

FLOGGING A DEAD HORSE THAT IS STILL ALIVE AND KICKING: NOTES ON INDIAN NATIVISM

NATIVES AND NATIVISM

Digging for the meaning of words is one of philology's indispensable routines. It promises to assuage minds in the face of dissent and insecurity. The words "native" and "nativism" are both minefields that call for such an exercise in ascertaining a semantic field. In the 1971 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* quoted by the most articulate Indian nativist in literary studies, Bhalchandra Nemade, the noun [native] had an undeniably racist meaning: "The original or usual habitant of a country, as distinguished from strangers and foreigners, now especially belonging to a non-European and imperfectly civilized race; a coloured person, a black" (237). This meaning, one of several even in that OED edition, lingers on in gestures of rejection in much postcolonial criticism. But then, of course, meanings and uses of words change over time. The new *Oxford Dictionary of English* cites this racist meaning as dated and privileges the more neutral semantic ranges of *native* as: associated with the place or circumstances of a person's birth; of the indigenous inhabitants of a place; of indigenous origin or growth (of plants and animals), as belonging to a person's character from birth, and several specialist uses in biology, mineralogy and information technology (1171). In the latter field, a global regime has given an up-to-date twist to *native* in the current phrase of digital natives for the innocent neutrality of the dot.com generation.

In Hardy's novel *The Return of the Native* the hero returns from the urban metropolis Paris to his native rural Wessex (to an unhappy future — in the late stages of Victorian England the home is not a panacea for modernity's losses). "The Return of the Native" seems to generate metaphoric transfer: in the postcolonial domain it has recently been used in anthropological discourse about the restoration of rights of the native inhabitants

of settler colonies¹. The indeterminacies of reference that result from the word's history often invite humorous uses, also listed in current dictionaries of English. Also strange ironies, when for example a writer from a postcolonial country reverses the old racist charge by using it in the metropolitan centres. When Amit Chaudhuri begins an essay about his lectures on literature at Columbia University, he describes his professional brief there as "civilizing the natives" (140). Doing so he is at the other end of a spectrum of uses from his hyper-anglophile Bengali namesake Nirad Chaudhuri who was, half a century earlier, writing innocently about "the natives" of Calcutta (qtd. in Chakrabarty, 2000, 184).

In German we have quite a fortunate semantic development in the field of *native*, adjective or noun. There is a split between the *Einheimischer* as a neutral signifier of being native to a place (the terrible things Freud was playing with around the etymon *heim*, the home, as both the source of the *homely* and the *uncanny* have mercifully bypassed everyday speech), and the antiquated *Eingeborener* from a colonial past that, equally mercifully, only survived the German Empire in dubious jokes at the expense of inhabitants of locations considered inferior for whatever reason. (In Polish there seems to be a similar doubling of the word-field into *krajowiec* and *tubylec*, but that is beyond me).

A special problem of the referential function of *native* in post/colonial discourse is the divisive, binary drive the word carries with it. Depending on the difference between settler colonies and other parts of the British Empire, *native* can refer to differently placed majorities. So the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives an Australian use of *native* for the White community, which in view of the signifier "Native Americans" is not possible in the USA, but does not prevent the use of nativism for political movements against immigrants among the White population (in *Wikipedia* still the only use listed).

There are at least three major meanings of *nativism*: xenophobic majority movements against immigrants, biological concepts of innate characteristics rather than acquired ones, and, finally, the one that I am here concerned with, as a concept in literary and cultural criticism. This is the use of nativism that postcolonial criticism has admitted into its debates. It has quite a bad name and is in critical practice not used without critical reservations in the institutions of higher learning, neither in India nor elsewhere. In

¹ See A. Kuper; 2003, The Return of the Native, *Current Anthropology* 44, 389-402.

respectable criticism, even among critics who do not consign colonized (native) people to history's "imaginary waiting-room"². It is a dead horse that you must have some valid reason to be still flogging. One reason is its practical influence in some fields of publication for which the novelist Kiran Nagarkar's critical reception in his own regional Marathi context (being considered a traitor to the Marathi language by changing from it into English in Bombay) provides a telling example.

INDIAN NATIVISM

Nativism as defined by its best-known proponent, the Emeritus Professor of Marathi and Comparative Literature at Bombay University, Bhalchandra Nemade, is a throwback to what in the West was once constructed as the idea of an organic community. Some such concept even went into the foundational texts of British cultural studies through Raymond Williams's definition of culture as a "whole way of life", taking his cue from T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis (11f.). Nemade's 1983 essay "Nativism in Literature" clearly outlines the boundaries of what he calls the "spirit of nativism":

Nativism evokes a whole constellation of feeling, perception, thought, enlightenment, and memory which has grown due to one's attachment to a specific geographical area. There is more emotional poetry in the nativistic consciousness than rationalism. The viewpoint is more traditional than modernist. It prefers to look back into the past to looking ahead into the future. Nativism is a response of the people to the past and also to the future. It is a lifestyle of a whole group, past and future society's collective power of reflection and emotion is expressed through nativism. Broadly speaking, nativism prefers maintaining the status quo to gaining momentum (250f.).

Many passages in Nemade's programmatic essay emphasize the essentially defensive character of nativism, e.g. against "alien, imported values, language, and cultures coming from outside" (236), against "tendencies which are alien, obstructive, imperialistic, hedonistic, capitalistic" (240f.), against "standards other than those we have evolved ourselves" (254). It is not, incidentally, anticolonialist or based in a social minority. In sum, nativism of this kind runs counter to all current tendencies of critical discourse not only in the West, but in India itself, as the editor of the only collection of nativist writing in

² Cf. D. Chakrabarty, Reason and the Critique of Historicism, in: Chakrabarty Provincializing Europe, 237-255.

India notes, granting Nemade and G.N. Devy (a professor of English at Baroda in neighbouring Gujarat) heroic statures for their writing against the grain of received opinions. Heavy guns are stacked against it, from Said to Appiah, Robert Young, Meenakshi Mukherjee, Timothy Brennan and Elleke Boehmer who all dispute nativist claims to cultural authenticity and to the radical stature that Nemade's formulations are claiming, their usual target being texts from Africa (like *negritude*)³.

G.N. Devy's book *After Amnesia. Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism*, one of the central statements on nativism from India, gives another definition of nativism that stresses its language-specific oppositional status — opposed both to colonial historicization and indigenous mainstream dominance (in the Sanskrit tradition) as well as to any universalism.

Nativism views literature as an activity taking place 'within' a specific language, such as Marathi or Gujarati, and bound by the rules of discourse native to the language of its origin. It understands writing as a social act, and expects of it an ethical sense of commitment to the society in which it is born. It rules out the colonial standard of literary history as a series of epochs, and the *marga* claim of the mainstream literature as being the only authentic literature. Nativism is a language-specific way of looking at literature. It rejects the concept-specific method of 'universal' criticism (Devy, 1995, 119f.).

Needless perhaps to repeat the mantras of postcolonial, also postmodern, criticism that Devy's definition is directed against. I will just focus on the standard humanist postcolonial line.

³ See Edward M. Said; 1994, *Culture and Imperialism*, London: Vintage, 275-279; Robert J.C. Young; 2001, *Postcolonialism. An Historical Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 265-269; Elleke Boehmer 1995, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature. Migrant Metaphors*, Oxford, New York, 100; Meenakshi Mukherjee; 1998, *The Anxiety of Indianness. Our Novels in English*, in Nilufer Bharucha and Vrinda Nabar, (eds.), *Postcolonial Indian Literature in English. Essays in Honour of Nissim Ezekiel*, New Delhi, Bombay, Hyderabad: Vision Books, 80ff.; see also Timothy Brennan (2006), *Wars of Position. The Cultural Politics of Left and Right*, New York: Columbia University Press, 86f.

STANDARD CRITIQUE OF NATIVISM: EDWARD SAID

The chapter on “Resistance and Opposition” in Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* contains a critique of nativism as, unwittingly, reinforcing rather than combating imperial hierarchies, which leads to bad politics on top of bad theory:

Nativism, alas, reinforces the distinction between ruler and ruled even while reevaluating the weaker or subservient partner. ... To accept nativism is to accept the consequences of imperialism, the racial, religious and political divisions imposed by imperialism itself. To leave the historical world for the metaphysics of essences like *négritude*, Irishness, Islam, or Catholicism is to abandon history for essentializations that have the power to turn human beings against each other; often this abandonment of the secular world has led to ... an unthinking acceptance of stereotypes, myths, animosities, and traditions encouraged by imperialism (Said, 1994, 275f.).

Following Said, many similar objections have been raised against the validity of nativism in cultural and literary discourse. Instead of a discussion of the major voices raised against nativism, I shall just summarise the recurring points made by its critics:

1. Nativism is taken to task for perpetuating binary divisions between dominant and subjected cultures and so prevents change by an essentialism that preempts self-criticism. This line of a self-reflexive consideration of nationalist independence movements was already started by its founders like Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral⁴.

2. Nativism is charged with not fitting historical or present realities in any culture because of its homogenising view of cultures which are all of necessity polyphonic and hybrid.

3. Nativism is regarded as politically pernicious — in spite of its claim to be radically resisting domination — because it encourages or engenders communalism, violent *ressentiment* and xenophobia.

These objections to nativism have in their combination resulted in relegating it to a peripheral position in today’s critical discourse, in India as elsewhere in the postcolonial world.

⁴ See F. Fanon; 1968, On National Culture, trans. Constance Farrington, in Fanon *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press, 206-248; Amilcar Cabral (1973), *Return to the Source. Selected Speeches*, ed. Africa Information Service. New York, London: Monthly Review Press, 51.

QUALIFIED DEFENCES OF NATIVISM, NECESSARY DISTINCTIONS

Benita Parry offers a qualified defence of the nativist position in decolonised cultures — this is still treading familiar ground:

When we consider the narratives of decolonization, we encounter rhetorics in which ‘nativism’ in one form or another is evident. Instead of disciplining these, theoretical whip in hand, as a catalogue of epistemological error, of essentialist mystifications, as a masculinist appropriation of dissent, as no more than an anti-racist racism, etc., I want to consider what is to be gained by an unsententious interrogation of such articulations which, if often driven by negative passion, cannot be reduced to a mere inveighing against iniquities or a repetition of the canonical terms of imperialism’s conceptual framework. This of course means affirming the power of the reverse-discourse by arguing that anticolonialist writings did challenge, subvert and undermine the ruling ideologies, and nowhere more so than in overthrowing the hierarchy of coloniser/colonised ... (Parry, 1994, 176).

Parry looks for the productive elements of nativist articulations in their historical contexts, choosing her examples from African anticolonial resistance movements. Her aim is to locate “resistance in its moment of performance” (Parry, 1994, 179), rescuing (unnecessarily?) Fanon’s and Césaire’s ‘concept of *negritude* from charges of an essentialist politics and a “reverse ethnocentrism which simply reproduces existing categories” (Parry, 1994, 180). Laura Chrisman has reminded us of Fanon’s important distinction between progressive and reactionary uses of nativism (Chrisman, 1994, 192f.). Therefore, any critique of nativism “by considering it in a disembodied way outside the political and social situation within which it was conceived” misses its point (Young, 2001, 265).

The one example from India that Parry adduces is Ranajit Guha’s attempt to vindicate an “Indian idiom of politics” in vernacular languages outside colonial culture’s dominance but going beyond it to precolonial indigenous formations. This is a useful reminder of the difference between the Subaltern School of historians and critical nativism. The difference is one between essentialist affirmations of cultural identities and a dialectical reconstruction of usable pasts in subaltern research, between materialist historicity and a purist appropriation of homogeneous agency. When Gayatri Spivak argues for the positive function of a strategic essentialism she calls for a contextualization that would be different for minorities in colonial or settler cultures from what looks like a similar “blood and Soil” essentialism in the case of mainstream communities such as the Marathi-speaking majority population of the state of Maharashtra. Nativism differs in these

opposed cases in its political import along a line from progressive empowerment to reactionary ideology that mirrors chauvinist politics.

The limitations of nativism in India do not necessarily diminish the achievements of its vernacular literatures. In a reversal of the static, undynamic nature of nativist theory, Amit Chaudhuri has pointed out that many of the modern writers in vernacular Indian languages (from Anantha Murthy to Mahasweta Devi) have gone through a professional career in English literature (Chaudhuri, 2008, 46). This does not of course vindicate theoretical nativism at all but it might offer it a helpful function in encouraging literary praxis in postcolonial cultures.

From another angle, the rejection of nativism in critical thought might be modified by realizing that the rediscovery or privileging of native resources by postcolonial societies could serve as an antidote to the loss of reality imposed on them through colonization which does not simply disappear on independence.⁵ Both these arguments, though, are insufficient to revalidate nativism in any thorough manner.

THE MARATHI CONTEXT

There is a complex conjuncture between nativism in literary criticism and political movements in the region of Bhalchandra Nemade as the chief proponent of nativism in the state that has Marathi as the dominant, although not the only, language. The radical nationalist political party Shiv Sena with its programmatic policy of Hindutva has placed a strong emphasis on pushing Marathi against its competitors, and English is the prime target of its populist drive, apart from its regional competitors. Although academic nativism has not positioned itself in Shiv Sena's nationalist programmatic — in fact it has stressed its antielitism and anticapitalism — it cannot avoid the overlap with the essentialism and sons of the soil rhetoric of Shiv Sena and its powerful cultural organizations, their stress on the vernacular culture, hostility to modernity and intellectualism, their parochialism and xenophobia.

My own case against nativism in India, apart from its political effects, centres around the fact that nativism, in its counter-identification with the colonial or Western other, does

⁵ See T. Khair; 2001, *Babu Fictions. Alienation in Contemporary Indian English Novels*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 73.

not reach beyond a notion of cultural authenticity that is based on seeing cultures as discrete, homogeneous units in the European enlightenment tradition of Herder and Rousseau.⁶ It is also helpless in deciding about the boundaries of its nationalism in terms of language, ethnicity, caste, class, creed and other parameters. It is at the opposite end to any concepts of transculturality, and also cosmopolitanism as productive expressions of contemporary cultures, in India as elsewhere. In this I agree with a point made by Anthony Kwame Appiah twenty years ago in his attack on the topologies of nativism, that “few things are less native than nativism in its current forms” (Appiah, 1988, 162).

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⁶ Cf. Bernd-Peter Lange and Dirk Wiemann; 2008, *Transcultural Britain. An Introduction*, in: *Journal for the Study of British Cultures* 15.1, 3-10.