. Why not books then? But if it has to be a kind of globalisation most readers would welcome, it would be a healthy exchange, not erasing differences, but keeping them alive. It would mean more translations, it would mean a greater mobility of books. It would mean that books encircle the globe on the wings of their own merit and excellence,

instead of being pushed around through fierce promotion and aggressive selling strategies. This is the kind of globalisation we need. Unfortunately, economic factors impose their own curbs on such a possibility; because the trendy, the facile and the well-marketed will always sell faster. And since, obviously, the publisher needs to recover the money invested as quickly as possible, the books that will go global will continue to be those which will appeal to the largest readership, those which a large readership is manipulated into believing are significant and must be read.

But, if the recent protests at the WTO meeting at Seattle are a sign of the times, there is a growing resistance to the conformity that globalisation means, to the crushing of the regional, to the imposition of a uniform drabness in the name of globalisation. Globalisation, we are slowly beginning to understand, is not only a commercial concept, it also means the imposition of standards and norms - whether in trade, in beauty, or in culture - which are really the standards of the powerful nations. And literature, specially, can never be global in the sense of being the same the world over, because the liveliness of literature lies, as Rushdie says, 'in its exceptionality', in its being, 'the individual idiosyncratic vision of a human being.'



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*Shashi Deshpande, who lives in Bangalore, has published five short story collections and eight novels (including two short crime novels). Her books, published both in India and abroad, have received several awards, including the Sahitya Akademi award for That Long Silence. Many of these have been translated into a number of Indian and European languages. Her latest novel Small Remedies was published in April 2001. Ms Deshpande has also written a number of articles, in national newspapers and magazines, on literature, Indian writing in English, feminism and women’s writing.*

*She is also the author of four books for children, as well as the script for the prize-winning Hindi feature film Drishti. Her novel The Dark Holds No Terrors was made into a movie recently.*

