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Intercultural Framework and the Dialectic Aspects of the Study of Transnational Literatures: A Talk with Sarbani Sen Vengadasalam

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Abstract:

Many researchers have studied the “postcolonial experience,” but focus on the aspect of dialectics in the same framework has not been processed adequately. Taking up a conversation with Sarbani Sen Vengadasalam on *New Postcolonial Dialectics: An Intercultural Comparison of Indian and Nigerian English Plays*, I investigated how and why the intercultural framework is noteworthy; probed into how Sarbani Sen Vengadasalam visualises Indian and Nigerian English plays that are set in national traditions, and who she perceives as the beneficiary for such knowledge. Correspondingly, I attempted to ascertain if recipients can reframe their own cultural environment. In doing so, I concentrated on the ambiguous notions of national tradition and cultural environment, the postcolonial experience in relation to drama, and also the anxieties of the Indian and Nigerian dramatists in postcolonial theatre in conflict to the one-dimensional depiction of colonialism.

Keywords: Badal Sircar; interculturalism; postcolonialism; Rabindranath Tagore; Sarbani Sen Vengadasalam; Wole Soyinka.

Each year we notice publication of articles by several scholars, as well as books on criticism by numerous authors, who endeavour to investigate discounted genres under the aegis of Postcolonial theory, with wavering levels of success. It has been observed that the topics that are more popular amongst the readers of English literature in the 21st century are national narratives and global connections in Postcolonial writing, scholarships that construe nationalisms exploiting a “psychoanalytic hermeneutic.” (Anker 2011, 588)¹ This encounters dominant concepts of the global and a range of perceptions on Postcolonialism i.e., the articles cover

¹ E. S. Anker, (2011) *Worlds within: National Narratives and Global Connections in Postcolonial Writing*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 588.

“conceptual and methodological issues” (Breto 2013)² and extend the scope of the discipline as it pertains to race, society, change, language, migration among many others. We have also seen that since 2000, there have been many publications on postcolonial scholarship exploring the relationship between Postcolonialism and Marxist thought (explicitly in Subaltern Studies). Vivek Chibber studies the Lazarus value of “Marxist rethinking” (Hitchcock 2015)³ in his *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (2013), whereas Neil insinuates that Marxism and Postcolonialism are antithetical notions in *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011). *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Postcolonial Writing* (2018), edited by Jenni Ramone, on the other hand, ambitiously attempts to “register the emergence of new intellectual arenas in Postcolonial Studies via largely Anglophone contexts.” (Toth 2019)⁴ Similarly, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010) focused on the trending field of Ecocriticism.

While we find a lot written on Postcolonial theory and multiculturalism, we find very few articles on the concept of “interculturalism”. In Stanyek’s interpretation, interculturalism has been used in the context of music where the kind of intercultural music-making “serves to reinforce differences and to rupture contiguities. Interculturalism thrives on both proximity and distance.” (Stanyek 1999, 44)⁵ In this manner, in the attraction to interculture, race can be a reason in explaining musical notes, along with style, constituents, class, and subject position.

Interculturalism is constructed upon an utterly distinctive conceptual framework and proposes an innovative and reformist approach to how we learn to live with multiplicity. Although several multicultural theorists have struggled to oppose any change of approach – involving those advanced since 2001 under the banner of “community cohesion” – there are now signs that this is beginning to transform. There are assertions that the new ideologies of interculturalism were “foundational” to multiculturalism (Meer 2012, 182).⁶ Any proof, nevertheless, does not support such declarations and, therefore, many of the significant beliefs of

2 Breto, I. Breto, “Literature for Our Times: Postcolonial Studies in the Twenty-first Century,” *Atlantis* 35 no.2: 219. (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2013).

3 P. Hitchcock, (*Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015) *The Comparatist*, 39, 356. doi: 10.2307/26254734.

4 H. G. Toth, *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Postcolonial Writing: New Contexts, New Narratives, New Debates* *The Modern Language Review*, 114 (2), 372 (London: Bloomsbury, 2019) doi:10.5699/modelangrevi.114.2.0372.

5 Jason Stanyek, “Articulating Intercultural Free Improvisation: Evan Parker’s Synergetics Project.” *Resonance* 7, no. 2 (1999): 44.

6 N. Meer, and T. Modood, ‘How Does Interculturalism Contrast with Multiculturalism?’, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 33, no. 2 (2012) 182.

interculturalism were disregarded or overruled by multiculturalists. Interculturalism, which admits “difference” between people and the society now crosses national borders and also represents the heterogeneity of national, racial, and faith groups (Cantle 2016, 134).⁷ Interculturalists recognise socio-economic characteristics as vital foundations of preferences and stereotypes, but not as the sole basis, and correspondingly highlight education/interaction policies as the means of disconfirming stereotypes and presumptions.

Last year (2019), I received an email regarding writing a review for a book titled *New Postcolonial Dialectics: An Intercultural Comparison of Indian and Nigerian English Plays* (2019). The writer is Sarbani Sen Vengadasalam, and the book she has written argues that the intercultural use of dramatic forms by both Indian and Nigerian dramatists is not inadvertent but depicts a resolve to initiate an innovative form for modern Indian and Nigerian theatre. During my PhD at the University of Leeds, United Kingdom I worked in the same line of research, which made me curious and excited to read and review the book. I was intrigued by its blend of dense writing and evocative ideas and wanted a discussion with its writer for further detail.

The book showcases Sarbani Sen Vengadasalam’s ability to stare deeply into the aspects of cultural encounters as it manifests itself in Indian and Nigerian drama. She transposes an intercultural framework on to the academic exploration of the anxiety in the Indian and the Nigerian cultures before and after the struggle for freedom. The book makes a proportional study of Wole Soyinka's colonial and pre-civil-war plays with Rabindranath Tagore's plays from pre-independence India and Badal Sircar from liberated India for how they reflect the relationship of cultures. The book mainly examines how the plays make evident the avant-garde philosophies of the playwrights, who seized the task to express as well as stir Indian and Nigerian national consciousness.

New Postcolonial Dialectics begins with an introduction and an evaluation of critical theories and moves on to a detailed study on Indian and Nigerian drama. The evaluation reveals the pressing necessity for an intercultural dialectic. The framework that the book uses can be transferred to both particular and comparative studies of intercultural literatures. The study effectively throws light on how cultures and dramatic traditions can be intermarried to both represent and enrich intercultural societies. Moreover, the new intercultural dialectic can be

7 Ted Cantle, “The Case for Interculturalism, Plural Identities and Cohesion”. Dans Nasar Meer, Tariq Modood et Ricard Zapata-Barrero (dir.), *Multiculturalism and Interculturalism: Debating the Dividing Lines* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 134.

useful for over-all studies of intercultural encounters in literature, and comparative studies of East and West, and pre-colonial, colonial, or postcolonial literature particularly.

The book explores how biculturalism in Tagore and Soyinka's disposition and nurturing enabled them both to develop a style of intercultural theatre that helped to understand cultural interactions that colonialism brought in. Both playwrights embraced dramatic idioms in their plays that were not only conventional but also modern. Their plays delivered the dramatic encounter between the foreign and the conventional through age and youth. As the book analyzes, it is the young that epitomize indigenous culture in the Indian play whereas it is the old that denote the indigenous in the Nigerian play. Things transformed drastically in post-independence India and Nigeria. Like Sircar, Soyinka was also acutely alert of the necessity to engage people in the theatre, therefore, Soyinka moved towards ritual in his dramaturgy. Tagore did not credit naturalism on the stage, similarly, Sircar rejected the proscenium to support mobility. As Sarbani Sen Vengadasalam points out, "Whereas the colonial Soyinka and Tagore founded indigenous and foreign structures as well as fables through which the opposites could accomplish a harmonious combination in their dramas, a transformed national condition made the post-1960 Soyinka and Sircar present the combat between the indigenous and the foreign at all points and in all spheres in their plays." As the West had seeped in everywhere and become more than a foreign other, the intercultural sympathy of the dramatists pressed the writers to get a more intricate interculturalism than the one they had counterfeited before independence.

In her preface, Sarbani Sen Vengadasalam asserts that "theatre is a crucible for change" and debates for the requirement of an intercultural dialectic in comparative postcolonial and performance studies. The West observed Africa "either as a paradise of innocence or as a jungle." (Vengadasalam 2019, 140)⁸ Disregarding this wrong idea in Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, Sarbani Sen Vengadasalam rightly observes that Nigeria earnestly required finding "means to feed the hungry and build roads, not an ideology that would take her to a dead end." (Vengadasalam 2019, 105)⁹ Sarbani Sen Vengadasalam's evaluation discourses concerns of modifying culture and language whereas building forward "into the broader spectrum of an

8 Sarbani Sen Vengadasalam, *New Postcolonial Dialectics: An Intercultural Comparison of Indian and Nigerian English Plays* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), 140.

9 Vengadasalam, *New Postcolonial Dialectics*, 105.

eclectic internationalism,” (Vengadasalam 2019, 12)¹⁰ and pronounces that it is imperative to embrace the West while eluding imitativeness.

Sarbani Sen Vengadasalam’s *New Postcolonial Dialectics* is a deep exploration of the postcolonial condition. While exploring the similitude in the way colonised world civilisations interacted with the colonising culture to produce a new theatre that is nationalistic yet richly multicultural, she evolved an intercultural scaffolding or theoretical framework for comparative commonwealth studies. This book can be useful for readers, with especial interest in colonial history, as the book is an engaging narrative of British rule and resistance to it in India and Nigeria.

Sarbani Sen Vengadasalam is the recipient of awards such as the Junior Research Fellowship from the University Grant Commission, Merit scholarships, Outstanding student prizes, and five University gold medals that include the Lord Pentland Prize and the Grigg Memorial Gold Medals for topping the University for her masters. She completed her MPhil at the University of Madras and her PhD at the University of Pune. She has been teaching at Rutgers University since she moved to New Jersey in the USA. Since 2008, she has taught at all levels at the Writing program - from Business and Technical writing and Expository writing courses for undergraduates to Dissertation writing and Writing for Publication courses for PhD students and is specialist in online and hybrid teaching. She has chaired panels and presented at several conferences, seminars, and symposia. Also, she is an Associate editor of the *Watchung Review* and a member of New Jersey College English Association, American Studies Research Centre, and Modern Language Association.

I was honoured to talk with Sarbani Sen Vengadasalam about the various questions, experiences, and obsessions that made its completion possible.

Interviewer: What was the purpose of your book *New Postcolonial Dialectics*?

Sarbani Sen Vengadasalam: The purpose of the book is to highlight the intercultural aspects of Indian and Nigerian drama that have not been researched into as much as other literary forms. Since drama is meant to be performed, I strongly believe that dramaturgy needs to be studied for the light it throws on cultural history. Also, there is a need for a new comparative framework. While working on my self-appointed project, I realized that the existing models do not do justice

¹⁰ Vengadasalam, *New Postcolonial Dialectics*, 12.

to the intercultural aspect of the plays, so I went ahead and decided to use interculturalism itself as a framework for comparison.

Interviewer: What were your findings in summary?

SSV: The entire book is about what I found. To summarize it in a sentence, Tagore's symbolic intercultural theatre gave way to Sircar's defiant intercultural third theatre, while Soyinka's dramaturgy moved from intermingling European and Yoruban elements towards a more ritualised, mythopoeic theatre in the playwrights' attempt to both portray and ameliorate their nation's cultural experiences.

Interviewer: Why is the study of intercultural framework significant?

SSV: The world we live in today is intercultural. An intercultural framework is the only approach that works both in literature and in criticism because it is protean, nonrestrictive, and reflective of the human experience. Wherever there are two or more cultures and an unequal balance of power—every nation today has regional subcultures—there is interculturalism. Please note that I do not say multiculturalism but interculturalism because interculturalism is evolving, interactive, and transactional.

Interviewer: Few other historians have trodden this ground before. Who do you see as your recipient for such knowledge? How can the recipients reframe their own cultural environment?

SSV: I am glad you see my book as a contribution to an unexplored area of cultural history because that is exactly what I conceived it to be. What *New Postcolonial Dialectics* brings out is how colonial and neo-colonial English plays from India and Nigeria were deeply grounded in national traditions while also including the international in their creative scope. I think that critical theorists have been so constrained by postcolonial thought that they have not adequately acknowledged the reframing of the cultural environment through theatre that Rabindranath Tagore and Wole Soyinka pioneered during colonial times. I picked *Red Oleanders* and *The Lion and the Jewel* to bring out the groundbreaking nature of their dramaturgy. Just as with the colonial playwrights, post-freedom dramatists—drama is a very public form of expression—took cognisance of the altered reality created by neocolonial forces and evolved a new dramaturgy

that could best achieve their goals and resonate with their audiences. Since Soyinka composed his plays both during the colonial and the neocolonial era, I point out that the revolutionary dimension he incorporated into his evolved dramaturgy later was in reaction to what his nation required. I was struck by the way Soyinka dramatised the Nigerian national situation in *The Road* as well as how it bodied forth Soyinka's evolving dramaturgy. As Tagore did not live to see free India, I elected to study Badal Sircar since he is from the same Bengali subculture as Tagore. I opted to study Sircar's *Procession* with *The Road* and *The Lion and the Jewel* with Tagore's *Red Oleanders*. Finding out how the plays were strikingly similar, while also being significantly different, shows the impact of milieu on dramatic art since the nations were going through comparable, not identical experiences. Understanding interculturalism can help recipients frame their individual responses to their current environment.

Interviewer: How is knowledge of national tradition important to reframe one's cultural environment?

SSV: Knowledge of national tradition is important, but what is key is sensitivity to what the country requires at the moment. It is that consciousness that makes a writer look outside his own cultural oyster into useful aspects of other cultures. If interculturalism is a literary tool for writers to both portray and ameliorate the natural situation; theorists and critics, teachers and students need to be grounded in their own cultures but open to other cultures in order to understand, reflect, and critique the uniquely international national situations that are being portrayed in the literary works they are studying.

Interviewer: Why did you choose India for a comparative study with Nigeria?

SSV: My book is the outcome of a passion project. When I read English plays from Nigeria and India during my graduate studies, I knew that I wanted to compare them for my doctoral research. My comparative intercultural studies went beyond my doctoral project—it evolved as I experienced and studied new cultures and literatures in the United States, my adopted country.

Interviewer: This is interesting! So how was your experience regarding the United States as a diverse society and its tolerance towards immigrants? And how do you see the concept of “us and them” in the USA especially with the need/practice of interculturalism?

SSV: I think the United States is a living example of interculturalism. Every new citizen of the United States goes through the process of finding how the “us” and “them” breaks down and becomes “we, the people of the United States.” Since people from all cultures of the world have entered and become part of the cultural mosaic that is the United States, I become more intercultural with each passing day of my life here. And so does the United States.

Interviewer: What were the challenges, contradictions, and conflicts (if any) you faced as a researcher to explore the role of Indian and Nigerian dramatists?

SSV: Yes, I faced plenty of challenges. Even though getting scholarly information on the plays and finding notes on performances were difficult, I did not give up. I felt it my mission to pursue the project. Though I did not receive funding to visit UK or Nigeria, I had the opportunity to meet and travel with Sircar, and stay and research at Viswabharati in Santiniketan. I met with many Africanists at seminars and conferences who sent me privileged, first-hand information. While these valuable inputs were enough for my doctoral research, this project was more than a way to add “Dr” before my name. Hence, I did not publish my work immediately. I wanted to let it evolve as I looked for ways to update and expand my research and the intercultural framework. As the intercultural framework needed to be popularised, I looked out and found an appropriate publisher. Even though interculturalism is explained and validated in my published book, the intercultural project is far from complete – it will need a whole generation of researchers to do justice to it.

Interviewer: How has your research influenced your professional identity and self-conception as a researcher?

SSV: My research has become me. My interculturalism has influenced me as a researcher and teacher. I have become a global thinker and an intercultural personality—there is no going back to the person and world view I had before my project happened.

Interviewer: Do you think it is a time of necessary reinvention regarding theatre?

SSV: Wherever there is conflict, there is a need for reinvention. Since theatre is a tool for social change, there is a need to reinvent theatre. To a large extent, it is theatre on celluloid that comes into our homes in tv shows and movies, however, it is missing the live interaction between

people that makes theatre so potent and so special. It is time to rediscover the human element in theatre.

Interviewer: What efforts can be made to develop a popular, socially conscious theatre for a movie-going audience conditioned by the stereotypes of commercial Bollywood and Nollywood?

SSV: I think the one thing that differentiates movies—that are hugely popular—and theatre in both nations is that theatre has and celebrates human interchange. In theatre, it is direct and immediate communication between actor and audience. What is significant is that the three dramatists my book studies—Tagore, Sircar and Soyinka—were deeply conscious of this and got rid of sets or proscenium stage so the audience became part of the action, and not its target.

Interviewer: What are your thoughts on the state of Indian and Nigerian criticism on contemporary theatre?

SSV: Drama is an under-researched area of Indian and Nigerian criticism, because of the difficulty it presents as the most public of literary forms. I think much work needs to be done and many exciting opportunities exist here.

Interviewer: How is the intercultural model in the West different from that of the experience in India and Nigeria?

SSV: Interculturalism is a response to the conflict of cultures. Every nation has a myriad of subcultures with their own centres and margins. Power conflicts between cultures exist in the west and the east, so interculturalism exists everywhere. However, since India and Nigeria underwent a cultural conflict that was provoked by the horrendous experience of colonialism, their sense of interculturalism is keener—this is true of all literary expression from ex-colonies, be they British, French, Spanish, Italian, etc. However, there is great room for intercultural studies in the USA—since interculturalism in native American literary expressions or in America's lost plays during the colonial era has not been studied adequately. Though the premise is the same, every intercultural experience and literary expression is similar and different—even the UK is not just England but an amalgamation of Scotland, Ireland, and Wales with their unique cultures.

Interviewer: What is postcolonial thinking's position with regard to India and Nigeria? Does it adopt Europe's values? What is your take on decentring of European thought in the context of developing countries?

SSV: The intercultural framework is an attempt to break out of European frameworks and neo-colonial cultural impositions. Interculturalism, as I approach it, is a decentring, and a decolonisation of critical thought. Interculturalism is not an attempt to trivialise the colonial experience, but to show that cultural clashes take on many forms and exist beyond and before as much as within the colonial experience.

Interviewer: Is postcolonial discourse becoming less relevant in an age of globalisation?

SSV: Postcolonial discourse certainly needs to be revised. Postcolonialism stands in for many kinds of critical thoughts and approaches-and means different things to different theorists and their followers. Globalisation is good and welcome but does not imply that national identities and experiences are rendered irrelevant. That is why I call interculturalism a new postcolonial discourse

Interviewer: How, if at all, can students along with the dramatists play an important role regarding theatrical intercultural innovations?

SSV: You raise a very significant question. Students have always played an important role in innovations and revolutions. Tagore's plays were staged in Santiniketan, so students watched and performed in them. Similarly, Soyinka as a Professor taught drama and literature at various universities including Ibadan, Lagos. He founded the 1960 Masks which eventually became a part of the university's acting troupe. Though Sircar was not part of any University, students or the younger generation vibed well with his message and joined his troupe— Satabdi—I have seen that myself while interacting with and witnessing the troupe's street performances.

Tagore, Sircar, and Soyinka were writing for students or the younger generation and saw themselves as students and experimenters. That students were a part of the theatrical experience certainly contributed to the innovative slant the three writers took to drama. Since all three playwrights were concerned with reaching out to their audiences, they conceived their plays from the performance perspective-hence their appeal- and often took part in the performances

themselves. So yes, students can and do play an important role in responding, encouraging, and sustaining theatrical innovation.

Interviewer: What about the anticolonial and postcolonial struggles that you see in the plays of both Soyinka and Tagore?

SSV: The anticolonial struggle happened forty years apart in India and Nigeria. However, the struggles are portrayed using very similar motifs. Tagore and early Soyinka invented, Though Sircar and Soyinka too had different personalities, I found the ennui found in the plays of Soyinka and Sircar to be alike too –it was almost as if the nations were writing through their pens. This led me to conclude that it is human to be intercultural. National, racial, and time differences matter—as they should— however we humans fundamentally react in the same way to cultural imperialism.

Interviewer: You mentioned that the playwrights used similar motifs in their plays? Can you elaborate?

SSV: Sure. For instance, both colonial plays used the motif of a love triangle. In *Red Oleanders*, hatred for the colonizing British and desire for more Anglicisation is mirrored in the love-hate relationship between Nandini & the King who falls in love with her and joins her struggle against his own machine state. Sidi in *The Lion and the Jewel* similarly is in a love triangle with the Bale and Lakunle vying for her attentions. However, Lakunle does not symbolize British culture itself but the foolishness of imitating what is not connate. Superficial Anglicisation becomes a response to, a taming, and a domestication of the coloniser's culture. Interestingly Sidi is confounded by the cultural encounter, but Nandini sees through it. It is not surprising therefore that unlike Sidi's beau, Nandini's soulmate is the son of the soil, Ranjan.

To portray the neo-colonial milieu, Sircar and Soyinka use the motif of death and the road. While the search for Khokha and endless processions characterize *Procession*, confused identities and search for the elusive word are depicted in *The Road*. While the procession motif brings dynamism and movement on the stage, the motif of Khokha repeated dying, and rising up after being dead on stage brings out Sircar's message—that death in life is emblematic of the neocolonial condition. To communicate the same idea, Soyinka uses ritual and the egungwu-

who are suspended between life and death. The stage gets transformed into a womb, a transitional space that encloses the unborn, the living, and the dead in its arc of experience.

Interviewer: Can you comment on the way language is used in the four plays?

SSV: In *The Lion and the Jewel*, Soyinka uses agricultural similes and motor metaphors. *The Road* uses pidgin-Soyinka's successful nativisation of the coloniser's language. He no longer uses words for humour and fun but use words as weapons to arrest the ease of normally complacent people. Similarly, Tagore incorporates poetry and philosophy as also dance and music in what is an allegory in *Red Oleanders*. Sircar's language in the *Procession*, on the other hand, is keyed at a factual, mundane level and is direct, repetitive, and accusatory.

Interviewer: Towards the end of *New Postcolonial Dialectics*, you write that 'As the West had seeped in everywhere and become more than a foreign "other", the intercultural sensitivity of the dramatists pushed the writers to seek out a more complex interculturalism than the one they had forged before independence.' Could you elaborate on that?

SSV: Sure. The colonising culture is very distinct and identifiable and seen as foreign in colonial times because the colonial master is present physically and present in a position of power. Colonial writers hence depict the two cultures in conflict as separate. In neo-colonial times, things change and yet do not. While independence brings in freedom from the coloniser, it does not imply freedom from the coloniser's culture. Writers portraying the post-Independence situation, therefore, show how the indigenous and the non-indigenous culture are still in conflict but are not separate—the conflicts are within than without. My statement highlights how the intercultural dramaturgy evolved with the times—Wole Soyinka moved from mime and masquerade into a ritualised, mythopoeic drama in Nigeria while Tagore's unconventional symbolic Santiniketan productions gave way to Badal Sircar's defiant "third" street theatre in India.

Interviewer: Much of what you have said hinges on how we understand the postcolonial movements and political history of India and Nigeria. Could you elaborate on how important was the study of the long history of both countries, for you?

SSV: I strongly believe that to critique a play well and correctly, you need to know the nation's history and culture. While Tagore as a bard has received critical attention, the same cannot be said of his dramatic contributions. I believe justice can be done to Tagore, Soyinka, and Sircar as playwrights only if the plays are situated and studied within the milieu and the larger socio-political and cultural movements from which they sprang-hence my deep study of the two nations' cultural histories.

Interviewer: How do you see depiction of the manipulation of the gullible working class in Wole Soyinka's plays?

SSV: *The Road* shows how the working class is at the mercy of the rich. Their poverty, illiteracy, and naivete make them easy victims. Not only are they as gullible, but seem reconciled to their positions. In *The Lion and the Jewel*, Baroka plays on the gullibility of Sidi which leads to her undoing, but unlike Sidi, her counterparts in *The Road* cannot amend their situation by partnering with the ruling class-they are stuck. Hence the play ends with Professor's exhortation to gather strength while they wait.

Interviewer: How do the three writers present power relations?

SSV: Power—and those in power— feed on those that are not. However, the plays are about empowerment. Even in the most one-sided power relationship, empowerment is shown as possible -through interculturalism. In each of the four plays, the powerful also have a weakness and are not as strong as they appear. While the powerful and the disempowered are in a permanent relationship—one exists because of the other—the players and their positions are in flux—reflecting the nations and the times that the plays emerged from.

Interviewer: How do you see the feminist narrative in relation to patriarchy in both Tagore's and Soyinka's plays?

SSV: I think the feminist narrative is a very important narrative and perspective in understanding Tagore. As I elaborate in my book, Tagore had a high opinion of the potential of Indian women. As integrative forces that were rooted in tradition, they drew their strength from nature and preserved the sanctity of the heart. Accordingly, all his female protagonists were strong women who were not stereotypes or homebound, but women who desired to claim their place in the

world. He believed that when Indian women awoke to a consciousness of their power, they would catalyse change. That is why Nandini, a colonised woman, is shown in *Red Oleanders* as accomplishing a unity with the colonising King.

Sidi in *The Lion and the Jewel* does not body forth Soyinka's thoughts about Nigerian women though much has been made of Sidi's choice by critics. It is not as if representatives of two cultures are vying for her attention. Lakunle does not represent Anglicanism as much as its harmful impact on colonial subjects. Similarly, if Baroka was envisaged as a figure of tradition in the Negritudist sense, he would not have been presented as a corrupt chieftain. Again, Sidi is hardly the upholder of her tradition as her choice might suggest. Even if she is the embodiment of fertility and beauty, Sidi is at odds with the role prescribed to Nigerian young women. Sidi does not represent the possibilities of Nigerian womanhood in the play, she makes the best of a bad situation by marrying the Bale, saving her pride while ensuring a future life of comfort. Marrying Lakunle would mean making her situation and shame public, with Lakunle and her pers would mocking her forever for her naivete.

While *Red Oleanders* and *The Lion and the Jewel* have women in the centre of their action, women o get marginalised in Indian and Nigerian societies after freedom dawned. Accordingly, *The Road* and the *Procession* do not have any women characters. Even though Chorus member Six in *Procession* is a woman, she is no match to Nandini of *Red Oleanders* or a Sidi or Sadiku of *The Lion and the Jewel*.

Interviewer: You mentioned Negritude and how Bale has not been drawn in the Negritude mould by Soyinka? What do you think of Soyinka and his stance towards Negritude?

SSV: I am glad you asked this question. Soyinka was too much of an interculturalist to subscribe to Negritude. He saw Negritude as a nativist movement and his famous quip "A tiger does not proclaim his tigritude, you know it when he pounces,... the duiker does not proclaim his duikertude, you see it in his elegant leap," provided fuel to the nativist school to brand Soyinka as a Western agent. However, Soyinka's balanced stance went beyond its fallacies and narrowness of the two binaries. To him, an identification of science with the European present and of mysticism with the African past was simplistic. Soyinka rejected the idea that science was Western, and acknowledged that the past had its own play of power and that community subsumed the individual in tribal society. The past was, thus, both a source of weakness as much

as strength. Soyinka prized his heritage; only he was more concerned with the future. He took interest in the past but did not advocate replaying or escaping into it. His African world was his source of inspiration and philosophy. But it was different from the Negritudinist's Africa in that it was pluralistic.

Tagore had the same pluralistic heterogenous vision. As I point out in my book, Tagore refused to subscribe to the simplification of the Swadeshi movement taking place at the time. In reaction to the division of Bengal on communal lines, the Swadeshis, instead of deconstructing myths, created new ones. When the need was to accept one's roots without rejecting the West; the Swadeshis in India, tried either to escape into the past or mould themselves as an obverse to the West. Tagore did not want a rejection of the West, as that would isolate India. Nor did he want India to go without the advantages of science and technology. He, therefore, called for a union with the West; however, it had to be on equal terms. This philosophy also characterised the university he founded—Visvabharati.

Interviewer: What are the stakes of introducing comparative theory into a postmodern culture?

SSV: The urge to compare is a basic human trait. I believe comparison is energising and empowering. Seeing the way we are both alike and different makes us better appreciate the nuances of both experiences while promoting understanding. Introducing comparative thinking may even be a corrective to postmodern distrust.

Interviewer: How does commonwealth theory speak to us now? How and where it can be used and why?

SSV: I think commonwealth theory is outdated. It is an attempt at British intellectual or backdoor colonisation. If being colonised was the principle that brought white and coloured commonwealth colonial experiences together, then why not include literary expression from French or Spanish colonies? If English language and British rule is the rationale for the commonwealth model, then why exclude American literature?

Interviewer: To what extent do you think that the writer has a role to try and help people to understand, to deconstruct history?

SSV: The writer may not deconstruct but does interpret history for his or her people. Writers determine the graph of their country's responses. As sensitive national spokespersons, writers record the anxiety, torment, and anger of the people about colonial oppression. Even if s/he records it in a non-native language, s/he invests the language with native meaning. In helping the community develop the capacity to cope with the oppressive anxieties of entrapment, s/he uses the relevant west as a subculture that is important, though not all-important. While evolving as a national voice, the writer charts out an eclectic internationalism as a driver of decolonisation. S/he makes it his or her task to invent a counter-discourse that contains textual strategies that reduce the dominant discourse to a subordinate one in the philosophical arc of an authentic interculturalism. As the writer sets out to both portray and ameliorate the national situation, s/he does justice to his intellectual task when s/he incorporates indigenous values without sounding archaic, while including the non-native without seeming derivative.

Interviewer: You refer to yourself as a comparativist, correct? How does your book contribute to comparative scholarship?

SSV: Absolutely. *New Postcolonial Dialectics* contains the special insights I gained because I chose to study the four plays comparatively. In the book, I go over the similarities and the differences in the way the two colonial and neo-colonial portray interculturalism. I also study the two Indian and the two Nigerian plays represent the new interculturalism in their countries.

Interviewer: How do you see your work as similar or different in comparison to Ted Cantle's idea on plural identities and cohesion? Or in other words which scholar do you think is the closest to you in your interpretation of interculturalism?

SSV: We arrived at interculturalism independent of each other. I do agree with Cantle about the differences between multiculturalism and interculturalism, however I do not think that interculturalism is new. I appreciate his work in the UK through his foundation. I think that all interculturalists celebrate interdisciplinarity and all differences including race. Perhaps interculturalism is more visible today in the new context of technology driven globalisation and super diversity. Interculturalism is constantly growing and metamorphosing and will evolve through different practitioners in different parts of the world in different ways.

Interviewer: Your bibliography is exhaustive. Would you like to comment on it?

SSV: Glad you noticed that. I have keenly examined and assessed each of the four hundred and twenty five sources listed at the end of the book. I have included primary sources such as newspaper interviews, photo essays, and performance notes in my extensive bibliography. While updating and evaluating my bibliography before the book went to press, I aimed to ensure that any researcher of the four plays under consideration particularly finds the bibliography useful. In this, I saw myself as making a three-way contribution—my book offers a new theoretic, a comparative dramaturgical analysis, and a bibliographic compendium.

Interviewer: This must take up a lot of time. How many hours a day do you write?

SSV: It depends on my commitments. I may write seven days without interruption or not be able to write a full fortnight. However, I have noticed that I will find a way to go a little of everything—teaching, writing, and researching every day—it makes that day whole and makes it count.

Interviewer: What are your future writing plans?

SSV: While I have always wanted to do an intercultural study of America's lost plays from the colonial time and the civil war as well as an intercultural study of native American writing, my next publishing project focuses on something very different. It grows out of and reflects my insights and experiences as a full time and visiting professor teaching writing and literature at undergraduate and graduate levels across a dozen institutions in India and the United States. The book titled *A Writing Pedagogy Sourcebook* is for teachers instructing academic, business, and technical writing courses synchronously and asynchronously. Online teachers are a neglected community and face a series of problems that onsite teachers do not. The stark dreadful realities of COVID 19 have driven home the need to focus on remote and online teaching. Hybrid, onsite, and online teachers are going to find the book helpful since it complies all my teaching experiences and publications while facilitating onsite, online, and hybrid writing courses myself in teaching academic and professional writing courses during my twenty years in American academia. The book takes a new look at teaching pedagogies and offers best practices and support to teachers from syllabus creation to teaching to grading.

Interviewer: I am given to understand that you are editing a book currently as well. Tell us about it.

SSV: Technology and social media are transfiguring the twenty-first-century classroom. I use social media and technology myself in the professional writing classroom at Rutgers University and I thought my peers would like to know more about it. As I completed my article detailing my experiences, it struck me that I should expand it to a book. That was how the idea of *Teaching with Social media and Technology: Global Dossiers* was born. My edited collection will bring together scholarly discussions by teachers worldwide who are revising instruction and assessment methods like I am while incorporating new technologies and new learning spaces into their teaching. This discussion is critical if we as teachers have to successfully engage and prepare our post-millennial students for the increasingly technological and global workplace.

Interviewer: So you are working on two book projects simultaneously? Are you a research professor? If not, how do you keep it going?

SSV: No, I am an Assistant Teaching Professor. I teach seven writing-intensive courses at Rutgers University take up summer visiting professor assignments in teaching literature and writing. I enjoy teaching—I draw energy from my students when I teach them. Also, I see my writing and research as aligned. I think my teaching of writing makes me a better writer and vice versa.

Interviewer: Doesn't this interrupt your family life then? How do you balance your research with your writing and teaching?

SSV: My research makes me an interesting person—or so my daughter who is all set to go to college and start a lifetime of research discoveries herself—tells me. My family comes first and they know it. I have been blessed with a supportive family both before and after marriage. Not just supporting me, they have played an active role in my research and the many travels and absences for it. That is why I have dedicated the book to my brother, parents, husband, and daughter—it is my way of saying thank you.

Interviewer: Did you want to always be a writer?

SSV: I wanted to do something for posterity to cherish. Hopefully, it will be the three books and more that are still inside me.

Interviewer: I am sure that is exactly what will happen. Thank you Sarbani Sen Vengadasalam for taking the time to have a dialogue with me, it was enriching and indeed a pleasure. I wish *New Postcolonial Dialectics* success and good readership and offer my best wishes to you for all your future endeavours.

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